

Prologue

She came to her senses, barely able to see. The light reaching into the cell was mild and quite weak, seeping through cracks of the door and the small closed window hidden behind rusted bars. The window itself rarely open, only to reveal Mordek's ugly face every now and then as he made sure she was still among the living. It was becoming increasingly harder for her to disappoint him, to keep grinning up until he would enter the cell in order to whip her. Even though she went through hell every time the door opened, she also had a brief glimmer of light and hope, just enough to keep her sane.

She was very grateful for the darkness shrouding her bruises, concealing her wounds as well as her filth. She was also quite grateful for her numbed out senses, allowing her to endure Mordek's increasingly frequent punishments. He clearly didn't have the Lord's approval to permanently debilitate her and inflict serious harm, otherwise he would have done so long ago. Instead, he resorted to restricting her of food and water as much as possible, to make up for the lack of proper torture, but even that didn't break her spirit. As time went on, she got used to the miserable conditions within her dungeon, from the unbearable cold down to the stench of the stale air.

At the moment, she was desperately craving for a drink, but decided not to move her worn out body just yet, having heard a tiny set of paws clawing across the floor, heading her way. A rat had stumbled out from one of the holes near the floor. She held her breath, patiently waiting for him to approach as she barely

moved her eyes around. She spotted him stopping just a step outside her reach, a tiny shadow sniffing the air.

“*Come closer*” she thought in earnest. “*Please come closer.*” The rat hesitated for a while, then began slowly sneaking his way to the corpse, or at least that’s what he perceived her to be. A few tiny steps, then a brief stop to sniff the air, then a few more steps, slowly but surely the tip of his nose reached for her foot. She suppressed her impulses and refused to move, this wasn’t the first time.

Further steps echoed in the silence as she felt his whiskers sliding along her thigh. He was heading for her stomach but he didn’t climb up on her body, which was more than enough for her to figure his intentions out. He was clearly heading towards one of the wounds underneath her right armpit, the smell of fresh blood obviously attracting him. She gave him all the time in the world to approach, darting after him at the last possible moment, faster than he could react. He instantly began squealing and screeching in a futile attempt to bite her and break free as she quickly brought him up to her mouth and took a hard bite at his neck. “*Damn it, I missed the spine*”, she groaned as she drew first blood and tried again, managing to crush his vertebrae and kill him instantly.

She turned him over, exposing the stomach and biting as hard as she could into the flesh she knew tasted the best. She hadn’t had a proper meal for three days straight and the sensation of raw meat brought tears to her eyes, drawing her in to bite for more and only stopping to spit out the bones and fur. It wasn’t enough, nowhere near enough to satiate her appetite.

Her thirst took priority again. She got up on her knees and dragged herself to her unusual water source. It was a small, hollowed out spot within the wall opposite to the door and quite a way up from the floor so she had to climb in order to reach it. She dragged herself upwards, her arms being strong just



enough to lift her up, and grab hold of the edges she carved in the wall, relying on the sheer force of will. She climbed almost all the way to the ceiling, found her shallow waterhole and began drinking. The water was pure and cold, thirst quenching and pleasing, washing away the rat blood after each gulp. Then a strange thought hit her all of a sudden.

Her watering hole never ran dry and would never overflow, no matter how much she drank from it, by instinct she felt it was infinite but had no idea how she figured that out. It was quite strange, even more so when she realized that every single cell she was locked in also had a similar waterhole hidden away in plain sight and there for her convenience.

“Does it have anything to do with that dream?” A random thought crossed her mind once she had drunk enough and began her slow descent to the floor.

In that recent dream of hers, she took the shape of a thin mist and left her own body, squeezing her way into the stones beneath her feet and becoming one with the floor. She made her way from one stone into the other, eventually becoming part of the wall and making her way upwards, wondering why every subsequent stone is colder than the last. Urged to figure that out, she made her way deeper into the wall, suddenly stumbling upon a force that dragged her along for a long ride, falling into a stream of water that ran through a labyrinth of pipes, eventually bringing her out into the open. The shadows around her slowly began to take shape and it took her a while to realize the water brought her up to the main fountain in front of the main castle entrance.

Silhouettes went past her one after another, random bystanders not realizing she was observing them from within the water, trying to identify them but miserably failing at it. Fortunately for her, a short-haired Knight in dark armor appeared after a while, stopping at the fountain and leaning directly above

her, shattering the surface of the water and taking hold of her in-between his palms, bringing her straight up to his face. She felt a numb sensation when the cold water splashed all over his face and armor, narrowing her entire existence down into a single droplet sliding downwards. Frightened that he might suddenly throw her off, she quickly focused her attention to his sword, somehow managing to jump into it and hide within.

The sheath was made with a couple of convenient holes just big enough for her to gaze outward as she was being carried deep into the castle, passing down the long hallways and huge windows that basked her with intense light. She enjoyed the sensation, its warmth brought her bliss every time it made its way through the holes in the sheath and down to the cold metal, up until she spotted Mordek in his worn-out coat heading from the opposite direction. At the exact moment he crossed paths with her Knight, she wished to go along with him, instinctively transforming into a thin mist again and making her way from a high-quality steel sword over to a cheap metal dagger hanging on his belt.

She moaned and despaired for not being able to do this for real, completely aware she was dreaming. Still, she refused to wake up for two reasons. Firstly, she was curious to see the chain of events that might unfold and, secondly, she also wanted to see if she could pull off any other interesting effects, just for fun.

Mordek rampaged his way down the hallways in full sprint up until he ended up before the Lord's quarters, taking his sweet time to catch his breath before he reached for the door and assumed a decent posture to properly walk inside. Fortunately for him, the Lord seemed busy with his paperwork to notice, or care.

When the Lord eventually threw his gaze their way, Hella felt an onslaught of fear so intense that she caused the dagger

to subtly vibrate. Mordek was quite a capable teacher but, compared to Lord Azrael, he wasn't even worthy of mention. The Lord was quite a character, standing out among all men in more ways than one, mostly due to his frightening gaze that imposed considerable authority and definite superiority. The teachers were able to penetrate into the minds of their students to figure out their thoughts, their strengths and their weaknesses with ease, but the Lord was capable of pulling that off with the teachers without even breaking a sweat. To make matters worse, it was rumored he could breach into the mind of anyone in his vicinity without even having to make eye contact, a rather obscene ability only the Guardians themselves were allegedly capable of.

“Please, would you remind me why did I bother to summon you?” the Lord asked from behind his desk, raising his gaze at Mordek, his stoic voice being made of sheer authority and clearly showing he knew the answer to the question before he asked it in the first place.

“Because of her and... her condition?” Mordek replied quite tensely in cold sweat. He was roughly the Lord's height and size, he feared him more than death itself but clearly wasn't allowed to show it, just like the students were forbidden to do so in front of their teacher. Keeping the fear at bay meant privilege for those who succeeded and misery for those who failed at it.

“So, what is her condition?” he asked again, eyes still pointing directly at the teacher. She felt the same sensation in his voice as before, he clearly knew the answer to this question as well. But why would he bother to ask it in the first place? What could he possibly learn if he already knew the response?

“I haven't figured her out, not yet.” Mordek finally confessed, barely able to muster the strength to speak, “I moved her into a different cell two weeks ago and I never brought her any food or water. She's got blood on her face every now and then, I've seen

the rat remains all over the floor so I know what she was eating, but I still don't know how she handles the thirst.”

“Did you check her previous cells?” the Lord asked with a cynical grin on his face as if Mordek's confusion was the funniest act of comedy ever conceived. Yet again he knew the damn answer to the damn question before he had asked it.

“I certainly did, quite thoroughly, but I wasn't able to deduce anything worth mentioning.” He snarled dejectedly, then dropped his face and his shoulders as if expecting to be punished for an obvious oversight.

“You blind idiot. The answer is there for you to see, yet you remain as blind as you are stubborn.” The Lord spoke as he took the glass of wine in his hand. Instead of taking a sip, he swirled the wine around while gazing somewhere above Mordek's head, then turned aside and loudly mumbled: “Looks like Nature herself doesn't want her to die, as if the elements have come together to sustain her.”

“The Elements?! That's a load of crap, she's a Jiran! She's not even a Mage, let alone an Elementor.” Mordek protested violently as he felt wrongly insulted. “We assessed her and there can be no mistake. There cannot be!! You were there yourself, my lord, you saw it with your own eyes!!”

“Yes, she was assessed indeed, along with the rest.” The Lord retaliated, rebutting his subordinate and taking a sip of his wine. He briefly stared at Mordek, then his gaze wondered elsewhere. “The Staff of Gashelan craves for an owner, even if that someone barely has any talent for elemental control. That's how it reveals them, the Elementors to be, without mistake.”

“I know that, my lord, but...” Mordek budged in but the Lord quickly silenced him and spoke up again.

“The staff does not make mistakes!!” He grumbled and sipped some of his wine, directing another brief gaze at Mordek

before lecturing him further. “Fully-fledged Mansers are unable to wield it, let alone potent Jirans. But then again, I saw the gaps in the stones and her waterholes with my own eyes.” He waved his other hand and finally got up from his chair, turning around and looking outside through the large window. “It is a fact beyond doubt that you cannot kill a true Elementor with hunger or thirst, you can inconvenience them at best. Even if you were to leave one bound, broken and naked, completely isolated in a dried out cell and throw away the key, they will endure. Nature does not allow them to die in such a miserable manner... Why is she worthy of that sort of attention, I honestly have no idea.”

“If you would give me permission, my lord, I could easily break her and find out...” Mordek spoke eagerly, quickly jumping at the opportunity to prove himself, but the Lord instantly turned around and cut him off, as much with his frightening gaze as with his commanding tone.

“You will not debilitate my finest Jiran!! You are to inflict light wounds upon her, moderate at most! Do I make myself clear?!” His proclamation filled Hella with quite a pride, so much so that she briefly lost control of herself and almost flew out of the cheap metal she was currently occupying.

“I understand, my lord, but...” he replied in shame like a scolded child, dropping his gaze to the floor and mumbling on into his own chin. The excess of fear had nearly silenced him, only just.

“There are ways of reaching the truth, far easier for some than others.” The Lord spoke in a calm tone again, tightened his grip of his glass and drank it down, then poured more wine. “As soon as I have the time, you will bring her to me. If she’s guilty, feel free to break her to your heart’s content, otherwise you will do exactly as I say. I would appreciate if you were to hand her to the maids beforehand.”

“Of course, my lord.” Mordek agreed with his signature grin. At that exact moment, the doors behind him opened with quite an intensive screech and the same Knight who brought Hella into the castle walked in. He stopped just two steps from the door and assumed a military posture, slamming his heels together and mildly leaning forward in respect.

“Now get out of my sight, I have more pressing matters to deal with...” the Lord spoke for the last time as Hella’s dream shattered and brought her back to reality.

She knew there was a reason why she had been suppressing that particular dream and now she remembered again. It was fear! Fear of the Lord’s questioning! Fear of whatever he could learn about her, including anything significant even she wasn’t aware of. There was no way to stand up to his gaze, all of her secrets will be revealed to him the moment he stares her down. That is why she would freak out every time Mordek would come along to check up on her, she was terrified the day of reckoning might have arrived.

She did her absolute best to roam her way all over her own thoughts and feelings for anything the Lord might consider worthy of even the slightest bit of his attention. Of all those things, she most vividly remembered the assessment that was mentioned in the dream, which occurred when she was barely eight years old. That particular day, the teachers gathered all the initiates in the training grounds, made them assume a completely unnatural posture and gave them a long and somewhat heavy staff to attempt channeling their fledgling talents to the best of their abilities. Every single one of the initiates tried to do what they were told, but only five of them managed to get results, three of them caused a notable gust of wind to appear while the remaining two managed to summon a small burst of flame. Those five were separated from the rest and branded as the chosen ones. Just before she took hold of that weapon, she

instinctively knew it was different than their school wands in more ways than one. She knew the staff wasn't made to channel raw mental abilities they were taught to perform, but she had no idea how that knowledge came to end up in her head. More to the point, she was instinctively aware of her potential to use that staff better than anyone else. Someone had taught her the moves to summon the advanced set of abilities, someone had taught her the basics of elemental control. But who?

She felt a burning desire to prove herself as soon as she took hold of the staff, to become one of the chosen. She felt her body pulling her along for the ride and her instincts slowly kicking in and she would have gladly seen it through had the staff not stopped her dead in her tracks.

The weapon aggressively denied her the attempt and had forced her violently away, causing a sensation of immense remorse too strong for words. It was the first time she felt such a thing coming from a weapon, as if it was a living, breathing creature and not an inanimate object partly made of precious materials. It threw her away just as it did with most of the initiates, but not only that. She was the only one who received more than a rejection, more than a repulsive shockwave to cast her aside, she received a vision through a rush of images served up in a flash of memory.

“Blood...” she heard her own voice echoing in the deep and felt intense sadness. The word was accompanied with a sensation of extreme cold and discomfort that would only become apparent to her as the sensation of drying blood. Her eyes were completely covered in shades of red and an array of melting shadows.

“Pain...” the second echo caused the sensation of rejection and envy. The bloody image flashing before her eyes showed a tall man kneeling while the other one, heavily armored, was swinging his greatsword straight at him. The moment the

weapon made its way across the air and echoed in the distance was the moment the man's head fell from his shoulders into the tall grass.

“Hope...” the third echo formed a new image as she felt the sensation of hope and loyalty. The image was similar to the previous one, but from a different angle. She saw a boy cowering within in the bushes, a perfect replica of the kneeling man, hidden and afraid, observing the execution.

“Life...” she heard the final echo at the exact moment her body hit the floor. There was nothing after that, other than a brief period of unconsciousness.

This was her solemn secret, and, if the Lord was to ask the right questions, it will be revealed. Does that secret make her innocent or guilty in his eyes, she could not tell. Lost in her own thoughts, she felt so numb that she didn't even hear the steps approaching her cell, jumping at the appearance of Mordek's face in the tiny window.

“You've been munching rats again!” he rumbled just before he entered the room, giving her just enough time to compose herself and form that same old spiteful grin of hers. He pulled his whip out and took a swing at her.

Atharon - Malevolence
Argent Hellion

Chapter 01

- Deal -

What doesn't kill you makes you stronger and that's exactly what happened to the Prelates who barely managed to survive their first and last Annual Encounter. Their final fight had revealed to them the genuine face of the world and quite a different picture from the one they were used to seeing; the cruel truth that the world revolves exclusively around the winners and being anything less than that isn't worth even a passing mention.

The fact they experienced this so soon came as a blessing in disguise, vastly affecting their mentality and allowing them to perceive their combat calling for what it truly was: too demanding and too risky not to be taken seriously. Fortunately, rather than giving up, they doubled down with genuine effort to improve. In due time, they not only managed to make their way through their subject matter but also to achieve an improvement far superior to their peers, something that did not come as much of a surprise to many around them. As far as Victoria was concerned, their defeat was an inexcusable fluke and she was never to forgive that, but even she could not deny their stellar performance as the days went by. In fact, she was aware of their potential more than anyone else, along with the possibility of exploiting it for her own gain.

Times were gradually changing, after more than a century of relative peace numerous conflicts began to pull the world into chaos and war, aggression and bloodshed. Strangely, the source of those conflicts was not of human nature. Nobody

knows why, but as the seasons passed, sub-sentient creatures occasionally began stumbling their way towards civilization, with devastating consequences worldwide. Many abominations long considered to be extinct made their way back into the spotlight, ravaging the population not only to sustain themselves, but also seemingly for fun and games. Senseless slaughter all across the world would cause a ripple effect on a scale never seen before and, naturally, conflicting politics reared their ugly head as old enmities slowly began surging again.

Just like with any other crisis, the mercenary trade became wanted and quite lucrative for anyone willing and daring to try their luck at it. Proficient fighters became sought out more than others, of course, encouraging Victoria to engage her trio into action whenever she was able to drag them away from their studies. She chose their assignments with great care, seeking out the tasks usually avoided by others, preventive quests of hunting down certain beasts before they became major threats rather than meddling into political matters or mercenary dirty-work.

Their first, genuine combat trials came from wandering the regions of the republics of Kaledonia and Macaterra, hunting numerous specimens other mercenaries usually avoided. Their business went on its merry way up until Victoria graduated in the spring of 1678 and went through a sudden mood swing for the worse. She concluded it was high time for them to tackle more serious matters and, just as she was preparing to seek their next assignment, destiny delivered a promising temptation she simply could not refuse.

Quite effortlessly, she managed to persuade her comrades to pack up and head to Lusida yet again, in pursue of their first assignment on demand.

* * *

“What are we waiting for, again?” Kris rambled on, carelessly sliding his glass across the table, spilling some of his drink. They were sitting just outside one of the inns near the city center. That particular summer day seemed just as appealing as any other but he was too impatient to pay attention to anything other than the time slowly ticking away.

“The clock.” Victoria nodded, slightly raising her head towards the cathedral and its large clock. It was almost one o’clock in the afternoon.

- “And then what?” he added, looking around the sparsely crowded area around them.

“We shall see...” She responded in apathy, as she stared him down, forcing him to lean back into his chair and quietly mumble to himself. Seated just next to him, Nick spent his time leaning over the table, using his elbows for support and sliding his drink from one side down to the other, just like Kris did earlier. The looming boredom managed to get even to him, the most patient of the three.

As soon as the cathedral bell stroke with a mighty blast and announced the passing of the hour, Victoria gulped her drink and slammed her glass on the table so hard the glass cracked in her hand. It was clearly the sign she was waiting for because, not long afterwards, a particular slender brunette in a short, gray coat made her way towards their table and stood next to Victoria. She seemed old enough to be her mother.

“You’re the one we’ve been waiting for?!” Victoria grinned a bit, leaning back into her chair and throwing her hands above her head. She would have dragged her legs up on the table itself too, if only she had the room to do so.

“Let’s go for a walk.” The woman smiled as she turned her gaze aside, an action which instantly got Victoria up on her feet.

Kris followed closely behind, empty his pockets to pay for the drink, with Nick eventually getting up after them. As the two women headed out on the street, the two men went a couple of steps behind them with not too much of a rush, doing their best to avoid attracting any unwanted attention.

“Where are we heading?” Kris impatiently threw a question their way as they were about to leave the heart of the city, heading down one of the boulevards. Instead of providing a response, the woman simply waved her hand over her shoulder in a particular way to shut him up. Whatever she had to say clearly wasn’t intended for everybody to hear, a fact that became pretty obvious as soon as she led them down one of the alleyways and into the shadows.

“What I’m about to tell you is beyond confidential.” She spoke in the same, mild manner as she did at the inn, just loud enough for them to hear. “If you consider yourself not...”

“Drop that damn mystery act and get to the point!” Victoria impulsively lashed out and grabbed her by the shoulder. The woman glanced over the hand laid upon her, then glanced back at Victoria before suddenly pulling herself back out of her reach and slipping deeper into the dark.

“Fine.” She spoke again after briefly looking around to make sure they weren’t followed or observed. “We intercepted a message intended for you some time ago.” She opened up her short coat and pulled a folded piece of sturdy paper, then slowly extended her hand forward, which was more than enough for Victoria to slide it out of her grasp as if performed by sheer reflex. She folded the paper out and read it in a heartbeat, whispering away as she read the text along.

* * * * *

Renown beast hunters!

We are well aware of your particular set of skills and we would like to offer you an opportunity more lucrative than any of your previous assignments. If you are willing and able to hear us out, please contact our recruiter in Lusida on the first day of the fifth.

Make a reservation at the Royal Hotel, take the room with an open view of the fountain and ask for a Conquest board.

Our recruiter will contact you by the end of the day.

* * * * *

“The first of the fifth is next week!” Victoria groaned, folding the paper and shoving it into one of her pockets. There was no sign or clue to reveal who wrote it.

“Indeed.” The woman smiled again and turned her back on them, slowly walking down the alleyway. “That’s why we asked you to come earlier, to throw the Arpenians off. We have an offer which includes whatever they have in store for you as well.”

“What makes you so sure...” Victoria began to protest but Kris cut her off by slamming his fist in her back. The mysterious woman grinned as she nodded in approval.

“We are willing to double their offer if you are willing to work for us. We don’t know what they are going to offer you and we really don’t care, what matters to us is that you complete whatever they ask to gain their trust.”

“I suppose you then expect us to kill them in their sleep, since you’re clearly not able to handle them yourselves.” Victoria spiked up arrogantly.

“No, nothing that extreme.” The woman let out a faint chuckle, briefly turning around with her hands shoved deep down her pockets. “We want you to find out how they are getting their hands on classified republic information.” She then turned her back on them for the last time, walking away and closing out with a particularly chilling statement. “We’ll talk again when you’re back in the city.”

“Well, this sucks.” Kris skeptically whispered as soon as he was sure they were alone again. “We haven’t even started and we already sank knee deep into their crap.”

“So you’re going to walk away from this?” Victoria barked at him. “We could make a fortune!”

“My greatest fortune is keeping my head on my shoulders.” Kris fired back in a surprisingly serious tone.

“I don’t think we have much of a choice.” Nick’s voice made his presence known for the very first time.

“It doesn’t hurt to hear them out.” Victoria confirmed. “If it isn’t worth our effort, we’ll be heading home.”

Victoria deemed it pointless to spend a whole week wandering aimlessly around the city, so she immediately led the trio towards one of the most prestigious establishments in Lusida: the Royal Hotel. Its prestige began with the large doors being not unlike royal entryways, pristine pieces of pale wood brandished with metal decorations. According to her routine,

Victoria went first and pushed the doors out of her way, opening up a realm of glamour before their very eyes.

The abundance of glass chandeliers, bright walls, colorful carpets and unique drapes made them feel as if they made their way back through history. They stared down the distant reception edged in-between the two stairways leading to the upper floors as a seemingly frail man sat behind it and read a book, staring down at it and speeding his gaze through a set of finely made glasses.

“We need a room!” Victoria yelled as soon as she walked in, heading down the red carpet and dragging her feet along, wiping her boots on it.

“Huh?!” the receptionist responded calmly, taking his time to place a pencil as a bookmark, then lowering the book aside. He looked at her as if her roar went into one ear and out the other.

“Good afternoon.” Nick stepped up to the reception and politely spoke out, instantly causing the man to turn his way and change his rigorous expression into one of comfort and hospitality, even going as far as providing a humble smile. “We would like to take a room with an open view of the fountain, if possible.”

“Certainly. Give me a moment.” The man nodded and proceeded to pull out a logbook thick enough to serve as a bludgeoning weapon, slammed it on the desk so hard it echoed across the room and opened it up, quickly shuffling it over to its mid-section and mumbling into his own chin up until he found what he was looking for. “The only one I could provide you is 314, that’s up on the third floor. It’s yours for three gold pieces and you can stay up until noon tomorrow. Extra services are not included. How long will you be staying?”

“Just one day, for now.” Nick responded after taking the information in, quite baffled with their pricing. Three gold pieces would normally be more than enough to comfortably lodge in a regular inn for more than a full week. “We would appreciate if you could provide us with a Conquest board.”

“I will send for one right away.” The man smiled as soon as Nick pulled the money out of his pocket and laid it down on the reception, hastily swapping it for the room key and disappearing through the back door.

“Idiot...” Victoria uttered as she made her way up the stairway, but not before she was absolutely certain the man in question had indeed gone.

“Serves you right,” Kris grinned away behind her back, “this is an establishment, not a whorehouse.”

“You’re the one to speak,” she growled back at him anxiously, eagerly jumping at the opportunity, “you haven’t even seen one, let alone set foot into it.” Even though he intensely wanted to bite back, Kris remained silent and proceeded to follow her up along with Nick.

They eventually got up on the third floor, heading down a hallway lit up with several oil lamps, walking down the blue carpet until they reached the door bearing their number. Since he was the one with the key, Nick was the first one to enter.

Their chamber was actually an elite apartment clearly reserved for aristocracy. A fine, small table stood at the center of the room, surrounded by four red sofas with blue cushions on them. Two large beds stood on the opposite side of the room, each of them accompanied with another small table and a closet. A number of additional closets was also placed around the room, providing more than enough storage for anything anyone could bring along.

The only window stood in-between the beds, large enough to light up the whole room, negating the need to fire up the oil lamps hanging on the walls. The only thing left in the dark was the bathroom, hidden behind the door next to one of the beds.

“Three gold pieces for this?!” Kris uttered in awe when he realized the room they walked into was almost the size of one of their classrooms. As expected, the drinking closet was the first order of business for him, even though the damn thing stood next to the door in such a way it could not be seen when initially entering, Kris had managed to find it without jumping a beat, as if he could smell the alcohol held within.

“Some things never change.” Victoria mumbled on to herself in a groggy manner. She was the last one to enter, while Kris was rummaging the closet and trying to decide which drink to open first, she made her way to one of the beds and hooked off her gauntlet from her belt. “This one is mine, you two take the other one.” She spat out and made her way towards the window.

“We’ll be staying for the night?” Nick asked, rather surprised as he closed the door shut.

“I don’t know.” She shrugged, approaching the window and sliding the curtains apart, opening up the gorgeous view down the fountain and up the cathedral on the other side of it. For a brief moment, she gazed down on the masses gathered near the fountain, looking down on them in the same manner she considered them: petty and insignificant.

“Then why are you staking a claim?” Nick proceed, leaving the key on the table and slowly approaching her.

“So none of you would get any funny ideas!!” She turned around and lashed out, stopping him dead in his tracks with her well known glare brimming with anger. After everything they’ve been through, she still treated them both the same, a pair of

children she had to put up with them just because she could make good use of their talents.

The tensions in the air did not last, Kris had managed to choose his drink, take hold of a couple of glasses and get to one of the sofas when they heard a heavy knock on the door. In order to change the subject, Nick turned around and opened the door, finding himself face-to-face with the porter slightly shorter than him, wearing the typical red-and-white usher uniform and carrying a Conquest board.

“Here’s your Conquest board, beast hunters.” The porter spoke in a seemingly innocent manner, rhythmically raising and lowering his eyebrows as if sending out a secret message.

“We got here early.” Nick responded and stood aside, allowing him to walk in.

“So, I see you got my message.” He smiled as the door slammed shut behind him, causing Victoria to turn away from the window while pulling the piece of paper out of her pocket, briefly turning it his way. “Alright then, let’s get down to business.” He put the board down on the table and then dropped on the sofa next to Kris, leaning back into it as if he owned the place, pulling his cap off and brushing his short hair. “Pour me a glass, will ya?”

That should have been quite a sight to behold under normal circumstances, a porter asking his guests to do his bidding, but not for those reading between the lines.

“Before we begin, do you mind telling us who you’re representing?” Kris asked.

“Sorry, can’t tell you that,” the porter spoke mysteriously, completely unaware they already knew the answer, “at least not until we get under way.”



“Then by all means tell us what it is about.” Victoria joined the conversation, sitting down on the sofa next to him. “Seems you went through quite the hassle to get us here.”

“You see, our organization had been losing a fair amount of resources in a particularly sensitive location for a while now.” He spoke with an official tone as if being some sort of an ambassador, taking a small sip from the glass Kris had provided him before continuing. “We tried resolving the issue through the use of discrete methods, but to no avail, so now we’re taking a different approach.”

“Trying with large formations did not occur to you?” Victoria grinned and grabbed her drink as Kris was passing them around.

“I said ‘*discrete methods*’, lady. Large formations..” he mumbled for a moment, as if he needed that time to come up with a proper response, “how should I phrase this? They attract a lot of unwanted attention, so we’re... improvising.. and then we heard of you. We’ve been sending our own to solve the issue more than once, you’re the first outsiders we reached out to.”

“If you’re not dealing with competition or traitors, then you’re up against beasts, or just some random raiders.” Kris assumed.

“Yes... I can tell you’re not just a random pack of mercenaries.” The porter eagerly smiled.

“No, we’re not, and enough foreplay!” Victoria flared up, unwilling to put up with any more delays. “What’s the price and what’s the assignment?!”

“I’ve been told to make an offer of seven hundred and fifty,” he moved on with his speech as if nothing happened, unshaken with her outburst, “but I think you surely deserve a thousand. Gold that is, for each and every one of you.”

The room fell silent as the Prelates looked at each other. Such a sum was not a laughing matter, which meant only one thing: they were getting desperate to solve this issue.

“What’s the assignment?” Nick spoke out, realizing the porter had been clearly waiting for someone to respond before moving on.

“You have to find the cause of these disruptions and deal with them. If you discover any solid proof, you are to bring it to me and I will pay up half the sum. You will get the other half when we’re certain the issue has been dealt with.” He concluded in the same chilling tone as the woman who spoke to them earlier that day. By the looks of it, both of them had the same routine and quite a similar approach, perhaps they’d been working together.

Once again, the Prelates paused for a moment, rolling their eyes and rolling their heads without saying a word, like a pack of wolves debating in silence whether to join forces to hunt and feast together or to split up and starve to death alone.

“We’ll take it.” Victoria was the one to speak, her comrades nodding in silence as confirmation.

“Excellent!” the porter rejoiced as he jumped from his seat, quickly grabbing his cap with one hand while digging into his pocket with the other. “We’ll be heading to the docks by carriage in the morning. Your stay tonight is on the house.” He winked at Nick as he pulled his hand and passed over a dozen gold pieces to him, leaving him dumbfounded as he saw himself out.

“Now that we got that out of the way, I’m going to sleep. You two should rest, too.” Victoria moaned as she got up, unbuckled her belt and began to undress next to her bed, with her back turned towards them. Clearly she had no intentions to talk about the assignment, at least for now.

She threw her belt aside, along with her pouch, her shield and her dagger all still attached to it, next to her gauntlet which was now quite a weapon when compared to the initial cylindrical one she started off with. She pulled down her breastplate and her blouse, revealing an abundance of scars she considered trophies from her adventures, adamantly refusing to remove them even when offered to do so without charge, relying on her regeneration just enough to close the wounds that caused them.

She never concealed her upper torso from anyone, unlike the lower bit which she kept strictly to herself. After undressing down to her waist, she put on the sleeping gown from the closet and proceeded to remove the rest of her clothing, tossing it on a messy pile next to the bed before slipping under the sheets.

Kris and Nick paid no attention to her, occupied with their distant thoughts as they sat one across the other and began arranging the pieces on the board.

The two of them have improved quite a lot since they started off hunting beasts, evolving into reliable fighters able to pull their own weight without asking too many questions. Even though he was three years younger than Victoria, Kris was equally capable when it came to combat, becoming a reliable Prelate but still being the second fighter in the trio simply because it was smoother for him to follow commands than issue them. He was the one supporting whatever Victoria came up with, even taking up a portion of the responsibility when necessary. He became far more observant and far more cautious than her, which was clearly visible in the complete lack of any scarring. Most notably, he got his ego under control, not taking nearly as much pride in his actions as she did, gradually turning from an egoist into a responsible fighter and quite a capable mercenary.

On the other hand, Nick was the odd one out, the unique element. Unlike Kris, who woke up from his coma after only a couple of days after the Annual Encounter, it took Nick two whole months to regain consciousness and two more to get out of bed without anyone's help. Most had assumed his combat career came to an end then and there, but barely six months later they were all proven very much wrong.

His unique talent allowed him to easily master pretty much any Prelate knowledge he was provided, as if he already knew most of it beforehand, but he did not stop there. Determined to become an exceptional Cleric, he hit the books way beyond his intended level and was, somehow, able to perceive and apply certain Cleric skills even though he hadn't mastered their Prelate prerequisites, performing a feat which was considered incomprehensible by many and impossible by most. Because of this, Nick became the first Prelate in the history of the Asurthan Amphorium who was given special treatment: instead of attending third year Prelate classes he was now promoted to the fifth and his Amphorium days were quickly coming to an end.

Within the trio, he was the one with the most potent enhancements. Not only were they stronger than anticipated, but also lasted longer. He also mastered a couple of Cleric enhancements only the chosen elite could pride themselves with. That made him the designated enhancer in the trio and it was pretty much everything he ended up doing. In combat, he would usually stand aside and provide aid whenever needed, keeping his allies safe from anything unwanted and providing the boost to overcome their challenges. His first great adventure with the spider in the Kobold mine was the last adventure worth remembering and the last challenge to truly test his limits, as time went on he became less of a fighter and more of an active observer, sometimes an enhancer, sometimes a healer, depending on requirements.

As time moved on and as their assignments went on, he was slowly coming to terms with his role within the group, slowly grasping the true nature of being a Cleric. But, even though he understood this, Nick still felt something was awfully wrong.

Chapter 02

- Interview -

The faithful day had finally arrived. Instead of waking her up with a slash of his belt across her back, Mordek took her by the hair and raised her off the ground. She barely felt any pain, at least that's how she made it appear.

“You will be broken today.” He laughed maniacally as he stood her up on her own feet. Hella tried her best to remain upright, but the weight of her own body pulled her back to the floor the moment he released his grip, her legs unable to bear the load.

“I want to... get up...” she growled from the floor, trying her best to muster the strength she clearly did not have. She wanted to disappoint Mordek more than anything, to show him how pointless his torture seemed to be, but willpower alone wasn't enough to get her body moving again. Her rage slowly began turning into sorrow but failed to wither entirely, as she applied her metal conditioning to turn to apathy by sheer will.

“Hah... Take her away.” He mumbled with a displeasing expression on his face.

Two maids dressed in their casual uniforms, both in their early forties, appeared out of the hallway behind his back and slowly approached her, carefully picking her up and helping her move. Mordek did not follow them, proceeding to inspect the cell instead.

She was well aware what were they lining her up for, but surprisingly, she wasn't afraid, not anymore. As soon as she was

dragged out of the cell, she felt genuinely happy. Leaning on both of the maids as supports, Hella managed to barely walk up to the dungeon entrance, impatiently waiting for one of them to open it. With that out of the way, she had herself dragged out of the dark underpasses of Umbrekhan, the Dragon's Nest, and was now heading back into the world she had left seemingly long ago.

A sincere smile stretched across her face when the maids lead her to their chambers and finally brought her into the castle. Through the large windows, for the first time in what seemed an eternity, she felt the daylight on her face and immediately felt it being far stronger than before. At that very moment, she realized that, either way things turn out today, she will never set foot in those dungeons again as a prisoner.

The maids took to their duties, while the younger and taller one remained standing to provide Hella with much needed support, the older one attempted to take her clothes off. To her great discomfort, her rags were soaked in sweat, blood and filth for far too long and were thoroughly fused to her skin. No matter which part of her clothes the maid reached for, it simply did not give way even the slightest.

“Looks like we have to soak them off you.” The maid concluded as they slowly lifted the tortured girl just enough for her feet to slide over the edges of the wooden tub. They gently lowered her into the clear water which quickly changed color for the worse. “Could you heat it up, please?” the maid politely asked, realizing the water had cooled down considerably since they poured it in.

Without responding, Hella lowered her hands into the water and released a deep sigh, made a nasty expression on her face as she briefly strained herself, summoning one of her skills and releasing a raw burst of energy. Soon enough, the water around

her palms began boiling and fumes began billowing out from below.

She squealed when the younger maid tried to remove a part of her torn dress from her back and miserably failed at it. The coarse piece of cloth had still been fused to her skin, soaking it did not help but there was no choice in the matter; the maids had to get her undressed. The younger tried to pull harder, forcing another squeal out of Hella when her skin cracked and a brief stream of blood made its way down her back, opening up one of her countless wounds.

“Call for Alma!” the older maid ordered without too much of a fuss, forcing the younger one to leave the room. “I’m sorry...” she quietly added as she pressed on the wound in order to stop the bleeding.

“It’s not her fault...” Hella replied with a fake smile, slowly shifting her thoughts towards the event ahead of her. “What... what should I do when I stand before him?” she asked away as she gazed into her own filth.

“If you haven’t done anything wrong, there’s nothing to be afraid of.” The maid replied compassionately, genuinely surprised the girl was clearly aware of her predicament. She proceeded to undress her, her experience allowing her to strip some of the rags before letting loose another stream of blood. Hella felt the pain, but it was considerably milder than before. “Just be your own self and everything will be fine.” The maid concluded when she finally managed to strip her down to her waist after more than half an hour of patient tugging.

The damage on her hands and her stomach wasn’t too serious, but the skin on her back was completely deformed, layered with scars and wounds stacked one on top of the other, clear signs of Mordek’s thorough routine.

“We’re here.” Alma spoke up as she entered the chamber, a blonde in her early thirties with a sincerely innocent face not unlike the older maid, arriving along with the younger maid sent to seek her out. Her uniform made her appear somewhat privileged, compared to the other two. She took one look at the half-naked girl in the tub before exclaiming: “I can’t do my work while she’s still dressed.”

Hearing that, the older maid stood up behind Hella’s back, grabbing her underneath her armpits and helping her straighten up, while the younger one proceeded to strip and tear the last of her rags fused to her legs. Fortunately, Mordek did not pay too much attention to striking below the belt, so that part of her body was largely void of bruising or wounds, making the rags come off somewhat smoothly.

Slowly washing her down with the filthy water they had at hand, the maids managed to wash Hella as carefully as they could, rolling her up in a large towel and carefully wiping her dry from head to toe, leaving only her hair wet to a certain extent. They then folded the wet towel and dropped it in front of her tub, helping her to stand on it to keep her feet off the cold floor. Once they were sure she was able to stand firm on her own, the maids stood aside to give Alma the room to work.

“Spread out your arms.” Alma suggested while pulling two halves of a modern Cleric stick from beneath her uniform and smoothly latching them together, instantly causing an surge of hatred in Hella’s mind. Even though she was aware the woman was here to help her, Hella felt an instinctive hatred towards her the very moment she realized how different they were. As a Dominion Manser, Hella was taught and came to accept that her profession is the exalted one and that she was bound to nurture as much hatred as she possibly could towards any other in order to harness that same hatred as a weapon. Still, even with that hatred starting to burn inside of her, Hella complied and gently



raised her arms, providing clear access to the wounds on her chest and her waist. The Cleric took hold of her stick with both her hands and summoned a blue glow, then directed it forwards with her left hand.

“Leave me my scars.” Hella proudly and grudgingly rumbled, but remained in her compliant stance nonetheless. She felt a mild breeze reaching her skin when the Cleric directed her glow into the wounds, accompanied with a strange numbing sensation that briefly forced her to cringe at first.

“My naive child.” Alma sighed, proceeding with smooth movements across her skin, slowly removing her wounds one by one. “Scars are worthless to all but the weak.” Hella felt another burst of hatred building up inside, caused by the realization she won’t be able to show her scars off to anyone. She considered doing something about that, maybe fighting the Cleric and keeping her scars by force, but she decided not to pursue that thought. The sensation of healing was all too appealing to let go of, a stream of seemingly cold energy was slowly regenerating her body and she could feel her skin becoming as smooth as it once was. She felt the pleasure of healing for the very first time and it was too addicting to disrupt, so, in secret, she was hoping for it to last for as long as possible.

She lowered her head and released quite a sigh when Alma began healing her back. Considering miserable state of it, the healing took a while, so much so that the treatment had to be briefly interrupted for the healer to catch her breath. She had her hands full.

Finally, when her back was dealt with, the Cleric proceeded to form the blue glow again and took it in front of Hella, to restore the skin on her stomach, kneeling down to reach for her legs as well. All the while, Hella did not shift her gaze even once, staring in apathy directly ahead as if she was standing in formation and had to remain perfectly still until ordered otherwise.

When the treatment was done, Hella heard the sound of the weapon cracking; Alma separated her stick and pulled it behind her back, concealing it underneath her uniform again along with her true nature. She did not utter anything as she left the room, leaving the maids to dress Hella up. They quickly embellished her for her encounter, dressing her up in the fanciest grey Manser dress they could find. At first they attempted to provide her with fancy heels, but since she still wasn't able to walk on her own and never had the privilege of walking in those to begin with, they quickly replaced them with the appropriate grey boots.

By noon, she was ready to face the lord. The time she spent with the maids and the humble Cleric treatment was just enough to partially recover her ruined state, she could finally walk on her own, but considerably slow and not too far without requiring a rest. Since she did not know the way to the lord's chambers, the older maid helped her along through the corridors and the stairways of the Dragon's Nest up until they reached a particular area Hella suddenly recognized.

"Knock on the large door at the end." The maid directed her to the opposite end of the corridor and left her to her devices. It was the very same corridor she got carried through in her dream, from a different perspective. Damn, seems that wasn't just a dream.

She stood in front of the large metal door and took hold of the handle on its middle, banging it four times while doing her best to keep her emotions in check. Sadly, when the doors opened without anyone holding them from the other side and when she saw him, she barely contained her heart from stopping out of sheer panic.

Lord Azrael sat behind his large desk and was currently facing her way. Not far from his papers, scrolls and the two large cups containing his pens and his writing ink, on the closer half of the desk stood several plates loaded with food. A great

porcelain bowl occupied the very middle of the desk and, being the largest and the brightest object, it immediately caught her attention; warm steam was slowly rising through the holes on its lid and spreading the appealing scent of chicken soup all around, a scent she felt the moment she entered the room. On her side of the desk stood a single chair, along with a single empty plate with a single fork, a single knife and a single spoon next to it.

“Please, sit.” The Lord said without raising his gaze nor his hands from his paperwork. As soon as Hella stepped away from the door, it spontaneously closed behind her so silently she didn’t even notice. She sat down on her chair opposing the lord, observing him in great fear; he still wasn’t paying her much attention. She kept on looking at him, questioning her fears and trying to suppress them, tapping her heels in anxiety as the moments stretched on.

She did manage to open her mouth once or twice, mustering her courage to speak, but every time she strained herself to push the air out of her lungs, her throat would lock up and she would fall silent. He seemed to be quite busy with his paperwork, that much was clear, Hella concluded it must have been some important business as the lord suddenly folded a piece of paper, dripped a bit of wax on it and pressed his ring on the document to properly seal it.

“You must be famished... eat...” he spoke in the same, mild voice as before, putting the sealed paper aside and taking hold of another one. He appeared nowhere near as mythical as the teachers described him to be, not even a glimpse of the abomination from the depths of darkness he was usually portrayed.

Hella’s initial intention was to pour a humble amount of soul into her plate, perhaps afraid she might insult the lord with any rude gesture, so that was what she did at first, but then, in

the midst of her chaotic thoughts, a particular one appeared out of nowhere and threw her focus completely off.

To hell with this, I haven't had a proper meal in, like, forever, and I'll be damned if I'm going to starve sitting in front of all of this food.

That same moment the Lord chuckled a bit and made a silent cough, but didn't shift his attention from his work. Maybe he managed to snatch that thought or sense it, or maybe it was just coincidence. Either way, Hella was way too starved out to care, her stomach was screaming for attention and begging her to stuff it up. She poured as much soup as she could possibly fit into her plate without spilling, took her spoon and took her first gulp. That yellow, juicy, fat-riddled liquid loaded with small chunks of chicken meat and vegetables brought upon the taste of such perfection, she nearly choked from the pleasure. One spoonful after another, she cleared the entire plate, then proceeded to fill it up again and then clean it even faster. Then she took her fork and snatched the closest bits of cheese, roasted meat and steamed vegetables in random order from all the plates, completely giving into her gluttony.

The roars from the depths of her stomach had finally ceased only after the amount of food on the table was cut in half, when she was so stuffed she couldn't even open her mouth properly, let alone swallow another bite. With her stomach fully loaded and bearing a sense of fulfillment she hadn't experienced in a long time, she leaned back into her chair and let out a sigh of clear pleasure. Seemed that was exactly the moment the Lord was waiting for.

“Hella, do you know why are you here?” he spoke up all of a sudden, still focused on his paperwork. She, of course, had a million thoughts instantly screaming through her mind, quickly reminding her where she was, but none of those thoughts was helpful enough to provide a sensible answer.

“I have no idea...” she offered the only response she could, sincerely and quickly, just like she was advised to do.

“Try again.” He sighed for the very first time and raised his head up to make eye contact. That stare of his made her feel as insignificant as a grain of sand, it made her shrivel in terror as she felt literally swallowed by it. She felt the true intention hidden behind such a gaze and realized he accomplished it flawlessly, becoming aware of every single detail of her entire life in an instant.

“I really don’t know.” She responded, now reverberating with fear more than anything.

“I see.” He nodded and slowly got up from his chair, coming to the left side of the desk. “Are you aware that you’ve been stealing from me?” he asked as he took hold of a chunk of fried meat from the closest plate and bit into it. “Are you aware that everything around this castle and everything within its walls belongs to me alone, starting with the water you’ve been secretly drinking and the rats you’ve been secretly eating?”

“I haven’t... thought of that.” She confessed, lowering her head in shame. She was completely aware how thieves are punished according to Drakonian law, mainly by losing their fingers or their entire hand, sometimes even being put to death if the case is serious enough or the victim was of higher stature and influence.

“Of course you didn’t, but that doesn’t matter now.” He humbly smiled and stepped forward, walking behind her back and lowering his hands on her chair. The dry wood shrieked from the sudden increase of weight, sending a chill down Hella’s spine, all the way down to her rear as he leaned forward and whispered: “I’m just curious how you did it. That is why you are here.”

“Well, I don’t know..” she thought quite hard, looking out the large window. “The water was always there and the rats came by themselves.”

The lord took a step back, took one good look at the back of her head and nodded, then moved into her view from her right and grabbed a slice of cheese, devouring it in a single bite. He briefly turned his back on her to open the glass closet and reach for two glasses to pour some of his white wine. He put one on the desk for Hella and kept one in his hand for himself.

“Tell me..” he asked on, slowly tilting the glass in his hand, shuffling the wine before taking a sip, “are you aware of the correlation between the Mansers and the essence of elements?”

“There is no correlation, that essence denounced us when we managed to rise above its limitations.” She spurred out the well learned definition, slowly directing her gaze at the glass in front of her. She never had the privilege to taste proper wine, she never really cared for alcohol and, considering this was not an opportune moment to indulge into that curiosity, she did not dare reach for it.

“Unfortunately, it definitely denounced us, all of us, but you.” The Lord spoke and drank his wine down, then lowered his gaze at the table in front of him. “I apologize for dragging you through the dungeons for the last three months, but we had to be completely sure.”

“We?!” she asked with genuine curiosity. She could clearly see and feel the pride filling the lord’s heart as soon as he heard the question and, just for a moment, she felt mighty strong for being able to read his thoughts, but then she quickly concluded it was by no means an accident. Reading thoughts and emotions solely depends on a single factor: the gap of willpower between the individuals caught in the process. The stronger can easily read the thoughts of the weaker and prevent him from reading his own and, considering the lord is undoubtedly the mightiest

individual in the Dragon's Nest, the only way for anyone to read his thoughts is for him to voluntarily allow such a thing.

“My daughter and myself, of course.” He humbly smiled. “We’ve been trying to regain control over the abilities that the essence of elements had selfishly denied us for quite a while. Maybe you, the only Manser who retained that connection, could help us.” Hella felt a surge of pride, realizing she had suddenly become perhaps the most influential individual in the entire Dominion, but, of course, she did her best to suppress her emotions, to remain humble and refrain from an outburst.

“How can I help you?” she bravely asked, staring at him with a gaze of complete dedication; a gaze used only by those able and willing to lay down their lives for their cause without second-guessing anything. She was willing to die for him because, even though he was a terror to behold, he was an exceptional role model for anyone who walked down the path of the Manser.

“The carriage to Lakrimar is already waiting for you at the main gate. You will be provided with anything you require. When Sonya returns from her journey, we will commence with your mission, I recommend you brush up on everything you learned so far in the meantime. You are excused now, but remember: this is a secret only the three of us are aware of.” He concluded and drank his wine.

Hella got up from the desk and bowed politely, turned around and slowly left the room. As soon as the door closed behind her, she grinned like never before and gleefully proceeded further down the corridor.

Left completely alone again, the lord re-arranged all of his papers and gently gestured towards the food on the desk. The plate holding the fried meat obeyed his command and slid into his reach. After biting a chunk out of the piece he chose, he gestured towards Hella's glass and it also slid across the table,

providing him another drink. He turned and stared down, through the window, watching over the carriage waiting for its prestigious passenger, turning his attention to finishing his meal, or at least what was left of it.

Atharon - Malevolence
Argent Hellion

Chapter 03

- Sorra -

They went out of the privileged lodgings straight into the city carriage, reaching the Lusida docks after a short ride with breakneck pace. The sun hadn't managed to climb its way high enough to leave the morning behind by the time the trio was already heading out to sea, sailing out of Lusida as quick as they've arrived. For the very first time, their assignment was taking them beyond the realms of the familiar and the sanctuary of friendly territory, into the unknown. It seemed just as exciting as it was terrifying.

The recruiter hadn't said a word during their carriage ride, he did not feel the need to. The modest frigate they were now sailing on had sailed under the republic flag at first, replacing its banner as soon as the cathedral disappeared on the horizon, now bearing a large, square flag depicting a white unicorn within a red shield.

"You don't seem surprised." The recruiter noted as he approached the trio on the deck, realizing they aren't paying even the slightest bit of attention to the flag, or any of the crew for that matter, expressing nothing but mild exhaustion and annoyance.

"There is no such thing as bad money." Kris replied in a way only a proper mercenary could appreciate.

"In that case, let us proceed." He nodded in appreciation and pulled out a broad map of the central Kaledonian region, spreading it over one of the crates, the mercenaries taking note of his action and immediately approaching to observe. "Our last

contact with the previous expedition was here, in Lewin, about two weeks before we sent the message your way.” He explained, tapping the map somewhere near the middle of the main road connecting Tricia and Arpenia.

“That’s all you got?!” Victoria muttered after a brief moment of silence, which made Kris more than disgruntled. He was rolling both his eyes and his mouth, but again, he kept whatever he had on top of his mind for himself.

“Pretty much.” The recruiter shrugged. “It is up to you to explore the area around Lewin and eliminate whatever is disrupting our convoys, then bring the proof of your accomplishment back to me.”

“How much time do we have?” asked Nick, taking a careful look at the map. The region the recruiter had pointed at appeared to be a combination of hilly terrain, minor gorges and thick forests, not unlike the indigenous areas of central Macaterra where they nearly lost their lives during one of their recent pursuits.

“If we are to take the journey home into account, I’d say three months from your drop-off. If I don’t hear from you by then, you’ll be discarded in favor of another group.”

“Three months?!” Victoria stared at him, completely dumbfounded, finally realizing the true scale of their predicament. It was only then she had realized why the price tag on this assignment was so damn high.

“Judging from your reputation,” the recruiter relished, “I think that’s more than enough time. We’ll be arriving at Sorra in about a month and you’ll be discretely dropped off there. I suggest you use that time to familiarize yourselves with the maps of the region, maybe copy a couple of them.” He added and straightened his back, groaning in mild pain.

“What maps?” Nick wondered.

“Those maps!” the recruiter pointed him towards one of his tall subordinates rapidly approaching, with quite a bundle in his hands. As soon as he slammed his bundle in front of the mercenaries, he pointed out several detailed maps of the region, starting from the northern shores and ending with the southern border region familiar to most as the Ghost Hill.

“This is not how we operate!” Victoria screamed in anger, but strangely, nobody spat back at her, not even the recruiter who was already heading to the other end of the ship.

“How are they supposed to know we really did it?” Kris discretely whispered to Nick.

“Well, if we don’t show up in Lusida in three months’ time, we won’t get paid at all and, if we try to screw them over, I feel they are going catch up with us sooner rather than later.” Nick quietly responded, taking note of the individual who just gave them a substantial piece of homework. The man pulled a piece of writing coal wrapped in a thin layer of leather, stood still for a moment to contemplate his options and proceeded to give it to Nick, then turned around and disappeared the way he came. Nick immediately put the piece of coal aside and began shuffling through the maps along with Kris, trying to find the one that suited them best, while Victoria, in her usual manner, remained leaning on the nearest fence huffing and puffing like an ignored hound.

* * *

The Arpenian frigate managed to make its way to the northwestern Kaledonian archipelago after two weeks of sailing around the reef, crossing its path with several other ships bearing the banners of several Kaledonian countries. Out of everyone aboard, Victoria seemed the one most surprised when she noticed that all ships seemed to ignore one another, as if

all animosities between their countries were strictly limited to solid land. The weather was favorable for most of the voyage, visibility was ideal and the shore was always present at the edge of the horizon.

The Prelates managed to track their progress on the map with relative ease, recognizing the landscape and familiarizing themselves with the maps. Day after day, island after island, they were closing in on their destination, everyone dealing with their boredom in their own different way. Unlike the others, Nick spent most of his time in his quarters, trying his best to copy as much of the details from the provided maps. As far as he was concerned, every single one of those could be of great importance.

Under the cloak of night, almost a full month after it set sail from Lusida, the lone Arpenian frigate reached its intended destination. The seas were unusually calm and silent, the fog had reduced visibility to less than fifty meters and that made their quiet approach all the more subtle and less likely to attract any kind of attention.

The outlines of the thick forest they were after made its debut on the edges of the horizon ahead. Without much noise, the sails were secured and the frigate crawled to a halt, one of the boats got lowered on the side facing the shore, making its way toward it with synchronous movements of its oars. There were six of them in the boat, three mercenaries, two crewmembers and the recruiter himself, he was the one turning the rudder and directing the boat, keeping a lookout on any signs of life.

“Good luck and be discrete.” The recruiter whispered after Kris jumped out into the waist-deep water, barely able to muffle his screaming into wailing when the cold sank its frosty teeth into his groin. After dropping them off, the boat drifted back to the open seas, the mercenary trio made their way to the shore bearing their full workload. The fog moved along with them, the

frigate had vanished along with the boat as the shrouded depths fell completely silent.

“Move it.” Victoria barked in her usual commanding tone as Nick was slowly falling behind while trying to figure out the map he had just reached for. He managed to find Lewin on it, as well as the tens of kilometers of thick forests standing between them and the town, figuring it would be far easier to go around than crawl through. Fortunately, there was a shore town nearby, it was named Sorra on the map, the same the recruiter had mentioned before. The only thing the recruiter didn’t bother to mention and pretty much everybody had failed to take into account was that the way around was a bit too long to be crossed in a single day of walking.

“I sure hope it’s just a bunch of random beasts.” Nick uttered after a while, managing to disrupt the silence that had befallen the group. They were making slow progress, following the barren shoreline, all the while referencing the map and seeking the outlines on their sketches with barely any success.

“You know what,” Kris moaned, “if it turns out those numbskulls are actually counter-intelligencing their asses over our heads, we’re utterly screwed.”

“Shut your air holes!” Victoria spat back from the front, moaning and stretching her arms for the hundredth time. “We’ll do what we came here to do, they can blame the vampires for all I care.”

“Bloody right you are, mistress! Hisss...” Kris mocked her in a patronizing voice, causing her to burst out in laughter for the first time in a while.

The morning came and went as the fog slowly lifted, revealing a wide shore bracketed in-between the endless sea on one side and a thick forest on the other. As they forced their way through an endless slog of sludge and shallow mud, they

finally managed to reach solid ground and stumble upon a thin layer of shore foliage. They thought about taking a break, but then they spotted an unknown silhouette at the very edge of the fog. It was looming over the water and seemed to be whispering something.

The trio pulled out their weapons at the ready and slowly began their approach, Kris and Victoria were the ones going in the front, slowly tightening the buckles on their gauntlets while Nick was trailing two steps behind them, holding his Cleric stick with both hands and ready to engage his first enhancement if called for.

They approached and quickly realized it was just an old man, dressed in a soggy black raincoat, sitting on his stool on the pier, rocking back and forth while constantly muttering something into his chin. He had a bent metal bucket nearby, along with an improvised fishing pole he had jammed in-between two planks so he wouldn't lose it.

“Caught anything?” Kris yelled out as soon as they approached close enough to clearly see him, to which the old man jumped up on his feet. His slow motion and his atrophied face were clear signs of considerable age, along with his eyes which were incapable of grasping the world around him as they once did so they had to be open as wide as possible.

“Oh, they're as big as they come!” He called back in a rippling voice as he turned their way, pointing at the bucket to show a pair of small, still fish inside. “Would you join me for dinner?” he suddenly asked, stretching his neck out as if he was trying to spot something further behind them.

“We don't have the time.” Kris politely replied, lowering his guard and approaching the old man. “Could you show us the way to Lewin?” he asked.

“Nah, nah...” he moaned, took a good look at them and opened his mouth as wide as he could, took a deep breath and continued, “you don’t wanna be wandering around here, definitely, not at all.” Even though he was wearing a thick raincoat and yet another coat underneath it, he was shivering uncontrollably as if the draft had blown its way through him long ago in more ways than one.

“Is that so?” Victoria joined in, speaking up more sharply than she intended, expecting yet another prolonged and rather pointless senior lecture.

“Yup, all kinds of crazy stuff goin’ around here, creepy, freaky, horrible, baaaaaaaad!!” the old man rambled on, his voice trembling on that last word of his, clearly frightened of the perky girl who did not seem to be willing to lower her weapons or stop staring directly at him. It seemed like she was trying to strangle him with eye-contact alone, so much so he even briefly stopped shaking.

“We’re aware of that, that’s why we’re here.” She proudly waved her gauntlet and her shield around just in case he hadn’t noticed. “Either show us the way or piss off.” She growled.

“I really have no idea about that Lewin of yours,” he spoke on with notable ease, raising his left hand and pointing towards the opposite side from which they came, “but my buddies probably know who you’re talking about. Just follow the road and you’ll reach them... I guess...”

The conversation ended then and there as the trio made their way down the shore in the direction they were pointed, the old man sat back on his stool and began mumbling to himself again, continuously leaning back and forth just like he did earlier. After several kilometers, the shore began to pull its way deeper inland and made a sharp turn behind a rift. When they reached the curb they stumbled upon quite a settlement, a sight which was just as impressive as it was depressing.

Sorra was one of those settlements not many people outside Cilusia knew of and, considering where it was located, it didn't come as much of a surprise. It appeared to be an isolated place, quite a way away from the main roads and from any noteworthy traffic. But seems it got a lot of unwanted attention recently, almost all of the houses at the edges of the settlement were torn apart, disfigured, neglected and abandoned. Those made of wood have mostly been burned down or rotted away while the ones made of stone were in a somewhat better condition, but not by much. The vast array of ruined housing was disrupted with a palisade wall four meters high, buried in solid ground and surrounded by a deep moat filled with stakes instead of water, coated with numerous and colorful deterrents. There was only one way across the moat: through the palisade gate which also controlled the only drawbridge in the area. For the sake of brevity, a vast clearing was made just before the moat, more than enough to open up the view for the watchtowers to spot anything moving out of the abandoned ruins towards the palisade. It seemed Sorra had been split into two parts: more than three-quarters of it was left abandoned while the remaining quarter seemed like a tightly packed suburb of a small town.

They made their way down the path and quickly found themselves among the ruins. Taking a closer look revealed that any useful material had been long salvaged, leaving the area for nature to claim as her own again, something she was diligently working on. Any ruins left without a roof were almost completely covered in foliage, while those still bearing at least something that resembled a roof held on to their traces of civilization. Step by step, they made their way down what seemed to be the main street not too long ago, not being even the slightest bit surprised when the palisade guards began screaming at them the very moment they cleared the last piece of rubble and stepped into open view.

“Hey, where do ya think you’re going?” an old guard yelled out in a frail voice from one of the watchtowers, wearing a uniform of a Ranger that saw way too many generations of service to be considered battle worthy.

“We’re just passing through!!” Victoria screamed back at him so hard she nearly tore her throat apart.

“And where the hell are ya headed?!” came a pretty obvious question.

“Why should you care, you old fart?” She muttered at first but then decided to respond properly. “We’re looking for Lewin.” She raised her voice just enough to be heard, in an attempt to keep her vocal cords from aching.

“Tristan, get that gate up!” They heard the guard’s voice on the other side of the wall. “We’ve got another damn pack of mercenaries.” He was talking more than loudly enough for all of them to hear as two other guards began turning the wheel to lower the drawbridge. When it finally made its way down and granted them safe passage, the trio found themselves facing not too humble of a guard wearing a typical Knight armor with the mark of Tricia on his chest: a grey sparrow within a white contour of a castle. He had two of his subordinates standing right behind him, at the ready.

“Guess we’re not the only ones passing through, huh?” Kris spoke up as soon as they approached him. The guy was more than two meters in height and looked like a highlander who just recently got re-introduced to civilization.

“So you heard that...” he spoke in a condescending and rather deep voice, faking a humble smile and revealing two rows of bright, white teeth. “No, you’re not the first ones and you won’t be the last. Please follow me.” He politely turned around and made his way deeper into the settlement.

As they moved among the populous, their attention was mostly focused on the palisade. The forest was clearly visible from within the palisade, but it seemed to be spaced out far enough to prevent any creature from jumping the gap. Judging by the appeal and the mood within the settlement, the palisade was clearly doing its job at keeping whatever had plowed its way through the remainder of Sorra at bay. The houses seemed well maintained and the people walking around without much concern for their safety.

“Nice walls you have here.” Victoria taunted the guard.

“True.” He took the bait and began spurring dialog as he was walking them down the main street. “Ever since we managed to get the palisade up, Sorra is recovering. It’s slow, it’s hard, but at least it’s safe.” He spoke in apparent apathy, repeating the same old lines he had the chance to rehearse a thousand times.

“Any unusual occurrences lately?” Nick asked in something of a crude tone, realizing their presence didn’t appear unexpected and that both the guards and the general population didn’t seem too concerned with their presence, or their intentions.

“Truth be told...” the guard thought for a moment and shifted his tone, “now that I think about it, the attacks have almost completely stopped.” He waved to a couple of settlers loitering at the nearest corner, seated around a wooden barrel and drinking their beer. “Up until about two months ago we couldn’t get a break from those damn freaks, but they barely make an appearance now. Sometimes we spot them wandering the ruins, some of them approach the moat every now and then so we chuck some fire at them and that’s pretty much it.”

“How’s the region doing?” Nick continued to inquire.

“Couldn’t tell you, we’ve been ordered to stay put.” He shrugged. “Your best bet would be to ask around yourself, I



suppose people seem to be handling themselves quite well. They haven't been asking for any help since this damn thing began."

"Ummm... we were told there's some kind of weird stuff going on around here." Kris threw his own observation into the conversation, causing the guard to drop his head and sigh quite heavily.

"I see you met Benny... Poor bastard. Ever since his wife and daughter got torn apart he lost his damn mind. Keeps sitting on that damn pier of his from dawn 'till dusk just talking to himself, eating nothing but raw fish and sleeping in the ruins of his own house. He refuses to enter the palisade. It's a miracle nothing bad happened to him yet, those freaks seem to be ignoring him for some reason. Who knows, maybe he's right and maybe something or someone greater than us is to blame... I don't know, I'm just rambling."

The enclosed area of Sorra wasn't a large one to begin with, they manage to reach the southern gate after not much of a walk. Seeing them approaching, the guards had already lowered the bridge and opened the gate beforehand, allowing them to seamlessly pass through the entire settlement without ever stopping.

"This is where we part ways." The main guard nodded as he stopped at the far end of the drawbridge, taking his orders not to leave the palisade quite literally. He stood aside and allowed them to pass, dropped his cloak back and rested his hand on the hilt of his sword as if he got tired by the brief tour. "Keep going straight, then turn towards Tricia when you reach the main road. You should hurry if you want to reach Lewin by nightfall, this region can be quite treacherous at night, especially the woods!" He said his goodbyes and saluted them, Nick being the only one to respond with same gesture as he was the only one facing him at the time.

Now that he was done escorting yet another batch of mercenaries out of town, the guard returned to his duties, commanding his comrades to close the gate and begin raising the drawbridge. The Prelate that had just saluted him stood still as the wide bridge made its way back into its vertical position, once again the path behind them was closing off and forcing them onward. When the rattling of the wooden tackles and tugging chains died out, he turned around and ran towards the other two.

He caught up with them as they walked among the ruins once more and began conversing about their own personal matters, unaware that a particular set of eyes had just laid their sights upon them, the very same ones that followed them around on each and every one of their expeditions. Those mysterious eyes weren't far, stealthily concealed within one of the highest canopies, out of human reach.