

**TITHE**

**REBIRTH & RETRIBUTION**

# PROLOGUE: NEW ENEMY

“Anything?”

The petty officer paused for a moment before looking up from his screen.

“No sir, communications are still down. Cause is unknown.”

Radio static filled the room, accented by raindrops landing on the hard metal roof above. The captain stood in the center of the room, surrounded by personnel attending various terminals. Looking out the window in front of him, he observed the movement of patrols below. Security had been heightened not too long ago on his orders.

The captain let out a puff from his cigar, sighing as he did so.

“*Of course,*” he muttered under his breath.

He turned towards the radio operator.

“Petty officer, alert the Knight and his men. I want them here ASAP.”

“Aye aye, sir.”

The captain returned his attention to the window. Opposite the runway ahead of him was the barracks, and further beyond that lay the outer perimeter, a dark and damp forest surrounding them for miles in each direction.

Across the base, three men stood watch outside the barracks, sheltered from the rain inside a small, rusted metal shack.

“Lovely weather tonight, right Kyle?”

Kyle had propped himself up against a wall, arms crossed, and uniform untucked.

He scoffed and leaned his head back.

“Tell me about it. Just my luck to get stationed in the ass end of Stenheim.”

“Could be worse, we could have been sent to Etovsika. There’s always something going on over there.”

Kyle slowly slid down the wall till he reached the wood floor. He could hear the creaking tracks and whining engine of an MT-41 Adulator tank passing by.

“I guess, but it seems like things are going to be just as bad tonight. Not like they tell us grunts what’s going on. I’m just ready to get out, I’m tired of this shit.”

Lee fiddled with the straps on his chest rig as he swung side to side in his rolling chair.

“What are you going to do when you get out anyways?”

“Can’t say I’ve given it much thought. Figured I’d just find a girl, settle down, have some kids or something. Nothin’ special. What about you? Gonna start that sewing club, Lee?”

Lee chuckled as he reclined further into his rolling chair, resting his arms behind his head.

“Very funny.”

Kyle shrugged his shoulders. “What? I’m not judging, some guys are into that kind of stuff. Not all of us are cut out to make it with the ladies.”

“You’re right, some of us like sewing and others like getting dirty with their sister.”

Lee began howling with amusement. Kyle smirked in response.

The third trooper, who sat on the ground with his back against the wall and cover obscuring his face spoke up.

“By the Flame, can’t you guys be quiet?! I’m trying to sleep!”

Kyle and Lee both turned to look at the drowsy soldier.

“You’re gonna get written up if they catch you snoozing like that, Thorne.” Kyle said.

“Isn’t that what you two are supposed to be keeping watch for?”

“Only cause I’m so nice” Kyle said with a shit eating grin.

Lee immediately jolted out of his seat, to the others’ surprise. Frozen still, he motioned to the others with his eyes and whispered.

*“Get up!”*

The other two rushed to attention, both trying to fix their garments as quickly as possible, as though they hadn’t been half asleep a second earlier.

A trio of armed men approached from the opposite side of the runway. Clad in jet black coats and kit from head to toe, the golden gleam of their goggles was their only defining characteristic in the darkness of the inky night.

They stopped just in front of the shack, now illuminated by the fluorescent droning light hanging outside the barracks.

The leader of the trio methodically scanned the men inside; laser rifle firmly gripped in his hands. Thorne and Lee tried their best to maintain their composure.

A light nod, and he holstered his weapon to the side.

“You’re relived” said the leader, in a deep synthesized voice.

The three soldiers glanced at each other, dumbfounded at what the sailor had told them.

“Captain’s orders, alert the Knight and report to the command center.”

“Wait, you said the Knight?” Lee inquired.

“Good to see your ears work, trooper.”

He signaled to his rear with his off hand. “Now fucking move.”

They stepped out of the shack, and the three sailors stepped in to take their place. Taking one last glance behind him, Lee swung open the door to the barracks and stepped inside, with the others following suit.

A long sterile hallway stretched across the length of the building to both the left and right. The eerie hum of overhead lamps and muffled sputters of rain echoed through the building. Distant thunder broke up the quiet. A door at the far end of the left side is what they sought. A faint golden glow emanated from beneath the door frame, and the rolling gust of incense clouded the way.

“Wow, it’s really quiet in here.” Said Thorne.

Kyle looked towards him. “No shit.”

Kyle stepped forward to Lee’s side as the trio proceeded towards the door.

“Who the hell were those guys anyways?” he asked.

Thorne spoke up from behind.

“Gunmen, they’re the Navy’s elite. I heard they’re the real deal. If they’re involved, it must mean things are pretty serious.”

Lee chuckled. “You think the Gunmen are the real deal? Wait until you see a Knight for the first time. If they’re calling on him, then shit’s already hit the fan.”

“Good thing he’s with us then.” Kyle said.

They stood outside the door. They could hear a faint hum and what sounded like the rustling of a wind chime. A piece of paper was hung to the door by tape, reading *Please Knock*. It ended with a smiley face.

Kyle scratched the back of his neck.

“You know... I heard its bad luck to walk in on a Knight like this. We could probably get someone else to do it.”

“Shut up Kyle.” Lee retorted.

Kyle shrugged his shoulders.

“Just saying.”

Lee knocked three times.

A grizzled and muffled voice responded from the other side.

“Come in.”

Pushing the door open, Lee stepped in first and the others followed with trepidation.

In the center of the small, dark room was the Knight, kneeling in front of an altar covered in prayer beads and wax sealed inscriptions. The altar portrayed the image of a figure made of fire adorned with a large magnitude of eyes and clothed in extravagant white, red, and gold robes around the waist. The only light in the room came from the pink and yellow flames he held in his hands. Over his shoulder was a diminutive golden figure with feathered wings.

The Knight wore a pearly white suit of armor that speckled like stardust, with an oily black undersuit beneath. Strewn across his back was a silver-colored fur cape. The arms were made of interlocked sections, hard enough to protect against gunfire, but still flexible enough to allow great freedom of movement. An antenna adorned each side of his helmet, with large cables and tubes running from the back of the helmet towards his suit.

He turned his head towards the trio, revealing the neon blue visor that shimmered from the burning ashes.

“What is it?”

Lee shifted and straightened his posture, hoping to at least show some semblance of military bearing.

“Uh, sir, excuse us, but the captain has ordered us to report to the command center.”

Kyle nudged Lee’s shoulder.

“Sir.” Lee said as he stared blankly ahead.

“I see. Any details?”

“No, but it seemed important, sir.”

The Knight closed his palms, extinguishing the flames in his hands. He stood up, retrieving a sheathed blade and dagger from in front of the altar as he did so. Grabbing a sidearm from his side holster, he released the cylinder to inspect the weapon before returning it to its resting spot.

The golden figure turned towards the trio, revealing a blank void where its face would be with nothing but four glowing yellow eyes. It faded into golden dust, the harmonious sound retreating as it did so, and the particulates flowed towards the Knight.

“Let’s go.”

The four men exited the building to the storm once more. The roar of helicopter blades howled overhead as its searchlights panned past them. More patrols and armored vehicles spread out across the length and breadth of the facility.

Thorne piped up from behind the Knight.

“Excuse me sir, I don’t mean to bother you, but do you know what’s going on?”

The Knight turned his head to acknowledge the soldier while continuing forward.

“No, I don’t.”

“Oh. I just figured you might know.” Thorne replied in a hushed voice.

Boone took notice of the man’s worries.

“I wouldn’t concern yourself trooper, as far as I’m aware tonight is supposed to be relatively uneventful. We’ll be fine.”

Thorne smiled.

“Yes, thank you sir.”

Entering the command center, they were greeted with the sight of personnel rushing in every direction, much livelier and more chaotic than the barracks. With communications down, they had resorted to sending information in the old-fashioned way. Cutting through the crowds, they made their way up a staircase at the back end of the atrium.

The farther up they went, the fewer and fewer people they saw. At the summit they were met with a singular open doorway, two Gunmen to either side.

“Knight Commander Boone, it’s about time.”

It was Captain Sanderson, the commanding officer of the Navy personnel on the base.

A crack of lightning pierced through the sky behind the captain, the sound of thunder breaking up the monotony of rain and whirring computers. The three soldiers would salute as they entered, the Knight would not. Boone could feel the displeasure in the Captain’s voice and annoyance on his face.

It seemed most of the personnel had left already, no point sitting around if the radios weren't functional. All that was left was the captain and his Gunmen guards.

"At ease."

The troopers dropped their salute in response.

"I'd like to get this done within a timely manner, Knight. So, gather around the tac-screen, I'm not going to go over this twice."

The four men stood in front of the command table and a holographic display of the local area appeared. Though normally there would be indicators for local forces, the communications blackout only allowed for the map data to be shown. The blue glow of the screen highlighted the captain's cleft lip and scarred cheeks.

"As you are already aware, tomorrow was meant to be the start of the yearly joint branch training exercise, though as you might have guessed, that is no longer the case. At about 0200 hours ago, we received a message from ANRCOMM moving all stations to high alert. Since then, a communications blackout has prevented any further responses. I've ordered all personnel return to the base until this issue is resolved. All of our patrols have reported back. Except for one"

Boone looked up from the screen.

"And that's where we come in, sir?"

The captain glared at the knight as he put out his cigar.

"Real intuitive, aren't you? Refrain from making any more unnecessary comments. But yes, that's what you're here for. Search Sakra squad's last known position and report back here with any findings. Dead, alive, or otherwise, doesn't matter. I want to know."

The captain glanced side to side as he looked over the three men.

"Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir!" said the troopers.

"Good. Now move out."

The mortals left and proceeded down the stairs and back outside, though the Knight stayed behind, standing eerily still, attention still fixed towards the screen.

The captain pulled out another cigar from inside his coat.

"What is it, Knight?"

Boone lifted his head up, focusing his attention on the captain.

“Sir, are we expecting an attack? There’s been no insurgent activity in this area for months, why the concern now?”

The captain scowled “Everything is on a need-to-know basis. I already told you everything that you *need* to know.”

“If this was just a simple search and rescue, you wouldn’t be calling on me. I need to know why. Is it the rebels? Or something else?”

The captain slowly stepped forward, one foot at a time towards the Knight with his arms behind his back. Reaching up, he placed his hand on Boone’s bulky shoulder pad, who stood at least a foot taller than him.

The captain spoke in a low and serious tone.

“I don’t know what you were before this life, Boone. Farmer, teacher, politician, who knows. You might think that you’re special cause of that little shard in you.”

The captain brought his face closer to the Knight’s visor.

“But you’re not.

Not here.

Here, we have a chain of command, and while you are on these premises you will respect that chain of command. You Knights think you mean something, that you know everything, and that the secrets of the universe are at your fingertips. But you know nothing. Just children playing with fire.”

He removed his hand and walked back towards the other side of the tac screen.

“Do as you are ordered, commander, or I will be sure to let your masters know of this insubordinate behavior. I’m sure they don’t take too kindly to those putting their nose where it doesn’t belong either.”

Boone looked to his side, noticing one of the Gunmen tightening his grip on his pulse laser rifle.

“I trust that there will be no further issues, Boone?”

A thin veil of steam seemed to rise from the Knight’s clenched fists.

“No, sir.”

The captain smirked. “Good. Now get out of my command center.”

Boone turned towards the stairs to reconvene with his men. As he did, he heard the snarky remarks of the captain echoing behind him.

“I’ve got a feeling that your kind will get what’s coming for them, sooner than later.”

The Knight returned outside where his men sat waiting. The drops of rain sputtered and evaporated as they struck the Knight’s armor.

“Something wrong, sir?” asked Lee.

“I expressed some concerns to the captain. He had some choice words to share.”

The trio had grabbed their armaments while waiting for the Knight, the standard issue R-53 impulse rifle, a long rifle with a carry handle and built in ammo counter. Kyle held out one for Boone, who grabbed it before heading towards the gate. The men followed closely behind.

Boone reflexively looked over his weapon, checking for any damage or faults. It was by no means the most sophisticated option, but it was reliable, and a classic he couldn’t help but appreciate. He removed the magazine, inspecting the sabots.

“Is the Captain always like that?” Thorne asked.

Kyle smirked. “Who knows. Brass have always got a stick up their ass. Considering he’s Navy, probably literally too if I had to guess.”

Lee jutted in. “Watch your mouth there, Kyle. You don’t know who might be listening.”

Exiting the confines of the base through the gates, the guards saluted as they walked past.

“Good luck, sir” one of them said.

Boone turned his head and nodded in response.

Entering the darkness of the surrounding forest, the troopers activated the flashlights on their weapons, while Boone activated the lights adorning the sides of his helmet. The Knight’s enclosed helmet protected him from the increasingly violent downpour. His men weren’t so fortunate.

Boone reached for a spool on his waist. Pulling apart some of the thread, he weaved it into a small orange bubble which began to lightly hum and float near him. It was a rudimentary song, but one that was still useful.

“Fancy lightbulb, sir” remarked Kyle.

“It’s a little more than that” Boone replied jovially.

The bubble floated forward, illuminating their way and creating a small pocket of warm air. The further they went, the thicker the brush and shrubbery got as they were further removed from civilization.

Kyle pointed ahead.

“See that?”

There was a faint red glow deeper into the forest, barely visible through the branches and leaves.

“Maybe they set a fire to stay warm.”

“Possible” replied Boone. “But not certain. Stay alert.”

As they continued forward, the orange glow highlighted barbed wire, barricades, and other fixed fortifications, a sign they were near their objective.

Ahead of them lay a small set of trenches, leading closer towards the red light they saw before. Dropping into the trench, they searched for signs of life, hoping that Sakra squad might have decided to take shelter for the night.

The thick mud clung to their boots as they walked, making it difficult for the troopers to move as they slogged through. Boone had no such struggles, for his strength, a little extra weight on his feet meant nothing.

As the red glow began to envelop them, they were met with a large clearing. Burnt and splintered trees lay all around them, as they heard the screeches of another tree tumbling to the earth below. The trench they were in seemed to have been breached, creating a gaping hole.

“What could have caused all this?” Thorne inquired.

Kyle shook his head. “I bet it was those Etovsikan rebels. Bastards.”

Lee picked up some of the ashes from the ground, feeling their subtle heat. “It had to have been some kind of bomb, what else could have caused this much damage?”

Thorne spoke up. “If it was a bomb, wouldn’t we have heard it back at the base?”

Boone stepped up the dirt mound where the hole was and positioned himself in the center of the clearing as ashes continued to fall around him.

He looked down towards his chest.

“Sam, get out here. I need you.”

In a brilliant, gilded light, the winged figure from before appeared once more.

The three troopers were awestruck; they could do nothing but watch.

The angel bowed before he spoke in an elegant and sophisticated manner. “Yes, Boone?”

“Sam, search this area for signs of IEDs or plastic explosives. I need to know what happened here.”

“Of course, Boone.”

Reaching out his hand, samples from the ground began to float towards him, and the angel cast an incantation upon them.

Boone pointed towards Thorne.

“Stay with Sam. The other two, follow me.”

Thorne dug into a small divot in the mud, while the others proceeded back down into the trenches.

“Seems like you were right to be concerned, sir,” said Lee.

“Clearly,” snarked Kyle. “As if I thought it couldn’t get any worse.”

Boone stopped in his tracks, signaling the others to halt as well.

“Sir?” said Lee.

“*Shh.*”

Boone pointed to the mud ahead of them.

Footprints, clear as day etched into the murky soil.

The trio were on high alert now, Boone took the lead as the others followed closely behind, watching any and all directions for signs of hostile activity.

The trail pointed them deeper into the trench network. The orange bubble would lead the way, illuminating the path before them. A faint smell began to afflict the nostrils, growing stronger the further they went.

Lee sniffed the air. “You smell that too?”

“Smells like pork to me,” remarked Kyle.

The trail ended in front of a wooden door in the side of the trench wall, a tarp canopy hanging over it. The bubble dissipated as it reached the door. The smell was overpowering now.

Kyle and Lee moved into position along opposite sides of the door, as Boone steadily opened it.

A pungent wave of odor swept across them as a torrent of flies followed in its wake. The two troopers began to gag as the diseased smell escaped the confines of the room.

Boone set his helmet to filter out the smell as he stepped inside.

The ground below him was covered in a disgusting ooze of melted flesh and bone. Molten skin stuck to black charred bones jutting out of the disgusting mass of biological material. Only bits and pieces of some human faces and clothes could be identified in the mess.

Lee covered his mouth and nose as he spoke. “Righteous Flame... how?”

Boone turned his attention towards the wall. It was adorned with several large burn marks, smoke still fresh in the air.

He reached into the flesh puddles below him to grab any dog tags he could, hoping the metal hadn’t fused with the molten meat.

“Boone.”

It was Sam, he had returned and now floated in front of the doorway.

“What is it? Where’s Thorne?”

“He elected to stay and watch the rear. I found no traces of explosives residue in the clearing, though I detected abnormal levels of Xenon in the air.”

“Xenon? Any idea what it could mean?”

“My analysis indicates that it could be the residue of an experimental plasma-based weapon. It would align with the burn marks on the interior wall of the room you now stand in.”

Boone scoffed. “Plasma weapon? I’ve never heard of Etovsikan People’s Army cells having access to lasers, let alone something as sophisticated as plasma weaponry. It can’t be.”

“What if it isn’t the snowmen sir?” said Lee.

Boone looked down towards his balled fist, still clinging onto the dog tags he had just retrieved before stowing them in a pouch on his waist.

“We need to get back to base immediately. We don’t have the time to waste guessing. The captain needs to know about this as soon as possible. Let’s move!”

“Yes, sir!”

The angel retreated into Boone’s chest once again.

The trio returned the way they came, now with haste. The storm began to pick up as the leaves and branches rustled through the wind and the downpour grew ever stronger.

The Knight called out as the group passed by the clearing “Thorne, we’re leaving! Get your ass moving!”

No response.

They stopped and turned back towards the clearing.

“Thorne?”

Still nothing.

Boone went back up the mound to look for Thorne.

“Trooper, we have no time for...”

Thorne laid in the mud unmoving. A large smoking hole was left in the back of his torso.

Boone kneeled alongside the man, flipping him over. Eyes were rolled back, body stiff.

“He’s dead?” inquired Lee.

“We’re not alone.”

Kyle twitched in his boots. “What the hell, man.”

“Stay calm, keep your eyes open, we don’t know-

BOOM!!!

A shockwave roars past them.

Turning behind them, a massive ball of fire shoots up into the air, originating from within the confines of the base. The glow of the explosion illuminated the surrounding forest. Tracers begin to light up the night sky. Gunfire and the whining alarm grew ever louder.

Crunching leaves and skittering footsteps surrounding them.

They raise their rifles in a flash, assuming a circular formation.

He could sense the unease in his men. Their hurried breaths, their rapid heartbeats. They gave it away. He understood their worries, he hardly knew what they were dealing with himself.

He was a Knight; he had to sway himself away from such thoughts.

Fear was for others.

He could hear the heartbeats of his stalkers too, though they sounded irregular. They spoke in a dialect he neither understood nor heard before.

“Sir?” said Lee. “What do we do?”

The footsteps silenced for a moment, a brief reprieve.

*Click*

The faint pull of a trigger.

“DOWN!”

POW! POW! POW!

Boone grabbed the two men and leaped into the trench behind them, narrowly avoiding a barrage of green, purple, and blue orbs hitting them from multiple directions.

A torrent of plasma began melting through the muddy trench as they were fired on from the surrounding trees.

Boone rose to his feet and lifted the two men, pointing back the way they came.

“Go! I’ll cover you!”

They made a mad dash to the relative safety the base provided.

Like a buzzsaw cutting into steel, his rifle screeched, cutting its way through the surrounding trees in a fury of lead. His bullets left behind fist sized holes, mowing through acres of forest with just a single magazine.

His attackers pressed forward, not human.

Small insectoid creatures attacked in droves; their shots began to strike his barrier.

With perfect precision, he blasted them into pulp, dozens had already fallen yet still they persisted. More shots struck his barrier, he couldn’t hold.

He retreated in the direction of his men, continuing to fire as the bug creatures dropped into the trench to pursue him.

Boone grabbed strands from the spool at his waist, ripping them apart with the sound of a violent guitar shred, now glowing red into a ball of holy fire. Tossing it behind him, the insects lit ablaze, violently screaming in high pitched voices as their chitinous exterior withered away.

Another shot from behind finally broke his barrier just as he made it to cover.

Respite.

A constant ringing in his helmet reminded him that his barrier was depleted. He grabbed another strand, stretching it across the width of his body. A white flash covered his armor and the beeping resided.

The ammo counter on his rifle flashed red. The magazine fell from his weapon, and he loaded another from a pouch on his abdomen. He pulled back the charging handle.

*“Breathe Boone.”*

It was Sam, from within his mind.

He exhaled.

Ready.

Another bug came around the corner. A lightning fast round house kick into its body obliterated it instantly into tiny green chunks splattered across the trench wall.

Boone reached into a pouch on his chest, pulling out a flashbang. Pulling the pin, he tossed it over the trench into the swarm.

POP, POP, POP!

Several flashes and the thunderous crack of the flashbang disoriented his foes. The perfect opportunity.

Leaping out of the trench, he let loose with his rifle. They were turned into mulch in short order. Some screamed and desperately clung to life but another quick shot put them out of their misery.

He could hear more encroaching in the distance, but he had given himself an opportunity. With the lull in their numbers, he sprinted back towards his men, the rain parting as he did so. The ground quaked with every step and in no time, he was out of the trenches.

“HELP!”

Boone slid to an abrupt stop.

A massive creature stood around 50ft ahead of him, holding Kyle up by the neck.

Boone readied his rifle.

“Put the man down!”

It turned its head towards him.

Its head was covered in tan colored fur, the rest of the body covered in blue bulbous armor. Long floppy ears adorned the sides of its head and two larger ones were positioned on the back. Curved horns jut out of the top of its head. A massive tail wiggled behind it.

Its eyes were large and they glistened a vibrant violet. It had a small nose and short muzzle.

Boone yelled out again.

“Do you understand me?! Put the man down, now!”

It grinned from cheek to cheek, revealing multiple rows of jagged razor-sharp teeth. The beast licked its own face with its long, slobbery, tongue.

It widened its jaws further.

CRUNCH

It chomped into Kyle's neck, causing him to scream in agony before his throat was ripped out.

Boone began opening fire.

The beast threw Kyle's corpse to the side, splattering it against a nearby tree as it leapt towards Boone on all fours. He barely had time to sidestep it as it charged past him.

He kept firing, but to no avail as his rounds fizzled away on contact.

An energy shield.

The creature turned back towards him and dashed forward, splintering his rifle in its hands, before sending him flying through a tree with a side kick from its massive legs.

He landed against a rock, cracking it in two. Boone grasped his chest and recoiled in pain. He was given no time to rest as it pounced on him once more, sending a quick jab to his gut and kneeling him in the helmet.

It then sat on him, putting all its weight on his torso as it wrapped its long-clawed fingers around his neck and its tail around his legs. It was unlike any pain he'd ever felt.

He was already tall for a human, yet this beast still dwarfed him.

"Why?" Boone asked, barely able to gasp for breath.

The creature laughed in a feminine voice, lapping up some of the blood left on its face.

"Do the cattle need to know why they are culled?" she said in a commanding voice.

She loosened one of her hands and scratched his chin with her pointer finger.

"We all heard stories of *your* kind as pups. Nobody really thought they were true though. But our goddesses have shown us the way. Now *here we are*. And oh, what a treat you are..."

Boone was filled with anger at his helplessness; he couldn't do anything but watch her toy with him.

She brought her face to the side of his helmet and whispered.

*"I hope you don't break as easily as the others."*

She giggled, unhinging her jaw once more.

"Playing with your food, Overseer?" said a raspy male voice from behind her.

She lifted her head and turned towards him.

Another creature clad in glossy red metallic armor stepped up from behind her. He wasn't nearly as tall, though he was still larger than Boone. A neon green visor obscured his face. He

had broad shoulders and a wide torso with a tapered waist and stood in a hunched posture. His abdomen protruded from behind like an ant. The black undersuit hid a strong physique underneath.

“Let me have my fun, Varg.”

“There are millions more of these things. Hundreds in that pen alone. Don’t waste your time with one. The Reaper did her job well; they were not prepared for our arrival.”

She scoffed. “Of course she did, she’s one of the Chosen. Besides, you wouldn’t get it.”

Varg shook his head in annoyance and walked away towards the base. “You’re right. Just make it quick, woman.”

She turned back towards Boone.

“Where were we? Oh, right.”

She pressed her head against his helmet, fogging up the visor.

“Did I tell you how the other one died? He wasn’t as fortunate. He tried to run, too bad he was so slow. I grabbed him up and started popping his little fingers into my mouth, one by one. CRUNCH!”

She jabbed her claw into his side, causing him to wince in pain. He was furious.

“He begged for mercy. ‘Please stop!’ HA! An animal begging for its life! How ludicrous...”

Boone’s blood was boiling hot.

“But that’s just the beginning. Soon enough, we’ll do the same for the rest of the monkeys. It’s going to be so fun to break them all.”

He wanted nothing more than to rip out her heart.

She pulled her arm up and ignited a wrist mounted energy blade.

“The Queens will it so.” She smirked.

“RAAHHH!” Boone screamed with all his fury.

The Overseer jolted back as the burning armor forced her away.

He broke free of her grip and bashed her head with his own, sending her stumbling back. Before she got a chance to recover, he sent her flying back with a kick of his own. The Overseer barreled through the air, smashing through several trees as she smacked into the dirt next to Varg.

“I told you to kill that thing.”

The Overseer stumbled to her feet, spitting out a wad of blood and readying her execution blade. Varg did the same as well.

“Just shut up and help me kill it!”

They began to sprint towards him.

Boone retrieved his sword from his back. Pulling it between his bicep and forearm, it ignited in a burst of holy flame.

“Show these heathens no mercy, Boone!” said Sam.

A mighty swing launched a ball of blazing fire towards his enemies. The Overseer leapt back to avoid the explosion as Varg pressed forwards.

The alien warrior slashed repeatedly, Boone gracefully avoiding each one before countering with a precise swing that severed the arm to which his blade was attached. To Boone’s surprise, he ignored the pain and instead wildly swung his stump of an arm.

But another swing from Boone bisected him straight down the middle.

The Overseer dashed towards him, but Boone would grab an uprooted tree to his side and bash her, causing her to fly into another stump.

She could barely move before Boone’s sword flew forwards and stabbed into her gut, followed by a haymaker that eviscerated the tree behind and buried her into the dirt.

She vomited up blood.

“What, going to have your-“

CRACK!

Boone gave her no chance, curb stomping her head into the dirt, scattering gray matter and blood. He lifted his helmet slightly to spit on the corpse.

He could barely breathe; it had been so long since he had felt a sensation like this. That he could actually did that is. The adrenaline was wearing off now; he felt the pain in his side return.

Boone punched into the Overseer’s chest, pulling out her massive heart. He crushed it in his hands, allowing the blood to flow down his arm and pour into the cracks in his armor.

His flesh began to heal rapidly, the whole in his side was no more and the suit itself was repaired as well.

“Remember to breathe.”

“I know, Sam.”

He breathed in.

And out.

“I just want to know why this had to happen. Thorne, Kyle, and Lee...”

“They are in a better place now. Focus on saving those you still can, the Flame will shepherd the dead.”

“Right.”

More came from behind, as an ending army of alien creatures marched through the desecrated forest surrounding him.

Gunshots and cannon fire still could be heard from the base; all hope wasn't lost just yet.

Recovered in mind and body, he let loose, charging forward with superhuman speed. The ground cratered and the trees turned to dust in his wake. It wasn't long at all before he had managed to reach the base.

At the gates, he could see that half the base on the side of the barracks had already fallen to the attackers. Most of the remaining personnel were centered around the command center, fighting desperately to hold their ground. He could hear the roaring sounds of a new threat, shaking the ground with every step as it approached.

BREEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE

A colossal three-legged vehicle pressed forward from behind the barracks. Two pods attached to its main body by mechanical tendrils fired heat rays that evaporated those caught in its blast.

Boone rushed towards the command center on the left, dodging a hail of fire from across the base. A trooper signaled from an open doorway at the side of the building.

“It's the Knight, he's here!”

As Boone passed through the door, a duo of troopers quickly shut the door behind him.

“Thank the Flame, we thought you might have died!”

“Is the captain still here?”

“Yes, sir, he's still holed up in the top of the tower. He ordered us to hold our ground; he's assured us that reinforcements are en route. We just need to buy some time.”

“What?! That's suicide! The base is lost, trooper, you all need to leave!”

“But-

“Go!”

The trooper hesitated for a moment.

“Yes, Knight.”

The trooper rallied the other soldiers around him as the Knight made his way up the stairs to confront the captain. He could hear someone talking to him above.

“Sir, we’re about to lose the armory, how much longer can we hold? Should I relay the order to fall back?”

“No, continue to hold. It won’t be much longer now.”

Boone stomped forwards, pushing aside the Gunmen guarding the entrance.

The captain turned to look at the encroaching Knight.

“Commander Boone? Good to see you alive, I had feared the worst when-

BLAM!

His head exploded like a pinata, and his body slouched to the ground. Boone had shot him in the head with his revolver.

The men around him reeled in shock.

“What the hell are you doing!”

The sailors raised their weapons and pointed them towards the Knight.

“He’s not on our side.”

GRAHHHHHHHHHH

A guttural roar came from the captain’s throat. His body twitched and convulsed, gradually rising to his feet. His body shook violently as the roar grew louder and louder.

AHHHHHHHHHHHH

His flesh melted into pink pus, long tendrils sprouted from his back, and his rib caged opened into pointed teeth. A new head appeared from his neck. It was a round pink blob, with two massive green and purple eyes. Two glowing horn-like protrusions grew out of the top and two long tentacles grew out of the back of the head.

The old flesh melted away, as the figure of a pink alien woman appeared. Its torso, head, and abdomen were made of supple pink flesh, connected by large red tubes. Its limbs were long and girthy, two large claws adorning each foot. A long tail appeared from behind, with a red eye at its end.

It extended it’s arms forwards at though beckoning them.

Everyone in the room began firing on the creature, to little effect.

A jagged smile appeared from the creature's face.

Sharp tendrils burst out from its body.

Boone avoided it, while the others would be impaled. They all screamed as their bodies slowly melted and congealed into the creature.

The Knight reached to grab his blade, but the creature smacked him with another tendril. He flew out the door and threw the window of the stairwell, landing outside the base perimeter as the troopers from before ran for safety.

One by one they were cut down, melted and torn apart by the unceasing barrage of the advancing aliens. There was no end to their numbers.

The tripod appeared from behind the building, and more still approached from the horizon. The land burned around him, and no more souls were left to witness.

Human, that is.

He was the last.

His ears were ringing, his vision blurry, yet he stumbled to his feet.

A single voice cut through the fog.

“Boone! We need to run! Now!”

“Sam?”

The pink creature leapt hundreds of feet from the tower, landing directly in front of him. Boone stumbled back, still dazed.

It just stared.

“Run!”

He wanted to fight.

But he couldn't.

He turned and sprinted away.

It continued to stare at him, all the while the army continued to bear down on him.

It was too late for everyone here; he was the only one left.

He had to run, fast and far.

It might not be too late just yet.

He had to warn them before it was too late.

## ACT ONE: FALL

CHAPTER ONE: EMPIRE

*One week prior...*

The roaring winds rustled through the fur atop his head.

White pillowy clouds surrounded him, the glimmer of the fading light dancing through the skies. The deep reds and purples of the encroaching darkness mixed with the gold of the sun, creating a brilliant spectacle of color.

In the distance, he could see the blinking signal lights of passing cruisers. Just like those he would find himself upon during his own travels. No doubt carrying cargo and travelers off to far corners of the empire.

Up here in the sky there was nothing to distract. Only a few spires could break through to the heavens. The cold breeze washed away any concerns that plagued him from the lands below.

The world felt quiet.

Only the Palace appeared clearly up here. A knife pointed to the abyss above, standing brazenly above the rest of creation. Its monolithic size dwarfed everything else around it. The fluttering banner of the matriarchs stood across from him. Two overlapping right triangles sitting on their shortest side. A glittering emblem of both defiance and authority.

“I could stay up here forever.”

He rested against the metal grating below him, back to a maintenance console that hummed with a jittering static. He stared blankly into the twinkling stars and blue moon above, eyes darting between the numerous constellations.

He could hear a high-pitched cackling.

“You don’t really mean that. I know you’d miss some things down there. Besides, it can’t all be bad, can it?”

The flamboyant voice of a diminutive creature had piped up from behind him. She sat in a ball, holding her chunky legs close with her four arms as her eyes bore into the back of his skull.

The man let out a sigh, once more reminded of reality. “Easy for a meeb to say.”

She lowered her bulbous head. “My apologies Arlo, I didn’t mean to offend.”

“It’s fine, Siv.”

*She could never understand.*

She scooted closer towards him, dragging her abdomen along the grate at her feet, now sitting squarely at his side.

“We could talk about something if you’d like, sir. I know how busy you’ve been these past few months, perhaps something interesting happened during your travels you could tell me about?”

She nudged his shoulder and smirked. “Maybe even met someone special?”

He rolled his eyes. *As if.*

The man pondered a moment, forming the image of his memories in the canvas before him. A flight across the desert sands, a menagerie of vibrant alien folk, the bleak, sterile walls of an embassy. He had to wipe it away before the dread overtook him.

“It really isn’t as exciting as you might think. Besides, it’s not like I’m on vacation.”

“Nothing? Not even one interesting story?”

“Yep.”

“Really?”

“Unfortunately” he said with a groan.

Siv sighed with disappointment.

“I see. Well sir, if you ever have anything you want to talk about, I am here to listen at any time. Even the boring parts.”

Arlo chuckled “Not like you have a choice in the matter, do you?”

“You would be correct, but I really do mean it.”

She gave a great wide mouthed grin; he returned the gesture with a slight smile.

She nestled against Arlo, now resting her head against his chest. Her antennae drooped in comfort as she closed her eyes. He could feel the softness of her neck fluff pressing against him now and the quiet vibration of her purring exoskeleton, a silent thank you. She softly stroked his chestnut-colored head fur with the three digits on her upper left limb.

He swung his right arm around her, now gently caressing the top of her plump, shiny, shell with his cold, pale hands. The heat of her body contrasted with the frigid, metallic touch of the cybernetic module affixed to her back.

Arlo gazed past the Palace once more. The red sands of the surrounding desert shimmered under the glorious sun. Across the horizon, he could see rising dark smog spewed forth endlessly from grimy factories.

He took a glance down towards Siv. They were fortunate to have each other.

His gaze was now drawn towards the distant streets below. Flashing lights and wailing sirens. Best not to look at it too much, he wasn't up here to remember that.

She spoke softly with a voice like silk. "You were right, it is beautiful here, sir. Thank you for taking me with you."

His own cheeks were red hot. The warmth of an exuberant young lady was enough to make this a great outing. She was perfect, better than the last one. Even if she has some unusual eccentricities.

Siv tracked a vessel roaring in the distance.

"I bet you have other spots like this, don't you?"

"Perhaps. Any reason you ask?"

She poked his belly with one arm while twiddling with her antennae with another.

"Just curious."

Arlo looked across towards the Palace ahead of him. Its massive presence now dwarfed the sun itself as it retreated further over the horizon. A few rays of light barely managed to peak their way through the circular segments surrounding the tower. The light waxed and waned as the structure shifted.

"Yes, I do. But none of them can compare to the view here in Tonmo. Of all the places I've seen, it's the only city on Tithé I'd ever want to call home."

"Even now?"

Arlo looked towards the emblem emblazoned on his own robes. He glanced once more at the squalor beneath his feet.

"Yes, even now."

He reached out his arm, as though to grasp the towering Palace before him. "How could it not be home?"

Siv rolled her head across his pecs to look at him with her fat, round eyes.

"Do you ever wonder if they're still up there?"

Arlo lay in silence.

His view shifted to the Palace.

He turned his head towards her.

"I know they are."

The two came closer together quietly. She wrapped Arlo's arms around herself as she now lay on top of him. Arlo closed his eyes once more, content with the blankness of unreality.

"May I ask something of you, sir?"

"What is it?"

"Will you ever take me with you? At least once, outside the city?"

Siv scooted off as Arlo lifted himself up from the ground to sit in an upright position, rubbing his eyes as he groaned.

"You know I've told you already, Siv."

"I know that you always tell me it's dangerous, but you never explain why. I can handle myself, sir, I'm not a child. You won't even tell me stories anymore, just let me see for myself. Please?"

"No. I'm not going to say it again."

She stood up and crossed her front arms.

"Well, what if someone else were to take me outside the city? Your mother perhaps? Maybe I should ask her instead, since you don't want to."

Arlo jolted to his feet and grabbed onto her shoulders, bringing his head lower to match hers and speaking in a harsh whisper.

"Don't bring my family into this! Do you know what would happen if you did that?"

"What else am I supposed to do? Stay here my whole life? Why do you get to see the world and I don't? It doesn't seem fair to me at all!"

"You don't know what it's like, Siv! I'm just trying to protect you. You think it's bad here? It's nothing compared to what it's like beyond the walls. They will eat you alive."

"I just... want to see for myself is all."

"Do you know how many meeps would kill to be in a position like yours? If my parents found out..."

He lowered his head and softened his tone.

"Just please, don't."

Siv shuddered, her antennae rose high, her voice barely a whisper.

"I'm sorry, sir..."

Arlo straightened his posture. He could see the tears pooling up beneath her pink eyes as she began sniffing. He reached out his palm a moment, but receded, as though he lost the words. He was never very good at this sort of thing.

A deep screaming alarm echoed from beneath the clouds.

A holographic popup appeared within his eyes. Siv widened her own, no doubt seeing the same thing as him.

*CURFEW IN FIVE PARCELS*, it read.

“Look, we can talk about this more later. But right now, we need to get going. Come on, Siv.”

“Shouldn’t we ask your parents to send someone for us?”

Arlo shook his head. “The last thing I want is for them to know I took you up here, especially this time of day.”

“Will we be safe?”

“Of course. I know a good way back home. We’ll be fine, I promise.”

Siv mumbled “Okay...”

Arlo took one last glance behind himself as he walked towards the nearby transportation chute. The sun had faded, leaving but the scattered lights of the violet skyscrapers, and the ominous presence of the dark Palace.

Back to reality.

The triangular sections of the chute doors opened before them. They were greeted with the stench of a filthy alleyway and unkempt living quarters. A burly reptilian warrior laid across the garbage, either blissfully ignorant of their presence or simply too inebriated to notice. Arlo didn’t even want to think about what kind of biological matter was encrusted on the ground beneath his feet.

Arlo knelt beside Siv, fixing a collar around her neck with a leash. It let out a slight chirp as he clicked the latch into place. He threw his own hood over top of his head and raised his scarf above his nose.

“Keep this on until we get home. I don’t want to draw too much attention to us around here.”

Siv lightly nodded.

Exiting the alley to the left, they were surrounded by hundreds of luminous signs atop serrated buildings. Their buzzing was drowned out by the whining of passing hovercraft overhead and the commotion of the crowd around them.

People of all shapes and sizes maneuvered through the open streets in a frenzy of terror and anger. A trio of Judicators towered above the crowd on their extension frames, laden in a reflective skintight suit. Their metallic limbs clanked as they strode over the masses.

“Disperse immediately! Curfew will be in effect in three parcels!”

Arlo kept his head low and his pace steady, hoping to avoid garnering any unwanted attention to himself. One of the Judicators turned their attention his way with their numerous red circular lenses but seemed to be preoccupied with another rioter.

Siv looked up to Arlo.

“Are you sure we’ll make it in time? Where are we going?”

“Over in the market. There’s an old maintenance causeway for the lower districts. It’s a tight squeeze, so most don’t know about it. We can follow it straight to the Manor.”

The two were constantly pushed from side to side as they moved past the hordes. Neither of them was particularly large, leaving them at the mercy of those around them.

Arlo clashed with a feathered avian, knocking him to the ground.

“Mind your presence!” screeched the irate ratoran.

Arlo adjusted his scarf, making sure it had not slipped loose.

Siv, stepped in front of him.

“Are you alright, sir?”

“I’m fine, just keep going” he said as he lifted himself up once more.

The crowd grew larger and more intense, seeming to gather around a focal point in the center of the street. Arlo could barely see through the gaps.

In the middle, he caught glimpses of a gangly ratoran atop a stack of crates. The robes he wore were battered and torn, and the sacs under his eyes were a sickly green hue. His black eyes were wide open and his beak ajar as he squawked to the crowd.

“Your Goddesses have abandoned you, maiden-folk! You have grown fat and weak, yes! For I have seen the folly; the truth! Repent; repent now I say! Or damnation shall befall us all!”

The ground quaked as the Judicators marched towards the preacher.

The leader uttered with a sensitive voice, strained to its absolute limits. “Residents: This activity is in violation of standing jurisdiction! Please disperse immediately, or corrective measures... will be taken!”

Her extension frame seemed to wobble as she barely held onto her footing.

He pointed his sharp talon towards them.

“Your threats are meaningless, welp-servants! You no longer have divine right to your actions, no righteousness to your words! You serve no Goddesses, but the Deceiver! The maiden-folk shall know the truth, yes!”

A figure in the crowd threw a bottle towards one of the Judicators, splattering green liquid across her suit. She wiped it away, visibly flustered and angry.

The leader raised her stun blaster, firing a short burst of electric bolts, causing the preacher to convulse and fall violently to the ground.

Onlookers stood shocked at the sight.

A voice rang out from the crowd.

“His truth must not be silenced!”

The mob grew louder, a tidal wave of righteous fury that crashed against the stalwart Judicators. Electric bolts crackled through the air as they fired wildly into the masses gathering around them.

Amid the chaos, Arlo tugged on Siv’s leash, determined to slip through before the violence engulfed them as well. Siv stumbled, her wide eyes reflecting the flashing lights and pandemonium around them.

The market, which would normally be full of shop owners and customers alike, was nearly barren. It reeked of spilled oil and wilted produce. The ground was littered with some residual goods, and a few still were in the process of tearing down their makeshift stands.

A clinical female voice came from loudspeakers across the district.

“Attention residents: ANTIPATHETIC anomaly detected. Please comply with all FAITHFUL. CURFEW is now in effect. Remain within your DOMICILES.”

The city went dark for a moment.

Then the red lights activated, the barrage of advertisements and signage was no more. Only the hovercraft and cruisers of the Judicators remained, scanning the streets below with their passing beams.

“Is it always this bad, Arlo?”

“As far as I am aware, no. It’s only been getting worse recently since the last riot. It’s fine though, we’re getting close.”

The pattering steps of distant paws came from across the market. Arlo yanked Siv’s leash and pulled them both behind a nearby tarp.

A quintet of five crimson furred wixles trotted through the empty plaza in the direction of the action, their ears and poofy tails bobbing as they did so. They carried large electric shock spears and bore rose capelets across their backs.

A nima led them forward, slithering across the ground with her massive scaly tail, girthy legs tucked close into her stout body.

She reached her hand up towards her drooping leaf-shaped ear and spoke.

“Corrections Team, moving to contain.”

The duo stepped back out after they passed, a moment of reprieve.

Metallic rattling came from his right as they passed by the cluttered stands.

“Spare some jeng for an old warrior, would you?”

The gray scaled man sat in a secluded living pod, cluttered with half torn rags and ripped clothes. Arlo continued to walk after an awkward step, trying his best not to gaze too much.

“Sorry... we really need to get going...”

His meaty hand seized Arlo’s wrist.

“Surely you can spare but a moment?”

As much as he tried to pull himself away, he couldn’t even make a budge in his grip. He could not afford to try any longer.

“Of course... I’m sure I can transfer some to you right now.”

Arlo tapped a device embedded in his forearm, activating a red holographic display. He fiddled with the image. He didn’t even bother checking the amount; the sum meant nothing to him. The beggar rested his open palm against the projector.

“TRANSFER COMPLETE!” said a synthesized voice in his arm.

The man activated his own wrist mount, enamored by his new wealth.

“Appreciation from this one. You have the heart of the Vermillion Lady herself.”

“It was no problem, truly...”

The beggar's yellow eyes grew as he was enamored by the transaction bill.

"It says here the transfer is from... huh, is that so?"

"Thank you for your service and devotion to the Queens, sir!"

Arlo's steps increased in length as he moved towards a gap in the nearby walls. Siv's stumpy legs could barely keep up with his increased pace.

"What was that about?" asked Siv.

"Forget about him, let's just get home already."

Messy graffiti was etched across the walls bearing slogans that were no longer legible. The droning sound of whistling pipes softened the roars behind them.

Posters covered everything, fading over the years. Siv looked up towards them, barely able to make out the image of a couple, seemingly embracing one another. A busty purple toned woman and smaller and more energetic tan furred one. The other details were too far gone to make anything out.

A six limbed jelly creature stood in the alleyway, inspecting a maintenance console affixed to the wall. It paid the duo no mind, content only with its work, even as they passed by it.

A small metal panel protruded from the end of the alleyway in front of them, tucked between a trash chute and a stall. He lowered himself to pull it off. But it would not budge at all.

He continued to strain himself, hoping it would come loose, to no avail.

"By the Queens, you've got to be kidding!"

"What is it?"

The plate rang as he smashed it with his fist.

"It's welded shut!"

Siv stepped back, stunned.

"What? I thought you've been here before?"

"I mean, it's been a while since I've come this way, but there's no reason they should have gone and done this now!"

Arlo turned his head towards the sound of rustling footsteps.

Siv's antennae shuddered. "What was that?"

"Stay behind me Siv."

She followed without a word.

The s'hal beggar from before stood across the alleyway, now flanked by a ratoran and a wixle. They cast shadows across the length of the strip in front of them, looking down on him from afar.

Arlo reflexively reached behind him, pulling out a handle from a holster affixed to his waist. Pressing the button on the hilt, it let out a gaseous hiss as it ignited, a small dagger of purple plasma.

“I don't want any trouble here, sir. I can give you more money. Just let me and my friend go by and we can go on about our own business.”

The s'hal bellowed, the other two followed with avian squawking and canine chattering.

“If that were so, then you would not be here, would you? Has the runt of the queen-spawn come to gloat? And brought your little pet too...”

The trio stepped closer.

Arlo's voice was broken.

He was shaking.

“Don't bring her into this or I'll- “

The towering man barreled forward.

Arlo held his arm out, swinging his dagger wildly.

In vain.

The beggar seized his arm; Arlo dropped the knife as his arm crunched and he screamed out in pain.

“Stop it!”

Siv had slipped beside the beggar, scratching his calf causing him to stumble. But the wixle sent a swift kick into her belly, throwing her back against the wall.

The ratoran took the opportunity to seize her collar and placed his talons on her back, pinning her against the filthy ground.

Arlo was hoisted up now, the imposing figure of the eight-foot-tall behemoth blocking out the light before him.

Arlo tried to fight back still, hoping to loosen the man's grip, but it was nothing. Even his exhausted punches wouldn't make him flinch.

The s'hal clicked his mandibles. “What brings one of the collaborators here? And a Soremo at that...”

Arlo winced, barely able to speak through the agonizing pain. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

The hulk let out a guttural roar.

“Spare me your lying tongue! I saw the transaction, I know what you are! Your House thrives off our misfortunes... by the Violet Queen’s bosom, you’re the reason we live in this squalor!”

“I don’t have anything to do with that. I’m just a diplomat!”

The birdman to his right had Siv in his grasp, chirping as he held her closer. “It matters not what part you play, you are still another pawn in their regime, yes. Every jeng you spend down here comes from another like us.”

The s’hal brought his snout closer to Arlo, now peeling away his scarf and hood.

The assailants let out a gasp of curiosity.

The foxy beast ripped away part of his robes, exposing his ghostly flesh.

She brought her muzzle close and sniffed.

“No fur or scales on this thing, what even is it? Doesn’t look like there’s any meat on those bones either, gek!”

The beggar grimaced and flexed the small antennae atop his head.

“What a specimen you are. Look at him... no scars, and a plump belly. Yet they tell us to have faith, hmm. I’m sure the Clan would pay a high price to have someone like you...”

Siv sobbed, letting out a violent torrent of sadness.

“Why are you doing this to us?!”

The wixle slapped her across the face with her tail to shut her up.

“And what of the hive-folk? What should we do with her?” the ratorans chirped.

The s’hal turned his head towards them. “It matters not. Kill her or eat her, we have our true prize right here.”

“Don’t you dare lay a finger on her! I’ll kill you!” Arlo yelled.

“Is that so? It would certainly be entertaining to watch yo- “

A ball of hot plasma soared by.

The beggar was no more.

His head reduced to mist; the body lurched and fell forwards. Freed from his grip, Arlo reflexively held onto his battered wrist.

“Gaku vermin...” said a deep voice from across the alley.

It was another s’hal, clad in deep violet battle skin. His face was obscured by the glow of his crimson visor.

The other two assailants tried to rush him desperately, but two more shots from his lance reduced them to residual dust.

Arlo crawled along the blood and dust-soaked ground towards Siv. Her face lay against the ground motionless.

“Siv? Are you alright? Please, talk to me...”

He lifted her head up.

Tears continued to run across her face. Her pinkish shell was laden with numerous scathing marks and cuts from her attackers.

She could barely utter a word.

“Arlo...”

“Siv!”

He wrapped his arms around and held her tightly, resting his chin upon her head. His own wrist was inflamed from the action, but he gave it no control over himself. He couldn’t help but cry himself.

“Thank the Queens you’re alright...”

The shadow of their savior obscured them now.

“You and your friend almost died. A parcel later and there wouldn’t have been anything left.”

Arlo turned to look at the man.

“I... I don’t know...”

“Your father flagged your signal the moment curfew hit,” the s’hal said. “The Houses would be all over us if I didn’t come for you.”

“T-t-thank you...”

A hovercraft descended near the entrance of the alleyway, blowing away the posters lining the walls. One of its side mounted doors unfolded, forming a ramp.

“Time for you to go home.”

Siv and Arlo sat in the back of the hovercraft. An eerie silence held sway over the interior for much of their trip. Only the whining of the engine and distant sounds of unrest outside could be heard.

Siv’s attention was focused only on the floor.

Arlo looked outside the window. He could see more conflict raging between rioters and the Judicators on the streets below. Fires raged as looters swarmed across the district. He imagined it now; he couldn’t be the only one to get attacked like this.

“I feel sorry for you, Arlo.”

Arlo turned his head towards the s’hal, puzzled.

“What?”

The man kept his eyes forward. “It wasn’t always like this,” he said. “Back in my day at least. That was many cycles ago.”

The craft lurched, recoiling as its landing gears extended, and it descended towards the ground. The s’hal turned his head across the seat towards the duo behind him.

“We’re here.”

The side doors opened once more for Siv and Arlo. The s’hal stepped out of his door in the front, now leading them towards the entrance to the Manor of the House of Soremo.

It was a massive tetrahedral structure, dotted with jutting spines and stained-glass windows. A bountiful garden surrounded the building for miles, carefully tended by a hive of meeb workers. Some of the only flora one would find this deep into the city.

A duo of bleach furred wixles descended the grand stairway ahead of them, wearing revealing robes and short skirts. Their faces were obscured by thin veils. The pair flanked an even larger and more imposing figure.

The wixles retrieved light rags and vials from pouches on their waists. They set about rubbing the medical solution across his body. It stung, but he could visibly see the wounds begin to close and heal.

Siv simply stood to the side, ignored, holding onto one of her limbs.

The woman who came down the stairs stopped in front of the s’hal, with her arms crossed. She spoke with a harsh, but clear tone.

“Thank you, Captain Ir’ig. I will handle it from here. The House of Soremo appreciates your service.”

He bowed with his fist held close to his chest before making his leave.

“Don’t let me catch you out past curfew again” remarked Ir’ig as he passed by Arlo.

The wixles, finished with their work, retreated to the sides of the woman.

Arlo continued to stare blankly ahead, as did Siv.

“Are you just going to stand there all day?”

He looked up towards her. She stood nearly twice as tall as him, gazing down at him with her unamused expression. Her black dress with embroidery of golden leaves, eyes, and flowers on the bottom left clashed with her spotted peach-colored fur. It seemed to be stained with some red liquid.

“Sorry, father.”

The woman rubbed her snout, letting out an annoyed snarl.

“Your mother and I need to have a talk with you. Come inside, dinner is ready.”

“Yes, father.”

She pointed next towards the maids.

“Find him something decent to wear. And throw out the old ones while you’re at it. So filthy...”

They jumped with excitement and glee.

“Yes, mistress!” they said as they galloped up the stairs.

As they entered through the cathedral-like doors, another woman rushed out, clothed only in a towel surrounding her torso, her light gray-fur soaked wet and full of soapy spuds. She was even taller than the other, though not nearly as burly.

“My beautiful pup!”

The woman careened down the stairs, directly before him.

She quickly wrapped her arms and tail around him, lifting him up into the air, nudging her muzzle against his face and licking his cheeks.

He was giddy to see her, though embarrassed by her actions.

“Mom, you can stop, I’m alright.”

She pulled her head away. The two eyes on the right side of her head and the one on her left both shimmered with palpable joy.

“You’re home, that’s all that matters. I was so worried about you. But you know what they say!”

Arlo rolled his eyes. “‘There is no faith without fear’ yeah, I know.”

“Ahem!”

It was from his father, who was adjusting the rings on her horns protruding from on top of her head.

“Yes, Chaji?”

“Inside.”

“Oh! I’m sorry!”

His mother returned him to the ground.

“We can discuss things once you’ve freshened up. Come along!”

Her long prehensile tail wagged side to side as she was escorted up the stairs by her partner.

“Wait!” exclaimed Arlo.

Their floppy ears fluttered as they turned back towards him.

“Hmm?”

“What about Siv?”

The humble insect-woman had remained frozen in place the whole time, not even uttering a single word.

“Who?”

Arlo groaned, “The meeb? My servant?”

Chaji was confused. “What about her? Just have her return to her quarters, doesn’t really matter.”

The pair interlocked their arms, playfully rubbing their noses against one another as they returned inside the Manor.

Arlo sighed, looking once more towards Siv and taking a knee in front of her.

“I’m sorry about all this. I didn’t realize just how bad it’s gotten recently.”

She remained mute.

“Siv?”

“I don’t think that’s the case at all,” Siv said. “I think you just wanted to ignore it before.”

“What?!” Arlo said, shocked.

“It’s whatever.” She said in a monotone voice. “Not like it really matters.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to endanger you. Well, I know how much you love stories. Maybe I can tell you about some of my travels after dinner. I’m sure that’ll cheer you up, right?”

“Right.”

“Siv, I- “

Siv interjected, eyes narrowing. “Just go eat dinner with your family, sir.”

He sniffled. “Alright... I’ll... talk to you later, Siv.”

Arlo and his parents sat on cushions beside the dining table in the grand hall. A large meaty roast was prepared in the center, glazed in a sweet and succulent dressing. It sat atop an open flame, slowly rotating. A chandelier of assorted colorful crystals hung from the ceiling above, casting their glow on the floor below.

The harmonious strums of a stringed instrument echoed through the hall, accompanied by the humming of a young woman.

“So,” said Chaji, tearing flesh from the roast with practiced ease. “Would you mind explaining to us what you were doing outside past curfew?”

Arlo poked the portion before him with his finger.

“Son...” she growled in a low voice.

“I had some... difficulties with my divinator. I wasn’t able to contact you, and I didn’t want to draw too much attention to myself in that district. I apologize.”

Chaji stripped the flesh from a bone, before using it to pick between her teeth.

“Is that so?”

“Yes, father.”

“Interesting. I don’t recall there being any complications with your firmware after your last exaltation.” She tilted her head slightly. “Is that the whole truth, Arlo? Is there anything else you wish to share?”

Arlo lowered his head. “That’s it.”

“In that case, I suppose you wouldn’t mind if I were to check the recording data on that meeb you had with you. To corroborate your claims, of course.”

“Are you going to do that right now?”

She stood up from her cushion, stretching her limbs. Even under all that fur, her muscles were remarkably well-defined. Certainly, an imposing presence.

“I believe I will. If your account holds, you have nothing to fear, right?”

She turned towards the door of the hall.

“Wait!” Arlo exclaimed.

She stopped.

Arlo sighed “I lied, okay? My divinator works; I just didn’t want to tell you. I thought I would be fine.”

Chaji returned to her cushion.

“As I suspected. There will be repercussions for this behavior. Right, Ojiri?”

Ojiri was wiping her own mouth with a cloth.

“Dear, please don’t be so hard on him. He just suffered through a terrible tragedy. I’m sure we don’t need to make it any worse for him. And besides, we have a busy day tomorrow and I need him at his best before the Ascendancy.”

Chaji lowered her head, rubbing her palm against her face.

“Fine. I think you’ve learned your lesson. But I expect no further incidents such as this in the future.”

“Yes, father... but how did you- “

“Know where you were? I know you removed your tracker. Fortunately, I had the foresight to have the cyberseer install a redundant one.”

Arlo lowered his head, ashamed.

The three nobles tended to their own food for a time. Wixles servants came by routinely to refresh their beverages and clean up any mess. Other nodes of the house came by, talking with Ojiri and handing her tablets and whispering brief reports.

Ojiri opened her wrist mount display. Static buzzing screamed through the speakers on the wall as the screen came to life. A node woman, not unlike Ojiri, in a fine dress with a rope around her waist appeared on the screen.

“Three Judicators were killed tonight as dissident activity continues to grow more violent. Citizens are advised to avoid travelling through the Akamaita District at this time while authorities deal with the ongoing crisis. In other news- “

Chaji slammed her fist against the table. “Damn, animals...”

Arlo turned his attention away from his food.

“Why is this happening?”

Chaji shrugged. “Your mother would know better than me. Dear?”

Ojiri pushed her plate to the side, contemplating a moment.

“It has been hard for us all in their absence. It’s been nearly twenty cycles. But it seems some have taken it worse than others. I believe that we are doing the best we can, given the situation. It would appear that isn’t good enough for some in the lower districts. Our faith has not abandoned us.”

His father spoke; face still being stuffed with more meat from the platter. “You’ll learn in due time son, some people will never be satisfied no matter what you give them. All you can do is keep them in line.”

Arlo rested his head against his open palm. “Yeah. The man who attacked me... he seemed to think that we caused all his problems.”

“I wouldn’t give it much mind. The opinions of worms like that are as worthless as a human’s dung.”

Arlo looked towards the walls. They were lined with numerous painted portraits, each depicting different members of the Soremo House.

All nodes. Except for the last one. With him.

Ojiri piped up. “Oh! We did have something exciting to tell you!”

“Hmm?” Arlo turned his head.

“Your father and I were talking to the Rukus earlier today, and they would love to have you meet their daughter!”

Arlo’s head laid back, shocked. “Really?”

Ojiri clapped her hands together. “Isn’t that exciting?!”

“Surprising, isn’t it?” interjected Chaji.

*Of course, she’d say something like that,* Arlo thought.

“So, when will that happen?”

“Well, the details are still being worked out right now. But that they agreed at all is truly a blessing from the Queens!”

“It certainly took long enough, dear” remarked Chaji.

“Well, when we decided, we were going to raise someone like him, I think we both knew how... different, it would be.”

Arlo bolted up from his resting position.

“Different?!”

Ojiri held her arms out towards him.

“Oh, I didn’t mean it like that Arlo. I’m sorry.”

Chaji exhaled through her snout. “I think what she meant to say was difficult.”

Arlo stood next to the table. His cheeks swollen red.

“Perhaps you should have left me then.” He stormed off, moving towards the nearby stairwell.

Ojiri started after him—then stopped. Her claws flexed once against the table before she lowered them again.

“Arlo, please, we didn’t mean it like that! Come back!”

It was too late now; he was already long gone.

She turned to look at Chaji, bearing a look of annoyance.

“Really? Was that necessary?”

“What?” Chaji shrugged. “It’s the truth! He should be mature enough by now to hear it and not cry about it.”

“That doesn’t mean you have to be so rude about it!”

“If he were anyone else,” Chaji said without looking at her, “tonight would have ended very differently. Going behind our backs like that... he can’t keep scaring us.”

“Yes... you’re right. He can’t. But you know how difficult it’s been for him since he got out of the Academy. It’s not easy out there for someone like him, especially now.”

Chaji took a deep sigh.

“I know. It’s just...” She stopped and contemplated for a moment. “The people out there are going to say much worse things than anything I’ve ever said.”

Ojiri rested her claws against her partner's shoulder. "And that's exactly why we need to be there for him. To get him through these hard times. We are the bastion that strengthens his belief. That's our duty."

"You're right."

Ojiri smirked. "Aren't I always?"

"Of course."

The two clasped each other's palms, nestling their heads against one another.

"Could you please go talk to him?" asked Ojiri.

"I'll go do that right now" she said quietly, her cheeks still rosy and warm.

"Thank you."

Arlo sat atop the roof of the Manor, his legs dangling over the side of the balcony. It wasn't nearly as quiet as the spire; the world was still so close. The oppressive noise made it impossible for him to forget. The low hum of patrol craft was only an unwelcome reminder.

Chaji stepped onto the roof from the nearby transportation chute. Even as she moved to his side, he paid her no mind. He just stared into the darkness above, as he did so many times before.

She took a seat next to him, almost joining his sightseeing. The wind tugged at the golden rings lined across her horns. She adjusted them absently, a habit from an old life of perfection and discipline. Chaji contemplated, she wanted her words to be perfect.

"Arlo?"

He exhaled, closing his eyes.

Chaji cleared her throat.

"Look. Apologies never came naturally to me; I've always been a stubborn soldier. But I want you to know that I am sorry."

"Sorry for what?" he asked in an annoyed tone.

"Sorry for what I said earlier. It wasn't right of me. I thought if I hardened you, the world wouldn't break you."

He turned his head towards her. "You shouldn't apologize. Everything you said was true. I'm hardly the ideal heir."

“And there is nothing wrong with that. The Queens’ give us all our own challenges to face, and we are better for it.”

Tears ran down Arlo’s cheeks, his body jittering as he pulled his legs in close. “I’m just a mistake, a burden. You would be better off without me.”

“No, Arlo” she said with a firm tone. “Believe me, son, the day your mother found you was the happiest day of my life.” She placed her hands across him, pulling him towards her. “Look at me Arlo. I was never into this politics and high society stuff like your mother. Just a simple military woman. I didn’t think I would ever find true love, let alone have a child of my own.”

She pulled him up right with ease and hugged him deeply with all the love in her hearts. Awkward, and restrained, but sincere.

“You were not a mistake, and I praise the Vermillion Lady everyday that I found you.”

Arlo pulled himself in closer. “Thank you.”

The two pulled back, reclining themselves and simply letting the feelings of happiness linger in the air.

Chaji chuckled. “Did I ever tell you how I met your mother?”

“I don’t think so.”

She actually had, many times in fact. But telling her otherwise was of no use, she was going to tell the story anyways. He didn’t mind, as much as he would never admit it, he did enjoy talking with his parents.

“This was many cycles ago, back when the Queens were still running things. I was running guard duty for some special party with an old s’hal battle buddy of mine. Real big fellow. Awesome guy. Well, he dares me to go get us something to drink from the party. And me, being the meeb-headed idiot I am, do it.”

She makes motions with her hands, as though she was still there.

“So, I decided to start climbing up the building to get in through the roof, and what do I find when I get up there? The whole roof is made of glass! I start scooting my fat tail across and end up falling through and landing right on top of your mother’s table! And you know what I say to her?”

“What?” Arlo asked, enamored as though it was the first time she ever spoke to him.

“I say, ‘Hey beautiful, you gonna eat that?’”

The pair erupted into exuberant laughter, driving away the doubts that had flooded into both their minds for too long. They gasped for air, barely able to contain themselves between the bouts of joy.

“Isn’t that so dumb? The fact I ever had a chance with such a fine, plump woman as your mother is truly a miracle.”

Chaji would regain control of herself turning towards Arlo with a great smile.

“Look Arlo, it is tough out there. But I know you will find your place in the world someday. It doesn’t have to be in our House. But you will do great things. I know it.”

Arlo’s tears came now from joy, rather than sadness.

“Thank you, father.”

Chaji nodded, then rose and made her way towards the chute.

“I’ll leave you be. Don’t stay up too late. You have a busy day with your mother tomorrow. I love you, my son.”

“I love you too, father.”