



TYRANNY

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Hello, future tyrants! My name is Paul Kirsch. I'm a Narrative Designer on Tyranny, and I have the pleasure of introducing our first of several short stories: *Under New Management*.

This story showcases a small detachment of the Scarlet Chorus – one of several armies that serve the Overlord's conquering ambition. My goal was to give readers a first glance at the brutality and community that go hand-in-hand with the Scarlet Chorus. To the untrained eye, they might look like hardened, bloodthirsty killers. Viewed through a filtered lens, you find something very different – a complex, self-correcting ecosystem with a rich and diverse culture.

If the distinction isn't obvious while the Scarlet Chorus is raiding your village and burning your house to the ground, you aren't looking closely enough.

Now that I've whetted your appetite for uncompromising brutality, enjoy *Under New Management*!

– PAUL KIRSCH, NARRATIVE DESIGNER

UNDER NEW MANAGEMENT

“Someone ought to kill that bastard.”

The declaration came as a whisper, but it went off like a gong in the circle of killers. Crow Trap glanced up at the others around the fire. Their makeshift weapons of tarnished bronze and chipped wood all lay close at hand, and each wore the tattered red of the Scarlet Chorus. Seven in total, they represented the full contingent of their gang, minus the absent leader who had stepped into the overgrowth to empty his bowels on a stump, as he so proudly declared was his intent.

The gang made camp on the slope of a mountain pass – one of many that separated the Northern Empire from the Tiers. The exhausting march into the wilderness permitted them to light a fire without any concern of attracting enemy patrols. Their boots were gray with the ashes of a village they had set to the torch, and their nerves were aflame with the many joys of the raid. A good day's work.

As the sun set, their thoughts had turned away from brutality and skewed inward. This should have been the gang's time for spinning tales of battles won, but apparently they had other plans.

Someone ought to kill that bastard.

It didn't matter to Crow Trap which of them had said it. The words hung in the air as if written in their campfire's rising smoke, demanding to be addressed.

The Trap Gang had spent the last fortnight moving south at a tireless pace, clearing a path for the Disfavored army that marched in their dust. It should have been an uncomplicated stretch of raids and plundering, but their coordination was all wrong. Miscommunication and bad timing got in the way of simple operations, and every failure chiseled at their resolve. For the first time in recent memory, Trap Gang was weak.

Custom held that the boss was to blame. If the strongest couldn't keep them together, then he needed to be replaced. Man Trap had taken them far as a gang. Maybe it was far enough.

The other six recruits turned to Crow to gauge her reaction. She was a Scarlet Fury, one of the elite soldiers of the howling mob. An old, deep scar stretched from ear to ear, and her bony features were marked with

the crisscrossing evidence of duels both old and recent. She hunkered down on the balls of her feet, turning a bronze knife in her hands.

She flicked the blade in the direction of her compatriots like a finger pointed in challenge. The gang intuited her meaning at once:

Convince me, maggots.

Rat Trap, a recruit whose uniform hung like dirty rags over his broad shoulders, cleared his throat.

“Man Trap takes a greater share of everything,” he said. “Spoils, vittles, war wives. One of us could divide it up better. Without him, we could go to bed with full bellies for a change.” The suggestion came out more as a question, and everyone heard it as such.

Crow shook her head, keeping the blade pointed at him. If anyone doubted the plan, the gang would never back it.

What else?

Rat Trap looked to each of the other nonplussed gang members in turn – a panicked beast seeking quarter, finding none.

“If you was boss,” he started, directing his words at Crow, “you’d portion the spoils as was fair.”

Some murmurs of accord grew in volume, but Crow cut that off at once. She shook her head and snapped her fingers at Rat Trap.

Not good enough.

The big man flinched. Without a word, he offered Crow a shaking hand, biting his lower lip.

In a quick, blurring motion that no eye could follow, Crow slashed the recruit’s palm and flicked the blade to send a splash of blood sizzling into the fire. Rat Trap withdrew and clutched his palm with a hiss, but nodded to Crow.

“My thanks for your mercy,” he said.

Fear turned to love as Crow Trap nodded to accept his contrition.

The wound was a useful punishment. It could mean his death the next battle to come, unless he fought twice as hard to think past it and keep his hand steady. Either possibility served the Scarlet Chorus in some way.

Crow turned her attention to the other gang members, swinging her blade in the slow motions of a pendulum.

Anyone else? Time is short, and the boss returns. Convince me.

Sitting across the fire from Crow, Fox Trap spun a length of red silk between her fingers – a garrote that was hungry to be used. She grabbed Crow's attention with a stare of deep intensity between hairs that hung over her brow.

"We're marching ahead of the Disfavored to soften the Southern pigs for surrender," she said. "Peasant work. We should be occupying every village in our path and conscripting from the locals." She glanced at the assembled gang, taking in the nods and grunts of agreement. "Once we're back to capacity, Trap Gang can put a real dent in this war. We won't need Graven Ashe and his ironclads to finish the job."

Crow Trap weighed the matter. The gang was sixteen members strong at the start of the campaign. Disease, brawls and a modicum of resistance had whittled them down to a skeleton crew. Inviting new blood to join their ranks was always a high priority. If they took more time to recruit from the villages and outlying farms, the gang could be forty strong by the time they reached the Bastard City and the real war to come.

She shook her head to dismiss temptation, and jabbed at the earth three times with her dagger.

March now, conscript later! The Archon needs a victory.

Heavy sighs preceded a cloud of embers lifting from the campfire. All agreed that Crow Trap was right, though the gang had no reason to enjoy it. Their patron Archon, the Voices of Nerat, would be none too pleased if one of his gangs needed to resupply and recoup their losses before they had a chance to prove themselves in a decisive battle.

Fox Trap extended her palm without a word. Crow Trap took the customary offering of blood – Fox barely registering the pain – and turned back to the gang.

Anyone else?

Before the next gang member could speak up, a snapped twig announced a new presence just beyond their circle. Man Trap lumbered into the perimeter, pushing aside saplings and hoisting his belt around his expansive gut.

"Why so silent, my ninny-shitters?" he shouted, as garrulous as ever. "We've every reason to celebrate after today's red work. Cat, favor us a song. Snake, tell us about the time you..."

Cutting off his own speech, Man Trap halted just outside the perimeter. He sniffed, turning his gaze to each of his red-clad killers in turn.

"Something's wrong," he said. "I smell at least one bloody palm among you stinking mongrels." He turned to Crow Trap with an implied question. Her knife was still out, and his attention drew to it like a compass to true north.

The silence lengthened. Crow Trap swept her gaze around the circle one last time, equally prepared to execute a plan or let the matter drop.

Anyone else?

A stooped-over recruit with a body like a siege tower lifted his head to regard Crow. His hands up to his elbows were still red from an earlier kill that day. His brow sloped over tiny eyes that twinkled with determination.

Crow leaned forward to listen. Bear Trap hadn't spoken to anyone since the start of the campaign. He was a man of few words, which she could respect as a woman of none.

"We kill him," he said. "We kill him because it's fun. If he can't defend himself, then he's no boss of mine."

"What's that?" Man Trap reached over his shoulder for the hammer slung across his back.

Crow had heard enough. With a flick of her wrist, the blade left her hand – streaking over the heads of the gang like a shooting star. When it came to a sudden stop, it was buried up to the hilt in Man's arm, pinning it to his shoulder.

"The fuck, Crow?!" Man Trap said in a cloud of spittle. He reeled from the blow, but didn't dare try to extricate his arm. She would kill him faster than he could think to try. "After I saved you from the Bleak Rotters – them who gave you that scar? I thought we was mates."

She shrugged. Turning to the gang, Crow Trap drew a line across her throat.

None of them needed any help interpreting her meaning. They took up arms and swarmed Man Trap like ants to an injured spider, swiping and clawing and picking away at him – filling the night with screams and wild, untrammelled howling. The deed took far longer than it should have, but Trap Gang needed the release, the deep pleasure of a satisfying kill.

Crow Trap held her spot and watched the carnage play out, knowing that tonight could have gone no other way. A slow trickle of blood seeped downhill until it touched the edge of the campfire. She glanced at Bear Trap, who was likewise unmoving, and caught his attention.

You're boss now, she signed, letting her fingers do the work in the absence of her blade.

He nodded, hiding any reluctance if he felt it. "If I must. You make the calls, though. I can give them courage, but I don't got a mind for thinking ahead."

She stood and kicked dirt over the fire, letting the shadows pool into camp. Welcoming them.

If I must.

They marched at first light – Bear Trap with his new hammer, and Crow following close behind. They went to war one man short, but everyone who saw them fight in the Bastard City said that Trap Gang was stronger by tenfold, though none of them could guess why.

THE END



Greetings from the Narrative Design team! This is Paul Kirsch, and I'm here to present the next part of our short story series that showcases the world of *Tyranny*.

I previously introduced the Scarlet Chorus – one of the armies serving Kyros the Overlord – in my story *Under New Management*. This time around we have a very different military force in the spotlight: the elite Disfavored. I wanted readers to understand both of these armies from the perspective of soldiers (or conscripts) at the front lines. Though *Tyranny* has no lack of fascinating personalities at the highest levels of leadership, some of the most interesting stories are found in the rank and file.

I also wanted to offer a sense of what it means to serve within the Overlord's organized hierarchy. Even though Terratus is a world where evil won, that doesn't make it a world devoid of hope or ambition. As long as hope and ambition aligns with the will of an all-powerful tyrant, everyone should get along splendidly. Right?

With that firmly in mind, enjoy *Commission*!

– PAUL KIRSCH, NARRATIVE DESIGNER

COMMISSION

Aurora moved to plunge her sword into her opponent's guts. He dodged to the side and bashed her across the face with his shield. She took the blow with a deserving sting and barely managed to catch herself by one hand on the way down to the sawdust-strewn floor of the sparring field. She accepted the fighter's offered hand with gratitude.

"I almost had you," Aurora said, wiping blood from the side of her mouth.

"Aye, almost," said Teodor of the Stone Shields. The big man was twice her size and out of breath. Aurora could at least content herself on having exhausted the behemoth.

"Any serious damage?" Aurora asked. She took off her helmet and winced as she touched her cheek.

Teodor appraised her and shrugged. "A nasty bruise, but it's already at the end of its cycle."

She guessed as much. A familiar warmth spread throughout her body as the Archon of War's covenant healed her wounds. Aurora had taken numerous injuries throughout this span of hard training leading up to the offensive, and would have appeared a horror of cuts and bruises if not for the protection of Graven Ashe to mend her in short order.

Teodor rolled his shoulder with a smile. "You're getting better. Gave me a few dents I won't soon forget. I'd say you're more prepared for the long march than any of us."

Aurora was about to compliment his form when a loud voice bellowed outside of the training circle:

"Stand at attention!"

Aurora straightened her posture and struck a respectable salute. She knew only one person in the legion who could trumpet over the din of battle: Iron Marshal Erenyos. When she made her presence heard, no one stood at ease.

The Disfavored lieutenant marched into the training arena wearing the armor of her station – the imposing plates and skull-shaped mask of an Iron Guard. She turned to survey the dozen assembled members of Aurora's cohort.

"Close order!" she called.

The soldiers responded with single-minded coordination – arranging

themselves in a two-layered phalanx, locking into their assigned spots and raising their shields with practiced ease.

This was the default form they were to execute in the event of an ambush. The Iron Marshal was testing their reflexes. Aurora steadied her breathing and held herself in a battle-ready stance.

The Second Cohort lived in anticipation of marching on their enemies in the South. Graven Ashe and his twisted counterpart, the Voices of Nerat, had already dispatched a Scarlet Chorus mob to prepare the way for an organized invasion. Was this to be their hour of glory?

The Iron Marshal walked down the line and nodded, stopping once to knock the wind out of a soldier whose breastplate was improperly secured. At the end of her survey, she spun on her heel and called:

“Stone Shield Aurora!”

It took Aurora a moment to register her name. She gasped and stepped forward. “Present!”

The Iron Marshal advanced on her, taking a scroll from the case looped at her hip. The vellum was bound by a seal of purple wax, but Aurora had seen enough of these pass her by that she didn’t need to guess at its contents.

“Congratulations are in order, soldier!” the Iron Marshal barked. “The Archon of War has deemed you worthy to command the Second Cohort. Prepare to march at first light.”

Aurora released her stored breath and allowed a smile to burst onto her face like a sunbeam. Her countrymen who shared the line broke into immediate applause – for her, for the war, for the Archon, it didn’t matter. The Iron Marshal held her silence for as long as she could tolerate the display, and then cut it off with a piercing whistle that got everyone scrambling back to attention.

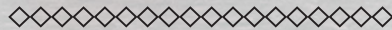
“Commander,” she said to Aurora, “report to the smithy. They’ll send you off with iron befitting your new rank.” She held out the scroll and nodded to the assembled Stone Shields. “When we leave Fort Resolution, this sorry lot will answer to you. Remember the North. Remember that we bring the glory of Kyros, not meaningless slaughter. And most importantly, don’t let the legion down.”

“Yes, ma’am!” said Aurora. “Hail Kyros and the Great General!”

The Iron Marshal gestured to the highest tower of the citadel keep. “After you’re outfitted, report to Evocatus Varimas. He’ll formally discharge you from service to the Stone Shields and debrief you on the mission. Dismissed, Commander.”

Aurora accepted the scroll with pride. She nodded and struck a sharp salute. Teodor smiled at her and resumed his training with a new partner. Aurora waved her commission at him and marched from the arena holding her chin up.

Commander, she thought. I could get used to that.



Zdenya, Maser of the Forge, squinted at Aurora and motioned for her to turn around.

“Does it feel tight?” she asked.

They stood in the midst of artisans laboring over forges, conjured flames, and molds of white-hot iron. Aurora had donned her new armor – a breastplate that seemed ornate compared to the austere trappings of the Stone Shields.

“Feels good enough to sleep in,” she said.

Zdenya wrinkled her nose. “I won’t understand Disfavored traditions if I live to be as old as Tunon. Consider yourself lucky. That might be the last piece we produce for a while.” She glanced to a diminishing pile of iron ore and frowned.

“What makes you say that?” asked Aurora.

The Forge Master sighed. “Fatebinder Calio is breathing down my neck to increase productivity for the war effort, but I don’t know what miracle she expects to get out of me. We’re low on supplies since the collapse at the Tanavon Mines. Consequently, keep an eye out for a source of iron in the South.”

Aurora nodded as she made the mental connection. Apparently the rumors spreading throughout the legion had not reached the forges. She heard that the miners at Tanavon had cast off their chains and killed their taskmasters. The Archon of Justice dispatched the Fifth and Seventh cohorts – seasoned veterans, all – to revive the operation and curb the growing iron shortage, but no one received word of their success. That was privileged information. Sensitive information. One did not talk idly about the defiance of Kyros’ Law.

“We couldn’t adjust your iron in any case, what with the accelerated timeframe,” said Zdenya. “Perhaps later, if you find it uncomfortable. The legion will have a contingent of Forge-Bound traveling in tow. I’ll join

the war effort after you've established a permanent outpost in the Tiers. With any luck, I'll see you there."

Aurora shook her hand with gratitude. "We won't need luck while the Great General leads the charge."

Before they could say their farewells, an ear-splitting boom shook the walls of the forge. Aurora and Zdenya whirled about to see one of the smiths immolated head to toe in his own conjured fire. The man was beating at his face and chest, screaming with wild abandon as flames roared under his uniform, consuming him with impossible speed. The others kept their distance and shielded their eyes. Aroused by the noise, soldiers swarmed the area, but held back from intervening.

"Someone put him out!" Aurora sprinted across the workspace, shoving aside the gawking artisans as she grabbed a bucket of water.

A hand snagged Aurora roughly from behind. It was Zdenya, fixated over Aurora's shoulder and wearing a stolid expression.

"Don't," said Zdenya. "The forge doesn't show mercy for human error. Ours is an exacting, indifferent art, and this fate is no more or less than what any of us can expect."

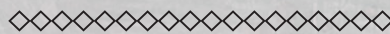
Aurora forced herself to look at the burning man. He was curled up on the ground, most of his body already reduced to smoking ashes. Candle flames peeked from the spaces once occupied by eyes.

"So fast," whispered Aurora. "If someone had reached him in time..."

Zdenya tightened her grip on Aurora's shoulder. "Do you seek a glorious death in battle? This is ours. A talented man gave himself to the forge, and the rest will learn from his example. Don't diminish his sacrifice with regret."

Aurora lowered her gaze as much out of respect as to quell the dizzying sensation that rolled through her.

"The iron you wear has a price dearer than gold," said Zdenya. "Remember that when you march to war, Commander."



Aurora made her way across the grounds of Fort Resolution and toward the highest tower in a daze. Soldiers and attendants busied about assisting in the cleanup effort at the forges, but she worked hard to push the tragedy from her mind.

She explained her purpose to the castle guard and mounted the spiral

staircase, but only when she reached the entrance to Evocatus Varimas' quarters at the top did she realize she had crushed the scroll bearing her new title in a sweaty fist. She flattened out the creases against the wall and knocked on the wooden door.

"Enter," someone called.

She pushed through to a spacious, carpeted lounge. Varimas stood at the window. He was bald and thin, wearing a purple robe that covered his skeletal frame. Aurora could see the stitching on the back where the sigil used before Kyros dubbed the legion "Disfavored" had long since been removed. He was facing away from her, looking out on another sparring field of Stone Shields drilling in formation.

"If you've come to escape whatever din they're raising outside," said Varimas, "you're in the right place." He turned around and smiled. His entire face was a ragged mess of scar tissue that had long since healed into a smoothed-over approximation of his features.

"Evocatus." Aurora bowed. This time she had to work to summon up her confidence. Before it had come so easily. "I received a new assignment, and with my compliments I beg that you release me from duty so I can lead the Second Cohort to war." She held out her scroll.

He unrolled the vellum and read her orders. "Such a hurry to form up against the Southern barbarians and deliver Kyros Peace," he murmured. "Ashe must be under a great deal of pressure to send our freshest and brightest out into the field."

"The Great General does nothing without good reason, sir," said Aurora.

"Your certainty is well placed, but... ah, never mind." Varimas frowned and made his way to a desk where he signed the commission with a flick of his quill. "Come tomorrow, the fort will empty and I'll be on my own, dispatching birds to the Archon and hoping they remember their way back. I envy you the freedom to die on your feet in battle, as every Northerner should. When I was doused with boiling oil at the hands of agitators, Ashe's protection denied me the cold embrace of the Void. If you receive such a terrible wound, make sure it counts."

"Evocatus," Aurora started, "I..."

He waved her off. "Don't let my apprehensions deter you. I have lived too long and optimism is the privilege of the young. But I can still wish you a pleasant conquest."

His turnabout didn't comfort Aurora in the least, but she nodded all the same.

"Now," said Varimas as he pored over the document, "the Second Co-

hort leaves in advance of the legion's thrust. No doubt Ashe believes that a subtler approach can spare a few Northern lives, and I'm inclined to agree. Just remember that..." Varimas cut himself off and furrowed his brow, taking note of a pulsing illumination outside. "What are those fools of the Nineteenth Cohort up to now?"

When he reached the window, he raised a shaking hand up to his mouth and sucked in a gasp.

Aurora joined him, at once convinced that another fire had broken out. The soldiers in the arena below had set their weapons aside to look up, beyond the walls of Fort Resolution and toward a distant sky. Anxious, indistinct murmurs built in volume.

A ray of dark green light descended from the thickening clouds and struck the remote mountains with waves of arcane energy. Aurora tightened her grip on the window as if to steady her balance, though she didn't understand exactly what she was witnessing. Something about it felt terribly wrong, like a perversion of order and sanity.

"The Fifth and Seventh!" someone cried below. "Ashe's mercy... they failed!"

At first Aurora didn't intuit the meaning or implication. Panicked discussion grew in volume, making both apparent to her in waves of mounting dread.

Varimas clutched his brow and let out a moan. "Of course," he said. "As the crow flies, that way leads straight to the Tanavon Mines. Kyros must have lost patience with the uprising."

Aurora focused on his words, suddenly the most stalwart and dependable objects in her life. She pictured the jagged hills distorting as the assault opened up massive sinkholes, allowing the land to rush in and fill them anew. Two cohorts of Disfavored soldiers – good Northerners – lost in the arcane equivalent of leveling an anthill.

"An Edict to quell the dissent," Varimas said. He set his mouth in a tight line and squeezed his eyes shut. "It's an appropriate response, but..." he trailed off, risking nothing of what he may have felt on the matter.

Aurora stood next to him and watched the Overlord's magic unmake the horizon. She imagined the men and women underground, their bodies crushed under pressure. She saw controlled flames licking at every forge with hungry anticipation. Even the soldiers below resembled nothing more than the armored dead. Never had her thoughts rallied so gruesomely against what she once considered her better reason.

"Not even the Great General can protect us from this, can he?" she asked.

Varimas looked at her. Had he eyebrows, they might have raised. “Everything that happens in the name of Kyros’ Peace is yours to endure.

Graven Ashe cannot heal that wound. It is our duty to stand as the righteous sword of the Empire, our devotion unquestioned... Commander.”

He slid the parchment back to Aurora. She only picked it up after a long hesitation, and its promise no longer filled her with warmth.

THE END



Hello, tyrants! I'm only too pleased to introduce *The Archon's Voice* – the third of our short stories highlighting the world of *Tyranny* (Previously released: *Under New Management* and *Commission*). This story introduces the Voices of Nerat, the enigmatic leader of the Scarlet Chorus and one of our game's powerful Archons. I had a difficult time figuring out what angle to take with the Voices. He's a slippery figure who can't be easily defined, and any number of stories could be written about him.

Mad as it may seem, I drew from personal experience. I once had an interview for a writing job (in the back room of a Coffee Bean) where my prospective boss declared: "Here's how this is going to work: I'm going to tell you about how I do my business, and you're going to sit there and listen. Your body language will tell me everything I need to know about you."

A one-on-one meeting with the Voices of Nerat would unfold in a similar fashion. The only difference is that you might not make it out of that interview alive.

Now that you're properly calibrated for uncomfortable meetings, enjoy *The Archon's Voice*!

– PAUL KIRSCH, NARRATIVE DESIGNER

THE ARCHON'S VOICE

Servio rose to his feet when he spotted figures cresting the hill. As the creaking of wagon wheels grew in volume, he silently hoped that these were the killers he sought.

A regiment of soldiers drew up to him. At least they were an approximation of soldiers. They varied in age from ten to fifty, and had armed themselves with a fierce medley of weapons – tent stakes, boat hooks, clubs bristling with sewing needles, and many twisted harpoons. A tall woman in a featureless, bronze mask separated from the gang to approach him. Servio recognized her garb as the raiment of an elite fighter – not the leader of this ragged group by far, but a gang boss or taskmaster of stature.

“Old man,” she called, clipped and professional, “you the one who sent us the missive?”

“Prantum Servio,” he announced, clearing his throat. “Originally of the Bastard Tier. I have a proposal for your master, if he’ll hear me.”

“He will. You needn’t worry about that.” She glanced over her shoulder at the assembled recruits, then returned her attention to him. “I’ve been instructed to convey a message: prepare for total commitment. Is that understood?”

Her words left him at a loss. Then, across the gulf of uncomfortable silence, he intuited her meaning.

“I already know what the Archon is capable of,” he said. “Whispers of the Scarlet Chorus reach us daily. News of your methods, your growing numbers, and your... unconventional leader.” His words quavered with unease.

She regarded him a second more before speaking up, this time with a smile in her voice.

“Just don’t let the Archon hear you call him ‘unconventional.’ He doesn’t take criticism well.” Some of the tension dispersed as she uncrossed her arms and rested her hands on her hips. “You have courage for a graybeard. If circumstances were different, I’d have you conscripted to the front lines. A pity. Wait with me, then. He approaches.”

She beckoned him to stand closer, and they watched the procession together. In spite of himself, Prantum Servio shared her company without fear. She reminded him of the daughter who left home in anger so many years ago, though he would never tell her that.

The army stretched beyond the horizon – tens of thousands strong, flowing through the treacherous hills that separated the Northern Empire from the Tiers. The forces of Kyros were making their way south. It was only a matter of time before they arrived in the Tiers proper.

“What do they call you?” he asked.

“Half Nose,” she said.

“They... they give you that name?” he asked. “Is that how it works?”

She nodded. “That’s the easiest part of recruitment, but you’re not here because you want to learn about us, are you?”

They both knew he wasn’t. Quite the opposite – he never wanted to learn what his countrymen would be subjected to as the army swept them up in its relentless tide.

Bare-chested haulers put their shoulders to the task of dragging wagons laden with supplies. They were slaves caked in dirt, blood and sweat. Nothing of their former humanity was evident in their empty gazes. He memorized that look, repeated across endless faces. He needed to bear witness to this. Then Half Nose and the other recruits turned as if responding to a call, and Servio snapped back to attention.

Moving with funerary slowness, a pair of slaves bore the weight of a covered palanquin draped with red silk. A warm breeze stirred the covering. The slaves held onto their burden and stopped just short of Servio. A young boy lowered to all fours beneath the opening and waited.

A piercing, reedy voice catapulted from behind the silk canopy.

“Is this one worth our time?” it called.

Half Nose raised a fist in salute. “I believe so, Archon.”

“He understands what is required?”

Servio winced. The Archon’s words sliced the air to ribbons, at times sounding like multiple voices speaking at once.

Servio gathered his courage and called out. “I’m not such a fool as to come without knowing the price of your audience.”

The pause that followed was uncomfortable in length, until a dry chuckle sounded from across the gap.

“Fool enough to speak out of turn, though. We can respect that.” The Archon laughed once again – a jubilant, barking sound.

Servio was no academic like the scholars of the Vellum Citadel, and knew little enough about the happenings outside of his own borders, but he understood that a conscript army answered to bravado. That much he had mastered in his younger days, though he was long since out of practice.

The curtain parted at last. The figure that lowered onto the slave's offered back was stranger by far than any of his cohorts. Green flames licked at the fringes of his crimson sleeves and fanned out from his tattered shirt in the shape of a glorious, burning collar. The head – if one could call it such – was a brass helmet, ornately molded into a man's disapproving likeness, his brow adorned with spikes. It floated over the man-shaped inferno and regarded Servio with passing interest.

Servio held his ground and hoped that his fear wasn't showing. Even if he smothered all of his trepidation down to the bottom of his thoughts, he suspected that the Archon of Secrets would find it anyway.

"Raise our tent!" the Archon announced, twirling his golden scepter in the air. "We make camp tonight. Someone prepare a goblet for our visitor. His mouth is strikingly dry."

Servio realized that it was so.



Hours passed before the last of the supplies made it from the rearguard. Servio politely declined the second offered cup. The work ahead of him was sobering enough that he found it difficult to enjoy the fine Northern vintage.

The Archon of Secrets paraded about his ragged army, kicking slaves and shouting orders. His words vaguely originated from under his helmet, but at times it was difficult to tell. Half a dozen masked soldiers followed in his wake – Crimson Spears and Scarlet Furies, as Servio learned from Half Nose. Those fighters were a cut above the rest of the filthy recruits, who spat and squatted and competed for space around the many campfires.

Only when the Archon reached down and pulled a supplicant's head from his shoulders with a quick, wrenching motion did Servio agree to more wine.

"You might find this little comfort," said Half Nose, "but I've served under worse than the likes of him."

"I believe you," said Servio.

The Scarlet Chorus had come to deliver Kyros' Peace under a banner of war. Until the last of the South bent the knee and accepted the Overlord's rule, the entire realm was forfeit to the brutality of occupation.

Pain was coming, and atrocities like those arrayed before him would soon become commonplace.

"He is the Voices of Nerat," said Half Nose, nodding toward the distant Archon. "He'll refer to himself in the plural, but I wouldn't recommend you do the same. 'Lord' or 'Archon' will do. Understand?"

Servio didn't, but he nodded.

"He has it within him to be exceedingly polite," Half Nose continued, "but he'd crush you like a spider if it fit his grand design, and wouldn't think twice about it."

"Spinning tales are you, Nose?" The Archon turned about and shouted in their direction. He was well out of earshot, but Servio didn't think that mattered. "We'll be with you in a moment, sir."

"Whatever you take from these last moments, make sure they count." Half Nose whispered to Servio. "I'll see if we can give you proper rites. That much I promise."

"You've shown me kindness," said Servio.

"No, I haven't." She hesitated. "Kindness would have been loosing an arrow into your throat before we ever met."

They stood by as laborers erected the Archon's tent, but there didn't seem to be anything else to say. Half Nose offered a quick bow to Servio and vanished back into the thickening mob of soldiers. Another attending recruit nudged him inside the tent and closed the flap behind him.

The tent contained a wooden throne and a small rug on the ground. Servio sighed and assumed the appropriate stance, dropping to his knees.

"Kyros," Servio whispered, "you may define law for the rest of us, but you aren't ignorant of mercy. I supplicate before your servant with fear in my heart. Give me some small reason to hope."

Shoving the last of his pride somewhere deep, he bowed his head to meet the carpet. No sooner had he done so than the tent flap whipped open and a familiar voice shrieked at the top of its discordant lungs:

"What are you doing on our rug?!" bellowed the Voices of Nerat. He beckoned Servio to stand. "We had our attendants bring you a chair. Must you reject our courtesy so soon?"

Servio stood on shaky legs and allowed himself to be lowered onto the throne while the Voices sat down on the rug, curled in comfort and ease.

"You have a speech prepared," said the Voices. He was staring at the brass gauntlet that comprised his hand, studying nails that weren't there. "It won't be necessary. Your posture, the sweat on your cheeks – they've told us everything about you and why you're here."

Suddenly the Archon shifted forward, regarding Servio with the full brunt of his attention. "You have information," said the Voices, "and you'll offer it up in exchange for your town's safety."

Servio nodded. He opened his mouth to speak, and then closed it again. He had practiced his words a hundred times over, only to have the Archon dismantle his intentions in a few scant breaths.

"We just want to be left alone," Servio whispered. "Whatever peace you bring, we will accept it, but don't drag my people into this war."

The Archon tilted his head in a mockery of interest, toying with him. Everything from his exaggerated movements to his grating tone hacked away chunks of Servio's optimism.

"It would be easier if you had asked for payment in rings or precious gems," said the Voices. "We can't spare your town any more than the Archon of War can crack a smile."

Something about this caused the Voices of Nerat to break apart in laughter. The flames under his tattered clothes built to a blaze that licked the ground underneath him.

"Kyros' Peace is coming," said the Voices, "and like a flood, it will drown anyone without the good sense to stand tall. Were it up to us, your nameless, insignificant family would be hauling wagons, donning red and shrieking themselves to sleep this very evening." He paused to regard Servio. "But that needn't be so. We are legion, and we delight in nothing more than a change of heart. You are the first Tiersman we've met who didn't soil himself at our mere presence. In our eyes, this makes you a remarkable specimen."

Servio had arrived expecting this, but now that his fate lay before him, he was speechless. The Voices, who never lacked a thing to say, spoke up ahead of him.

"A rare opportunity lies before you. Join us in our howling madness. Convince us of your worth by stripping away all pretense of self, and become one of our Voices."



Half Nose sat by the dying embers of the fire long after the others had dozed off. She kept the tent in the corner of her eye and listened for any movement or activity. Hours had passed since she left the old man.

She lifted her mask to scratch her face, which she was too frightened to show anyone these days. Better that the cold, stoic bronze represent her. Any hint of what she felt – any echo of a question regarding her nerve – could only get her killed.

The journey south had cost the Scarlet Chorus many lives, which would be replenished from the locals soon enough. Half Nose aimed to endure rather than be replaced. She glanced to the men and women of her gang, who didn't dare step closer to share her fire, and hoped they felt the same. A new recruit bundled herself in rags and trembled under a dying tree. Half Nose reminded herself to kick that one into shape and toughen her up. Elsewhere, she heard a prolonged shriek as men gathered to slaughter a pig – at least what she assumed was a pig. She wondered who had given them permission, and shook her head. The work was never done.

She flinched when the tent flap shuffled open and the Voices of Nerat marched out, making a beeline for the Crimson Spears who guarded the corners of his private camp. Where was Servio?

Half Nose leaned forward and pretended to poke at the fire, but all of her attention was centered on the Archon. It was impossible to miss his voice carrying over the quiet evening.

"We march at first light," he announced. "You will pair up the gangs and send them down either side of the valley. The west-facing will hit the Apex defenders first, and the east-facing will follow." The Voices of Nerat paused, turning from the exchange to focus across the Scarlet Chorus camp, straight at Half Nose.

"You!" the Voices shouted. "There's a withered corpse slumped in our throne. Dispose of him for us."

Half Nose released her stored breath. "Yes, Archon!"

She crested the hill up to his tent. The Voices studied her the whole way, his helmet bobbing gently on his collar of green flame. He refocused on his Crimson Spears as she passed.

"Give the man rites," he said. "A promise was made to us, and we would see it kept. He served the realm to the best of his abilities. A wasted gesture, but we suspect a better attempt to placate us than any of his countrymen will manage."

The Crimson Spears nodded and offered their "Yes, Archons," but Half Nose hesitated at the entrance of the tent.

A promise was made to us.

She glanced back at the Voices of Nerat and wondered at the vague, almost undetectable Southern accent that colored his discordant speech.

She found him looking back at her, and for the first time, she wasn't entirely afraid.

THE END



Greetings from the Narrative Design team! I'm here to bring you another story from the world of Tyranny. "*Trial by Iron*" showcases Barik, one of the Fatebinder's companion characters first introduced in a prior Dev Diary. As the entry describes, Barik is trapped in a rusted-together suit of iron scrap. He's a mess. The literal and metaphorical chip on his shoulder weighs a ton.

I wanted to spend some time with Barik outside of his armor (which sounds naughty when I write it like that). This is Barik before the events of the game – proud, ambitious, self-defeating and eager to prove his worth. Soon you'll see how well this troubled boy fares after a few years of war. In the meantime, enjoy "*Trial by Iron*!"

– PAUL KIRSCH, NARRATIVE DESIGNER

TRIAL BY IRON

Barik felt a hard shudder as the sword impacted his tower shield. He set his stance the way his brothers had taught him, letting his feet cushion the blow. He wouldn't be any use to the phalanx if he lowered his defenses, even for a moment. Enemy forces thickened ahead of him, growing in strength, forming into a relentless mob. His armor, his body, his life – he was the shield between the Southern barbarians and the civilized North, and he would give up all three to defend her. Kyros and the Empire depended upon him.

He pulled his thoughts back to the moment. There was no phalanx, and the mountain hamlet of Battle's Rest was a long march from the front lines of any war. Barik's shield was oak treated with tar – hardly the elite iron that the Disfavored carried into battle. His opponent wore a glorified bucket of a helm, and they fought to the cheers of their countrymen.

"Come at me already, you motherless swine!" called his opponent. A cold stare peered through the slits of his makeshift gear, but Barik recognized it not. Those eyes belonged to a neighbor, a friend, perhaps. With the bloodlust of the North coursing through him, Barik could hardly be tasked with anything as sensible as recognition.

Barik attempted to press forward, his ill-fitting armor restraining his movement. He didn't lift his wooden spear to do aught but parry the occasional blow while his opponent attacked – swinging a fine sword with fierce, experimental jabs. If Barik didn't act soon, he would be carried back to his tent on a stretcher instead of the shoulders of his fellow landsmen.

For a moment his attention shifted to the crowd. Barik had demonstrated nothing of his combat prowess. He was a shambling mound of patchwork leather, trying in vain to outlast a speedier, more determined foe. There would be no victory for him this day.

A resounding impact on Barik's helm preceded a collective gasp from the crowd. His opponent had slapped him with the flat of his blade, inviting and shaming him back into the melee.

He blocked another hard strike and then answered by letting his spear close the distance. The attacker danced back just in time to avoid it. Barik swore under his breath.

Graven Ashe, Barik thought, Archon of War, guide me this once, if never again.

Barik surprised himself by turning to the side, lowering his shield and presenting his flank.

The other fighter moved to steal the advantage, seeing this as one more in a long line of missteps. In the last instant, Barik completed the motion to plant the butt of his weapon in the warm earth. Holding it fast with his weight, he allowed the fighter to drive himself onto the spear's tip, wetting it with dark blood.

The crowd exploded with cheers.

"A strike from a son of Barikonen Faris!"

"Kyros' champion waters the soil!"

Cautious of reprisal, Barik stepped back from the collision. The wooden shaft held firm in the dirt, but the end had splintered and snagged on the bottom of his opponent's chest plate. The injury wouldn't be lethal as long as he disentangled himself and got the sharpened point out of his gut, neither of which was happening. He was stuck – unable to retreat and unwilling to advance, where only death waited. All of his strength seemed bent on gripping the shaft to keep it from sinking any deeper into his bowels, but his fingers were slick with blood.

"Get up, damn you!" Barik rasped.

Hearing Barik's voice, the other fighter glanced up. Agony flashed in his eyes, and dim understanding crossed the distance between them.

Then the blood pooling at his feet caused the fighter to slip. He fell down, and the spear welcomed him with a wet sound. As he came to a stop, the red tip presented itself through his back in grim salute. He twitched for a moment, suspended in place like an insect mounted for display.

There was no cheering from the audience this time. A groan of sorrow built in pressure like a storm, washing over the arena and over Barik, who stood over his dead countryman and felt nothing.



"People get killed in tourneys all the time. You can't judge yourself too harshly," said Waymar, Barik's squire. They had retired to the privacy of their tent, letting the organizers clean up the mess outside. "You got some prize money out of it – enough to buy a real shield, I warrant." He jingled the small belt of rings that Barik ignored. "Here, let me take a look at you."

They sat across from each other on separate cots. Barik stripped from the waist up and allowed the other to inspect him for wounds.

"When did you get this?" Waymar pointed to a long cut on Barik's muscled side, which looked fresh and raw. When Barik didn't respond, the squire set to dabbing it with a wet cloth. "You're lucky this didn't go any deeper. The way Lastin swung his father's sword, I'm surprised he didn't open you up from groin to gorget."

The name caught Barik's attention. "That was Lastin?" he said.

"Didn't you hear the announcer when they brought him into the ring?"

Barik remembered being so focused on preparation and adjusting his armor that his own name had sounded like it was shouted underwater. He had entirely missed that of his opponent.

"What of the recruiter?" Barik asked. "Did he see the fight?"

Now it was Waymar's turn to pause in silence. "His travel plans were delayed. He never made it to Battle's Rest. That's what everyone's saying."

Barik pushed his squire off him. "Leave me."

Waymar knew better than to argue. Barik waited for the tent flap to close before clutching his brow and taking several long breaths.

With the announcement that the Disfavored army would march on the South, the highest officers in Kyros' army were visiting every village and hamlet in search of promising new recruits to join the elite legion. They kept their soldiers notoriously limited in number, and tied to only the most noble and storied of bloodlines. Those few invited to march would carry the pride of their homelands to the new frontier.

Battle's Rest had staged the tourney to coincide with the recruiter's arrival, but now it was all for naught. Barik had killed a good Northerner, and to what end?

He raked his nails across the cut in his side. The sting he felt was a deserving punishment, and one of many to come. More so than his honor restored, Barik wished to open the cut wide enough to climb inside it. He dug his nails deeper and squeezed his eyes shut.

A time later, the entrance flapped open again.

"Did I not tell you to go?" snapped Barik, quickly moving his hand from the cut.

A hard grunt followed. "I see you left your manners in the arena."

Barik turned in his seat. A cloaked figure loomed over him, crossing his broad arms. The afternoon sun beamed pale, yellow light through the canvas walls, painting his visitor the color of amber. He was accompanied by a smaller figure, who regarded Barik in silence.

"Who are you?" Barik asked.

"I watched your performance out there," said the larger of the two.

As the tent closed behind him, Barik could better see his visitor – old and balding, with a beard that stretched down to his chest. “What do you make of your accomplishment, boy?”

His attendant said nothing at all, only watched with detached interest.

Barik sighed. This was doubtless some cousin of Lastin’s, here to speak a grievance. His friend had the stoic bearing of an undertaker, here to organize the last rites.

“I killed a friend today, and I did it with trickery,” said Barik. Then he surprised himself by voicing the thought that oppressed him most. “I’ll bow out of the tourney.”

“Why?” asked the old man.

Barik faced this new challenger with a defiant glare. “Because Graven Ashe wants no tricksters in his army. He’s to march with the best of the Northern Empire at his back, bearing Kyros’ standard into the land of unbelievers. I’m no decorated hero to join his vaunted ranks.” He turned away, unwilling to meet that cantankerous stare. “The most I can do is gift these paltry rings to Lastin’s family, and hope that I can look into my mother’s eyes with pride again.”

The figure raised a bushy, white eyebrow. “Is that all?”

Barik readied to spout off a litany of harsh words, but the stranger put up a mollifying hand.

“It isn’t my intention to mock you,” he said. “I would only point out that Graven Ashe needs good women and men. These days, someone with the fortitude to drive a spear through his neighbor is a qualifying trait.”

“You’re wicked or mad,” whispered Barik. “Likely both.”

The stranger’s tone softened. “You took no wounds in that arena. From where came this?” He gestured down to Barik’s exposed side. The cut had grown wider and more ragged, and blood seeped down to the bed.

Barik said nothing, but gripped himself self-consciously.

The stranger seemed to understand. “Your suffering is harsh enough without doing further harm to yourself. Men by the hundreds will die in Kyros’ war. Thousands. Mourn for them all in our custom, but pick up your sword and fight.”

“I will not,” Barik said in a restrained, clipped tone. “Leave me be, heartless one.”

“Wicked, mad, heartless.” The stranger nodded. “Some have called me that and worse. Others call me father, or husband.”

He unfastened his cloak. For the first time, Barik noticed that it was pinned with an iron clasp in the shape of Kyros’ sigil.

"A precious few call me General," the stranger continued, "but more people still call me 'Archon.'"

Barik blinked twice before he looked up at the stranger again.

The man who stood before him towered as high as a Spire and wore a suit of polished iron. As his cloak slipped aside, mage runes decorating the fine plates flared up with pale, blue light. Barik could see his bewildered expression reflected in azure gems set under the pauldrons, each the size of a dinner plate. The raiment must have weighed as much as an overfull wagon, and yet Graven Ashe – the Archon of War – stood unbowed.

The recruiter had showed up, after all.

"My Lord..." Barik left the cot and fell to his knees. "Forgive me, Archon!"

Graven Ashe waved with dismissal. "Enough of that. I have questions for you, son of Barikonen."

Barik squeezed his eyes shut and held his pose. "Anything, Lord."

"You called for my aid in the melee, did you not?"

"Did I?" Barik was about to apologize, but then remembered the moment when he begged for Graven Ashe's favor. A moment of weakness, of foolishness, and yet it granted him a measure of courage that he hadn't possessed before. How did the Archon know?

"I... I was afraid, my Lord." Barik could think of no falsehood to protect his honor, knowing the Archon would see through it anyway. "Afraid, exhausted. I..."

Graven Ashe spoke up before Barik could continue. "Your opponent was fast, but you hesitated. You waited as he spent himself on the attack. When death presented an opportunity, he ran to it headlong."

Barik squeezed his eyes shut. He didn't think he could survive a verbal dissection from the Archon of War himself.

"Mercy," he whispered.

Ashe ignored him. "You may never be the strongest or the fastest, son of Barikonen, but you asked for help when you needed it. No woman or man could learn that if they did not already possess it. No training could instill it."

Graven Ashe laid his palm on Barik's shoulder. A hot, itching sensation moved through his body. Barik felt inspected and oddly recognized by the Archon's mere touch. He knew, without needing to check, that his wound had healed over.

"The strength to seek help," said Graven Ashe. "That is a quality I value most in the Northmen, and is first among all that I seek in my recruits."

He brought one of his expansive hands down, and Barik took it – finding himself rising to meet the Archon’s fatherly expression.

“Arise, son of the North. You are welcome to join my Disfavored legion, if you will have us.”

His attendant, who up to this point had seemed in every way unconcerned with the exchange, approached Barik and stretched a length of string across his chest, nodding to himself and whistling as he measured Barik’s dimensions. Barik simply turned to the Archon with a questioning look.

“No soldier of mine goes to battle in a pauper’s leathers,” said Ashe. “We will fit you for a suit of iron, forged with care, as a symbol of our covenant.”

Barik informed his mother and brothers at once, but took no time to celebrate or pack belongings. Everything he needed was waiting for him at the front lines, in the phalanx. He deposited all of the tourney winnings at the doorstep of Lastin’s family. He would have written something by way of apology or gratitude, but Barik, son of Barikonen Faris, was illiterate and crafted for naught but war.

THE END





When I sat down to write *Carved of Shadow, Crept From Darkness* I had a couple of goals in mind. The first was that I wanted to write a short story from the point of view of a Fatebinder during or leading up to the years of Kyros' conquest of the Tiers. I wanted to get into the head of someone who knowingly served a higher, "evil" calling but was not necessarily a bad person himself. I wanted to play with the idea that even when people do bad things, that doesn't mean they can't be a good-looking, charismatic war hero, or have people they dearly love. I also wanted to hurt that Fatebinder — because I, myself, am a terrible person, ha.

My second goal with *Carved of Shadow, Crept From Darkness* was to provide a satisfying and hopefully exciting introduction to the companion I'd been writing over the past year for the game. Because Kills-in-Shadow is a monster, (albeit an intelligent, humanoid one with her own desires and motivations,) I thought it would be fun to draw upon classic horror fiction and film techniques for revealing her, such as unveiling the monster slowly, glimpse by glimpse, claw... by fang... by glowing red eyes.

Thank you for reading. I hope you enjoy it!

— MEGAN STARKS, NARRATIVE DESIGNER



CARVED OF SHADOW, CREPT FROM DARKNESS

Three. “A charmer till the end,” she says. Her face is pallid, her voice cracked as the tiled porcelain beneath their feet. Listless, she weighs no more than a ragdoll in his arms.

“Your fate is not yet finished. Remain steadfast.” *For Terratus, for Tunon. For me.*

If he speaks with enough conviction maybe, just maybe, by the grace of Kyros, he can make it true. Can really, truly bend reality to his will. To save her life. Her lips split in a fleeting smile, her teeth tinged red. She bleeds rivers from her back, drenching his hands.

He’s never felt so useless as a Fatebinder.

He slips on the slicked, split porcelain tiles of the bathhouse floor as he lunges forward. In his haste, he nearly forgets his halberd. The steam stings at his eyes. Clogs his throat.

This is unfamiliar territory for a battlefield.

“Where is it?” he asks. His muscled body surges like a thrust spear through the steam. With each damp, panting breath, he tastes perspiration and mead.

For Nunoal, Fatebinder of War, death takes the form of a Beast.

A shadowed silhouette rises like the jut of a mountain, hazed before him. Blocking the door.

Layla takes a ragged breath but doesn’t scream. She rattles in his grip as he crashes into the wall. The entire right side of his body throbs acutely, numbed. Soon he won’t be able to feel anything. Not panic, not grief, not the haft in his hand. Not heat nor anger nor love.

“My dagger,” she says as it skitters across the floor.

How she’d maintained a clutch on it before is beyond him. Even draining like a split boar, she’s tough as bronze. Had always been the toughest of all of them.

“Rademos!” he howls.

“Did you see it?” she asks. “It slunk from the shadows.”

“Rademos!” Nunoal shouts again. “Rademos!”

Layla’s head lolls, and the darkness draws closer. Hunched and hulking, it moves inhumanly on elongated hands and feet, crawling, creeping, no, stalking across the room, its saber-like claws tap-tap-tapping slowly, deliberately, against the mosaic tiles. It is hunting. And they are its prey.

Cold sweat beads Nunoval's brow. His pulse pounds in his neck, thump-thump-thumping to the clawed beat of their coming death. For a skip of several heartbeats, everything feels surreal.

When the creature, the form of darkness, is only a few yards away, it rises once more and, ambling, drags its black claws along the wall, casually but deeply furrowing the stone.

It's savoring this, toying with them.

"Do not close your eyes," he says to Layla and jounces her to force her awake, but maybe he says it as much to himself, and all the while his thoughts are racing, thinking—where is Rademos? Gaien and Evander and Niccol he knows already are gone. Branwen, as well, cannot help them, and if no one can come, he will have to set Layla down in order to fight, and then she will be dead. Behind his back, she will slip away like the sands in an hourglass, while he savagely hacks their attacker to bloodied chunks in his fury and anguish.

"Wouldn't dream of sleeping now, might have nightmares," she says. She jokes, teasing him unbearably to the end, but her lips are ashen and grimaced as she speaks. "Might dream of you, mewling and pawing at my breasts, kissing my clavicle in that sloppy way you do."

She is looking at him, eyes half-focused and bluer than the northern sky. So he offers her the softest quirk of a smile, though he cannot decide what to do.

Fight or die?

It is a decision he should have no problem answering, has never had a problem answering before.

Fight or die?

Yet now he asks himself again and again—

Fight or die?

And where is Rademos?!

Blessedly, in answer, the door in the crook of the far wall splinters. Finally. A thud, a beat, and it bursts fully inward, slamming against the stucco wall before hanging askew in its frame.

"Commander?" Garbed in a rucked tunic, leather trousers, and flaking, mud-caked boots, flaxen hair mussed with sleep, Rademos strides into the room. His eyes dart about before settling on the pair of them. "Shit, Layla." His fingers falter mid-sigil.

Help is near, but so far away.

"Careful!" Nunoval shouts. "It's among us!"

"In here?! How?"

Layla simply says, "It's a clever one," as if that explains everything.

Nunoval surges again for the door. He shifts Layla more to one arm so he can better heft his weapon. The dark Beast swipes again, but this time Nunoval halts the attack. One-handed, muscles straining against the force, he holds the brute at bay. It is no easy feat. Black claws like scythes score his fingers before he returns the slash, the blade of his halberd lancing across the Beast's thigh.

Then he is moving again. And with a rumbling chuckle, the creature disappears into the steam.

Rademos raises his staff, knuckles blanched where they grip the helve. "I thought we lost it at Lethian's bridge."

"Clearly, we did not."

Rademos swears profusely before invoking the name of his Archon, fingers contorting into the form of a familiar sigil, a rune he's favored a hundred times and more in battle, but now hesitates to cast, holding back the acrid swell of energy, jaw set grimly as he waits on his commander and squad-mate to slip past, and the air pops with accumulated power.

"Forget the Beast," Nunoval gasps as he skids into the doorway. "Help her."

Rademos glances to them sidelong before releasing a whiplash of lightning arching throughout the steam-clouded room. Behind the haze it looks like a distant thunderstorm. "You know I can't mend flesh and blood," he says.

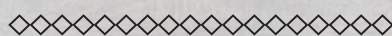
"I don't care. Do something, whatever you must," Nunoval counters. "Save her."

"Do you hear it?" Layla asks, eyes closed as she listens, and the men fall quiet as well, panting and straining to hear over the rushing of their blood in their ears.

Rademos is the first to speak. "No."

"I didn't either," Layla says. She reaches for her hip, fingers fumbling for the dagger that isn't there. "But that's the trick, isn't it? Not to feel it first."

In the moment before the Beast struck, she'd been laughing deeply, abs bunching beneath taut, bronzed skin, water swirling her navel. Then her drink sloshed as she pitched forward, face twisted in confusion and pain, and his arms outstretched to catch hers, grasping desperately to hold on.





Five. The Beast had been hunting them for days. He'd issued orders for caution. He'd tightened their formation and altered their route. He'd taught them, for so many years, how to survive no matter what, how not to fear or falter, how to strike hard and bury their foes in the dirt.

Evander and Niccol went to take a piss in pairs, but only Niccol stumbled back, swearing and shaking. Nunoal stared down the line of his soldier's arm, rent red from shoulder to elbow. Then he rolled his eyes to the sky.

Kyros have mercy. His soldiers had turned to mewling piglets in the face of a single Beast. Even he was beginning to worry, to wonder. Yet had he not, himself, cut down an entire pack with tawny fur and citrine eyes less than a fortnight before? Beastmen were nothing to be feared.

A Beast was nothing he could not best, yet despite his efforts, both Gaien and Evander had carelessly gotten themselves killed. And now Niccol was injured.

"Branwen! Stitch Niccol before we eat. Layla, Rademos—with me."

He did not wait for a reply as he set at a sturdy pace for the edge of the clearing. Withered leaves crunched beneath his boots. With each step, he felt his pulse quickening as he approached the spot where Evander's corpse would forever lie.

What should have been a simple scouting expedition had become a tepid and drawn-out bloodbath. Forget mapping Haven's marshes. He was tired of soaking in the blood of his own men. It felt unbearable to lose them now, when the invasion of the Tiers had yet to even begin, when they were only just preparing a military stratagem for Tunon the Adjudicator. At least, if they were to die honorably in battle, he could accept the loss. But like this? Like this he would have only failed them.

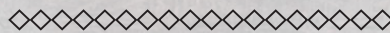
He was going to confront the Beast that night. And barring his assured victory, they would head for Lethian's Crossing—the closest human settlement to their position in the realm.

The three of them stood silent, nearly elbow to elbow as they peered down at the hewn gore that was their former companion.

Nunoal gritted his teeth as he barked a single command.

Lethian's Crossing was protected by a well-known band of mercenaries. No Beast would dare follow them there.

"Dig."



One. His chest heaves as he runs. The Beast slams into him, pitching him to the ground. Layla tumbles from his arms and rolls, a twisted heap, her hair spilled around her like a golden crown, her damp skin caked with blood and mud from the road. She's gone.

Aching, he crawls to his forearms, palms and knees. He scrapes his hand over the haft of his halberd, so livid he can't even speak. He feels it looming over him before its dusky, gnarled foot steps into view. With a low, rippling growl, it drops Rademos's severed head before him, and he screams, stabbing it in the gut. He twists the blade, cursing it back to the darkness from whence it came, forcing it backwards as he shoves to his feet.

"Damn you!" he chokes, "Kyros damn you all!"

His voice breaks, but he doesn't stop. He's wounded the Beast. He can barely distinguish it from the surrounding shadows, but he can smell its blood. He hacks and slashes and thrusts, pressing his advantage. He will end this.

He *will* kill it.

It tries to block an upward thrust, and triumphantly, he stabs straight through its thick-muscled forearm. A fiendish grin breaks across his face, the first outward sign of his surging bloodlust. Of his fury and raw desire. But instead of shirking or yowling, the Beast chuffs with a dark amusement. It stalks forward, pressing further onto the sharp, speared tip, closing the distance between them. Swiftly, he moves to rip the blade back, but it grabs onto the helve of the staff and with a monstrous strength wrenches it away. It tugs the barbed blade from its flesh with a snick, and then his weapon is tossed, clattering, into the darkness.

The Beast is on him in an instant.

His back hits the ground, hard, the wind painfully jarred from his lungs. His fists lash out, but its massive, calloused hands grab his wrists, and he realizes with a shock that it's a woman. Her naked, scarred teats brush his chest.

Her nostrils flare as she inhales his scent, and she growls deeply, purpled lips peeling back to bare yellowed fangs. Her scarlet eyes hungrily rove his face. Shattered, his thoughts flee his mind, deserting him to his fate. This is how he's going to die.

She speaks. Words form with heated effort, her voice rumbling, low. "Did human think own roaming pack could hunt as wished? Could slaughter three river-whelps in Beastwomen-lands?" She licks his neck, her mauve tongue rough as wood. "Did not know Shadowhunter would take vengeance?"

When she breathes, her exhale is hot against his skin.

"How? How could I have known?!" he howls. He grits his teeth until he tastes blood. "Do it! It's because of me they're dead."

All of them. Because of his mistake.

She grins, fierce and dangerous.

For reasons he'll never understand, or maybe for no reason at all, she spares him. Unlike the others, she leaves him – alive, heart thrashing, emotionally riven but bodily whole, battered and nearly broken in the rammed-clay street, staring up through clouded eyes at a starless sky.

But before she slips as the ebb of a shadow into the pitch blackness of the night, she carves, slowly, painstakingly with one claw, a deep scar into his chest. With it, her parting words brand into his mind.

"Remember Beastwoman's vengeance. Remember Kills-in-Shadow."

THE END



During the year I've spent writing Sirin's dialogue, I've gotten very attached to (and protective of) her. This is a weird thing to say because every time I sit down to flesh out her story, invariably something horrible happens to her. I can't help it, I want to see how she'll react to the terrible things I throw at her. But, to me, that's precisely what made her such a strong person. Her life has consisted of nothing but tragedy after tragedy and she has refused to let it stop her. I have come to admire her for that. She may only be fifteen years old, but she has lived more in those few years than many people do their entire lives and she shows no signs of giving up.

When I was asked to write a story, there was no question who I was going to write about and what story I was going to tell. I wanted to show exactly how powerful Sirin is. Even when she was a little girl, her power was unparalleled, and the event in *The Songbird* is a true demonstration of that power and is one of Sirin's defining moments. Although you can ask her about it in-game, what she tells you is only her recollection of the events – *The Songbird* reveals how the whole mess actually went down.

– ROBERT LAND, NARRATIVE DESIGNER

THE SONGBIRD

The songbird refused to behave. No matter how she tried to get it to come over to her, it simply would not obey. She whistled. She hummed. She even sang it a little song – under her breath, of course, she didn't want her mother to hear her. Nothing she did made it land on her arm the way she wanted it to. It refused every request. Frustrated, her walking turned briefly to stomping as she followed her mother down the dirt trail.

"Sirin, baby, what are you doing?" her mother asked without turning around. She didn't even slow down. Sirin's frustration grew and she stomped a little harder.

"Sirin!" her mother chided, looking over her shoulder.

"I'm sorry, Mommy," Sirin sighed. "It's just that there's this songbird over there and he sings the most beautiful songs and I want him to come say hi to me and I know he wants to be my friend but he won't and..."

"That's nice, sweetie," her mother interrupted. She still wasn't paying attention. Sirin grimaced, trying to decide if she should make her mother listen to what she was saying. She sighed again and continued walking, following her mother toward the village. It wouldn't be worth the trouble she'd get in if her mother found out, not after she was specifically warned against using her power on other people without permission. She rolled her eyes and stomped a few more time for emphasis, eyeing her mother carefully.

She still didn't know why everyone was so upset about that. It's not like Nerek got hurt. All she did was make him her friend – they were having fun! And he was being nice to all the other kids, too. If anything, their parents should have been happy she was helping out, not yelling at her and saying she better watch out if she tried using her power on unsuspecting people again. But that made it easier! If the person was tired or distracted, it was so much easier to work her way into their head. She looked at her mother again and then back at the songbird. No, it definitely wouldn't be worth it.

"You're going to be my friend," she sang softly to the bird. "I know you want to be. Come here. Come to me." She held out her hand. The bird just stared at her and chirped.

II

"Why won't you tell me what we're doing?" Slackjaw said petulantly to Blood Lump.

He looked around at the rest of the crew Blood Lump brought with him for the job. "And why such a big group? It's one little girl and some farmers – we could handle these people by ourselves in our sleep!" He looked at Blood Lump, who stood with his back to Slackjaw. He was rooting through a pack he held in front of him. "Blood Lump!" Slackjaw raised his voice. "Killing livestock? Digging up plants? Is this really why we started following the Voices of Nerat? I was promised blood! Excitement! Adventure! Not backwoods sabotage! So I'll ask again – what are we doing here?"

"Shut up!" Blood Lump hissed, turning around, closing the distance between them in two steps. "If anyone finds us before we're done, this entire trip is a waste and you know what the Voices will do if we come back empty-handed. I don't know about you, but I kind of like having my skin attached to my body. So. Shut. Your. MOUTH!" Blood Lump pushed Slackjaw's shoulder. "Now, you know everything you need to know and I am tired of you constantly asking me. The answer is never going to change: We are here to get the girl. But we aren't doing anything until Marin gives us the signal. So you are going to stand here and keep your mouth shut until it's time for us to move. Do you understand?" Slackjaw nodded slowly, his face flushing. Blood Lump shook his head, turning again to his pack. Is this enough? he thought, looking at the contents. If it's not, I guess it won't matter, will it?

"Blood Lump?" Slackjaw asked and Blood Lump gritted his teeth, resisting the urge to spin around and punch him. For two years he'd been subjected to the man's incessant questions, screw ups, and all-around stupidity. Why he didn't just kill Slackjaw and find another lackey is something he wondered so many times, but it always came around to the same thing – an idiot you know how to control is much better than an incompetent you can't. Not that he didn't contemplate it, fantasizing all the different ways he'd remove this thorn from his foot. I suppose that won't matter much after today, either, will it? Blood Lump plastered a smile on his face and turned to Slackjaw. "Yes?" he asked. 'This had better be worth my time,' was implied in his tone.

"What is so special about this girl? Why does the Voices want her so bad?" Blood Lump sighed, putting the heels of his hands over his eyes. "For the hundredth time, I don't know. Maybe nothing. That's why we're here. The only way to find out is to see what happens, so keep your mouth shut and watch. We've been working at this for a very long time and we're about to see the payoff. It's possible that we're going to be very rich very soon." At least I am, he finished internally.

A quiet shuffling noise from the underbrush spurred everyone into a combat pose. Blood Lump almost laughed, but was glad they took it seriously. When he accepted the job, the Voices of Nerat told him what he was about to witness could be one of the most dangerous things he ever got himself involved in, but also the most wondrous. Who could say no to that? "Calm down, fools," he said to his men as Marin entered the clearing.

"They're almost here," Marin whispered, hooking a finger over his shoulder, pointing back down the road. "People are already gathering. This might be easier than we thought." Marin smiled and the look of it chilled Blood Lump. Not that he was squeamish at all, but Blood Lump liked to think there were some things that might still make him pause. What they were about to do could end with Marin's daughter's death, and he seemed happy by it. Perhaps Marin was better suited for this work than either of them realized. When it was over, he'd suggest a meeting between him and the Voices of Nerat. The Scarlet Chorus could use more members.

He shrugged and shook his head. No sense in dwelling on that now, they had to get in position. "Get ready to watch the show," he said to Slackjaw as Marin pushed back through the bushes, walking toward the woman and child entering the village.

III

A crowd had gathered in the street, but Sirin hardly paid attention to them. She was too busy watching the bird. It had landed on a fence across the street from the group and she was trying to come up with a new song to lure it over. Her mother slowed which made her happy, it would give her more time to finish the song and make the bird be her friend. She didn't think anything of the crowd; people came to greet them every time they got back from one of her trips to be the Songbird. Everyone always wanted to know what town they traveled to and what miracle she had performed this time. She let her mother tell the stories. She still didn't understand how a simple song could make bones heal or the corn grow, but if they wanted to give her parents rings for her song, she would sing. If being the Songbird helped make them money, she would be the Songbird. It made her mother happy and Sirin loved taking trips with her.

"Sirin, stay here," her mother commanded and the tone of her voice pulled Sirin from her concentration.

She looked at the crowd and immediately knew something was different. Nothing really seemed out of the ordinary, but... yes... this was different. Why were they holding stones? Why did they look upset? Her mother turned and knelt in front of her. "No matter what happens, baby, stay behind me. Okay?" Sirin opened her mouth to protest, but her mother put her hands on her shoulders and gripped them tightly. "Promise me." Her voice allowed no room for refusal. Sirin nodded quickly. "I promise."

Her mother stood and turned as her father stepped from the crowd and approached them. Things didn't just feel different anymore. Something was definitely wrong. Her father looked upset and anxious. "Marin," her mother said, stepping forward to intercept him, "what is going on?" She had lowered her voice so Sirin could barely make out what she said. She was trying to keep the others from overhearing their conversation.

"Kellisandra, you know full well what's going on. You had to know this day would come. You had to know Sirin couldn't be our Songbird forever. We have to do something before anyone gets hurt. Well... Anyone else." Her father smiled at that and her mother flinched from his words. His voice was... She didn't have the word for it. When they traveled to bigger towns that had marketplaces, Sirin loved to listen to all the salesmen calling out to people, trying to get them to buy their goods. They'd talk about how fresh the produce was, describe how sweet the fruit was, detail how perfect the bread tasted. Everyone had something to say, had a special way they'd try to get you to listen to them. That's what her father was doing now. He sounded like he was trying to get his mother to buy something. "Sirin is so much more than we ever imagined. There is so much power in her and it's only a matter of time before that power causes an accident. So, the Overlord demands a demonstration of that power, Kellisandra. We need proof of what she can truly do and then maybe she'll have a better life because of it." He raised his hand slightly and brought it down in a quick side-to-side action.

"What are you talking about, Marin? What are you doing?" Her mother's voice was confused, wavering with fear. There was motion across the road and Sirin saw a group of men step from the overgrowth, watching them intently.

"I told you to go along with it, Kellisandra," her father said and backed up a couple of steps. "This could have gone differently." He lifted his head and turned halfway to the crowd of farmers standing behind him. "I was right! She said it was Sirin who did it all! She just begged me not to say anything to you! Sirin's songs withered your crops!"

Her songs killed your livestock! Kellisandra admits that Sirin is the cause of the problems we've seen recently in town!" He turned the rest of the way to face the gathered crowd, holding up his hands to quell their disgruntled mumbling. "Before you say anything else, there is a way we can deal with this. There are men that can take Sirin away! They can help her control her power! They're here, ready to help us!" He made another motion at the men who had come out of the woods. They hadn't come any closer. They were staring at Sirin. When her father pointed at them, most of them reached into their packs and pulled something out – all but one. He was looking at his friends, a confused look on his face.

"Kellisandra refuses to see that this needs to be done! She refuses to admit that no matter how much it hurts, we need to say goodbye to the Songbird!" He turned back to them and looked directly at her mother. The look on his face made Sirin go cold. "And I need to say goodbye to my wife," he said just to them, as angry shouts erupted from the crowd.

IV

Blood Lump saw Marin's signal and motioned to his men to step forward. A whisper of fear snaked down his back as they emerged from cover. Do you really want to be part of this experiment? What if your 'protection' doesn't protect you? He laughed quietly at the thought. Then I guess I'll be one extra bit of proof, won't I? There just won't be anyone around to see it... He watched as Marin told his final lie, wondering if even he had any idea what was about to happen. Would Marin survive to collect the rest of the rings he was promised? Not that he cared, but Blood Lump was curious if he'd ever see Marin again. He saw the second signal and turned to his men.

"Get ready," he murmured. "It's almost time." Slackjaw looked around, an amusingly dumbfounded look on his face. Blood Lump shook his head, almost ruefully. I'll think I'm actually going to miss him. Well, isn't that a surprise!

"W-what are you talking about, Blood Lump?" Slackjaw asked, confusion almost making him stutter. "What's going on?" He looked around, simultaneously jumping and ducking when someone in the crowd shouted, "Get rid of her!"

"I don't understand." Tears started welling up in his eyes and his breathing was coming a little quicker. Don't worry, Slackjaw, you'll understand soon enough. Blood Lump pulled the worked wax from his pouch.

Goodbye. Slackjaw stared at him, dumfounded as he put the wax in his ears, then turned and watched the rest of the men do the same. "What is this? What are you do..." His words continued, but Blood Lump could no longer hear them. He could see Slackjaw's lips moving, was certain his voice was raising, but he stopped paying attention to his second-in-command. Former second-in-command he reminded himself. There were more pressing things to watch at the moment. Once the show started, Slackjaw would have a very interested audience in Blood Lump.

V

Sirin crept closer to her mother, peering around her at the angry crowd. Her breath quickened slightly, her fear fighting to take control. Singing always calmed her so she started humming, hoping the sound would dissipate some of the terror she felt building. What were these people saying? Why did they want to get rid of her? What did her father mean about the crops and livestock? She had never killed anyone! Well, except... she shook her head. But that was different. That was an accident and she had never done anything like it since! It wasn't working, so she raised her voice a little, making the song more insistent.

"No!" her mother hissed at her, reaching back and gripping her shoulder again, tighter this time – almost painful. Sirin cried out in pain as a rock flew by them. She couldn't tell where it came from but someone in the crowd shouted "The little monster killed our crops!" as she watched it sail by. It missed them, but it hit the fencepost behind them with a resounding crack, causing the songbird to take flight. Her mother jumped, a frightened "Oh!" bursting from her lips. Her father smiled at them and turned to go, putting something in his ears as he did. The crowd, their ire focused completely on Sirin and her mother, didn't even see him go. Or, if they did, they didn't care. They had someone to blame for their misfortune and that was all that mattered. The terror Sirin had felt before bloomed, spreading through her and out to her hands and feet. She felt weak, sick. She pushed her face into her mother's back, wrapping her arms around her waist.

"Let her go, Kellisandra!" someone shouted and the crowd, bolstered by its anger and numbers, moved toward them a few steps.

"No!" her mother shouted back. "I will not let your fear and their lies take my daughter from me! You all know the good she has done for us!

How can you turn your backs on us now? This is insane! She's one of us! She is our Songbird!" Sirin could hear the fear in her mother's voice and, knowing that even her mother felt helpless, she began to hyperventilate. As she did, her terror came out in little moans, punctuated by each ragged breath. "Uhn, uhn, uhn, uhn..." Rhythmic and melodic.

"She's using her powers on us! Stop her!" a scream erupted from the crowd and another rock flew by them, missing them again.

"Oh, for the love of..." she heard a voice say, sounding like whoever was speaking thought they were being much quieter than they really were. She turned to look at the speaker and saw a stone sailing through the air. She knew what was about to happen. As she watched the stone, her terror overwhelmed her and she inhaled deeply, filling her tiny lungs. When the stone struck her mother's temple, a scream of fear colored by rage ripped from her mouth and into the ears of everyone present.

VI

When the girl screamed, Slackjaw's eyes widened in abject terror. His mouth moved, rapidly opening and closing, but Blood Lump couldn't tell if he was actually saying anything or just going through the motions. His breathing quickened and he began rocking from foot to foot, putting his hands to his ears and screaming himself. At least, it looks like he's screaming, Blood Lump thought absently. Slackjaw raked at his cheeks over and over, tearing gashes across them, blood pooling in the trails and quickly running down his face. He balled his hands into fists and started pounding on the sides of his head, shaking it, making it look like he was actually punching his head back and forth. And she's not even trying, Blood Lump thought.

Slackjaw stopped, head in his hands, staring at the ground, holding his hands over his ears. With a start he suddenly lifted his head, his gaze landing on Blood Lump's other men. Blood Lump looked at them and saw they were backing up, staring across the road. In his desire to watch Sirin's effect on Slackjaw, Blood Lump completely forgot anyone else was there. He turned to see what was happening to the villagers when a dark shape shot past him. It was Slackjaw, who charged one of the other men and bowled him over, grabbing the front of his tunic, throwing him to the ground. Before Blood Lump could process what was happening, Slackjaw's mouth was on the man's throat. He pulled back, a chunk of flesh between his teeth and a look of such rage on his face that it stopped Blood Lump before he could even move.

Slackjaw jumped to his feet, spitting out the piece of the now-dying man's throat and began kicking him in the side, over and over. While he kicked he began screaming something, looking around wildly at the other men. Scream. Kick. Scream. Kick. Faster and faster. More insistent. More violent. As he kicked, Blood Lump started hearing the words Slackjaw was screaming. "No!" Kick. "You!" Kick. "Won't!" Kick. "Hurt!" Kick. "Us!" The kicks sped up as his screaming became more frantic until he was just repeating it over and over emphasizing every word with a blow to the body at his feet. "No! No! You won't hurt us! NO! NO! STOP STOP STOP STOP!"

Slackjaw stopped and stared at Blood Lump, an insane glee in his eyes and Blood Lump knew he was going to charge again. He knew it and there was nothing he could do to stop it. He was going to charge and Blood Lump was going to die and he could hear the words Slackjaw was screaming and how could he hear the words Slackjaw was screaming? And at that moment, Blood Lump realized the full extent of Sirin's power. He had assumed there was something there, of course. The Voices of Nerat would never have sent a group into the middle of nowhere if there wasn't something to see, but he didn't really believe they'd find true power. But here it was. And Blood Lump believed.

When the realization hit him, a new wave of terror rushed over him. It was as though someone reached into his ears and removed the stoppers. He was frozen, staring at Slackjaw – death waiting to tear his throat and finish him off with a few good kicks. But before Slackjaw could attack, a scream caught his attention. As luck would have it, somewhere across the road someone's death granted Blood Lump his life. Slackjaw rushed off to join the carnage now laid out before Blood Lump's eyes. He watched, numb and terrified, unable to process what he was seeing. Shapes and motions, blurred together, everything coated in a horrible red and he couldn't understand why he couldn't see until he realized he was crying. Horrible, wracking sobs tore from his lungs and his breath wouldn't come. He felt the terror crawling through him, taking over, and if he didn't do something, he would be lost to it as well. He put his hands over his ears and screamed, running as fast and as far away as he could, hoping his feet could carry him from the slaughterhouse.

VII

Sirin woke up, dazed. Her left cheek was cold and wet and her left eye wouldn't open. She went to sit up and realized she couldn't move.

There was a weight pressing down across her back. She grunted, opening her right eye, blinking it to try and focus on the still shape in front of her. Crying and the occasional moan cut through the air around her as the world slowly resolved itself before her and she let out a quiet yelp. She was staring into the dead eyes of her mother, who was lying over her, pressing her into the mud. The songbird had returned and was standing on her mother's cheek, staring at her. "Hello, there," she said, her voice thick and raw, her throat protesting in pain from the screaming and crying. The bird hopped back, its foot landing on the gash in her mother's temple, the one made by the stone that had pushed her over the edge. She swallowed and reached out, her hand grasping for purchase anywhere, trying to extricate herself from under her mother. She found a hunk of grass and gripped it tightly, pulling with all her might, slowly working her body free, her mother's body rolling onto its stomach, her face sinking into the mud. Sirin stood, unsteadily, and looked around at the carnage her voice had unleashed on the village. She stared at the bodies, the death, the horror, the destruction and knew that this was all her fault. She heard a light clicking noise and then a quick chirp and she turned to see the songbird back on the fence post where it had been standing when everything started. She stared at it, wondering still if there were any way she could make it be her friend and if she even dare try. It chirped, a harsh, piercing sound – admonishing her, blaming her – and then flew away, its shape quickly lost over the trees. She sat on the ground next to her mother and leaned into her, tears freely flowing down her cheeks.

"I'm sorry, Mommy," she said, her lips pressed against her mother's cold body, her arms finding their way around her mother's waist. "I'm sorry." She laid there, repeating the words over and over until they stopped being words and turned into light sobs. She had no idea how long she laid there, listening as the world grew quiet and cold around her, but after a while, she heard a sound behind her. A quiet, furtive sound – stealthy and wrong. She stood to see what it was.

VIII

Blood Lump slowly emerged from the copse of trees he'd sequestered himself. He sat there for hours, his hands pressed tightly against his ears, humming roughly, his eyes closed. Eventually, the terror faded and he could no longer hear the screams inside his head.

He stood with his ear up, listening for any indication that it was still not safe to enter the village, but none came. Sighing, he walked back toward the site of the massacre, warily looking around. When he finally arrived at the edge of town, he just stood, looking at all the dead – the villagers, his men, everyone. How quickly everyone had been overcome. Such raw emotion – utter terror. Once that terrible feeling started to spread, once her power worked its way through their defenses, they didn't even need to hear her – they just had to know it was happening. Quiet sobs reached his ears and he looked for their source, seeing Sirin leaning over the body of her mother, hugging her. A new surge of fear wrapped itself around him as he stared at her, looking at the girl who just destroyed her entire village – and his gang – in a matter of moments. You've still got a job to do, gang or no gang, he thought and slowly approached her, desperately trying not to attract attention. As he crept forward – nearing her, almost upon her – his foot caught the edge of a stone, turning it over and almost sending him sprawling. He stared down at it, recognizing it as the one he threw at Kellisandra, the one that actually hit her, the one that set the whole massacre in motion. Sirin stopped sobbing, her body stiffening at the sound of his foot across the rock. Blood Lump leaned over and picked it up, brandishing it like a weapon. Though, what are you doing to do with that? She can make you do anything she wants just by asking you to do it.

Sirin turned, her eyes locking with his and he knew she knew – she knew he was the one. She knew he had started it all. She also knew that there would be one more victim to her songs before the day was over. She inhaled, the hatred in her eyes burning into him as he screamed at himself Do it! Do something! Do ANYTHING! HURRY! and he was acting without thinking. He raised the rock – Hurry! Don't let her sing! DON'T LET HER SING! and brought it down on her head, knocking her unconscious before she could make a sound. He let out his breath in an explosive gasp and bent over, trying not to vomit. That little experiment almost had a 100% fatality rate. He stayed bent over, trying to catch his breath. When he finally felt he could move again without fainting, he crouched next to Sirin and looked at her. All that power in such a little body, how was that even possible. If he hadn't see what her voice could do, he wouldn't believe it. Now he wouldn't ever be able to forget it. He picked her up and slung her over his shoulder, her head bouncing against his back. Let's get this present to the Voices of Nerat and hope he knows what to do with it. He laughed. Well, that's his problem now. There was a sharp chirping and he jumped. A songbird landed on the fence post in the center of the massacre.

It stared at him, cocking its head to the side. He laughed, a sound devoid of any mirth. I wonder if I'm ever going to feel safe again. The bird took wing, flying over to him, landing on Sirin's back. It chirped again and began preening itself.

"Come along, little Songbird," Blood Lump said to Sirin as he started down the road. "We're going to teach you how to behave."

THE END



EPISTOLARY OF SONG AND STONE

BY: ROBERT LAND

17 SPAN OF SWORDS, 430 TR

Dear Stelio,

I don't know if you heard the news, but it seems Nerat got its wishes and I have officially been named its ward. Can you believe that? It's bad enough that they're forcing me to be part of the Scarlet Chorus, but now this? Why do I need to be its ward? Sometimes I wonder how Kyros maintains control of the world if these are the kinds of decisions coming from the palace. They've put the most powerful Archon in history (sorry, but we both know it's true) in the - and I use this word very lightly - care of that monster? I suppose I understand why I was so unceremoniously dumped on Nerat's doorstep, but can you imagine how different things would be right now if I had actually succeeded? A couple more seconds and Terra-tus would have been short one tyrannical overlord. If I ever get the chance again, I won't let my excitement get the better of me.

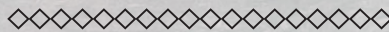
And this helmet! Did they at least tell you about the helmet? Seriously, what were they thinking? Two armies worth of grown men and women so terrified of a teenage girl that they put this thing on my head? Okay, so it's a little funny, I guess. And the trouble they went through to silence me when they actually placed it on me... First they magically silenced me - from another building, mind you - and then, for good measure, they bound and gagged me! Can you say paranoid? Granted, they were right to be. If I could have made a sound, they would have all found themselves jumping from the parapets. But that's really their own fault, isn't it?

At least it's pretty. I'll give them that. But if I attempt to use the full range of my powers, the gem in the helmet will shatter and kill me. Isn't that delightful? At least, that's what Nerat said would happen. We both know it lies just as often as it tells the truth, but I'm not about to experiment with my life on the off chance a homicidal monster is playing a trick to amuse itself.

Anyway... I heard you're in Azure somewhere. Is that true? And you're gathering Beastmen? Is that true, too?

I've heard they've very brutish and hard to control! Are you sure that's what you want? Very exciting if it is - but you better be careful! We all know Kyros doesn't take it well if anyone deviates from all those carefully laid plans. Look out for yourself.

Sirin



4 SPAN OF REAPING, 430 TR

Dear Stelio,

Yes, I know I should refer to you as Cairn publicly, but this is hardly a public forum and I refuse to use the name that they gave you. You are Stelio. And, as far as I'm concerned, you always will be. What's the worst they could do anyway? Yeah, don't answer that question. I already heard. I thought the helmet was bad - but an Edict? Really? Although I suppose you can't really be all that surprised, can you? I did warn you about defying Kyros - especially with Beastmen! Were they as savage as everyone says? My teachers were always so dismissive of them, calling them evil brutes. I can't believe you would associate with a group like that. Or were you trying to civilize them? That must be it. You always had a way with words in a way I never could grasp. All I can do is force people to see my side, you could convince them your way was better. I was always envious of that. How did you do it? I suppose now I may never know...

What did it feel like? I mean, when Kyros's Edict hit you? Did it hurt? Was it terrible? That's a stupid question. And it's not like you can tell me, anyway. Of course it must have hurt. Sorry. I don't know much about magic beyond my own - no one will teach me. Not that I blame them, really. I do seem prone to killing people... To be fair, though, only one of those deaths was intentional.

I remember a time while I was in school - after the death of my instructor, after they had magically bound my tongue - I would wander the building when I wasn't in class. Most of the time they'd immediately track me down and take me back to my room. But over time, I learned a few tricks I could use to slip away unseen.

A little girl could easily get herself lost in those corridors, and even with a location spell it could take them hours to find me. All that time to myself! The gardens were one of my favorite spots. I could hide in the plants, breathing in the fragrance of the flowers, listening to the birds and insects, and feel the sun warm me through the leaves. Even while they tortured me and "trained" me, that was the most peaceful I had ever felt.

And then I found the library. I knew I would be punished severely if they found me in there, but I had to explore it. All that knowledge! I didn't understand most of what was in those books, but I looked through them anyway. Maps, history... magic. They had books on magic! I had no idea anything like that existed! They wouldn't let me use my power outside of class, so this was my consolation. At least, I thought it would be. Before I could even puzzle out the first real sigil, they found me. And I was right - the punishment was swift and severe. When I was caught in the gardens or the kitchen, all I would get was a slap on the back of the hand and the admonishment never to do it again. When they found me in the library, I was dragged to the master's suite - such an ugly, spiteful man - and made to stand in his study for five days. I was not allowed to move. If I so much as shifted my weight from one foot to another, he would shock me with the rune they had placed under me. I was ten years old! Can you believe that? By the third day, I had decided I wasn't going to let that stop me. As soon as I was able to get away again, I would find that library and I would make them pay for what they were doing.

The grand schemes of a child, right? Of course it was over a month before I was able to sneak away again, but I found the library. My mind raced with my revenge plans and I rushed to the door, ready to grab the first book I found and run. When I touched the handle, there was a bright blue flash and I was thrown back against the wall. The door opened and the master emerged from the library.

"Sirin," he said in his cold, condescending tone, "it would appear you haven't learned your lesson." He walked over to me, leaning down so he could look directly into my eyes. They were a hard flat brown with flecks of gold. His nose had short, bristly hairs sticking out all over. His lips were bright red and sagged awkwardly, giving him the appearance of sneering and frowning at the same time. And his breath! Stelio, I can't even begin to describe how bad it was. But I couldn't move, the magic that shocked me had also paralyzed me. "I won't make you stand in my study this time. You'll stay right here and think about why you're in this predicament. That door," he pointed at the library, "is now warded against intruders.

I'm sorry... I don't mean to compare a couple of days or pain to what you're going through. I suppose I just wanted to let you know that I know how it feels to have this power inside you, to have people use you for it, abuse you without a thought because they "know better," try to control you and force you to do what they want without a thought for your needs. I understand what you wanted to do, Stelio, and you didn't deserve such a harsh punishment. In the middle of the horror wrought upon the world by Kyros, you wanted to create something more. I wish you had been able to.

Dear Stelio,

"You've been a very naughty bird," it cackled, its voice cracking as it raised in happiness. I recognized the voice immediately and knew it let her through just to torture me - which meant it wasn't playing around. It had a very specific purpose for its visit and wanted to cause as much pain as it possibly could.

"Is that any way to treat your Uncle?" it chided. The honey in its voice nauseated me. "Perhaps you should be nicer to us, little bird. Perhaps you have a hug for us? Then maybe your punishment won't be as bad..."

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I don't know why Nerat is letting you talk, but if you think that's going to scare me, try again." I inadvertently took a few steps away from it as I spoke, betraying my nervousness. "So, unless you feel like pushing a sword up through your chin, tell me what you want and get out. I'm not sure it would actually kill you but I would love to find out."

It laughed again, then moved toward me making low, admonishing clicks with its tongue as it did. "We know you are unable to control us. We know you've tried. So, your little bluff isn't going to work on us, little bird." The condescending tone of its voice made my lip curl into a sneer.

"I'm the one that tried to kill Kyros," I said, staring it down in its blank, bronze eyes, taking slow, deliberate steps toward it as I spoke. "When I was twelve I tried - and very nearly succeeded - to destroy someone that countless armies have been unable to even get near. Do you think self-preservation has ever been my goal? True, it might kill me to do it, but if I could rid the world of your foul presence, I would use the full extent of my powers on you." It stopped moving toward me and I knew it had never considered I would actually sacrifice myself - for anything, let alone its destruction. It stood there for a moment, staring at me with its frozen face. And then it laughed again. My feelings of superiority crumbled when it giggled at my threat.

"You are absolutely adorable, Songbird," it said and closed the gap between us. I refused to back up or recoil. I would never give it that satisfaction. "We found something of yours, naughty bird," it whispered gleefully, its breath playing over my face in a hot, green mist. "We've known for quite some time, but we let you play your little game, but enough is enough." I could feel the horrible desires of the personality talking to me pushing at the edges of my brain. It wanted me to climb inside its head. It wanted me to know all the things it desired to do to me. You would be so proud of me, Stelio. I stood my ground. I held its gaze and I did not relent. Eventually it shook its head and took a step backward. "Fine," it said, "we tried to be nice about it, but you refuse to play." It took its hand out from behind its back and held a stack of papers under my nose.

"Where did you get those?" I asked, the fury I felt making my voice drop to a whisper. My gaze went to the chest at the foot of my bed. It had been moved. Not by much, but someone had been in it. I looked back at Nerat. "You went through my things? My personal belongings?" I reached out to grab the stack but it pulled them back before I could take them. "Those letters are mine! How dare you violate me like that! Isn't it enough that I have to endure your incessant chatter and your clumsy advances?"

I directed that last part at the voice currently speaking through its body. I'm sure it flinched a little. That felt good. "If you dare come into my room again when I'm not here, I will scream so loudly, the entire Chorus will tear us both apart before you can silence me." It just stared at me holding my letters - the letters I've spent the past year writing to you - out in front of it. Then it silently set them down on the table and turned to go.

"Take care, Songbird," it said, and its voice was Nerat's again. "You may not believe I have your best interests in mind, but I do. Kyros may not have had you executed for your little... display in the palace but that is only because you are useful right now. Your time would be better spent staying useful instead of writing letters to a dead man. You're lucky you never sent them, or both of us might also be dead right now." Then it walked out of my tent.

I don't know how long I stared at those letters, Stelio, while Nerat's words echoed in my mind. You were always the one I could talk to about anything - everything. So many secrets in that pile. So much information no one should ever know. And so many personal stories that I had never told anyone. All dangerous information in the wrong hands. And deadly if the wrong person found out about it. As much as it pains me to admit, it is right. You were always a good friend to me, but I have to look out for myself. I have to let Nerat win this battle. Tonight, I will burn these letters and say goodbye. I only hope you can forgive me.

I will never forget you.

Sirin



The Scarlet Fury stood in the door to the Voices of Nerat's tent for a while before she finally pushed through. Being in his presence always gave her the most uneasy feeling and she was afraid what she had to show him would not go well for her.

"What do you want? We are busy." Nerat seems distracted. That was good. If she could ask him and get away without drawing too much attention to herself, it might go much better than she had hoped.

"I found Sirin in the aviary. She was picking up the birds one by one and singing to each one of them." The Voices of Nerat stopped what he was doing and turned to look at her. Shit, she thought.



Exactly what I don't need. "She was also holding this." The Fury held out a piece of paper. Nerat stepped over to her and took the paper. He stared at it intently for a minute or two, then handed it back.

"Give that back to her," Nerat instructed. "Also give her one of my personal message birds. Then leave her alone. She has business to attend to."

"But..." the Fury protested, against her better judgment.

"Do as we say!" Nerat snapped. The Fury left Nerat's presence to do as she was instructed.

"Good little bird," Nerat whispered after the Fury disappeared. "Obey..."

2 SPAN OF FORGEFIRE, 431 TR

Goodbye, my friend. I am sorry.

I hope you are at peace.

Sirin

THE END



RED RECRUITMENT

BY: PAUL KIRSCH

Jagged Remedy strode up to the palisade of the Disfavored encampment and planted his spear in the ground. Through the meager eye slits of his bronze mask he stared daggers at the pair of Stone Shields guarding the way forward. With their noses upturned and hands at ease on the pommels of swords, their bearing was no more welcoming or congenial than his.

"I'm here for the prisoners," Remedy announced.

The guards exchanged a brief glance. Remedy already knew how this would go, and the necessity of watching it play out annoyed him to no end.

"On whose authority?" the leftmost called.

Remedy's grip on the spear tightened. The sun was beating on his shoulders. Back in the Chorus camp, he might have challenged these two simply to take their shade.

"Fifth Eye," he said. "The Voices of Nerat. Kyros. The last shit you took. Pick one."

"Hey!" The rightmost guard stepped forward and spoke in a clear voice. "No one informed us of a prisoner transfer. You'll have to go through the proper channels."

Remedy focused on a distant tree, smothering his temper, picturing it like embers in his gut that he could snuff out at will.

The rising tensions between the Scarlet Chorus and Disfavored at the Apex campaign were reaching a head. Graven Ashe had started this leg of the war on a low note by declaring his intent to stay upwind of the Chorus camp. As a reprisal, the Voices of Nerat sent him a crate full of spoiled meat. The brewing aggression between the two Archons – be it petty insults or outright violence – was setting a poor example for the soldiers in their care.

Remedy had dispatched a bird that morning with a message to anticipate his arrival. Expecting no reply, he didn't wait for one, as it also took the better part of a day to cross Vendrien's Well, the valley of southern Apex. Remedy doubted very much that any pigheadedness on the part of his so-called allies was the result of a communication failure. He refocused on the guards, the heat in his belly almost too unbearable to contain, and released some of his anger in a controlled burn.

"I'm not crossing this fucking valley a second time so that I can prove myself to a couple of disposable peons who just rotated out of latrine-digging to make my afternoon miserable."

Jagged Remedy pounded the butt of his spear in the mud. "You think yourselves safe with Ashe's fatherly protection? Let me through before I'm tempted to explore your tolerance for pain – I brought the tools for the job." He hefted an ominously-shaped roll of fabric slung to his pack.

The guards shared an uneasy glance.

"Shit," muttered the leftmost. "This is the surgeon. Didn't Ceveus tell us about him?"

The rightmost cleared her throat and nodded, focusing back on Jagged Remedy. "Our commander wanted to see you personally. We weren't expecting you until tomorrow."

The Void you weren't, thought Remedy. "I am here now."

The leftmost took Remedy's measure with curiosity this time, and called over the palisade:

"Jagged Remedy to see Ceveus!"

Both halves of the gate swung open and Remedy stepped through, taking care to track as much mud on his way inside as possible.

He could barely hear himself think over the constant din of formation training. Rows of armored soldiers clicked into their assigned spots of the phalanx while drill instructors barked orders. Off to the distance, a heavy-set man hammered dents out of breastplates. There was a sheath for every weapon and an assigned spot for every soldier to plant themselves until instructed otherwise.

Ceveus approached him from the opposite end of the training ground. His broad shoulders supported the weight of a full suit of iron. By his age alone, Remedy guessed the commander wouldn't have lasted a day in the Scarlet Chorus, though he kept this observation to himself.

"Glory to the Voices," Remedy said with a fist upraised.

Ceveus spread an uneasy frown across his weathered cheeks. "Graven Ashe protects. I understand you're here for a score of enemy captives."

Pausing on the distinction between "prisoners" and "enemy captives," Remedy chose his words with care. Ceveus was a military man, and could be expected to solve his problems in an equally militaristic fashion. Bravado wouldn't get Remedy anywhere.

"A score of captives to replace the score we lost in battle," Remedy said. "The Voices needs to pad the vanguard with something. Fair is fair."

"Fair is fair," Ceveus parroted with a thoughtful nod. He motioned them to walk at an easy pace. "Though it seems that more of your new conscripts defect back to their countrymen as the war drags on. We could put them to better use than your degenerate horde."

Wagons will always need pulling, ditches digging, pallets warming.”

If the self-satisfied Northerner wanted them both to leave this exchange in a foul temper, he was making remarkable progress. Remedy sucked on his sweat-coated upper lip.

“Aye, the Chorus ranks have thinned,” he said, “but it’s because your tactics favor the rearguard. Our gangs bloody themselves while your dumbest units polish their gorgets and toast to their success. If you don’t want to surrender what’s ours by right, that’ll be a disagreement for the Court to settle, and you can take your chances with a Fatebinder.”

Ceveus showed Remedy his teeth in a gesture that no one could confuse with a smile. “You Tiersmen are all the same. No respect and no spine.”

Remedy was suddenly more aware of the soldiers all around them, and the number of heads that turned at the sight of a Chorus rat chatting up a decorated unit commander. A simple gesture from Ceveus and these good Northern soldiers might take it upon themselves to intervene. They could spin any tail that they wanted about Remedy after the fact, including one where he struck first, or one where he never made it to the Disfavored camp in the first place. Another victim of the Apex defenders – wretched Southerners that they were.

“But you came for fresh recruits,” Ceveus chimed, “not to debate the finer points of war. I wouldn’t want to overburden you with matters beyond your ken. Follow me – I took the liberty of rounding up our tithe to the Voices.”

This time Remedy kept his mouth shut and followed Ceveus, shoulder to shoulder.

He had spent much of the trek across the valley wondering why Fifth Eye dispatched him on this chore alone, lacking the company and security of his gang. Now Remedy was beginning to understand. Like everything in the Scarlet Chorus, this was a demonstration, and his performance – even his restraint – would be subject to the harshest scrutiny. There was something more to it as well, something that he wasn’t seeing. But then, nothing was straightforward when the Voices of Nerat and his inscrutable orders were concerned.

At the farthest end of camp stood a crude, iron cage lined with straw. Remedy made out the shapes of several ragged figures milling about inside – either slumped to their knees or collapsed in weak, unmoving heaps. By the smell alone, he knew that Ceveus had picked the most infirm and wounded score of prisoners they had on hand, likely having to scrape them off the floor of some dungeon. Corpses in all but name.

"Are my recruits clean and ready for the long march, commander?" asked Remedy.

Ceveus tossed him a small key. "One tried to escape, and we taught him a good lesson for his trouble. The others... well, they got the welcome that any Tiersmen deserve, didn't they?"

Remedy figured they had gotten more than Ceveus would ever admit. A mixture of blood, feces and stagnant sweat thickened in the humid air. Careful to let nothing give away what he felt, Remedy strode up to the bars of the cage. He took a deep breath, accepting as much of the reek into his lungs as he could allow, letting it stoke the embers inside.

"Have you mangy fuckers slept long enough?" he called into the cell.

Faces beaten purple and eyes swollen shut peered out at him in pain and incomprehension. Some of the sorry bunch blinked with dim awareness or ran their tongues over caked lips.

Remedy held himself between the prisoners and Ceveus. "Your kings and queens failed you. In death and disgrace, they proved themselves unworthy. You may think the Scarlet Chorus a conquering army, but don't mistake us for these iron-clad pissbucket foreigners."

He gestured toward Ceveus, which caused the commander to perk up at attention. Remedy continued.

"This rusted shit and his sanctimonious cohorts did you wrong. I can't make it right again. I can't undo the damage. But I can give you something to fight for – a cause, a family, a hope. If nothing else, I offer you back your lives and your humanity, and with them the promise that no one will harm you unless you let them. Beyond these walls, the Scarlet Chorus is eager to call you brother and sister."

Remedy wished that he could have delivered the speech that Blood Mulch gave when he was invited into the ranks, but Remedy was a man of fewer words. This sorry lot would have to settle for a second-rate shepherd.

"The Chorus is the Tiers. We are Haven, Azure, Apex, Stalwart, the Bastard Tier, and the Free Cities. By joining us, you don't lose what makes you strong. The Disfavored took your home away. I offer you another one. To Graven Ashe, you are nothing more than slaves. The Voices of Nerat embraces you as family."

He let those words soak in as he knelt to the ground. Remedy moved slowly, gave the recruits no cause to panic, and let them follow each of his careful motions. He unrolled a bundle of cloth from his pack on the dusty earth and revealed its contents – twenty bronze daggers.

"Fighting for us won't be easy," Remedy said. "Make no mistake: plenty of folks will want to hurt you. This time you'll have the freedom to fight back. That is the Voices of Nerat's personal covenant to each of you."

He stood and unlocked the cell with Ceveus' key. The commander flinched, his confidence no doubt shaken by the life and energy flowing from Remedy, which fed the tattered men and women like they were suckling piglets.

Remedy focused all of his attention on the recruits. He let the door swing open of its own accord. They needed to see it happen. In their state, any symbol weighed ten times its meaning.

"You can even try to kill me, if that's how you want this to go!" Remedy laughed what he guessed was the first genuine laugh the captives had heard in weeks. "There's usually two in every batch who dares. Like anything else in the Scarlet Chorus, that will be up to you."

He backed away and observed. One by one, the prisoners slowly rose to their feet. They exited the cell, shielding their faces from the light and testing their physical boundaries. Their attention darted from Ceveus to Remedy with fresh anxiety.

The first of the captives stepped forward and picked up a knife, turning it and growing accustomed to its weight in his hand. The tension in the air told Remedy that Ceveus didn't like it, but arming the recruits offered a measure of empowerment that he needed them to feel. He needed them to trust his intentions, and he needed to deserve their trust, which was challenging enough with the Disfavored dimwit presiding over the recruitment, gawking with his sword half-drawn.

One of the prisoners, who stood no higher than Remedy's hip, scrambled to pick up a knife. Remedy stopped her and spoke in a calming tone.

"The young will be protected. The Archon of Secrets will see them cherished and sheltered. We have very few rules, but anyone who violates that one will answer to me or worse. If they're lucky, they'll only be fed to the swine."

He patted the child's shoulder and nudged her to join the others.

"Tonight will be hard on you," Remedy said, addressing the crooked line of recruits. "You'll be named, branded, and initiated with whatever cruel rites we deem fit. But you will live. Kyros has a plan for all loyal subjects, and you will have the distinction of fighting under the Overlord's banner – no matter what uniform you wear."

Some of the sickly, beleaguered few stood taller as his words took root. Others doubled over and retched with a combination of malnourishment and understanding of the life ahead.

Remedy made no assumptions about who would endure and who would fall in the long run. Plenty of recruits had surprised him in the past.

Ceveus stepped forward timidly and cleared his throat.

"Well spoken," he said.

Remedy kept his arms folded, his attention fixed on the recruits.

"Where do you go from here?"

"Where my Archon commands," answered Remedy, wishing to give up no more of his sweat or time.

"At first light I'm marching to the Vellum Citadel," said Ceveus. "The Sages are due to surrender. A boring task, to be sure. Perhaps I'll see you there."

"Perhaps not." Remedy turned on his heel and made a beckoning gesture. Each of his recruits followed without a moment's hesitation. Love and trust were all the discipline they needed.

All twenty joined him on the long trek back to camp. Five succumbed to their injuries along the way, but Remedy permitted no stretchers on the first march as a rule. The dead were always worthwhile investments if they sent a message to the living. In the weeks to come, he took it upon himself to harden the rest, carving survivors out of their unformed matter, giving them the freedom to arm themselves with strengths he never would have found otherwise.

Neither Fifth Eye nor the Voices ever commented on his demonstration, only nodded their accord as they observed his progress with the new batch. And when they instructed him to take the gang further south, with orders to keep an eye on the Disfavored, Jagged Remedy never stopped to ask them why.

THE END



SHUSH

BY: MEGAN STARKS

“So? How did the meeting fare?”

Bleden Mark, Archon of Shadows, leaned back against the wide, stone colonnade. The infamous assassin liked the hard press of the stone between his shoulder blades. It jabbed at the back of his mind, distracting. It affixed him as his amber eyes roved the captivating form of his Overlord.

Kyros’ answer was a refrain, an enchanting, clipped little beat in time with his pulse in his ears. “Well. Much too well.”

He felt his pupils dilating, the blackness bleeding steadily to swallow the light from his eyes. Already, his anticipation was piqued.

His Overlord explained, “Icarix offered the perfect counter to my every concern. He anticipated, expertly, each and every question I asked—before even I had thought of them. I could not catch him off guard, though I most certainly tried.”

To hold one’s own in a political discourse with Kyros, the empire’s most feared and beloved ruler? It was an impressive feat, if not entirely unsurprising in this case.

“He favors that little mind-trick of his often at banquets,” said Bleden Mark. “Of course, we both know he’s merely foretelling a future he’s already experienced. But I’ve seen the way ladies and servants alike titter in response to his... attentions.”

“And yet, I am neither a lady nor a servant. I am Kyros.”

The dangerous undercurrent to his Overlord’s reply cautioned him to choose his words with greater care. He smirked. Then he struggled for a moment to ground his thoughts. His heart lashed at his chest. He thrummed, overcharged with adrenaline and a dark need.

He pressed harder against the grit of the stone colonnade before he said, “So he couldn’t resist the attempt to benefit himself in your presence. I’ll bet he’s been resetting events, here and there, changing outcomes, to have even garnered your interest in the first place.”

“Yes. I believe he has a limited capacity for prudence, and by extension, a fatal excess of ambition. He altered the meeting several times in order to influence me.”

Bleden Mark curled his fingers against his palm, resisting the urge to flit them across the handle of a dagger. Experience and the pain of his Overlord’s discipline had broken him of such senselessly impulsive gestures. Mostly. “Then I take it you have need for me?”

"See that the Archon of Time does not survive another evening," the Overlord agreed.

"Mark."

“You’ll have but one stab at this. Miss, and Icarix will reshape the events with the knowledge of when and where to kill you. You cannot merely shadow-leap to victory this time. First, you must ensure that he cannot escape into the past.”

ARCHON OF TIME, POISONED BY A SHADOWY FIGURE, 351 TR - 388 TR

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my mouth waters at the thought of what is to come, brims unbidden with a fiery bile, choking, burning as the goblet topples from my hand, dully strike-strike-striking the whorled marble at my feet—and time ripples backwards, again;

behind me

a shadow looms and in my thoughts rises a dark desire, the swirling whispered words that really Kyros is not so very impressive once met, is merely an Archon like myself, risen to fame, but with a power laughably inferior to my own, and who must rely on the cunning of an advisory council to survive, surely, of which I will soon be a well-respected member, because I saw within the Overlord's eyes a coveting for which I myself felt toward my enchanting Dalia even as my wife still struggled to live, and so I understand cannot be controlled;

as I approach the bed, soft linen garments shushing across the marble, a virile laugh cracking from the pit of my throat, thunder claps,

and Dalia is crouching on the cream-colored coverlet like some little Beast, her tawny skin burnished nearly black from a sharp swath of shadows, her gleaming Brunette—no, milky white hair flung forward over her forehead, untamed though I alone was able to cage her, just as I shall soon bring even the Overlord to heel, and abruptly Dalia is backlit by a strike from the skies, beyond the narrow window, her wholly-shadowed face and sultry black eyes seared wildly into my mind, her smile dark and promising as she hands me my nightly concoction, and I am struck by how dusky and cold her fingers are, wispish where they brush my own, and the goblet is just as frigid against my lips, the silver liquid caustic in my throat, and I choke,

as poison spews in a deluge, a drowned curse from behind gritted, grinding teeth,

and time stutters and stumbles once again as I mentally trip backwards over my own feet even as cream-cloth-covered, they shush forwards across the churning whorls of blood red marble beneath; I am at the bedside and my throat and heart are fire, and Dalia—

she is a shadow, she is darkness,

she is grinning, inhuman, teeth flat and white in her shrouded face,

a sibilate exhale rushing past her parted, black lips, a shush-shush swishing in my ears, the sound of shadows coalescing as my temptress warps and twists and flickers into the solid, broader form of a man with red war paint masking his face, and time painfully wrenches around by my hand, as far as I can wrest it, though I am so very tired now and though

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His Overlord's head canted to one side. And Bleden Mark grinned, teeth flat and white in his shrouded face.

"So who's next?" the shadow assassin asked.

Who, he wondered excitedly, *would the darkness devour later?*

THE END

