

## Cross-Realms

Had I known then what I know now, I probably would have just kept working at the Whorehouse. For cycles, I followed the same schedule. I'd wake up before the suns rose, throw on some tattered rags that had once been mediocre leather armor, walk out into the snow and piss covered streets of Provesh, step over drunken bums and bum-like drunks, and stumble into a house of ill repute to begin my, uh, "duty." They say there's no job worse than being a whore. Perhaps so, but dumb, naive me thought differently at the time. Being a whore was bad, I reasoned, but surely working as a bouncer for a whorehouse was little better. My wages were abysmal; I barely made enough to afford the vermin infected closet I called an apartment, and I considered myself abnormally lucky if I got more than one hot meal a day. The, er, "customers" were among the saddest and most disgusting people in all the Independent Kingdoms, and the leading ladies themselves weren't exactly the sort that you'd want to have a drink with either. For every day I ended up breaking the wrist of a not-so-gentleman who didn't believe in our pay to play policy, there was also times where I would have to prevent one "demure beauty" from tearing the left eye out of an "exotic beauty." I'll be honest, I preferred, and still prefer, breaking wrists to breaking apart women, its easier and far less dangerous. Still, to say that I got into brawls on a regular basis would be a lie. What I disliked most about my work was not the violence, or the crappy pay, or even the sore covered customers. It was the monotony. I just stood there, outside, in the cold. Almost constantly. I wasn't even able to talk to anyone, because part of my job was to look like a menacing brute. From the rising of the suns, to their setting, I'd stand outside,

ax in hand, making sure that the people who weren't allowed inside would not get inside. When my job was over, I'd stumble back home in the dark, being sure to avoid the hordes of drunken mercenaries wandering the streets. I'd get back to the inn, drag my aching body up two flights of creaky splintery stairs, yank open the crooked door to my room, tear off the rags that once were passable leather armor, and pass out in my sloppy pile of bedding. Moments later, I'd wake up and start my day anew. My life was miserable. But my life was predictable, and my life was stable. I always knew the night before what I would be doing the day after. I had a miserable, but malleable life. Which is why I'm a damn fool for throwing it away.

Like most significant events in my life, it all started with free drinks. An old union buddy of mine had recently moved to Provesh, and he insisted upon buying me a few rounds at the creatively named "Provesh Tavern." "Hey, Red," he said as the bartender poured us some of the tavern's not quite finest ale, "Why the hell are you still at that, uh, "house of ill repute.?" I took a chug from my mug, swished the piss watery drink around in my mouth for a bit, swallowed, then answered. "Same reason the whores are there. Cause they pay me to be." The green eyed and browned haired man with a blue strap on his shoulder smirked. "No shit. But you know as well as I do that you could rake in much more metal doing something else." I snorted. "Ha, I wish. Unless you're suggesting I host a room at Madame Funiertia's, then maybe." The man who was my senior and my junior ignored my half jest and pounded the stool. "No, I'm serious. Look, doing commission work is fine for an old man like me. But you're young, and you have a name that few others get to have. There are hundreds of Axeman Blues. There are only ten

Reds. And the fourth best of them shouldn't spend her time getting paid pittance to deal with whores." I finished my drink and set the mug aside. "Look Blue, don't put so much stock in the union thing. Things are different now. All this red stripe on my shoulder means is that I get harassed four times a cycle by a courier asking for metal. Work is hard to find everywhere, I take what I can get." The middle aged man sighed and motioned for two more drinks. "You know, your cynicism will be the end of you. True, our Union is about as useful as a scholar in a shieldwall, but I think you're underestimating yourself." I downed half of my drink in one gulp, and sloppily wiped my mouth with my sleeve. "I'd be lying to ya if I said I enjoyed working where I do, but hey, it turns out I can't make a living by talking to overly-sentimental old men. I playfully punched Axeman Blue Three Fourteen in the shoulder. He laughed, as heartily as a man of his considerable stature and girth could. "Fair enough. But this old man actually has reason for his ramblings. Turns out that one of the merchants here is looking for some seasoned fighters, and he's willing to pay some serious metal. So I think tha-" I cut him off with a wave of my right hand. "I hate doing this to ya, but save your breath. You're new in town, so I ain't shocked that you didn't know, but all the good work goes to the Swordarms. You and I have a better chance of crapping gold than we do of getting the gig." The tanned old man gave me a toothy grin. "Oh, the hubris of the young! You shouldn't underestimate me like that Red. This merchant I speak of is apparently a maverick. For some reason or the other, he hates the swordarms with a passion, and is refusing to hire any of them." I was caught offguard by my friend's elaboration. "R-r-really?" I stuttered, my cynicism put aside momentarily. "Are you sure you're not just buying into a rumor?" Good old Blue rubbed his hands together and

chuckled. “Heh, I’ll admit that I’m more prone to seeing the lighter side of things than most folks, but I’m completely sure that this merchant fella is legit.” My cynicism came back in the form of a frown. “How so, exactly?” Sporting the goofy grin of a well matured man, Axeman Blue stared into my eyes for a bit. He looked like he was about to burst into laughter at any moment. He stared at me with a smug, knowing expression for quite some time, then, like a customer at a stall finally deciding on what to purchase, clapped two hands together. “Grab my satchel,” he said loftily as he leaned back on his stool. “Grab yer own damn satchel, you old geezer.” Blue yawned lazily. “Just humor me, Red.” Knowing that he was working an angle but also having no damn idea just what that angle was, I acquiesced to his command, got off my stool, slumped over to the communal closet, and grabbed his slightly torn leather bag from the top shelf by the handle with my right hand. That proved to be a mistake. Moments after I yanked the satchel off its resting place, I felt an incredible amount of weight on my right hand. Unprepared for the unexpected weight, I dropped the satchel out of reflex. The old man’s bag crashed into the creaky wooden floor, splintering one of the floorboards. Wide eyed, I looked back at the bar. Miraculously, the bartender didn’t seem to notice that a plank of the floorwood was now sticking out jaggedly. My old friend burst looked at my flustered and embarrassed face and burst into riotous laughter. “What the hell did ya put in this thing, Blue?” He cupped his hands over his mouth and called out to me. “I don’t know, why don’t ya open it and find out?” Having already made a fool out of myself, I figured there was little to be lost by playing along further. I untied the first buckle on the satchel, then the second, and finally the third. Then, perhaps somewhat more awkwardly than I would have liked, I yanked open the satchel and peeked inside.

Almost immediately after I looked into it, I recoiled from the bag in a manner which suggested that I had found my mother's decapitated head in it. Truth be told, what I found in the satchel was far more shocking than a detached body part from a whore of a parent could ever be. In Axeman Blue's bag, stacked from top to bottom, were solid metal bars. Runiertian bars, to be exact. To put this into perspective for ya, I made maybe half a Runiertian bar a cycle. At best. I looked down into the bag, up at Blue, down into the bag again, up at Blue, and back to the bag. I opened my mouth and tried to say something, but the only thing that came out was an idiotic sound moan. Axeman Blue brushed some lint off of his leather coat, got off his barstool, and put an arm around my shoulder. "You didn't think I would offer to buy you drinks if I was lacking for metal, did ya?" "Abuh, gah... uh..." I insightfully responded. My disbelief turned into doubt. "Uh, where did you, how did you-" "Oh, the Runiertians? Well, truth be told, they aren't all mine." Reality began to seep back into the dreamworld I had found myself in. Obviously, my old friend was delivering the bars to a vault of some kind or something, because there was no way that he would personally own even a fraction of the- "Half of this is my son's," Blue explained. Reality left the room as quickly as it entered. Somehow, I gathered my composure enough to stutter out a word and a question. "How?" Blue Fourteen threw his hands out. "Hey, I'm disappointed ya didn't figure it out already. We're supposed to be "sharp as an ax," right?" His teasing was lost on me, I was still completely bewildered. I guess he noticed my incredible amount of disbelief, because he toned down the theatrics (if only slightly) and explained. "The merchant I was talking about? He gave me and my son a half cycle's payment in advance. And, though this is purely speculation on my part, I'd be willing to wager he'd do the same for you." If

anyone else had given me the song and dance that Blue did I wouldn't have believe them for an instant. Work that pays well is hard to find, no matter what that work is. But Blue and I had known each other for quite some time, and while the old man was a bit of a prankster, he would be the last person to throw my astray in regards to metal-making. I stared down at my right hand and poked my cheek with my left. An alien and bizarre feeling began to creep into my chest. I realized, to my horror, that I was not dreaming. Either Axeman Blue had gone crazy, or I had a legitimate shot of respectable employment. I tried to mask my excitement with a facade of skepticism. "Are you sure that he paid you in Runiertian bars? I've heard that the Off-landers found a way to remove the filling of the bar through one of their smelting methods." Blue wagged his left index finger at me. "I'm sharp as an ax, remember? I had both a blacksmith and a Sister of Fiat look at the bars. I know it sounds crazy, but they're real, real as the job offer my son and I accepted." I accepted his explanation, and moved onto another subject. "How do you know that what you'll be doing will be honest work? This guy could just be a lucky vagabond or something." With a gentle smile, Blue nodded his head. "No, he's no vagabond. He has a name and color, same as you and me." I tapped my fingers against the wall impatiently. "Oh yeah? What color?" "Black." I let out an exaggerated sigh. "You've either gone senile, or somehow managed to do in a quarter-cycle what I've failed ta do in three." The blue haired man whom I had sparred with more times than I could count shrugged his shoulders at me. "Don't fret about it. Actually, you should thank my son. He's the one who told me about this little gig." I wobbled back to the bar and sat down.. I motioned to the bartender. "Give me something a bit stiffer, would ya?" I rubbed my hands together and looked back at

Axeman Blue. "Alright. So do I meet this guy for an interview or something?" I said, as I took a sip from the stronger stuff the silent bartender had been so kind as to pour me. A devious sort of look crept back onto my brown haired friend's face. "If you want the job, all I can say is to head over to the docks inbetween sun risings." I spat out my drink.

"But that should be right about now, ya jackass!" Blue lazily leaned against a wall.

"Better get a move on, then." I jumped off of the stool. Well, ok, more like fell clumsily off the stool. Anyways, I tightened my ragged leather armor around me as much as I could manage, grabbed my shoddy old ax from the communal closet, and ran my way out of the tavern. I was slightly tipsy and very much panicked, so as I sprinted to the docks I was as elegant and composed as a freshly castrated mule. Being "the frostbitten city of wood and snow," Provesh was extremely cold during the day, and even more so at night. Even though it was very windy as I ran towards the dock like a lunatic, I couldn't feel the cold. My chest was beating rapidly, and not just due to the physical exertion of sprinting in armor while carrying a giant ax in two hands. In the face of all logic, it seemed that I finally had a chance to better myself. I refused to allow tardiness to be the thing that sent me back to the whorehouse. The first sun hadn't quite risen yet, and the docks were only three or four blocks from the tavern I had been at. Even so, I ran as if a horde of offlanders were behind me. There were not too many people up and about, naturally. Even the bums had drunk themselves to sleep, and most stores, inns, and taverns had extinguished their braziers. A few members of the town guard, clad in their well maintained metal armor, small shields, and short swords looked suspiciously at me, but I didn't care. I'm sure I looked like a fool, but I'd be a complete fool to stop or slow down just to make a better impression on the overpaid and underworked guards.

Finally, just as the first sun started to rise, I came to a snow dusted set of stone staircases which led down to the docks of Provesh. The docks weren't used by much of anybody, ta be honest. Only a few specifically constructed ships could successful navigate the half frozen waters of the city, and so the brunt of Provesh's trade, both legitimate and dubious, tended to lie at the land entrances of the city, where the caravans from the Collective and the other Independent Kingdoms would arrive. Because the docks weren't well used, they also weren't well maintained. Rotting piers and half sunk cannoos littered the water only a few paces in front of me. I looked around to see if anyone else was at the docks. As far as I could tell, I was the only person at the darkened docks. A wave of nervousness surged through my body. Sure, sure, the first sun hadn't even fully risen yet, and I had only given the docks a cursory glance, but you know how it is. The more something matters to ya, the more paranoid about it you'll be. Anxious or not, there wasn't much I could do but look around some more and wait to see if the situation changed. I leaned my battle-axe against the wall side of the stairs. My ax then was by no means a pretty thing. It was slightly bigger than most axes, with its well worn wooden handle being about one and a quarter arm-lengths. The slab of metal that made up the blade wasn't all that shiny, and I had to take great care to make sure that it was tightly fastened to the handle. Still, despite its apparent dullness, the blade of my axe was sharp enough for my tastes, and it had the proper amount of weight needed to pierce through most any type of armor. It was definitely my most valuable possession at the time. I was in the middle of doing a once over of my axe when I heard a crunching sound. I turned my head over my shoulder to investigate. When I did, I saw a blonde haired man carrying a lance of some sort. He was dressed in



shoddy clothing like myself, and was walking around the docks a few paces in front of the stairs. From the criss-crossing bootprints on the snow, I figured that he was pacing around the docks. I watched him scurry back and forth as I leaned against the side of the stairs. He certainly was younger than I was, or at least so his soft face suggested. As I got a better look at him, I could tell that he was flustered. There was a notable red tint to his cheeks(although that could have been due to the cold), and his jet black hair was disheveled. He stopped his pacing and took two quick glimpses around the docks. Knowing that he couldn't possibly be the merchant that I wanted to meet(he didn't even have an armband, let alone a black one), but knowing that he might have been in a similar situation, I called out to him. "Oi, you. You with the lance. Ya looking for something?" I had used as casual a tone as possible, but the man in front of me flinched like I had just let out a fierce battle cry. He stood still for a bit, and for a few moments I thought he was petrified or something. But eventually he turned to me. He was even younger looking than I had first suspected. At most I'd give him seventeen cycles, and that's a generous estimate. His face pinker than ever, he finally managed to stutter a response. "Uh, no, uh, I'm, uh, on a walk, and-" I threw both my hands up and interrupted him. "Ya sure? Cause I was told that some merchant guy was interviewing people here or something, and I don't-" The fellow carrying a blue lance in his hand shushed me. No, really, he shushed me. There was no one around in any direction but he still shushed me. "That's a secret, you idiot." I was slightly confused, so I played along. "It is?" I whispered. "But Merchant Black One is looking to hire some people, right." The black haired man child looked from side to side and nodded sagely. "Yes. But it's top secret." I scratched my head. "It, uh, it is?" "Absolutely," he whispered. "If the

Swordarms found out about this there'd be hell to pay." I shook my head, quietly ceding the point. By definition, all Union work was legal. But even though Merchant Black One was about as legitimate as an employer could get, the Swordarms had a stranglehold on Provesh. I knew that, but I guess I didn't think it was as big a deal as it was. See, nine times out of ten "conspiracies" are just a matter of people with connections lying in bed with each other rather than an elusive elite stomping out the opposition by force. The way the jittery fella with the lance was talking made it seem like the Swordarms were gonna cut out my tongue in the middle of the night if I spoke too loudly. There's almost never any harm in being quiet though, so quiet I remained. Even though it seemed that the lance guy knew more than I did, he seemed to be just as clueless as I was as to where our potential employer was gonna meet us. So we both just sort of stood around, backs to the stairs and faces looking out at the ruined shipyard and half frozen bay, and waited for something to happen. The first sun was fully above the horizon, now, and the second sun was nearly halfway risen. The nervous looking kid scratched his neck and spoke to me. "You didn't see anyone walking around here when you showed up, did you?" I rolled my eyes at him and nodded my head. Just as I was deciding ta cut my losses and leave, an authoritative voice descended from the heavens. Or, ta be more precise, the stairs. "I've been expecting the two of you." Both me and Twichy immediately flung our attention to the disembodied voice. Even without asking, I knew he was Merchant Black One just by looking at him. He was old, he was limping on a cane encrusted with jewels and Runieritan, he was dressed from head to toe in well tailored white fur clothing, but above all else he had that tell tale black band on his forearm. I tightened my throat and spoke out to the walking bag of metal. "Is that

so?" I said, as gruffly as possible. The young man with the lance was a bit more enthusiastic. "Oh, it's an honor to meet you, Mr. Merchant Black One!" The young guy bent a knee to the ground. "I'm looking forward towards working with you!" The Merchant, not moving from his elevated position on the stairs, let out a laugh or twelve. They were dry, raspy sort of laughs, and I couldn't quite figure out if he was laughing good naturedly at the enthusiasm of the man with the lance or if he was just being a pompous asshole. His laughing fit went on a bit longer than it should have. I was leaning against a slab of stone with my arms crossed, but the poor guy who bent a knee seemed unsure if he should rise or not. "Oh, forgive me," the Merchant said. "Once I find something amusing, I find it hard to keep my composure." He grinned a bit, giving us a nice view of his yellow teeth. "And I find so many things amusing." I decided not to wait for the old geezer to be struck with another laughing fit. Once more I tried to make my voice sound gruff, detached, and intimidating. "Well, I was told to come to the docks between the rising of the suns to meet a Merchant who wanted some work done, so here I am. My name is Axeman Red IV, and if the pay's good enough, then so am I." Merchant Black's eyes met mine. He stared at me for what seemed like an eternity and... burst into a fit of raucous laughter even louder than his last. "Oh, sorry, sorry, " he managed to spit out between cackles, "you just caught me off guard." My companion in confusion had dragged himself off the ground for quite awhile now, and once more he was awkwardly, silently rubbing the back of his nice. "Forgive me, but that was just too good." His face took on an exaggerated sort of seriousness. "If the pay's good enough, then so am I?!" He let out a little giggle. "Classic! Perhaps your parents should have put you in with the Jesters, I'm sure you would have risen to Black by now." He turned his

head to the fellow with the lance. "And what's your name, I wonder?" The man with the lance looked down at his boots awkwardly. "I, uh, I don't have one, exactl-" The fat old man let out a raspy cackle. "Oh, but you do my boy! You're Unassigned, right? I mean, so are countless others, but a name's a name! Even if it's a humiliating one!" The Unassigned looked humiliated, naturally. I remained silent as I reclined against the wall, then decided to just do away with the pretensions. "Look," I said in my normal voice, "are you gonna hire us or not? I didn't exactly come here to be laughed at." The black haired man with the lance looked at me like I had just stripped naked, but I didn't care. I was cold, and tired. I had no intention of dealing with some eccentric old man's bullcrap, at least not for nothing. The white fur garbed Merchant looked down at me, tugged on his beard for a bit, and responded in a bored sounding monotone. "Fine, fine. On to business, I supp-." He paused, licked his left index finger, and swirled it around in the air. "Oh," he said, mildly surprised by something. "Actually, before I elaborate further, would you two mind dueling each other?" Me and the other fellow stared blankly at him. "I need to assess your combat abilities," the old lunatic explained. Both me and the raven locked man with the lance looked at each other reluctantly, then we looked at each other's weapons. You can spar with wooden staffs, sure, and then at worst you'd break your nose or end up with a few bruises. But real weapons are meant for killing, they're not designed with restraint in mind. There was no way that I'd be able to smack the other guy with my greataxe and not end up maiming him severely. "That's not necessary." I said diplomatically. "You know my name, and my color. That alone should attest to my skills." The old man chuckled. "A nice attempt, but sorry, that armband of yours doesn't mean much of anything to me." The other man interjected. "Uh, how do

you want us to fight?" Merchant Black shrugged his shoulders. "As well as you could, I'd hope. Wouldn't be much of an evaluation if you both chose to fight poorly." I took a half hearted glance at my greataxe, leaning against the side of the stairs, and then turned my head to take a look at the black haired man. He was still gripping his lance reluctantly. I glanced up yet again at Merchant Black One, determined to convince him otherwise. I cleared my throat, and in as reasonable of a tone as I could manage, said: "But what if w-" That's all I managed to get out before my body shook severely. Without even knowing why, I jumped backwards from where I was, two strides up the snow dusted stone stairs. Heart racing, I looked down at the spot I had been standing only moments prior. On that snow covered spot, I saw my two boot prints, and in between them a blue lance, attached to one very hostile looking man. I didn't pay much attention to it at the time for obvious reasons, but in retrospect I remember hearing a clapping noise and an old raspy voice exclaiming "Oh! Good initiative!" "Tch." said my enemy with the lance, apparently irritated that I wasn't all too keen on letting him skewer me. I was in a rather bad spot. I had put a few paces of distance between me and the black haired man with the lance, fair enough, but that didn't do me a whole bunch of good. For one, I was operating on instinct, nervously and steadily backing up the stairs while my foe with the lance steadily advanced on me, and two, I didn't have my axe. I dared not turn around and run. If so, it would give the leather clad guy a chance to stab me in the back. My ragged armor's breastplate was crappy already in terms of protection to my front, it offered little if any protection to my rear. Despite having a clear advantage, the young man moved slowly towards me. "J-just give up, yeah? Yield, and all that." he mumbled. His nervous stutter hinted towards an innate weakness, but I couldn't figure

out a way to capitalize on it. His sharp blue lance simply gave me no opportunity to move forward or to dash to the side. As young as he was, he was semi-competent at taking advantage of his long weapon to close the distance between him and me, and semi-competent was all he needed to be towards an unarmed opponent. I thought of many things, like blitzing him, or using my height “advantage” to jump tackle him, but all my strategies had a distinct chance of ending with a lance through my stomach. I kept backing up, and he kept advancing, his blue lance pointing up at me. I was focused strictly on the movements of my assailant, reacting solely to him. As a result, I was taken by complete surprise when I backed up into something solid. Perhaps instinctively, my right hand felt the barrier. The texture that it felt was wirey, and a bit fuzzy. For a split second, I looked behind me, to see that I had not backed up into a wall, but rather an amorphous blob of white fluff. In that split second glance, the man with the lance decided to charge at me. To my horror, I noticed the man and his lance when they were merely half a pace in front of me. Not even realizing what it was I was doing, I yanked the wirey and fuzzy thing with my right hand as hard I could, and threw it over my shoulder with all my strength at my charging foe. With a spectacular crash, Merchant Black One slammed into the man with the blue lance. They both collapsed in a disoriented heap. The flow of time returned to normal. Seeing my chance, I leapt down the stairs, fiercely ripped the lance out of my opponent’s hand, threw it to the side, and started punching his face as hard and as fast as I possibly could. My blows were sloppy and unfocused. After I smashed his face with the hard leather on my gloved right hand for the fifth time, the black haired man sputtered something out. When I delivered the eighth blow to him, I was actually able to register what it was he had said. “ield... I

yield.” I stopped punching his face, slammed my knee into his stomach, walked over to his discarded lance, and threw it into the bay. Keeping an eye on both Merchant Black and the black haired man, I calmly walked over to my greataxe and picked it up. Then I collapsed on my knees and panted profusely. Resisting the temptation to rest on the ground for a while, I looked at the two men. I had either knocked the man with the lance unconscious or worse, because he was motionless in spite(or more accurately, because) of his bloody face. Merchant Black was rolling from side to side on the stairs in a curled up position, with his hands cupped firmly on his large stomach. I rested on the stone ground some more, when I became aware of a throbbing ache on the upper part of my weapon arm. I realized, with exhaustion and annoyance, that my right shoulder had popped out of its socket. Resolving to take care of that injury later, I approached the weird old man who had instigated the entire brawl. As I limped up the stairs towards him, I heard him let out what I assumed was a pained groan. Naturally, it was nothing of the sort. Ya probably see where this is going, the fat old man was giggling. Well, it started as a giggle. Then it became a cackle. Then it became a loud cackle. Then he was practically howling with laughter. Then he was ACTUALLY howling with laughter. Apparently unharmed, the fat man decked in white fur got up on two feet. And then started laughing again. “Gahahaha! HA! Oh, you really threw me for a loop there. Literally, come to think of it! Heheh, gah! Ah!” Leaving the irritatingly unharmed Merchant to his giggles, I shifted my focus elsewhere. With a grimace, I applied pressure to my right shoulder. One painful “pop!” later, the aching started to die down a bit... only to be replaced by a stinging sensation which alerted me to the fact that I was bleeding slightly from a minor cut on the side of my stomach. I spat out some mucus

and spittle, then addressed Merchant Black. “Was that up to your standards, ya maniac?” As if to hold in some laughter, Black covered his mouth with both hands. He cleared his throat, and in a strangely sane sounding voice, spoke to me directly. “Yes, I’d say you’re more than qualified. You managed to turn the tables on a bad situation, and used the resources at your disposal.” Luckily for me, Merchant Black didn’t seem to take too much exception to the fact that the, uh, resource I used happened to be morbidly obese, covered in white fur, and prone to bouts of insanity. Merchant Black shifted his focus to the bloodied man without a lance. “You passed too, of course.” I raised an eyebrow at the Merchant, who grinned and threw his hands in the air. “He took the initiative and caught someone with a name and color by surprise.” Though a bit skeptical, I shrugged my shoulders, cringing at the pain immediately afterwards. Apparently the cut on my side wasn’t too deep, because it had stopped bleeding. “Alright, so you’re willing to hire us now, right?” Merchant Black One looked at us, and... with a huge grin, nodded his head. “Wha?!” I exclaimed. “Come on, you said we passed! At the very least I musta passed, I mean I beat that jackass half to death with just my fists, and-“ “You did pass. Both of you. You both passed the *combat* portion of my little evaluation. It’s not over yet.” Like hell it wasn’t. I was just about to ditch the docks, head back to my crappy apartment and drink myself to sleep with some crappy ale, when Merchant Black dugged deep into his fur coat and threw something at me. Though both my hands were cold, sore, and partially covered in gray-black beard hair, I managed to catch the projectile. It was heavy, rectangular, smooth, and cold to the touch. And, as I looked down at it, shiny. Very shiny. In my hands, somehow, was a Runiertian bar. I almost started drooling. The fat old Merchant dug into his white coat



once more and threw a bar down at the bloodied man. He, uh, he didn't catch it. The bar sort of just landed on the back of his hard leather armor. The man without a name or a lance made no effort to get up, or to collect his reward. Not wanting anything to go to waste, I slumped down the stairs to check on the young fella. He was as responsive as a rock, but sadly, er, um, happily, he was breathing. Sighing vocally (out of relief, I swear), I turned once more to my possible employer. "Alright, so what's next?" Merchant Black tugged on his beard with an amused look in his eyes. "Oh, well look who is eager to please all of a sudden!" he said with a chuckle. I shrugged my shoulders, and immediately winced at the wave of pain I had idiotically invoked yet again. "That hunk of metal you just tossed at me is about as much I make in three cycles. Suffice to say you've got my attention." Merchant Black frowned. "Again with the stoic mercenary spiel..." he said in a weary tone. "Well, no matter. I had intended for the two of you to take part in the next segment of my little interview immediately, but I think the circumstances warrant a small postponement." He glanced down at the motionless man near the bottom of the stairs, and sadly nodded his head. Looking both at Merchant's saddened expression and the guy I had pummeled, I couldn't help but feel a bit of guilt. For all of an instant, that is, because a gust of cold wind on my wounded flank all too painfully reiterated who had struck whom first. "Fine by me. When and where would you like me to meet you for the second part of your test?" Merchant Black stared out into the bay for a few moments, unresponsive. Just as I was about to repeat myself, he softly muttered eight words. "Here. Same time. Exactly four risings from now." I nodded at him, and headed back to my apartment. If I had the slightest bit of intelligence, I would have used the Runiertian bar I had gotten to buy a new apartment and better armor,

and let that be the end of the whole affair. I chalked up Merchant Black as an eccentric and irritating person. He **was** eccentric, and certainly the most irritating person I had ever met, but my thoughts on the matter ended there. I was poor, he was rich, and adhering to his bizarre whims seemed like a good way to make me a good deal less poor. It was still fairly early in the day, so I didn't get all too many strange looks as I limped back home. Of course, I put the Runiertian bar inbetween my breastpiece and tunic. Walking in Provesh wounded and alone shortly after the risings was a dangerous undertaking as it was, walking alone, wounded, and with a Runiertian bar in hand was more or less asking to be robbed, killed, maimed, raped, and pickpocketed. My wounds were more superficial and annoying then they were critical and life-threatening, but appearances mean everything. Appear weak, and you'll be preyed upon. Appear strong, and odds are people will opt not to attack you in a dark alley. Thankfully, nothing happened. I got back to my small, cramped, and moldy apartment without having to brandish my axe just fine. I was tempted to pass out in my bed and just sleep until I couldn't sleep any more, but there were a few things I needed to take care of. First, I dug the Runiertian bar out of my breastplate. It was warm now, thanks to my body heat, but it looked as shiny and authentic as ever. I took the bar, wrapped it in an old gray handkerchief, and put it underneath my bed, behind a chamberpot. I removed my ragged, useless armor, and the tunic I wore underneath it. I frowned. As I looked at my side a bit more closely, I noticed that the cut was deeper than I thought it had been. Not that it suddenly had a worse effect on me, it didn't, but the lower portion of my gray tunic had been stained with my blood. I groaned. I walked up to the small, second rate dresser near the door to my apartment. I plucked a small carving knife and a

considerably larger glass bottle from the top drawer. I took my ruined tunic laid it flat on the top of the dresser, and with the knife, cut a segment of cloth off, from the non-blood stained area. I opened the bottle, and poured a splash or two of the liquid inside on the segment I had cut out. I pressed the damp cloth on my lance wound. I clenched my teeth at the stinging sensation, then took a long chug from the bottle. Like everywhere else in Provesh, my room was freezing, so I collapsed in my bed and wrapped the blankets around me as tightly as I could.

I slept longer than I anticipated. I woke up the following morning with my shoulder aching and my side stinging. After laying in bed for some time, I stood up and examined myself once more in the mirror. My lance wound seemed to be healing cleanly, the cut was definitely smaller than it was the previous evening, and a scab had formed, luckily without much puss. My right shoulder, on the other hand, was still heavily bruised. Moving my right arm around in a circle caused minor aching pains, but I could perform the maneuver as competently as ever. After making sure that the scab on my lance wound was solid enough, I threw on an unstained offwhite tunic. I examined my crappy leather armor with more scrutiny. There was a tear on the right side, of course, and the seams of the armor, breastplate and otherwise, were frayed far more than I woulda liked. The insulating fur was starting to come off as well. I shook my head, and reluctantly fetched the Runiertian bar from underneath my bed. I put my ruined armor on, threw my axe over my left shoulder, and headed out into the streets once more. Though it pained me ta get rid of such a beautiful piece of currency, I exchanged the Runiertian bar to a banker for five purses of Runiertian coins. I wasn't in an extravagant

sort of mood, and I certainly loathed handing over the shiny bar to a seedy banker, but I had to replace my armor and did not have nearly enough metal saved up from my job to buy anything of value otherwise. I ended up spending a purse and half worth of coins on a full set of studded leather armor. A bit darker and heavier than my old set, the new armor had thicker leather, was a tighter fit on my body, and came with a head piece. I had always wanted a head piece, admittedly mostly for aesthetical purposes, but never had the metal for it. I spent another half purse on getting the worn wooden handle of my axe reinforced with Runiertian-sheet plate, and I also bought a specially made holster for my axe so I wouldn't be caught unarmed. The remaining three purses I hid under my bed, like I had done with the bar. There wasn't much else to do after my short spending spree, so I intended to more or less laze about my apartment while I waited for the risings to dwindle down. I did try to meet up with Axeman Blue, partially in order to brace myself for the next batch of craziness I was sure Merchant Black had up his thick furred sleeve, but my old buddy was apparently out on work related duties. Sleeping, sitting, and shitting staying in my apartment got old fast. Things got so dull that I considered going back to work at the Whorehouse, though that idea was shot down almost immediately. After two risings, my boredom riddled mind suggested that I wander about Provesh to kill some time. So, wearing my new armor(minus the headguard), wielding my refurbished axe, and carrying the same old red band on my right arm, I hit the streets of the city, heading nowhere in particular. Provesh isn't really all that big. It's known as the largest city of all the coastal independent kingdoms, but compared to places like Trunchet, Fremdos, and Cercenlet it's no more than a glorified village. A glorified village at the edge of a vast frozen wasteland, and one of the few

places which uncontestedly belonged to the Unions, but a glorified village nonetheless. Even then I knew that I wasn't exactly living in the culture capital of the world. Not counting the docks, there were four districts which made up the "city." Where I lived was the Union district. Located next to the docks, and two times bigger than the other three districts combined, its name was kind of misleading. It wasn't called the Union district because it hosted the various Union headquarters or anything like that. It was called the Union district cause before the exodus, Provesh was known as Union City. The district was essentially all that remained of old Union City. The district itself functioned as the slums of Provesh, hosting most of the poor, nearly all of the unnamed, and a hearty amount of the unskilled. There were tons of shoddy wooden buildings, nearly all of which served as cheap housing or hole in the wall pubs. Naturally, I lived in the Union district. When I bought my studded leather armor, I had walked over to the Utility Corridor. The Utility Corridor were two and a half streets with stores that sold food, weapons, armor, clothing, and other basics. You could get all that stuff in the other districts, but the Utility Corridor had the best stuff for the lowest prices. At the other end of the corridor was the Magistrate's Circle, where all the political crap went on. The circle hosted guards barracks, the ever over capacity jail, and all the other government type buildings you could think of. Apparently that's where my Union's headquarters were located too, but I never bothered to find out. Finally, past the Magistrate's Circle was the Trade District. Course, by trade I don't mean the buying and selling of wares, the trade district in Provesh was where all the big shots made their steals and deals. The details of the trade routes and large scale operations were planned in the center trade forum. If there was a job worth having in Provesh, odds are it originated in the

Trade District. I know beyond a doubt that the Swordarms' Headquarters were located in the Trade district, cause they basically ran the damn thing. Sure, the Merchants had some say in the details of the trade policies, but only some. The Swordarms knew about everything that went on in their district, public or private. I'm pretty sure that's why Merchant Black had opted to meet me in the docks instead of his (probably rather lavish and comfortable) house. I had no intention of heading there either. I opted to walk to the city square. The square was smack dab in the middle of the circle, the union district, the trade district, and the corridor. It was a big stoned paved square with a bunch of stalls and the like. People in Provesh mostly just cut across it to get from one section of the city for the other, but it was also one of the few places for non-whore related recreation. Nearly all the con-artists operated here. They'd set up their wooden stalls with rigged "games of chance" when they weren't busy trying to sell potions of immortality and the like. I'm pretty sure the con artists made nearly all their money off of the few travelers who came to Provesh, because like me, the residents of the city acted like the assortment of superficially saccharine men and slutty women at the stalls didn't exist. I know I'm coming across as harsh, but I've seen everything in the book pulled by those folks. A rich traveler who needed but a few coins to mail a letter to her wealthy wine making father in Fremdos, a genius inventor who required only the smallest investment for his revolutionary new weapon(a sword with daggers clumsily attached to its blade), they were wastes of flesh who preyed on people's naiveté and compassion. Well, at least I thought I had seen everything in the book. I walked through the square slightly before the suns set, so the square wasn't terribly crowded like it was during mealtimes. A handful of rag clad vagrants, some half naked offlander labourers who evidently didn't

realize that they were in the “frozen” city, and to my pleasant surprise, a couple of musicians. And a boatload of con artists and their stalls. I ignored the stalls and wandered around the square aimlessly, spending my time listening to the musicians. They were an interesting sort; they played no instruments, rather they replicated the sounds of string, drum, and wind with their voices. Sounds unimpressive when I tell ya, I’m sure, but they were decent enough. Perhaps the music put me into a more light hearted mood or something, cause when a white blur crashed into my left side, my first instinct was to yell angrily inside of whacking the thing with my axe. “Hey, watch it!” I spat at that small hooded figure that had idiotically smashed into me. The black hooded person looked down at the square for a moment, rubbed the back of its head, and then looked up at me. “Oh, a thousand pardons, sir” said an airy and gentle voice. The clumsy figure looked up at me, and its eyes met mine. “It” was a white haired lady, with a soft face, fair skin and a small body. Her admittedly nice features, in addition to the fact that she had all of her teeth, set her apart from the other con artists in the square. She was fully covered in a hooded form hiding robe, but from her skinny arms I wagered that the rest of her was equally scrawny. I nodded my head and let out an annoyed hiss. “Yeah yeah, whatever. Don’t do it aga-“ The white banged woman started to take off again as soon as I had hissed. It was then I realized that a few coins which had been in the pocket of my right trousers, weren’t quite there anymore. I yanked her back by the hood with my left hand and grabbed the handle of my axe with my right. “Hold it. Stay right there.” Nervous, the lady frowned at me. “S-S-Sir,” she stuttered out in a shakey, frantic tone, “ I’m sorry, and I’ll apologize to you as many times as possible later, but I left something at my stall and need to get go-“ “Shut up and stay still, thief.” The white

haired woman pouted at me. "I'm no thief!" she practically shrieked at me. "Please, just let me go back to my stall, I left something really valuable there!" I scoffed. "If you're not a thief, then what happened to the four runiertian coins that were in my pocket?" "I haven't the slightest clue, you brute!" the woman said as she tried without much luck to break out of my grasp. "Maybe they're in your other pocket or something?!" I shook my head. "Look, the whole fast talk thing won't work on me." I dug my hand into my left pocket "See, I know damn well that my coins aren't in my other-" I trailed off as my fingers felt something round and metallic. "Uh... er. Oh." I loosened my grip on the woman in black. "Gah!" she screamed as she charged away from me and towards the end of the square. Embarrassed and heavily ashamed of myself, I never the less jogged after her, partially to make sure she was ok, and partially so that I didn't get arrested by the town guard for assault. She really was a black blur, weaving in and out of the crowds of people in the square, all of whom didn't seem too pleased with being ran past. I'll admit, keeping up with her would have been nearly impossible if she wasn't running in a mostly straight, and thus predictable, path. Eventually she came to a stop in front of a pretty plain looking stall. Without bothering to pull her hood back up, the small woman frantically started searching on and around the stall. "Oh no, oh fiat, oh this isn't good, it was on the desk I'm sure of it, and-" "Yo." I casually announced my presence. "You, uh, you looking for something?" Shaking, the white haired woman turned to face me. "Gah! Of course I'm looking for something you imbecile! Are you retarded? Do you only have one good eye?!" "Woah, I was-" "Don't even start!" she fumed. "First you detain me, and now you interrupt me while I try to locate something of vital importance! Ugh, what is WRONG with you?" I rubbed the back of my neck nervously as a (half



naked, of course) Offlander family walked past us, thankfully apathetic to our heated exchange. "Look, I'm sorry. I acted like a bit of a jer-" "A bit of?!" "Er, fine, I acted like a gigantic ass. But if you lost something important, then it is sort of my fault, I guess, so I'll help ya look for it." I paused for a moment, then frowned. "What exactly did ya lose, again?" The black robed woman responded with a growl, and continued to search around her stall. Her stall, like most of the other stalls, wasn't very complicated looking. It consisted of a wooden desk, a wooden stool, and two drawers. The small white haired woman checked both draws four times, crawled on her knees and underneath the desk two times, but her efforts were in vain. I guess she had exhausted most of her options, cause she finally responded to me. "...a satchel." "What?" "You asked what I'm looking for. I'm looking for a satchel. A big, black and white leather satchel. I left it on the stall at lunch time." I grimaced. If that was true, then it was probably long gone. Unattended bags did not stay unattended for long in Provesh. Still, guilt, embarrassment, and shame over-rode rationality. I extended my right hand to the black gloved woman. "Alright then, lets look around for that satchel of yours, miss, uh-?" The robed woman responded, but not with her name. "Come to think of it, I might have left the satchel back at the restaurant." "What restaurant?" "The Provesh Tavern." "But they only serve drinks there." "So?" I shrugged my shoulders and ran with the hooded lady back to the "restaurant." There were more people in the tavern than when I had gotten drinks with Blue, all. The lady in black damn near kicked the door open, and yelled into the tavern like she was being stabbed. "HAVE ANY OF YOU SEEN A BLACK AND WHITE SATCHEL?" The five or six people at the bar stopped what they were doing and stared blankly at her. After a brief, but incredibly awkward moment, the patrons went back to

drinking and talking with one another. The bartender looked the woman in the eye, and pointed to the closet next to the entrance. There, in plain sight, was a black and white satchel. She quickly plucked up the bag and ran out of the tavern. The matter evidently settled, I had no real reason to follow the woman besides curiosity and boredom. I was a bit curious and really bored, so I ran right up to her and nudged her on the shoulder. "That the satchel you were looking for?" I asked in between breaths. The woman in black ignored me and kept running ahead, though exhaustion or the satchel on her back slowed her down a bit, to the point where I could actually jog by her side. As both our boots crunched snow in tandem on the not quite so busy streets, I noticed two things. The first was that the white haired woman seemed to have a one track mind. She suddenly tripped on a pothole in the streets, fell to the ground, and before I could even ask if she was ok the lady got right back up on her feet, not even bothering to brush the snow and dirt off her robes. The second thing I realized was that we were heading in the opposite direction of the square. To get to the square from the tavern, ya take a left turn and walk down a few blocks. But we had taken a right turn from the tavern, and the only place that would lead was the docks. "Hey!" I exclaimed with confusion, "you're going the wrong way! The square's behind us!" Once again, I was ignored. I continued to keep pace with the black garbed girl regardless. It wasn't long until we reached the long set of stairs that led down to the docks. The woman with the satchel ran to the far end of a pier, and, with her scrawny, shaking arms, threw it into water, where it sank like a stone. Then, finally, she fell to her knees, panting. An instant later, she swiftly got back up, brushed the snow off her robes, turned to me, and smiled. "Thanks for helping me find my bag! I was really worried I had lost it!" My mouth opened and shut for a few

moments, as my mind tried, with no degree of success, to make sense of what I had just saw. Utterly bewildered, I just decided to say it. "Why the hell did ya do that?" The short haired woman looked at me with a curious expression. "Do what, sir?" I waved my right hand around. "Why the hell didya make such a big deal about that satchel of yours if you didn't even want it in the first place?! Seriously, what's wrong with you?!" She pounded her right hand with her left. "Oh! Oh, I see where you'd be confused, si-" "Don't call me sir." "Whatever you say, sir. Anyways, I just wanted my satchel so that I could dispose of it posthaste. Thankfully, luck and fiat's goodwill were on my side!" Still taken aback by the tossing act, my brain didn't immediately process the tell-tale "f" word that the ludicrous lady had blurted out so casually. "Don't tell me that ya just threw away contraband or something. That's a death sentence for both of us if the guards found out!" The woman brightly smiled at me. "No need to worry, sir-" "Don't call me sir" "I only got rid of a bunch of useless metal!" Curiosity overcame my incredulity. "What kind of useless metal?" Her smile grew even wider. "Thanks to you, I was able to dispose of over fifty Runiertian bars! Isn't that just great?!" My jaw nearly hit the floor. "Wait, WHAT?!?" I practically shrieked. "Why the hell would you just throw away fifty Runiertian bars?! Are you out of your mind?!?" The black robed woman blinked a few times at me, then responded. "Calm down, sir. I didn't THROW AWAY fifty runiertian bars, I DISPOSED of them. In the bay. The currents will drag them far out into the frozen ocean, in whose bottom they, fiat willing, shall remain for all of eternity." The clarification didn't do much for me. "But... why?" I blurted out, half tempted to dive into the ice cold water so as to salvage the bars. The woman in black's eyes opened suddenly. "Oh! Oh! I get it now! I didn't introduce myself, did I?" I nodded my head.

“That explains everything. Sorry, I guess I should wear a patch or something. My name is Sister Sabarene.” I raised an eyebrow. “What’s a Sister? And for that matter, what sort of color is Sabarene?” Sister Sabarene winced. She started to fiddle with a strand of her white hair . “Oh. Oh, ok, you don’t know. That’s fine. I’ll explain, but you have to promise me you won’t get upset or angry or anything.” I just shook my head, dumbly agreeing. “Ever hear of the Fiatists?” This time, I shook my head with more strength. “Yeah,” I said. “They’re the followers of that quack philosophy, and the reason we all live in this frozen piece of crude city, right?” Sister Sabarene blushed a bit. “I don’t know if it’s quite that way, but yes, they’re a group of devout believers who engage in the way of Fiat.” She blushed a bit and twiddled her fingers. “Well, actually, I suppose I should say *we’re* a group of devout believers who engage in the way of fiat.” My right hand instinctively grasped the handle of my axe. Sabarene waved both of her hands frantically. “Woah! Woah! You said you wouldn’t freak out!” “Ya kind of just told me that you’re a fiatist!” I spat out in a panic. Sweating slightly, Sabarene waved her two hands nervously once more. “Please, s-s-sir, calm down and bear with me, I haven’t finished explaining!” I loosened my grip on my axe, but also took a step back. “It’s true that, um, some of my siblings are a bit, uh, enthusiastic about their vocation, but...” Sister Sabarene paused for a few moments... “well, um, let me just assure you that I’m completely legitimate! I’m as much a citizen of Provesh as you and anyone else!” She looked to her left, and then to her right. We were at the docks, so of course no one was around. In a hushed voice, she whispered to me. “To tell you the truth, I’m actually here on a secret mission.” My hand grasped the recently reinforced handle of my axe once more. Everything became clear. “So you’re a sp-“ Flustered, Sister Sabarene nearly fell

face first onto the haphazard collection of loosely cobbled stone that made up the pavement of the docks. "Gah! No, no, I'm not a spy or an assassin or anything like that!" Sister Sabarene insisted, while ducking down on the ground with her hands over her head. "S-see, unlike my most sacred of siblings, I'm here to spread the good word of Fiat... peacefully! It's my mission! I'll do with soft words and enlightened discussion what my siblings failed to do with sword, shield and bow!" Sister Sabarene smirked at me, and pumped a pathetically underdeveloped arm. As confused by the spectacle as I was, I had another question on my mind. "That sounds nice and all, but..." I paused as I thought about my question, trying to not let my emotions interfere with my intellect. I failed. Choking back tears, I continued. "W-W-Why did you throw all those Runiertian Bars into the water?" As I sniffled pathetically, the smirk on Sister Sabarene grew even wider. "I see," she said with a smug grin. "So what exactly do you know about the Order of Fiat?" she asked in a tone that suggested she knew the answer. I straightened myself up and tried to push the tragedy I had witnessed to the back of mind. In a disinterested and depressed voice, I half-assedly answered the black robed woman's question. "You guys don't like us Union folk, and so beat the crap out of us and sent us to this piece of crap town." Sabarene sagely nodded her head. "You're not wrong, but you're missing the most important bit." As disinterested as ever, I questioned her. "And that would be?" The short haired woman with silver hair wagged her finger and winked at me. "The motive. Tell me, WHY do you think that my dear siblings kicked you Unionists out of Fremdos and the other cities?" I shrugged my shoulders. "I don't know. Something involving whores, I'd reckon." I reckoned. Even so, the dainty woman in black's answer surprised me. "It all comes down to money!" she exclaimed with a smile. My disinterest

vanished. “Money?” She nodded her head. “Yes, money!” “What’s money?” I asked in a flat tone. Sabarene lost her balance for a bit, but swiftly recovered. “I think you would call it... uh.. metal?” “Oh. Oh, you mean like Runieritan Bars. What, does your God hate money or something? Does he want everyone to share everything or something? Cause that ain’t gonna happen, y’know.” Sister Sabarene pivoted slightly in the snow. “Heh. We don’t hate money. We hate metal! Money’s great.” I scratched my head. “But metal *is* money.” I received another finger wag from the weird woman with the nonsensical name. “I suppose” she said with poorly concealed disgust, “but it’s not the only form of money. Ever see this before?” She reached deep into the darkest recesses of her dark robe with one hand, poked around a bit, and dug out a few slips of paper. I shook my head solemnly. “Yeah, you buy those slips of paper for when you want to clean yourself after using the chamberpo-“ “No, you idiot!” Sister Sabarene quickly regained her composure. “I mean, no, that’s not what these are for. They’re marks! Marks, signed by the Supreme Sibling Himself! You use them to buy things!” I raised an eyebrow. “Really?” She nodded her head solemnly. “Absolutely. Food, attire, homes, in the Collective we use these pieces of paper and only these.” A bit confused, I inquired further. “Are those micks-“ “Marks.” “Are those marks written with ultra rare ink or something?” Sister Sabarene smirked. “Not at all. But ust one of these slips of paper has as much buying power as three of your Runiertian bars.” I was deeply confused. “But if you use normal ink on those pieces of paper, then they can’t possibly be worth more than one, two Runiertian coins at best.” Sabarene clucked her tongue and leaned on the solid blue stone wall that separated the docks from the Union District. “Their value is given not by their physical body, but rather the divine will of the Sacred Sibling.”

“The Sacred what?” “Our leader. Through his wise and through meditations on the mostly holy book of Fiat, the value of these miraculous marks relative to several common goods is determined.” I was confused, I knew that the woman in front of me was operating on some sort of logic, but what that sort of logic was eluded me completely. “Ok, but why throw those bars into the water? And why did you Fiatist guys give us all that static in Fremdos?” Sabarene looked down at her feet. After a pause, she elaborated in a much more reserved tone than she had used before. “Well, I can tell you why I threw the bars into the water. We followers of Fiat don’t believe in metal currency, and-“ “Why not?” I interjected. “It’s useful, ain’t it? The value of a Runiertian bar is always gonna be the value of a Runiertian bar. It’s not random like your pieces of paper, no one guy can just declare the value of it to be higher or lower than it actually is.” Sister Sabarene shook her head in agreement. “That’s the point precisely. Think about it this way, cities grow, populations expand. But there’s not too much Runiertian in the world.” “Which is why the bars are valuable” I countered, exasperated. Sister Sabarene pouted. “But they SHOULDN’T be valuable! All those bars do is hold you Union folks back! What would you do if you found, say, fifty Runiertian bars?” “Well, I’d spend it and get better stuff.” Sister Sabarene nodded her head. “But would you spend all of it?” “Hell no, I’m pretty dumb, but I’m not that dumb.” Sister Sabarene cleared her throat. “But wouldn’t it be better for everyone if you did spend each of those fifty bars?” I narrowed my eyes. “What do ya mean by “everyone?” “I mean for this city’s businesses. If you spent fifty bars, then you’d support the taverns around here, you’d aid the restaurants, the tanners, the butchers, your spending would help Provesh to grow.” This time, I wagged my finger at her. “Maybe, but I’d be a fool to part with all that metal. Getting

work around here is hard enough as it is, and, uh, if you couldn't tell, I'm the sort with a limited skillset." "Yes, but what if everyone spent more? Businesses would expand, right? Wouldn't that mean that getting work would be easier?" I was thrown for a bit of a loop. "...Uh, yeah, I guess, but..." Sister Sabarene shook her head in understanding "But no one would want to take the risk of spending so much, right? Even though everyone would be better off with them, these valuable Runiertian bars protect people, give them security against bad times. But those bars you all place your trust in are nothing more than pretty looking chains. They prevent your businesses from booming, they prevent any real growth!" I bit my lip. She had a point, I suppose, and her logic was definitely more sound than it had been before. There were still a few things which bothered me, of course. "I guess ya got a point. But how do your micks-" "marks" "how do they solve that issue of spending any better than Runiertian bars do? I mean, even if everyone listened to your scary sister-" "Supreme Sibling" "right, even if they listened to the guy, how would they spend more?" Sister Sabarene grinned. "Oh, simple. Suppose that people here stopped spending money, because of a famine, or because of a business going under, or something. With marks, people afraid to spend their money would spend it anyway." I squinted my eyes. "How so?" With a giggle, Sister Sabarene elaborated. "Simple! The Supreme Sibling would lower the value of a mark. A mark that used to be able to buy three pints of ale, would now only be able to buy two!" Let me be clear. Back then I was a complete moron, and I am very much an imbecile today, but even morons can see through bullshit. "That means nothing, though. Ya put more micks into Provesh, sure, but if they're worth less you aren't gonna be expanding any business, you're just gonna end up with a bit more paper lying around." The finger wag



made its appearance yet again. “Ah, but you misunderstand. Having more paper around isn’t good, but it isn’t bad either. Think about it: if you knew that tomorrow the value of your metal could be worth less than half of what it is right now, would you be more likely to spend it or save it?” My eyes opened in shock. “I, uh, I guess I’d spend it.” Sister Sabarene grinned triumphantly. “See! That’s why marks are so much better! Their value can drastically increase or decrease on a dime, and kick even the most cautious consumer into action!” “Hold it.” I said in the tone I used when I wanted to sound tough. “I suppose I can see how those marks of yours can help things out. But what yer doing is glorified robbery. Who are you, or any one person, to say what something is worth? Sure, it might help some people, but if yer Supreme whatever decides to cut the value of a mick in half, he’s essentially stealing from everyone else!” Sister Sabarene clicked her tongue again. “Maybe, but I’d say that true thievery is hoarding money instead of using it to benefit those around you.” I nodded my head disdainfully. “And there’s something else I don’t get. Why the hell did ya throw those bars into the goddamn ocean?!” Sister Sabarene looked at her feet again. “Oh. Well, that’s easy enough to explain. It is the mission of the Holy Collective to rid the world of all metal currency. I was just doing my part to aid Fiat’s most holy mission.” Suddenly, everything clicked. “Wait a tick... don’t tell me that the reason me and every other Union bastard live in this frozen craphole is...” “Because your union leaders refused to adopt the mark as the one and only unit of currency, yes. The last Supreme Sibling did his best to avoid bloodshed, but your leaders, those with the surname Black One, would not relent, so unfortunately, we had to appoint a General to take more, um, extreme measures. ” Disgusted, I spat on the ground next to Sister Sabarene’s plain white boots. “Justify it

how you will. Those pieces of paper are no excuse to start a goddamn war.” “I...I agree.” Sister Sabarene said soberly. “That’s, that’s why I came here. To stop my siblings from killing people over pieces of metal, and to convince the Supreme Sibling to do away with the General.” The frail looking thing said those words with a certain, desperate sort of strength. I took the harshness out of my voice. “Hey, uh, don’t take anything I said ta heart. I don’t know jack about much of anything besides swinging an ax, so odds are that I was unfair towards you feet-at-tests fellas-“ “No, no, you hit the nail on the head, sir.” Sister Sabarene jolted her head up and stood up firmly, with the two suns behind her. The sudden movement caused her hood to fall off her head. Illuminated, she rolled back her right sleeve, and made a bony looking fist. “And that’s why I’m here. I’ll prove to my siblings that you can defeat the menace of Runiertian bars, and I’ll do it without shedding a drop of blood!” Skeptical, I threw my hands up in the air. “And how do ya plan on doing that, exactly? People aren’t just gonna line up and throw their metal in the ocean with ya, you know.” Sadness left Sister Sabarene’s face, replaced by a confident smirk. “Heh. Sir, how do “ya” think I got those bars?” I shrugged my shoulders. “By being disgustingly rich?” I frowned. “Seems like everyone except me is these days.” The white haired woman in black giggled. “No, not quite. Say, Mister, uh,-“ I interrupted her and introduced myself. “Axeman Red Four.” “Right, so Mister Axeman Red Four, tell me, do you have anything to do during the upcoming risings?” I shook my head. “Actually, I do.” Sister Sabarene pouted. “Aw. Well, if you ever have any free time, meet me at my booth in the square. I’ll show you the glory of Fiat firsthand!” I mumbled that I’d consider doing so if I had the time, and headed back to my

apartment. I don't quite know why, but as I walked up the stairs to the Union District, a smile crept onto my face.

I had a nice sleep that evening, a rarity in Provesh. I managed to sleep like a traveler at the end of a long journey, even with the knowledge that I would be subjected to some form of lunacy by Merchant Black One in the morning. I woke up shortly before the first rising, having stuffed the proper amount of wood into my brazier prior to going to bed. Wasting no time, I sprang out of bed, and looked into my mirror. My wound had healed substantially, it was only half as wide as it was when I got it. My right shoulder was still black and blue, but I felt no pain whatsoever as I rotated it. I threw on my studded armor, and this time I decided to put on the headpiece as well. I examined my axe. With the Runiertian reinforcement handle, it looked slightly more intimidating than the average weapon in Provesh, and definitely more valuable. Valuable was good, and bad. A thief typically would get more metal for a shiny looking axe than a dull, inconspicuous axe, but the presence of a shiny axe suggested that its wielder was well paid, and thus, more dangerous. For me, it meant that I was less likely to get ambushed in a dark alley, and more likely to lose anything that I didn't keep a close eye on. After polishing my axe thoroughly with a damp linen cloth, I holstered it on my left side. I looked in the mirror once more, and made sure that the three pieces of my studded leather armor were strapped onto my body neatly. Solemnly, I marched down the creaky wooden stairs, into the moldy lobby of the shoddy apartment complex and out into the streets. As I trampled noisily on the snow, the drunkards, mercenaries, and guards alike turned their heads to look at me. I paid them no attention. My desire to be properly prepared for whatever

ridiculousness awaited me at the docks outweighed my desire to maintain a low profile. Soon enough, I turned on the street which led to the stone stairs I had used so much over the past set of risings. The first sun had only risen halfway, so I was very shocked to see both Merchant Black One, in his giant white fur coat, and the Unassigned Man both standing around at the bottom of the stairs, looking out at the decaying docks. The man who attacked me with the blue lance didn't look much better from when I had saw him last. He wasn't bleeding anymore, of course, but his face was a bruised mess. His cheeks were swollen, and he had a good amount of bandages on the bottom of his jaw. Then again, he was wearing a much nicer set of leather armor than he had worn previously (though it was not studded), and had apparently replaced his blue lance with a slicker and sharper looking red one. "Er, I'm not late, am I?" I said after I jogged down the long set of stone stairs. Both men turned their heads towards me. The fat old merchant with the black band around his white furred arm looked at me, and then nodded his head. "Oh, not at all, my maiden of war! In fact, the two of you are rather early." I rubbed my non-bruised shoulder, and responded in my professional voice. "If you say so." The Unassigned with the red lance cut straight to the point. "So what sort of test did you have in mind for us today?" He slid his right hand down that lance of his. My left hand grasped the handle of my axe in turn. A solemn look crept its way onto Merchant Black One's face. He looked at the Unassigned, then to me, then back to the Unassigned. "I see that both of you are eager to begin." He clasped his fat hands together firmly. "Very well!" he damn near shouted. The bearded Merchant turned towards the bruised man with the red lance. "My dear Unassigned... what is the most important quality in an employee?" The young looking guy paused for a few seconds, no

doubt weighing his answer carefully. "Loyalty." He said firmly. The fat old Merchant shook his head. "I see, I see. And why do you believe that?" In a detached sounding voice, Unassigned elaborated. "It's obvious, isn't it? If a job's worth doing, you need to be sure that the person doing the job for you is acting in your interests. Otherwise, there's no point in assigning him..." he turned his head to me for a few seconds "or her the task." Almost immediately, Merchant Black One turned to look up at me. "What do you think, Axeman Red Four? Do you agree with the Unassigned gentleman's logic?" "Eh." I said. "I wouldn't say that he's wrong. But you can be loyal as they come and still be completely useless. I'm sure that there's tons of kids here who care a bunch about this city, but they wouldn't be much use in a shield wall if we were attacked, y'know." Merchant Black tugged on his beard. "So what do you think is most important then, my green haired friend?" I shrugged my shoulders. "Competence, I guess. I met a tanner the other day who was a complete asshole, but he made the best damn leather I ever purchased." Merchant Black One looked at me, and then to the Unassigned, and then back to me. "You make decent enough arguments," he said with a chuckle, "but I must disagree with both answers. Certainly, loyalty is important, and likewise, a baker who couldn't bake would not be able to sell bread for very long, but there's something that the two of you are missing." The white coated man rubbed his hands together. "There are many qualities that a man like myself values. I value intelligence, I value loyalty, I certainly value competence. Above all else, however, I value devotion, and-" "Wait, wait," I objected, "that's just another word for loyalty, ain't it?" Merchant Black nodded his head slowly. "Not quite, no. Loyalty, you see, is a passive trait. I'm loyal to my collaborators, but all that means is that I musn't pay patronage to the house of your

employment, and trust me when I say that staying away from those women is not all too heavy of a burden.” He let out a laugh or eight, then continued explaining his rationale in a calm voice. “Devotion is more than mere loyalty. Devotion is a chase. Devotion is growth, a devoted baker will make a better muffin at the end of the day than he did at the beginning. Devotion requires loyalty, not necessarily to a person but almost certainly to a cause. Devotion, by its very nature, defies normalcy, if everyone was devoted we wouldn’t have a need for the word.” The fat old man swallowed, and then continued. “I want my workers to be loyal. I want my workers to be competent. But if I can find someone who is devoted, then I know that they’ll be both.” The Unassigned man opened his mouth and said something he probably shouldn’t have. “But how can you possibly tell if someone is devoted to something? Improvement is something that everyone is capable of doing, isn’t it?” Merchant Black chuckled, but it was a soft sounding chuckle, devoid of the raspy quality that seemed to constantly accompany his fits of hysteria. “Oh, I have a way to tell. Don’t worry, I have a way.” A devious grin quickly spread on his large blubbery face, and he turned once more to face me. “Say, Axeman Red, would you mind doing me a little favor?” I narrowed my eyes. “Depends on what that favor is, sir.” He waved his big hands in the air innocently. “Oh, it’s nothing terrible, I promise. Do you see that wooden crate five or six paces behind me, right before the first dock meets the water?” I looked past the merchant to see what he was referring to. Indeed, on the pavement just before the first creaky half wrecked dock was a waist high wooden crate. Unlike the rest of the dock, the wood seemed to be fairly new, and by fairly new I mean it wasn’t splintering and the light brown color hadn’t faded too much. “Yup, I see it.” “Excellent! Would you mind opening the crate for me? I’d have

our dear Unassigned do it, but I think that axe of yours would do the trick better than his lance would.” Without speaking a word, I shrugged my shoulders, walked down the steps, walked over to the crate, and unceremoniously gave the lid a wack with my axe. I didn’t put too much force into the blow, so as not to damage whatever contents were in the box. I more or less tapped the top of the crate so as to make a hole near the lid, and then used my two hands to rip open the rest of the top. The crate was filled with bottles. They were small and made of glass, each one about as large as the palm of my hand and about as wide as two of my fingers. Curious, I plucked one from the crate and turned the small b. The glass was colored light blue; I could tell there was some sort of liquid in the little bottle but couldn’t reliably determine what that liquid was. The bottle had a small cork firmly lodged in the top, presumably to keep the blue tinted liquid inside fresh, or potent or whatever. I tossed the bottle up at Merchant Black. “This what you wanted, sir?” The big man nodded his head. “Not quite. Dig a little deeper into the crate, if you would.”. The small bottles were arranged in the crate almost as if they pebbles carelessly dumped into the box; haphazardly and inconsistently stacked on top of each other. It was pretty strange, usually the bottles would be neatly stacked in rows and columns, separated by small wooden barriers. Strangeness seemed to be the new norm however, so I just shrugged my shoulders and dug through the pile of small bottles, hoping that my hands wouldn’t be bitten by hidden vermin or pricked with concealed needles. After spending a few moments groping through the large pile of small glass bottles, my left hand came into contact with something that felt much larger than the bottles I had to dig through. Assuming this was what Merchant Black wanted, I nonchalantly yanked it out of the crate. It was... pretty much just a larger version of the

other bottles. About five times larger, I'd reckon. I hoisted the bottle up towards my potential employer and tilted my head. This time, he clasped his hands together and enthusiastically shook his head. "Yes, yes, there's what I wanted. Be a dear and toss that bottle to me, miss Axeman Red IV." I grabbed the bigger bottle by its neck and flung at Merchant Black. He casually reached one of his large hands out to catch the object... and missed, only managing to clumsily swipe the bottle. Luckily, the Unassigned used his free hand to catch the blue bottle before it shattered into pieces on the solid stone stairs. "Nice save. And they say that the unnamed are unlucky!" He turned his big bearded face to me. "Alright. Fetch two of the small bottles from the crate, and hand one to the bandaged gentleman, if you would." I grabbed two bottles from the crate, and then squinted at Merchant Black One. "What should I do with the other bottle? Hold on to it?" "Of course, my dear, of course." I walked up two of the snow dusted steps and handed one of the small blue bottles to the guy I had violently pummeled six or eight risings ago. "Fantastic! Ok, open the bottles and take a sip from the bottles." "Both of us?" asked the man with the lance. "I did say bottLES, didn't I?" Me and the Unassigned fellow looked at each other skeptically, then to the bottles, then back to each other. I shrugged my shoulder and uncorked the small glass, but before I took a sip the man without a name quickly blurted out an objection. "There's nothing strange in these bottles, is there? I mean, that blue stuff isn't poison or anything, is it?!" Merchant Black wiped his face with his sleeve and chuckled. "I understand why you would be hesitant, my bruised boy, but the contents of that bottle are completely harmless." The bandaged man awkwardly uncorked his bottle, and slowly tipped tilted the glass container towards his lips. Just the liquid was about to reach his lips, Merchant Black chuckled again. "Of



course, I could be mistaken.” The bandaged man spastically yanked the bottle away from his mouth. I rolled my eyes, uncorked the bottle, and took a sip of the blue tinted liquid inside. ...And immediately spat the stuff out with a series of violent coughs. “-The hell is this stuff, old man?!?!” I gasped out as I purged my mouth of the disgusting tasting blue liquid. “It tastes like blood!” Of course, the fat bastard just giggled. “A little bit of bitterness and you lose your cool, I’m shocked.” He reached inside his fur coat, and produced four small drinking glasses, the type you’d use when you were intending to get absolutely hammered. He laid them on the stone step behind him, uncorked the bigger glass bottle, and filled each minuscule glass two thirds of the way up with its contents. “Take two each.” He said, or rather, ordered, to us. I put the small bottle with the disgusting tasting liquid aside, and grabbed the two glasses with my left hand(it wasn’t the most elegant way to carry the glasses, I’ll admit, but I wanted my right hand free just in case.) The man with the lance followed in turn. “Alright, now would one of you kindly take a sip from one of these glasses?” The man with the lance looked at me with expectant eyes. I nodded my head slowly. “Sorry bud, but I was on point last time. It’s your turn.” His shoulders slumped, he slowly took a tiny sip of one out of one of the small glasses, sloshed the liquid around in his mouth, and then non-chalantly downed the rest of the glass in one go. I raised an eyebrow. “So what does it taste like, blood, vinegar, dirt?”, I asked. “Uh, water, actually.” He said while rubbing the back of his neck. “Oh.” I said, with the slightest hint of disappointment. I turned my head to Merchant Black. “Alright, I guess this is the part where you go into a speech about how some things in life are bitter and some are empty and meaningless, right?” Merchant Black chuckled. “No, not quite. At least not yet, that is.” The bandaged Unassigned spoke up.

“Ok then, what next? Or are we done?” he added, hopeful. “Not just yet. There’s two more tasks to be done. I want the two of you to pour the contents of ONE of the small glasses into ONE of the bottles, then I want the two of you to drink the entirety of the small bottle before I count to five.” My shoulders drooped. “I’m guessing that if we don’t, we fail, huh?” Merchant Black didn’t answer me, so reluctantly; I poured one of the shot glasses into the small glass bottle full of the disgusting tasting blue liquid. The man with the red lance followed in turn, refilling the shot glass he had drank from. Just as I was almost done pouring the contents of the glass into the bottle, Merchant Black spoke up. “One.” He said in a loud, low sounding voice. Panicked, I finished pouring the clear liquid into the bottle and damn near flung the small glass on the ground. “Two.” He said. I swiftly tilted the small bottle upside down and put my lips over it. “Three.” I started chugging the bottle as quickly as I could, hoping that I would be able to suppress my gag reflex and power through the revolting taste. But as Merchant Black said “Four.” in his super serious tone, I realized that, somehow, the liquid in the bottle didn’t taste bitter, or like blood, or dirt. The flavor was actually... sweet, and a bit minty. Far from causing me to gag, or cough like before, the drink went down lightly. Just as well, because if it hadn’t I might not have slammed down the small bottle triumphantly just as Merchant Black One damn near screamed out the word “Five.” I looked up, and shook the small empty bottle at the man in the white fur coat with a grin. “Well done!” Merchant Black One said with a yellow toothed grin. “Then again, I’m sure that even a child could gulp down Fremdosian wine that quickly.” The Unassigned scratched his non-bandaged cheek. “Tasted a bit like candy.” He looked at me skeptically. I waved my hands in the air. “W-w-wait a bit! Fremdosian?” I asked, beaming. “As in, from Fremdos? Ya sure?”

No kidding? You ain't kidding, are ya?" Merchant Black smiled and shook his head.

"Really? Awesome! Er, I mean..." I lowered my voice and spoke a bit more calmly.

"That Fremdosian crap tasted terrible a few moments ago, so how the hell did it suddenly become drinka-" I stopped. The answer was obvious, really. Merchant Black let out a haughty laugh. "Fremdosian wine is, without a doubt, the finest in the Holy Collective. Of course, the pious gits ban the production of the stuff, and crack down brutally on anyone who tries to make a mark peddling it, a practice started by that illustrious General of theirs. By all measures, getting a bottle of the wine should be impossible, even moreso in Provesh." He tossed the big blue bottle in the air a few times. "And yet, here we are. Now, how do you suppose I got a hold of this?" The Unassigned man was the first to answer. "You used your contacts, right?" Merchant Black nodded. "Not quite. A reasonable guess, to be sure, but I didn't use my name or influence to procure this crate. Truth be told, even an Unassigned individual like yourself could obtain this stuff with relative ease, it's all a matter of-" "Ordering two separate items and mixing them, huh?" I interrupted. "To be honest, it became obvious as soon as you made us pour the watery stuff into the disgusting tasting stuff." Merchant Black threw his hands up. "Well said. Yes, selling Fremdosian wine is illegal, but selling the two liquids I had you mix, now that's another matter entirely." I smirked. "Huh. Ain't that something. But, uh, what was the point of all this? I mean, granted, that was a neat trick with the wine, I'll be sure to show it to the friends I don't have at parties. I just don't get why you bothered to have us do that." Merchant Black One chuckled. "Three reasons. The first reason is that I would like you and our unnamed friend to deliver this crate to my apartment in the Trade District. I felt that it was appropriate for the two of you to get

first hand knowledge of what it would be, exactly, that you were delivering.” The man in the white furred coat cleared his throat and spoke in a semi-serious tone. “Far more importantly than that, I think it’s a good metaphor for what I expect from my employees. The two liquids are useless on their own, one tasteless, the other repugnant. But when combined, they form a highly sought after delicacy. And-” I interrupted his monologue, cause I was pretty damn sure I knew where he was going. “Like the two liquids which combined to form decent tasting wine, so shall me and not-so-pretty boy over there’s joint efforts surpass anything that we could do on our own, right?” Merchant Black grinned. “That’s EXACTLY what I wanted to say! But there’s one final point to this little demonstration. Indeed, I’d say it’s even more important than understanding the lesson that you just so elegantly explained.” Puzzled, I raised an eyebrow. “And what would that be, exactly?” Merchant Black One smiled. “Simple. When properly mixed, Fremdosian wine will have a sweet, minty flavor- “Yeah, I noticed-“ “-and also serve as a rather potent hallucinogenic.” Both me and the Unassigned raised an eyebrow. “A what?” I asked. “A hallucinogenic”, Merchant Black repeated blankly. I rubbed the back of my neck and smiled. “What does that mean, uh, exactly?” Merchant Black One looked at me, and nodded his head. He then nodded his head again. And again. Annnnnnd again. Nodding his head all the while, the old bastard decided to melt on me. Like, into a puddle. A puddle of white goop, with a small black section where his black armband was, to be precise. The goop started to drip down the stairs, so I moved above and away from it, despite the weird fuzzy feeling my head had. “Ain’t that something.” I muttered. Then everything started spinning, and a whole bunch of weird stuff happened. Most notably, the two suns in the sky merged into one. I ran up a few loaves of bread to

the Unassigned man with the lance, who was swaying back and forth on a pretty tasty looking baguette. "Hey, hey, hey." I said as I grabbed his arm. "Does, uh, does something, uh, does something seem off to you?" He stared at me with wide open eyes. "No, no, no. This is, this is what's supposed to happen, I think. But aren't we missing something?" "You're right," I noted. "We were supposed to deliver something to the trade district." I paused for a moment to gather my thoughts. "Ah, I remember now. Whores, I think. Yes, definitely whores. Fremdosian whores, I believe, we have to deliver them to Merchant Black's apartment." The Unassigned gentlemen paused for a moment. "Wait a tick. Sorry, I was wrong. There's something weird going on here. My head's not feeling right..." I shrugged my shoulders as the loaves of bread we were standing on turned into giant rats. "Oh, oh, I've got it!" the Unassigned man said as he pounded his right fist into his left pound. "I realize what's wrong now!" I grinned widely and jumped up and down on my baguette turned rat. "Do tell!" With a confident smirk and a wave of the hand, the Unassigned gestured towards the crate at the bottom of the rat stairs. "It all has to do with that, you see. Our current predicament is utterly and irrevocably tied to that crate." "How so?" "Isn't it obvious? We need to deliver that crate to the giant black bird's cage." "No, no, we need to deliver Fremdosian whores to that puddle's house. Pretty damn sure about that." The man with the red lance nodded his head. "I don't think that's right, but even if I'm wrong, we'll need the crate." My eyes opened widely as the unified Suns split into four and the sky turned green, red, and purple. "Absolutely! Oh, sorry, I'm an idiot. Of course we'll need the crate, how else will we transport the whores?" Apologizing profusely, I slide down the tails of the rats and grabbed the wooden crate on the docks, which was filled with miniature mes, some of

whom cheered loudly as I lifted the crate, others of whom decided to climb up my right arm. I swatted one of the green haired pests off my shoulder and shouted up to the bandaged man, who had apparently switched the bandages on his face with raw bacon. "Got the crate." I said. "Let's get a move on, hopefully we'll find Fremdosian whores to put in the crate along the way." The bacon faced guy gave a grunt of approved, then frowned. "Say, what do you think Fremdosian whores look like?" I scratched my nose. "Good question. Huh. Oh, oh, I got an idea. See, my guildmaster told me that I'm from Fremdos, originally, so I think they'll have hair like mine." "Ah, ok. So first we look for women with green hair," I shook my head in concurment as he continued. "Then we ask them if they're from Fremdos. Then we ask them if they're whores or if they'd like to be a whore. Finally, we stuff them in the crate and deliver it to Merchant Black Twenty." "One" I corrected my ally. "Sorry, then we deliver the crate full of whores, or aspiring whores, to Merchant Black Twenty One's apartment." I narrowed my eyes and spoke up. "Fantastic. Let's get a move on." I walked up five or ten rats, and then took the turn into the Union District. The Union District looked the same as ever, except half of the streets were nowhere to be seen, replaced by a gaping series of canyons. Also, the buildings were made out of cheese. Carrying the crate filled with little mes, I let the bruised man walk ahead of me. "Lead the way, man with no name." He pouted. "Hey, no need to insult me. I mean, like, what if you, had, uh, um, ....." While jumping over a small cavern in the streets, I finished his sentence. "A sword? Then I'd be a Swordarm, probably. Hey, why aren't you called Lancer Blue or something?" The Unassigned stopped walking towards the town square and sighed as he leaned against a pillar of aged cheddar. "Wasn't good enough for them. Wielding a lance is the only thing I can

do well, but, apparently not well enough.” I frowned. Despite my temporary insanity, the Unassigned’s explanation still managed to confuse me, far more so than the fact that I was apparently carrying a crate full of miniature mercenaries who looked identical to myself in a quest to find green haired whores. “Wait, you have to try out to join the Lancers? I thought they took y’all in as kids. I mean, I was damn near born into my union, and...” “Oh. No, no, the Lancers only take in people with thirteen cycles under their belt.” His eyes narrowed. “They also fight for their color.” Even under the influence of the Fremdosian wine, the last bit the Unassigned said to me shocked me. “Wait, wait, if they fight for their color, and you tried out and failed, then how the heck are ya even here right now?” The bacon bandaged man sighed. “Luck, I suppose. Once it was clear that I wasn’t going to pass the test, I booked it.” I readjusted my grip on the crate. “Smart enough move on your part, I guess.” My companion twirled his red lance and stood up. “Smart or not, it’s what I did. Anyways, let’s get a move on, I can’t see any green haired women around here besides you, and you hardly count anyways.” I shook my head steadily. “True, true. Let’s go check the square, maybe we’ll have better luck there. Plus it’s on the way to... to.” I paused for a moment, and looked . “to wherever it is we’re going!” So we headed over to the city square, although we had to take a few breaks along the way. The Unassigned man made a huge fuss over being chased by shadow creatures, and I wanted to wait until the four suns in the sky changed back to two. The wait took longer than expected, so we risked the wrath of the sky and the shadow creatures, and journeyed cautiously towards the city square. After we walked through the Utility Corridor(which looked completely normal, besides the snow being replaced by confetti), we came upon the square. By the looks of the terribly indecisive

sky, it was night-time, then day time, then night-time, then day time again when we got to the square. I frowned. "You know what, let's get the whores later. For now we should probably just drop this crate off in the.. in the place where crates go." The raven locked man with the lance shook his head sagely. "Sounds like a good plan to me. Be careful though, that snake on your shoulder looks pretty nasty." I looked at my shoulder, then looked back at him, stupefied. "I think you're seeing things, man with no name.

Anyways, let's move our asses to the Trade District before that goddamn sun splits into two again." The rest of our, er, "journey" was far too ridiculous and incoherent to even try and remember, so I won't. All I'll say is that somehow, somehow, we ended up outside Merchant Black One's residence. Doing so would normally be easy as all heck, considering that damn near every residence in the city had a sign with a color, number, and profession on it to indicate whose apartment was whose. But, uh, that Fremdosian Wine worked wonders, so we got sidetracked. A lot. But, miraculously, we ended up in front of Merchant Black One's residence. I say "residence" and not "apartment", cause the place was freaking huge. At the time I figured it was just the wine, but no, Merchant Black One lived in a big house, twice the size of the apartment complex that I and twenty five other slobs lived in. And man, did it look nice. The Trade District had tons of nice looking buildings, but his house really stood out. Instead of wooden exterior like almost all the other places in the city had, Merchant Black's place was made out of marble. Not stone, not gravel, not metal, marble. Hell, the damn house even had a fountain outside of it. Not that me or bandage bacon faced stopped to look for long. Under the influence of the hallucinogenic, we pretty much just stumbled towards the



front entrance, only to be stopped by a closed metal gate(which looked like a series of giant blood puddings to me).

“Aw, damn it.” I said. “How are we gonna get in?” Bandage face’s... face looked serene. “Why don’t we, uh, um, open the gate?” I frowned. “I’ve been pulling this pastry open for forever, it ain’t budging. At this rate we won’t be able to drop off the box of whores to the puddle guy with all the metal.” Bandage Face squinted his eyes at the gate, tilted his head one way, then the other, leaned his red lance against the wall of a more mundane looking building, and slowly pushed the assortment of blood pudding open. “Woah. It opens one way, but not the other. It’s like, a door, or something” I said, amazed. Both of us still a complete mess mentally, we walked through the open gate. To be honest, I don’t know why I just accepted all the nonsense happening around me so easily. I guess it may have been because of some of the effects of the wine. The warping of reality around me as I knew it would have horrified and bewildered me in most circumstances, but there was just this feeling of euphoria that came along with the drink. It’s hard to describe, really, it was much different from being drunk. Me and the lance guy strolled and swayed to the front door of the residence. The door was quite huge: it was about three times as tall as your average fella, and ten times as wide. “Hey, bang on the door.” I said to my companion, my hands full. Lazily, the unassigned knocked on the door a couple of times. At first, not happened, we were left out in the cold. Eventually, the door opened. See, the strange thing was that no one I could tell was behind the door. Like, it had been opened, but as me and the other guy entered we didn’t see a trace of anyone else in the residence. If it wasn’t for my wine addled brain, I would have been on guard. Instead, I just casually strolled into the main hall of

Merchant Black's house. I don't remember how the inside looked too much, cause of the wine and all, but I do recall that it was big, had a bunch of nice looking crap decorating the walls, and had a big marble staircase heading up, and a small creaking wooden one going down. "Where do we put that box of yours?" Bandage face asked, as he sauntered around the main hall of the residence, using his lance as a cane. I shrugged my shoulders. "I have no idea. Let's go to the basement, there's always something interesting in a basement." Crate in tow, I headed down the creaky, spooky stairs. The stairs led to a dark room, so dark that my misguided mind couldn't even turn any of the surroundings into food or snakes or something. That's when things got really weird. Three shining lights suddenly appeared in the small room. The lights were candles, and they illuminated the basement, revealing it to have a hay covered dirt floor and crude stone walls. That wasn't the interesting bit. The interesting bit was that the candles were being held by three figures. I say figures, cause they were all dressed in blue robes, with weird looking black masks on. The masks didn't have any expressions or what have ya, they were just strips of black cloth that covered the heads of the candle bearers in front of us. Me and the man without a name looked at the three ominous figures with the candles, slowly turned our heads to each other... and starting laughing hysterically. "Pfft, hahahahaha, oh man." I spitted out between giggles. "Heheheheheheh." Bandage Face said, covering his mouth with a gloved hand. The candle bearing figures advanced towards us, unaffected by our laughter. The completely cloaked men(or women, maybe) walked in tandem, their sandals clapping on the hay covered floor in a unified rhythm as they slowly approached us. Still laughing, my right hand went to the handle of my holstered axe. The three figures

stopped, about two or three paces in front of us. Suddenly and without the slightest bit of warning, I was grabbed from behind, two strong restraining me and forcing my hands behind my back. Shocked, and actually frightened, I turned my fuzzy head to look behind me. Somehow, four more of the cloaked figures had managed to sneak up on me and the man with the lance. I struggled, of course, but my movements were as unfocused and light as my wine riddled brain was. All it took was a mildly firm shove to push me face down in the hay. "Augh! Argh! AAAAAAAAAAH!" I thrashed ineffectively and grunted inarticulately. In no time at all I was stripped of my axe, my hands were tied behind my back with a binding of some sort, and my leather headpiece was fiercely ripped off. With a soft "pomf," the Unassigned man hit the hay next to me, hands tied and lance missing. An alertness finally hit me, washing away most of the haze in my mind. Too little too late, my hands were bound and what felt like boots were firmly pressed on my back. The only thing I could move was my head, so I looked up from the hay. The three robed figures were right in front of me, though I could only see up to their waists. "Three questions." One of them said, in a rough sounding masculine sort of voice. "Three answers." Another one droned out, in a more refined sort of voice. "We shall ask," the third one said, "And you shall respond." "What the hell..." I muttered, bewildered. The Three figures ignored me. The rough sounding voice spoke out once more. "Unassigned. Filth without a name. Untrained Trash who contributes little, and deserves even less." I looked at the "filth" lying next to me. The tips of his ears twitched at the voice, and his bandage covered face winced with every demeaning word. I got a bit irritated. I had begun to work out what was actually going on, and was starting to realize the reality of the situation. The more refined voice spoke out again. "Unnamed

and unskilled wielder of the lance. Why should you be chosen to serve? Those bruises on your face are proof enough of your incompetence.” The teasing got to Bandage Face, who started to stand up, only to be violently pushed down into the ground. “These wounds on my face, they come from the color Red, and from an honorable and close fought duel!” The rough sounding voiced responded. “You were bested in moments by an unarmed woman, from a pathetic and defunct Union. The name Axeman is only slightly better than no name at all.” Angry and hurt, the Unnamed man continued. “Even so, I proved my combative abilities. Merchant Black Twenty One said so himself.” The elegant voice rang out again. “His name is Black One, weak minded punchline of a mercenary. But you are not incorrect. It is true that your fighting skills were noted to be adequate enough. That matters little. A wild beast can fight adequately, and they’re much cheaper than a man, named or not.” Desperate, the lanceless guy spoke out one more time. “I delivered the package! It’s right there, on the ground.” The rough voice spoke out. “The package never mattered, idiot. Your sputterings and stutterings have only highlighted your ineptitude.” The room got darker as the candle light in the middle went out. The third voice, the more effeminate of the three voices, rang out. “Woeful Woman. Axeman of simple minded motives and means. Why you? Why you, and not him?” I took a few moments to make sure the stuck up thing had shut up, then responded, my irritation dripping out onto every word I spoke “Can’t tell ya why my friend over there is undeserving of a job, cause he ain’t. But I’ll do most any job, and I’ll do it well. That’s all I gotta say, ya dang weirdos.” The elegant voice rung out. “Crude, crass, and unrefined. Then again, what else would one expect from a wielder of an ax? An idiotic weapon, which requires little skill to use.” I don’t mind being insulted. There’s

a lot to insult, honestly. But talking bad about my weapon, well, that's a different sorta issue. "WHY DONTCHA UNTIE ME AND SEE JUST HOW IDIOTIC THAT WEAPON OF MINE IS WHEN IT'S BURIED IN YER GODDAMN SKULL, YA SMUG BASTARD," I whispered, softly. Without a word from the three robed gits, the second candle was extinguished. The rough voice resounded out. "Two questions we've asked." The elegant voice continued. "Two asinine answers you've provided." The third voice finished. "One final question, one final answer. This last light is your life, will it be snuffed out like the others?" Humiliated, irritated, and impatient, I bitterly spat out my thoughts on the matter. "Just ask the last question, ya overly theatrical jackass." "Very well, inelegant imbecile." Rough hands grabbed me by the chin and forced my head up, as something yanked down hard on exposed braid of hair. I was now looking right up at the robed freaks. The left and right candles had gone out, the basement's only source of light coming from the middle candle. With a "shrink" sound, the silhouettes of the two figures on the left and right unsheathed something from the waist of their robes. Swiftly, the two figures walked behind me and the fellow without a name, and to my horror, pushed a sharp blade right against my throat. The middle figure, the one with a rough voice, dug into his robbed with his left hand. He removed his hand shortly after, except now it was curled into a fist. He walked up close to me and the Unassigned man and put his fist right in front of our faces. Slowly, finger by finger, he uncurled his fist, and revealed what was in it. "A coin." He said, in a deep voice. "A common coin, made of Runiertian metal. I shall toss it in the air, and you shall tell me what side it lands on. Guess correctly, and this last candle shall remain lit. Guess incorrectly, and the light, as well as your life, shall be extinguished." "Or," the pretentious sounding voice added "you

could leave right now. Leave, and never make contact with Merchant Black One again.”

I glanced at Bandage Face, he was in the position I was. A knife at his neck, and far too many hands forcing his head up. Naturally, he was nervous, sweating, his black hair dropping, his bandages coming loose, but his eyes, well, they had a sort of steel to them. “Unassigned. What is your decision?” On his knees, held down forcefully by a bunch of cloaked freaks, the Unassigned man softly, but firmly, muttered out two words. “Engraved side.” “....?” “T-that coin you say you’re gonna toss. It’ll land on the engraved side.” The robed figure closed his hand around the coin, and retracted his fist.. “So be it.” With a swift motion, he tossed the coin into the air, and let it fall to the hay covered floor. The room was far too dark for me to tell what side the coin landed on, but the robed figure looked down at the piece of metal, plucked in off the floor, and with an outstretched palm showed me and everyone else in the basement the coin. It was smooth side up. Without a word, the robed man licked his left thumb and pointer finger, and extinguished the last candle. Even knowing it was all an act, even knowing that the knife on my throat was just for dramatic, I damn near wet myself in fear as the darkness overtook me. No blade touched my throat, of course. But I heard something in the unrelenting pitch blackness. A gasping sort of sound. Like someone had just ran a hecka long distance and needed some air, badly. Course, I didn’t pay attention to that for long, cause I felt something sharp and cool touch my throat. My body stiffened up, my heart started to pound rapidly, sweat dripped down my face. Then... the candle was relit. A knife was still right against my throat, but at least it wasn’t IN my throat. I relaxed a bit... for all of an instant. Things seemed off. Something in the hay stacked basement had changed, and I gotta say, it didn’t take me long to see what. To my left, the

Unassigned man lay on the dirt floor, as if he was asleep. He was face down in the dirt. That wasn't what scared me. What scared me was the puddle of blood pouring from his neck. It was just a trick, I told myself as I looked at what couldn't have been the Unassigned man's corpse. Just a hazing process, when I got my name I went through one, they got me drunk, blind-folded me, told me to eat a heart and to kill an infant. But the infant was just a goat, the heart was just a raw steak. It was trickery. So the gruesome scene before me had to be trickery. But for some damn reason I really thought the unassigned man was dead, and that I might be too if I played my cards wrong. The rough sounding voice boomed out once more. "He made his decision. It is time for you to make yours, Axeman Red Four." I gritted my teeth. "Hold on a moment, would ya? Give me some t-t-time, to think, alright?" My head held up, a knife to my throat, and what seemed to be a dead man next to me, I considered the best way to proceed. The safest thing to do would be to leave, of course. Just ask the cloaked jerks to let me go. That way, on the off chance there was any real danger, I'd be completely safe. That line of thought stayed in my head for awhile. But then I remembered my life before Merchant Black and his shenanigans. Doing boring work, for little pay. Dealing with the worst sort of people regularly. Working so I could eat, eating so I could sleep, sleeping so I could work. A life like that... well, it didn't seem like much of a life at all. I was sure that whatever job Merchant Black wanted to hire people for would be ridiculous, but my dumb ass at the time thought that ridiculous was realms better than monotonous. "The engraved side." I spat out, defiant and determined. "What?!" the rough sounding voice ejaculated, apparently shocked. Though I was nervous as all hell, I continued, doing my best to come off as confident and uncaring. "That damn coin of

yours is gonna land on the engraved side. You ain't gonna extinguish that candle, and you sure as heck ain't going slit my throat. So toss the damn coin, mongrel." The figure in front of me... burst into laughter. Rough sounding laughter. Warm laughter, not the bizarre giggles that Merchant Black couldn't stop vocalizing. Laughter I had heard for most of my life, to be honest. My eyes narrowed as I recognized the sound of the chuckles. "Goddamn it, is that you Blue?" The robed figure continued to laugh, covered his face with one hand and gestured to the fellas behind me with the other. The knife was removed from my throat, and I felt the bindings slip off my hands. Finally, my head was given freedom from the pairs of hands holding it in place. The blue robed figure tore off the black mask of his, showing his face. Like I had guessed, the figure was Axeman Blue Three. All the fear and doubt I had went away in an instant, seeing his dumb old face, with his stupid blue beard, and his moronically tan skin. He bent down and smiled. "I'd say "congratulations," but that "ain't" really our style, is it Red?" The other robed figures starting taking off their masks as well. They might as well not have, I didn't recognize a single one of them. Most of the figures, in particular the five who had held me and the Unassigned Man down, were men around Axeman Blue Three's age. They looked how you'd expect middle aged union men to look, they were bearded, burly, and boisterous. Like Axeman Blue, their blue and purple hair and beards were flecked with patches of white. With the outstretched hand of my old buddy, I got back up on my feet. "I reckon I passed then, right?" Blue slapped me on the back. "Of course ya did! Otherwise me and the rest of the gang wouldn't have taken our masks off and such." He frowned. "Honestly, I'm a bit upset that you figured out it was me, I wanted to surprise ya." "Yer damn fault for the hooting and hollering, old man. Alright, so that's that? I



passed, I have the job that Merchant Black was testing me and the other guy for?" I glanced skeptically at the "other guy." He still seemed quite, uh, dead. The elegant voice answered me this time, except it was more than just an elegant voice now, it belonged to a youthful looking man with blue hair. "You certainly have the job, of course. But wait for Merchant Black One to make an appearance, you've earned far more than mere employment." I pointed at the Unassigned Man laying face down in the hay. "Wait, wait, what about the lance guy? He ain't really dead, is he? Ya wouldn't actually kill someone for messing up a coinflip, would ya?" The whole room burst into laughter, minus me. "No, of course we wouldn't." said another familiar voice. I turned my head towards the sound. Merchant Black One, garbed in his big white fur coat and his Runiertian soled leather boots, slowly walked down the creaky wooden stairs that led to the basement. "Congratulations, Axeman Red Four. You've passed my test with flying colors." I looked once more to the Unassigned Man in the hay. "What about him? Did he pass?" Merchant Black One smiled, and nodded his head. "Of course he didn't pass. But don't worry! He didn't fail either. His participation was solely so we could best evaluate you." I rubbed the back of my neck. "Wait, what do ya mean, exactly?" Merchant Black threw his hands in the air. "I suppose the wine is making your mind more cloudy than I intended it to. I used that Unassigned Gentleman to test your skills. His presence allowed me to witness firsthand your combat proficiency, your ability to accomplish a task even in the most bizarre of circumstances, and most importantly, how you acted in the face of lady death herself." Blue nudged me in the stomach and smirked. "Course, you were never in any real danger. The test was all about seeing if you'd go through with the coinflip after seeing that dumb bastard get his throat slit." My

good buddy Axeman Blue Three smiled and continued to talk. “Wanna know something funny? The coin really did land on the engraved side the first time around. Good thing that guy didn’t see where it landed, right?” Merchant Black One waved his hands casually. “Trivial details aside, you surpassed my expectations. Bowman Yellow Five over there..” the fat fellow pointed to the youthful man with blue hair “burst into tears before he made his decision to flip the coin.” The fellow with the elegant voice blushed. “Yes, well..., such behavior on my part was only natural, was it not?” Merchant Black One shrugged his shoulders. “Natural, unnatural, it is a pleasure for me to offer you a position as one of my caravan guardians.” Before I could get a word in, Merchant Black turned to the five or six blue robed men behind me. “But I think Axeman Red Four’s excellent performance calls for a celebration, does it not?” Roars of approval echoed throughout the small basement, as everyone followed the old man in the fur coat. I stared at what couldn’t, but had to be, the body of Bandage Face. His eyes were glazed over, his mouth curled in a grimace, or perhaps a scream. His face and neck was pale, and had the complexion of spoiled milk. Unless the wine was still wrecking havoc on my brain, I was looking at a corpse, and a recently killed one at that. Halfway up the stairs, my old buddy hollered down at me. “Oi, Red, you coming?” “Uh, yeah, in a moment Blue. Waiting for that wine to leave my head, is all.” Blue threw his hands out with mock-exasperation. I looked at the corpse of the unnamed man one last time, and headed up the stairs to attend the banquet, with a stomach that felt anything but hungry.

Merchant Black One insisted that I bathe before attending the feast. “Er, I’m good,” I said, in a voice which hid my complete and utter panic. Merchant Black grinned and

wagged one of his big fat fingers at me. "Nonsense! It's a banquet in your honor, you musn't reek of hay, wine, and sweat, at least not until after the feast starts!" He whistled in an oddly high pitched tone, and then two young women with green hair, drabbed in thin white linen sheets, quickly strolled down the set of marble staircases and stared attentively at my employer. "Handmaiden Blue Seventeen, Handmaiden Blue Twenty, give Axeman Red Four a bath and adorn her in the finest dress-" "Tunic and slacks", I insisted. "Tunic and slacks you can find." So yeah, the two Handmaidens damn near dragged me up the stairs, quickly and precisely yanked off my studded leather armor, washed me, combed my hair, sprayed some weird smelling stuff on me, all that and what have you. If I wasn't freaking out over the dead guy in the basement I might have actually enjoyed the treatment, I barely got to bathe usually, and when I did the water certainly wasn't all that hot, or, uh, clean. As the two oddly dressed(if ya can call wearing glorified pillow cases dressed) Handmaidens worked on making me look halfway presentable, I tried to formulate the best course of action. The smartest thing to do would have been to run like hell out of the Merchant Black's estate and never look back, right then and there. But I was in shock, and more importantly, I still hadn't gotten my axe back. I figured the sanest thing to do would be to attend the banquet, grab my axe, and THEN leave and never return. As I mentioned before, I was an idiot. The Handmaidens dolled me up in a fine silk tunic, colored white and green. Despite, (or perhaps because of) how awkward as it was having every inch of my body handled by complete strangers, I decided to try and talk to them. "So, uh, y'all from Fremdos?" The two identical looking young women just stared blankly at me for a moment, and then went back to making sure that my arm fit in the sleeve of the tunic properly or whatever.

Slightly embarrassed, I pressed on anyways. “Ya know, cause, you have green hair, like me. Apparently that’s where I was born, but I don’t know much about the dang place, and, uh. wel-.” I decided to stop trying, as my legs were thrust into a pair of white silk slacks without so much as word from the Handmaidens. Neither of the two girls would respond to me. They creeped me out. I mean, to be sure, they were gentle and all, and did their job well, yeah, but their faces were blank, it was like they weren’t even living or nothing. Like they were robo-... shoot, never mind, that word won’t mean anything to ya. The two were creepy, alright? While the two brushed my hair and used some weird lotion to scrub my hands, I looked around the room I was in. I reckon it was a guest bedroom, with a bathing room attached, but man, it was about four times as big as my entire apartment. Not only that, the room had a red velvet rug, two big windows with sheets, and several photorea-... er, that is to say, life-like paintings of Old Provesh. After bathing me, dressing me, and even braiding my hair, the two servants began to withdraw from me. I looked at myself in the mirror for the first time. I gotta say, I actually looked somewhat presentable for a change. The cravat was a bit much, but by and large everything fit on me neatly. I looked about as put together as I ever would. “Uh, thanks. Good job and all that.” To my surprise, my half-assed compliment caused both of the lightly dressed Handmaidens to smile. They didn’t say anything, of course, nor did they make any noise, but their emotionless faces changed to something that almost made them look human. Course, an instant later, they bowed their heads in unison and left. For a second, I panicked, thinking that the two had taken my studded armor with them. Fortunately, the servants had simply left the stuff they had taken off of me in the corner of the guest bedroom. I paused for a moment and considered just bailing

anyways, but even if I hawked my leather armor I would never have enough metal to buy a suitable replacement for my axe. It would take me four cycles of work to afford something half as good. I took in a deep breath, tightened the laces on my boots, and headed back downstairs to the main hall. I was about halfway down the stairs when I heard a familiar, rough sort of voice. "Ah, there ya are! And wow, you actually look halfway decent for a change! That thing on your neck's a bit much, though..." Axeman Blue Three was standing at the bottom of the marble staircase. I grimaced. "Not like I asked to wear any of this or nothing. Shouldn't you be eating and drinking with those old coots?" I asked. Axeman Blue threw up his hands. "Aw, don't be like that. I just thought that you got lost or something." My old friend smiled. "Not that getting lost in this place would be difficult, of course." He was wearing a tunic and slacks, same as myself, except his tunic was a mix of black and white. To my surprise, he had trimmed his big, bushy blue beard a bit, and had brushed his wild mane of hair back. Like me, he actually looked somewhat presentable for a change, though he notably WASN'T wearing a ridiculous looking cravat. I looked around in the great big marble hall, making sure that I truly was alone with Axeman Blue Three. I walked down the stairs and tapped him on the shoulders. "Oi." Blue looked at me, and looked at me like I had lost an eye or something. "What's up, Red?" "Where's my axe?" I asked, bluntly. A devious grin spread across Blue's slightly wrinkled face. "Heh, about that, well, you'll see." I frowned. "What the heck do you mean by that, you ol-" A loud bell suddenly rang out, . Blue rubbed his hands together excitedly. "Sounds like it's time to eat. Come on, let's go get some food already." My buddy took me by the arm and dragged me from the main hall of Merchant Black's residence into a side corridor to the left of the staircase. The

side hall had more of a Provesh look to it than the other parts of the house did, less marble, carpet, and pillars, more wood and fur. Course, the finely polished wood wasn't rotten, and the precisely cut furs weren't ragged, so even the side corridor was a far cry away from most of the city. The side corridor gave way to a wooden spiral staircase. I followed my pal up the stair case, which led to another corridor almost identical to the one we had just walked through. The only difference was that this corridor headed towards the main hall, not away from it, and it had a giant oval door at the end. The closer we got to the end of the hallway, the more I could hear voices chattering, plates shuffling, and glasses clinking. Blue pulled the door open, and bowed. "After you, Mi'lady." he said in a poorly done, but very heart-felt attempt at sounding classy. I punched him on the shoulder and walked in. The dining hall had to be the most mundane place in Merchant Black One's estate, minus his creepy murder basement of course. There were no fancy decorations lining the simple wooden walls, no finely crafted sculptures, no marble, no pillars. Nah, the dining hall was like any other, ya had about six plain wood tables, and twelve creaky benches, two very small windows that looked out on the trade district, and that was that. The modest room was packed with tons of people, about three or four times as many as the folks who had dressed up in cloaks when me and that poor bastard went through our "trial." They were mostly blue bearded men Axeman Blue Three's age, but I saw about five or six people my age, two of whom might even have been women, or at the very least very effeminate men. They were dressed similarly to me and Blue, wearing fine tunics, boots, and slacks. Course, also like me and Blue, the people eating and drinking in the hall looked out of place in their fine attire. Needless to say, all of them wore a colored armband of sorts, mostly

blue, but I saw a few yellows and even another red in as I gave the banquet a quick scan. No whites, and no blacks, but that was to be expected. Having the name White was almost the same as having no name at all. "Let's hurry up and sit down before they start serving the food." Axeman Blue Three said, once again dragging me by the arm. He led me over to the leftmost table. I sat down awkwardly on a bench, in front of a bowl of hot stew, and a small plate freshly baked brown bread. A tall lanky man with a purple armband and turquoise mustache approached me and Blue and bowed. "Would either of you like some ale, or wine?" I asked him for water. Just as I was in the middle of half heartedly picking at a piece of bread in front of me, when I noticed that the elegant sounding man from before was sitting directly across from me. Unlike everyone else, the classy attire seemed to fit him well. Heck, he was wearing a cravat like I was, but it actually didn't look that bad on him. The young man with the yellow armband smiled. "Ah! How fortunate! I was hoping to get to speak to you, Axeman Red..." "Four." I stated. "Four, yes, quite right. There's only ten of you if I'm not mistaken, so I do apologize for messing that important detail up." He extended a callous covered hand. I clasped it, as was the custom. "Yer that guy from before, right, the fella who kept taunting me and what not?" The guy with the elegant sounding voice shook his head and smiled. "Quite right, but don't let my words then trouble you too much. I'm just a Bowman. Bowman Yellow Five, to be precise. Our gracious employer insisted that I in particular haze you." Bowman Yellow Five frowned, and continued: "Merchant Black One seems to be under the impression that my way of talking, is, well, so to speak- "About as irritating as waking up with an aching skull and needing ta piss." Axeman Blue Three interjected, helpfully. Bowman Yellow Five blushed and nervously twiddled his

fingers. “I s-suppose the way I speak is mildly ostentatious. I was raised a ways away from here, so pardon me for coming across as-“ “A complete twat?” I mumbled. Yellow winced at my words, so I half-assedly backstepped “Er, don’t worry about it. That’s what yer supposed to do in those sorts of things. Not like I ended up getting hurt or nothing.” “That’s great to hear. We only have one other Red here, so naturally getting another one is pretty nice.” “Ya didn’t seem too impressed by my color back down in the basement.” Yellow smiled sheepishly and lightly blew on a spoonful of stew. “I was merely acting out a role. And obviously you didn’t let it get to you.” I dipped a piece of bread in the stew in front of me. “Yeah, yeah. S’all good” I muttered, as I munched on the soup and side. Suddenly, Axeman Blue slammed down on the table with one of his fists. Both me and Bowman Yellow jumped up in shock. “Oi, oi, this stew is really good!” He waved his hand in front of Bowman Yellow’s surprised looking face. “The meat’s so tender it damn near melts in my mouth! The broth ain’t that bad either.” Bowman Yellow regained his composure quick enough, and gently smiled. “Oh, well, that’s to be expected. Our chef is none other than Chef Red Two, after all.” I tilted my head, curiously. “Wait, so that’s the other person with a name like mine? Not Lancer Red Five, or Maceman Red Six?” Bowman Yellow Five frowned. Axeman Blue Four yawned. “Don’t know why that’s so surprising to ya, Red. There’s only ten of you guys in a Union, give or take. This hall is Green and Blue cause there’s so damn many of us lying around.” Blue had a point, of course, but I dunno, it just seemed strange to only have two Reds around. While we were talking, the waiter from earlier made a beeline straight for me. “Er, I told ya, no win-“ I started to say, but the lanky guy walked right past me to the other side of the table, and whispered something in Bowman Yellow Five’s ear.



Bowman Yellow's eye opened wide, then he shook his head firmly. Finally, a few pieces of parchment were discretely handed to the finely dressed guy. Bowman Yellow Five turned to me and Blue. "Pardons, but it seems that I've been asked to step in for our ever-industrious employer." I raised an eyebrow. "Step in? What do ya mean by tha-" Not missing a beat, Bowman Yellow Five raised a wine glass and, with a bright smile, tapped his spoon against it several times. The rhythmic chimes caused the roar of the conversation to shrink to a mutter, and when the room was absolutely silent, save the sound of glasses and utensils being placed down, began to, uh,... orate. "Sorry to interrupt your meal, everyone. I was asked to say a few words on behalf of Merchant Black One, who is unfortunately preoccupied with the formidable task of counting all his metal while engaging in sordid activities with all of your current and previous cycle collaborators." The crowd let out a couple of chuckles, some polite, some sincere. "Ah, but seriously, I'm afraid the gargantuan task of delivering today's speech falls upon my humble, dainty hands." Even I smirked at that gag, cause like any Union member worth a damn, his hands were covered with grotesque callouses and scabby scratches. "There's a longer pre-written speech that I'll read later, but let's begin with the fun stuff! First off, I'd like for all of you to give a warm welcome to-" I groaned and covered my face with my hands. "our new cook, Chef Red Two!" The room erupted into thunderous applause, whistling, the works. "He's busy working in the kitchen right now, so please, take some time to thank him for his efforts before you head out." Bowman Yellow hit his hand against his palm. "Oh! I almost forgot!" The daintily dressed man straightened the parchment he was holding. "In four risings we'll be having shots and stories at the tavern in the Union District, feel free to come by if you're in the mood for piss poor liquor

and idiotically lewd tales.” Bowman Yellow Five adjusted his cravat and cleared his throat, then sheepishly rubbed the back of his head. “I’ll try to be as succinct as possible.” Suddenly, his demanour changed. His face, which had been so soft and pleasant, became harsh. It had a sorta seriousness to it, and what have ya. His eyes narrowed, and looked focused, determined. “My esteemed employees.” Bowman Yellow’s voice sounded exactly like it did in the hay covered basement: haughty, knowledgeable, and perhaps a bit cruel. “Why do we have names? The answer is obvious, is it not? Our names set us apart. Each individual on the sphere is born with different talents, passions, desires. Some people excel at painting, others at baking, more still at matters of warfare. I myself have a knack for trade. My name tells you my nature. I am a Merchant. I buy, I sell, I hire. My color and my number indicate the skill I possess in regards to my profession.” Bowman Yellow Five paused, and with that serious look on his face, slowly turned his face from one end of the room to the other. “That’s the conventional wisdom that you and I possess. We sweat and bleed for our names, we sweat and bleed harder still for our colors and numbers. In return, we are set apart from the untrained masses, our cycles of hard work rightfully giving us higher salaries and commissions, luxurious accommodations, the choice cut of job opportunities.” Me and Axeman Blue turned to raise an eyebrow at each other. Bowman Yellow Five slowly nodded his head. “What I just said is, of course, a fantasy. A fabrication. A myth. Your names mean nothing. Not to me, not to any of the other Merchant Blacks, and certainly not to anyone of any importance in Provesh.” I noticed a few diners rub their arms nervously. As if addressing the uncomfortable atmosphere in the room, Bowman Yellow Five continued. “What I just said is the truth. An unfortunate

truth, to be sure, but it IS the truth. Your names and colors mean nothing here, or anywhere else in the Independent Kingdoms. All of you in this room are valued, to be sure. I spent nearly two cycles to gather the lot of you. Without exception, everyone in this hall is a skilled, dedicated, and promising worker, deserving of respect, praise, and much more.” Bowman Yellow Five clutched the torso of his tunic. “Even so, I did have to go through great pains to find you fine people, and even greater pains to test you. Why is that? By all accounts, hiring caravan escorts and personal body guards should have been easy enough. Any fighting specialist with the color blue would have been more than sufficient, if our names meant as much as our leaders taught us to believe they did. Alas, they don’t. The Independent Kingdoms are a joke, a punchline. While the Fiatists and their Holy Collective grow richer by the day, we decline further and further into poverty, and decadence.” The people in the hall began to mumber in agreement, most scowling at the mention of the “F” word. “Do not misunderstand me,” Yellow said while wagging a finger. “I am not condemning the Fiatists in the slightest.” Confused expressions spread on the faces of the blokes in the hall, Axeman Blue Three in particular looked like he had just bitten into a tart fruit. “The so called “sacred siblings” are not our enemies.” The hall got a bit rowdy, a few of the more intoxicated men even started to jeer and hiss. Bowman Yellow paused for a bit, then continued reading from the parchment in front of him. “They are also not our friends, or even rivals. No, we are to them as an insect is to a giant, a senile old man to a robust youth.” The dapper young man with blue locks tilted his head slightly and pursed his lips. “Do not misunderstand me; I am not lavishing praise on that order simply to be a contrarian. The Holy Collective is arrogant, tyrannical, and quite clearly a blight on our sphere,. But they are

strong. In spite of their flawed ideals, over the past fifty cycles the brothers and sisters of the order have, through their devotion, and through the cruel insight of that illustrious General of theirs, reduced our influence tenfold. The fall of Fremdos several cycles ago is merely the latest in a long line of failures.” I sipped some water from my glass and swished it around a bit in my mouth. “Note well that I said failures. The current situation exists not so much because the Holy Collective is strong, though they ARE indeed strong, but because we are weak. We, yes, we, the Unions, the Independent Kingdoms, have lost our way. Even the drunkards in the street could tell you that much. There’s little work to be found, for even less pay. Disease, death, and decay run rampant, and the only trade that has grown over the last few cycles is the most ancient one.” The room felt very uncomfortable. I gulped down some more water as ta not make eye contact with anyone. Bowman Yellow Five bowed. “Of course, it is so easy to be a critic. Fret not, for I would not have written out this message for our dear Bowman to read if my intentions were merely to complain about the current state of affairs. What happens after one identifies a problem? He fixes it, of course. And our problem lies with two groups of individuals. The first group we must overcome, are, of course, the unassigned.” The hall exploded into cheers and fiercely shaking heads. “The unassigned roam our streets, without a name and without a purpose. They take the lowest of jobs for the lowest of pay. In better times, the unassigned were a blessing. They set those with names apart from those without. There was a purpose in their purposelessness. That has changed. No longer is it true that “the lowest man with a name is ten times better than the highest without.” Bowman Yellow nodded his head slowly. “The line between named, and unnamed, has been muddled, to the point where

perhaps there is no line at all. Somewhere down the line, we stopped rewarding talent and dedication, and started rewarded flattery, trickery, and deception. A Bowman like the gentleman reading this speech for example, can advance to Red in a mere five cycles if he is rich enough. Nevermind his aim, his endurance, his strength. No, the Bowman Union has decided that metal matters more than integrity.” Boos echoed throughout the hall. Bowman Yellow Five waved his hand as if to dismiss the crowd. “Of course, the Bowman Union is a symptom. It is not the disease that is killing our society. As a Merchant, I believe that all the evils of the world stem not from moral issues, but from issues of commerce. People do what is most profitable for themselves. They weigh incentives, both positive and negative, and make the smartest choice. The Bowman Union’s decision to engage in such a corrupt practice is evidence that the game, so to speak, has been rigged. The best and brightest are no longer treated with the respect and dignity that they deserve.” Yellow cleared his throat yet again. “Bizarre, isn’t it? That tradition hundreds of cycles old is being thrown out on the proverbial streets like a cheap whore? That those with skill are being treated the same as those without? “ I absent mindly stirred the stew in front of me a few times. I didn’t know where he was going with all of this, but I sure as heck wasn’t liking his tone. The more he spoke, the more impassioned and obsessed he seemed to become. Bowman Yellow Five’s voice had a grandiose affection to it, and his eyes were damn near bulging. “Of course it’s bizarre,” Bowman Yellow snapped. “The cause of this decadence and corruption is anything but bizarre. It all lies with a certain cabal of individuals. Wealthy, intelligent, and influential folks, they profit and thrive off our decline.” The blue haired man shook his head slowly. “I wager that most of you already know of whom I speak.” His voice

grew more and more maniacal by the moment.. “The Swordarms.” Yellow whispered. “Yes, The Swordarms. The ones whose names still matter. They connive and coerce businesses in Provesh and the wastes into handing THEM the lucrative contracts, THEM the jobs that should rightfully be ours. The Swordarms influence the Magistrate, using even our laws, intended solely for public defense, to grant themselves more power. The richer they get, the more influence they receive, and the more influence they receive, the richer they get.” “So long as they exist, we are no higher in station than the unassigned filth,” the Bowman spat. I had heard enough. I quietly stood up and turned towards the exit. I lightly yanked on Axeman Blue’s left ear. “Gah! What was that for, Red?” “Gotta talk ta ya about something.” I said. “Alright, what is it that ya wanted ta talk about?” my friend replied, somewhat impatiently. I nodded my head swiftly. “Not here, outside.” Ignoring his protests, I dragged Axeman Blue out of the dining hall, doing my best to block out Bowman Yellow/Merchant Black’s speech. I didn’t say a dang word til we got back to the spiral staircase. Bluntly, I asked Blue a simple question. “Where’s my axe?” My old friend answered my question with a question. “The heck did ya do that for, Red? You just walked out in the middle of our employer’s speech, you dolt!” “Not my employer. I’m getting the hell out of here. Where’s my axe?” A look of surprise spread across Axeman Blue Three’s face. “Wait, what, why?!” I shrugged my shoulders. “This whole mess doesn’t feel right.” Blue covered his face with his right palm. “You’re giving up a well paying gig like this just cause of a hunch?” “More or less, yeah. Where’s my axe?” Axeman Blue wasn’t having it. “Red, if something’s bothering ya I wanna hear it.” I took a deep breath. “What did ya think of Bowman Purpl-“ “Yellow” Blue quickly interjected. “-Yellow’s speech in there? “I dunno, sounded the same to me as the other

forty speeches he made.” I rolled my eyes. “That stuff he said about the Unassigned didn’t trouble you at all?” Blue blinked at my question. “Why would it?” I sighed.

“Where’s my axe?” “You ain’t gonna leave cause of a speech, are ya? Come on, don’t blow an opportunity like this over something stupid!” Flustered, I damn near screamed at Blue in the small hallway. “This whole thing is stupid! Now tell me where my axe is, else I’m gonna pull rank on ya.” Blue gave me an exasperated look. “Man, Red, you need to calm the hell down. Look, how bout I show you to your axe and we talk about what’s troubling ya on the way?” “Gah, whatever. Just show me where my weapon is so I can get the hell out of here.” Once again, Axeman Blue led the way. We walked down the wooden spiral staircase, and through the corridor below, but Blue stopped half a hall before we reached the main marble hall. My friend leaned against a wall and crossed his arms. “Why are ya so panicked? What about that dumb speech made your feet so damn cold?” I scratched my chin. “Don’t it seem odd?” Blue tugged ever so slightly on his beard. “Don’t what seem odd, Red?” I bit on my lip. “Alright. So, Merchant Black is looking for Caravan Guards. He puts them through a series of tests ta see if they’re up to snuff. I got that, it makes sense, mostly.” “Then what are you so scared o-“ “But then he has Bowman Blu-“ “Yellow.” “Yellow read an over the top speech like that, ranting and raving about the Swordarms and the Unassigned and the like.” I narrowed my gaze. “Don’t that seem odd to you?” Axeman Blue Three chuckled. “What are you so worried about? All speeches are dumbass grandstanding, that’s just how they work. Remember when ya got named Red? Those old farts presiding over that ceremony droned on about how us Axemen were the foundation of the Independent Kingdoms and what not. “Yeah, yeah, I know. But what the hell do the Swordarms havta do with escorting

caravans?” “Oh, that’s easy enough. Merchant Black doesn’t hire swordarms. The man just doesn’t like em.” I rubbed my neck. “Huh, I guess ya got a point there...” Though I acted like I was having second thoughts, I wasn’t. The speech Bowman Yellow would have been fine by itself, grandstanding and all, if not for one thing: the dead guy in the basement. There was no reason to kill the poor lance guy. He implied that it was for me to get scared and what not, but if he wanted to scare me he coulda just hired an actor or something, but no, he actually murdered the guy. Sometimes some folks gotta die, I know, and I wasn’t exactly a beacon of morality back then myself, but the senselessness of bandage face’s death tainted every word of Bowman Yellow’s oratory, meaning that what seemed like macho posturing to Blue was the ramblings of a lunatic ta me. I shoulda just confronted Axeman Blue about the dead guy thing, ask why he was so ok with it. But... to tell ya the truth, Blue’s role in that whole mess was something that I don’t think I wanted ta understand. “Alright, so where’s my axe, ya half-senile halfwit?” Blue smirked. “Patience, patience. You’ll have it back in yer hands soon enough.” Without another word, he walked out into the marble hallway. There was no one there, well, no one save those two green haired servants, who continued to sweep the pristine room without even turning their heads to look at us. Blue decided ta go up the big set of stairs in the middle of the main hall, which led up to the guest bedrooms and the like. When we walked about halfway up the stairs, my burly bearded buddy stopped and turned ta face me. “Alright, try to keep quiet if ya can. It’s a bit early for me and you to be up here.” “Gotcha.” I mumbled. We tip toed up the rest of the stairs and headed left into the corridor with the guest bedrooms. For a second I thought we were heading right back to the same room where the two silent handmaidens had shoved me



into the moronic looking outfit I had on, but Blue casually strolled past the white painted door that led into the snazzy looking room I had stored my studded leather armor in... only to open the door on the opposite side of the hall. Axeman Blue Three bowed. "Ain't like we just your axe away or nothing." The room looked identical to the one I had been in previously, just flipped. The carpeting, the pillows, the curtains, all of it looked damn near the same. There were only two differences, really. The first was that the room Blue had led me to didn't have a bathing room attached to it. Much more importantly, leaned neatly against the large bed in the center of the room was an axe. I frowned. See, it was an axe alright, but it sure as heck wasn't *my* axe. The handle was made completely out of metal, and the shining bright gray blade was double sided. In terms of pure craftsmanship, the thing lying against the bedpost had to have cost five times more than my axe. That didn't really matter, though. I lightly elbowed Blue in the stomach. "Oi, oi, that ain't my axe, old man." My friend feigned indignation, probably ta mess with me or something. "Course it ain't. Did I ever say it was?" "Ya said my axe was in here." "And?" "That ain't my axe." I stated bluntly. Blue just smirked in response. "So what do ya think that means, Red?" "I think it means you're being a pain in the ass." "Aw, come on, play along and look around, I promise ya that you'll like what ya find." I started searching around the room. Course, the first thing I did was check directly under the bed, but all I found were some old worn pair of boots, and a thankfully unused chamber pot. As Axeman Blue stood uselessly in the corner, snickering with his old worn hands over his mouth, I noticed that there was a slight lump under the covers of the bed. Rolling my eyes, I tugged off the white fluffy comforter of the bed. Course, what I found underneath wasn't my axe. The bulge on the bed turned out to be an armored breast plate. Plate by

the look of it, and though I couldn't quite make out what sort of metal the chestpiece was made out of, I knew that the material wasn't exactly cheap. The breast plate was colored midnight black, I had no idea if it metal looked that way naturally or if it was painted. As anxious as I was to get my axe back and get the hell out of Merchant Black's residence, I must admit that the black chest piece caught my interests and stuff for a spell. "Huh, this belong to you Blue?" Still leaning against the white wooden wardrobe, he nodded his head slowly. "Yeah, figured as much, this thing don't look too affordable, I wonder who owns i-" "That breastplate belongs to someone in this room," Blue said mysteriously. I looked around. There was no one around but me and him. I scratched my chin for a bit, if the chestpiece I had never seen before didn't belong to Axeman Blue Three, then- "It's yours, stupid." Blue said with a wry smile. I nodded my head. "No it ain't. I wear a decent studded leather get up, this thingy here is way above my price-range." Blue chuckled. "It's a gift. That shiny axe over there on the bedpost is what I got when I passed Merchant Black's test." I narrowed my eyes suspiciously. "You ain't messing with me?" Blue smiled gently and fiddled a bit with his trimmed blue beard. "Course I'm not. Swear it on my name." I began to open my mouth to say something, then hesitated. On one hand, I knew that the right thing to do, logically and morally, would be to find my axe and leave. On the other hand, the shiny looking black chestpiece sucked me in. Not just cause it looked cool and had brilliant work put into it, but because- Blue stood up straight and gently clasped my right shoulder with his big callousy right hand. "Look, Red," he said warmly, "I get that this stuff confuses ya and makes you all sorts of nervous. But you and I, we ain't the type to worry about politics, or unions, or stuff like that." I bit my lip. "That ain't what I-" Bue waved his hand. "Ya

think too much sometimes. It helps ya as much as it hurts ya. See that Cercentian armor on the bed? That ain't just a nifty thing to wear, it's proof of your value to Merchant Black." My friend's words began to sink in. "There's not much more you or I can ask for than someone who respects us. Leave the politics and details to the bureaucrats, and the actual labor to u-" The sound of simultaneous footsteps echoed from downstairs, causing Blue to flinch a bit. "Ehehe, we better get going and talk about this later. We're not exactly supposed to be here right now," he said sheepishly. There were all sorts of things I wanted to talk with him about, cause like a moron I was starting ta have second thoughts about bailing, but I needed to take care of something more important first. "Uh, Blue," I sputtered nervously, "where's my axe?" "Oh, sorry, I forgot about that." He scanned the room briefly and nervously tugged on his beard again. "Should be around here somewhere..." he said absently mindly. The burly man backed up into the wardrobe he had been leaning on earlier. "Gah!" he yelped, as he crashed into the white painted piece of furniture, causing one of the doors to fling open. Through Blue's clumsiness, I managed ta find my axe. That was good. Cept, the axe had been placed standing straight up in the wardrobe, and now that the wardrobe had been knocked around a bit, the head of my Runieritian reinforced axe started ta fall down towards Blue's neck. That was bad. Instinct kicked in, and before I even knew what the heck my body was doing I caught the blade of the axe between my hands. "Gah!" I shrieked with a higher pitch than I woulda liked. The blade of my weapon was about an eyelash away from my forehead. Saving what little dignity I had left, I carefully laid my axe on its side. "You alright?" I asked Blue. "I'm fine." he said sheepishly. After gathering my composure, I helped Blue onto his feet. Embarrassed as all hell over

nearly dying via klutziness, we both looked away from each other. I forced myself to cough. “Ya said we weren’t sposed ta be here or something?” “Uh, yeah” my disheveled friend stuttered, “so let’s get back to the banquet before we get in trouble-.” Both of us suddenly flinched, as a huge crashing sound echoed into the room. Unhinged as all hell, I braced myself, thinking that the wardrobe was gonna fall down on me or that Blue’s tumble had broken a vase or something. Fortunately, well, least it seemed fortunate at the time, the din didn’t seem to come from anything in the room. Me and Blue quietly stepped out of the guest bedroom and began to head towards the main staircase. As we tiptoed through the upper hall of the main part of Merchant Black’s estate, we heard that weird crashing noise again. This time, though, the noise was a bit different. It was less “one gigantic crash”, and more “a burst of similar sounding loud impacts.” The closer we got to the stairs, the more clearly we could make out the sound. When we were halfway to the stairs, I slowed my pace and looked up at Axeman Blue. “Oi, Blue, is Black getting something a new wing constructed here or something?” “Why do you ask?” “Just wanted to know what’s the deal with all that clanging noise, sounds like someone’s building something.” My burly buddy bit his lip. “That racket isn’t from construction, I can tell you that much. Merchant Black only hires Union members, and all of them should be eating stew and drinking wine right now.” The bit about the stew and wine was said with a smidgeon of melancholy. I frowned. “Then what the heck is causing that clanging noi-“ “AURGHER-!” A loud, inelegant scream rung out from below us. In an instant, the casual atmosphere died out. The clanging noise intensified, but for some reason or another, perhaps due to my increased alertness, I could hear what sounded like boots smacking against the marble floor below. Blue looked down at me

with a concerned look on his usually carefree face. “Red, I-” “Yeah, I know, I just heard it myself.” We stopped moving. The clanging noise continued, and we heard a few more terrible shrieks, which cut off suddenly. A million panicked thoughts entered my head, so I did my best to ignore them. “Blue, is there any way to get back down without using the main staircase?” With a troubled but focused face, Blue quickly nodded his head. “No, unfortunately.” “Can we get out of the estate through a stairway or exit on this floor, then?” “Not to my knowledge, Red.” My fingers began to twitch nervously. Me and Blue had our axes on us, but we were still wearing our formal attire. “What do you reckon we do?” Blue asked. I frowned, and swallowed. “I say we go back to the room we were just i-” “And just hide like a scared child?!” “No, course not. Hiding would be completely moronic, cause if whatever’s causing that noise ISN’T a bunch of rowdy drunks, we’d end up trapped here.” Blue frowned. “Then why do ya wanna go ba-” I pointed at my cravat. “Point taken.” We sprinted back into the room with the black metal chest piece. I quickly ripped off my tunic and started to put on the piece of Cercenlentionian armor. “I don’t suppose Merchant Black bought me a helmet and leg guards to go with this, did he?” I asked as I thrust my right arm through the shoulder strap. “Fraid not,” Blue said as he finished putting on a worn but durable looking set of leather. “Guess this’ll have ta do, then.” I said as I tightened the back of the chestpiece. I musta looked completely ridiculous. My torso was covered by the black armor, but my lower half still had on the silk slacks and fine dress shoes. My thoughts were too far away from my mixmatched appearance for me ta really care, though. I turned to Blue, who was now fully decked from headguard to spurred boots in his brown leather armor. “Alright,” I instructed in a low voice, “we gotta be silent, and quick. Keep yer axe out, but the primary objective

here is just ta find out what's going on, and then to get the hell out." I frowned. "Actually, ya know what, let's just go with that second part." Blue shook his head. "Ok," I said as I opened the door and stuck my right foot out into the white rugged hallway, "stay behind me, and try to match my height best you can if I go prone or something." Without saying another word, I dashed outta the room, doing my best ta be quick and quiet as possible. It didn't take me too long ta hear the clanging sounds echo from below again, partially cause the sounds had gotten louder and more frequent, and partially cause the excitement of the situation had sharpened my senses. This time, I could quite clearly hear some grunts and yells. No doubt about it, there was some sort of struggle going on downstairs. I tightened my hands around the handle of my axe. I pushed my back against the wall five paces before the entrance to the marble staircase, and stood completely still. Down in the main hall, I heard a deep masculine voice let out a short roar. "Ragh!" the voice resounded, followed shortly by what sounded like a clash of metal on metal. After four of these metal on metal clashes, the deep voice let out a long and fierce battle cry. As he screamed, I heard the sound of feet rapidly stomping on the marble floor of the main hall "ARAUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUG-" The battle cry stopped abruptly, and so did the stomping noises. I had to tilt my head to hear it, but I vaguely made out a mewling, gurgling sorta whimper, followed by a hard thud. Eyes wide open, I extended an open palm towards Blue, indicating that he should stay absolutely silent and still. His tan face was sweating, and his twitchy hands were causing his double sided axe to shake a bunch. I grimaced as I pondered my options. Me and Blue were about as close to the stairs as we could be without risking someone on the ground floor spotting us. There was a definitely struggle going on downstairs, between who I had no

idea. I agonized for a spell. On one hand, if there was a struggle, my buddy and I would have a chance ta capitalize on the chaos, y'know, with an element of surprise sorta deal. On the other hand, only being able to hear the *sound* of a struggle meant that I had no clear portrait of the situation. Two or even three men out for blood would be manageable, if not exactly desirable, but if there were four or more dangerous fellas downstairs, me and Blue would almost certainly be done for, shock value or not. "A-are we done here?" The sound of a nervous, squeaky voice from below flung me out of my thoughts. "Aye," a caustic, booming voice responded, "this poor bastard seems to be the last of em." The stuttering voice rang out again. "T-t-then should we head back? I know we have the Magistrate's permission to be here and all, but- "Yea, let's get a move on. This bloke is gonna stink worse than a whore's cunt in a few moments, and staying in this We'll look elsewhere." "O-ok." I heard the sound of footsteps touching down on the marble floor in a much more even pace than the rapid stomps from earlier, followed by what had ta be the giant wooden entrance to Merchant Black's residence opening and closing. I stay pressed against the wall for a long time, but the only thing I heard was the thumping of my chest. I swallowed nervously, and very quickly peeked around the corner. During the quick glimpse I gambled ta take, I saw... well, I didn't see much of anything. The marble hall looked the same as it did when I had first seen it, with its pristine white floor and fancy looking pillars. The giant wooden door that me and Bandage face had come in through was shut tightly. I looked to Blue and motioned for him to follow me. Quickly and carefully, I descended down the large marble staircase, scanning my perimeter and keeping a strong grip on my axe all the while. We made tons of noise walking down the large set of stairs, but no one seemed ta notice. As I

walked off the last step, I found out why. See, the hall wasn't quite as unoccupied as I thought at first glance. Nah, there were five other people in the main hall besides me and Blue. Near the left corridor was one of the green haired Handmaidens. She was curled up in a fetal position, and shaking far more than Blue and I were. As to why the stoic servant was freaking out all of a sudden, well, I guess that'd be 'cause of the dead guy less than an armslength in front of her. I had seen him before, he was one of the robed figures who had held me down when I had taken the stupid test. He was middle aged, red haired, and had an orange band strapped around his right arm. His plain white tunic was stained a reddish pink from a whole lotta blood dripping down from a gaping wound in the middle of his throat. My stomach started ta feel nauseous, so I winced and averted my eyes. Blue ran ahead of me. "This... this ain't good...." he said as cradled the dead man in his arms. "Ya think?!" I spat back. Blue nodded his head quickly. "No, Red, look. His throat...." Impatient and irritated, I quickly cut him off. "Has a gaping hole in it, yeah, I kinda noticed." My friend leaned his axe against a wall and clasped his hands together. "Ain't what I'm driving at. That's the only wound this fella has. Means that..." I caught on. "Means that someone with at least a degree of skill killed him, and quick. Yeah, well, maybe. We didn't see nothing, so we can't say." I turned towards the shaking woman in white. Sorta white, anywho, seeing as her pillow case of an outfit was splattered with blood. "Uh, you alright?", I asked. With wide open eyes, a sweaty face, and messy green hair, the servant shakily shook her head while her body convulsed. "Good to..hea-...uh... see. Can ya tell us what happened here?" "Specifically with the dead guy and what not." Blue added. The handmaiden just nodded her head. Over and over again. Axeman Blue Three frowned. "Merchant Black always



said that his servants were meant to be seen and not heard, I guess they take a vow of silence or something." I rolled my eyes and walked closer to Handmaiden Blue Seventeen, or Twenty, or whatever her number was. "Can you at least point to where the guys who did this went?" The green haired servant raised a shaky hand and point towards the main entrance. I turned towards Blue. "Then we're going out the back exit. Lead the way, old man." Blue picked up his axe, and started to head down the corridor that led to the wooden spiral staircase. I started to follow him, then looked behind me. Handmaiden Blue something was still clutching her knees and shaking. "Oi, servant girl, don't just sit on yer ass like that, come with us." She looked up at me and slowly nodded her head. I smirked. "Ah, but I ain't asking ya, I'm ordering ya. My color's Red, so ya gotta obey me." She didn't havta listen to a word I said in the slightest, of course, but my explanation seemed to resonate well enough with the mute. Shakily, she got up on her feet. Axeman Blue turned and flashed a cheesy grin at the blood splattered girl. "Stay behind me and Red, we'll get ya out of here safely." Our bravado was, of course, completely manufactured. Both me and Blue were terrified, probably just as much as the green haired girl was. But, see, ya don't act the hway ya need ta when you're *visibly* terrified, so acting nonchalant and confident towards the mute servant gave us a chance to ease our nerves and keep our focus. The three of us ran through the side corridor, hopefully heading towards an exit that didn't have a bunch of murderers waiting outside. As we made a mad dash for the spiral staircase, I scanned the wood floor of the nostalgic hallway. I didn't see any blood stains, or scuff marks. Actually, the hall looked the same way it did when I had first walked down it, all the paintings of Union City were intact, along with the wooden statues and what have ya. If there was a struggle in the

corridor between the main hall and the spiral staircase, it wasn't a very big one. Something about that puzzled me. I had clearly heard a brawl of some kind take place in the marble hall, and the fella who had a hole punched in his throat had been wearing a tunic, so he had to have come from the banquet. One of the two voices I heard while up on the second floor had mentioned that the dead guy was the "last of em," so whatever had happened in the main hall probably wasn't an isolated incident, like an assassination or something. I shivered. The three of us finally got to the creaky wooden spiral staircase. Right before the first step, Blue turned around and stopped. "Ya gonna wanna go down those steps and to the right ta get out of here." He said, casually. I raised an eyebrow. "Wait, wait, you ain't leaving? Are you out of your mind?!" Blue shrugged his leather pauldron adorned shoulders. "Maybe. There's something I wanna check on real quick." "Are you fricking retarded!?" I asked, calmly. "We don't got any time to spare, we need to get the heck out of here." Blue tilted his head. "Yeah, yeah, I know. It's just, well, that Bowman Yellow kid. I'm worried about him." I clenched my teeth. "Worry about yerself, ya moron. Last time we saw Yellow he was in a hall with fifty other people, if he's in any trouble then that's even more of a reason ta get the hell outta here." Blue threw his hands up and half heartedly smiled. "Call it the whims of a tired old man, I guess. My back aches all the time, so I ain't able to get much sleep, ya see, and I would probably get even less sleep if a kid's blood ended up on my hands somehow." I looked at my friend with a mouth open. Maybe he really was going senile, I thought. What he wanted to do was dumb. Ya don't try and be heroic when people are dying around ya for no reason. It just won't end well. I frowned. "Sorry Blue, ain't gonna happen. I'm pulling rank." Before my friend even had the chance to protest, I cleared my

throat and started ta say the words that I had to memorize cycles ago. “I, Axeman Red Four, being of both higher skill and nobler color, hereby command you, Axeman Blue Three, to...” get the hell out of here, is what I had intended ta say. But as I said the words which Blue would havta obey, I saw a really defeated sort of look come across his face. It wasn’t the discomfort or irritation that you’d see on someone who didn’t agree with ya, Blue looked .. betrayed.. He usually was easy going about most anything, so his discomfort just didn’t sit right with me in spite of the severeness of the situation. “...to let me come with ya to check up on that prissy Bowman.” Blue’s face went from mopey ta dopey almost instantly. I sighed and turned to the handmaiden, who had watched our exchange with a blank face. “Me and Blue are going back up to the Banquet Hall cause we’re morons. You should probably head outta here while ya still can.” The mute looked up(well, ok, down, she was taller than I was) at me and just nodded her head. “Really?” I asked, exasperated. “C’mon lady, ya don’t even have a weapon or nothing, at best you’ll get in the way.” Without missing a beat, the green haired servant grasped tightly on an exposed flap of my tunic. “Fine, fine!” I said, a bit red in the face. “You can come too. Don’t complain ta me if you get raped and killed or something, though.” I nodded at Blue. The two of us proceeded up the spiral staircase, towards the banquet hall, and away from the exit. Our axes were out and ready ta be used at a moments notice. As we headed towards the entrance to the banquet hall, I held my breath a bit so as ta hear anything suspicious sounding. See, here’s the thing: I didn’t hear anything suspicious, exactly, but that was very suspicious in and of itself. The corridor that led to the banquet hall was silent as the docks of Provesh at night. If things were somewhat ok, me and Blue shoulda been able to at least hear some sort of

noise come from the banquet hall. But there was nothing, nothing I heard besides me, Blue, and the girl's breathing. I started to shake. My gut screamed at me to just forget the whole thing and leave, but I refused ta, like a moron. Blue got to the door first. He leaned his double sided axe against the wall, put one of his hands on the circular wooden door , and motioned me forward. Understanding almost instantly, I assumed a breaching position, which is a fancy way of saying that I readied my axe so that if there was anyone nasty behind the door I'd be able to wack him something fierce. Blue glanced at me with clenched teeth, then yanked the round wooden door open. Axe in front of me, I quickly stepped into the banquet hall. I scanned the immediate area around me, luckily there wasn't some smartass pressed against the wall ta try ta get the jump on me or nothing. I turned behind to look at Blue. "All clear, old ma-" I trailed off. Blue's headguard covered face looked completely stunned. His jaw was agape, and his eyes were twitching slightly. Like a statue, he stared straight into the Banquet hall, his head not turning, his legs not moving. As I reflectively turned my head to look where he was looking, my body started ta freeze up too. I hadn't noticed it when I breached into the Banquet hall, but now that I had the chance to look beyond my immediate radius, I was able ta see a bunch of stuff neatly propped against the left and right walls of the mess hall that hadn't been propped up against the wall earlier. And, uh, by "a bunch of stuff," I mean a bunch of dead middle aged guys with gaping, blood oozing wounds in the front of their necks. Their pale blood drained faces, the few I dared ta look at anyways, were curled up in a state of... well, not horror exactly, but shock. Y'know, the type a face ya make when you hear a mug or a plate shatter in a tavern cause of a clumsy waitress or something, Them all being quite dead was almost the least horrifying

part of what I saw, inna way See, besides the fifty some-odd corpses lined against the walls of the mess hall, the room was entirely unchanged. No, really. The wooden bowls of stew, partially drunken glasses of wine, and utensils looked like they hadn't been moved at all. The benches were in the same place that they were when me and Blue had left to fetch my axe, and even the papers Bowman Yellow had placed on the podium looked just like they did when he had delivered his speech. What me and Blue saw defied any reasonable explanation. We hadn't even been gone for all that long, and yet in that short period of time everyone else who had listened to Yellow's speech had gotten killed. Killed in the exact same manner, and killed without even there being even the slightest sign of a struggle in the hall. No broken plate, shattered glasses, overturned benches, nothing. "Ah....ah...uh..." I stuttered, my brain turned to mush. Somehow, I was able ta turn and look back at my friend and the green haired servant. They both looked completely stunned, Blue in a more dumbfounded way, the servant in a "completely terrified and on the verge of a mental breakdown" sorta way. I was scared and confused too, but, somehow, gradually, my confusion and terror was replaced with another kinda feeling... In the midst of all the insanity, I started ta think about a lot of things. I thought about my crappy job at the whorehouse. I thought about the dumbass tasks that that fat Merchant bastard had me and Bandage Face do. I thought about how Bandage Face got his throat slit by some robed bastard for little more than theatrics. Finally, I thought of the sight before me. A sight that couldn't be real for any number of reasons, yet was. Nothing made sense ta me. And that, more than anything else, *angered* me. I ignored my fear, clenched my fist and gritted my teeth. I steadily stepped out of the banquet hall, and past my dazed companions. "We're leaving. Now." I hissed.

Then, steadily, swiftly, I walked towards the spiral staircase. The only thing on my mind was to get out of the estate. I had to. Not just to save my hide from whatever was causing the almost comical amount of bloodshed, but to finally do something of my own accord, to act, instead of just react. I ran. Through the corridor, down the first flight of spiral stairs, and then down another. I shut out damn near everything but the path ahead of me. Heck, I didn't even know if Blue and the girl were behind me, and at that moment I didn't care. With my tunnel-visioned mind, it didn't take very long to get to what I figured was an exit. The last flight of spiral staircase led down to a hay floor basement not unlike the one I had been in with Bandage Face, but there was a small door that had both light and a cold wind come from its crevasse. The door didn't have a handle or a knob, so I leaned my axe against the course stone wall and tried to budge it open. Blue, who had followed me, exhaled loudly. "Well, crap." He turned and looked at the servant. "Do you have a key or something that could—" My buddy was interrupted by a rough-sounding impact. Namely, me picking up my axe and wacking the shoddy wooden door to bits. Well, "to bits" might be over-stating it, but I did hack at the damn thing until it decided to open. The three of us dashed out of the murder-happy mansion and into the loving frost-bitten embrace of Provesh. The door that I had delicately opened led to an outdoor stone staircase. After a brisk jog up the staircase, we found ourselves on the terrace outside of the main entrance to Merchant Black's estate. My anger-induced energy ran out, and my sprinting caught up to me. I knelt over a bit and started to pant for air. "D-d-did that really just happen?!", I managed to spit out between gasps. My friend was at a loss for words. "...I don't...I don't..." Blue stuttered, then trailed off. His tan, rough, and confident face looked the same as a child who had

broken an arm for the first time face would look. I got back up on my feet, and tried to regain my focus. I spoke with a easy going confidence that I didn't have. "Gah. Let's just get the hell back home. Or to a tavern. Suns above know we need them." Or help us to forget them, I thought. "Oh, a tavern, huh?" a deep booming voiced questioned. "Well, ok, but only if the two of you are buying!" My body froze up immediately. The comment was something that Blue would say... but the voice that said it... it didn't belong to Axeman Blue Four. It was rougher, more callous. To my horror, I realized it was one of the voices I had heard when My heart pounding like a war-drum again, I reluctantly looked in the direction of the voice, knowing that I wouldn't like what I saw. In the distance, right in front of the gate that was the final barrier ta getting out of Merchant Black's Residence, were two people. One of them was a middle aged man, bulky . He was bald, but had a patchy red beard. He was covered from neck to toe in a green painted platemail suit of armor, and casually rested against his shoulder was a huge looking claymore, about as tall as he was. The sword was covered in dents and nicks, and didn't even really look all that sharp, but what it lacked in refinement it made up for in sheer intimidating size. An orange stripe was painted on his right pauldron. Next to him was a small, young looking woman, younger looking than I was, anyways. She was wearing a fur lined set of light leather armor, and had a gray metal headguard covering most of her face. Her sword was a small, one handed sort, though it looked more like a sharp piece of wire attached to a handle than a sword. In her other hand she held a small metal buckler, about the size of the chest piece I was wearing. "Red... look!" Blue quickly hissed, "Their swords!" I squinted my, uh, eyes for Both the woman's wirey sword, and the burly man's glorified slab of iron were covered with a brownish-red taint.

Immediately, me and Blue raised our axes. “Who the heck are you two?”, I asked, even though I had a pretty good idea. The man with the red beard stepped a bit closer to us. “Well, my name is Swordarm Orange Two, and this here is the lovely Swordarm Blue Eleven.” He flashed us a big toothy grin and hoisted his sword in front of his chest. “We’re here ta kill ya!” Then, smiling like a maniac, he charged at us. I immediately dashed to the left, both to evade the clearly hostile man and also ta get my confused ass in a better position. There were two small stone walls around the exit to the stairwell that me, Blue, and the servant had just come out of, so I wouldn’t have been able to swing my axe around as freely as I woulda liked if I stayed where I was. Fortunately, Blue had the good sense ta run to the right after I went to the left. Not so fortunately, the giant man with the giant sword readjusted his direction mid sprint and ran after me. “Guhhhhhhra!” he yelled, as he lifted his sword over his head and tried ta slam it down on me. I barely managed to jump back from his attack in time. I saw it coming way before he even started to swing his sword, but his speed was so that my foresight didn’t make much of a distance. What he lacked in subtlety he made up for in strength and speed. Almost immediately after his greatsword slammed on the pavement in fronta me, Swordarm Orange pivoted ta strike me again. Once more I managed to avoid his powerful slash, but only by a hair’s length. My reaction time was crap, and all I could do was back up as Orange struck at me with progressively stronger and quicker blows. Merchant Black One’s terrace was big and rectangular, so I could keep up my evasion for a time, but I knew eventually I’d end up against a wall or a corner, and shortly thereafter a bloody smear. Still, knowing something and being able ta do anything about it are two different things. Orange was just too damn fast, if I stopped to think for even a



moment I'd get my skull caved in. I knew it, and from the smug look on my opponent's face, he knew it. "EEEEERRAH!" he grunted, and swung his great sword at me once more. I leapt back to avoid his strike, but I didn't leap quick enough. The edge of his sword sliced into my left shoulder and cut a heavy gash down my forearm, reopening my old wound and then some. If I had been wearing my studded leather armor instead of just one measly breastplate, things might have been different. But I hadn't been, so I shrieked in pain as the left sleeve of the white tunic I was wearing quickly turned dark red. My opponent smirked sadistically. "C'mon lass, that was just a little nick!", he taunted. I ignored him and tried to bear the pain that stabbed into my shoulder and arm over and over again, like a hundred invisible red hot daggers. I desperately struggled to keep my axe hoisted so I could block or retaliate if need be. My strength was rapidly leaving me, dripping away like my blood. All the while, my opponent's blows got faster, stronger, and bolder, and the space I had to retreat to got shorter and shorter and shorter. Now, I'd like to tell ya that just as my back hit the stone wall that blocked in Merchant Black's Terrace I managed to beat Swordarm Orange with some sorta secret technique or that I turned the tables on him with a clever trick, but that'd be a lie. In every sense possible, Swordarm Orange outclassed me. In a sparring pit, or a formal arena, he'd mop the floor with me for sure. But the terrace my arm was dripping blood onta wasn't a sparring pit, and it sure as heck wasn't an arena. The stone pavement of the terrace was well paved, smooth, damn near uniform, but like any part of Provesh, it was haphazardly covered with snow. In a way, I guess that Swordarm Orange was a victim of his own success. His eyes were locked on me as he advanced, bloodthirsty and confident. He stared at my wounded left arm as it twitched, he had to know that I

wouldn't be able to even hold up my greataxe for much longer. But he was so focused on me as he advanced, so absorbed in reading the sluggish movements of my exhausted body, that he missed seeing the obvious: a little mound of slush half an armslength in front of my shaking right foot. Needlessly, he charged at me, readying his great sword for a final swing, an over the top maneuver that would end the conflict just as easily as a few jabs to my armpit and stomach would have. I leaned back, putting a bit more distance between my head and his greatsword, hoping that he'd miss. He did far more than just miss. His front leg slammed down on the pile of slush, and he slipped, his awkward footing and massive frame making him lose his balance, if only for a moment. A moment was all I needed. "GUAAAAAAAAAH!", I roared out, and with strength summoned from who knows where, swung my axe up at his momentarily vulnerable stomach. With a crunch, my axe bite through his metal armor and into his intestines, causing his face to twist in agony, and more importantly, forcing the man's two hands to let go of his giant sword, which smashed down clumsily on the pavement before us. I fiercely ripped my axe out of his stomach, and then slammed it back into his stomach again, and again, and again, until the last of my strength escaped from my left arm and I couldn't even move the damn thing. Swordarm Orange collapsed facefirst on the ground, his two big hands tightly pressed against his stomach, as if they could somehow stop the many deep wounds I gave him from leaking blood or oozing guts. He rolled to his side and started weeping and moaning in pain, along with making all the other sounds a soon ta be corpse makes. Lacking the strength or desire to put an end to his suffering, I stepped over his body and my way to where Blue had ran to, dragging my axe on the ground by its handle with one hand all the while. He was engaged in

combat with the other Swordarm, the small one with the shield and wirey sword. Well, to say he was engaged in “combat” would be a bit of a stretch. More accurately, Blue was wailing mercilessly on the female Swordarm, who was doing little besides desperately blocking and backing away from his attacks. Her buckler was nicked, chipped, and bent. As I limped over to assist my friend, I wasn’t at all surprised to hear the woman gasp out: “I yield! I yield!” Blue gave his opponent a goofy grin in response, though he didn’t lower his axe. “Good thinking. Be a shame if I had to stain these hands with the blood of a lady.” I strolled up behind the defeated woman, and hit her in the back of her head with my right elbow. She fell face first on the pavement. I stomped on her head with the dress shoes I was still wearing, crunching her nose hard against the stone pavement something fierce. My foot firmly pressed against the back of her head, I dispassionately addressed my buddy. “Oi, Blue, get that stuff away from her,” I said, painfully gesturing with my wounded arm to the Swordarm’s fallen buckler and sword. While he did so, I started to chat with the whimpering woman. “Sorry bout this. I know it hurts like a bitch and all. Still, your pal kinda forced our hand.” When Blue had kicked the Swordarm’s weapon and shield far enough away, I moved my leg off her. “Alright, feel free to get into a more comfortable sorta position or what have ya”, I coughed out to the weaponless woman, “but don’t do anything that’ll make me or Blue nervous.” Without saying a word, the Swordarm turned onto her rear and sat upright in the snow, and rubbed her bloody broken nose with her left arm. Her headguard had fallen into the snow, revealing her full face to me. She was actually pretty... pretty looking. I mean, sure, Swordarm Blue..something’s nose was bloody and scrunched up, probably cause of me stomping her and all, but even so, her face looked dainty and unblemished, on

the whole. Nowhere near as dainty as Sister Sabarene, but more dainty than a weapon wielding Union worker shoulda looked, even if she was a woman. I only mention it now cause I was caught a bit off-guard, is all. "I suppose this is the part where you question me, huh?" she said in a surprisingly calm voice a nervous smile. "Pretty much." I replied with a grimace, trying ta ignore the ever increasing pain of my slashed ta shit left arm. Blue didn't try quite as hard as I did. "Oi, Red, your arm!" I dismissed him with a weak wave of my left hand. "It's just a little nick." "Like hell it is!" I narrowed my eyes. "I'll take care of it later." I turned to look at the Swordarm. "Alright, so what's up? Who hired ya to attack me and Blue?" She remained silent, her bloody face hesitant. I rolled my eyes. "Come on, out with it. I really don't want ta start torturing you or whatever, but I'm short on time here." The shieldless Swordarm cleared her throat. "Well... you see..." "Yes?" I said, impatient and anxious to settle things in the terrace and get the hell back home. The Swordarms face looked at me with a straight face. "We were sent here on behalf of the Magistrate." "What?!?!" I blurted out, jaw agape. "Why?! This is a private residence, there's no way a government official would just send ya here of his own volition. Look the other way, I guess, if ya bribed him or sovmething, but not explicitly tell ya to trespass!" She looked up at me with a half smile. "You have a point, I suppose, but that's what me and my partner were told to do nonetheless. The Magistrate, he went on about some nonsense involving a series of murders here, the victims supposedly being Unassigned." I shivered at her words, and at the my sudden recollection of Bandage Face's fate. She continued, oblivious to just how on the mark the Magistrate had been. "The pay was good though, so Orange and I accepted the gig." I bit my lip. "Which was slaughtering everyone in the Merchant Black's house, I suppose?" The woman before

my feet fervently nodded her head in denial. “No, not in the slightest! We were just here to look around, investigate the rumors and what have you.” Squinting from the pain my left arm continued to hit me with, I pressed her a bit. “If that’s the case, then why did your friend go on about being here to kill me and Blue before I gutted him like a fish?” A wounded look flashed across the Swordarm’s face, and was quickly replaced by indignation and fury. “He was just responding to the treatment you brutes gave us the moment we walked in the door! Merchant Black agreed to let me and Orange look around his house four rises before, but we had barely walked inside his bloody mansion before we were set upon by a bunch of his attack dogs.” “We had to fight hard to defend ourselves,” the Swordarm spat out bitterly, “so of course Orange did what he did when he saw you two.” I slowly shook my head, remembering the four bodies lying around the marble hall. “It’s a bit too late to say it,” I said with a sigh, “but me and Blue weren’t itching for a fight. Still, your story doesn’t add up. I buy your reasons for coming here, I even buy that you were attacked in the hall. But what about the folks in the banquet?” “The folks in the what?” the woman repeated, confused. “Never mind.” I said, briskly. I had heard all I needed to hear. The Swordarm was telling the truth, least I was pretty sure she was. The four bodies in the marble hall had been mangled and stabbed and slashed, as you’d expect from a struggle, albeit a heavily one sided one. The horror show in the banquet, on the other hand, was a different story. The sheer number of people killed, along with identical wounds to the throat and untouched surroundings couldn’t have been done by two, heck, even twelve people, unless every in the room decided to stand still and let Swordarm Blue shove her wirey sword through their throats. In all honesty, I was actually starting to think that the whole conflict between me

and the Swordarms was probably one misunderstanding. Hell, Swordarm Orange and Blue might have even been good folks trying to do right by the Unassigned. If Swordarm Blue wasn't lying, then she and Orange were in the same situation that me and my friend were. So of course the temptation for me to just walk away was pretty strong, heck I was even considering giving the woman her shield and sword back. But our altercation had led to death, so the only way to resolve the affair cleanly would be through the hair of the dog that bit us. Without making a show of it, I tried lifting my greataxe with just my right hand. I wasn't even able to get it partly off the ground. Softly, I called out to Blue. "Oi, Blue." "Yeah?", he responded. "We heading out now?" "Not just yet. Do me a favor and, uh, entreat Swordarm Blue." I hesitated for a bit, then continued. "As quickly as ya can, please." Blue's surprised voice echoed back at me immediately, probably cause he knew just what the hell I meant by the word "entreat". "Wha-? No, absolutely not! There's no need for that at all, Red!" A shocked look popped on Swordarm Blue's face. "Do what to me, again?" I didn't answer her question. I didn't wanna make Blue be the one to carry out the entreatment, but I had no other choice, what with me being unable to lift my axe and all. I cleared my throat, and calmly said the words I knew Blue would listen to. "I, Axeman Red Four," I began to drone out in a dull monotone, "being of both higher skill and nobler color, hereby command you, Axeman Blue Three, to-" Blue started to plea, his deep voice cracking as he did. "Come on Red, we don't need to do thi-" I just nodded my head and continued. "entreat this woman. Right here, and right now." I swallowed a bit, and finished saying the phrase. "On the honor of your name, you **will** obey me." The crimson red haired swordarm looked up at me with panicked eyes. "Wait, what?! What does "entreat" mean?!" Unanswered, the

woman started scrambling to get back on her feet, but it was too little, too late. Quickly, and about as silently as a man wielding a giant axe could be, Blue, ax raised high in the air, ran at the Swordarm, and chopped down at her neck. She didn't suffer long, I'd imagine, cause his strike rang true, decapitating her almost instantly. She tried guarding, of course, but two small arms crossed in front of yer head ain't really gonna stop a big ass axe from doing its thing. While her headless body pulsed on the pavement, my eyes met the stone gaze of Axeman Blue Three's. He was furious at me. But that was ok. I knew he'd be furious at me. The important thing was that he and I could leave the Terrace without one Swordarm returning to report the demise of the other. The Swordarms took care of their own. If we had left the woman with the wirey sword alive, then in all probability me and Blue wouldn'ta lasted a quarter of a cycle. I knew that, and I'm sure he knew that. I cleared my throat and coughed. "Let's get a move on. Less time spent here the better." Without saying a word to me, Blue slowly walked away from the woman he had just beheaded and towards the gate. I scanned the terrace. With tons of scattered footprints on the pavement, a disemboweled man in plate, and woman with her head missing, there wasn't exactly a way to pass the whole thing off as an accident. Therefore, the best course of action would be to run like hell the moment Blue got the wooden gate open. As he fiddled with the lock or the handle or whathaveya, I realized with shock that someone had gone missing. Handmaiden Green had vanished completely. When and where, I had no idea, cause I was too busy trying not to die, but she **was** gone. Still, I wasn't that concerned. The servant had probably ran off once blood started ta spill, and if she had had the good sense to do that then she almost certainly would be fine. Even if she wouldn't be, with my left arm the way it was,

and the incriminating terrace looking the way it did, I had no desire to go and search for the servant. After a few uncomfortable moments of tinkering with the wooden gate, Blue managed to find and unlock the lock. Left arm hanging limp, I strolled over to the gate, and looked up at Blue. "So here's what we're gonna do.", I began to explain. "We're gonna open the ga-" "You mean I'm going to open the gate", Blue retorted venomously. "Whatever." I said with a pained gasp. "So yer gonna open the gate, but only as much as ya need to ta get outside. Soon as we open the gate and get out, we shut it, and then we walk away from here, slowly. Moment we get outta the trade district, that's when we start running like-" I winced as an unexpected burst of pain throbbed through my left shoulder. "like hell." The disgust in Blue's eyes vanished, replaced by concern. "Oi, oi, Red! You should do something about that arm of yours before we leav-" I nodded my head firmly. "No time. I'll take care of it later." "At least bandage it up, you idiot!" "L-later." I weakly insisted. My arm was a problem, and Blue had every right to be concerned about it, but we couldn't afford to waste any more time. "O-open the gate," I squeaked out, my vision going hazy and my legs getting wobbly. Axeman Blue shook his head quickly and started to pull the gate open. "Good..." I muttered, "now we can get..." I paused, a wave of drowsiness causing me to momentarily forget what I wanted to say, "now we can... get outta-.." My head spinning, I tried my best to stay on my feet. My best wasn't good enough. The bloodloss from my arm finally took its toll on me, I reckon. I don't know when I collapsed face first onto the snow covered terrace, but the short of it is that I did. Somehow, even though I had collapsed with my stomach on the snow, I managed to tilt my head to look up at the wooden gate, the exit, the path to survival. My vision went in and out, on and off, like the eyes of a child who



had stayed up past his resting period. I remember seeing Blue's concerned face, I think my friend yelled out to me. He ran over my side, at least I think he did, if only for awhile. After touching my neck, or something, I think he went back to opening the gate. If he did go back, he stopped once he had gotten the door a crack open. A look of shock spread on his face. I wondered at the time why he was so concerned; he had managed to open the gate and was finally going to get us all to safety, if anything he shoulda looked relieved... My eyelids shut once more. Snow crunched noisily right by my left ear, I opened my right eye to see two big black leather boots in front of my face. I weakly smiled. I was sure that Blue would be able to carry my unconscious ass out of Merchant Black's world of strangeness, even if the breast plate I was wearing made me heavier than he woulda like. With an odd sense of relief, I drifted off into unconsciousness. Had I been slightly more focused, or awake, I would have remembered that Blue had been wearing dress shoes when he stepped out of the mansion, same as I had been.

I knew something was wrong the moment I woke up in a nice warm bed. The mattress was soft and supportive, the pillows that rubbed against the points of my ears fluffy yet firm, and the blanket over my half naked body was smooth and warm. It was comfy as heck, but there was no way the bed I was lying stomach down on coulda been mine, precisely *because* it was comfy as heck. The sleep I had awoken from was the crappy sorta rest that ya get after drinking too much ale, or wine, except instead of a pounding headache I had an agonizing arm ache. Course, I was only partially awake. Sure, I was conscious, and able to piece together that I probably wasn't home or what haveya, but only conscious enough to understand my current situation, not enough to actually do

much about it. I was just too damn exhausted. In the head as much as the body, really. Being banged up in the body I could deal with, I'd been through scraps like the fight I had with Swordarm Orange before and was used to the long and painful process of recovering from an asskicking. But recovering from being banged up in the head was different. There was just so much I didn't wanna think about when I was running amuck in Merchant Black's house, like the pointless death of the Unassigned, my buddy's casual acceptance of it, Bowman Yellow's speech, and of course the banquet hall that became a slaughter house. At the time I was able to ignore it, cause I was too busy focusing on surviving and getting the heck outta there to actually think about the stuff I was troubled by too deeply, but now, exhausted and half-asleep in a bed that wasn't my own, thinking about that stuff was about all I could do. The events repeated themselves in my head over and over and over again, managing to make less sense with each iteration. Well, that ain't completely true. Some things actually managed to click the more I thought about em, like the death of the Unassigned man, and the speech Bowman Yellow made. But the scene in the Banquet Hall, all those corpses with those wounds, neatly lined up against a wall like life sized dolls, nah, I just couldn't get what the deal with that was. I had several guesses on the why, but the what and how, well, that's where the trouble lied. How could a buncha experienced warriors just be slaughtered like that? I mean, them dying, ok, that made sense, if yer only wearing a tunic and don't have access to a weapon odds are that you ain't gonna last all that long no matter who yer up against, but the complete lack of ANY signs of a struggle in the banquet hall made no sense to me in the slightest. As I was pondering on the subject, I was forced outta my half awake state by a sudden spikea pain that flushed down my left

shoulder all the way to the tips of my fingers. Jolted upright and eyes flung open, I finally got a look at the room I was in. First thing I noticed was that I definitely wasn't in my crummy apartment. The room, which was at least three times the size of the sack of crap I called home, was lined top to bottom with neatly carved blue stone, instead of the dark brown rotting wood I was accustomed to. The stone walls were decorated liberally with about fifteen lit torches, whose light almost made up for the lack of any sort of window in the room. As for furniture, there was a little desk to the left of me, carved out of stone from the looks of it, a carpet that was laid under the bed and the desk, and at the opposite side of the stone bedroom was another bed, which managed to grab my interest more than anything else. Not because the bed itself looked special or anything, it sure as heck didn't, but, much like the medium sized, tan blanket and white sheet covered bed I was lying in, the other bed was occupied. More to the point, it was occupied by Handmaiden Blue, er, 14 or whatever. Unlike me, who was tucked under the covers and lying on my back, the silent servant was sitting at the edge of the bed, kicking her feet back and forth absentmindedly. She was staring down at her feet, so I don't think she noticed me jerking up, or if she did she sure as heck didn't seem to care. She was wearing a slightly different outfit than she had on before. I mean, she was wearing a light looking robe made of thin white linen, sorta like the one she had on when I first saw her, but it had sleeves, longer leggings, and wasn't, uh, splattered with blood. I was about to call out to her, but another wave of pain twisted my head away from her and down at my left arm before I could. Kinda afraid of what I'd see, I looked at my arm for the first time since Orange had sliced into it. I winced soon as I did. Someone had been nice enough to cover up the wounds on my shoulder with some

medical linen, but my arm looked like it had seen better days. See, while I wasn't bleeding or nothing, the few bits of my left arm that weren't covered by bandages had a milky white hue to them. My skin's brown, so, uh, yeah, I was a little concerned. That concern was probably unwarranted, weird as my bandaged up arm looked. The mere fact that I could feel pain, even agonizing pain, meant that my left limb was probably fine, if a bit lacking in blood. Even so, I started ta panic. See, besides the bandages, there was something else wrapped around my arm, er, wrist. It was a small manacle, made outta runiertian, and connected ta the metal frame of the bed. Reflexively, I thrust my arm forward, extending the chain of the manacle as far as it would go. Course, once I tried extending the manacle further I was yanked back towards the bed's frame.

"Sorry hun, that's not going to work.", a sympathetic sounding voice called out. With the face of a scared rat, I jerked my face towards the direction of the cheery sounding voice.

"GAH!" I shrieked, my unease turned immediately into terror. Standing right at the edge of the bed was... the splitting image of Swordarm Blue Eleven. Well, splitting image is over-selling it. The woman in fronta me looked ALMOST exactly like Swordarm Blue Eleven last time I saw her, cept, well, her buckler wasn't dented, her sheathed wirey sword looked a good deal sharper than it was before, and more pressingly, her head was firmly attached to her neck, as if a giant axe hadn't sliced through it like butter.

"Wa..what the... wha.." I stuttered in a mix of confusion and horror. There was a red circle of what looked like blood round her neck, The red haired woman had called out to me in a sweet sounding voice, but her eyes looked cold, focused, and above all else, vengeful. "Funny thing about dying," the phantom in front of the bed whispered to me, as I repeatedly tugged at the manacle anchoring me to the bed, "it doesn't really stick."

She drew her wirey sword and pointed it at me. A gentle grin came on her face. "So don't worry, this won't hurt for long!" she yelled. As I closed my eyes and cowered in fear, the zombie thrust the sword right towards my neck.... And stabbed it into the pillow next to it. The vengeful spirit stared at me with cold stony eyes... and then started cackling not quite unlike a fat Merchant I knew, covering her mouth with her gloved hand as she did. "Gahaha! Oh wow! I actually managed to pull it off! You actually thought I was a ghost!" The "ghost" with scrunched up hair covered her stomach and continued to laugh hysterically, as I moved my head as far away from the sword near my ear as my neck would let me. "Sorry, sorry," the red haired woman said as she licked her right index finger and started rubbing her saliva on the crimson circle round her neck. "That was pretty mean of me." Scared and confused, with my head a hairslength away from a pointy blade, I wasn't exactly able to respond. "Still, you know," Swordarm Blue Eleven said casually as she wiped the red off her neck like it was vegetable sauce or something(it probably was), "I've always wanted to try doing something like that, and considering the chop job you did on my sister, I decided that I might as well go for it while I still could." "Y-your sister?" I coughed out, my voicing cracking as I did. "Yeah." The "ghost" said breezily, as she took off her blue armband and threw it to the side. "Swordarm Blue Eleven, my twin." She bit her lip and clucked her tongue. "Well, former twin, I suppose..." The woman who wasn't quite Swordarm Blue Eleven untied her hair, tossed the non-dented buckler to the side, and yanked the sword near my ear out of the pillow and strapped it back on her waist. "It's a shame though," she said, frowning slightly as she adjusted her now-loose hair into a ponytail, "Blue was never in the mood to engage in twin shenanigans, no matter how many times

I asked her to.” She tapped her ungloved hand on the frame at the edge of the bed. “Isn’t that just sad?”, the red haired woman asked me, her lips clenched in an irritated frown. “I mean, come on! The odds of being born a twin are astronomical, and to be born an identical to someone else, even more so! You’d THINK she’d totally be down for stuff like that, right?!” Swordarm Not Blue Eleven sighed and shrugged her shoulders. “Ah well, there’s not much use being all mopey about what could have been. At least I managed to spook you just now, right?” I met the woman’s inappropriately breezy attitude with the only weapon I had at my disposal; casual disinterest. “Ya sure did.”, I muttered. “Now I get why I’m chained to the bed and all, but why the heck am I naked?” The pony-tailed woman clucked her tongue. “Well, I didn’t see a need for stripping you myself, really,” the former twin said while scratching the bottom of her chin, “but the reason your chest is exposed like that is because the Medic we commissioned insisted upon taking off your shirt.” She droned on casually. “Something about how the loose fibers of that bloody tunic you had on might infect your wounds and force him to chop off your arm, or something.” I bit my lip. “Then thanks, I guess.” I opted not to ask why my slacks had also managed to disappear. “Don’t know why you’re thanking me, it was the Medic who did patch you up, and besides,” the red haired lady said, raising an eyebrow “we can’t exactly interrogate a corpse, you know.” I calmed down a bit once she said “interrogate.” See, I’m a dumbass, but I ain’t a complete dumbass. I knew there were gonna be problems the moment I woke up naked and chained to a bed. But the fact that the lady in front of me wanted to at least interrogate me before having me tortured, raped, and killed was a pleasant surprise. It meant I had wiggle room, some leverage. Not much, but some. I chose my words

carefully, cause words were all I had. “Interrogate, huh?”, I asked with put-on boredom. “Is that that thing where ya threaten me with pointy objects ta get me ta talk about stuff I’m reluctant ta talk about?” The red haired woman smiled. “Pretty much, yeah! The higher ups wanted me to find out how Orange and Blue bit the dust, so I came here to hear what the two of you had to say about the whole thing, get your perspectives and what not...” She scratched her head. “ Though I don’t really see a need for the pointy objects just yet...” I forced out a chuckle . “Neither do I, but c’mon lady, why should I tell ya anything? I mean, yer just gonna kill me no matter what happens, so why bother telling ya how yer sister died?” Ponytail bit her index finger. “You have a point...” A big grin formed on her face as her eyes light up, as if on fire. “Oh! Oh, I’ve got it! What if I promised to make your execution painless, would that help?” Heart beating a thousand times a minute, I nodded my head. “Nah, not really.”, I said as calmly as I could manage. I gambled with a bluff: “Heck, I might just make stuff up outta spite if that’s the best I can hope for.” The possibility of me lying that I brought up was itself a complete lie, of course. There ain’t really anyone out there who does all that well against torture, a shortstack like me leasta all. Cause, y’know, it’s torture. It’s sorta designed ta make ya give into it, even when you know damn well that ‘giving in’ means “checking out.” . Peel someone’s skin off with a rusty razor long enough and you can get em ta say whatever ya want them ta. I knew all about that, but I was banking on the woman in fronta me not ta, I wanted her ta think that I was somehow immune to pain and agony. Kinda a dumb strategy at first glance, I know, but I sensed a sort of naivety coming from miss Ponytail, a psychotic, dangerous naiveté but a naiveté none the less.. Maybe it was her tangent about wanting ta prank people with her (late) sister, or maybe it how she wore a glove

on her right hand but didn't wear anything on her left. Maybe it was just my blood deprived brain being retarded. Regardless, I felt that the best way to proceed would be to try and lead her to a conclusion that didn't end with my corpse being nailed to a wall. The Swordarm whose color and number I didn't know frowned. "Aw, I've sort of got my back against the wall here, then. Swordarm Black Five reaaaally wants me to find out every little detail about what happened to my sister and her superior, but at the same time, I'm obligated to balance the numbers and al-" The red haired ponytailed woman paused. She looked at me for a few moments, then to Handmaiden Blue Fourteen, then back to me. "Actually..." She started to say, with some hesitation... "I might be able to offer you something a bit more appealing than a quick death." I raised my left eyebrow in an exaggerated manner. "Oh?" I asked, doing my best to sound like I had barely heard her. "And what would that be, exactly? Cause if it's a paid burial or something forget it, I don't give a crap what happens to my body once I'm gone, feed it to the dogs for all I care." The red haired woman waved her gloved hands as if to dismiss my assertion. "No, no," she said, her pale face flushed slightly. "I might be able to pull rank and let you go, if you tell me what happened with Blue and Orange." My left index finger started to twitch involuntary as I met the Swordarm's gaze, the slight possibility of survival causing a slight crack to form in my facade of apathy. Her eyes were locked into position, not moving around or twitching. She seemed to be sincere, but then again, seeming to be something ain't the same as being something. I was more doubtful than hopeful, so I pressed Ponytail a bit. "By "let me go", do you mean that I'll be able to walk outta this fancy bedroom-" "Dungeon", Ponytail quickly corrected. "Wait, this is what y'all consider a dungeon?!" I yelped out in shock, then quickly lowered my voice and got



back on track. “Er, that is, walk outta this dungeon and go home, or by “let me go” do ya mean you’ll “let me go” straight through a fifth story window?” The red haired woman frowned. “No, I mean we’ll pardon you and let you go home.” She blinked a few times. “Though I guess you can jump out of a window afterwards.” The Swordarm frowned. “Of course, that all depends on what the two of you can tell me, I’m not promising anything.” “Two of us?” I questioned, confused. “Yeah, you and that servant girl over there.” I tilted my head in confusion for a bit, only a bit. I had forgotten that Handmaiden Blue Sixteen was in the room. She still was right behind Ponytail, still at the edge of her bed, still looking down at her feet. I wasn’t terribly concerned. It was good that the Servant was in the same room as me, she could corroborate my story, if Ponytail got suspicious of my answers. I cleared my throat and took a deep breath. “Alright, well, I guess this is about as good of a deal as I’m gonna get. Ask away, lady.” With a cheery smile that woulda been infectious had I not been chained to a bed naked in a (rather comfy) dungeon , Ponytail shook her head. “Great! Ok, this won’t take long, and so long as you tell me the truth, I promise that, at the very least, I’ll have you beheaded instead of the usual.” My curiosity got the best of me. “What’s the usual?”, I asked. The Swordarm scratched her chin with her gloved hand. “Hm... well, I think it varies depending on the prisoner’s gender and the infraction they committed, but usually it’s a combination of torture, gang-rape, castration, amputation, and death via immolation.” She paused for a second. “Not necessarily in that order, I think, but....” Feeling the stew I ate earlier start ta come back up again, I changed the subject. “Ya know what, never mind. Let’s just get on with the interrogation.” Ponytail clucked her tongue and grinned. “Sounds great to me!” She cleared her throat. “Ok, first things first. Why did you attack my sister and her

superior?" I opened my mouth to say something, but was cut off before I could. "I mean, Ponytail elaborated, "Were you paid to assassinate them? Did they catch you stealing something from that old Merchant guy? Or were they in the, hehe, wrong place at the wrong time?" I told the Swordarm the one thing I never expected to tell her; the truth. "Me and Blue, we didn't attack them. They attacked us." Ponytail scratched her chin. "Really?" she asked, doubt clearly embed in her eyes. "I mean, I know you're under pressure and want to make yourself seem as innocent as a murderer can seem, but there's no way Swordarm Orange Three or my sister would attack you." "Why do ya think that?", I asked while trying ta keep my face as emotionless as possible. Stroking her chin, this time with her ungloved hand, Ponytail elaborated. "It's pretty straightforward. The job I sent the two of them on, well, it wasn't the sort of commission that involved assaulting people." I stared blankly at her. "No, no seriously!" she insisted, "Swordarms do more than just stab people! My sister and Orange were investigating Merchant Black One's estate for the Magistrate. I gave them permission to use their weapons, but only in self defense." She put her hands on her hips and looked down at me with a smug smile. "So there's no way that they could have attacked you." I objected immediately. "But they did attack us! That fella with the big sword yelled about being here ta kill me, and-" "That's enough," Ponytail said as she rolled her eyes. "You can talk about Orange attacking you all you want, but as things stand that's just an assertion. You need to give me more than you're giving me, Axeman." I let my irritation get the besta me. "Alright, Swordarm, look. The Orange fella charged at me. He did. I don't know why, but he did. I didn't provoke him or nothing. Why would I attack him, anyways?" The swordarm shrugged her shoulders. "Metal, machismo, whim. Same

reason as anyone else would, I guess.” I bit my lip. “Ask that girl over there, she can vouch for me.” Ponytail looked at Handmaiden Blue Fifteen for a bit, and then nodded her head. “I don’t know, when I found you unconscious it was her who was busy bandaging you up. She’s not exactly an unbiased source.” My heart-rate started to beat a bit quicker, the little confidence I had started to crumble. My captor wasn’t buying what I was selling, a fact only made painfully clear by how she started to draw her sword. Ponytail smiled pleasantly. “Is that all you have to say?” I took a deep breath in, knowing that if I couldn’t convince the lady in front of me that I acted in self-defense I’d... “Tunic.”, I said. “Tunic?”, Ponytail questioned. “Yeah,” I confirmed. “Tunic.” The redhead squinted her eyes. “What about a tunic?”, she asked, thrown off by the word. I breathed in. “I was wearing one when ya found me, wasn’t I?” The Swordarm shook her head. “You were, but I don’t see how that’s relevant to..” I cut Ponytail off before she could dismiss what I said. “Nah, it’s completely relevant. I was wearing little more than a breast plate and a tunic. Don’t that strike you as odd?” She clucked her tongue. “I guess, but I don’t see how your weird taste in fashion means much of anything-“ “It does mean a whole bunch of things,” I insisted, confidence growing where there once had been doubt. I tried to not sound too excited as I began to explain what I meant. “Look, say ya want to kill someone, how would ya go about it?” Ponytail grinned mischievously. “I’d stab, slash, and skewer them until they were dead, of course.” “Fair enough,” I said, “but would ya wear armor to do it?” The Swordarm nodded her head. “Of course I would-“ “See!” I yelled out. “That’s what I’m saying! Why the heck would I attack two Swordarms in little more than my pajamas?!” “Oh, I could think of a reason for that,” Ponytail answered in a cheery tone. I wasn’t having it. “C’mon, there ain’t no way I’d

attack two armored Swordarms with little more than a breastplate on unless I had ta!", I insisted. "It'd be suicide!" Swordarm Ponytail Creepy Bitch shrugged her shoulders. "True, true, but only if you took them head on." Her friendly smile changed into a smug one as she elaborated, twisting her wirey sword back and forth in the air. "There's always the possibility that you used the good old honey trap on em." That caught me off guard. "H-honey trap?" Ponytail explained: "Yeah, the honey trap. You know, charm, feminine wiles, seduction. I heard that you used to work in a whorehous-" "As a GUARD!" I frantically insisted, as I suddenly became more conscious of my nakedness. "I worked there as a GUARD!" Flustered and cheeks turning all sorts of red, I blabbered out some more bilge. "Besides, ya can't honestly think tha-" I was cut off by a chuckle. "I was mostly kidding, naturally.", the ponytailed woman said, twisting her blade in the air. She rested her right middle finger on her lips thoughtfully. "But the tunic you were wearing makes total sense. It's entirely possible that you posed as a servant or something, and then, when Orange and Blue had their backs turned, you-" "I instantly put on a metal breastplate, pulled a greataxe outta my ass, and wacked them with it?" I finished, being sure to drip a good bit of sarcasm onto my words. "C'mon, I know yer sympathetic to yer fallen comrades and all, but do ya really think someone who carries around a gigantic axe could manage ta be all that sneaky?" Ponytail's leather padded shoulders slumped, and she began to scratch at the stone floor with the point of her sword. "W-what if you poisoned them first, and the-" I massaged my brow with my right hand, somehow feeling more embarrassed by the Swordarm's flimsy arguments than terrified at the fact that she could have me gang-raped and set on fire with the snap of a finger. "Didya find poison on me? Any disguises on my person? Some sorta sinister

insignia, or form of payment?" "No, but-" "Did ya find a knife on me? A venom covered lined short sword? Different color armbands? Scattering dust?" I didn't let up with my barrage questions, cause I knew the way I planted the seeds a doubt in my captor's mind mattered just as much as the seeds themselves. "Did Swordarm Orange have a knife wound in his back? I mean, wouldn't make much sense for an assassin to strike from the front, right?, and did-" "Enough, enough, I get your point.", Ponytail said with a sigh. The woman who had been so confident and easy going now looked a bit shaken and upset. She sheathed her sword. "Well, shoot. So much for letting you go, I suppose." "Wha?!?" I spat out in shock. She stared at me blankly. "Well, it's clear that you're not an assassin, just a . So obviously I can't let you just walk out of here." "Wait, wait, wait, you're saying that cause I AIN'T an assassin I don't get to leave?!" Ponytail blinked at me a few times. "Uh, yeah. That's what I just said, was it not?", she uttered out dully. "What sorta sense does that make?!" I shrieked out, not even caring about how hysterical I sounded.. "Self-defense ain't ok in yer book but cold blooded murder is?! What the..." I babbled, my focus and confidence shot to hell, "what?!?!" To say I was confused would be one hell of an understatement. Even so, the Swordarm seemed unaffected by my confusion, and started to talk out loud to herself. "If this woman isn't an assassin, and that old guy wasn't... then...." She tilted her head towards Handmaiden Blue Sixteen. "Hey, Fremdosian girl, are you an assassin and/or hired killer by any chance?", Ponytail inquired of the servant, like she was asking her about the weather or something. Course, the servant didn't react, she just kept swaying her shoes back and forth, the words of the Swordarm. The points of her ears didn't even twitch or nothing, she just swayed on the edge of the bed, rocking back and forth, repeating

the motions like a broken recor-, er, I mean, repeating the motions over and over again. “Hey, mopey, did you hear me?” Ponytail waved her gloved hand a few times in front of Handmaiden Blue’s face. “I was asking if you were an assassin or something. If so, then the offer I made to smiley over there still applies, I’ll let you leave here, no problem!” Not too surprisingly, the fur and leather clad woman got no response outta Handmaiden Blue Seventeen. It wasn’t like the servant was catatonic or nothing, she just wasn’t responding to anything that Ponytail did or said. As scared and confused as I was, I didn’t really see a need for Ponytail to bother the mopey girl. Calming myself the best I could, I spoke out to the Swordarm in as casual of a voice as I could. “Oi, Ponytail.” I clucked out, reclining against the wooden bedrest to give off the impression that I was comfy as opposed to shakey. “Two things.” I began to say, as the Swordarm looked towards me, mild confusion on her face. “I don’t why yer so obsessed about an assassin or what haveya, but one, that girl over there ain’t the talkative sort, and two, she’s just a servant, she ain’t some sorta criminal mastermind or what haveya.” Granted, I didn’t know for a fact that Handmaiden Green *wasn’t* a criminal mastermind, but as ridiculous as the last few rising periods had been for me, something like that seemed a bit much. More to the point, if I was gonna be beheaded for *not* being an assassin, I sure as heck didn’t want my last memory to be some crazy girl in a Ponytail badgering a mute little servant. “Ain’t the talkative sort?” Ponytail questioned, mimicking my, er, somewhat less than elegant way of talking. “Yeah.”, I explained, trying to sound as disinterested and condescending as possible. “She took a vow of silence or something, so she’s not gonna answer much of anything you say, least not verbally.” Ponytail frowned. “That could be a problem...” Firmly, but not all that roughly, the Swordarm cupped

Handmaiden Blue's chin and forced her head upwards. The servant jerked a bit, startled no doubt by the sudden contact. "What's your name?", Ponytail asked the now-shaking servant in the white gown. "Her name's Handmaiden Bl-" "I didn't ask you, Axeman.", Ponytail said coldly. "Tell me your name, Servant." The Swordarm definitely had the servant's attention now. The green haired Handmaiden's face was nervous looking, but her mouth was clenched shut, and she nodded her head over and over again. "Don't want to tell me?" the Swordarm said icily, her left hand slowly moving towards her sword. "Oi, oi!" I quickly yelled out, "There's no need for that!" The Swordarm didn't pay any attention to me. Her gloved hand grew closer and closer to the handle of her wirey sword.... And went right past it, ta join her non-gloved hand in clasping the poor servant's cheek. I don't know if I was relieved or creeped out by Ponytail's decision not ta draw her sharp and sleek blade. I mean, sure, it was great that the Swordarm wasn't gonna interrogate the servant via slicing and dicing her, but the way Ponytail was cupping the green haired girl's chin made me feel even more uncomfortable than I already was. The Swordarm pulled her nongloved hand away from the servant's chin, narrowed her eyes at the scared servant, and with blinding speed, used her open palmed hand ta.... gently poke the girl a few times on the nose. "Hey.", Ponytail said as she poked Handmaiden Blue's face. "Say something." The servant didn't say anything. "Say something!", Ponytail repeated, this time poking Handmaiden Blue's left cheek. "Ah well," my captor said with a sigh, "I didn't want to have to do this, but I have no other choice." The easy going Swordarm took in a deep breath of air. "I'll guess I have to use "that." I gulped. I had no idea what "that" was, but if she had to use "that" then whatever "that" coulda been it couldn't have been "that" good, least not for me or the servant.

Ponytail cleared her throat. "I'll give you one last chance, Handmaiden..." Ponytail paused and turned her head to me "Um, what did you say her name was again?" "Blue Seventeen." I said flatly. "Handmaiden Blue Seventeen!", Ponytail exclaimed in a grandiose manner. "This is your last chance! I care not for your supposed vows, or for past loyalties! Answer me, or face the wrath of my secret technique!" All the green haired servant could do was nod her head, over and over again, scared as all heck. "So be it," Ponytail said with a sigh. The Swordarm clenched her gloved hand in a fist. "I will show you my true power!", she exclaimed boldly, and.... started tickling Handmaiden Blue all over. "Ha!" she said with a smirk. "Feel like talking yet? My technique is unsurpassed!" The servant's lips puckered up, as if she had eaten something sour. She was clearly struggling not to laugh, I noticed as I observed the bizarre and idiotic spectacle. I woulda found the whole thing funny if the whole "impending execution" thing wasn't stuck in the front of my mind. Still, something seemed off about the whole situation. It wasn't Ponytail that confused me, a crazy person acting crazy made sense. It was the way Handmaiden was resisting the tickle treatment. Her face was scrunched up, and her body was convulsing. Heck, she was even holding her breath, causing her pristine pale face to turn purple. I mean, there was respecting a vow of silence, and then there was being ridiculous. It was just tickling, but I could see from the despair and panic in Handmaiden Blue Eighteen's eyes that the tickling was actually something akin to torture. If Ponytail noticed the discomfort that the servant started to display, she sure didn't do nothing to alleviate it. Finally, after a long while of the tickling, the servant gave in. At first it was nothing big, just an involuntary exhalation of air, caused by the Swordarm's nimble fingers. Soon after though, Handmaiden Blue started to laugh...



kinda. What the scared servant did sounded like a laugh, but it was hoarse, reluctant, short. Even for someone being tickled against their will, the laugh that was forced outta the servant was unnatural. It just didn't sound right. I think Ponytail picked up on it as soon as I did, cause after two more of the servants hoarse laughs, she stopped tickling the poor girl. The moment she did, Handmaiden Blue Fifteen clamped her mouth shut and covered it with both hands, like she was guarding a precious treasure or something. Perhaps doing so was a mistake, cause Ponytail, an intrigued expression on her face, quickly yanked the white gowned girl's hands offa her mouth and then used her gloved thumb and index finger ta force the servant's mouth open. "Oh my!", the Swordarm exclaimed, evidently taken by surprise. Admittedly more outta curiosity than concern, I squinted my two eyes ta try and see what had shocked the Swordarm. As tears began ta well up in Handmaiden Blue Seventeen's eyes, I realized that Ponytail's shock didn't come from seeing something unusual in the servant's mouth, not in the slightest. Nah, what surprised me, shocked Ponytail, and made the servant started ta weep was something that WASN'T there. Namely, a tongue. Handmaiden Blue Seventeen had no tongue, only a tiny sliver of flesh where her tongue was supposed ta be. Unbidden, Merchant Black One's words echoed in my mind. "Don't worry, I've taken great care to ensure that my servants will be seen, not heard, my dear Axeman Red Four..." While I tried not ta puke, Handmaiden Blue Seventeen, her secret exposed, started ta weep, strange sounding guttural groans coming outta her as she did. The atmosphere of the dungeon somehow managed ta become even more grim than it had already been. Even Ponytail looked somewhat disturbed by what she saw, her front two front teeth scraping up and down her bottom lip. It was one thing ta be born mute, or ta agree not

ta talk as part of a contract or something. But to have had yer tongue cut out.... Chained to a bed, and lacking the words ta reassure or comfort the servant , all I could do was listen ta the wailing sobs of the servant, her last remnant of stoicism completely destroyed, gone just like her tongue. Course, even though I didn't have any words ta say, that don't mean someone else didn't. "...Disgusting.", Ponytail muttered, in a cold sounding voice. "Absolutely disgusting.", Ponytail spat out, spitefully, her harsh words exacerbating the green haired servant girl's misery. The Swordarm pulled her hands offa the servant's chin and face. With determined eyes, the Swordarm lunged at the servant, as if ta strangle her. Like an idiot, I sprang outta the bed to prevent that from happening, I got all of half an armslength before the tug of the manacle reminded me that I wasn't gonna go nowhere. But apparently I didn't have to. To my surprise, the Swordarm, who had muttered out such harsh and disdainful sounding words, wasn't strangling the mute girl, or nothing, far from it. Nah, for the first time, I saw Ponytail display that thing that you display when ya show concern for someone else. Telegraphy, I think is the word. Ponytail's hands were wrapped around the servant, but not around her neck. She embraced the servant, gently, as friends or a family would. "Shh...", she cooed. "I wasn't calling *you* disgusting, so please, don't cry." The embrace calmed down the servant, though I reckon it was less because of Ponytail's inante empathy and more cause Handmaiden Blue Sixteen's sobbing face was smothered by a fur and leather breastpiece. Hard to cry when you can barely breath, ya know. But Ponytail certainly seemed ta think she had calmed down the servant. "Your employer... he's the one I find disgusting." She gently pushed the servant offa her chest. Handmaiden Blue sniffled a bit. "Don't worry," Ponytail said, as she affectionately patted the servant on the head

with her ungloved hand. "It's him who deserves to suffer. Not you." Ponytail paused, hesitation clear on her face. "Still... what a let-down. I was told I could keep you in my entourage, but if you can't speak, I won't be able to make much use of you..." The Swordarm massaged the temple of her forehead as she furrowed her brows, like she was trying to work out a riddle or something. "What to do...", she muttered to herself. Suddenly, her face lit up. She turned her head away from the servant, and back to me. "Hey! Axeman! I have another offer I think I'll be to present you with, want to hear it?" "Sure, sure. S'not like it can be worse than decapitation, I'd reckon." With a toothy grin, Ponytail shook her head enthusiastically. "Yes, quite right! So here's the deal: I had originally intended to take this girl in as a servant. She's around my age, and without an employer. But the whole mute thing, well, it's a bit of a deal breaker. I need someone to talk to, especially with my sister gone. So I can't really hire her at all." The Swordarm's eyes light up with a mischievous sorta glint. "But you, well, you still have your tongue, or at least you seem to. How about-" "I become your servant?" I finished for her, in an educated and hopeful sorta guess. "Sure, so long as it means I don't end up on the chopping block, or set on fire, or what haveya." I said in a casual tone, with my heart racing. My instincts had made me jump to accept the deal, the need for immediate survival outweighing all of the implications of Ponytail's offer. I didn't even bother to find out what I'd be doing as a servant, the short of it was that being a servant seemed to be one hecka better deal than getting executed. "Are you sure?" Ponytail asked me, the happiness in her voice laced with a bit of caution. "I have pretty high standards, and the work you'll be doing for me won't be the type you're trained for." "Will working for you get my arm outta this clamp?", I asked bluntly. "Well... yes, I suppose.", Ponytail

answered. "If I work for you, will I get to put some clothes on?", I asked. "Of course! I have a fantastic looking outfit picked out for you, it's black, and white, and has ribbons! And pink frills! And pink frilly ribbons!", the Swordarm said, enthusiastically. "Eh, well, close enough I guess. Yeah, I'll work for ya. Beats dying, I guess, and you ain't as weird of a person as I thought you we-" "Great!", Ponytail said, as she looked at me, smiled graciously, and, with a flourish of her ungloved hand, shoved her sword right into the chest of Handmaiden Blue Seventeen. She looked at me and smiled. "My name, by the way, is Swordarm Red Two. It's a pleasure to meet you!" The events following her introduction ain't all that fun ta remember. Swinging an axe around has its benefits. One of the biggest ones is that the folks ya end up killing don't really take all that long ta die. Ya cut off one of their limbs, ya bury yer blade inta their skull, they ain't gonna be around much longer. They'll pass out damn near instantly, and die soon after. A smashed up skull, a caved in chest, and a headless body ain't all that pretty ta look at, but least ya usually tend not ta see yer opponents struggle fer too long. But a sword like the one Ponytail had stuck inta the servant's chest, well, it was too small ta ensure a quick death. Handmaiden Blue's eyes bulged, and her hands went instantly ta the wound in chest, pressing up against it like Orange had done to the wound I gave him. Much like Orange's last efforts, the servant's actions were futile. The damage was done, the sword was stuck in her chest, the arteries severed, the lung pierced. Her white gown rapidly turned a dark red. The servant opened her mouth in agony, probably ta scream in pain. She didn't scream though, not cause she didn't have a tongue, not cause she was trying ta be silent or nothing, no. The green haired servant was *unable* ta scream, because the sword buried deep in her chest forced her ta cough, and ta gasp for breath,

and ta vomit. Spastic bursts of blood, mucus, and half digested stew gushed outta the servant's small mouth, as she toppled outta the bed and fell on her knees, her stomach churned, the thin sword still embedded in her chest. The more blood she coughed out, the slower she moved, and it wasn't long before she completely collapsed, face flat on the stone floor. Blood, from her chest and from her mouth, pooled out under her, into an oval on the stone floor. She stopped coughing, and stopped gasping, but her body twitched, and the pool of blood grew bigger. My stomach felt queasy. I covered my mouth with both my hands, but that didn't do much of anything. The contents of my stomach emptied out onto the white sheets of the bed I was in, even as I forced myself ta sit upright, and tried ta get a hold of my bodily functions. "What's wrong?", Ponytail asked me, confusion clearly planted on her face, as I tried not ta vomit anymore, as the servant continued ta gasp and cough out blood, writhing on the floor right by me. "Y-y-you just... you just..!" I shrieked out inna stutter, my heart racing as rage, sadness, and terror overwhelmed me. "I just what?", the murderer asked me, apparently not getting why I was such a nervous wreck. "You just... yer sword... that girl!", I screamed, hysterical. Getting the gist of what I was saying, Ponytail shook her head at me. "Yes, and?", Swordarm Red Two asked, apparently not seeing anything out of the ordinary about the situation. "Why?!" I shrieked. She answered with a puzzled expression. "Didn't I already say that I couldn't use her as a servant?" "Yes, but-but-but..." I paused for a bit, realizing it wasn't all that smart ta yell at someone who could kill ya in an instant, but ended up letting the words out anyways: "There was no need to kill her! Why didn't you just boot her out on the street, or something?!?" I questioned, my mind trying ta rationalize the actions of a crazy person. "Oh!", Swordarm Red said, , punching

a bare fist into a gloved palm. “That’s simple enough! I had to balance the numbers.”, she said with a courteous smile, as if her vague words cleared everything up. “Balance the numbers?!?” I shouted, incredulous. “What the heck do ya mean by “balancing the numbers!?” Irritation started ta creep on Ponytail’s face soon as she heard my question. She rolled her eyes. “It’s quite simple. Orange and Blue were killed, so I have to make up for their deaths. That mute servant makes up for Orange, and another fella will make up for Blue. Two lives for two lives. Balancing the numbers. Surely your union practices something similar?” “W-w-ell we do, but...” Red Two clucked her tongue and filled the silence as I struggled ta regain control of the conversation. “Then what’s so strang-“ I managed ta form a semi-coherent thought and leapt back into the conversation, “ But that girl had nothing ta do with the deaths of yer sister and that bald guy! I even told ya it was me who killed those two! How the heck could ya possibly think that murderin that girl ,makes up for anything?!?!” Swordarm Red smiled deviously, like a child caught cheating in a game of tag or something. “That’s one way to look at things, I suppose. I agree, if the maid didn’t kill Orange or Blue, then what I just did wouldn’t be balancing the numbers in the slightest.” She sighed and raised her hands above her head. “ But what proof do I have that the Handmaiden on the ground there *didn’t* murder my dear sister?” “I told ya that she didn’t, I told ya that I was the one ta kill the lotta them!” I practically screamed. “Yes, yes,” Red droned in a bored sounding voice, “that’s what you *said*, but what you *said* happened isn’t necessarily what actually happened. All I know for *sure* is that I found three people near the corpses of my comrades, namely, you, that bearded gentleman, and that poor mute servant making a scene on the floor. While I admit that it’s more likely that you and that older gentleman were the ones to

eliminate my fellow Swordarms, in my mind, there is still a *possibility* that the servant killed them as well.” “Thatsa load of crap!” I yelled, tears of rage damn near simmering down from my eyes. “Perhaps,” Red admitted, breezily, “but isn’t this a better outcome for both of us?” She smiled warmly. “I get to fulfill my superior’s request of balancing the numbers, and you get to live!” Swordarm Red Two eyes narrowed mischievously. “Plus, I get a servant who can speak, AND short enough to fit into the outfits I picked out!” At a loss for words, I buried my head in the palms of my hands, and... laughed. I laughed, each chuckle coming outta my mouth like puke, unwished for and unpleasant. I laughed cause it was all I could do. I laughed cause I was completely, and utterly, helpless. Red musta mistook my mini mental breakdown for amusement, cause she patted me on the head like a dog who had finally learned howta roll over. “See! I knew you’d come around!” The leather garbed woman cleared her throat loudly and stood up. “Alright, well, I have to take care of a few things, but I’ll be back soon, goodies in tow. It might take me a while to finish balancing the numbers, so hang tight for a bit, ok?” I just continued to laugh as the Swordarm left opened-and shut, the wooden door to the dungeon. My brain was a buncha mush. If I had been focused, and if I wasn’t a dumbass, I woulda done exactly what the Swordarm told me ta do; sit back and wait for her to return. If I was smart, I woulda humored her when she came back with the maid outfits, I woulda pretended like everything was fine, I woulda talked about the weather, I woulda played along. But I wasn’t focused, and I am a dumbass. My thoughts rushed to the last thing she said. “It might take me a while to **finish** balancing the numbers.” My memory was shot ta shit, but even in my mind’s messed up state I was able ta figure out what she meant by that. Balancing the numbers meant making up for the deaths of

Swordarm Orange and Blue. If she had only made up for **one** of the numbers so far, then....! I sprang up in bed, and desperately tried ta force my way outta it, I yanked on the manacle as hard as I could, not ta break the links holding me to the bed, but rather ta rip the frame off altogether. I had ta get outta bed, I had ta get ta wherever Axeman Blue was, before... I just hadta! My struggles proved fruitless. I have strength in me, more than most women, heck, more than most men, comes with swinging an axe all yer life, but my strength wasn't enough ta rip off a frame offa bed, least not that frame, least not that bed. For an instant, I wallowed in defeat, and almost accepted that I was constrained to the bed. Then, inspiration hit me. I looked over at the body of Handmaiden Blue Sixteen. She had gone rigid, her eyes were glazed over, her limbs scrunched up like a bug's. Without a doubt, she was dead, or at least I hoped so, her face frozen in agony as it was. More importantly, Red's sword was, for some reason, still impaled in her chest, and her body was right by the edgea the bed I was in. With my right arm, I reached out to the dead girl, ta pull her and the sword over ta me. I was unable ta even get my hand halfway to the topa her head. My arm extended as far as it could go, I took a different approach. I lied flat on my back, the backa my head on the pillow, and kicked my legs as far out as I could, and stretched the chain of the manacle as far as I could stretch it. This waya doing things proved ta be a bit more successful. The toes of my right feet managed ta touch the cold and sticky stone floor by the edge of the bed. My head facing the ceiling of the room, I thrashed my feet about wildly, trying ta find something ta grip on. It took me awhile, but eventually the big toe of my right foot brushed against the deceased Handmaiden's hair. With the little flexibility my bruised and battered body had, I wrapped my toes in the green hair of the servant, and tried ta



pull her body closer to me. It took me about three attempts, but somehow I found the strength ta do it, ta drag Handmaiden Blue Eighteen closer ta me using by her hair using the toes of my right foot. With a good deal of effort, I managed ta drag her body to the point where my left and right arm could reach her, and more importantly, the sword stuck in her chest. With a rough yank, I pulled the blade outta her chest. Lukewarm blood gushed outta her chest cavity and all over my right arm as I did so, but I couldn't afford ta be squeamish, time was too short for that. Clumsily, I hacked and hacked and hacked at the chains of the manacle with the blood drenched sword, using unfocused but heavy blows ta get the strap offa me. But no matter where I struck or how much force I used, the chains and manacle would not break, bend, or come loose. The most I managed ta do was cause a bit of a scratch ta form on the smaller chains.

“GAHHHHH!”, I screamed in frustration, dropping the sword that was as useless as I was. I started ta sob like a child, snot pouring outta my nose and everything. I more or less gave up at that point, knowing that if Blue wasn't dead yet, he soon would be, cause there was just no way I was getting outta that bed. I lied back down on my back, ta go ta sleep and forget about things for a bit. But as I was turning around ta bury my head in the sheets and the pillows, an idea popped into my head. The bloody sword I had tried ta free myself with couldn't cut through the manacle, sure, but from the gaping hole in Handmaiden Blue's chest, it clearly could cut through... I dismissed the thought as soon as it came ta mind. Even if I did *that*, chances are I wouldnta been able ta.... I paused, conflicted. What I had in mind was dumb at best and downright suicidal at worst. But unless there was a skeleton key shoved up my ass that I had forgot about, it was the only way I would even have a shot at reaching Blue in time, before Ponytail-. I

didn't have that much time ta think about it. My right arm shook as it picked up the bloody blade I had discarded. Reluctantly, I opened up my left hand, and stuck my thumb out as much as I could. I raised Red's wirey sword, and took a few deep breaths. Then, firmly, forcefully, I slammed the sword into my left hand, right at the basea my thumb. My strike rang true, and the blade cut through the skin, flesh, and bone of my thumb quickly, severing it from my hand inna instant. "ACK!" I screamed out at the pain. It was the worst I had ever felt in my life, hotter than any heat I had felt before, a stinging sort of pain that drowned out halfa my thoughts and forced my remaining fingers ta scurry and thrash about, like the legs of a crushed spider. Still, I had done what I had set out to do, with my thumb off, I would be able ta slip my arm outta the manacle.... least so I had thought. I twisted around my hand, and yanked my arm away from the cuffs keeping me chained to the bed. Nothing happened. No matter how tightly I pressed my four fingers together, my hand was still too wide ta slip through the manacle holding me in place. I thrashed about in the bed, bleeding profusely from my left hand yet still stuck ta one spot, I pulled back and back, as hard as I could, but I couldn't slip outta the chains, even as the blood from my severed thumb poured out into the bed. I started ta panic, partially outta the pain, and partially cause as bad as missing a thumb was on its own merits, things would be even worse the moment the crazy girl came back and saw my botched escape attempt. Then I remembered what I had seen when I woke up. The torches. The torches on the dungeon's wall. The *lit* torches on the wall. The fire, see, I could use the fire. With the fire, I could get my arm outta the manacle, well, mosta my arm outta it. Ta be more exact, with the fire I could get outta the manacle and **live**, probably. As alert as I could be, due to my

the pulses of pain surging repeatably through my hand, I raised the blade again... and struck down, below the manacle, into the flesh of my wrist, but not fully, the blade stopping halfway in. "Gah....uh....uh...Argh!..", I violently coughed out, but kept slicing into my wrist, back and forth, like a saw, each movement bringing more burning agony than the last , but I couldn't stop there, wouldn't stop there. The sawing movements proving ineffective, I raised the sword and struck down at my wrist again, this time cutting two thirds the way through the sinew and bone which had proven ta be far more resilient than I'da hoped. All feeling from my left hand vanished, my fingers which had been scurrying about wildly fell limp. Tears pouring outta my eyes, stomach convulsing, I summoned the strength and struck down at my wrist a third and final time, this time separating it, and the manacle holding me to the bed, from my arm entirely. My body a sweaty and bloody mess, I sprang outta the bed, nearly tripping over myself as I sprinted over to the torch, ineffectively covering the jagged, bleeding meat at the end of my left arm with the palm of my right (well, ok, only) hand. Gritting my teeth and trying not ta pass out from the pain, I thrust the blood oozing wound at the enda my left arm into the fire of the torch. Somehow, I guess it musta been the rasha the moment or the loss of blood messing with my sensea pain, I managed to endure the fire as it licked and incinerated the wound, causing the blood pouring outta my arm ta harden into a charred, thin scab, turning my left arm into a grotesque looking stump, . I looked away from my left arm, daring not ta see what had become of it, knowing that I had ta keep moving, knowing that if I stopped I would pass out, handless, naked, useless. As the smell of what was not quite cooked pork filled my nostrils, I ran, rather, I stumbled, back over to the bed that I had been confined ta, and picked up the small, bloody blade lying

on top of the considerably more red sheets. My vision throbbing in and out, my left arm screaming for relief, I nevertheless gave the small little thing a few practice swings. Even though I was by and large running on instinct at that point, I knew almost at once that Swordarm Red Two's weapon would prove insufficient. I could swing the wirey sword back and forth with a good deal of force, but I couldn't maneuver it for crap, my wrists, er, wrist lacking the skill and dexterity to angle the thing. Essentially, I was treating the one handed stabbing weapon as a two handed crushing weapon, and considering that I was one handed, well, it wouldn't have played out well. One forceful swing would be all I had against an opponent, and that was only if I managed to sneak up on them. My right arm shaking, I raised the sword to my mouth, and bit down on the flat of the blade with my teeth, holding it in my mouth. Then, I went right back up to the torch, and with a few panicked pulls, dislodged it from the wall, wielding it in my hand. The torch was hard, sturdy, more or less a big plank of wood that just so happened to be on fire. Briefly, I considered throwing a sheet over my exposed body before charging out of the room, but only briefly. There was no point in doing so, the thin layer of fabric wouldn't offer me any protection whatsoever, and the comforting warmth might have made me pass out or lose what little focus I had. With the tips of my otherwise occupied fingers, I slowly creaked the wooden door of the dungeon open, and crept out the room. Heart pounding, arm throbbing, vision blurring, I found myself at the end of a small stone hallway. A chill blew across my skin, and a biting cold briefly replaced the throbbing pain in the stump of my left arm. Curious in spite of everything, I looked over to my right to see where the chill had come from. Unsurprisingly, the source of the chill was a half open window, that looked out at the sea. I had to be somewhere by the docks,

then, there was no way I was in the trade district if I could see the sea. The window was tall enough and wide enough for me to climb outta if I wanted ta, but even the quick glimpse I got of it told me that I was far too high up to jump outta it and expect ta live. There was also a seta staircase right by the window, but they only led up, so they were useless. The right side of the dark and narrow stone hall more or lessa dead end, I looked over to the left. At the end of the left sidea the cramped hallway were a seta spiral staircases going down, and right across the hall from me was a rough looking wooden door with a crude metal handle, identical in size and appearance to the one I had stumbled outta. Unfocused, cold, and in severe pain, I rushed ta open the door, my hand reaching ta yank the damn thing open. The tipsa my fingers closed around the rough, jagged metal of the handle, and I prepared to pull the door open. Just as I was about ta, a chill blew across my exposed body. I became a bit more self conscious, a bit more alert. I stopped myself from opening the door, and considered the situation for a spell. Naked, and severely wounded, I was already at a big enough disadvantage. The way I was about ta pull the door woulda given me even worse odds. As I saw it at the time, I had two weapons, the torch in my right hand, and the sword in my mouth. By using the tips of my hand ta open the door, I woulda rendered the torch useless, at least for a bit. No, as disoriented as I was, I knew I hadta try a different approach, lest I make things even worse for myself. I swallowed some spittle, and took a few clumsy steps away from the door. Ideally, I woulda used a breaching maneuver, opening the door with one hand while also readying my weapon to wack anyone on the other sidea with the other. Cept there was no "the other", not any more, cause I had messily chopped it off moments earlier. The stinging scabby scorched stump I did have was too clunky ta fit

in the small space between the handle and the door. If it didn't hurt my throat to talk I woulda cursed out loud, there just was no way I coulda opened the door and not sacrifice the usea the torch I was carrying around. But then... then a thought came ta me. Why should I be the one ta open the door? I waddled back over ta the door, and used my left elbow ta quickly knock on it three times. An effeminate, yet definitely male voice rang out in response: "Oh! Just a minute Red, I'll be right there!" I gasped a bit at the mention of my color, but after realizing he was probably talking about a Swordarm, I took inna deep breath and pressed myself against the wall to the lefta the door. I heard footsteps grow louder and louder, the presence behind the door coming closer and closer... then suddenly, the footsteps stopped. "Yeah, sorry Red," the voice behind the door said casually, "I know you want to keep things moving," the wooden door creaked open a bit, I raised the torch up in the air "-but I haven't had too much success waking this gentleman up, it's been a bit of a-", the door was pushed open halfway, giving me a look at the person behind it. In my brief momenta hesitation, I saw that the voice behind the door belonged to a young man, one with short white hair, a gentle face, and more importantly, one who was wearing the same leather and fur armor as my captor had. He was more or less unarmed, there was a small sword strapped to his waist, but both of his white gloved hands were occupied with pushing open the door, and his face was pointed down as he talked ta someone who wasn't there. "...pain, looking after him and al-." His breezy conversation stopped the moment he lifted up his head and saw me, naked, covered in blood, sword in my mouth, and with a disgusting looking stump where a hand should been. "What the?...Who are...What?!", the young man stuttered, utterly confused at what he saw. I didn't do much ta ease his confusion. He was unarmed, he

was confused, he was vulnerable, and he was almost certainly in the way of me getting ta Blue. With all the strength I had, I struck down at his exposed head with the torch in my sweaty hand. I felt the sturdy wood crack a bit as it made contact with the top of the Swordarm's skull, the blow rougher and more on point than I coulda wished it ta be. The impact by itself made the guy collapse on the floor , and maybe the whole thing woulda ended there, with him unconscious or disabled from the blunt force of my strike, but unfortunately, the fire at the enda the torch caught on ta a bit of the fur lining by the neck of his leather breastpiece, and quickly spread all over the resta the interior of the Swordarm's brown leather armor. Naturally, he began ta scream, and frantically tried ta pat the fire out with clumsy, rapid blows, his gloved hands hitting his leather armor like they were beating a war-drum. It was of little use, of course, he was cooking from the inside out, so the firing kept burning in spitea his panicked pats, the light leather armor proving itself ta be a death-trap. "Ahhh... AHHH!" The white haired swordarm screams became louder and more frequent, perhaps because he realized the hopelessness of the situation, or perhaps because being incinerated alive really fucking hurt. Either way, the noise he was making became too loud for me ta ignore, so I threw the rest of the torch on the stone floor, yanked the sword outta my mouth, and with the elegance and grace offa half-retarded drunk, pierced through his skull with the wirey blade. That shut him up well enough, the white haired man collapsed completely on the cold stone floor, his body remaining still even as the fire continued ta lick and burn his body, the flames crackling softly, almost innocently. I didn't have the strength or the time ta hide the man's corpse, so I just left his body there, smack dab in the middle of the hall, sword through his skull and all. Weaponless, clothless, and clueless, I limped over the white

haired man's body and into the room he had come outta. The moment I stepped through the entryway, I saw my friend. Like me, he was strapped to a bed opposite the door, and like me, his left arm was bound to a stone wall via a manacle. Unlike me, the husky old man was fully clothed, lacking the armor he had been wearing but garbed in the formal attire he had on during the banquet. From the looksa it, he was unwounded, and in spitea the manacle strapped tightly ta his arm my friend seemed ta be sleeping like a baby, carefree snores causing the hairs of his blue beard ta be sucked in and pushed out in a rhythm. I slowly made my way over ta him, trying ta block out the pain, and force my way through the drowsiness. My vision starting ta blur, I ended up stubbing my toe on a small wooden table that I hadn't been able ta notice. As I winced at the unexpected stimulus, I noticed that there was a large metal key on topa the rough wooden table. I picked it up reflexively, before realizing that it was big enough ta fit in the locka the manacle. Perhaps emboldened by the fact that I wouldn't haveta cut off my friend's hand, I rushed over to him, and with a bursta focus, rammed the key into the lock of the metal binding, and turned it to the left. With a click, the manacle opened in two directions, and fell offa Blue's hairy wrist. My friend snored through all of this, so I roughly elbowed him in the stomach. "Gaugh!" he yelped, sitting up in the bed. "Get up, ya dolt.", I managed ta croak out. "Red? Is that yo-", my buddy began ta say in response. His eyes half open, Blue stopped talking. He looked up at me, then at my chest, then at my charred stump, then at my chest again, and groaned. "Oh Suns above...", he muttered, " not this dream again..." Woozy as hell, and strength leaving me fast, I didn't have the time or desire ta berate the old man for being weird. "Ya ain't dreaming. Get yer ass outta bed, and... get the hell outta here." Blue's eyes opened



wide. "What?!?", he yelled, the drowsiness of his voice gone in an instant, replaced .

"What the hell did they do to ya?!" "N-nothing", I mumbled, weakly, but truthfully. "Like hell! Your arm!" I nodded my head. "I know. Pretty messed up. But that don't matter. They're gonna kill us. You gotta get the hell outta here." Blue leapt, no really, he actually leapt outta bed, and started ta rip the sheets offa the bed he had been snoozing in.

"What the heck are ya doing?" I asked him, perplexed, watching as he randomly tore the sheets inta strips, some small, some large. "I'm serious, those folks are gonna murder ya unless you get the hell outta-" Without saying a word, Blue yanked me by my pigtail, and shoved me on the bed. "Don't care.", he barked, as he wrapped a buncha sheets around my chest, tying them together near my back. "You're gonna die if you leave that wound on your arm untreated, and running around outside naked'll kill you just as quick. " "B-but.." I insisted, helpless, motionless as Blue pushed me on my back and tied some straps around my chest, and thigh, and arse. He kept wrapping sheets around me until I looked like a burn victim, there was hardly a parta me that wasn't covered with lika bajillion layers of fabric. "Stick out your arm," he said, or ordered ta me. Half-awake, I stuck out my right arm. "No, the other one." I extended the stump of my left arm. "Those bastards", Blue said, an icy rage lurking beneath his calm words. "This is gonna hurt like hell," he gruffly warned me, "but it needs to be done." My friend took two small linen strips, and swiftly, roughly, efficiently, he wrapped them around my left elbow, tying them together tightly. It did hurt like hell, but gradually, I felt the pain disappear, as the circulation of blood stopped flowing to my charred stump almost entirely. After wrapping a few more sheets around my body, Blue roughly pulled me to my feet. "Alright," he said, examining me from head to toe, " now we leave." Dazed from

the experience, I nevertheless managed to regain a bit of focus. "Damn straight," I said, strength returning to me. "follow me, I think I know the way outt-" "Nope." Blue said, bluntly. "I'm not going to let you walk in that condition, idiot." I nodded my head slowly. With the pain gone, I felt more surea myself. "J-just trust me, willya? I know I look all sorts a messed up, but I ain't dead yet. Follow me and stay close, alright?" I decided not ta waste anymore time, and quickly limped outta the room, before Blue could protest otherwise. We hadta escape more than anything, I made the decision ta put my personal wellbeing behind the moment I decided ta slice off my left hand, I definitely wasn't gonna stop moving just cause Blue wanted me ta. I stumbled out back into the small stone hallway, and once again had the privilege of smelling not-quite-burnt-pork. Right outsida Blue's room was the charred corpse of the white haired Swordarm with the pretty face, though what little hair there was left on his skull was black now, on accounta the soot, and his face, the few bits and pieces of it that hadn't been completely incinerated anyways, wasn't much ta talk about either. I pressed my foot against the dead man's ash covered breastplate, and yanked the wirey sword from outta his skull. I turned around ta face Blue, and without saying a word, tossed him the sword. Blue, being the big burly oak offa man that he was, could do much more with a weapon than I could, least in terms a brute force. I hustled towards the stone stairs that led down, with Blue following closely behind. Perhaps it was because the pain in my stump was mostly gone, but I actually was able ta run at a decent pace, my bare feet scraping against the stone floor in a steady rhythm as I dashed ta the stairs, the chill offa the frozen sea pushing me forward. I had barely managed ta place two of my lil' brown toes on the second step when a soft voice called out ta me from behind. "Um, I don't mean to be a

killjoy or anything,” the familiarly efféminé voice said, “but to get out of here you two’ll need to go up, not down.” I quickly jerked around. Unsurprisingly, the person who had called out to me and Blue was Swordarm Red One. She was standing at the other end of the hall, right in front of the window I had thought about leaping out of earlier. By and large she looked the same as the last time I saw her, except she had strapped to her waist another wirey sword, one a bit longer, sharper, and shinier than the tiny blade that Blue was grasping in his big hand. The red haired lady with the ponytail looked at the body of the fella I killed and clucked her tongue. “Sheesh,” she said with a sigh, “I always thought that Green was a little ...” she rubbed the back of her head sheepishly with her gloved hand... “er, green, but this is ridiculous. I was only upstairs for a bit, and yet somehow you managed to burn him up like firewood!” Swordarm Red One seemed to be more fascinated by the charred corpse in the hall than agitated, almost regarding the death of her comrade as little more than a passing curiosity. I did nothing besides glare at the talkative girl, as Blue stepped in front of me, blade pointed towards the Swordarm. “Yeah, well, we’re a resourceful bunch, us Axemen.” Blue muttered with a cold confidence. “Perhaps it might be best for you to walk out of here and leave us be, lass. There’s been too much blood shed today, we spill anymore and some bard might end up writing an awful song about it.” The Swordarm chuckled at my friend’s jest, and extended both of her palms in a shrugging gesture. “Fair point sir, fair point, but Green’s demise makes things a bit dicey.” She drew her sword with her ungloved hand, and stepped into a fighting stance, extending her left leg in front of her waist and turning her right foot sideways, her sword tilted diagonally, as if to parry or block. “See, as incompetent and clumsy as that pile of cinder on the ground over there was, and as

much as he probably deserved every bit of what he got, he was still a Swordarm. So unfortunately,” the girl with the Ponytail said with far too much boredom, “I’m afraid I’m going to have to eliminate both of you, avenge my fallen comrade, carry out justice, show you the might of my Union, so on, and so forth.” Swordarm Red sounded breezy and nonchalant, but there was a clear firmness to her words. From that and the steel focus I saw in her eyes, I could tell that Blue, as charming as he was, wouldn’t be able to sweet talk her into letting us leave. The hall was cramped and small. Without all that much room to maneuver around, it looked like me and Blue had the advantage, at least so long as we were only dealing with Swordarm Red One. After all, my friend was big and burly, and Swordarm Red One was small and skinny, flexible, definitely, but not much of a powerhouse. Questions of armor and weapon proficiency didn’t really matter, all Blue would have to do would be to charge her and the matter would be settled more quickly than most of the encounters at Madame Runierita’s. Blue looked at me with a wry smile, his bearded face tilted slightly, begging me for approval. I smirked back at him, and quickly shook my head. Without anything more than that, Blue charged at Swordarm Red like a mutt going after a raw steak. I just stayed behind and watched, dressed as I was, and in the condition I was in, there was no way I could do anything to help. Instead, I stared at Swordarm Red One, watching her as intensely as I could, my eyes glued to her leg muscles to try and figure out what she’d do. My biggest fear was that she’d run back up the stairs, get some of her buddies, and then slice me and Blue to bits. Blue was strong, but he sure as heck wasn’t fast, if Red had the sense to book it my friend probably wouldn’t have been able to catch up with her, even knowing his life was on the line. From her stance, and the way her calf muscles were tightened, the

chances of her just fleeing seemed unlikely. For some reason, the woman in the evidently quite flammable leather armor was determined to hold her ground. As Blue lumbered down the hallway, his charge building momentum like a tumbling boulder, Swordarm Red One stood still, sword tilted diagonally, a confident smirk on her face. The hallway being small and Axeman Blue Four being big, well, it didn't take all that long for him to reach Swordarm Red. "eeeeeeRRAUGH!", my friend yelled, as he slammed down the teeny sword onto his target, like he was trying to smash a rock with a hammer or something. As the blade descended, I squinted my eyes, waiting for Red to make the inevitable parry attempt, or sidestep, or perform an evasive maneuver of some kind. I remembered how incredibly skilled Swordarm Orange had been, and if Swordarm Red's color was indeed Red, then she had to have some sorta trick up her sleeve...

Or, er, not, cause Blue's blade sliced into the top of her head without meeting any resistance, physical or otherwise, and with a dull thud and a soft squishing noise, split open her skull like a melon. I gotta say, I was taken aback. Not by how Red's brains were leaking out on the floor or nothing, but by how simple and quick the whole affair was. There was not really any fanfare or what have ya, my friend just chopped into the Swordarm's head like a cook chopping vegetables or something, and the blade buried into her brains with a modest sounding clunk. The sharp chunk of metal embedded in her skull like it was, Red One collapsed onto the floor, without screaming, or gasping, or gurgling, or doing much of anything, really, just shut down like an unplugged computer, I mean, she just fell down without making a sound or nothing. The "fight" ended there, with the Swordarm's skull crushed and my buddy only a bit outta breath. That little

matter taken care of, I jogged(well, limped) over to the end of the hall, right where Blue was standing over Swordarm Red's corpse, dumbfounded. "Huh. Well, good job, I guess," I muttered, carefully stepping over the body of the unexpectedly unskilled woman, trying to avoid getting any blood on the buncha white sheets I was wearing. Blue rubbed the back of his head, looked down at Swordarm Red's collapsed corpse while nodding his head, then shrugged his shoulders, looked at me and grinned sheepishly. "So, uh, do ya think we should go up, or down?" I opened and closed my right hand, almost as if to make sure I still had it. "I dunno.", I mumbled. "...Miss Red over there said we had to-" "Wait, wait, her color's a Red?", Blue asked in disbelief, his normally gruff and manly voice sounding high pitched and boyish. "Yeah, apparently. Least so she told me." I paused, trying to think of why she had been such a pushover. "I dunno, maybe she slept her way into it or something. S'not like it matters now, of course!" I trailed off suddenly, gacking a bit as an unexpected burst pain vibrated from my arm wound through the wholea my body. . My legs started to wobble, and I faceplanted right onto the cold stone floor. Least, I woulda, had Blue not rushed over to catch me. "Dan- dang it," I gasped out, the weakness returning to my body. "Up it is, then." Blue muttered, and swiftly slung me over his shoulder like a sacka potatoes. I was in no state to protest, so I just hung limply as Blue started to make his way over to the staircases which led up, and, if the Swordarm had been telling the truth, out to freedom. I felt like passing out. My eyes started to close..., the drowsiness winning out against a tired mind and body. My thoughts and focus became all sorts a muddled; nonsensical and such. The way I was slung over Blue's shoulders had me facing back towards the hall, so with little else to do I just gazed down the hall. My attention, at first, wasn't really

driven ta the corpsesa Swordarm Red One or nothing. Nah, somehow, in that weird, tired, and helpless state I was in, for no particular reason, my eyes found themselves drawn to the torches lining the walls. I don't havea clue why, but I was transfixed by the flickering flames, even as my body rocked up and down, up and down, affected by the movements of Blue's shoulder as he lumbered over ta the stairs. If I had actually been paying attention, then maybe what happened coulda been prevented. I didn't notice it as quickly as I shoulda, because my priorities were all aschewed, but something changed in the cold windy hall, right as Blue and me were about ta leave it. Cause I was mesmerized by the flames likea retard, the first thing I noticed was a big shadow appear on the wall suddenly, a shadow that hadn't been there before. Shadows don't just appear unbidden, of course, and if I had even the slightest bita perception I woulda immediately have seen what caused it. Instead, like a dumb mutt wondering where his bone went to, I searched around the hall, my eyes darting this way and that. Nothing seemed off, least not ta me. The hall looked the same as it ever was, cramped, lined with a couple of torches, and unoccupied, cept for me, Blue, and the two dead folk, of course. There was one thing that stuck out, but I only say that in retrospect, my oblivious ass sure as heck didn't pay much attention to it at the time. See, the corpse of Swordarm Red One, well, it hadn't moved or nothing, but there was something a bit odd. Ta be blunt about it; there wasn't enough blood leaking outta her head. I'd expect not ta see much blood if Blue had stabbed the lightly armored Swordarm through the chest or something, cause then the blade and leather woulda plugged the wound some, but like any Axeman worth his salt, Blue had opted ta shatter and crush instead a stab and slice. The sizea the wound he had left in her skulls was far too big ta not having

blood pouring outta it, yet the amounta maroon red liquid leaking out was no more than a spit of saliva. Not that my passing observation set off any warning bells at the time. Swordarm Red was motionless, her smashed up brains were exposed ta the same chill my arm was, that was enough for me to accept that she was dead. The conspicuous absence of blood didn't mean mucha anything ta me, least not initially. But then, as Blue was carrying me outta that dark chilly hallway above the frozen sea, something... off happened. Really off. My vision was going up and down, in rhythm with the movements of my friend's shoulders. At first, I saw nothing weird, no more shadows, no more biological implausibility, felt nothing I wasn't already feeling. But... well.... it started normally enough. The bit of blood trickling from Swordarm skull stopped, I noticed, in between contemplating the shadows on the wall. That wasn't too shocking, sometimes even the most grievous sorta wound will clot quickly, and what seems ta be a paper cut might drain ya completely if yer not careful. But, see, Swordarm Red One was bleeding in a way that thirty some odd cycles of living had taught me was impossible. See, she was bleeding.... In reverse. No. Really. At first I thought that the blood was leaking through the cracks of the stone floor or something, but no, like a line of ants crawling up a wall, the little blood that had spilled outta the Swordarm's skull slowly slithered back inta her battered head. Needless ta say, that was probably when I shoulda started screaming out in panic. That's what most folks woulda done, I reckon. There's no excuse for it, but I was sorta frozen. Not in fear, like when I stumbled across the butchered banquet, no, what caused me ta just stare down at the corpsea the Swordarm was something akin ta morbid fascination. What I was seeing was just so odd, so unreal that I momentarily forgot my surroundings and circumstances, heck, I



forgot I was being carried, even. I watched, inna trance, as the last of the blood crawled back into the red haired girl's skull. It wasn't until her brains started ta reassemble themselves that the full implications of what I was seeing hit me. "Blue!", I choked out, loud as I could. "Behind you!" Wildly, my friend jerked his big shoulders and turned around, meaning that instead a looking down at a self repairing corpse I was looking down outta a far too high up window, the breeze the sea blowing in my freaked out face. Naturally, I couldn't see what was going on, but I heard a loud, sick squelching sound, the type ya hear when you shuffle around the spittle in yer mouth a bit. "Wha-?" Blue said, excited by my sudden outburst but confused, probably cause he didn't see anyone threatening behind him. I reckon that he caught onta what, or who, was making the squelching sound, cause he looked down in the direction of Swordarm Red One. "Suns above..." Blue muttered, horrified, then quickly slung me offa his shoulders(though he had the courtesy ta lean me against a wall instead a just tossing my crippled ass onta the floor), picked up the Swordarms discarded sword, and, swiftly swung down at the not-quite-dead swordarm. My body could barely move, on accounta the bloodloss from hacking my hand off and all, so all I could do was watch as Blue did what any sane person woulda done when presented with a body that bled in reverse. Namely, hack it ta bits. Well, he also stomped on the corpse's skull once or twice, or twenty times. My big bearded friend's behavior would have looked disturbing, if ya saw him doing what he did without knowing why. "URAH!" he roared, a certain squeakiness in his deep voice betraying the slightest hinta fear, and kept slicing, and smashing, and stomping the Ponytail girl's body until she looked more like a leather breast plate submerged in a pile of pig intestines then she did a human being. "Ah...ah...ah..." he

gaped, as he slammed the sword into the remains of Swordarm Red One a final time, then leaned against the wall opposite from me, and tried to catch his breath. Me and Blue didn't talk for a while, instead, we both stared at the remains of the Swordarm, bracing ourselves for a giant tentacle to sprout from it or some shit. Well, that didn't happen, of course, so I asked the only question I could. "Did that .really just happen?" Blue just looked down at the floor without saying a word, his sweaty face exhausted and confused. I wobbled onto my feet, and cleared my throat. "Ya know what, I don't even care. Let's just g..er.. Gac-!", I sputtered out, another sudden pain in my right shoulder catching me off guard. My mind reeled, I thought I had managed to weather my wounds well enough, but the sudden ache I was feeling hurt almost as much as my arm did after I cut myself outta the manacle. Instinctively, I looked down at my sheet covered shoulder, right at the source of the hot burning pain. Soon as I did, my eyes found that something sharp, metal, and pointy had pierced through the white sheet on my shoulder, and, from the fierce white hot stabbing pain I felt, me.. My stomach started to churn, a feeling of dread spread through my body, as the sheets started to turn pink, then red, then maroon. "Ar-are ya fricking kidding me?", I wheezed, then violently collapsed on the ground, face first. My nose made a sick crunching sound soon as I slammed onto the cold floor, but the pain I felt from that was trivial compared to the pain that came from having a goddamn sword in my shoulder. "You know, I'm impressed," a sickeningly familiar girly voice commented. "Usually when I perform that recovery stunt people just stand around in fear, mutter prayers to their impotent gods, vomit, cry, you know, that sort of thing." As I struggled to push my face off the floor, the voice I couldn't actually be hearing elaborated: "Green almost lost his lunch when I showed the trick to

him. But not you, Sir, nope! You didn't even let me get the top of my skull back before going all berserker on me! Remarkable focus, I must say..," She stroked the bottom of her chin and gazed upwards. "I suppose even the most irrelevant Unions have some worthwhile folk lying around." Lifting myself on my knees with a one handed pushup, I somehow managed ta turn my head around just enough ta who was talking. Course, it was Swordarm Red One, alive and well, her red hair neatly tied inna ponytail, the hole smashed in her skull completely gone without a trace. I couldn't believe what I was seeing. Though my disbelief wasn't cause the Swordarm had come back ta life, making a cruel mockery of nature in the process, ok, well, it was partly that, but what disturbed me more than her not dying after having her skull caved in was that she had done so inna way that didn't make add up with what I'd seen. A regenerating corpse, as ridiculous as it sounds and insane as it was ta see, at least was understandable, inna warped, Fremdosian wine fueled way. But see, here's the thing. Her body was still right fricking there, less than an arms length in fronta me, just as battered and broken as it was when Blue smashed it ta bits. Yet, at the same time, even though her body hadn't moved, was far too smashed up and paste like ta move, she was also standing in the middlea the hall, a smirk on her completely unblemished face. For a moment, I thought I was suffering from one of those fever dreams or something, cause my eyes were seeing double, a corpse on the ground, yet the woman who was that corpse standing right by, with a body that was healthy as could be. And that's when I noticed it. I noticed that Swordarm Red One looked different, just a little bit. Not her hair, or her eyes, or her body, no, her clothing, that was what looked off. Worse than looking off, her clothing looked... burnt. Freshly burnt. Like someone had set her on fire not so long ago. "S-step

away from Red right now, abomination.” Blue stepped inbetween me and the Swordarm, his bravado gone, his body shaking nervously. “Oh, no need to worry about her,” Red said cheerfully, waving her left hand back and forth like she had picked up the tabbata bar or something. “I definitely hit her vitals just now, she won’t be around much longer.” She didn’t actually hit my vitals at all, though it hurt like hell, a blade through the shoulder was more likely to kill me through infection than it was through blood-loss, even taking into account my looped off hand. But the reality of the situation didn’t matter. Blue’s fear disappeared in an instant, replaced with a burning sorta anger, hatred and disgust manifested onto his face, as distinct as his big blue bushy beard. Before I could reassure him that I was (well, relatively) fine, he ripped the sword outta the corpse that belonged to, or had belonged to the smug Swordarm, and charged at her, opting to strike her down in the same way he had before. With an almost bored looking expression and a flourish of her wrist, Swordarm Red One sent Blue’s borrowed blade flying. Not that that stopped him of course, he attempted to smash down onto her with his massive frame. Inna flash, the resurrected woman dodged his strike, and poked him in the arm several times, with a series of quick strikes. Blue grimaced in pain, gasping as he jerked his wounded arm back. To my disbelief, the left sleeve of his white tunic became bloodied almost instantly. She smiled and clucked her tongue, opting to keep her distance instead taking advantagea Blue’s vulnerability. “That won’t get you very far, I’m afraid...”, the red haired woman gently chided, that carefree smile on her face like it always was. She raised her wirey sword up in the air, in the same sorta diagonal pose she had done before, though I knew that if Blue bumrushed her things would turn out much different than they did before. Her eyes shined with a childish

excitement, like a mutt about to chow down on a cutta raw steak. Her undivided focus being on Blue was altogether terrifying, but it gave me a chance. Slowly, and as nonchalantly as I could manage, I crawled towards the Swordarm's extended leg. I knew one thing above all else; Blue would not survive a fight with the Swordarm if he tried to beat her in a conventional fight. He was a giant of a man, he was definitely stronger than her, and if he had an axe I'd say he woulda been more skilled than her, but strength and experience didn't mean squat in the face of someone who could shrug off death like a light headache. He musta known that just as well as I did, and I suppose that's why he kept his distance, why he stared back at her, his eyes twitching. Somehow I managed to ignore the wound in my shoulder and inch my way over to the woman's left leg. I took in a deep breath, and, quickly, roughly, yanked at the Swordarm's leg, causing her to topple over, face first into the pavement. Pain exploded through my arm, but it didn't matter, the battle rush was upon me. I raised my arm up to pommel the abomination of a Swordarm, but before I could land a blow on her face she kicked me in the stomach, damn near toppling me off of her. Frantically, I reached for something to maintain my balance, my hand managed to grasp a buncha red hair,, so I jerked back on that, pushing me and the Swordarm away from Blue and towards the window. My hand still firmly grasping my enemy's Ponytail, I tried to throw her over my shoulder, both to give me more leverage and hopefully to disarm her. It didn't work. My right arm didn't have nearly enough strength to even lift the woman up partway. The Swordarm kicked me in the stomach again, this time successfully managing to knock me off of her. I maintained my balance though, and was able to stand up, right in front of the Red haired girl, who took a defensive position right in front of the window. Time seemed to

stop. Technically, I had her backed up against a wall, er, window. With Blue behind me, and no space for the Swordarm to maneuver, the fight seemed like it was guaranteed to be our win, so long as no reinforcements came or nothing. But of course that assessment wasn't true in the slightest. I was unarmed in every sense of the word, and Blue wasn't doing much better, judging by how I heard him gasping for air behind me. Our opponent may have been backed into a corner, but that didn't mean much of anything. If I charged at her, it'd be a repeat of Blue's earlier attempt, the Swordarm would pick up on my bumrush and cut me into cheese before I could even get a crappy one armed punch in. Assuming I did somehow strike her face unimpeded, she'd be able to retaliate with a couple stabs that would easily pierce through the very thin linen sheets haphazardly draped around me. And if I still somehow managed to kill her without getting a dozen holes punched in me, well, she would probably just come back to life anyways. I knew all that, I was having trouble accepting it, but I still knew it. The Swordarm knew she had the advantage too, even though she was against a wall and a bit disoriented from our tussle, her sword was raised and her face was plastered with a big ass grin. "If only you could see yourself right now...." Swordarm Red One said to me, her smile wide as I've ever seen it, the Swordarm's eyes open fully, gazing at me, without blinking, like a lion staring at its prey. "You're bleeding out from your shoulder... your hair is a dirty mess.... Your battered face is contorted in agony..., and those pants of yours....so undignified...like a dog...like a bitch put to the lash.... Hah... Hah.... Hah...", she muttered, still smiling, breathing loudly from her mouth, before continuing: "So brutish....primal.....raw...." Then, and I ain't making this crap up, the red haired woman with the ponytail started to drool. "Oh yes....", she gasped, a strand of saliva

spilling outta her mouth.. “This is for the best...I knew there was something I liked about you” .Her smile became even wider, and she started ta take a few steps towards me. “Come, RAs creepy as the Swordarm’s behavior was, I’d be lying ta ya if I said I was letting any of her words register with me. No, I was too hellbent on figuring out how ta demolish her, ta tear her apart at the seams, ta crush her, ta really let any words, insults, or twisted compliments interrupt my thought process. Like I said earlier, I knew that charging at her would be a surefire way ta get myself killed, a reckless action that would likely result in my throat getting slit, my lung getting pierced, or perhaps even my brains getting smashed. Outta all the dumb things ta do, charging the freak would be the dumbest, even for a dumb dumbass like me. So I charged at her. The way I saw it at the time, wasn’t like I had much ta lose. Sure, me bleeding out and missing an extremity had a bit ta do with it, but there was a whole buncha stuff motivating me at the time. In that cramped hall, high above the semi-frozen sea, I came to a realization, an epiphany of sorts: I was a complete and utter imbecile. My whole life had been a series of bumbling failures, not causea bad luck, but cause I had less perception than a deaf, dumb, and blind fella. There was so much happening around me that I was unable ta see or comprehend. Folks like Swordarm Red, Merchant Black One, they knew stuff I didn’t, understood the world inna way I couldn’t. I would never match them, not in a million cycles. I wasn’t like that General fella Merchant Black had ranted about, and I sure as heck wasn’t the assassin Swordarm Red had thought me ta be. Compared ta folks like them, I was just a rabid dog, a mangy animal that was, at the very most, a nuisance. But even a bitch can bite. “Guyaaaaaaaaaah!”, I shrieked, for once not giving a damn how high or how low pitched my voice was. With that crappy excuse fora yell, I

charged at the red haired woman in the charred leather armor, my bare feet loudly slapping against the stone floor, I charged right at her, and her raised sword, knowing I'd be stabbed, knowing, but not caring, in fact, getting stabbed was what I was counting on. The only way I could possibly win against my better equipped, better trained, and better off opponent would be to take a blow from the get-go, and use the weight of my body on her blade to force an opening. So instead of recoiling away in pain when I felt the point of Red's blade begin to cut into the tip of my eye, I pushed forward. I pushed forward because I didn't really care about living in a world where some poor smuck with a lance could get his throat slit for no reason. I pushed forward to give the one bloke I cared about a chance to return to his collaborator and kid. And I pushed forward, because frankly, I really wanted to knock the smug ass zombie whore in front of me out of a thirteenth story window. Then the blade of the Swordarm pierced through my right eye, just as I got within grappling range of my opponent. With a piece of metal embedded in my face, and with a swiftness granted through unparalleled fear and panic, my right hand snatched up at the blade, and yanked it out of the jelly that was my now useless left eye just quick enough to stop the blade from stabbing me deeper. I felt the sharp small sword cut deeply into my palm as I forced it away from my face, while Ponytail tried, but failed, to push the weapon back into my eye. With the last remnants of my strength, I ripped the sword out of my opponent's hand, tossed it blindly behind me, and whaled on her, wildly, savagely, letting instinct take over. I felt what had to have been the Swordarm's knee hit me in the gut, hard, but absorbed the pain, knowing that if I knelt over that the fight would BE over. I couldn't see crap, the vision in my right eye obscured by a thick red mist, so I just kept blindly punching and shoving and pushing



the person in front of me, knowing that I couldn't let up, knowing that I had to finish her off and chuck her out of the window before the last of my strength disappeared.

The haze in my half open right eye cleared, just a bit, just enough for me to make out the situation in front of me. I found that my right arm was pressing against the throat of the red haired woman, forcing down on her while she tried, and failed, to breathe. Try as hard as I could, though, I was unable to force her out of the window, unable to finish things with the sword arm once and for all. I was choking her to death just fine, given the way she frantically gasped and sputtered for air, but her dying wasn't good enough, not even in the slightest. I needed her gone, out of the window, far away from... wherever me and Blue were in. So I let go of her neck for a moment, stumbled away from the window sill, crouched down and bent my legs a little, and, before the woman in the charred leather armor could recover from the strangulation or get her bearings, dived at her with a running tackle, hoping that momentum and the weight of my body would provide the strength my weak arm couldn't. Well, my maneuver worked, the lady with the ponytail was still in a daze when I wrapped my arm and my stump around her back. Course, it worked a bit too well. Sure, sure, I hit her out of the thirteenth story like I had planned, but I did so by doing a diving tackle, meaning, of course, that when Red plummeted down to her brutal demise in the sea below, I was right there with her. Now, I suppose I could say that I nobly sacrificed myself to do Blue a solid and what have ya, but that really ain't it. My goal was simply to force an unholy abomination who was set on killing me out of a huge tower, and the tackle I performed was all in part seeing that modest goal come to fruition, but I was so darn focused on making sure that there would be no more nature defying bullshittery from the woman with two bodies that I

forgot the entire point a killing Red was to ensure that I would live. So, due to my potent idiocy, we both fell, down outta a tall ass building, all cause I wanted to make damn sure that the murdering zombie bitch who had cost me an eye and a hand wouldn't be able to bullshit her way back to life, least not inna way where she could hurt no one. My face was buried in the burnt chestpiece Swordarm Red had on when we crossed over the ledge, so I didn't see much a anything. But I remember the chill, and how the wind that rush past as we descended felt sharp and damn near cut my skin like a knife. I remember screaming non stop, crying and blubbering in fear like a infant, I remember how the points a my ears twitched rapidly, how my screams were muffled by the loud roar of the wind, and how my stomach lurched as I spiraled down, down, down towards the ice covered water below.

But I don't remember ever actually hitting the ground.

"ake.", "Ar- uo, ake." "Are.... Ake?" That's the first thing I remember after taking the dive with Red, a gentle, girlish voice muttering a bunch a nonsensical gibberish. I didn't respond to it, figuring I was dreaming, or dying, to the extent that I could "figure" much a anything out. My senses were about as sharp as a wooden mallet, my thoughts and focus straight as rainbows, I wasn't tired so much as I was aching in the body, and bewildered in the mind. When ya pass out, you usually wake up with a sorta inate knowledge of how long you were out for. But for me, well, I lost all graspa time and space "Are you awake?'," asked the almost angelic sounding voice, its query clear to me as a cool crisp morning. Course, even though I could make out the question, my

exhausted body was in no rush to respond. After few moments of silence, I felt a soft hand brush my cheek, and gently rub my forehead. The touch was unexpected, but not exactly unwelcome, heck, it even made me feel a bit relaxed, for the first time in a long time. But there was something off about the hand, not uncomfortable mind ya, off. The skin of the hand felt weird, it didn't really feel like skin at all, more like leather, or silk, the kind ya'd find on a glove. "Gah!" I yelled, forcing myself up and awake at the sudden realization of just who it was stroking my face. I quickly sprang outta the pilea straw I had apparently been lying on, and swung my right, (and, er, only) fist wildly at the black hooded figure less than a nose length in front of me. My fist connected with the face of the figure, the impact of flesh upon flesh making a satisfying smacking sound. That one sloppy and panicked punch of mine was all it took to knock the hooded figure flat on its back. Or her back, really, cause just as I was about to start strangling the white glove wearing fella to death, I gotta look at the its face. Thankfully, it wasn't Swordarm Red back from the dead for a second time like my instinct had suggested, no, from the snow white hair and polished face I knew almost at once that the figure was actually... Sister Sabarene, dressed exactly the same as she had been when I met her, her thin frame covered by a simple black robe, and sandals on her bare feet. Not so thankfully, my punch had kinda... sorta... Knocked one of her teeth out. I was still confused as all hell, but quickly moved to cradle the Sister who didn't have a color or a number in my arm anyways. "Aw crap," I muttered, "Are ya alright, Sister? I'm sorry about that, ya caught me by surprise, and-" I trailed off, as I saw exactly where I was. It sorta looked like my apartment, what with the rotting wood walls, dirt covered floors, and, er, "cozy" living space, but had even less amenities than the crapshack I called home. See, there wasn't

a bed in the room I found myself in, the pilea straw I was lying in seemed to be the works in terms a place to snooze in. There were no candles, no braziers, just a very small fire place, with a flame so pathetic and so ineffective at producing heat it was practically begging to be extinguished by the strong chill which blew through the poorly constructed walls every now and then. That was about it, the room didn't exactly have a lot of stuff in it, heck, there wasn't even a window. As I looked around to gather my bearings, the poor woman I had socked in the face sat up with a dazed expression and... apologized. "Soweh... soweh..." Sister Sabarene mumbled as she stumbled onto her knees, nursing her jaw with a small dainty hand. She took out a napkin and dabbed at the inside of her mouth, digging out the tooth I had separated from her gums in about the most dignified way someone who had just got clocked in the face could. "I just needed you awake so I could change your bandages and, also, um..., ampu.... Er.."

Sabarene gulped nervously and waved her hands back and forth. "I-I didn't mean to shock you, Sir." Sabarene's face flushed a little, and her eyes went from looking into mine to gazing at my chest. "Or should I say... miss, ?", she said with a blush. I scratched the top of my head. "Just Axeman Red Four is good-" I paused, and my face as red as an apple, looked down where Sabarene's eyes had wandered. Thankfully, my chest was covered with what looked to be yellow medical wrappings of some kind, which meant that the damn near overwhelming embarrassment I felt was unwarranted. But my relief at managing to scrape onto some form of modesty was almost immediately eclipsed by shock when I looked at the rest of my body. My right shoulder was heavily bandaged, especially the section where I had been stabbed. The wounds that Orange had inflicted on my right arm seemed to have been rubbed down with a medical

ointment of some kind, cause instead aching like they had when I was in the Swordarm's dungeon complex, they just stung mildly, and felt more like a freshly scrapped knee than they did a series of deep cuts. The stump of my left arm was wrapped in bandages, looking and smelling like a few cycles old sausages. It hurt like hell, but that wasn't necessarily a bad thing. Being able to feel anything, even pain, in a limb is good, compared to feeling nothing. I rubbed my face some. My broken nose was swollen up pretty bad, and seemed to have a bandage or something similar over it. Most of my face had apparently been smeared with a sticky sorta ointment, but besides that, seemed to be more or less fine, with one notable exception, a section of my face that I had deliberately been avoiding. I took a deep breath. Shaking, my hand moved over where my right eye was. The tips of my fingers made contact with... what felt like leather. And what seemed to be connected to my face by a string strapped around the back of my head. My throat suddenly felt very sensitive. Clumsily, with twitching fingers, I pushed the round piece of leather off my eye, the small piece of fabric feeling heavier than it had any right to. "Wait, don't do that!", a lispy voice cried out, "you might hurt it!" I ignored the woman with the speech impediment, and poked the surface of my eye with my index finger. Or rather, I woulda, had there actually been an eye present to poke. My finger felt nothing but empty space as it went wiggled between my eyelids. "Ah. So... it's, uh... gone." I gritted my teeth and looked up at Sister Sabarene. The silver haired lady in black looked at me with pity, as if she was the one who had just punched me. "I'm sorry.", she said, wiping some blood from the corner of her mouth off with a handkerchief. "Your right eye was heavily damaged and covered in pus, so I had to, um.... scoop it out." I just bit my bottom lip, hard. I sorta knew all along that my

right eye was a goner, I think I knew it soon as Red's sword went into it, and the fact that I couldn't see anything outta it when I woke up was pretty much a dead giveaway. I gritted my teeth and smiled. "Don't worry about it. S'just an eye, ain't like... ain't like it matters or n-n-nothing..." I swallowed a bit, smiled some more and....burst into tears. "Guah! Guaaaaaah!" "Uuuuuuuuuuuughhhhhhhh!" I buried my busted up face in the palm of my cut up hand and just wept, bawwing as if I was a baby. The dainty woman in black awkwardly patted me on the back, then, hugged me, tightly, but having some weird girl I barely knew comfort me was hardly a comfort at all. Sabarene musta knew that, cause she backed off and coughed. "Um... Perhaps I should just let you rest...I can change your bandages later...although..." "Awuh... duaaaaaah!" I kept on sobbing, like a spoiled child, upset about my own, more or less, self inflicted wounds, like I hadn't been the one to cause em or somethin. "Hauh... guh...", I hiccupped. I probably woulda kept on bawwing, but then I remembered: I was alive. I shouldn'ta been, not in the slightest, and yet, I was. Not that I was glad to be alive in the state I was, but being alive meant I sorta had to stop crying and start getting back on my feet, least if I cared about Blue in the slightest. I choked back my tears, and cleared my throat, or tried to.

"Actually, Sister Sanguine-" "Sabawene," the white haired lady corrected, still rubbing her somewhat bruised, but non fractured jaw, "Sabarene, I do have one question." "Oh really? And what would that be?" I rubbed the back of my head. "How the heck did I get here?" The woman dressed in black blinked a few times. "Oh! That's simple enough. Your friend brought you over here, said you hurt yourself by falling down a flight of stairs, and that you were in dire need of medical care." "And ya actually bought that?" "Of course no-, ahem, I mean, of course not.", Sabarene said, clearing her throat and

rolling her eyes. "Do I look mentally ill to you? But Fiat calls upon us to help those in need, and, well, you were nice to me a few risings ago, so changing your clothes, tending to your many, many," she paused, and took a deep breath, "MANY wounds, making sure you didn't freeze to death, and amputating your left forearm was the least I could do." I shook my head in acceptance, and swallowed a bit of spittle. "Oh, well thanks, I gue- Amputating my what now?" I flatly asked. "Your forearm," Sister Sabarene answered, bluntly. "I need to cut it off, um, like, now. It's burnt pretty badly, and liable to get infected." I started to sweat profusely. "Er, could ya... could ya not? See, weird as it may sound, I, uh, I sorta just woke up, had a bit of a mental breakdown, and, I don't know if I'm ready for any more-" Sabarene nodded her head apologetically. "Sorry, Miss Axeman Red, this isn't negotiable", she said, politely, but firmly. "The ruffian who cut off your hand didn't really care to do so in a hygienic manner, I'm afraid. I've wrapped the area in surgical cloth, so you won't be able to see for yourself, but already the signs of infection are starting to show." "Bu-" "If I don't separate your forearm from your elbow now, you WILL die, slowly, painfully. The infection will make your skin turn pale, then green. You'll lose all feeling and movement in your left arm." "But I-" Sabarene continued on as she sat, crossed legged, at the edge of the straw pile. "Pus will seep out of the infected area, light and night you'll be plagued with fever dreams and fatigue, to the point where you'll begin to hallucinate, and then, assuming of course your necrotic limbs haven't fallen off from mere exertion, you'll-" "Alright alright, ya made yer point!" I gritted my teeth. "Just... get it over with, yeah?" The last thing I wanted was to lose even more of my left arm, but if Sabarene was remotely close to telling the truth, I didn't really have much a choice in the matter. There was so much

more I wanted ta ask Sabarene about, like where Blue, who had apparently saved my dumb ass, had gone, or even where the heck I was, but that knowledge could wait, had ta wait. Knowing the full details of my current situation wouldn'ta made a lick of difference if the wounds I had somehow survived ended up killing me from infection, or lack of proper treatment, or me being a wuss. "As you wish.", the Sister said. She dug into her black robes, and produced a small glass bottle, filled with transparent liquid. "What's that for?", I asked, confused. "It's a pain dis-, um, reliever.", Sabarene explained. "Cutting off your forearm won't take too much time, I've taken measures to ensure that it'll be as quick and as hygienic as current circumstances can allow, but if you don't drink this then the procedure will hurt." She blinked. "A lot." I clutched and released a buncha straw with my hand, then gulped. "Well, hand it over, then. The sooner ya do this the better." With two small fingers, Sabarene picked up the bottle by its neck and handed it over ta me. I uncorked the small glass bottle, raised it ta my lips, and.... stopped. "Wait a tick," I said, "This ain't Fremdosian wine, is it?" "Of course not!", Sabarene insisted, a hard sort of irritation present on her usually soft face. "Not only is that stuff contraband, it has no proven medical applications... despite what some of my more lax Siblings may say...." I shrugged my shoulders and unceremoniously chugged down the contents of the small bottle. I figured that if I could trust Sabarene enough ta let her slice off a chunka my arm, I could trust her enough ta drink a bitta liquid. I closed my eye and chugged the contents of the glass bottle. The clear liquid tasted... well, bad, but bad inna "warm ale" sorta way, not bad in a "rotten, cycle old" meat sorta way. I swallowed alla it, and waited for the numbing effects ta hit me. They didn't. Instead of feeling sleepy, like most pain killers or ointments tend ta make ya, the drug I drank



made me... focused. Really focused. At the same time, I also felt a wave of calmness wash over me. I was at once really aware, and yet almost completely relaxed. The sensation was bizarre to say in the least. "Hey, Sister Sabarene," I commented, in a reserved sounding voice I never had spoken in before. "How is this concoction supposed to help with the amputation? By all accounts, it seems to be a mental stimulant of some form, rather than a pain killer." Sister Sabarene didn't answer me, instead she strolled over to a corner of the rustic room, and started to remove various instruments from a beaten wooden chest, a slightly dull, but thankfully serrated, bonesaw most notably. "Hm," I said, my thoughts becoming clearer and clearer by the moment. "Once again, Miss Sister Sabarene, I must insist that you inform me of the purpose behind the drug I just consumed. I feel that, if left unenlightened, I very well may begin a physical altercation with you out of fear or frustration, which probably would be to our mutual detriment." That got a reaction outta the black robed woman. Sabarene nibbled on her left pinky, then answered. "Well, um, Miss Axeman Red Four, I um, well... lied. I didn't give you a pain killer." Sabarene swallowed nervously. "I gave you a pain distractor.", she clarified, rubbing the back of her hood in a fidgety sorta motion. "Is that so?", I asked, apathetic, my voice utterly devoid of all emotion. "But don't worry!" she said, with a smile that coulda seemed genuine, had I been born retarded. "The end result will be the same, I assure you, you won't feel any pain at all, kind of! Sabarene just held my stump down, and started to cut through my wrapped limb, along the red line. "Interesting," I observed, as if I was a Houndsman watching two mongrel pups play from afar. "I quite clearly see that you are in the process of sawing the remains of my forearm off, yet what should be agonizing pain is manifesting itself as little more than a

slight vibration. Likewise, instead of screaming out in agony, or pummeling you repeatedly in the face as a means to cope with the visually and sensorally traumatic effects of the procedure, I seem to be content with simply vocalizing my thoughts. Is that what you meant by pain distractor? Is the trick behind your drug that it causes pain to manifest as another, entirely different sensation?" The petite girl just bite her lower lip and continued to saw through my stump. "Ah." I muttered. "Yes, sorry, my mistake. I shouldn't be trying to converse with you, especially when you're attempting a surgery. Yet, I feel some strange compulsion to talk to you anyways. In all probability, an effect of the drug you had me consume, one might suppose. Oh, interesting. It seems like you've begun to cut into my forearm with that saw of yours. I appear not to be bleeding too much, that's odd, the pain I felt in my forearm earlier means that some should have been flowing to it. Then again, I suppose you slowed down the circulation of blood to my arm before I woke up. Oh, wait, wait, I think I had a tourniquet on, that probably explains the trickle of blood. Hm. Perhaps I-" I babbled on and on as Sabarene went through the motions of cutting off a pounda flesh from me, the saw easily cutting the wrappings ta threads, slicing through my bone and sinew like it was butter. I really don't wanna talk too much about how I acted under the influence of that pain distractor. Not cause it was embarrassing, or cause I did anything dumb, nah, that ain't it. See, the drug really messed with me. On one hand, yeah, it distracted me from pain, I didn't feel nothing as Sabarene sawed through my arm, only a slight vibration, maybe a little pinch. But I sorta lost myself, if only for awhile. The concoction not only made me talk like I was somebody else, it made me feel like I was someone else too. Like I wasn't Axeman Red Four no more, like I was someone who just happened ta look like her. I couldn't feel

any pain, but I also couldn't feel much anything, is the thing. No fear, no anger, no irritation, nothing. All I was was my thoughts. The drug was good for that. I could think just fine, more clear than I believe I ever could or ever have, but that was about it. I fortunately passed out, probably from before the stuff really started ta mess with my head.

I woke up not much later, least I think so, cause when I did it seemed like Sabarene was just putting the finishing touches wrapping up my now even shorter left arm. To be honest, with the exception of not feeling much pain, my arm didn't feel too different from when I had first made the brilliant decision to slice my hand off. "Oh, you're up! How are you feeling, sir-, uh, I mean, miss?" Sabarene's light hearted voice and smiling face made her seem cheery enough, but her twitchy eyes hinted at a bit of anxiety, then again, tending ta a blood, pus, and sweat covered body probably wasn't all too therapeutic an activity. "Fine, sorta, all things considered.", I mumbled. "Is it a bad thing if I still can't feel nothing?" "No, no, not at all.", the small woman assured me. "Some residual effects of pain distractor I gave you will last for a good while longer, I imagine, I gave you the military strength variant, after all." Drowsy as I was, Sabarene's statement took me by surprise. I raised an eyebrow.

"Military strength, ya say?" Sabarene bit her lip. "Yes. I had a milder mix on me, but to be frank, your condition is worse than most any soldier I've ever had to treat." With a grunt, I sat up in the straw. "Hm. Well, that drink ya gave me was pretty weird, but I guess it does seems like the perfect thing fora platoona troops ta take. No wonder y'all managed ta take over Fremdos so quickly, if yer soldiers were hyped up on that stuff." I

gazed at my left arm in disbelief. The white haired woman took off one of her gloves and placed her hand lightly on my forehead. "You don't seem to have a fever, that's a good sign. And we did manage to capture Fremdos in a swift manner, true, but that medicine I had you drink had very little to do with it." I probably shoulda just shut my eye and rested, but Sabarene's denial of my little theory confused me. "Ya sure? I mean, perhaps I just have a weak stomach or something, but that stuff really did the trick. An army that feels no pain would be pretty..." "Useless.", Sabarene stated nonchalantly. She turned away from me, and strolled over to the pathetically tiny fireplace, put her glove back on, and tried to warm her hands. I bit my lip, confused. "Huh?" The twiggy woman in the little black robes threw a bit of powder onto the small fire. "An army that can't feel pain is useless. Feelings like anxiety, restlessness, hunger, agony they're nuisances, and of course we mustn't let them affect us too much, but all the same, we experience those sensations for a reason." Sabarene poked at the fire some with a metal rod. "Pain, emotional and physical, should be accepted, perhaps even embraced. Pain is what delivers us from damnation, it turns us away from the abyss before it is too late." Sabarene chewed on her index finger, her eyes focused as I've ever seen em. "The successful resolution of a conflict, military-related or otherwise, is almost entirely dependent upon one's ability to assess, recognize, and manage threats." Sabarene paused for a bit, her mouth still open. It seemed to me like she was debating on whether or not to continue with her spiel. I guess she felt comfortable enough around me, cause after a moment or two of silence, she started talkin again. "Pain is simply an instinctual recognition of threat, truth in its most primal form. A soldier who is not adverse to the idea of charging into a barrage of arrows, a formation of lances, or a

storm of swords may be a fearless soldier, the type that are talked about in poems and songs, but will also be a dead soldier, given time.” I sat up best I could, tired as I was, wounded as I was, Sabarene’s explanation didn’t ring completely true ta me. “I suppose so, but don’t ya need a bit of that “I don’t mind being skewered by tonsa pointy things” mentality ta win? I mean, it’s war, people are gonna die, better that they accept it than be afraid it, right?.” Sabarene rolled her eyes. “It’s a matter of degrees. There’s a thing line between bravery and foolishness. And, to put it in a way you might be able to understand, the goal of fighting is not to die for your country, it’s to make your enemy die for his.” Sister Sabarene exhaled, and her soft face drooped a bit, like she was tired or something. The twiggy woman clasped her hands together. “Still, every soldier should always be *prepared* to die, to sacrifice his or her life if the need arises, I’m not so naive as to reject that notion, but the use of pain distractors means that they might die needlessly, give up their lives pointlessly.” She tightened her hood around her some, in another attempt ta get warm. “When I was first...”, she started ta say, “...conscripted by the Supreme Sibling, nearly a third of my brothers and sisters in arms were hooked on the potion you imbibed, because, like you said, they believed it would give them an edge in battle.” “Huh, a third? Pretty large amount, that.” Sabarene licked her lips nervously. “Well, it might have been closer to two fifths than a third...” She nodded her head some. “Anyways, the pain distractors were known as “Focus”, back then, because, well, you know, that’s what the front liners thought it gave them; focus, an ability to concentrate, to think critically, to shrug off “distractions” like pain. Initially, the upper brass of the military was fine with letting them use it, seeing the stuff as no more dangerous than going to battle . “Initially, ya say?” Sabarene shook her head. “Yes.

Obviously, there ended up being issues with it, at least when used as combat “enhancer” rather than a surgical aid. The troops who drank focus before rushing into battle had the largest mortality rate in our military by far, and took more casualties than they gave, without capturing anything of significance in return. The problem was so bad that our General had to halt combat preparations to fix it.” “Yer General, huh? Ain’t the first time I’ve heard that name. What’s his deal?” Sister Sabarene blinked a few times before answering, in a brisk, callous tone. “Well, Miss Axeman Red, all you need to know is that the General is both the cause and a symptom of all the Holy Collective’s problems.” I swallowed some saliva, sensing that perhaps Sabarene wasn’t the gentleman’s biggest fan. “Huh. Take my words with a grain of salt here, but I heard that yer General is pretty, uh good, as far as military leaders go, least if the word of a morbidly obese Merchant is ta be believed. Why is he a problem?” Sabarene sighed, like a parent who had discovered that her son was born without any legs or arms. “The General is competent, sure, but.....” Sabarene trailed off, and that weary sorta look came across her face again. I scratched my head. “But what?” Sabarene bit her lip, looked at me, then down at her lap, then back at me again, . “You’re still quite badly wounded, you know. I managed to change your bandages while you were out, but by my estimates it’ll be quite awhile before you manage to- “But what, Sister?”, I repeated, ignoring her attempt to change the subject. Sabarene said nothing for awhile, and twiddled her fingers nervously, like she was waiting onna bench for a courier ta deliver a package or something. Just as I was about ta shut my eyes and rest for a spell, she spoke up, inna subdued, soft sounding voice, soft and quiet even fer her. “You know, Miss Axeman Red, when I was first conscripted into the military, I was terrified.” “Don’t

imagine most folks would be happy bout being force ta fight, Sabashee— “Sabarene.” “Sabarene.” Sister Sabarene played abit with some straw, before continuing. “I-I always knew that my time to serve would come, same as anyone else in the Holy Collective, but it wasn’t until I arrived at our forward camp, only a few measures away from Trunchet, that the reality of the situation hit me... that instead of spending my time calculating marks I would be spending my time training to help my siblings hurt, maim, and kill others in battle.” “Wait, wait,” I interrupted, “What do ya mean yer time to serve would come, same as anyone else?” Sabarene rubbed the topa her hood bashfully. “Oh, forgive me, I got, um, ahead of myself. See, we’re all equal in the Holy Collective, Brothers, Sisters, and Lay-folk alike, but-” “Lay folk? Brothers?”, I questioned, the words unfamiliar ta me. “Brothers, um, Brothers are just what we call male Sisters, though it feels odd to describe them like that. Lay-folk are those who choose not to worship Fiat.” She swallowed and got back on track. “Privileges and responsibilities are shared alike in the Holy Collective. If there’s a military campaign going on, which for the past fifty cycles there has been, all citizens are required to pitch in, for at least two cycles, perhaps more if the Supreme Sibling desires it.” She smiled nervously. “I-I had been hoping that my way of pitching in would be to coordinate supply chains to Trunchet, but the Surpreme Sibling saw it appropriate to send me to the front lines, something I had not expected nor hoped for.” Sabarene waved both of her hands in the air, and nodded her head. ““D-don’t get me wrong, I’m no pacifist, but the transition was just really jarring. I, um, I had a rough time, in those early rising periods.” Sabarene swallowed nervously. “I couldn’t get much sleep, I had difficulty eating, and felt like I was always on the verge of throwing up. The daily routines of army life left me exhausted, in body, and in spirit.”

Sabarene looked down at the floor like a mutt caught in the act of eating all the meat from the larder. “I-I was weak, back then. So weak that, one evening, I packed up my belongings when everyone else was asleep, and tried to desert, to leave my responsibilities and siblings behind.” She twiddled her fingers some, and a slight smile spread across her face. “B-but that’s when I met Brother Brounde.” “Handsome fella, I take it?” “N-n-no, well, m-maybe, but, uh, we, um, our relationship, we didn’t quite, um...” “Relax, I’m just teasing ya.” Sabarene rubbed the back of her head a bit. “Ah, I, uh, see..., sorry, I’m not really too good at recognizing humor... and-“ “Tell me about this Brother Brown bloke.”, I said, interrupting Sabarene’s litany of excuses and apologies. “S-sure. Brother Brounde was a veteran fighter, which was unusual in and of itself. In the Holy Collective, you are obligated to serve in the military for two cycles at least, and possibly more if the need arises. Brother Brounde had been serving for ten cycles when I met him, and had been eligible to retire for about four.” “Guess he really musta liked killing folks, then.” “That’s not quite it. Brounde definitely was a cheerful man, and he did have a rather unsettling tendency to joke about the more morbid aspects of military life, but he absolutely despised war.” “Then why keep on serving?” Sabarene scratched her left ear. “I asked him the same thing, the night I planned on running away. And his answer... well... it resounded with me.” I rolled my eyes, er, eye. “Don’t tell me he gave you a tirade on justice or any of that crap...” Sabarene nodded her head. “No... no not quite. Brounde told me that, the way he saw things, him serving in the military meant that someone else wouldn’t.” “That ain’t wrong, I reckon, but I don’t see how taking someone else’s burden makes doing something ya hate any easier.” Sabarene took in a deep breath. “I didn’t either at first, but as time went on, I saw some



wisdom in his words. The things you want to do, and the things you are talented at doing, can be very different from each other. That is... sometimes, you can do more good by doing things you hate than you ever could by doing things you like. And taking on that mentality helped me get by, helped me perform my duties without having a giant pit in my stomach, at least for awhile." I bit my bottom lip. I had a feeling I knew how Sabarene's story was gonna end, anecdotes involving an old mentor figure tended to only go one way. "So what made ya go back to doubting yerself?", I asked. Sabarene's answer was, unfortunately, exactly what I expected it to be. "Brother Brounde... one rising period... he... passed away." I winced, even though I knew it was coming. "Did he, uh, fall in battle?", I asked, trying my darndest to sound sympathetic. "No, no, Brother Brounde was not slain in combat." A bitter look suddenly came across Sabarene's face, her eyes narrowed, her lips pursed, her gaze harshened. "He was executed.", she scowled. "By some of us Union folk?", I stuttered, suddenly a bit more on guard than I had been. Sabarene nodded her head, the scowl still clear on her face. "No, no, not by the Union forces in Trunchet," she said. Her eyes narrowed. "By us. By five of the more vetted siblings, to be precise." Sabarene seemed a far cry from the girl I had met in the square, least at that moment. Every thing she said was dripping with spite, the tone of her words alone deeply unsettling, even coming from a frail thing like her, no, perhaps *because* they were coming from someone like her. Sabarene bit the nail of her thumb, her face scrunched up in disgust. "Brounde was dragged on top of a pile of soot and incinerated alive in front of our entire platoon..., everyone was made to watch, even the sick... the injured... everyone. First, his toes were burnt, individually, with a flame at a temperature hot enough to cause him unimaginable pain, but cool

enough so as to allow the nerves in his flesh function for as long as possible. After they were done with his toes, they went for his fingers, breaking every one, then hammering nails in each of the joints. T-then... then they... flayed him alive, limb, by limb... surgically removing his skin...so that he didn't pass out from blood loss.... " Sabarene's eyes watered up. "Naturally... naturally... the pain made him go mad..., made him lose sight of where he was .. Or so I had assumed... or... hoped." Sabarene's face twisted, as if she was the one who had been burnt alive. "He... called out to me...", she stuttered, her body shivering all the while. " somehow, as he was burning. Just stared at me, and yelled, no, no, he couldn't yell... he gasped... out my name over and over, until his vocal cords stopped working, until the only thing coming out of his mouth was unintelligible nonsense...." "Wha-" I blubbered, dumb-founded. "Why? Why did ya guys do that to him?! Did he, like, kill a baby and eat it, or something?" Sabarene shivered, and I don't think it was causea the cold. "No, no, Brounde's death was something the General ordered." "Course he ordered it, but why? What the heck could Brown have done ta warrant that?" Sabarene took in a deep breath, I guess ta try and regain her composure. "R-remember how I told you about Focus, and how it was a problem?" "Yup." "Well...", the lady with the black hood slowly stated. "Brother Brounde was in a unit that used Focus before they went into battle." "Ah, so yer friend was a druggie? Guess he had it coming, then." Sabarene stared at me, eyes sharp as daggers. "Brounde was no addict, you imbecile.", she said, clearly pissed. "He didn't drink an ounce of that stuff. I would know, I shared his tent-." "Sure he wasn't handsome?", I quipped. Sabarene glared at me, then continued. "Brother Brounde would be the last person in the world to use Focus, he would have little use for it. For fiat's sake, the man

didn't even drink!" Sabarene's eyes seemed to over, and the righteous fury disappeared from her voice completely, replaced by a dull monotone. "Even so, the General came to the conclusion that, in order to dissuade the use of the liquid for combat purposes, a soldier should be made an example of, not one who necessarily used the concoction himself, but one whose demise would send a clear message to those who did."

"That's... that's pretty messed up... Did the General really know-", "I'm positive the General knew.", Sabarene spat, indignant, anger back in her voice. "The underlings told the entire camp that Brounde was, as you so idiotically put it, an 'addict', but anyone with an iota of perception would know otherwise. Brounde was a sacrifice, his life deemed an acceptable loss, so long as the troops would get their acts together." "How on earth is that General of yours still around?" Sabarene smiled bitterly. "Well, it's very simple, Miss Axeman Red. The General's plan, brutal as it was, worked. After we witnessed Brother Brounde's execution, the use of Focus for combat purposes stopped almost immediately. The few individuals who were still set on using the liquid were pointed out to the General by the remaining members of Brounde's platoon, and dealt with in a similar manner. As a result, the combat efficiency of the units, if the General's numbers are to be believed, rose by thirty three percent." Resentment flashed across Sabarene's face. "The General was, accordingly, granted our highest honor." "Was the sick fuck given a medal or something?" "Worse. Put on one of our marks, a privilege that's *supposed* to be reserved exclusively for exceptionally talented Supreme Siblings." Sabarene rolled her eyes. "Apparently the bills will start circulating through the Collective next cycle." I gritted my teeth a bit. "Must be a pretty popular fella...." Sabarene shook her head, and took in a deep breath. "Do you see now why I am so

against the General, Miss Axeman Red?”, Sabarene asked, her voice still shaky, but seeming ta come back ta normal, if only slightly. “So long as someone like that is in power, extreme means will be seen by the Supreme Sibling, and thus, the rest of the Holy Collective, as routine.. And the skirmishes between us, and your Independent Kingdoms, will never truly end, until this city is captured, and the rest of the Independent Kingdoms, are completely, and utterly, destroyed, or absorbed into the Collective.”

“Provesh’ll be destroyed?”, I repeated. “It’s in the cards, I’m afraid.” Sabarene said with a grim expression. “The current stalemate will end soon enough. Cerenlet, Trunchet and Fremdos have all been taken under the “protection” of the Collective, given time, this city will be too.” “All over us using metal instead paper?”, I asked, incredulous. “That seems sorta.... Retarded.” “It’s not retarded in the slightest, moron.”, Sabarene snarled.

“If the entire continent used the mark, instead of those needlessly burdensome bars of yours, a brilliant new age would be ushered in, one of untold economic prosperity and abundance, one which wil-.” I raised my hand, as if ta interrupt the white haired woman in black. “We already had this lil’song and dance, back when ya lost yer satchel. Ain’t gonna argue no more, so save yer breath.” Sabarene exhaled, suddenly looking a bit guilty. “S-sorry for getting angry.”, she squeaked. “I, um, I know we don’t see eye to-, um, face to face on this issue, and I know I’ve been coming off a bit strong.” She tightened both her gloved hands inta fists. “ But I really do believe in the power of the mark.” Sabarene sighed. “Unfortunately, so does the rest of the Holy Collective, to the point where they would be more than fine with the General razing this city to the ground to ensure, if not the spreading of the mark, the abolishment of Runiertian bars.” The pointsa my ears twitched. “Razed to the ground, ya say...” Images flashed through my

head at that point, first, a legion armed to the teeth causing chaos in the square, burning the stalls, and slaughtering Union folk and Unassigned alike. I saw visions of men being beheaded, women being gang-raped, children being put to the sword. I saw the grand paved path of the trade district overrun with blood and corpses, then finally, as if from afar, saw the wooden city of ice and snow reduced to a horrific inferno. I gulped nervously, the prospect of Provesh's destruction filling me with dread... for a bit. Then another set of images flashed through my head. The Unassigned man in some remote basement, his throat gutted open like a pig at the butcher's, his lance inert next to his body. I saw the dead Handmaiden, her arms and legs scrunched up like a bug, her mouth wide open, showing the remnants of her tongue, cut off of her on the whims of a man who used his too much. "Eh.", I said with a shrug, "Worse things have happened." I took in a deep breath, and pressed my right arm against the splintery wood floor. Then, slowly, I pushed myself up, and began to rise to my feet. "Wait, wait!", Sabarene cried out, shocked at me suddenly standing, "what are you doing!?" "G-going outside.", I gasped out. "Appreciate what ya done fer me, but I need to get going." Sabarene waved her hands around in a panic. "No, no, you can't walk right now!", she ejaculated, clearly distressed. "I havta. Gotta meet up with a friend, ya see." I took one step off of the pile of straw, then another, my feet scrapping the splintered wood of Sabarene's apartment as I walked, no, limped, towards the exit. I lifted my right leg, then my left, and slowly made my way over to the door. To be honest, it wasn't exactly a long trip, Sabarene's room was quite small, and my wounds weren't as bad as they shoulda been. I had no problem getting my busted up self to the door. I turned to look back at Sabarene, who was sitting on the straw. "Once again, thanks," I said with a wink, forgetting that I. "Ya

ever need help beating the crap outta someone, look me up. I'll give ya a fifty percent discount." With a cool smile, I opened the door, and left the room. At least, I woulda, if I didn't fall flat on my face. I had reached for the handle of the door, but, uh, I... missed. It was almost like the door was a mirage, cause I could see it, but couldn't touch it. The fall didn't hurt none, cept the shock and embarrassment made me pretty frustrated. "Oh for frick's sake...", I grumbled, my lips pressed against the rotting floor. She ran over to me in a hurry, her hood falling down some. "Oh no, oh no, oh no!", she gasped, knelling right in fronta my face like a concerned parent. "A-are you alright, Miss Axeman Red?" "More or less. Wasn't expecting ta end up eating dirt, though." The Sister clucked her tongue. "Well, I DID warn you about trying to walk, didn't I? I understand that you're eager to see your friend, but trying to move around so soon with your injuries is a bit..." "Can walk just fine. Damn door disappeared on me." "Disappeared on – Oh." Sabarene giggled. "Um... heheh... oh I shouldn't be laughing about it... but..." "But what?", I snapped, irritated. "Izzat drug making me see things?" Sister Sabarene coughed a bit. "No, no, um, it's not a matter of what you're seeing, so much as what you're not." I narrowed my eye. "What do ya mean?" "In a sentence: Your depth perception is a bit... um... different now." "What about my death conception?" Sabarene chuckled a little, then looked guilty for doing so. "No, no, depth perception. It's that, well, you only have one eye now, so seeing things is naturally going to be a bit more-" "Difficult, yeah, but I saw that door clear as crystal." "I'm not saying that you didn't see the door, Miss Axeman Red, I'm saying you didn't see the door *correctly*. You assumed it to be closer than it, um, appeared." I groaned, and poked the leather patch on my head a bit, as if doing that would somehow cause my eye to grow back. "So that's just how things are

gonna be, then, huh?" Sabarene scrapped the bottom of her lip. "Well.... yes. But don't worry! A cycle's worth of physical therapy, and you'll be able to compensate for your utter lack of depth perception! ... more or less, I mean, you DID lose an eye..." I shoved myself up again, and carefully, very carefully, put my hand on the door. "Don't have the time for therapy, I need to go and find Blue." "Blue?", Sabarene asked, the name seeming ta catch her off guard. "Yeah, Axeman Blue Three. The bearded gentleman who left me in yer capable hands." Sabarene's face looked a bit troubled. "Blue and bearded, you said?" "Yup. Pretty seasoned fella too, middle-aged I'd say. Probably mumbled something about being too old for this crap when he dropped my half-dead ass off." Sabarene put her fingers to her lip. "Oh dear." I squinted my eye. "What now? And no, I ain't willing ta get another piecea me chopped off, so don't even ask." "That's not it. I, well, I don't think the gentleman who dropped you off was this Axeman Blue you're talking about." She smiled and pounded her fists together. "But don't worry, the handsome fellow was definitely a friend of yours!" I sighed heavily, knowing that the conversation wouldn't be going anywhere good and cupped my face in my hand. "Can you describe how the fella looked?" Sabarene shook her head slowly. "Sure, sure. He was a younger gentleman... he spoke Continental, but in a funny accent. I, um, I don't know if he had a beard or not..." I cut in quickly. "Was he an offlander? And what do ya mean, don't know if he had a beard or not?" Sabarene's face flushed, and she twiddled her two index fingers together. "He, um, he was wearing a mask." "He was wearing a mask.", I repeated, flatly. Her face light up, and she smiled widely. "Yes, a black mask. With a... um, oh yes... a white jawbone painted on it! Oh, and he had these gorgeous amber eyes and short, brown hair..." I rolled my eyes. "Look, look, I've seen a buncha

weird crap lately, but I gotta straw the line somewhere.” I took a deep breath, and tried ta stay calm. I failed. “Yer telling me that this guy had BROWN hair?!”, I shrieked. “I know, right!”, Sabarene swooned. “I can’t believe you’re friends with someone so... exotic!” I scowled. “I ain’t friends with nobody who ain’t Axeman Blue Four, and some guy with freaky hair and a skull mask sure as heck ain’t Axeman Blue Four!” The woman in the black robes rubbed her neck. “Are you sure? He did say you were a good friend of his.” I massaged my temple. “I don’t even KNOW anyone like that!”, I groaned. I really didn’t. At first I thought the masked fella Sabarene spoke of mighta been someone I met at the banquet, or perhaps a customer at the Whore House who I had done my best ta forget, but no, I sure as hell woulda remembered someone who looked as ridiculous as that, witha hair ludicrous as that. “O-oh!”, Sabarene declared, her eyes light up like the suns. “Oh, that’s right! The gentleman told me to give you this letter when you got...” she glanced at my bandaged stump “...better. Here, maybe this will settle the confusion.” Sabarene dug into her robes yet again, and produced a small sealed envelope. The seal itself was kinda weird looking. It was madea red wax, but the wax was in the shape of a deformed looking lady... diminutive in size, with eyes taking up half of her head, her right hand inna fist, with the exception of her pointer and middle fingers, which were raised and split apart, like the legs offa prostitute. Loo I tore open the topa letter with my teeth like I was biting the skin off of a lega meat, removed the note from the envelope, then unfolded and stared at the parchment for a good bit, my eye glued ta the ink spread throughout the parchment. I remained silent for a good while, the breeze in Sabarene’s apartment making my barely covered body shiver. “Is, um, is something wrong, Miss Axeman Red? ”, Sabarene said, concerned. I bit my lip.



“Uh, no, n-nothing’s wrong.”, I stuttered, face somewhat flushed. “Letter’s just hard ta make out, is all.” The Sister tilted her head. “Hard to make out? What do you mean?”

“The...er... the penmanship’s sloppy!”, I quickly blurted. “ And, uh, uh, the fella smudged the ink!”, I quickly lied. “ A curious sorta expression slowly came ont a Sabarene’s face. “Mind if I take a look at it?” she asked, and before I could make up an excuse for her not ta, she yanked the parchment out of my hand. “Hm, let’s see here... well... the ink is blue... that’s interesting...perhaps it’s in a language you don’t.... hey!”, Sabarene exclaimed. “Wait a minute, this is in Continental! You should be able to understand this just fine, the inflection is a bit weird, but the lettering isn’t messy at all, it’s almost impeccable!” I coughed. “Uh... about that. I ain’t, uh, ain’t all that good at making out words.” “Not good at making out words?” “Which is ta say, um... I can’t. Read, that is. At all.”, I admitted. “Wait, wait, really?”, Sabarene asked, incredulous. “Yeah.”, I said, embarrassed but trying not ta seem so. “Oh... I see...” Sabarene trailed off, then jolted ont a her feet, springing up from the floor like a paraplegic who had just been told he could walk again. “How about I read the letter aloud for you then?”, she said, pumping a fist. “I don’t mean to brag, but I’m one of the most well-spoken siblings in the Holy Collective, I’d be more than happy to utilize my public speaking skills to help you out!” “You’ve already done enou-”, I began ta say, only ta be drowned out by Sabarene’s hotblooded yell: “Nonsense!”, she roared, tightening her white gloved hand into a white gloved fist, “Fiat calls me to help those in need, and only a monster would refuse to aid an illiterate crip- um, Axeman.” She cleared her throat, and in a voice far too loud for such a small room, began reading the words a the letter aloud. “Greetings and salutations, one armed girl!”, Sabarene exclaimed dramatically . “Am friend! Am

friend Fisher Blue Thirty Two, or friend Ferryman Yellow Fifty Five, or friend whatever name brown girl is gullible enough to believe.” Sabarene took a breath and continued to read the letter with far more gusto than she needed to. ‘Found brown girl floating in bay, sadly not find girl’s hand, or clothes. Decide to save from freezing water. Know about friend Axeman Red Fool’s troubles with not-so friend Swordarm Red Bun. Can explain and help friend, if friend heads to Trunchet town hall. Apologize for continental, is not up to snuff.

Love,

Friend Thief.

PS: Thank pretty white haired lady for saving friend brown girl.

I stared blankly, the short little letter confusing as it was irritating, least if the woman in black was to be believed. “What.” I stated, completely lost. “I know!” Sabarene gushed, “he’s even more well spoken in his letters!” “No, no, that ain’t-” I closed my eye and took a breath. “Sister Samafen-” “Sabarene”, she corrected. “Sister Sabarene, yer a medic, right?”, I asked, needlessly. She tilted her head. “More or less, though I’m more self taught than professionally trained, I wouldn’t be able to hold a candle to the Medics here.” I stood up on my feet again, and tightened my hand into a fist. “Well, I know where I’m going now.”, I said, my mind made up, my resolve firm. Sabarene’s eyes opened wide. “A-a-re you really going to Trunchet?!”, she asked, in utter disbelief. I

glanced at her with a narrow eye. "Hell no. I'm going ta go to the tavern and drink myself to death." "B-b-but why?", she replied, mortified. I snorted. "Ya really havta ask?" "I'm an axe for hire that's missing an axe, not ta mention an eye and a, er, y'know, **hand**. I wouldn't even cut it as a prostitute like this, let alone a mercenary." Sabarene tilted her head. "But what about your real friend, the one with the beard? I hardly think he'd approve of your, um, plan. " "Blue?", I repeated. "Well, up until ya read me that letter, I was planning on meeting up with him, mooch off him and his collaborator for a bit, maybe learn how ta juggle one handed." "And now?" "He's almost certainly dead. Sabarene stared at me intently for a good deal... and burst into hysterical laughter. "Pffffffftahhahahahaha!", she cackled, reminding me all too much of a certain fur coated Merchant. "Yeah, guess me losing everything and everyone I ever cared about is kinda funny.", I spat, bitterly. Sabarene rubbed her eye a bit, and slowly, very slowly, calmed down. "Ha... whew... No, no, that isn't it", she firmly insisted, pushing her hood down. "I knew you Union folk were naive, but sheesh, to give up your life over something so little...", she exclaimed with feigned exasperation, amusement sparkling in her eyes. "You lose one small part of one arm, and then think that's it?" "Can't exactly swing a greataxe one handed, y'know.", I retorted. Sabarene deliberately rolled her eyes, then moved her face close to mine, an almost predatory smile glued to her face. "Oh, but Miss Axeman Red," she said huskily, as I frantically backed away to put more distance between my nose and hers. "that doesn't matter as much as you may think." "Here..", she said excitedly, "let me show you something." Sabarene put her white gloved left hand in front of me, fingers fully extended, palm stretched out and facing my nose,. "Can you see this?", she questioned. Seeing no harm in playing along, and

interested in where she was going with all her theatrics, I answered honestly. "Sure can. Less my depth perception is messin with me." With a big ole grin on her face, she plucked her left glove off, flinging it against the wall in an overly showy manner. "What the-"" I spat out, in shock. See, what I saw was Sabarene's hand, there wasn't a snake or something horrific beneath the glove, though that wouldn'ta been too mucha a stretch for me . But it hardly looked like a hand was supposed ta look. I mean, sure, it had five fingers, joints, so the *shape* her hand looked like it shoulda look... but, well, I didn't see any skin, flesh, or bone. Sister Sabarene's exposed hand looked ta be completely composed off a hard looking black metal, and though I didn't know then, actually was constructed with the same stuff my Cercenlention breastplate had been. "Are ya trying ta get a rise outta me or something?", I asked, still in my natural state, that of complete and utter confusion. "W-where did yer hand go?" Sabarene smiled smugly. "Oh, but this IS my hand.", the lady in black boasted. Ta stress the point, the metal fingers that seemed hard and straight as steel curled and twisted themselves, flexible as any joints a flesh and bone as I had ever seen. "N-no way..." I exclaimed, very shocked, but not very shocked that I was very shocked. "How in the world..." Sabarene smiled even more widely, and clasped her two hands together. "You underestimate the mark, Miss Axeman Red Four." she chided, tapping her metal fingers against the wooden wall for emphasis. "The heck does a piece a paper havta do with some magical nonsense?" Sabarene blinked. "Magic? Don't be silly, there's no such thing as magic." "Yeah, ok, sure there ain't.", I grumbled, staring resentfully at Sabarene's metal fingers. She picked up on my doubt rather easily, I reckon, cause she chuckled to herself. "Oh, but it's true! I know that growing up in an woefully underdeveloped city might make one more

superstitious than they ought to be, but this prosthetic hand is merely one of the many technological innovations the adoption of the mark has blessed us with, no more magical than the wheel, or printing press.” She rested her chin in three black metal fingers. I suppose it can be seen as magic, in a symbolic way...” ” I was gonna try and argue some more, but magic or not, the hand before me seemed real enough, I stared at the casual motion of her hand, transfixed by how natural something so unnatural could look. “S-s-so is the rest a yer body made outta metal?”, I asked, far more scared than curious, but curious nonetheless. “Oh fiat no,” Sabarene said, dismissing my speculation with a quick nod. “Only my left extremity is like this, and that’s due to a rather silly onion slicing accident.” “By accident.”, I mumbled. “Ya sliced off yer entire hand by accident.”, I stated. Sabarene rubbed the tip of her nose nervously. “Y-yeah. One morning in Trunchet, we were short on chefs and overstocked on rations, so I thought I’d do everyone a favor and....” she smiled awkwardly. “...lend them a hand.” I groaned loudly, got back up on my feet, and headed fer the door, the terrible pun pushing my already frustrated and confused mind over the edge. “Alright, that’s nice”, I blurted tersely, “but I’m gonna go now, the destruction of my liver ain’t gonna wait fer itsel-” Swiftly, so swiftly that I didn’t know what was going on at the time the lady with the black hand grabbed me by the braid. “Gah!” I yelped out in pain, the yanking more surprising than anything. “The heck was that for?!” I shrieked. Sabarene turned ta face me, but instead looking apologetic and bashful, had a determined, almost harsh look on her face. “Why do you think I showed you my hand, Unionist?” “Hell if I know, Fiatist.”, I replied, matching a label with a label. She ignored my barb and sighed, exasperated. “I didn’t remove my glove just for show, you know, I was trying to cheer you up. But

enough about that for now.”, she said with a wave of her hand. “I’ve realized something about you, Miss Axeman Red.” Sabarene stated, emotionlessly. “Oh yeah? And what would that be?” “You’re wounded.” I snorted. “Did the missing hand give it away?” Sabarene nodded her head. “No, no, I’m not talking about those kinds of wounds, though Fiat knows you aren’t short on them.” Sabarene swallowed. “I’ll be blunt: You’re incomplete.” “I’m what?” I said, glaring at her. “You’re incomplete.”, she repeated. “I can see it in your eye, you’re lacking, you’re fundamentally empty.” she mused. I forced myself to chuckle. “If this is some sorta sentimental religious pitch forget it, I ain’t buying it, go get off on some other poor bastard.” Once more, my words were like a light wind to Sabarene, she felt them but wasn’t affected by em. “I’m not being sentimental”, she insisted in a cold, calm voice, “nor am I trying to “get off” in any way, Miss Axeman Red.” Sabarene said. “I put quite a good deal of effort in insuring your survival, and though I’ll try not to be crass, cleaning your pus filled wounds and handling your, shall we say, excretory functions were two of the more sanitary tasks that caring for you entailed.” she calmly stated. “I don’t request much in return for my hard work, but I do ask that you not go and kill yourself over a few minor scratches. You owe me at least that.”, Sabarene said, curling and uncurling the fingers of her black left hand. That pushed me over the edge. “I don’t owe you a damn thing.”, I snarled “Did I ever ask ya to save me?”, I asked, rhetorically. Sabarene blinked. “Um, yes, actually, you did, quite clearly, in fact.” She scratched her cheek. “Unless you agreed to go through with the amputation just for jollies...” I ignored Sabarene’s completely valid point and started ranting and raving. “Wanna know how I ended up like this?” I spat, spreading my right arm and my left stump out. “Ain’t cause I’m some assassin, or a thug for hire, orra freak

who gets off on hacking folks ta death, ain't that at all. I tried ta get a job. That's it, I just wanted a job, a legitimate job escorting the caravans through the tundra, figured I'd make a decent living from helping folks out instead a scraping by through preying on their lust." I took a quick breath. " I went through a buncha bullcrap, did a whole lotta weird crap that anyone with half a brain wouldn't do. I put up with it – all of it, because I thought I was working towards something good, something meaningful, something that would make me more than just some moron with a axe. But then my employer started ta rant and rave about nonsense that has nothing ta do with caravans, revolutionary stuff that I didn't want part of, and before I can even hustle my ass out the door, folks start dying, fer no reason, and then I find myself fighting a buncha Swordarms, fer no reason." Sabarene held up a hand ta cut me off again. "That may be true, bu-" "I killed three innocent people!" I choked out, composure gone. "I ain't no better than yer general! I lit this one poor bastard on fire, I disemboweled an investigator who was completely right about his suspicions, and I forced my friend ta behead a defenseless, disarmed girl!" My body was shaking, and my stomach felt awful, but I couldn't stop ranting, or perhaps I just didn't want ta stop. "But that ain't even why I'm upset, I'd be lying to ya if I said that I haven't done worse stuff than that before, haven't enjoyed stuff like that, cause I have, I definitely have." I gulped. "It's just... it was all pointless!" I exclaimed, my teeth clattering. " The blood I spilled, the folks I killed, there was just no damn point in any of it! I didn't save Blue, I didn't save that servant, I barely managed ta save myself.", I said, voice cracking. "... I ain't afraid of being a murderer... but I can't stand being so goddamn incompetent!" I yelled, my vision starting ta blur, my body starting ta feel very hot in spite a the cold wind blowing. The sister in black clasped her

hands together and stared at me, didn't talk or move or nothing, just gazed at me, like someone wrapped up inna puzzle, though perhaps that'd be giving myself a bit too much credit. After a moment of silence, she spoke up, in the same analytical voice she had been using since she stopped me from leaving. "Yes, I suppose you are incompetent, and I agree, there's no point for you to keep on living, no inherent value in your continued existence." I answered frantically, "Which is why I should-" "Head to the Collective, get a prosthetic arm, and find something to give you a reason for life.", Sabarene stated, coldly. "I don't know all that much about you, Miss Axeman Red, and from what you've told me, I'm not sure if I particularly want to. But suicide is out of the question, at least for now. The world is far too big to let a few bad experiences make you give up on life just yet. You're incomplete, so you need to travel, to find a meaning for your meaningless existence. Otherwise, you will go to your grave even more of a failure than you already are." My eyes began ta tear up. "I... know...that.", I croaked, "... Course I know that... course I want ta find my place in the world, ta make up fer my mistakes, my blunders. I need ta get outta this city, I know I do, itsa dead end, always been a dead end. But it ain't that easy." I shuddered. "I'm alone now, Blue is gone, his head's probably decorating a pike in the Trade District. Ain't like I can just mosey over ta the Collective on my lonesome. Itsa long way away, and I don't got the strength ta do it, least not by myself." Sabarene softly chuckled. "Since when did you think I was encouraging you to head to the Collective on your own?" I snorted at her inquiry. "Ain't like Blue is around ta come with me- oh.", I realized. Sabarene smiled. "You didn't think I'd be so cruel as to instruct you to travel to the collective if I wasn't willing to help you make the journey, did you? " That snapped me outta my self-pitying funk easy enough.



“Wait, really? Ya serious? You’d be willing ta travel all the way ta the collective ta help someone ya don’t even know?” I asked, amazed. “Of course!”, Sabarene exclaimed, fire in her eyes again. “ I’ll do everything in my power to help you find your way, both literally,”, she said, eyes sparkling, “ and also metaphorically!” I smiled for a brief moment, but managed ta force a semi irritated look onta my face before Sabarene could notice. “Fine, fine, sheesh, I won’t off myself just yet, if it means so much ta ya.” I grinded my teeth for a spell. “But why are ya so willing ta travel with me? All I did was I help ya find a satchel you woulda found anyways, I didn’t exactly save yer life or nothing, quite the opposite.” The white haired lady smiled coyly. “As I said earlier, Fiat calls upon us to help the needy, and oh boy, are you needy. But, I’ll admit, there’s reasons other than altruism motivating me here.” “Uh huh.” “No, no, really.”, she insisted. “ For one, I’d prefer to have someone big and strong by my side, and while you’re a bit too diminutive to qualify for the big category, you definitely look strong, at least if those muscles on your arm are anything to go by .” “But I’m missing an eye and an arm, ya dolt.” “Oh, well, sure, you might not be able to, um, uh, “see”, but the intimidation and coolness factor of the eyepatch I put on you should more than make up for that!” she said with gusto, then frowned slightly. “The missing arm IS a problem, but only a temporary one, Fiat willing!” I just shrugged my shoulders, in no. “Alright, and the other reason yer keen on traveling with me?” “Um, how do I say this without appearing vain... I think I’ve finally found what I’ve been looking for.” That took me for a loop. “Whaddya mean?” “I figured out how to stop the war!” Sabarene said witha grin. “Ya did? Did ya find some magical incantation that makes folks stop killing each other or something?”, I asked, only half kidding. She nodded her head. “No, not quite. I found..

um...you!", she exclaimed bashfully, her cheeks flushing slightly. "Huh?" "I found you! You, Miss Axeman Red, are the solution to all of the Collective's troubles!" "How do ya reckon that?" I asked, beginning ta think that perhaps I was having one hella fever dream, or, more likely, that the person I had just allowed ta saw off my arm was completely out of her mind. "Easy!", she said, wagging her finger. "You're a wreck! You're such a complete and utter wreck, that I'm SURE I'll be able to eliminate the Collective's dependence on war if I can manage to put your life back together."

"...Really?", I asked. "Well, maybe I'm being a bit optimistic," Sabarene said, in the biggest understatement I had ever heard in my life, "but I truly do believe that helping you find your answer will allow me to find mine." Her cheeriness was infectious, I guess, cause I smiled, and this time didn't bother ta hide it. "Alright, ya convinced me well enough I guess. When do ya wanna leave for Fremdos?", I asked, like we were about ta head over ta the tavern fora drink instead. The white haired lady put a finger to her lip. "Hm, I'm not sure, Trunchet is pretty far away, and we'll need to make a good amount of preparat- Fremdos?!" Sabarene yelled, caught off guard. "Uh, yeah, Fremdos." I said, shaking my head. "Did I mess up the pronunciation or something?" Sabarene fidgeted a bit. "N-no, no, you didn't, b-but the letter said you should go to-" "Trunchet, yeah, I heard ya when ya said it.", I acknowledged with a wave. "But I have no desire ta meet up with some weird skull face guy, especially one with brown hair. Last time I followed the instructions of some eccentric fella I ended up chained naked ta a bed." "But what about getting a prosthetic arm?" I shrugged my shoulders. "I figure if Fremdos is in the Collective, they'll have the same magic crap that any other city would have." I swallowed. "T-true, but why not go to, um, Cercentlent? It's got beaches! And even

shores! Or perhaps Merchenze? I mean, it's the capital of the Collective, and I really think you'd-" I answered her question with a question. "Fremdos was only recently taken into the Collective, right?" "Y-yeah... a cycle and a quarter ago, to be precise.", Sabarene confirmed. " Which is why we shouldn't go there!", Sabarene quickly blurted. "I'm sure there'll still be a good deal of unrest, even with the bulk of our army patrolling the streets. " It was my turn ta smile smugly. "See, that's exactly why we *should* go there, Sister Sallackaden-" "Sabarene." "Sabarene. Unrest is a fancy waya sayin that they'll be folks beating the crap outta other folks , right?" I asked, cracking my neck. "...More or less, though I wish you wouldn't say it in such a crass manner."

"So Fremdos is the best place for botha us ta go ta, if ya think about." I said, bending my arm back and forth, making sure it was up ta snuff. "If yer set on stopping war and whatnot, well, ain't no place better ta go then the latest battleground, right?" Sabarene scratched her neck nervously. "P-perhaps, but why do *you* wish to travel to Fremdos so badly, Miss Axeman Red Four?" I grinned, dropped ta the floor, and attempted ta do a few one handed push-ups. "Well, -uh!- it all comes -ah!- down ta... -urgh!-, working with what I -guh!- got." I turned my body around and switched ta doing a seta sit ups, finding the creaky wood a bit too uncomfortable ta press the palma my hand against. "I wanna...one! turn a...two! new leaf...three! I do, but...four! ya see...five! I ain't...six! named...seven! Scholar...eight! Red....nine! Four...and ten!" I panted some, the minor physical activity tiring me out more than I woulda liked it ta, so I leapt back up on my feet and swung my arm in circles. "Fighting as a cripple ain't gonna be easy, hell, I'll probably end up killed, gang raped, set on fire, and lynched before I'm able ta swing an axe properly again, but it's about all I can do, all I know how ta. The trick is," I said,

wincing a bit at the pain my sudden bout of exercise had caused, “finding out how to fight without screwing myself and other decent folk over.”

Sabarene’s eyes drooped. ““Oh... oh... alright, if you really think so... sure, sure, we’ll go to Fremdos, if you really want to.” I raised an eyebrow. “Something wrong with that?” Sabarene bit her lip. “Um... not really.” I leaned against the wall, . “Look, I maya said that I was dumb, but I ain’t that dumb. Whattya got against Fremdos?” The hooded lady twiddled her fingers. “N-nothing... nothing, well, ok, not nothing... I um.... Don’t actually have the best reputation amongst the soldiers there.”, she said with a nervous smile. I squinted down at Sabarene, who was sitting cross legged on the pilea hay, nervously fiddling around with a few stringsa it again. “Huh... Are ya a deserter, or something?” “Am I a deserter?!” she squeaked. “Oh, no, no, Fiat no, of course not, well, actually, yes, technically, but not really!”, she insisted. “I mean, I’m not violating any laws of the collective, at least, well, I am, but none of the laws that matter, more or less!. ” “Ya lost me.” “Um, ok, so, here’s the thing.”, Sabarene began to explain. “Remember how I said everyone in the Collective is obligated to serve for at least two cycles?” “A huh.” “Well, I ended up serving for six cycles, because the Supreme Sibling kept on lengthening my tour of duty, which I didn’t really mind at first, but...” “That nonsense with Brother Brown made ya decide to split?” “Y-yeah.”, she admitted. “It’s fine though!”, she said, quickly stuffing her metal hand back into her white glove. “Technically, I served all the time I had to, even if it was pretty much an absolute certainty that the Supreme Sibling was going to extend my conscription!” “Then why would the soldiers have a beef with ya, if you put in more time than mosta them?” Sabarene started to sweat profusely. “Um...

well... I wasn't a fighter, so I'm not exactly seen as a veteran." I shook my head sagely.

"Ah. Yeah, I guess fighters ain't gonna think mucha ya if you stay in the tents while they're out in the fields." I sighed. "So where does that leave us? If you being a deserter means that they'll chop off yer head or something the moment ya put yer toe inta Fremdos, then fine, fine, let's go ta Trunchet, I ain't gonna be that picky." Sabarene slowly nodded her head. "No... there's no need for that.", she said slowly, then smiled. "I'll be fine." Sabarene's eyes sharpened. "Actually, I've been meaning to return to Fremdos for nearly a cycle now." "Shoot, really?" I blurted, surprised. "So yer ok with going there, then?" She narrowed her eyes, and shook her head inna determined fashion. "I'm sure. I can't keep putting off the trip forever." My excitement beat out my curiosity. "Then why wait?" I asked witha smirk. "Let's head out no-" "Wait!", Sabarene yelled, right as I was about ta slowly put my hand on the door. "Wha-what?" I muttered, shocked by her outburst. "Um... you're.... a bit... under-dressed", the woman in black said, her pale face a little pink. "Oh.", I said as I looked down at chest, and remembered that I only had a few stripsa bandages wrapped around me. "How bout that." I rubbed the backa my head. "Eheheh... uh... do ya got any spare clothes I could put on? I, er, sorta... lost mine, left em back with my hand, I reckon." Sabarene blinked, and then smiled. "I sure do!". She ran over ta the chest again, and frantically threw out various instruments and items from it, tossing a hammer, a napkin, and what looked ta be a small figurine carelessly behind her, until finally, she produced another seta robes, identical ta the one she had on, cept they were white instead a black. "Here!", she said, shoving the robes against my chest. "I think these'll be adequate... though they might be a bit... um... loose on you." "Ain't like I'm inna position ta be picky, Savamen-."

“Sabarene.” “Sabarene.” Fortunately, the robes were pretty easy ta get into, even with only one hand, all I hadta do was slip my right arm through the sleeve and the resta the process was a breeze. I looked absolutely ridiculous with em on, though. They were a bit loose on me, and were long sleeved, which meant that I had ta tie the left sleeve inna knot so the unfilled fabric didn’t flop around everywhere. Still, the robe was surprisingly comfortable, and though it wasn’t anywhere near as thick as leather armor was, managed ta offer a decent degree of insulation and warmth. I decided ta put up the hood, both ta heat my head some, and more importantly, ta assure that I would have some degree of anonymity, as much as a beaten up eye patch wearing Axeman could. After putting on the robes I turned ta Sabarene, “Let’s getta move on, then, and figure out the best way ta get ta Fremdos, from what I’ve heard, the trip ain’t exactly a short one.” Sabarene sprung up, and pumped her fist again. “Yes, let-“ Her stomach started ta growl. “Oh my. I think I may be a bit famished. Is it alright if we get some refreshments before we plan our trip?”, she asked. “Ain’t a problem with me. I’m a mite hungry myself, come ta think of it.” “Fantastic! There’s actually a pretty good place right below us, so let’s head downstairs as fast as we can!” And without saying another word, Sabarene thrust open the door of her small, windowless apartment, and charged out in the tight cramp hallway. I slowly followed her, making sure that I didn’t tumble or trip due to my utter lack of depth perception, out into the hall, down a very compact seta wooden stairs, which led out into the resturarent Sabarene had apparently been living above. Or ta be precise, the *tavern* she had been living above. The Provesh tavern. The one I went ta nearly all the dang time. The one that didn’t serve nothing but alcohol. Sabarene gleefully skipped over ta an empty table, and pulled out a chair fer me. “Take a seat!

Take a seat!" What would you like? Some ale? Oh! Maybe you'd like some wine? Don't worry about choosing something pricy, it's on the Order of Fiat!" I felt my ears droop a little as I realized Sabarene had no intentiona getting a bite ta eat. "Er, reckon I'll have some water, if it ain't too bigga deal." Sabarene blinked at me, and giggled. "Water! Hahaha, that's a good one!" I frowned. "No, I really do want some wat- "There's no need to be so bashful, Miss Axeman Red, here, I'll order something for you.", the black robed girl insisted. "Ain't being bashful, I just want some wat-" She ignored me with a smile, and motioned over a waiter. Just as the fella started ta walk over to the table, I suddenly remembered that I had, uh, kinda killed four people, so I quickly tightened the hood over my head, on the off chance that the gentleman remembered me. "Well, hello, Sabarene, it's lovely to see you again.", the waiter bellowed smoothly, in a low baritone. "What might I get for you and your beautiful friend this afternoon?" I breathed a sigh of relief, the waiter didn't seem ta recognize me, not dressed as I was, anyhow. Unfortunately, I recognized him. See, there's three types of serving folks, you'll run into them no matter where ya go, Independent Kingdoms, Holy Collective, heck, I've even seen somea them atta TGI Frid- er, atta...place far away from Provesh, they're the same people no matter what the venue. Ya got yer the silent type, who will just serve ya yer meal or drink and leave ya be no matter what, only coming back ta take more orders or give ya the bill, you have the type who will occasionally check in ta see that yer meal or drink ain't poisoned, and then ya have the really chatty type with tonguesa honey and heartsa crude, the type who won't give ya a moment's peace, the type that thinks customers aren't there ta eat or ta drink, but ta make really awkward small talk. The Waiter serving me and Sabarene was, as ya mighta guessed, the latter sort. He wasn't a bad fella, but

oh man, was he one heckuva chatterbox. For some unfathomable reason, Sabarene seemed ta enjoy his, er, overly polite mannera talking, cause she bantered right along with him. "I'll have the usual, my dear Mr. Waiter Green Fifty Three, and Miss Axeman Red Four here will have the boot." Sabarene freely letting my name slip almost caused me ta cough out a lung. Fortunately, the waiter didn't seem ta react ta my name... at first. "Alright, my lovely Sabarene,", he oozed, " your wish is my command. One mug of ale, two glasses of wine, three shots of fire water, and a boot for you, along with another boot for Miss Axeman Red Fo- " The man suddenly stopped speaking." "Axeman Red Four?!" he exclaimed, shocked. Sabarene mused. The purple haired man ignored her and walked up right ta my face. "By the suns! Madame, what on earth happened to you?!", he said, with what seemed ta be genuine concern. I swiftly pulled down my hood, heart beating a million times a moment. "Nothing happened ta me!", I hissed, inna panic. "But, your eye! And your arm!" "Lost em inna onion slicing accident four cycles ago.", I quickly lied, as a parta a hare brained gambit ta somehow convince the Waiter that I wasn't who he thought I was. "N-no way, that can't possibly be true. M-miss Axeman Red Four, you were just fine a few rising periods ago." "Well, I'm fine right now. I ain't Axeman Red Whatevr, name's Chef Yellow Seventy Four. Just came inta town, actually, heard y'all Proveshians were friendly like. Heard wrong, apparently." I remarked, bitterly. Waiter Green Fifty Three gaped a bit, his face contorted with confusion. "But you have to be Miss Axeman Red Four, you look exactly like he-..." I scoffed loudly, mustering up all the indignation I could fake. "Pah! What are ya insinuating? Is this Axeman Red Seven ya keep talking about a Fremdosian? If that's the case, are you saying that Fremdosian folk all look the same, just causea our green



hair? Our brown skin? Our pointy ears, even?" I battered the poor waiter with a barrage of nonsensical questions, hoping to bully him into submission, hoping that the man would end up complaining to folks about a jerky Chef instead of gossiping about a crippled Axeman. "N-no, not at all, of course I didn't mean to say.." "Bullcrap!", I yelled, trying to sound believable instead of melodramatic. "This is the third time this rising period I've been mistaken for that Axeman Red Seven girl or whatever, and each time it's always the same song and dance, "Oh, Miss Axeman Red Five, what happened to your eye, don't you need that to see?", "Oh, Miss Axeman Red Six where did your hand go, how can you swing an axe without a hand?" "Oh, Miss Axeman Red Nine, you're so beautiful, smart, and charming, would you please be my collaborator?" I covered my hand with my face. "Do you see an axe on me? Do you even see an armband on me? Course you don't, but that doesn't stop you none. I'm brown and got green hair, so clearly, I GOTTA be some dumb Axeman, oh now, I can't be a Chef, that'd just be RIDICULOUS." I tsked. "I oughta speak to your manager, let him know that you're a bigot who can't even differentiate between some brute with an axe and a culinary mastermind." The Waiter tried his darndest to cling to reality. "I'm sorry Madame, I didn't mean to offend, but, um, Lady Sabarene DID just call you Axeman Red Four-" I rolled my eyes. "Of course she did, you uncultured nitwit. She's a former Fiatist, she knows jack diddly squat about our way of doing things. You on the other, er, hand, don't have that excuse, unless you're actually just an Unassigned who stole his name." He recoiled in horror. "N-no! Heavens no! I'm fully registered and.." The purple haired waiter gulped. "I-I suppose an apology is in order, then, clearly I must have been mistaken, but I truly, sincerely didn't mean to offend-" "Well you did! Sorry doesn't mean jack, jackass." "Oh dear... oh dear... um, please forgive

me!", the Waiter begged. I appeared to mull it over in my head some for a bit, then shook my head, and loudly sighed. "Sure, sure, I forgive ya. Sorry about that, I didn't mean to snap at ya. I'm just tired of being mistaken for that Axeman Red Four girl, is all." The waiter wiped his brow with his hand. "Once again, a thousand pardons. Tell you what, how about I put your drinks on the house?" "Really? You'd do that? Aw shucks, thanks" I said with a warm smile. "Don't worry about it.", Waiter Blue Fifty Three bowed and walked off, completely dazed. I exhaled loudly, wiped a copious amount of sweat off my battered face, and jerked my head to face Sabarene. "Uh, in the future,", I said, teeth clattering, "at least while we're still in Provesh, could ya, uh, not call me by my name?" Sabarene tilted her head, curious. "Why shouldn't I call you by your real name- oh.", she said, and pounded her fist into her palm. "Oh, that's right, the murders! I forgot you committed those, how silly of me!" she exclaimed, with a bashful smile. "In that case, I suppose using your real name isn't necessarily the brightest of all ideas. But what should I call you then?", she asked, lost in thought. "How about that pseudonym I just used?", I suggested. "No, that won't do.", she said with a wave of her hand. "There actually is a Chef Yellow Fifty Three out there somewhere, I'd imagine, which could work out poorly for us on the off chance we encounter him. Oh!", she exclaimed. "I got it! How about I call you Sister Amelia?" "Sister Amelia?", I repeated. "Yes!" "Kinda weird sounding, to be honest." "Put up with it. That robe you're wearing is reserved strictly for Sisters of the Holy Collective, to give you any other name would just be ridiculous." Sabarene blushed. "And I also think it sounds kind of cute", she blurted. I tapped my hand against the table, with an amused smile. "Fine, fine, I guess Sister Amelia works, though it still sounds completely off to me." I looked around the tavern for a short while, scoping

this way and that fer ponytails, specifically those with red hair. I didn't see none. "So, how do ya think we should get over ta Fremdos?", I asked, deciding ta cut out the small talk and get straight ta business. Sabarene clucked her tongue and sighed. "There aren't many options, are there?", she mused. "I was under the impression that commissioning a caravan was the only reliable method of transit in and out of this city, though I have heard that travel by boat is possible, if not exactly efficient." "Yer under the right impression, we got some docks here, but they ain't used much. Cept, see, there's a bitta problem with using the Caravans. Unless yer a Swordarm, hitching a ride on onea the wagons is expensive. Really expensive." Sabarene waved her hand. "Oh, don't fret! I can scrounge up the money easy enough." "Ah, yeah, you were dumping all those Runiertian bars into the water before, I sorta forgot you were filthy rich." Sabarene smiled and nodded her head. "Actually, at the moment I'm completely broke!" I was hit by a sudden coughing fit. "T-then how the heck are we gonna get onna Caravan?" The white haired lady smirked confidently, her eyes sparkling. "Simple! I'll just prostitute myself!" I almost slammed my skull against the table. "Wha-? Are ya outta yer mind?" I yelled. Sabarene chuckled. "Relax. I was just kidding." "That's a relie-", I started ta say, before she cut right back in. "Obviously, you'll have to pick up some of the slack too, it would take me nearly a cycle to raise the money on my own.", she said, inna matter of factly tone. " Even assuming that my aesthetical appeal doesn't degrade and that current compensation rates for prostitutes remain the same, the novelty factor of a Fiatist in Provesh would wear off quickly, meaning that demand for me would decrease dramatically after a short boom." "Never fear though!", Sabarene exclaimed, in far too enthusiastic a tone than her plan warranted. "That's where you would come in! There's

some men out there who have a thing for amputees, and if we work together, you and I can easily corner the threesome market, which would enable us to-" Thankfully, Sabarene's, pitch was interrupted by Waiter Green Fifty Three, who unceremoniously slammed a tray carrying a copious amounta drinks onto the table. "I hope I'm not interrupting," the waiter said briskly. "Here are your drinks, girls. If there's anything else you need, feel free to motion for me, I am, after all, at your beck, and call.", he uttered softly, inna sing songey voice. "Oh, Mister Waiter Green Fifty Three!" Sabarene exclaimed cheerfully. "Thanks so much for bringing over our drinks, that was quick! And don't worry, we were just talking about prostitutes, would you care to join us?" The purple haired man's usually smooth hair seemed ta frizz, if only a little. "Pardon me?" "Chef Yellow Fifty Three and I are having a conversation focused on the ins and outs of prostitution, would you care to partake in the discussion?" The poor sonuvagun started ta sweat a second time, but somehow managed ta keep his cool, or at least tried ta. "I'd, um, love to,", he choked out, "but..." "But ya gotta go take more drink orders, right?", I quickly filled in, his embarrassment quickly becoming mine. "Um, right! Yes! Quite so!", the Waiter blurted, clearly relieved that I was giving him an out. "Perhaps another time, Miss Sister Sabarene.", the waiter said, before he scuttled off. "Aw, that's a pity, he really could have given us some valuable insight.", Sabarene moured, and downed threea her shot glasses with three soft gulps. Feeling about as awkward as I ever did, I absent mindedly poked the leather boot on the table with my finger and watched the dubious liquid in it shake'n slosh around, then quickly snapped back inta reality. "Look,", I said, trying ta sound as matterly of factly as I could, "I wanna go ta Fremdos something fierce, so of course I'll do my part ta help ya raise the metal, but there's gotta be a better

way ta get there than playing a gamea “catch the venereal disease” with our hips. “Ow weally? What would you sug-hest?”, my companion sloppily questioned while chugging down a mugga ale. “Er, I’ve got some metal saved back at my apartment, got it fer punching the crap outta some guy with a lance. Ain’t enough ta cover both of us, but it’s somewhere ta start.” Sabarene put down the mug, wiped her face with her black sleeve, and began to sip ata glass filled with pink wine. “Hm, that’s pretty good to hear, Sister Amelia.” She rocked the wine glass back and forth before continuing. “At the very least, that would cut down the time we’d have to spend scrounging up the metal.” She gently set down the empty cup and reached ta drink down another one. “Though I still don’t see a viable alternative to my suggestion, I’m afraid.” I bit my lip and pondered for a spell, as Sabarene gently set down the wine glass and began slurping somea the liquid from onea the leather boots. Ta tell ya the truth, Sabarene was making some sense, crazy as her plan seemed. We *did* need a good deala money in a short amounta time, and the oddsa a boney foreigner anda crippled Axeman getting a legitimate job were slim ta none. Prostitution paid well enough, there’s a reason the, er, profession has been around since the beginninja time. But I had no intentiona doing things that way, my pride, what little there was left, wouldn’t allow fer it. “I got a plan.”, I said, tightening my hand inta a fist fer emphasis. “Oh?”, Sabarene said, setting down the boot crusty leather boot she had apparently been more than fine with drinking outta. “And, um... hic! What would that be?” “You havea stall out in the square, right?” “I *had* a stall.”, Sabarene corrected. “I took it down once I ran out of marks to trade.” “You were trading micks?”, I asked, surprised. “Er, why?” Sabarene, whose face was pink as the wine she drank, giggled. “I had to get the Runiertian bars somehow, silly!” “Yeah, but us Unionists

don't like yer money much, I don't reckon we'd be all that willing ta trade Runiertian fer em." "You Unionists seemed to be perfectly willing to part with the bars, at least when I paid twice the exchange rate for the vile things." she said, putting her hands behind her head, as if intentionally taking a huge financial dive was some sorta accomplishmet.

"How bout that," I stated, flatly, and got back on topic. "So what did ya think of the other folks in the square, when you still had yer stall up?", I asked. "That depends.", Sabarene said, putting a finger ta her lips, "Are you inquiring about my thoughts towards the conmen, the panhandlers, the tricksters, the musicians, or the pickpockets?" "The conmen." Sabarene tipped the leather foot accessory upside down and lapped up the few remaining dropsa ... whatever liquid had been poured into the boot. "Welp,", she slurred, "I think that thje conmen are preeeeeeeeetty bright, leash when it comesh too schamming tourishes, and they're veeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeery good at rigging gambles." I smirked. "And that, Sister Sapadene" "Ish Sabarene, you dumb biiiiish!", she drunkenly slurred, "Er, sorry, Sabarene, is how we'll raise the metal ta get a ride ta Fremdos", I said, confidence slowly rising. "We'll bet all my savings onna rigged gamble." Inebriated as she was, Sabarene frowned when she heard my plan. "Wait, why would we do that? Gambling ish a fools venture to begin with, why tilt the odds against us further by purposely taking a gamble that's rigged?" I wagged my finger. "That's just the thing. I'd never try and risk my metal onna fair coin toss, that'd be leaving things ta chance. But rigged gambles ain't a mattera chance. They're designed ta turn out one way, and one way only." "Yeah, they're designed to have us lose and the con win, sho what?" "Don't ya see?", I asked witha wink. "All we gotta do is finda rigged gamble and figure out the trick behind it. Once we do that, we'll be sure ta double our metal." "I don't know, Sihster

Amelia,” Sabarene droned out. “She, I have full confidence that we’ll be able to find a rigged gamble in the square, and I even think we might be able to figure out the secret behind em.” “But sho what?” she exclaimed with outstretched arms. “Knowing how shomething worksh doesn’t equate to being able to capitalize on it. I know how firing a bow and arrow worksh, and I know how shtorming a besieged city works, but that doesn’t mean I can do it myself.” I grimaced, if only briefly. Again, she had a point, but I wasn’t about ta let logic or reason stop me. “Relax,” I insisted. “It’ll be easy enough. There’s bound to be at least one con artist out there who isn’t very good at his job, one who has a scam going that can be turned against him. It’s all justa matter of finding the sucker.”, I said, assuring myself more than Sabarene. “Shounds like a good... idea to me!”, the white haired lady bellowed as she slapped me on the back and got up outta her seat. “Letsh get a move on then!” Sabarene yelled out loudly in the crowded pub, indifferent to the faces that turned ta look at her, bewildered. “We’ll win that gamble for.... For...” She paused a moment, as if she was unsure of where she was going with alla that... “justice!”, she exclaimed. “For enlightenment! And most importantly, our hymens!” I somehow managed ta retain my composure enough ta get up from the table inna semi-dignified manner. “Suns above,” I groaned, exasperated, “let’s just get the heck outta here.” So we did, and luckily, I think only about ten people gave us the stink eye as bumbled and stumbled outta the tavern, into the cold snow covered streetsa Provesh.

The walk back ta my apartment was uneventful, ta my surprise. Sure, sure, my living quarters weren’t exactly too far away from the tavern, and there wasn’t anything of note

going on during that particular rising period, but I had been anticipating running into at least a little trouble. I had figured that there'd be a few Swordarms or Guards looking for me, but as I strolled back to get my savings, I realized a depressing fact of life: I wasn't that big a deal. Even though I had killed three Swordarms, there didn't seem to be too much of a hubbub about my actions, the wanted posters hanging on the posts the streets featured the faces of the same Unassigned folks they always did, accused of the same petty crimes they always were. My ugly mug was nowhere to be seen. Never the less, I kept the hood of my borrowed robes pulled tight over my head. There was always the chance that someone would recognize me, and I didn't want that to happen, if more out of shame than out of a desire for safety and survival. And there was always the possibility I was assumed to be dead, and keeping the hood over my head let that possibility seem more likely, if only a little. My wounds ached a little as I walked, my broken nose especially, though I imagine it was more the cold irritating me than any real sort of pain. The robes I was wearing were warm enough, but they didn't block wind chill as well as armor did. High profile or low profile, didn't take me and the somewhat stumbling Sabarene much time at all to get to the apartment complex where I lived. At first it was straight forward enough, we walked into the dusty unoccupied lobby, headed up two flights of dusty stairs, and walked past two or three of the other apartments before arriving at the entrance to my crapsack of a home. But then... "Aw crap! The damn doors locked!" "Then unlock it, shilly!", Sabarene suggested with a useless grin. "Wish I could", I groaned. "Except I left my key somewhere I have no intention of going back to. Guess I'll have to break down the door-" Sabarene interrupted me by shoving me out of the way. "Oh don't worry, I gosh this!", she drunkenly insisted. "What, ya gonna try and



bust the door down or something?”, I asked, irritated at the door being locked but slightly amused at the image of a thin girl trying to bust down a big wooden door. “Not ash all, imbecile!”, Sabarene chided me. “Never use a sledgehammer when you can use a chisel!” Sabarene removed her white glove once more, and stuck out her metal hand. I thought she was gonna do a super powerful magical punch or something, but nah, she pulled on her metal pinky with two of her flesh fingers, which caused a sharp looking pin to pop out of the edge of her pinky, the pin looking like a really long and cylindrical nail. “The heck are ya doing?”, I asked, bewildered. “Simple! Picking the lock!”, Sabarene said, as she stuck the cylinder metal extension into my apartment’s keyhole. “Picking the lock? Ain’t that supposed to be something only Lockmakers with the color Blue or better can do?” Sabarene laughed. “Not ash all! Lockpicking is easy. She, there are these tumblers inside the lock, and if you push up on em, while turning the lock the right way... the door will open... just like....” A clicking sound rang out in the cramped hallway, and Sabarene casually pushed open the entryway to my apartment. “That!” I rubbed the back of my bandaged head. “Wow. You’re pretty talented, fer a medic.” “I’m not a medic!”, Sabarene insisted. “Then what are ya?” “That’s a secret!”, Sabarene hiccupped. I shrugged my shoulders and limped into my apartment. Course, my room was exactly the way I left it, sheets sloppily folded over my bed, wardrobe a crack open, window shut tight as it could be. I got on my knees, and clumsily extended my arm to collect the purses I had stashed under the mattress. It took me all of an instant to start panicking again. “Guh... ugh... argh!”, I groaned, as I wildly thrashed my arm back and forth under the bed. “Where the hell are they? I put em right here!”, I yelled. “Where the hell are what, Sister Amelia?” “The purses, ya moron!”, I snapped. “You know, with the

Runiertian coins I said I had stored here?” “Oh. Well, um, they’re right in front of you, in that case.” “Like heck they are!”, I snarled. “No, no, really,”, Sabarene insisted with a smile, as she squatted down and pointed her normal index finger at some blank space straight in front of my nose. “They’re right there!” “I think all yer drinking is making ya see things”, I began to say, as I retracted my arm... and immediately felt the velvet covering of the purses. “Or, uh, not.”, I mumbled, embarrassed as I pushed both purses out from under the bed. I slowly got to my feet, carrying one purse in my mouth and the other in my hand. “She Sabareneens”, I said, letting the bag drop so I could actually talk coherently. “These coins should be enough to cover the price of one ticket to Fremdos and then some.” Sabarene frowned, and gingerly picked up the purse I had let fall to the floor. “Um, I’m not entirely sure about that, Sister Amelia.”. “This purse... there doesn’t seem to be anything in it.” “W-wuh-“ I stuttered, shocked. The woman in the black robes quickly untied the purse, and turned it inside out to prove her point. As she had said, there wasn’t anything in it, not a single coin, not even a bit of lint. I started to sweat. “I, uh, I guess I put all the coins I had into this purse... for some reason. Mind untying it for me? .” I tossed the heavier purse in my hand over to Sabarene, who clumsily caught it in two hands, her cupped out hands sinking a bit when the bag impacted her palms. “Ah, this is more like it! Though... hm... that’s odd. This purse feels heavy enough, but...” The white haired lady squeezed the purse, her eyes opening with shock as the velvet bag compressed like it was a soft stress ball. “Oh Miss Axeman Red Four...” Sabarene began to say, deliberately being slow with her words. “...Yeah?” “I’m so proud of you!”, she beamed, admiration plastered on her face. I gulped nervously. “Er, why’s that?” “Don’t play coy,” she teased, the pink flush from her

face completely gone. "There's no coins in this purse at all!" "T-there ain't?" I gasped, alarmed. "You stuffed this purse with marks, didn't you?" "I, uh, I did?" "Of course you did! This purse is heavy, but it bends when I squeeze it. You listened to my speech after all! Oh, I knew you weren't a lost cause, Miss Axem-, Sister Amelia!" I exhaled deeply, and braced myself. "Open the purse, Samanene.", I droned with a tired voice, knowing I wouldn't like she would find. "Sure, sure! I'm so happy I won't even correct your mispronunciation of my name this time!" She sliced open the knot of the bag with her metal pinky extension, and the wide smile on her face slowly faded away. "Oh... uh oh. Um, I don't know how to say this, but..." I massaged the bridge of my nose and cut Sabarene off. "Lemme guess. There ain't any micks or coins in that bag, right?" "Y-yeah." "So what's in there? A piece of candy? Some tissues?" "Actually," Sabarene said... there seems to be a note in here. "A note?" I asked, surprised. "Yes. Want me to read it to you?" "Go nuts," I mumbled, resigned. "Oh my!" Sabarene said, putting her hand over her mouth. "This note seems to be from that Mr. Thief gentleman." "Fancy that," I observed, suddenly not so surprised. "welp, go on read the letter, ain't like ."

Sabarene stood up and cleared her throat once more. "HELLO AGAIN, FRIEND BROWN GIRL.", she yelled in the deepest voice her tiny voicebox could muster. "Ya don't gotta shout, Satazene.", I groaned, the points of my ears twitching. "Of course I do!", she insisted. "He wrote in all caps! And you messed up my name again, so I'm going to scream my lungs out! With a smug little wink, she resumed reading the letter. "FRIEND THIEF VERY HAPPY THAT YOU ABLE READ NOTE, MEAN YOU DID NOT DIE.", Sabarene roared with glee. " IS GOOD THAT YOU AM NOT DIED." I clenched a fist. "Look, tone it down or I'll beat the crap outta ya.", I warned Sabarene. "You're no

fun,” she pouted, before continuing, this time in a slightly bored monotone: “Friend Thief know where one armed girl live, and decide to give present.” The white haired girl yawned, and blinked before I gestured for her to keep reading. “Present is not free, so Friend Thief took some of Friend One Eyed Coins. In bag Friend Brown Skinned Girl will find Friend Thief’s present.” “That all he wrote?”, I asked, after a moment of silence. “Yeah.”, Sabarene confirmed. “But I wonder what he meant by present- Oh! There’s two more pieces of parchment in here...” Her eyes started sparkling again. I think you might want to look at this Sister Amelia!” , she said excitedly. Sabarene reached into the purse and removed two folded pieces of leather. “What the heck am I looking at?” Sabarene let out a toothy smile. “I don’t know fully just yet, but I have a suspicion that...” “Oh! They’re tickets! Tickets for passage to Trunchet!” “They are?”, I asked, unable to really tell for myself. “Yes indeed, they’ve got the Magistrate’s stamp on them and everything!” “Fantastic!” I said, with a shark like grin. “Forget the gamble, and definitely forget the whole whole thing, you and I are good to good!” “D-d-does that mean you WILL go to Trunchet after all?”, Sabarene asked with sparkling eyes. “Hell no!” I laughed, giddy as a child. “We’re still going to Fremdos, but now we won’t have to do jack to get there.” “B-b-but these tickets are for Trunchet.”, the white haired sister mewed. “Course they are.”, I agreed. “That don’t matter none, we can use em to get to Fremdos all the same.” “What do you mean?”, Sabarene questioned , clearly confused. I raised an eyebrow. “You know, for someone whose entire way of life revolves around trade you aren’t really giving this as much thought as you should. Sure, that ticket can be used to get a ride to Trunchet, but that ain’t important. What’s important is that the ticket is WORTH a ride to Trunchet.” “What are you- Oh! How terribly foolish of me! So you intend to-.” “Yeah, ain’t

exactly all that complicated. All we gotta do is trade these tickets fer two tickets ta Fremdos.” Sabarene pursed her lips. “Hold on. Um, I don’t mean to be rude, but I think there may be a slight problem with your reasoning. Fremdos, if I’m not mistaken, is twice as far away from Provesh as Trunchet is.” “So?”, I asked, blankly. “So doesn’t that mean we’re still short, in a sense?”, Sabarene suggest. “I, um, don’t know if I can say this for sure, but if the trip to Fremdos is twice as long, wouldn’t that mean a ticket there will cost twice as much? ” I yawned, and laid down on my mattress. “Ya’d think so, but that ain’t actually the case. Caravans ta Fremdos run about four times a cycle, least they did back when I worked at the Whorehouse, now, compare this ta-.” “Oh my.... You worked at a whorehouse?”, Sabarene asked, witha very punchable smile. “As a bouncer!” I insisted. “I worked at the Whorehouse asa bouncer!” I crossed my legs and took a breath. “Anywho, what I mean ta say is that even though the trip ta Fremdos is longer, and as ya guessed, lot more costly fer the guy in charga the caravan, a ticket ta Trunchet is gonna be *worth* a heckuva lot more.” “H-how so?”, Sabarene asked, still not putting two and two together. “Simple. The caravan ta Trunchet only runs once a cycle, and has room fer only half the amounta people the caravan ta Fremdos does. The operating costs might be cheaper, but at least per ride, there’s gonna be a lot more folks jonesing ta get on the Trunchet Caravan. That means the wealthy fella in charga it can charge a lot more per spot than the Fremdos guy can. Least, that’s what onea the whores told me, at any rate.” “Oh. Oh... well...yes.... Yes, I suppose a ticket to Trunchet being worth more makes sense, then, though we won’t know for sure until we actually head over to the Caravan depot.” Sabarene said, her head drooping. “But why are you so insistent on spurning Mr. Thief? The man saved your life, he can’t be all that

bad." I laughed. "Like hell he can't. Try seeing it from my perspective, Sabanere-" "It's Sabarene.", she chided, while covering her right eye with her left hand. "See, I ain't ever seen this Thief fella in my life. But suddenly, after going through a buncha weird stuff and getting the crap kicked outta me, the guy pops up outta nowhere. Don't that strike you as off?" "I, I suppose, but-" "But nothing. The guy somehow knew where I lived despite me never even getting a glimpsea his mug, broke inta my apartment without disturbing even a piecea furntiture, and stole all my metal." Sabarene bit her finger. "True, he seems to have, um, redistributed your life savings, but... but he gave you something of higher value in return!" I nodded my head. "Don't change the fact that he's treating me likea child.", I hissed. "More to the point, his actions don't make a licka sense. He wants me ta go ta Trunchet, that much is obvious, and ta be frank there ain't nothing wrong with wanting ta meet up with me, but the way he's going about it is just too.. nonsensical fer me. Take the letters he wrote, fer example." "What about them?" "Why bother writing em?", I asked. "Perhaps he was in a hurry?", Sabarene suggested. I steadily nodded my head. "Even if he was, it don't explain much. The first letter, yeah, I could see that, the gent had somewhere ta be, so he jotted down a note, left it with ya, . But the second letter... nah. There ain't no reason for him ta have written ANOTHER note, ta have sneaked inta my apartment and planted it with the tickets. Why not just leave everything with you to begin with?" "Maybe he's just eccentric!" Sabarene said, ever the . "There's nothing wrong with eccentric!" "No, he ain't eccentric. Yer eccentric," I said ta Sabarene, causing her ta puff her cheeks angrily at me. I held up my hand before she could get too ticked. "This one chatty Bowman I met was eccentric. Eccentric is good, I like eccentric. This Thief guy ain't eccentric." I sucked in a breath, and sat up

on my mattress. “Ya can’t allow yerself ta be arounda nutjob, no matter how benevolent or useful the nutjob seems ta be. I’ve already...” I pointed ta my eyepatch, “seen how that ends.” The girl in the black robes clasped her hand together. “I-I suppose you have a point. I’m sorry, if I seem like I’m being a pain, I’m still slightly anxious about returning to Fremdos.” “Once again, we don’t gotta go to Fremdos. Anywhere but Trunchet works fer me.” Sabarene nodded her head and answered me, her eyes narrowed. “No, no, the more nervous I get about going back to Fremdos the more I know that returning there is the right thing to do.” “Don’t make a licka difference ta me, s’long as its what ya want.” I strolled over ta my wardrobe, and opened it. Inside were three tunics and two pairsa slacks, along with a hefty fur cloak and the tattered remains of my leather armor. I left mosta them in there. I did, however, take a fewa my red armbands outta my wardrobe, stuffing them in the pockets of the robes I had on. The armbands were valuable, not inna metal making way, but cause they were the only proof I hada my name. I walked over ta the wooden chest next ta my bed, and clumsily kicked it open. Inside were three hatchets, simple little things, with splintery wooden handles and . “Here, catch”, I said, and tossed onea the hatchets ta Sabarene. “Ah!” Sabarene shrieked, as the bladea the weapon buried into the wooden floor in fronta her. “Why on earth did you throw that at me?!” she gasped, terrified. “I wasn’t throwing it at ya, I was giving it ta ya. Hatchets are mighty useful, y’know.” “Y-you could have just handed it to me, imbecile.” I shrugged my shoulders as Sabarene shakily tucked the hatchet I had tossed her underneath her clothing. I took the two remaining hatchets and stuffed them into the right pocket of my robe. Two small little hatchets wouldn’t do much against a real weapon, but having em was better than being unarmed, especially when being “unarmed” was a literal sorta

thing. “Welp, time ta leave, I reckon.” Sabarene scratched her neck, and tilted her head curiously. “Why the rush?” “Cause we might need ta.” I answered, cracking my neck. “See, I know that the caravan ta Fremdos runs four times a cycle, but I don’t exactly know WHEN it runs. The next caravan could leave in about thirty rising periods... or it could leave... um... inna few moments from now.” Sabarene pouted. “Aw. I really wanted to stay here a bit longer, your apartment is so spacious!” She stretched her arms, yawned, and jumped up, fist raised energetically. “But I guess it can’t be helped. Let’s get a move on!” I opened the door with my left foot and bowed, best as a one armed girl could, anyhow. “After you, my dear Sister Zabarene.”, “It’s Sabarene!”, she laughed, and ta my surprise, intertwined my fingers with hers. With a gentle smile, Sabarene roughly yanked me outta my crappy apartment. We ran like children, hand in hand, through the hall, down the stairs, and out the door, both I can’t speak for Sabarene, but I didn’t feel even the slightest bitta cold as the harsh windsa Provesh slammed against my face.

The Caravan Depot was, for all intents and purposes, the main entrance and exit of Provesh. Sure, sure, we had a big impressive looking front gate, madea long intimidating spikesa Runiertian, but the ancient mechanism ta raise and lower the spikes was hardly ever used. Apparently, about a hundred cycles ago, the front gate actually DID serve its intended purpose as the entryway fer the city, but that was back when things were a mite warmer, and travel by foot was actually possible, instead a just a really good way to die a slow and painful death. The Depot itself was really impressive looking. Oh, the building was an ugly thing, don’t get me wrong, it was madea sod and



semi-rotten wood like most of the stuff in Provesh, but damn, was it gigantic. The Depot was easily four times as wide as Merchant Black's estate, and at least ten times as tall, maybe more. Tallest building I've ever seen, well, barring the Sears Tower, I guess. More notable than the size of the place, however, was just how many folks were walking out of the grand entrance. "Aw crap!", I gasped, and broke into a sprint as me and Sabarene closed in on the entrance of the place, crunching piles of snow beneath our light leather boots. "Why the rush, Sister Amelia?", she asked, confused but keeping pace all the same. "There's a..." I gasped in between breaths... "whole buncha people coming out from the depot." "So?", Sabarene panted. "I told ya, the Caravans only run four times a cycle at most. If there's people leaving the depot, odds are that there's a Caravan here! We gotta hurry!" I let go of her hand, and tightly pulled down the front of my hood over my nose as we made a mad dash to get inside the gigantic complex. "W-wha?..." I muttered, as I crossed into the depot. The inside of the place took my breath away, and probably would have even if I hadn't been sprinting like a madwoman. The interior looked just how ya'd imagine a lobby of a meadhouse, inn, or airport to look like; ya walked into a big open hall with a few benches here and there and a desk in front of ya to take or sell yer ticket. That wasn't what shocked me. What shocked me were two things about the place. The first would be that the floors were made of ice. Not marble, like in Black's mansion, not crystal cut to imitate ice, but genuine ice. "H-hey... wait up- ah!", gasped Sabarene, who damn near leapt through the door behind me... and immediately began to slip on the frictionless floor. I shook myself out of the daze and slid on my knees to catch the Sister before she smashed her nose on the hard ice. "Ya alright?", I asked, cradling the black-robed woman in my arm. "I'm, um, fine. Thanks for that, Miss

Ax-,uh,melia.” She looked down at the icy floor. “Are we seriously standing on what I think we’re standing?” she asked, as confused as she was irritated. “Evidently.” “The teachings of Fiat tell us to never dismiss something out of hand... but using ice to pave the floor seems a bit...” “Silly?,” I suggested. “I was thinking more along the lines of completely fucking retarded,” Sabarene warmly whispered. I bit my lip. “Floor’s not the only thing odd here, less my depth perception is acting up.” My companion looked up at me with a confused gaze. “What on earth could be weirder than – oh.” She didn’t finish her sentence, cause there wasn’t a point ta. Sabarene finally noticed the second thing that was so odd about the place, the thing that had made me stop dead in my tracks despite being in such a rush. See, besides the questionable floors, the big open hall woulda been completely normal, were it not fer one thing, were it not fer one featurea the place that made it stand out. The Depot only had three walls. The first wall would be the entrance, of course, and from the perspective of someone looking at the front desk, the other two walls would be the left enda the hall, and the right. But twenty paces past the front desk, where ya’d expect the fourth wall ta be, there was... nothing. Which is ta say, there was a sheer drop, a huge open gap in the building which overlooked the frozen wastes below. Mighta been becausea the eye thing, but I gotta sensea vertigo just looking through the gap. “Oh my.”, Sabarene exclaimed, just as taken aback as I was. “That’s... rather unusual.” “Ya don't say- Hey, waita moment.”, I responded, a tad suspicious. “How is any of this new ta ya? Didn’t ya take a caravan ta get here?” Sabarene nodded her head. “No, I chartered a boat.” “Huh,” I said, slightly impressed. “Weren’t ya scareda hitting an iceberg or something?” “Not in the slightest! The ships of

the Collective are of far greater quality than the floating pile of scrapwood you Unionists use, an iceberg wouldn't even put a scratch on the cruiser I traveled on!"

Sabarene raised her hand in the air for emphasis, then slipped on the ice once more, a bit too quick for me to catch her. "Ehag!", she shrieked, as her, er, posterior made rough contact with the floor. Don't think mucha anything besides her pride was hurt though. I yanked the dazed woman up by her wrist, and started tiptoeing towards the front desk. "Y'know," I groaned, as a fierce gust wind blew into my face, "we can save talksa ships for later, lets just try and get onto a caravan before our ineptitude kills us." The short walk I took to get over to the desk was far morea hassle than it had any right to be. In addition to the slippery floor and the weighta Sabarene behind me, the constant wind blowing in from the enda the hall made the whole affair a thoroughly unpleasant one. By the time I got to the fronta the desk, I felt more likea weary traveler than I did a wannabe tourist. Oddly enough, there was only one person behind the desk, even though there was easily enough space for fifteen people to stand behind it comfortably. The fella in question definitely stood out, about as much as I did, I reckon. The bloke behind the front desk was wearing tons and tonsa fur, making him appear almost likea balla fluff. His outfit looked completely ridiculous; his hood was pulled so tightly around his head to the point that I could just barely make out a mustached mouth, and not much out. I gently banged my hand against the desk to get his attention. "Tishesmss...", he mumbled. "Er, what?", I asked, a tad confused. "Tish. Mss.", he stated, this time a bit annoyed. "Look pal, I, uh, I can't makea licka what yer saying, could ya try-" "I think he said tickets!", Sabarene helpfully interjected. I looked at the bundled up bloke witha tilted head. "Ya want my tickets?" The figure groaned and shook his head deliberately. I

rubbed the back of my head with my hand, then dug into the white robes I was wearing and produced the two pieces of leather with the scribbly lines on em. The bundled up man carelessly ripped the tickets outta my hand, brought both of em up ta his face, then, ta my surprise, froze up, still as a statue, not moving, not mumbling, not even breathing, his eyes glued ta the two tickets clenched tightly in his righthand. "Uh, Sabarene, is this fella suffering from a stroke or something?" "I don't... believe so...", she hesitantly stated, gazing at the man with apprehension. I waved my hand up and down in front of his bundled up face, ta no effect. "Ya sure?" Sabarene opened her mouth, then threw her hands up and shrugged her shoulders, at as much of a loss as I was. I turned my back ta the motionless man and looked around the hall, this time from the vantage point of a person facing the entrance instead of a person facing the gigantic gap. There were two sets of stairs in the hall, one on the leftmost wall, one near the right. Irritatingly, and in the face of all logic and reason, the stairs too seemed ta be made outta ice. Far more troubling, however, were the catwalks that the stairs led up to. The catwalks were pretty darn high up, but more importantly, lacked any form of hand rail or barrier whatsoever. They also, for some unfathomable reason, looked ta be made outta ice. "Now how the heck are we supposed ta get up there?" "You aren't.", stated a deep, masculine voice from behind me. I jerked around at the sound, and saw... the fella I had handed the tickets ta. In the brief moment I had turned my back ta look around, he had somehow managed ta shed of almost half of his clothes. He was clearly an elderly man, streaks of white clear as day running through his blue hair. Now that the person behind the desk wasn't more than talking ball of fluff and fur, I could see that he was lanky, and his face, while not soft, had a clear well-groomed smoothness about it, his mustache cut

and trimmed precisely. "Those catwalks are for maintenance," he informed me, "travelers needn't worry about them." The man cleared his throat. "And I do apologize for the delay, verifying tickets for the Caravan is a somewhat... intensive process, one which necessitates my undivided and sustained attention." He placed the two leather tickets down on the desk gently, and splashed em with ink or something. Making sure that a ticket isn't a fabrication takes some time, even for an experienced Clerk like me." I smiled, glad ta see that things were going somewhat well for a chance. "Aw shucks, don't sweat it, Clerk Orange, er...", I squinted at his armband, the number on it blurry fer some reason. "Clerk Orange Twenty Four." He helpfully finished fer me. I rubbed the backa my hood and returned the introduction. "Well this here is Sister Sazatene,- "Sabarene." "Sabarene, and I'm-" "Sister Amelia, right?", the old man cut in, witha polite smile. "H-how the heck did ya know that?", I gasped out loud, not so much at him knowing Sabarene's real name, but at him knowing my fake one. The well poised Clerk laughed lightly ta himself. "I didn't get to be Clerk Orange Twenty by ignoring the names written on the tickets, Sister. Especially when the names are written on a first class ticket! The luxury suite of the Trunchet Caravan, my, I heard you Fiatists traveled " My throat suddenly felt very, very dry. I immediately jerked my head this way and that, frantically scanning the crowd, . The tall old man chuckled. "Relax. The Caravan for Trunchet doesn't arrive for another two rising periods. You haven't missed it just yet." I calmed myself down enough ta respond ta the Clerk, who had fortunately completely misunderstood the causea my terrified paranoia. "Er, about that. Any chance me and Saby here could exchange these tickets?" The mustached gentleman blinked. "Why, of course you can. Though," he warned, sternly, "I can't gurantee the same level of luxury,

especially if you plan to switch over to a Caravan leaving during this quarter cycle.”

“S’fine.”, I quickly blurted. “Any typea room or seat or cabin or whatever will do, so long as it’ll get our butts ta Fremdos.” “Are you and your traveling companion absolutely sure? A first class ticket to Trunchet is quite valueable, and I’m afraid I don’t have the authority to compensate you for the price difference.” “S’fine,” I repeated, antsy as heck.

“Just get us on the next Caravan ta Fremdos, I don’t mind the loss.” Clerk Orange bowed, and opened up onea those “book” thingies. “Very well, let me just look through the registry, and see where I can put you two for the tri- Sister- Oh my.”, he exclaimed, surprised. “I assume that the Caravan to Fremdos is fully booked?,” Sabarene guessed.

“U-unfortunately, yes.”, the elderly Clerk admitted, a frown on his face. I bit my lip. “So when does the next one leave?” “In a half cycle, I’m afraid.” “Alright, what about the Caravan ta Cercenlet?” Both Sabarene and the Clerk seemed ta recoil a bit at my question. “Miss A-, I mean, Sister Amelia,”, Sabarene began to say, slowly. “I don’t believe there is a caravan to Cercenlet.” I raised an eyebrow. “Ya sure?” Clerk Orange Twenty Two slowly shook his head. “Oh, it’s true, I’m afraid. The Caravans there stopped running nearly a cycle ago, probably due to some sort of spat between you Fiatists and the folks there.” I gulped nervously. “C-crap. So yer saying that the only Caravan running during the next few rising periods would be-“ “The one to Trunchet, and the one to Fremdos.” The situation was rather desperate. I literally couldn’t afford ta wait halfa cycle ta get my broke and Swordarm murdering ass outta Provesh, but my instincts kept on screaming at me ta avoid Trunchet, and the fella who so badly wanted me to go there, at all costs. It couldn’t be helped, I would hafta use.... “That.” I took inna deep breath, and.... made puppy dog eyes, er, fine, madea puppy dog eye, at the guy

behind the counter. “Oh, Mister Clerk Orange Twenty Two, ss-say it ain’t so!,” I sniffled, forcing my voice up an octave. “M-My collaborator is waiting fer me in Fremdos, he’s a fella by the namea Swordarm Orange Two.” saved me five cycles ago after I lost my eye and arm inna terrible accident, he patched me up and agreed ta collaborate with me even knowing. I promised I’d go over ta Fremdos ta see him, cause he couldn’t get any work here in Provesh, a-and-“” “A-nd...” Sabarene whispered mournfully, “and he doesn’t even know...!” she choked out, tearfully. “He doesn’t even know that you-!” I dropped the act for a split moment and turned ta look at Sabarene, her face as haunted as when she talked about her friend Brounde. “Doesn’t even know that what?” “He... he...” Sabarene stuttered. “He doesn’t even know that you’re with child!”, she quickly yelled, then burst into disgusting sounding sobs. “Yer right!”, I quickly cried. “Suns Above,”, I sobbed, “ what the heck are we gonna do now? Orange, -he always told me he wanted ta be there fer the birtha his son, but at this rate...”... I tried my best ta let out a few more sobs, but what came outta my mouth sounded more likea hiccup instead. My companion was mite more convincing, she Clerk Orange Twenty Two coughed nervously and twiddled with his mustache. Our horrendous acting skills somehow seemed ta have shaken him up some, cause the elderly fella’s smooth and composed face looked downcast and almost a bit guilty. “That’s, well, that’s unfortunate, but I’m afraid I still can’t get the two of you a spot on the Caravan you wish to ride.” “B-b-but muh child, a-a-and muh collaborator,”, I stuttered sadly, blinking my eye at the poor old man, like he had just slapped me. The Clerk exhaled with a sigh, his breath turning into steam in the windy hall. “P-perhaps I could check the registry one more time...” With a troubled face, the Clerk opened up his big book once more. “Alright, Caravan 2, the

Fremdosian Maid, Departs Three Rising Periods from now... Seats Four Hundred and Thirty One people, and.... Oh dear." He nodded his head sadly. "I'm sorry, but the caravan is indeed fully booked, there is nothing I ca-" His face froze up like it did when he first looked at our tickets,. "Oh ho!", he exclaimed, with gusto. "Didya finda spot fer us after all?!" I quickly inquired, alla my put on patheticness gone inna instant. The Clerk nodded his head, but smiled confidently. "Not quite, though I think the two of you may be in luck after all. As I said before, all the rooms in the Caravan to Fremdos are sold out, but..." he said, a glimmer of light twinkling in his old eyes, "it would seem that there was a clerical error of sorts made." "Oh! Let me guess! The trip was undersold, right?", Sabarene asked. "No,", the Clerk denied," *oversold*, actually." I frowned. "Ain't that worse than the Caravan being full?" "Ah, but that is where you are wrong, Sister Amelia." "I am?" The old Clerk gently raised his hand ta silence me. "Oh, your logic is perfectly sound, but our policies can be a tad.... counterintuitive at times," the elderly man began, as a gust wind shook his mustache move slightly, "I'm looking at the registry right now, and while it says that yes, the next caravan to Fremdos was overbooked, it was only overbooked by one ticket." "Don't see how that makes things any better.", I responded. "But it does make things better, much better in fact," the old man emphasized with glee. "If the Caravan was -just- full, well, yes, then there would be nothing I could do to help you." He smiled deviously. "The Caravan being overbooked, however, grants me special... privileges, privileges I would otherwise not have at my disposal." I tilted my head. "Such as?" "Namely, the ability to bump customers from the trip." "Bump?", I asked, confused. "I believe that means he's able to deny travelers a spot on the Caravan, even if they have a ticket.", Sabarene explained.



“Quite right, young lady. Usually when a caravan is overbooked, I ask for a volunteer to give up his or her spot, offering them a free ticket and upgraded accommodations for the next departure, but a quarter cycle is a long time to wait, so...” “So sometimes ya just say tough luck and revoke someone’s ticket? Can’t imagine they’d be too pleased with that.” “To put things lightly! But such pleasantries hardly ever occur, and when they do, we have measures to ensure that our consumers remain reasonably satisfied.”

“Those measures being?” “In the case of an overbooking without any volunteers, I use a special selection criteria to determine who I’ll bump. Naturally, luxury ticket holders never get bumped, nor do those in the first class. Long time customers are also immune, and I usually never take away a ticket from someone with a color of Blue or better. Unionists are given priority over Fiatists, though I’d never bump one of you before an Unassign-“ “That’s great and all,” I cut in, tersely, “but I don’t care about some poor bastard being bumped OFF a caravan, I care about getting onto the Caravan. It’s nice ta learn about yer procedures and all, but...” Clerk Orange coughed a bit, and rewrapped somea the fur he had discarded around him. “Oh, my apologies, I suppose I was rambling a bit there, allow me to cut to the chase. Right now, I can say with almost complete certainty that there is a way for me to get you and your friend onto the Fremdosian Handmaiden. “There is?” “Yup! There’s a fella here in the registry, I can bump him without a problem.” “Um, I’m sure you can, Mister Clerk Orange,” Sabarene coughed, “but won’t kicking him off just mean the caravan will be full instead of overbooked?” The old man wrapped his brown furs around him some. “Oh, you misunderstand. I have no intention of kicking the man in question off the caravan.” “Then how in the-“ “The man I’m speaking of bought five tickets, but technically

speaking, we're only supposed to allow an individual to purchase two tickets at the very most. Usually we overlook mistakes like this, but in the case of an overbooked ride...."

"Ah, I get ya.", I acknowledged, smirking a little. "The caravan is overbooked by one ticket, and this guy has a few more than he's supposed to. Take away three of them, and that..." "Will allow you and your friend to board the Handmaiden in a few periods time." "Ain't that swell.", I narrowed my eye. "But I reckon that it ain't that simple, right?"

The old man sighed. "Unfortunately, no, no it's not. I can confiscate the individual's tickets, but that's only if I run into him before the Caravan departs." "Um, why wouldn't you run into him?", Sabarene asked, perplexed. "Won't he need to come back here in order to board?" The old man frowned. "Oh, not necessarily. He could be a ticket scalper, he could purposefully avoid me, and besides, my role is to verify and approve tickets, not to take them. That role belongs to the operator of the Caravan, not to myself." "D.", I said. "Me and Saturnsheen-"" "It's. Sah. Bah. Reen..", the white haired lady next to me hissed, . "will find the fella, and drag his technicality violating posterior over here." I swallowed some saliva. "What's the fella's name, by the by?" The old man frowned. "The registry says his name is... Harry Potter" "Hairy Otter?", I repeated, the name Clerk Orange Two had muttered weird, jarring, and outta place to me, even more weird, jarring, and outta place to me than Sabarene's completely meaningless name had been. "Harry Potter. A Unionist name, I believe, though I could be wrong." Clerk Orange responded, his words confident, but his face understandably puzzled. I turned to Sabarene. "Hey, so whatsa Harry?", I whispered. "Is it likea Brother orra Sister?" She bit a gloved finger. "I haven't the faintest clue, that's the most ridiculous sounding name I've ever heard." Clerk Orange coughed. "If you two do manage to find the Harry with

the color Potter, I'll be able to get you onto the Caravan to Fremdos with relative ease.”

“No need ta fear. We'll find the sucker before ya know it.” My stomach started ta grumble. “Er, onna side note, do ya know any decent places ta eat around here?”

“Decent?”, Clerk Orange asked, though I doubt he actually expected an answer from me, “Forget decent! Our eatery is the finest in all Provesh!”, the old man proclaimed.

“Alright, now we're talkin-” I started ta say, before realizing that I was completely broke.

“By finest, do ya mean priciest?”, I asked, my ears drooping some. The lanky old man waved his hand. “Technically speaking, the eatery is free, at least for those who possess luxury class tickets.” “No kidding?!” I gleefully asked, drool pouring outta my wide open mouth. “Absolutely. All you two young ladies need to do is present Waiter Red Nine with your tickets, and you'll be given a seat almost immediately.” Thoughtsa a nice juicy steak and some garlic mashed potatoes flooded through my mind, alla my troubles washed away by the imagea butter being slowly scrapped over a warm piecea freshly baked bread. “Alright Sister, lets getta move on, them racksa lamb ain't gonna devour themselves!” I declared. . Sabarene tilted her head. “B-but Sister Amelia, we haven't the slightest idea of where this dining hall is...” I jerked my head and looked at the Clerk with an expectant (and only slightly crazed) expression “T-the eatery is located below...”, “j-just head down the stairs near the catwalk.” I shook my head passionately, and sprinted ta get ta the eatery, pulling Sabarene behind me with alla my might. “W-what the heck are you doing, Miss Axeman Red Four?”, Sabarene hissed the moment we were outta earshot. “Getting some victuals. I haven't had anything ta eat fer two rising periods, y'know.” “N-not that.”, the woman in black said, tightening her grip on my hand as another gusta wind shook us some. “Why did you agree to look for that

Hairy Otter gentleman?” “Why did I- So we can get onna Caravan ta Fremdos, of course,” I answered, trying my best not ta slide on the ice covered floor. “That’s not the... ah!”, “point.”, Sabarene said, losing her balance fera moment. “I was fine with telling the Clerk a little white lie before, but doesn’t taking someone else’s tickets seem a bit mean spirited?” I shrugged my shoulders. “Mean-spirited? Welp, yeah, I reckon so. But either we confiscate threea the fella’s tickets or we stay here in Provesh for halfa cycle, them’s the only options we got.” “N-no, there’s another option.” “Like what?” “W-well, we could always just go to Trunc-“ I stopped right before stepping down the stairs. “No. No, fer the fifth time, we ain’t doing that, we can’t do that.” I clenched my hand tightly, and tried ta calm myself. “ Didn’t ya catch onta what Clerk Orange said before?” “What do you mean?” “He knew my name before I even told him.” “S-so? “He knew my FAKE name, ya idiot.” My insult struck deeper than I had meant it ta, cause Sabarene puffed her cheeks at me. “I-imbecile, of course Mister Clerk Orange knew your psuedonym, unlike a certain someone I know, the gentleman can actually read.” “That’s the point. Sister, when did ya think ta call me Amelia?” “When we had lunch...” “Right. Yet the tickets, which we found when we searched my apartment, apparently had the name Amelia on em.” “And your point is- oh! Oh!” she started sweating. “That... that...” “Should be impossible, yeah. Unless..,” I mused aloud, narrowing my eye at Sabarene. “Unless w-what?”, Sabarene said, looking down at me nervously. “Don’t worry about it,” I smiled. “Fer now, let’s just get some food.” We got ta the icy stairs, so I let goa Sabarene’s hand, leaning her againsta thankfully wooden bannister. I stared at the stairs that headed down under the main halla the depot. There weren’t that many steps ta conquer, less than fifteen . I swallowed nervously, even though I had no real reason

ta. Besides the steps themselves being madea ice, there didn't seem ta be mucha a hazard ta them. Even one armed as I was, all I hadta do was grasp the bannister and carefully head down. Descending down a small flighta stairs shoulda been easy as heck. Still... still... fer some reason, I froze up, and I guess I musta started shaking or something, cause my vision got all blurry. "I'll go in front," Sabarene insisted, her hand firmly rested on my right shoulder. "A-ain't no need fer that..." I weakly replied, my face mighty pink. I didn't exactly try and stop Sabarene from going aheada me, though. I got down the twelve stairs easy enough after that, my knees mighta been shaking, and my head mighta been pounding, but I knew that someone would catch me if I fell, even if she did look about as strong asa malnourished infant.

The bottom floor of the Caravan was, oddly enough, much warmer than the main hall. Er, maybe "oddly enough" ain't all that an appropriate phrase ta use. I mean, the bottom floor didn't have a gaping hole wherea wall shoulda been, after all. Also, though the stairs were madea ice, the floora the basement level was, thankfully, madea rotten wood insteada frozen water, though I suspect this was less a matter of sanity prevailing over dubious aesthetical taste and more a mattera the lawsa nature. The bottom floor felt hot, and not just hot relative ta the gusty hall above, hot likea nice bath hot. I woulda put my hood down in order ta warm my ears some if I wasn't set on trying ta remain at least somewhat anonymous. Course, while the bottom floor wasn't weird like the top floor was, it was still weird, in its own, needlessly convulted way. After stepping off the last icy step, me and Sabarene found ourself inna cramped room. Room might be pushing it, the place we walked inta was more likea well lit closet than anything most

anyone could stand in and feel remotely comfortable. There were three small closed doors in the closet room, one right across from the stairs, and two to the left and right of the first door respectively. Sabarene, being in front of me, strolled up and pulled the handle of the first door, to little effect. She duplicated her efforts on the left door, then when that didn't work, triplicated her efforts on the last one. "Huh, they locked or something?", I asked. "Seems to be the case," the mildly exhausted Sister replied, sweat dripping down her usually composed face. "Guess we went down the wrong set of stairs, then.", I said, and with shaky knees, prepared to go back up again. "Oh! Wait, Sister Amelia!", Sabarene's voice called out behind me, right as I was putting my hand on the bannister. "Did you get one of the doors open?" "Um, no, but there's something I think you may wish to see." I turned around again, and looked at Sabarene, who pointed up at the ceiling of the compressed room. I looked up, and found... letters. Continental letters. A writing style that I recognized, but couldn't understand. "Huh. Is that graffiti or something? If so, let me assure you, while the offers may seem a bit tempting, the folks who jotted them are more disease laden than the-" "No, you illiterate imbecile, they're instructions." "Instructions to go frick yourself?" "Not quite," Sabarene replied with a slight smile. "Apparently, we're supposed to stick our tickets into a slot if we wish to venture further." I shrugged my shoulders and handed the tickets over to my companion, who inserted the two leather tickets into a small nook dug into the wall. The tickets were sucked further into the wall lickity split, and thrown back out almost as quick. "Did, uh, did our tickets get rejected or something?," I asked, right before each of the locked doors let out a clicking sound. Sabarene pumped her fist. "Yay! It worked!" "Er, great. So which way do we go to get food?" "Hm. Apparently, each door corresponds to a menu, I

guess all three unlocked because of the high quality tickets Mr. Thief gave us.” I tilted my head in confusion for an instant, then shrugged. “Alright, so what are our choices?” “Well, let me check the ceiling for a moment,” Sabarene muttered, as she looked up again. “The door over to the right is for freight class tickets holders, and the fare there seems rather, um, bland, unless you feel like having some chilled potato soup and coffee for lunch.” “I got better meals at the warehouse.” “Ok, well, the door in front of me seems to be for the luxury class ticket holders.” “That’s the place to go then, ain’t it?” “Don’t you want to hear the rest of the menu before you decide?” “Alright, fine.” “The main course luxury class menu seems to be anesthetized ants served on top of lemon grass.” “Wait, ants?”, I asked. “Ya mean as in the insects, the same lil fellas crawling on the floor over there?” I questioned in disbelief, doing my best not to step on three of the tiny guys. “Apparently they were shipped here fresh from Fremdos.” “That does sound tasty,” I conceded, “but I don’t know if a few lil’ ants’ll be filling enough...” “Well, how about the middle of the road option? Horse meat garnished with garlic, served with a side of cole slaw and roasted rats on a stick?” “That sounds more like it.” I confirmed, salivating some. “Besides, I’m so hungry, I could eat-” “Finish that sentence”, Sabarene warned, “and Fiat help me, I will nail you to a tree.” “Aw, fine,” I pouted, upset that she didn’t appreciate my lil’ pun. Sabarene looked at me, shook her head, and pulled open the small, red door on the left. The red door led into, well, it led into another strange looking hall. Strange, this time, didn’t mean life threatening, there weren’t floors made of ice, and there certainly wasn’t no gaping hole to the outside wastes. The dining hall looked sorta like a layered cake, there were three levels to it, each level circular, with glass floors so that you could see the level directly under ya. The first level

was about five or six armslengths below me and Sabarene. This level of the dining hall was by and far the biggest, having the longest diameter and seeming to have the most people. Besides it being in the shape of a disc, this level looked like your standard dining hall, there were a series of wide rectangular tables with benches, and a few Handmaidens and Waiters scurrying about bringing entrees, drinks, utensils, and napkins to and from the packed hall. The level me and Sabarene were on was a bit nicer. The serving tables here were smaller, and instead of big long benches meant for fifteen folks or more, each table had four or five chairs for people to park their posteriors on. There were also a good deal less people on the second level, besides me and Sabarene I'd say there were only about twenty other people present, not including the Waiters, of course. The folks on our level were dressed pretty well. I mean, they weren't wearing fancy smancy robes like Merchant Black One had been, but they looked decent, like they had dressed for the occasion, in contrast to the folks on the bottom level, who were dressed in rags and things of that nature. One interesting thing I noticed was that no one on the middle level seemed to be wearing their armbands. The folks on the bottom sure as heck were, but outside the people on the middle level, only two or three had their color marked on their clothing in some way. Strictly speaking, there wasn't a requirement for people of the Independent Kingdoms to display their color, but I had always been told the armbands were the only reliable way to set yourself from an Unassigned, and I had never really seen any other evidence to the contrary. Perhaps that was for the best, though, because it wasn't like me and Sabarene were wearing armbands either. Finally, there was a third level, a floor that was about two or three armslengths above the center of the disc me and Sabarene were on. This third level



was small, just as the second floor was half as large as the floor below, the third floor was only a quarter as large as the floor that Sabarene and I chose ta eat on. The third level was cramped, very cramped, there were only two small tables with two small seats. The seats on the third floor weren't madea wood, but what seemed ta be red velvet. Fer a moment, I regretted choosing ta go fer the second floor. Ants with lemongrass or not, nothing beats a comfy seat while ya eat, and the view from the top woulda been kinda nice. "So where do you want to sit?," Sabarene asked, as she strolled over the bridge that connected the red door ta the disc. "Eh, wherever. I'm just glad it ain't freezing in here." Sabarene opted ta sit ata table in the center of the disc, which bummed me out some, I actually wanted a seat near the edge so I could look down at the floor below. Lunch went pretty well, at least, initially. The waiter who came by was polite, but he wasn't overly naggy or nothing, didn't try and make small talk. He came by first ta ask us fer drinks(I opted fer some ale, Sabarene went fer some wine, some ale, some rum, some beer, and a glassa whisky), and then second ta ask us how we'd like our horse steak cooked. "Rare, of course." "I'll have mine well done," Sabarene answered. "Nah, she'll have hers medium rare," I insisted, and waved the waiter away before she could say otherwise. "Why did you do that!?", Sabarene whined, upset at my intervention. 'Cause there ain't no point in eating meat if it's gonna be a pilea limber. Might as well go and eat the legga this chair.", I said witha laugh. Sabarene twiddled her fingers and looked down at her plate. "B-bronde always had his meat cooked well done, though..." I bit my lip, getting the distinct feeling that I had messed up massively. "Aw, shoot, I'll go and get the waiter back over here then, dang it, I shouldnta-" "Don't worry about it," Sabarene assured me with a smile. "He probably

would have thought me getting my meat like his would be a little melodramatic anyways.” she said, and downed her glass of whisky. “If yer sure.” I answered with a shrug. Inwardly, though, I felt a chill wash over me. As I sipped at my ale, I realized that I couldn’t remember how Blue liked his steak cooked. I recalled his preferences were similar to mine, but if that meant he liked his rare, or medium rare, I just didn’t know. I slumped down in my seat, depressed. “Something wrong, Sister Amelia?”, Sabarene sloshed while gulping down her ale. “N-nah. Just hungry, is all.” I set my mug down, and opted to change the subject. “There’s actually something I’ve been meaning to ask ya.” “Oh?” “You said that that General of yours is out to conquer all the Independent Kingdoms, right?” “Conquer, subjugate, or otherwise render inadequate, yeah.”, she droned out, boredom dripping from each and every one of her words. “If that’s the case, then how come we haven’t been getting all that much static from folks around here?” “Smmms there’s Caravanads, mshey mshey”, Sabarene gurgled, her gullet full of wine. “Er, can ya repeat that?” Sabarene swallowed, and wiped her mouth with a napkin. “Same reason there’s a caravan. There may be a war going on, but money’s money. And technically speaking, the Collective is a trade partner of Provesh, not an enemy.” I took a gulp from my mug, and grinned. “Yeah, and technically speaking, I’m Fremdosian, but that don’t count for nothing.” “You’re Fremdosian?”, Sabarene asked, suddenly setting her glass down. “Got green hair, don’t I?” “No, I mean, were you born there?” “Apparently.”, I chuckled. “Apparently?”, Sabarene repeated, curious. “It’s a funny story, actually-” I began to say, before I was interrupted by the Waiter wordlessly placing a plate of horse meat, cole slaw, and rats in front of me. “Heh. I’ll tell ya some other time, let’s just enjoy the meal.” I grabbed a knife with my right hand, and tried to cut into

the horse meat. The steak looked good, nice and pink, with a little blood leaking out. Unfortunately, because I had ordered it rare, it was rather tough, to the point where my knife couldn't cut into it. I reached for my fork with my left hand, then realized I while I did have a fork, I didn't possess a left hand, least not anymore. Not to be deterred, I picked up the fork with my mouth, and slammed my face into the steak, with the hope that my teeth could pitch in for my five missing fingers. Sabarene covered her lips with her hand, and... burst into a fit of laughter. "I'll cut that for you." "W-what, ya think I ain't capable of doing it on my own?", I accused her, ears twitching with shame. "Oh no, no, I'm sure you could cut that steak on your own," Sabarene assured me, smiling sheepishly, "but the Caravan to Fremdos leaves in three rising periods, so I'm afraid I'll have to, um, lend you a hand if we don't wish to be tardy." I closed my eye, gritted my teeth, and pushed my plate over to Sabarene, who, with an odd serenity, started cutting it into small little squares. Hungry as I was, eating while my companion was preparing my meal for me would have been all kinds of rude, so I let my eye wander the hall again for a bit. Didn't take me long to spot something that caught my attention. Or rather, someone. He was a fellow sitting at the far end of the second disc, from my perspective, he was about two tables behind Sabarene. The guy was oddly dressed, he was wearing a purple top hat and an elaborate looking tunic and cape, but his bombastic manner of dress wasn't what caught my attention about him, least not at first. Nah, what caught my attention about the blonde fellow sitting a ways away from me and Sabarene was what he was doing with his hands. The guy wasn't, like, masturbating in public or nothing, but he was fiddling around oddly, stacking his utensils, his dishes, and his glasses, putting one on top of another. His childish behavior was pretty weird in and of itself, but what was

weirder was that, as dubiously balanced as his armslength high pilea utensils looked, it seemed ta be holding just fine. The fella seemed like he was in his own world, and was gazing intently at his lunch table sculpture, like if he took his eyes offa them the whole damn world would fall apart. “And your steak is.... done!”, Sabarene gleefully announced, snapping me away from the weird fella and back ta my meal “Wow, ya sure were, uh, thorough.”, I mused, the steak in fronta me cut inta more than fifty, almost perfectly square pieces. “Of course I was.”, the white haired lady scoffed, waving her utensils in the air confidently. “Now open your mouth.” I raised an eyebrow. “Open my wh- mffmmfm.” Witha serene, and mildly sadistic smile, Sabarene shoved a forka meat down my throat. I quickly chewed and gulped down the steak, then rolled my eye at Sabarene. “Look, I can feed myself, thank ya very mumphhghg.” “I think you talk too much, Miss Axeman Red Four.”, Sabarene said witha grin, twirling her fork like she wasa Lancer. I quickly yanked up my fork, stabbed it inta piecea steak, and... completely missed Sabarene’s mouth, while she managed ta get another square inta mine. “I yield, I yield!”, I coughed out, over-acting as much as I could. “You yield?” She set down her fork and placed the platea diced steak back in fronta me. “I suppose that makes you my prisoner then, huh?” “Reckon so.”, I answered, non-chalantly reaching fer my fork. “Well don’t worry, Sister Amelia. I’m very lenient towards those who surrende-ugmd!” “Gotcha.” I proclaimed, gently pulling my fork outta Sabarene’s mouth. She chewed and swallowed the three piecesa steak I had snuck inta her gullet, and then looked at me all indignant-like. “You cheated!” “No,” I corrected Sabarene, smiling as smugly as I could. “I won.” The resta the meal went by quickly enough. The horse meat was pretty good, but the stara the show had ta be the skewered rat. Y’know how

rat meat usually isa bit gamey? Welp, that weren't so on the second level of the eatery, the meat was the type that just melted in yer mouth. It wasa great combination, the skinna the rodent was all crispy, so ya gotta satisfying crunch when ya bit into one, but then ya gotta sweet, warm center when ya started chewing. Fer someone like me, who only got ta eat rat . All in all, joking around with Sabarene, eating some fancy smancy food, I really hada nice time in the eatery. By all rights, it shoulda been a fond memory, and if I only remembered the spirita what Sabarene had said, instead a the words, it woulda been. That aside, there was something else that marred the experience fer me. Or rather, someone. A Chef, specifically. He looked like yer stereotypical cook; short, balding, fat, dressed in all black, and scowling. The fella marched right into the midst a the folks eating on the second level, and started ta hoot and holla something fierce. "WHO TOOK MY ANTS?!", he yelled, as everyone in the hall looked at him in stunned silence. "I SAID, WHO TOOK MY ANTS? I AM MISSING PRECISELY THREE ANTS!" At the mention a *three* ants ,I raised an eyebrow. There weren't no way he meant- Well, no one answered him, of course, so he started walking up ta harass folks individually. "Did you take my ants?", he asked an elderly couple, who quickly nodded their heads. "Did you?" he asked a terrified looking girl, no more than five or six cycles old. "N-no, I d-din't!" she blurted, then started ta cry loudly. Not ta be deterred, the Chef moved onto a new set a victims. "Did you take my ants?", he asked a fella with a blue armband on. "Don't be ridiculous. I'm offended you'd even consider it." Finally, the Chef sauntered over ta the blonde guy, as he was chewing onna skewered rat. "Did you steal my ants?", the Chef asked, crazed expression in his eyes. The blonde guy, his mouth being stuffed and all, well, he didn't say nothing, he, simply, uh, well, he simply shook his

head. "Aha!", the Chef said, as he dug into his outfit and produced a bigass butcher knife. "So you admit it! I'll have your arm for that!" "Wait! Wait! I didn't take your ants!", the man exclaimed, inna weirdly high pitched tone. "No use in changing your story now, you fiendish thief!" The blonde fella leapt outta his table and tooka few steps back from the chef, sweating a ton. "T-thief?", he stuttered, swallowing. "No, no, I didn't steal anything, I swear", the increasingly flustered fella insisted, but even as he vocally denied the weird accusation, his head kept on shaking. "Now you're just messing with me!" the overly-aggressive chef yelled, and grabbed the guy's left arm, and slammed it against the table. "Oh please, don't!", the blond man screamed, as the Chef raised his knife high in the air. "Oi!", I called out ta the small little turd, stepping outta my chair, and clumsily dashing over ta him. "What is it, cripple?", the Chef hissed, knife still raised above the blonde man's arm. "This guy's done no harm", I answered, slowly sticking my right hand into the pocketsa my robe, "so ya probably should just leave him be." The Chef made a face like he had eaten something rotten. "Suns above, you saw him confess, didn't you?" "Sure did," I muttered, wrapping my fingers around the handlea my hatchet, "but folks do weird things when ya scream at em. Besides, I know where yer ants are." "Are you admitting to the theft, then, you one eyed wench?" I forced myself ta chuckle. "Nah, that ain't it, I just saw threea yer lil'fellas scurrying about near the bottomea the stairs on my way here. Odds are they're still crawling around there, somewhere." The Chef gazed into my eye fer a long, uncomfortable while, and... flung his knife off ta the side, let goea the blonde fella's arm, and without saying a word, madea mad dash fer the lobby. Everyone was staring at me, so I coughed and slinked back ta my table, without saying a word ta the other guy. Sabarene looked up at me

with a goofy smile. "Wow, Sister Amelia, I'm impress-" I held up my hand and cut her off. "I ain't hungry anymore, ya wanna get going, Patarene?" Sabarene shook her head softly. "Sure, sure, we could probably do with a change in venue." She stood up, and waited for me to pass in front of her before gently squeezing me in the back of my neck. "But I really must insist that you call me Sabarene." "Got-cha..." Our stomachs somewhat full, and with little else to do, we walked out of the nice eatery, up the icy stairs, and back into the windy hall, least, we started to. "Wait!", a voice called out, as we began to make our way towards the entrance. Not too surprisingly, the person who called out to me and Sabarene was the blonde fella. My instincts told me to keep on walking and find the Hairy Otter fella already, but my compliment hungry ego suggested I stay put and hear the man's words of gratitude. Though now that he was up close and personal, panting after sprinting up the icy stairs, I don't know if calling him a man would be the best way to describe him. I mean, he wasn't a child, certainly, but he looked young, real young. Younger than I was, certainly, by at least two cycles, maybe even four. His outfit also looked mighty different now that my eye could actually see most of it. He wore pretty normal looking slacks, off-white kinda color, and his shoes, black and well polished as they were, were pretty standard fare, the sorta thing that most people would wear at a formal event. It was the stuff he was wearing above his waist that struck me as odd. His tall purple top-hat was weird, and the long, silver cane-like baton he grasped tightly between his hands weirder still but that didn't trouble me none, rich people wear weird stuff all the time. What was strange was his tunic and his overcoat. The tunic the tall guy was wearing was... sparkly, no, really, the tunic itself woulda just been a dull gray sorta thing otherwise, but it was sparkly, light reflecting off

various partsa the cloth like there were small little stars plastered on it. His overcoat was morea purple colored cape than it wasa proper looking overcoat, the front end only reaching down ta his elbows, covering just his chest. Ta be fair, compared ta a one eyed Sister witha tiedup sleeve, the fella in fronta me looked totally normal, but even so, the gaudiness of his outfit seemed a bit much, even if he wasa Merchant or something. “Oh hey,” I mumbled, acknowledging the elaborately dressed guy as casually as I could. “Is that Chef fella troubling you again?” The man in the tophat twirled his cane. “Not in the slightest. But may I “trouble” you for a minute of your time?” “A what?”, I asked, thrown fera loop. “Er, sorry,” the blonde boy mumbled, clearing his throat some, “may I trouble you for a *moment* of your time?” I shrugged my shoulders. “So long as yer not asking me fer money, sure.” “Wasn’t quite planning on doing that.”, the blonde boy mused, fiddling with the rim of his hat, before elaborating. “I couldn’t help but notice that you were wearing the habit of a Fiatist sibling...”, he began “That’s cause I am one. Name’s Sister Amelia”, I lied. “Sister Amelia, eh?” The blonde fella asked, then flashed me a big ole smile, revealing his pristine white teeth. “Have you made any justice speeches recently?” I was thrown off a bit by his question. “Have I made any what recently?” “Hehe, sorry,” he cut me off witha chuckled. “I was making a little jest, you have the same name as a dear friend of mine, though she probably would have opted to pacifist punch that horrendous Chef instead of try to reason with him.” “Pacifist...punch?”, Sabarene repeated slowly. “That doesn’t make any sense...” “Of course it doesn’t, it’s an oxymoron.”, the weirdly dressed fella informed Sabarene, tapping the ice with his cane. “But therein lies the value. An oxymoron makes for a great joke, you see,” Blondie chuckled, then opened his eyes and gazed deeply inta mine.



“Just like the name Sister Amelia.”, he whispered. Even someone as dumb as me could catch onto what he meant. As swiftly as my arm could manage, I yanked one of the hatchets out from my robe, and swung it right at the fella’s throat. “Woah!”, the blonde haired man exclaimed, dodging my strike and landing neatly on his feet.

“There’s no- need- for- Ah!” The tall peculiar man leapt back, and slipped a whole bunch on the ice. “It’s rather frictionless in here,” he sputtered, regaining his balance“ and I’m not exactly dressed to-...Woah!”, Blondie exclaimed, as my hatchet flew into the brim of his purple top hat, knocking it off his head and sending it slipping and sliding across the icy floor. “A friend gave me that, you inconsiderate jerk!”, he said, as he cartwheeled behind a pillar, looking irritated as all heck. Wordlessly, I fished into my robes to get out my other hatchet, and hopefully, hit Blondie in his exposed forehead with my next throw. I barely had wrapped two of my fingers around the handle of my second hatchet before my hand was forcibly ripped out, and pinned behind my back by an iron pincer grip.

“Um, sorry, Sister Amelia,” Sabarene said, twisting my wrist with her left hand, “But now really isn’t the time for pointless altercations.” “F-fine...”, I mumbled, and dropped the hatchet. “C-could ya let go of my hand now-ack!” “Not yet!” Sabarene cheerfully answered, tightening her metal grip. “Apologize to that gentleman for what you just did.” I glared at her. “Are ya freaking kidding me OW OWOWOWOK-OK!”, I squeaked, and looked Blondie in the eyes. “I’m, er, I’m sorry.”, I stuttered, as the fella peeked out from behind the pillar and dusted himself off. “Why, whatever are you sorry for, Sister Amelia?”, Sabarene asked, lightly rocking my wrist back and forth. “I, uh, I’m sorry I tried to kill ya in an enraged bloodlust.”, I choked out, as Blondie gazed back at me with a curious expression. “And do you accept Sister Amelia’s apology, Sir?”, Sabarene

inquired of the man, her eyes closed, her expression light. “B-but... muh hat...” the man mewed. Sabarene’s light expression vanished completely, replaced by a cruel, vicious looking visage. “I mean, um...! Why, of course I accept her apology!”, Blondie nervously insisted, waving his hands. “Great!”, Sabarene exclaimed joyfully, finally letting go of my poor wrist. “Good to see that this little misunderstanding is all sorted out.”

“Misunderstanding?”, Blondie asked, twirling his baton as he walked over to his hat, and plucked my hatchet from it. “Yes, *misunderstanding*,” Sabarene answered, carefully emphasizing the word. “Clearly, you mistook Sister Amelia here for someone else, which is why you called shenanigans on her name. And clearly, Sister Amelia, being, um, intellectually challenged, assaulted you out of baseless paranoia.” “But her name really isn’t Amelia!”, Blondie insisted, as he tossed his tophat up in the air and caught it with his head. Sabarene cringed, her attempt at salvaging the situation jettisoned like a pile of refuse. I gritted my teeth. “And what’s ta say my name ain’t Sister Amelia, Blondie?” I angrily asked, lowering my voice. “If this is some scheme or something, then forget it,” I hissed. “I ain’t got any metal ta give ya.” The fella in the tophat blinked for awhile, thrown off by what I said, before the lights went back on in his head. “Oh!”, he realized, pounding his left fist into his right palm. “Oh, you think I’m trying to blackmail you!”, he said, eyes open in shock. “I suppose that does explain the whole attempted murder thing.” Blondie mused, scratching his chin. “No, no, I wasn’t calling your pseudonym a joke to extort metal from you, or to intimidate you, I thought it would be a rather discrete and friendly way of revealing that I knew you weren’t who you claimed to be.” “What sorta backward ass logic is that?!”, I asked, exasperated. “It seemed like a smart thing to say at the time,” Blondie clumsily explained. “But anyways,

I'm here because I wanted to *talk* to you, Patchy, not because I wished to coerce you.”

“Tough. I don't want nothing ta do with ya-” I blinked. “Wait, why did ya just call me Patchy?” Wordlessly, Blondie closed his left eye, and pointed at it with his finger. “Oh!”, I realized. “Yeah, Patchy, cause I weara...Gah!” “Let's hear him out, Sister Amelia.”, Sabarene suddenly suggested, stepping in front of me before I could strangle the guy ta death. “It's not like we have anything to lose.” “Fine,” I groaned, crossing my arm and stump across my chest. “I'll let Blondie here speak his piece... But only if he answers a few questionsa mine first.” I stared at the dubiously dapper fella as he leaned against a pillar, tossing his baton up with one hand and catching it with the other. “First off. Say I ain't named Sister Amelia –I am-, but say I ain't. How would you even know that?”

Blondie's eyes opened up wide, and he smiled wildly. “That's easy enough to explain.”, he said, almost as if he was bored or something. “I knew you were lying because I'm a wizard.” “Oh, huh, I reckon that does make some sen-Yera what.”, I stated flatly. “A wizard, Harry!”, he gleefully exclaimed. “Well, perhaps Sorcerer is the more correct term to use...”, Blondie pondered aloud. “Yes! I'm a Sorcerer.”, he stated, making up his mind. “The name's Lucas! Lucas Gandulfadore Melloi the Third, Sorcerer Supreme.”, Blondie finished, introducing himself with a bow. A cold wind blew through the hall, as Sabarene and I started at the purple clad fella in disbelief. “Let's leave, Sister Amelia,” Sabarene suddenly suggested, as my brain nearly imploded trying to figure out just what the hecka “Lucas” was. “This gentleman clearly isn't in his right mind at the moment.” “Aw! Don't tell me you don't believe in magic!”, the Lucas whined. “I don't believe in magic.”, Sabarene told him. Blondie pouted fera bit, then smiled. “Heh,” he breathed out, pulling the frayed brim of his hat over his eyes. “I suppose expecting both

of you to take me at my word would be a little too much to hope for. Very well then!", he declared. "I will perform a single spell, right here, and right now, to prove my magical prowess!" "Oh, this'll be rich.", Sabarene whispered to me. Lucas pointed his baton at us. "Be warned!", he, uh, warned. "This hex that I'm about to cast was invented by the great Magi, Joseph Nicéphore Niépce! It is an altogether terrifying spell to witness, and while it will cause neither of you any physical harm, I cannot, no, I WILL not, be responsible for any mental trauma suffered. This is your last chance to back out! The wounds of the flesh may heal over time, but the wounds of the mind, they can grow, fester, and rot, for all etern-" "Just hurry up and perform your little con, charlatan.", Sabarene yawned. "The more you run your imbecilic mouth, the more I regret stopping Sister Amelia from splattering your brains all over the pavement." "Christ, there's no need for nastiness...", Blondie responded, his face downcast, like a kicked mutt. "I mean, er, Ahem!", he coughed, and instantly perked up again, his theatrical aura and flamboyant manner returning inna instant. The boy in purple pulled out a small black rectangle from his left trouser pocket, the item no bigger than a quarter of a Runic Bar."Behold!", he said, displaying the palm sized rectangle to me and Sabarene. "What's that?", I asked. "This, my dear Patchy, is a magical conduit of some renown, produced by the Grand Vizier Jobs. By itself, it is a useless quadrilateral made of metal and glass ..." he said, as he lined up the rectangle with my face... "but when combined with just the slightest stimuli..." he slowly spoke as he tapped one side of the rectangle with his left index finger... "it becomes.... AN INSTRUMENT OF WONDER!" The fellow stared at me and Sabarene with a confident smirk on his face, his black rectangle pointed straight at us, as... absolutely nothing of note happened. "Uh, wait. Hold on a

sec here, I forgot to activate the...”, he mumbled, and tapped the glassa his rectangle a few more times, becoming increasingly frustrated as his actions produced little more thana soft tapping sound anda few clicking noises. “Wait, wait, hold on, I’ve almost got it!”, he called out, perhaps sensing me and Sabarene’s rapidly waning attention. “Ah! There we go!”, he proclaimed, just as we began ta walk away, a confident look on his face once more, one that was almost immediately replaced bya panicked one as a loud, clicking sound rang outta his rectangle. “Itbecomesaninstrumentofwonder!”, he quickly yelled out, right asa brilliant, blinding light flashed outta his, er, quadrilateral, causing me ta wince and stumble backwards. “Fiat preserve us!”, Sabarene exclaimed, covering her eyes with both her hands. She recovered fairly quickly. “What on the continent was that?!”, she asked aloud. “Oh, just a simple blinding spell,” Blondie responded from behind, lightly tapping Sabarene’s left shoulder with his baton. “Eah!” she yelped, shirking a bit. “Where in the... how did you get...” “Now that...”, Lucas said, as he casually dida frontflip over her black hooded head. “is a -ugh!”, he groaned, face planting on the icy floor. “Is a... is a secret,” he dizzily finished, as he clumsily got back up on his feet. “So do you believe I’m a Sorcerer now, ladies?”, the blonde fella inquired witha slightly bloody nose. “Of course we don’t!” Sabarene barked in frustration. “I don’t know how you just did that, but I’m quite sure it was a trick of some sort!” “Speak fer yerself, Septacene,” I countered, “I’m pretty darn convinced.” “You’re convinced?!” Sabarene asked, highly exasperated. “About what? The existence of magic?!” “Nah, that ain’t it.” I responded. “Well... good,” she slowly said, “because I was beginning to think that you truly were an imbecile!” I picked a bit at my teeth. “Eh, um, that is ta say, that blinding spell or whatever done convinced me that hesa Sorcerer

or whatever, I already sorta knew magic was a thing,.", I admitted with a sheepish smile "But-wha..!", Sabarene fumed, before Lucas cut her off. "I'm delighted to see that at least ONE of you has common sense," he answered with glee. I cleared my throat. "Don't get too happy there, fella.", I countered. "Ya still ain't making a whole lotta sense.", I said, as Sabarene began ta bang her head repeatedly against a pillar. "Ya have vast, unfathomable powers, fine, I get that, I even accept that. But why the heck would ya choose ta reveal that ta me and some overly idealistic alcoholic?" "Why, because I wish to lend you a hand, of course!", Blondie said with a bow. "Lend me a what?" I asked, narrowing my eye. "Um, I mean, I wish to be your servant!" he quickly clarified, flustered as heck. "Servant?", I asked, "Vassal. Minion, Sidekick, Assistant, Right Han- look, just let me travel alongside you, and in exchange, I'll lend you my magical might!" I blinked a few times. "Now why on earth wouldya wanna do that?", I asked, skeptical. "I suppose I could say that I'm grateful for what you did back in the restaurant, but that would be a complete and utter fabrication," Lucas responded. "No, no, there's a very logical and specific reason why I wish to lend you my aid, Patchy, a motivation far more captivating than such tried and tired platitudes as gratitude, or charity." "And that would be?" "Is it not obvious?" Lucas asked, removing his tophat, spinning it around by the inside of its rim with his index finger. "It's because you're an elf!" I stared blankly at the Sorcerer, the word not registering with me. "A what?" "An elf!" Lucas exclaimed. "A member of the fair folk! Plus two to dexterity, but minus two to constitution! Wait, then again, you might qualify as a drow, I suppose..." "I don't have the slightest clue what yer yapping about, boy.", I said, not wanting ta be rude, but not understanding a lick of what he was saying, despite his Continental being good as

anyone else's. "Ah, well, don't worry about the minor details.", Lucas said with a wave of his right hand. "All you need to know is that you're an elf!" "Oh?" I said, deciding to humor him for some reason, "And what makes ya reckon I'mma shelf?" Lucas stared blankly at me. "Seriously? Your ears, of course!" "My ears?" "Yes, your ears! They're tall! And pointy! Ergo, you're an elf!" "Oh," I stated. "Yer saying I'm Fremdosian, I getcha." "No, I'm saying you're an elf, Patchy." Lucas responded, a hint of impatience in his usually mellow voice. "Alright, so say I'mma shelf, and mind you, I ain't got the slightest clue what the heck that actually means. Why does thata all things make ya wanna hang out with me?" "Simple!", Lucas explained. "I'm a Sorcerer. Sorcerers love magic." He spun his hand in circles and pointed at me, "And you. You're an elf. Magic, you see, tends to be drawn towards elves." He tapped his baton against his tophat as he finished his outlining his, uh, logic. "Therefore, if I stick around you, I, a Sorcerer, will be sure to run into magic, and you, an elf, will be sure to have an experienced and knowledgeable companion at your side when inevitably confronted by the terrors arcana. Therefore, traveling together would be in both our rational self interest, would it not?" I tilted my head and thought fera spell. On one hand, the fella seemed like he could, in fact, cast a whole buncha magic and the like, which could be useful, more or less. But on the other sidea the coin, my prior experience with magic wasn't exactly something ta write home about, so perhaps avoiding the subject altogether would be the safe way ta go. "Sorry," I apologized, "but I ain't got no metal ta give ya, so even if I wanted ta hire you as a servant, I wouldn't-" "I'll pay for all my expenses, of course," Lucas said. "I'll also provide you with a minor stipend for putting up with me." My ears twitched. "Stipend, ya say?", I asked, significantly more interested in Blondie than I had

been before. "Oh, nothing major," Lucas said, "I can only offer two purses of Runiertian coins for every seven rising periods you agree to tolerate my presence." "Welcome aboard, Mucus!" I proclaimed, sticking out my hand. "Sister Amelia!", Sabarene hissed. "We don't even have tickets to Fremdos yet, why did you agree to let this imbecile travel with us!" "You're lacking tickets to Fremdos?", Blondie asked. "Er, yeah technically.", I admitted. "But don't worry, all we gotta do is beat the crap outta some guy named Hairy Deadpan, apparently he overbooked his tickets." "Harry Dresden.", Blondie uttered, smacking his face. "Er, what?" "The name I used was Harry Dresden, not Hairy Deadpan, you uncultured savage." "The name you used?", Sabarene said aloud, her forehead slightly purple. "Oh!", "That means that the person who overbooked his tickets was..." "Me, naturally.", Lucas said. "Though the clerk told me that it wasn't really a big deal when I bought them..." "Huh." I mumbled. "So you were heading ta Fremdos?" "Of course I was!", he said. "I didn't want to miss the upcoming speech, after all." "The upcoming speech?", Sabarene asked, a little confused. "Yes, the speech! The General's speech." Lucas added, grinning mischievously.

"The... the General is giving a speech?", Sabarene asked, her lips curled in disbelief. "I-I wasn't made aware of this!" "Oh, well, it's top secret," he said. "I had to ask around quite a bit to find out the truth. But from what the Merchants are saying, this speech is supposed to be the big one." "The big one?" "Yes, the big one. The rally to end all rallies!", Lucas declared with a wink. "The General will FINALLY declare war on this fine city of Provesh." "N-nonsense," Sabarene stuttered. "The... the General's been missing for cycles ..." "Not missing," Lucas corrected, "Traveling." "T-traveling?" Sabarene, her face looking more pale by the secon-, er, by the moment. "Yes, traveling, there's no



need to repeat the last word of everything I say, Snake.”, Blondie said, though why he called her a serpent I ain’t got the slightest clue. “The old man’s been gathering intel on the remaining Independent Kingdoms. Apparently, he’s gotten what he needs to launch an assault on this fine city, or so I’m told.” “B-balderdash.”, Sabarene said, a great deal more nervous. “Have you any proof of your claims, Charlatan?” With a wink and a smile, Blondie produced a sloppily stuffed envelope from underneath his cape. “Here, read this letter. I procured it from a rather voluminous merchant, you see.” I squinted at the sloppily folded letter, as the white haired lady’s eyes scanned it like a hawk. Don’t quite know what it said, but, uh, it sure *looked* important. The words on the paper were just scribbles to me, but at the bottom of the letter there was a fancy wax seal, a bright yellow color. “Oh... oh dear,” Sabarene said as she finished reading the letter, cupping her hand over her mouth. As she went into a state of catonic shock, I squinted my eye at the man in purple, who was whistling some tune light heartedly. “Not that I particularly care or nothing,”, I yawned, “but ya sure seem giddy at the prospecta this fella starting up a war.” “Giddy? No, I’m absolutely ecstatic!”, Lucas proclaimed. “Er, why?”, I asked. “Wars are like elves, you see.” “They both have pointy ears?” “They both tend to draw out the highest caliber of magic.”, he explained, rolling his eyes as if his, uh, unique sorta logic was easy as heck to follow. “A sealed, ancient, and forbidden tome entrusted from generation to generation becomes much less forbidden and much more tempting to unseal when one’s family is about to be put to the sword, after all.” “But what about all them folks who end up disemboweled, beheaded, and such?” I asked, not so much concerned as I was curious. “It’s a trade off.”, Blondie breezily answered, his hands up in the air. “Just as a few insects must be displaced from the earth when one digs to

make a well, some minor sacrifices must be made from time to time, in order to accomplish a greater good." "No," Sabarene violently hissed. "They musn't." She quickly turned to me. "Sister Am- No, Miss Axeman Red Four. I don't believe that this man is a Sorcerer, and I am pretty much completely sure the General isn't going to be giving a speech in Fremdos any time soon." She swallowed. "Be that as it may, falsehoods like the one this charlatan is telling us tend to have to them a kernel of truth, and this letter seems to be genuine. The more militaristic of my siblings may be plotting something.... stupid." "Ah, I see," Lucas said, nodding his head at Sabarene. "You believe that something is rotten in the state of Denm-... Fremdos." He smiled. "I suppose a conspiracy will work just as well as a war, secret plots tend to be chock full of good magical fodder; evil chancellors, demonic spirits, conspiring cultists, stuff like that." "So what's the plan?", I asked, ignoring Lucas as he continued babbling on. "Still set on going ta Fremdos?" "Naturally!" Sabarene spiritedly confirmed, tightening her left hand into a fist. "Justice demands it! But I'm afraid I'll have to put the whole "getting your life back in order" thing on hold, at least until I can confirm that nothing weird is transpiring in the city." "Ya mean, until we confirm that nothing weird is transpiring." I replied, brushing off my shoulders. "M-miss Axeman Red Four..." Sabarene slowly gasped, as her eyes began ta water up. I held up my hand. "I ain't gonna help ya causea any sentimental reasons or nothing, I'm just tagging along due to any other viable alternative." I clarified, and took inna short breath. "Still, looking inta this will at least be something ta do when we get ta Fremdos, even if it does turn out ta be a buncha nonsense." Sabarene looked at me, shook her head in understanding, and... embraced me inna big ole hug. "Erk.", I erked, my body tightly constrained by Sabarene's

surprisingly strong arms. "I toldya,", I squeaked, I ain't helping ya outta the goodnessa my heart or nothing, sothisherehuggayersisprettydarnunwarranted." "Thank you," she whispered into my ear, ignoring my panicked protests. "Y-yer welcome." I answered, my face weirdly warm. "Now that that's settled, why don't we head to the Caravan?", Blondie asked, smiling. "It is slightly chilly in here, and while I appreciate that the wind is causing my cape to blow around dramatically, the novelty is beginning to wear off." "Fine, Charlatan," Sabarene said. "If Miss Axeman Red Four thinks it's a good idea, then fine, you may come to Fremdos with us." "Fantastic!", Lucas said excitedly, handing me and Sabarene two small piecesa leather. "Wait here for but a moment, I need to grab my luggage." Then, skipping likea ballerina, the purple clad blonde boy scuttled off, heading back down the stairs ta the eatery. "Alright, let's use these two tickets to get on the Caravan before that guy gets back," Sabarene quickly whispered, soon as the fella was outta earshot. "Eh, why should we do that?", I asked. "Because HE'S RIDICULOUS!", she yelled, stomping her feet against the floor. "And I ain't?", I asked, wiggling my stump around fer emphasis. "Oh please, the possession of a minor wound or two does not put you on the same level as a delusional moron who insists in the existence of magic." I shrugged my shoulders. "Even if yer right, s'not like there'd be any point in taking the tickets and running, he has about four more, y'know. Might as well let him ride along with us and take his metal while we can." She rolled her eyes. "I suppose you're right, but I must say, you are being a bit of a hypocrite here." "Hypocrite? How so?" "You seem to accept this "Sorcerer" with open arm- um, with an open heart, but at the same time you're still extremely distrustful of that Mister Thief gentleman." Sabarene explained. "Ah. Yeah, I reckon I am being a bitta a hypocrite.

But, see, there's something that separates a weirdo like that Thief fella and this here wizard guy." "Whatever do you mean?" "Well, Blondie actually showed me his face, for one, and more importantly, he didn't break into my apartment and take my life savings. "T-true...", Sabarene answered. "Though I'll admit there is something else I'm thinking about. This Thucas-" "Lucas," Sabarene corrected. "Lucas fella. He says he's a Sorcerer. If that's even slightly true, there's a few questions I'd like to ask him, about magic and the like." Sabarene sighed. "If that makes you happy, then fine, though I must insist you don't get too taken in by a few odd parlor tricks. There's many things on this Continent that you and I may not understand, but to chalk them up to magic or the supernatural would be to walk the path of ignorance." I gritted my teeth, and thought about the gruesome girl who bled backwards. "Trust me," I said, slowly nodding my head, "I don't think magic exists because I want it to." "If...if you insist", Sabarene said, her face resigned, like that offa tutor attempting to teach a brain damaged dog advanced calculus. "Aw, don't look so down.", I added, trying to cheer her up. "Worst comes to worst, ya getta quartera a coin purse every seven rising periods just for putting up with him." "A quarter of a purse? Didn't he say he'd give us two whole purses?" "Nah, he said he'd give ME two," I responded, sticking out my tongue. "I figure giving ya a quartera one is fair enough though, especially if it gets ya to calm yer tits." "You vulgar Unionist!", she yelled, and slapped my cheek with her metal hand. The red eyed girl didn't put too much force into the blow, though, and from her face, I could tell she was beginning to lighten up, her scowl replaced by a slight smile, one that persisted even when Blondie returned, carrying on his back a weird sacka some sort, held to his shoulders by straps that kinda looked like suspenders. "Well, shall we be on our way?",

he asked. "Er, sure, let's getta move on." I said, and let the fella in the tophat lead the way. He took about three steps before pausing fera spell. "Um, by the by, do any of you know where the Caravan actually is?" I licked my lips some. "Was hoping you'd be able ta tell me that, Sucas.", I answered, completely clueless as ta the where in the big open hall we were supposed to go ta get ta the Caravan. "Hm," Sabarene chimed in. "I, um, I may be mistaken, but I believe that thing over there is what we're looking for.", she said, pointing straight aheada her. "Ya mean the front desk?", I asked, squinting my eye where she had pointed. "Yeah, I guess we could just ask the Clerk fella where ta....

Suns Above!" I didn't notice earlier, either causea the gusta snowy wind or my lacka depth perception, but Sabarene wasn't pointing at the Front desk. No, no, what she was pointing at, wasa the wide open gap behind the front desk, or ta be more specific, a hulking monstrosity, a gigantic ark madea wood and steel, that was lurching, forward and forward, towards the gap. "Oh wow..." Lucas muttered, without even a tracea irony in his voice, "that's one big boat.' He wasn't off the mark too much. The vehicle approaching the Depot certainly looked likea ship cept, it was about fifty times as large as any boat that ya'd see in the docks, and sure as heck didn't seem to be even in the slightest bitta disrepair, the wood on its humongous exterior well polished. "That ain't no boat," I said, staring wide eyed at the incoming hulka wood and metal, not so much scared as I was captivated. "I... gander that must be the Caravan, huh?" "That does seem to be the case, yes.", Sabarene concurred, as the thing docked, plugging up the giant gap in the Depot's entrance hall, not making the place warmer by any means, but causing the near constant gustsa wind ta calm down some. I opened up my mouth ta say something, but the words I tried ta speak was drowned out by a loud, screeching

sound, like a million axes being pressed against a moving grindstone. The cacophony was, of course, just a side effect of the massive thing coming to a stop, nothing to worry about, but damn if it didn't make me wish I had two hands to cover both my ears with. Once the Caravan stopped, well, so did the sound. For all an instant, that is, because the screeching was almost immediately replaced by a series of clunking and clicking noises, that started at the left end of the massive Ark, and ended at the right. Soon as the last click clunked, and the last clunk clicked, five vertical strips of the Caravan's wooden exterior detached from it, making the giant wooden "ship" look like a haphazardly peeled potato. I winced and took a step back, thinking the damn thing was gonna crash or explode or something, but fortunately, that didn't seem to be the case. See, the strips didn't fall off the Caravan completely, they just detached themselves like they were doors on an upside-down DeLorean. Five large, wide planks descended from the five openings, landing on the ice in a blunt manner. The planks served as bridges, it would seem, because all of a sudden, a whole bunch of people came out of the giant wooden ship that wasn't a ship, walking down the boards suspended hundreds and hundreds of arm-lengths above the icy wastes as calmly and naturally as they would a small set of stairs. The crowd that emerged was fairly big, I reckon, around two hundred people or so came out of the Caravan. Hardly any of them were dressed as flamboyantly as Lucas was, but they looked pretty well to do, their clothes nice and neat. Like the folks at the eatery, not many of them were wearing colored armbands, and even less were wearing any sort of armor, carrying any kind of weapon. At least half of the people leaving the Caravan seemed to be women and children, which was a bit of a surprise to me. I hadn't traveled too far from Provesh before, and certainly never on a Caravan, but even so, the

demographics of the folks leaving the ship didn't make too much sense. As hard as it was ta get a (legitimate) job in the city of ice and snow, it was a good deal harder ta get one elsewhere in the Independent Kingdoms. That meant that the vast majority of travelers ta Provesh were men, able bodied men who took on what work they could ta send some metal back ta their collaborators and offspring. But the folks the Caravan had dropped off, they seemed more like settlers than migrant workers, nice threads aside, mosta em were carrying a whole lotta luggage, even the little ones. And like in the wedding cake shaped eatery below, nonea the people coming outta the Caravan had armbands on em, which, if they were Migrant workers, they woulda almost definitely had on. "Er, Sister, are all these folks Siblingsa yers?", I asked, a mite confused. "I wouldn't imagine that any of them are, no." "How do ya reckon that?" The white haired lady frowned. "Unfortunately, the General decreed that any Siblings who traveled to non Collective cities without written permission were to be put to death via..." She paused for a moment... "via...oh!", she said, snapping her fingers. "Stripping, public humiliation, and stoning for the Sisters, and castration with a poisoned blade for the Brothers." "Christ," Lucas muttered, his face contorted in sympathy pain, "That's almost comically evil." I put my arm in fronta Sabarene, stopping dead in our tracks as the hordea people scurried past us, alla them walking slow so as not ta slip on the ice. "Woah, woah, hold up. We ain't gonna go ta Fremdos if it means that yer going ta be splattered bya buncha rocks." "Don't worry," Sabarene reassured me, " I was one of the few who DID receive written permission to travel, so I should be in the clear." "Then just who the heck are these folks, if they ain't yer Siblings?" "Hm. In all likelihood, they're inhabitants of Fremdos before it was conquered. The General said it was perfectly fine for *them* to

leave, in fact, I believe the edict in question even subsidized their traveling expenses.”

“Clever.”, Lucas observed. “The man conquers a city, then incentives and indirectly facilitates the exodus of those unable or unwilling to assimilate.” “I suppose so, though I’m loathe to call any policy thought up by that hare-brained murderer clever.” Sabarene said, then licked her lips. “But this isn’t a very good sign. I could understand people migrating from Fremdos immediately after it was conquered, but for them to flock here in such numbers four cycles after the fact.... Things may have deteriorated there more than I thought. Our conversation ended there, and while we weren’t doing much besides speculating on things we couldn’t have had any real clue about, our chat at least served the purpose of killing enough time for the planks leading up to the Caravan to free up. “Should we head up?”, Sabarene asked, as the rest of the crowd stomped on past us. “Might as well, I guess”, I said, and strolled over to put my boot on the edge of the leftmost plank. Now, to be sure, the plank I choose was more than sturdy, and about as wide as five people would be if they laid on the ground sideways, but even so, walking up the slight incline to get into the caravan felt like walking on a tight rope. There was just something scary about being up so high, and even though I was in no danger of falling, the lack of handrails on the plank made my head spin. The path before me seemed to thin and widen, thin and widen, and the ramp that fifty or so people had walked down with ease became a mighty struggle to me. Course, Sabarene and Blondie were behind me, so I didn’t stop walking or nothing, but I do admit that I breathed a sigh of relief once I got past the outer shell of the Caravan. Sabarene seemed to have no trouble navigating the plank, walking up it as calmly as the folks had walked down it, and Lucas, hat on his head, pack on his back, and baton in his hand, hopped up the



plank, traversing the entirety of the makeshift bridge using just his right leg, for what ever reason. I had thought that the plank would lead right into the heart of the Caravan, but instead, it led into a narrow, tube like corridor, one that seemed to snake around in a circle. "Pretty cozy in here, isn't it?", Lucas remarked, bent over at the waist like he was trying to buckle his boots. "You ain't kidding.", I concurred, the points of my ears scrapping against the cold metal ceiling of the round hall. "Those folks musta been mighty patient to have crunched up in here for the journey." "Um, this isn't where we'll be staying for the duration of the trip, Miss Axeman Red Four," Sabarene said, ducking her hooded head slightly. "I think we're in a passageway of some sort, one that presumably leads deeper into the Caravan." "Y'know, that does make a good deal more sense." We kept on walking through the tubish corridor, hoping that it'd get us somewhere with a little more breathing room. Our pace was pretty sluggish. The floor wasn't made of ice or nothing, but the hallway was just too darn tight for us to navigate it in a quick manner. See, besides the crampedness, there were these little oval shaped openings we had to step through every twenty or so arm-lengths. Going through the hall wasn't tiring, but it sure as heck was tedious. "Woah!", Lucas yelled out, tripping on one of the oval steps. He sprawled on the floor, not injured, but definitely shook up and irritated. "Christ, it's like they DESIGNED this hallway to be a pain in the ass!", he spat. "This wouldn't have happened if you were walking normally, Charlatan.", Sabarene chided, even as she helped him to his feet. "Ah, but Sister Sabarene," Lucas countered, "if I walked normally, I would have smashed my hat on the ceiling, and heaven knows Patchy damaged the poor thing enough." "Why not just take the silly thing off for a few moments, then?" Lucas looked up at Sabarene, horrified. "Don't be ridiculous." He

slowly got back up on his feet again, bending over at the waist, I guess to preserve the sanctity of his head covering. "Ah, that wasn't as bad as I made it out to be after all.", Lucas remarked cheerily, dusting himself. "Still, I should probably write a letter of complaint to the owner of this vessel. I'm fairly certain this hall violates quite a few OSHA regulations." Not knowing what a OSHA was, and only having the faintest of clues as to what a regulation was, I ignored Blondie's remark and kept on trudging through the death trap of a hallway. After spending far too much time covering far too little distance, we finally got to the end of the tight passageway, finding ourselves in front of a small door, same size as the twenty or so oval openings we had to step through. Unfortunately, the door had two handles on it, one on the left end of the door, one on the right. I yanked one of them down and pushed forward, but that didn't seem to be enough. "Uh, I might need your help here, Sister.", I said. "Oh! Oh, is the door locked?", Sabarene asked, pulling off her glove in an energetic manner. "Er, not quite, no, see, it, uh-" "Has two handles!", Lucas interrupted. "But, alas, Patchy only has one! Hand, that is." He shimmied past Sabarene, then me. "And so the differently abled elf reaches a dilemma! Try and open the door herself, or suffer the humiliation of requesting aid from a friend." Blondie sadly shook his head, then grinned. "Fortunately, the elf thought ahead! She hired a brilliant young sorcerer as her servant." He gently leaned his staff against a wall, and cracked his fingers. "Open sesame!" he yelled, and simultaneously pulled down both handles of the door. With a gentle push, he opened the metal oval. "After you, Patchy." I narrowed my eye, grateful for his help, but ticked off a mite more than I was grateful. "Did you really have to run your mouth like that, Lucas?" Lucas blinked a few times. "Not really, no." The oval door led into a much more open

room. It wasn't terribly large on its own merits, in fact it was half the sizea my apartment, but compared ta the corridor we had just exited it might as well have been the Pentagon. At the very least, it could somewhat comfortably accommodate the five fellas in it. I say five, cause besides me, Sabarene, and Blondie, there were two other individuals chilling in the room beyond the irritating corridor, botha them standing on opposite sides of a big, yellow painted door, one I reckon led deeper inta the Caravan. Botha em were clad from head ta toe in Blue Runiertian Armor, and I do mean head ta toe, the only openings in their armor were three small slits on their bucket shaped helmets, two fer the eyes and one fer the mouths. Now, the full seta Runiertian armor meant onea two things; either the giant tincans by the door were highly skilled, or highly rich, least, in theory. In practice, it meant that not a lotta weapons would do much damage to em, certainly not a couplea hatchets, a baton, and a weird metal hand. As intimidating as the two damn identical looking metal covered behemoths seemed, I was far more concerned about what eacha em held in their hands. The one farthest ta the right, well, his left hand was wrapped around a claymore, which wouldn'ta bothered me if his right hand wasn't *also* wrapped around a claymore. Both claymores were smaller than yer usual claymore, only about two thirds the sizea Swordarm Orange's, but that didn't change the fact that the guy was dual wielding weapons that just weren't meant ta be dual wielded. The other doorman was no less weird. He wasn't dual wielding no claymores, zweihanders, or bastard longswords, but he did shields strapped ta eacha his hands. And by shields, I mean two bigass metal kite shields, far bigger and heavier than the puny lil'buckler Swordarm Blue had used. "Oh!", said the fella with the shields, as he noticed me, Sabarene, and Lucas. "Hello there! You must be the Handmaidens,

right?" "Don't be absurd, Seventeen," the dual claymore wielding person responded, "We picked up the Handmaidens in Fremdos." "Ah, then who are they, I wonder?", Shields pondered. "I'd say they're call girls.", Claymore responded. "Yes, definitely call girls. Especially that blonde one, she's a bit too dolled up to be a Handmaiden." "The one with the hat? I dunno, she looks a bit too boyish for my taste...", Shields muttered, then cleared his throat. "Greetings, prostitutes! Swordarm Black Nineteen and I are honored to make your acquaintance!" The mention of the word Swordarm caused me to quickly duck behind Lucas's cape. "Unfortunately,", the man continued, oblivious to my disappearance, "due to a rather nasty incident involving a vat of beef stew and the proliferation of several bodily fluids, we are unable to allow the three of you on board." "That is quite unfortunate, my good man!", Blondie responded, smiling widely. "But we aren't actually prostitutes, well, me and Patchy anyways, I can't really speak for the albino." "Oh?", Claymore said, as Sabarene silently simmered. "We are but passengers, wishing to make our way to the cabin.", Lucas responded, waving three tickets in front of Claymore's face. "Huh.", Claymore acknowledged, tilting his bucket like a helmet to read the pieces of leather. He looked to Shields. "Apparently these three *are* passengers. Does that mean we let them through?" Shields tilted his helmet slightly. "No, I don't quite think so. Passengers or not, it's too early to allow them on board." "Ah! Yes, it is a bit early.", Claymore concurred. He looked up at Blondie and Sabarene. "I'm sorry, but you lot'll have to leave the Caravan for now, we're not due to depart for another two rising periods." "Why can't we board early, Mister Swordarm Black Nineteen?", Sabarene asked. "Oh, maintenance and the like.", Claymore said with a slight wave of his left sword. "The cabins have to be refurbished, the kitchen needs to be

restocked, the vomit needs to be cleaned up, you know, the usual.” “Er, is there any way you’d consider making an exception fer us?”, I asked, still hidden behind Lucas’s cape. “Sorry,” Shields say, nodding his head, “but procedure says that we’re only allowed to let a few categories of individuals onto the Caravan early.” “Those categories being?”, Sabarene asked. “Swordarms, Clerks with a color of Orange or higher, Cute Handmaidens, Waiters, Bartenders, Pregnant women, Lewd Handmaidens, anyone with the color Black, Shy Handmaidens, and finally...”, the Swordarm withouta sword said, “...Jesters with a focus in crouch related humor.” “Hey, Nucas,” I whispered, still cowering behind his cape. “Feel like taking one fer the team?” “Not quite, no.”, he coughed. “Aw, c’mon. Yera wizard, whatsa few kicks ta the groin gonna do ta ya?” “Non-negotiable, Patchy.”, he hissed, sweeping his cape around his shoulder fer emphasis. That actiona his was kinda unfortunate, cause my boots sorta got tangled up in the purple fabric as he turned his cape. I managed ta keep my footing fer alla an instant, then promptly proceeda ta fall over likea sacka potatoes. “Gah!”, I yelped, as the hard metal floor rushed up towards my already bruised and battered face. “Woah!”, Shields exclaimed, catching me with his aegises right before my smashed up nose beamea smushed up nose. “Are you alright, call-gir-”, he began to say, then stopped, as the eyeslits of his helmets gaze at my stump, then my patch. Shields continued ta stare at me fera uncomfortably long while. “Hey, Nineteen.”, he called out, excitedly. “Get a look at this woman!” Claymore strolled over, and like Shields, did a once over of me. “Ha!”, the dual sword wielding tincan exclaimed. “That’s hilarious!” “I know, right?”, Shields said, amusement oozing outta his every word. I gritted my teeth. “Look, there ain’t no need fer ya ta-” “You two ought to be ashamed of yourselves!”, Sabarene

squeaked out, somehow more indignant than I was. "Sure, Sister Amelia's hideous physical deformities may seem amusing to you, but she's a real human being, with real feelings!" Claymore tilted his head. "Er, girl, we weren't laughing at your friend' -" "If you must mock her,", Sabarene continued, anger in her voice rising, "then at least mock her for things she can control!" "Such as her horrendously bad temper, for example.", Blondie contributed. "Yeah, like her horrendously bad temper!", Sabarene agreed. "Or her rampant paranoia, her animalistic greed, her rather one dimensional views on currency, her lack of basic critical thinking skills, not to mention her-" She paused, perhaps realizing she was going off on a tangent. "Well, never mind that! The point is, laughing at someone for something they can't control is absurd! Even more absurd than-" "Uh, girl, we're not laughing at your friend," Claymore quickly interjected. "-soft cider! Wait, what?", Sabarene asked, kicked outta her self-righteous rant. "We're Swordarms!", Shields uselessly announced. "Y'know, righteous protectors of the Kingdoms, "Honor above all" and all that, we would never laugh at a small little crippled girl!" "I ain't that small..." I mumbled, then nodded my head. "Er, wait, forget that. What were ya laughing at, then, if not my hideous physical deformities?" "We were laughing at your eyepatch!", Shields cheerily proclaimed. I tightened my hand into a fist. "How izzat any different?!" I demanded, far more confused than pissed, though I was a good deal pissed. "Context, lass, context.", Claymore pointed out. "And that patch of yours looks fine, the polished leather is a nice touch." "Oh, it's not polished, just spit shone, and bleached slightly to match her complexion." Sabarene said bashfully. "Good on ya for keeping the color of her skin in mind, brown is a notoriously difficult tone to work wit-" "Enough blathering bout what does and don't match my mug!", I yelled, feeling mighty

objectified. "Just get to the point!" "Oh, right," the distracted Swordarm said. "Two rising periods ago, Seventeen and I were sent a message via duck- "A duck.", Lucas suddenly interjected. "You deliver your messages via ducks?" "What else would we send them by?" "Hm, wouldn't a raven, or an owl be more suitable for the task?" "A what and a what now?" Shields asked. "Don't pay that Charlatan too much mind, Mister Swordarm Black Seventeen," Sabarene cheerily chimed, " he's a nonsensical numbskull." I bit my lip, and looked at Shields left eye slit. "Alright, so ya gotta duck, he done flapped his wings and flew ta ya with a letter and everything. The heck doesa duck got ta do with ya laughing at my eyepatch?" "Uh, here's the thing, lass. The duck carried two letters with him. One was a surprisingly poignant poem addressed to me and Nineteen from a secret admirer, and the other one was addressed to, uh, do ya remember what it said specifically, Nineteen?" "I believed the envelope was addressed to, er, the "Brown Eyepatch Girl Who Will Attempt To Board Caravan Early In Two Rising Periods.", Claymore said. "Yer kidding me, that's absolutely ridiculous." "Hence why we laughed when we saw ya.", Shields explained. "I mean, no offense, but you don't see too many Fiatists in Provesh with eyepatches, even less with one arm, come to think of it." "But isn't it fascinating?", Claymore said, enchanted. "The letter not only was addressed to someone of your exact makeup, but it also predicted that you would attempt to board the Caravan early!" "You threw away the darn thing out, right?" I asked, hopefully. "Nope!" Claymore responded, proudly nodding his head. "I actually have it right here!" Before I could getta word in edgewise, the blue armored fella dropped his swords and shoved a folded piecea parchment inta my hands. As fer where he actually pulled the letter out from, I don't quite remember, and I don't think I want ta. "Huh. Yeah, that there

issa letter, alright.”, I muttered, glancing at the scribbles on the parchment. “Could ya let us through the door, now?”, I asked, crumpling the paper into a ball and stuffing it into the pockets of my robes. “No, no, sorry, you’ll have to wai-You’re not going to read the letter?”, Shields asked, a tinge of disappointment in his voice. “If I do so, willya let me and these two nitwits in?” “Er, no.” “Then no.” “Then again,” Claymore said, his voice oddly calm, “if the three of you want to board the Caravan early so badly, you can-”, he paused, a malicious looking smile spread across his face. “in exchange for providing me and Nineteen with a service.” “Witha service?”, I asked, lost. “I... I see.”, Sabarene responded, shaking her head grimly. She took in a deep breath, pushed her hood down, and quickly began ta disrobe. “I, uh, I wasn’t talking about that kind of service, lass.” Claymore choked out, the slitsa his helmet pointed down at his boots. “Oh, what were you talking about, then?” the half naked sister asked, blinking. “Gah! Put yer dang clothes back on!”, I yelled, doing my best not ta look at her chest, right before an intense bright light eclipsed the room. “Suns above!”, the two Swordarms exclaimed, understandably unused ta blinding spells and the like. I glared at Blondie, the sourcea the flash, well, the sourcea onea the flashes, at any rate. “Whatya do that fer, ya sorry excuse offa Sorcerer!?” “My apologies, I thought I had the flash turned off.”, Lucas not-so-helpfully explained, his black rectangle pointed at Sabarene. “So, er, Swordarm Black Eighteen-” “Seventeen”, Sabarene calmly corrected, slipping her naked arm back into a black sleeve. “Seventeen, yeah.”, I quickly muttered, inna futile effort ta cling ta some semblance of normalcy. “You were mentioning something abouta service?” “Y-yes, but it’s not, uh, it’s not that sort of...” “Yeah, not that sorta service, I gotcha, I gotcha. So what do ya want us ta do?” “He probably wants us to deliver an item of some



kind, say, a bag of flour to a baker.” Lucas explained. “ The Baker will then use said flour to bake a loaf of bread.”, Blondie continued. “Then the Baker will have us deliver the loaf of bread to a Chef, who will use the loaf of bread to prepare a beef wellington ensemble. We’ll then deliver the beef wellington ensemble to a starving artist who, invigorated by the nourishment of the dish, will paint his most brilliant landscape yet. He’ll get on his knees and beg us to bring his magnus opis to his estranged daughter, who upon seeing the painting, will shed a single tear of remorse, and-” “That’s the dumbest crap I’ve ever heard.” I turned ta Claymore. “So what is it that ya *actually* want us ta do?” “Uh... there’s this parcel, that I’d like you to bring to a Cook of ours, filled with, uh, fl-...” “Fulla flour, right?” I guessed witha sigh. “Fine”, I said, sticking out my hand. “Tell me where this Cooka yers is and I’ll run the package over ta him.” “He’s in Fremdos.” I raised an eyebrow. “Now y’know I can’t exactly mosey over there and back, least not in the spanna two rising periods.” “No, no, I want you to give the parcel to him when we get to Fremdos.”, the armored Swordarm clarified. “Wait, wait, so yer gonna let us board early first? I asked. “That’s the plan, yeah.”, Claymore said. “But what if we just end up not giving yer friend the package?” “Oh, you seem like a stand up lass, I trust you.” “Y-ya do?”, I asked, confused. “But ya ain’t got no waya knowing if I’ll uphold my enda the bargain. Er, I know! How bout I give ya Blondie over there as collateral?” “No need for that.”, Claymore responded firmly. “Just bring a satchel of Proveshian spices to my friend, and we’ll be even.” “If ya say so.”, I mumbled, rubbing the backa my head. The Swordarm with the Shields shook his head, put down his aegises, and witha chuckle, pulled the yellow door open. I shrugged my shoulders once more, and stepped through the opening, followed by a thankfully dressed Sabarene and a miraculously

silent Lucas. The yellow door led into another long corridor, one that looked almost identical to the first one we walked through, but fortunately this one was about three times as wide. Soon as we walked about a third of the way through, and got out of earshot of the Swordarms, I piped up. "Oi, Samftapene, mind answering a question for me?" "Not my name, but sure, ask away.", she responded from behind me. "Why the heck did ya spontaneously strip naked?", I inquired, in as composed a tone I could muster. "Oh! That's obvious!", Sabarene energetically exclaimed. "I thought the gentleman with those two big swords was offering us early access inside in exchange for sexual favors!" "No, no, that... that wasn't what I was asking-" I tried to clarify my question, then stopped, realizing that trying to make sense of a nonsensical action was futile. "What is it that Sisters of the Collective do, exactly?" Lucas whispered to me. "Don't know, and don't really want to.", I whispered back, then paused. "Wait a moment, ain't ya from the Collective yourself?" "Absolutely not!", Lucas loudly denied, rendering the entire point of our whispering moot. "Yer not?" I asked, perplexed. "But ya gotta weird name just like Sister-" "Sabarene", the white haired lady quickly interjected. "does." "True, true, but our names being different from yours doesn't necessarily make them similar to each other.", Blondie answered, a smile on his perpetually peppy face. "The name Lucas, well, where I'm from, it means light." "But you ain't made a light..." I dumbassedly observed. "Brilliant deduction, Patchy!", Blondie said, clapping his black gloved hands together excitedly. "My name, and I suspect the albino's name, aren't literal ones. They're based off of concepts that our parents found appealing when we were born." He scratched his chin. "Though to be honest, most people in my homeland don't particularly care about the meaning behind a name, unless they're about to give

birth or trying to figure out the true nature of characters in popular fiction.” “Then what’s the pointa yer name in the first place?” “To distinguish myself from others, I suppose.”, Lucas said. “After all, the land of Sorcerers is a very chaotic place, always in flux!”, he announced, twirling his baton. “Being able to pinpoint precisely who threw a frostbolt at whom is a necessity!” “Did you honestly just say you were from the land of Sorcerers, Charlatan?”, Sabarene asked, inna slightly frustrated voice. “Of course!”, he answered brightly. “I’m a Sorcerer, so it’s only natural that I’d hail from a land that specializes in sorcery, right?” “And just where is this land of sorcery?”, Sabarene asked, clearly not convinced. “Now that,” Lucas said, sweeping his cape dramatically, “is a secr- ugh!” The blonde boy in the tophat tripped over the fabric of his purple cape, and crashed into the floor inna semi-spectacular manner. “Needa hand?”, I asked, extending mine ta help him up. “Not as much as you do, I imagine.” I ignored the barb, and pulled the fella up onto his feet, promising myself that I’d knee him in the crouch fer that one later. The wider corridor led ta a very square looking room, with metal walls and floors like the resta the caravan, but with the additionuva staircase, one set that led up, and one set that led down. “Huh.”, I said, peeking over a guardrail built on the space between the stairs. “So which way are we supposed ta go?” “Didn’t you read the tickets?”, Lucas asked, rubbing his stomach gingerly. “Our cabins are in the basement.” I peeked once again over the rail. I couldn’t even see the bottom of the stairs, they seemed ta spiral forever. “They would be.” I spat, bitter at the thoughta having ta drag my exhausted ass down em. In spitea my bitching, going down the stairs wasn’t that bigga deal at all. Them not being madea ice helped, and the precensauva metal railing for me ta grab onto helped even more so, but it seemed that I was, at least partially, growing

accustomed ta the whole only having one eye thing. Course, my face still hurt like hell, my shoulder ached, and my stump didn't really seem ta know if it wanted ta sting slightly or inflict burstsa agonizing pain on me sporadically, but at least I was somewhat able ta gauge the distance between my feet and the next step down without falling flat on my ass. All the better, cause there sure were a lotta steps ta descend. We musta went down at least ten stories or so before getting ta the bottom of the gargantuan vessel. "Can...we... please... stop for a...", Blondie wheezed, winded. "Ha! What... kind of... Sorcerer... gets..." Sabarene panted "exhausted... from.. a.. a few..." I couldn't really tell who looked more tired. Sabarene had a purple face, but she was so darn pale that I suspect even a brisk jog would make her cheeks turn blood red. Lucas seemed ta be gasping a bit more, his narrow torso moving up and down inna rhythmic manner, though he wasn't sweating all that much. They both seemed terribly outta shape though, like they never were taught how ta run non-stop fera few rising periods back when they were pups or something. "Sheesh, if y'all wanted a rest, ya could just said so.", I said, tapping my fingers on the railing. "No, no, there's no need for that, Patchy." Lucas insisted, catching his breath. "I apologize for my weak disposition. Where I'm from, we don't really use stairs all too often, at least not for great heights." "Er, then what do ya use?", I asked. "Oh, simple, we levitate!" "Ya levitate." "Yup!" "If you can levitate, Charlatan, then why did you choose to walk with me and Miss...-" "Of course I can't do it on my own." he chided Sabarene. "Were it that easy, I would have chosen to levitate earlier, like when I scaled those horrendous ice steps." He shook his head. "No, no, the levitation ritual in my culture is a complex one. First, one must summon the levitation chamber, by pressing an arrow that faces up, or an arrow that faces down. Secondly,

one must proceed to enter the levitation chamber, sometimes on one's lonesome, but usually with others." He cleared his throat. "During the levitation ritual, it is imperative that one not make eye contact with another. Conversation, too, is prohibited, unless said conversation pertains to the weather or the lackluster music that permeates the levitation chamber. Very basic stuff, we learn it while we're in school." "Do you wish to know what I learned in school, Mister Melloi the Third?", Sabarene asked, smiling. "Something about subservience to one's fellow man, I'd imagi-" "I learned that religion is a lie, God is a farce, and that all forms of superstition are a sham.", she growled. "Oh. That's nice, I suppose." the Sorcerer responded with a smile, but there were a few wrinkles present on his usually serene face as he did so. The white haired lady's constant barbs seemed to be getting to Lucas, as I'd imagine they'd get to anyone, so I quickly spoke up to defuse the situation some. "Er, hey! I, er, uh, also learned something when I was, in, uh... school.", I quickly yapped, even though I had only the slightest clue as to what a school was. "Like, uh, I learned how to strangle a fella using his own entrails. See, the secret to it is that ya gotta slice open his stomach, yank out his small intestine, and, uh, well I guess the next part depends on if he's a big or small, but for the most part, ya stretch out the guts like a piece of string, wrap em around his neck, and-" Both Blondie and Sabarene stared at me, with a certain sorta look on their faces, y'know, the half disgusted, half pitying kinda look folks make when they see a mutt devour his own puke. "Uh, right.", I coughed. "So I gander we go through that door over there to get to our cabins?", I asked, pointing at the only dang door at the bottom of the stairwell. I moved to open the door with my hand, before Lucas stepped forward. "Worry not, Patchy, I've got thi-" Sabarene rushed in front of him. "No, no, I've got this.",

she said, and before Blondie could getta word in edgewise, yanked open the door, even though the handle of the darn thing wasa normal handle, one that I coulda easily opened by myself. The hall this door led ta was... actually pretty nice. It was likea floor offa Hampton Inn, orra Marriot, minus the air conditioning, of cour- er, scratch all that, sorry, I'm talking nonsense again. Lemme try again. The, uh, the corridor we stepped inta wasn't madea semi rusted metal like all the other ones had been. Nah, the floor was lined witha wood and covered bya nice red carpet, the walls were madea plaster and painted an off white, and the ceiling was coated witha nice, soothing light blue typea paint. Course, I reckon that Lucas and Sabarene only got ta admire the aesthetics of the left and right walls respectively, because both em crossed their arms and refused ta look at each other, making me serve as a human barricadea sorts. We past about three or four doors before Lucas abruptly stopped. "And here we are, cabins 101 and 103. I'll use the one on the left, and you may use the one the right.", he said tersely, opening the small little door ta his room without so much asa glance towards Sabarene. He slipped into the room, and slammed the door. My eye didn't get ta so much asa blink before the door opened again. "Actually, Patchy, would you mind doing me a favor?", Lucas asked, his left hand and left hand alone sticking outta the door. "Depends on the favor." "Oh, it's not nothing major, just wake me up before we depart. I'm going to take a quick nap, recharge my mana and all that." "A, uh, a nap?", I asked, confused. "But the Caravan departs in two rising periods." "Yes, yes, and if you don't wake me up I'll be asleep for three.", the disembodied hand explained, tapping on the outside of the door impatiently. "If ya say sOH!", I yelped, as I was yanked, braid first, inta the room on the right. "Ack! Why the hair?" I demanded of Sabarene as I spun around ta face her. "Why

wouldya grab someone by the hair?!" "Sorry," Sabarene apologized, "I just couldn't stand you talking to that Charlatan for another moment." I looked around the room I was forced into. The cabin was surprisingly spacious, not large by any means, but bigger than you'd expect a cabin on a ship to be (Then again, we weren't really on a ship, a fact I sorta had to keep reminding myself of). There was only one bed in the room, but it wasn't that big a deal, the bed was a queen sized one, more than large enough to fit me and Sabarene comfortably. The cabin had a wooden armoire, and a moderately sized oak chest. Finally, it had a table, and two rocking chairs in it. There wasn't any windows on the wall, like ya'd normally get in an inn, but that was hardly surprising. The way the Caravan was set up meant that even if the room me and Sabarene were in was located at the very exterior of the behemoth construct, a window woulda looked out at nothing but wood. There was one curious aspect about our cabin besides the lack of a window. In the center of the room was what seemed to be a cellar door. But unlike most cellar doors, this one was in plain sight, not covered by a rug or nothing. It was so conspicuous that even I noticed it. There was a latch on the wooden hatch, so like a curious toddler with a bunch of poisonous berries, I pulled at the latch. The hatch wasn't locked or nothing, it flipped over easy enough. "Ah!" Sabarene shrieked, once she saw what was beneath the trapdoor. I rushed over, expecting to see a dead body or a decapitated head, or a bunch of spiders. Instead, what I saw was a sheet of transparent glass. The window built into the floor looked down at the frozen hills and snow and ice below "Er, why didya scream so darn loud?", I asked Sabarene, confused. "I, um, I'm not very good with heights.", she sheepishly confessed. "Good or not, this ain't nothing to worry about.", I said, knocking on the glass with a fist. "So long as ya don't step on it or

nothing, you'll be fine." "Oh, I'm sure I'll be fine," she said, flipping the hatch down so that it covered the glass, "it's just that something like this is kind of irritating. Sort of like that charlatan." I sighed loudly, making sure Sabarene could hear my exasperation.

"Look. I get that you don't like Blondie and all," I responded, rubbing the back of my head gingerly. "I get that. But ya gotta keep yer disdain fer him a bit more subtle." "And why should I do that?", Sabarene asked, indignant. "Cause there's no reason not ta." I kicked off my left boot and sat down ta pull off my right. "Bitta advice: be polite ta people ya don't intend to murder." I paused, feeling like I hadn't been as delicate as perhaps I shoulda been. "Heck, be polite to those you DO plan on murdering. Little good comes from being all prickly towards those who get under yer skin." Sabarene gazed down at the floor with her red eyes, looking like a mournful mutt. "You're right.", she said, softly. "I forgot my manners." "Ain't exactly easy ta remember them around that guy." I snorted, then softened my gaze some. "Anyways, it's nothing major, just punch a wall or something next time the, uh, charlatan gets on yer nerves." Sabarene looked up at me and smiled, though her eyes were a still a bit downcast. "Your lecture right now, it reminded me... it reminded me of..." I gulped, knowing that the next word outta her mouth was gonna be Brounde, and knowing that the mood in the room was about ta become exceedingly uncomfortable as a result. "... my parents.", she finished, ta my great relief. "Yer parents, huh? Were they both Sisters like yerself?" "No, no, of course not.", she laughed, though her laugh seemed forced, obligatory, empty. "My mother and father were layfolk. Both of them worked as farmhands." That seemed off to me. "If they worked as farmhands, then why aren't you one?" "Because, um, working out in the fields requires being out under the suns for long periods of time." I looked at her,



puzzled. "I burn easily.", Sabarene meekly explained. "And, um, more to the point, the Scales of Justice determined that I was qualified to become a Sacred Sibling." "That some high court or something?" "Um, no. The Scales of Justice is, uh, a written exam. Everyone in the Collective takes it in order to find out where their strengths lie. I got a perfect score in the numbers section!", she boasted, proudly. "Huh. That's interesting, some weird exam determines what name ya get. Round here ya usually take on the name of onea yer Parents, minus their color and number, of course." "That's not quite how it works-... Oh! What were your parents names, Miss Axeman Red Four?", Sabarene asked, more spring in her step. "They, uh, probably didn't even have names." I admitted. "Probably?", she repeated, then opened her eyes widely. "Wait, you don't know?" "Yeah." Realization slowly dawned on Sabarene's face. "I. oh. Oh my.", she gasped, flustered. I didn't want her ta feel like I was angsting or nothing, so I elaborated. "Didn't have time ta know them, they left me out on the street moments after I was born." I swallowed, then smirked a bit. "But don't worry bout that. I hada father, of sorts." "Of sorts?" "Yeah. His name was Axeman Black One.", I said, as my smirk turned into a smile. "Toughest sonuvabitch ta ever swing around an Axe, heck, he could probably- no, he could *definitely* take onna Swordarm of the same color, probably could take on three atta time if he was feeling up ta it." I pulled off my other boot and fell onto the bed, the weighta my battered body displacing the air in the mattress witha "pomf." "The old geezer was about as grouchy and crotchety as old geezers come, but he knew howta raisea brat." "A brat?", Sabarene asked. "Er, by that, I mean me.", I clarified, stretching out my three anda quarter limbs across the nice and firm bed. "Wasa real snotty kid back then. I wanted a better name. I wanted more metal, I wanted respect, I wanted

everything and anything. Luckily, Black set me straight, er, straight as one man could, that is." "With words of wisdom?", the white haired sister guessed. "No, with the backa his hand.", I answered, flatly. "That's awful!", Sabarene exclaimed, horrified. I nodded my head. "Nah. Like I said, I wasa real brat back in the day." "E-even so, hitting a child is a bit much..." "I wasa bit much. When I was about six or seven cycles old, I challenged a buncha the boys Black raised me with ta a duel. Threea them vs me, alla us armed with our dull wooden training axes. I boasted that just cause I wasa girl, it didn't mean I couldn't beat the crap outta them inna fight. They whooped my ass. Then I ran crying over ta Black, and he whooped my ass." I grinned widely at the memory. "After the pain from the floggings, the spankings, and the punchings subsided, he scolded me. Said I wasa idiot, which was true. Said I wasa instigator, which was also true, but I didn't see it that way at the time. I moaned ta him about how the boys teased me, mocked me fer being a girl, fer not being as strong as they were. He grasped me by the shoulders. Barked at me that I would never be as strong asa man was, and that I wasa idiot fer trying ta prove otherwise." "Harsh.", Sabarene said, biting her index finger. "By all means completely correct, biologically speaking, but still harsh." "See, here's the thing.", I said, closing my eye slightly, the soothing cushionsa the bed beginning ta do their work on me.. "He said that, but woke me soon as the first sun arose in the morning. Black grumbled that a scrawny little girl like myself might as well get all the muscle on her that she could, even if she was going ta amount ta nothing." I flexed my right arm nostalgically, even though I was moments away from snoozing. "Black made me wear iron cuffs around my arms and legs, increasing the weighta em every seven rising periods or so. In addition ta that, he had me lift tonsa heavy stuff every morning,

before all the other trainees even got up. Then, after about three or four cyclesa that, after I was strong enough ta lift a greataxe, he taught me the secret ta building up even more muscle mass.” “And what was that secret?”, Sabarene eagerly asked, looking, almost dejectedly, at her own twiggy arms. “Squats and oats.”, I answered, half asleep. “Oh.”, she said, disappointed. I closed my eye completely. “So where do yer folks live?” I asked, babbling the way people do when they’re dead tired. “F-Fremdos...”, Sabarene squeaked. “Well, my brother Marston does, anyways.” “Brother Marston? What does he do?” “N-no, he’s not a brother.”, Sabarene nervously corrected me. “Um, I mean, he’s MY brother, but he’s not a sibling.” Reluctantly, I opened my eyelids again. The lady in black looked troubled. Er, more troubled than usual, at least. “Yer voice issa bit jittery. Ya feeling ok?” Sabarene waved her hands. “I’m fine, I’m fine!” “Izzat so.”, I muttered, not convinced in the slightest. “Oh, alright, it’s not *nothing*.”, she spat, irritated. “It’s just that Marston isn’t particularly fond of me....” I closed my eye again, and decided not ta press the issue any further. Even with my unorthodox upbringing, I knew that tension between family members wasa topic that ya didn’t touch with a giant stick. But I’d be lying if I said I dropped the subject ta be polite. Nah, I was tired, mostly, and wanted ta sleep far more than I wanted ta chat. The wounds on my body still ached, and my brain was going nuts froma information overload. I was so darn tired that I fell asleep on topa the bed, the comforter below me instead on topa me, my body still tucked in the borrowed white robes. The sleep I fell inta was a deep kinda sleep. I hada dream, during my rest. Wasn’t a special dream or nothing. It was just me, and Blue, atta tavern. We ordered ale, we drank it, we complained about our lot in life. In the dream the ale tasted like crap, and the tavern was far colder than it had any right ta be. Blue’s

jokes and jests were lame and perverted, and my angered-but-not-really responses to his vulgarness were clichéd and trite. It was a moment I had experienced on countless occasions, a meaningless ritual I had partaken in time and time again. Which made me waking up in a cold sweat all the more peculiar. Like most folk, there were times that I had been jolted outta sleep by the occasional nightmare or two, most involving skeletons, or snakes, or tax collectors, but I'd never been spooked awake by a *boring* dream before. "Gah... goddamn it.", I gasped, my heart racing. "Goddamn it? Shouldn't it be stars damn it?", an irritatingly cheerful voice asked. "Wha-", I sputtered, as I sat up in the bed, blanket over mosta my body. "From what I understand, you Unionists worship the suns. So, wouldn't stars damn it be more appropriate?", Lucas inquired. The blonde fella was sitting across from the bed I was in, in a wooden rocking chair. He wasn't looking at me, rather, he was bent over, his blue eyes gazing at his precious lil' black rectangle. "Thought you were taking a three period long nap.", I deadpanned. "Oh, that was the intention, my dear Patchy, but there are some things that even I can't sleep through." Lucas looked at me with his affable blue eyes. "Such as erratic elves who scream like they're being murdered in their sleep." "I was screaming?", I asked, confused. "And how!", the fella said, fanning himself with his tophat. "Seriously, I nearly fell out of bed from the cacophony. I tried waking you up, but, well, you ended up cursing at me." "Uh, look Ruckus, I don't remember screaming or nothing." "Of course you don't remember. You had a terror of the night." "But it ain't night, least, I don't reckon it is." "No, no, that's not what I-" Lucas paused. "I suppose the term is just a technicality. Did you have a bad dream?", he asked, chipper. "Er, no. Not quite. Coulda been a bit better, perhaps, but it weren't scary or nothing." "Aha!", he exclaimed,

victoriously. "What was your lame dream about?" "An old friend." Lucas's smile didn't dissipate, but it turned from jubilant to sly. "I see.", he said, nodding his head sagely. "Dreaming of a lost paramour, were you?" I chuckled despite myself. ", Bearded old men ain't my type." Lucas lightly slapped himself on the forehead. "Of course, of course. Elves don't end up with bearded old men, they end up with skillful and slightly effeminate looking heroes wielding magical swords. Besides," he continued, "if you were dreaming of someone you loved in *that* way, you would have woken up crying, not gasping for breath." I tilted my head. "Ya sure have a weird way of seeing things, Blondie." He threw out his arms and shook his head. "Only weird by your standards.", Lucas lied. "I'm a well traveled man, Patchy. I've probably forgotten more people than you've met. And in my travels I've learnt ever so much." "Ya mighta," I yawned, "but sometimes a dream's just a dream." "True, true.", he acquiesced. "By the way, do you know where that albino girl went?" "Ya mean Satherene?", I asked. "Um, no, I mean Sister Sabarene," he clarified. "Beats me.", I said, stretching out on the mattress. "She was with me before I dozed off, on topa..." I trailed off. "Huh.", I said. Once my heartbeat slowed down some, and my sweating stopped, I realized that I wasn't, uh, wearing any clothing. Again. "Looking for these?", Lucas asked, holding up the white robes that were supposed to be draped around me. "Er, yeah, thank-" I blinked. "Why do ya have my clothing?" "Oh, simple!", he said, cheerfully. "I was rummaging through them!" He tossed over the outfit Sabarene had lent to me. "Alas, the only thing I found your pockets were a few hatchets, amongst other trinkets." I measured the distance between me and Lucas. It would be a bit of an effort, but I figured I could spring from the bed and strangle him to death if I distracted him long enough. "I wasn't robbing you,"

Blondie suddenly said, perhaps sensing my killing intent, "I was just trying to see if you had any keepsakes on you, any items of sentimental value." "Just give me my robes already.", I groaned.. "Fine, fine, here you go," he said, tossing the habit over ta me. "Very interesting letter, by the way, typically us Sorcerers tend to avoid crumpling our messages.", he added, throwing the wrinkled pieca parchment up and down in the air likea ball. "Oh, that. Meant ta throw it in the trash." "Ah. I suppose that explains the condition it's in." He clapped his hands together, and frowned as he inadvertently crumpled the parchment further. "Mind if I read this then, if you're not going to?" "Don't know why ya'd wanna, but sure, go nuts." "Thank you kindly, Patchy." Lucas extended his thumb at me and smiled, then unraveled the crumpled letter in his hand. "Hm.... ", he began. "Something something Friend Thief, Something something Brown Girl... Something something Trunchet, disappointed, blargh" Blondie rolled his eyes in disgust and stopped. "Forgive me, Not-Amelia, but this is painful to read." "Yeah, I read onea them before myself.", I lied. "His grammar ain't all that good, is it?" "No, no, that's not the issue." Lucas said, twirling his hat with his left hand. "This Friend Thief guy doesn't quite get subtlety. All he wrote so far was that he was disappointed you didn't go to Trunchet, but the idiot put quotation marks around the word disappointed!" "And that's bad?", I guessed, not knowing whatta "quotation mark" was. "Yes Patchy, that's bad." He sighed deeply, and continued. "Something something... oh!", Lucas's face lit up, and he grinned. "Ah, that's more like it! He started slowly, but finished strongly!" "He, uh, did?" "Yes indeed, my inexperienced employer! Friend Thief ended his letter with both a promise and an ominous warning.", Lucas said, wiggling his fingers spookily at the word warning. "The warning, oh boy, scary stuff. He said that you will soon be approached by

a man claiming to be a wizard, and that whatever you do, you must avoid him at all costs." "So in other words, you." Lucas jerked his head back, shocked. "Of course not. He said you were going to be approached by a wizard, not a Sorcerer. Pay attention." "And the second thing?", I said, almost bored. "Ah, that's the interesting bit! He wrote that he found a close friend of yours-" My eye jolted open. "and that said friend is safe and sound." "Ya ain't kidding me, now, are ya?" "Look for yourself.", Lucas said, and turned the letter over to me. As I pretended to make sense of the scribbles, he luckily blabbered on. "See, the exact wording he used was "Friend Thief save Friend Brown's Friend." My mouth was suddenly overwhelmed by a bitter taste. "Can ya throw that thing away now?", I snapped, as I pulled the comforter over my head. "Aren't you happy?" "Use yer head, Blondie, if ya actually got one.", I snorted. "That letter was addressed to me specifically, couldn't been meant for anyone else, but it was sent three rising periods ago, at a time where I didn't even know if I wanted to go to Fremdos. Yet this fella knew all the same. He has a prophetic or something." I said, completely bewildered at the words coming out of my mouth. "A Prophet? Nonsense. You've got it all wrong, you erratic elf..", Lucas chided, snapping his fingers. "The power to see into the future is the easiest form of magic to fake." "Whatya getting at." "Allow me to explain!" Lucas suddenly stood up from his chair and posed dramatically with his baton. "This is a lesson straight from the grand illusionists Teller and Penn themselves, so pay close attention!" He cleared his throat. "There are three cornerstone professions that preside in every and any given culture; Policing, Prostitution, and Prophecy. The need for the first two is obvious, but the demand for Prophecy, ah, now there's where things get interesting. I'll begin my lecture by taking you back thousands of cycles, and then slow-

Get to the point." "Fine.", Lucas said, his hat drooping in disappointment. "Sure," he began, his voice devoid of all theatrics, "the letter predicted that you'd show up to this Caravan, but there's no limit on the amount of letters this guy could have written. Consider the following; that this Friend Thief guy sent duckmail to each and every means of transportation out of this City. That way, no matter where you showed up, it would give off the illusion that he knows your every move, without him having to actually know much of anything besides who to mail and who not to." I opened my mouth to raise an objection, then shut it again. "Gah! Yer right!", I choked out. "I really am a dumbass." "I wouldn't quite say that. Prophet or not, the writer of this letter sure was on the ball about a lot of things, excluding calling me a wizard, of course." "Huh. I guess he was." I smiled in spite of myself, the explanation Lucas gave me actually making some degree of sense. Maybe things weren't as crazy as my paranoid ass thought they were, and maybe Blue hadn't kicked the bucket after all. Blondie fanned air at his mouth and yawned. "So what's your deal, Patchy?" "Mhmm whhhts?", I asked, as I very clumsily changed into the white habit under the sheets. "Why are you traveling to the Collective?" "Looking for something." "Such as?" "The Sacred Amulet of Fremdos.", I responded. "S'just a legend, so to speak, but...." "Don't leave it there." Lucas insisted, his eyes sparking. "What are the properties of this amulet?" "Oh, all sorts of things," I began. "Flame conjuring, body duplication, the ability to control other folks like a puppet, the power to move anywhere you want in the blink of an eye, and-" "W-wait!", Lucas coughed, his voice high and panicked, the serene smile that was usually on his face nowhere to be seen. "Is what you say true? Can this amulet really transport people anywhere?" I looked at him, and started snickering. "Hahah, ya sure yer a Sorcerer?"



“O-of course I am!”, he said, defensively. “I reckon yer wizard senses failed ya then; I just made alla that up!”, I cackled., not even minding the bitta pain that came from my shoulder wounds with each laugh. Insteada getting angry with me, or retorting witha barb of his own, Blondie’s head just kinda sunk low, and, fera brief instant, his joyful blue eyes seemed ta water, justa bit. Lucas didn’t say a word, he just stared at the ground, silent. “I’m...” he whispered, tormented. “I’m not actually...a.... “ His face began ta shake, ever so slightly. “I’m not a...” “You, uh, you alright there champ?”, I asked, slightly unsettled by the way he was talking. “I’m not... I’m not a...bout to let a little thing like the facts get me down!” Lucas’ face went from catatonic ta peppy quicker than it takesa mutt ta finish his supper. “Jest or not, there’s magic in Fremdos, and you, dear Patchy, will guide me right to it!” He reached into his odd looking rucksack, and pulled out two pursesa coin. “I’ll place money on that.”, he said, winking, as he tossed em over ta me. Fera instant, a brief instant, I thoughta telling him about Ponytail, and that regeneration crap she pulled. But while that woulda helped out Blondie a bunch, it wouldn’ta done jack fer me. I kept my lips shut. Best ta bleed him of his metal as long as I could, I reckoned. “So how long have I been out for?”, I asked. “Oh, about three and a half hours or so.” “Three what?” “You were asleep for roughly half a rising period.”, Blondie elaborated. “Why do ya do that so often?”, I asked. “Do what?” “Talk so funny.” Lucas stared at me and blinked. His smile was replaced by a slight frown, and his eyes narrowed, a little. “Are ya really the right typea persona ta accuse me of talking all funny-like, pardner?” “Er, no, no, I ain’t talking about mattersa accents and such.” I muttered, a tad embarrassed “It’s just, uh... why do ya say so many strange words?” “The burden of an advanced education, I’m afraid.”, Blondie answered, sighing. “I try to

speak in terms that you and the albino can understand, but alas, my vast intellect compels me to utilize a few phrases from my extended vocabulary. I'll attempt to dumb things down for you, if it's a problem." "No need. I ain't dumb", I fibbed. "Anywho, I'm gonna take a walk around this monstrosity offa ship. Wanna mosey along?" "Ah, thanks, but no thanks.", Lucas said. "I need to get back to sleep, I'm afraid. Wake me up when the Caravan is about to leave, or if something strange happens." "Something strange?" "You know, if you happen to discover that the main ingredient in the soup is human flesh, or if a bunch of mercenaries hijack this vessel, or if the Caravan is harboring some super weapon or something.", Lucas explained. I sauntered outta the bed, and got a hatchet from the cabinet. I shoved the hood of the habit over my head, and left the room. I had barely stepped through the door when I heard loud snores emanate from the fella in the rocking chair. He was out cold, snoozing like he was inna coma. I let him be and walked through the hall, back ta the stairwell. I walked up about one flighta stairs or so, wasn't that high, abouta armslength taller than I was. I peaked over the railing. If ya were ta tumble off the stairs from the height I was at, at most ya'd bruise an arm, maybe break yer shin if ya fell awkwardly. So me jumping over the railing ta do a few pull-ups wasn't all that bada idea, I figured. I dangled back and forth, hanging onta the railing with my hand. I took inna deep breath, and slowly, very slowly, pulled my chin over the bar. Moment the basea my chin touched the cold metal of the railing, I let my arm go limp, and gasped fer air as I hung, legs kicking fer balance. I gritted my teeth and tried ta pull myself up again. Sluggishly and sloppily, I managed ta repeat the performance about five more times, before my arm gave out and I fell down onta the ground below, flat on my rear.. I shuddered as I wheezed out loudly. Six pull ups. That

was all I was able ta do, six pull ups. Four rising periods before I could do forty five pull ups in one go, sixty if I pushed myself. And now I could only do six. "Ain't good enough.", I grunted, angry. My head pounded, hard. Scowling, I made my way up the stairs again. This time I didn't stop at one flight, no, I went up and up, two flights, then three, then four, then finally seven. The height I was at now, well, it wasn't insignificant, I can tell ya that. About one hundred and sixty fifty armlengths or so, I'd reckon. A fall from the height I stomped up ta would almost definitely kill me, or mess me up so bad that I wish I was dead. I leapt over the railing without a second thought. This time, as I hung from the railing, I felta surgea power course through my body, the typea rush ya get when ya needlessly put yerself inta harms way. Quickly, mechanically, I did a buncha pull-ups, good ones this time; all the way up, and then all the way down. When I finished about fifteen or so of em, I felt my arm burning, and laughed. The burning wasa good sign, meant that weak as I was, I could grow stronger. Confident as heck, I continued doing more pull ups. I managed ta get about twenty additional ones in before the adrenaline rush wore off. I grinned widely, as I hung limp from the ledge, unable ta do even one more. Then, slowly, I, uh, realized the obvious. If I couldn't do another pull up, then there was no way ta pull myself back up over the ledge. Which, uh, was bad, least, if that whole gravity thing worked like it usually did. "Ya done fucked up now, Red.", my mind seemed ta say, as all fivea my fingers began ta lose their grip. As panic and fear took aholda me, I thoughta ways ta get outta my predicament. Fera brief moment, I considered trying ta swing ont a lower level. But the ledge I was hanging ont a had just enough depth to prevent me from getting any real momentum going, and I was all outta gas anyway. I grimaced as my hand started ta give out. "Gah!", I yelled,

summoning as much power as I could, ta drag myself up, ta do just one more pull up. No good. My body was completely drained, my second wind wasted onna projecta vanity. Unless I thoughta something quick, I was gonna fall ta a gruesome, though admittedly richly deserved, death. So I did the only thing I could do. "GAWDAMNIT! BY THE TWO SUNS AND THE THREE MOONS, SOMEONE HELP ME!" The message wasn't well thought out, or elegant, but it was loud, which was the important thing. "I hear ya! Don't worry, I'm coming ta help!" Fera instant I thought I was incredibly lucky, cause someone responded almost immediately. There was something really off about the voice. It belonged ta a woman, and she was speaking like most Proveshians did, but something... I dunno. There was just something eerie about the way she talked. Not that I cared that much at the time. "Sooner would be better than later, ya know!", I gasped, my grip slipping by the minute. "Sheesh, quit yer yapping, I'm moving as fast as I can.", the weird voice responded. As I hung helplessly, I heard the tell-tale pitter pattering of boots clunking against the floor. I shut my eye as my pointed finger lost its grip on the ledge. "Gimme yer hand!", the offputting voice yelled, no more thana armslength above me. "Ain't exactly an option!" I screamed back. "Whattya mean it ain't an option? Just gimme yer hand, idiot!" Right as the resta my fingers were about ta give up the ghost, I felt a tough grip on my wrist. "Gotcha!", the strange voice exclaimed, triumphant. My hand was fiercely torn from the ledge, and I felt my body being raised up. Soon as I felt my feet touch the floor, I breathed a huge sigha relief. "Hah... hah...", I panted, then opened up my eye ta look at my timely rescuer. I damn near jumped outta my boots in terror as I did. The lady who saved me was the splitting imagea Handmaiden Blue Twenty. The green hair, the ears, the eyes, almost every bitta her

reminded me of the poor servant girl I had completely failed ta save. But of course, she wasn't Handmaiden Blue Twenty. Even if Handmaiden Blue Twenty had somehow not died from having a Sword shoved through her throat(which, compared ta the other crap I had seen, wasn't exactly implausible), there was no way she was the girl standing before me. Fer one, the girl in fronta me was dressed, well, not asa mercenary or nothing, but she was dressed as you'd expect a working class gal sixteen or seventeen cycles old ta be dressed; slacks, tunic, boots anda fur jacket. And though something about her mannera speaking turned me off, that she could speak at all meant that, no, she wasn't a dead girl come back ta life, least not the dead girl I was thinking of. I knew that, but even so, I gawked at her fer far too long without saying anything. "Er... you ok?", the green haired girl asked, waving her hand up and down in fronta my face. "I'm, uh, fine." I wheezed. "Sorry bout that. Fera moment there I thought you were... somebody I used ta know." "Aw, it ain't no thing, sugar.", Not-Handmaiden Blue Twenty answered, shaking her head sympathetically. "Shock and awe messes up yer mind something fierce, lemme tell ya." I bit my lip and shook myself outta my trance. "Shock or not, thanks fer saving my hide, I was almosta goner there." "Ain't that the truth." the girl whistled, massaging her right ear. "How did ya get yerself in sucha precarious position, anyways?" "I tripped and fell over the railing.", I lied. She looked over me and clucked her tongue. "Don't take this the wrong way, hon, but ya really shouldn't walk around on yer lonesome." "N-nah.", I stuttered. "I'm fine. Just hada bad spill." The green haired girl put her hands on her hip. "Almost becamea bad spill, more like. Be more careful, if not fer you, then fer the poor bastard who woulda hadta scrape ya off the floor." "I'll, uh, I'll keep that in mind.", I said, then turned, ta limp back ta my cabin,

too fulla shame and too weirded out by how the kind girl looked and sounded ta remain in her presence. She was having nonea it. "Hey, hey, I just saved yer life, the least ya could do is stick arounda while!" I winced. "I'm mighty grateful ta ya and all," I emphasized, "but, see, yer about the third person ta save my hide in the past five periods, so I don't have all that much ta reward ya with." "I don't wanta reward.", the green haired girl scoffed, "though it'd be nice if you could at least tell me yer name." "It's A-...melia.", I slowly said. "Sister Amelia." "Handmaiden Blue Eighteen.", the warm girl responded, sticking out her hand. I damn near hada brain aneurysm on the spot. I don't how I coulda forgot, I had Handmaiden Blue Twenty's face so burnt inta my mind, but the fact she hada identical sister had slipped my mind entirely, even though botha them had shoved me inta the fancy get up I wore at Merchant Black One's shindig. Shakily, I clasped her hand. "So why areya on this here Caravan, Sister Amelia?" "Uh... y'know.... Traveling... ta Fremdos... and such.", I managed ta gasp, my mind spinning. Handmaiden Blue Eighteen looked at me witha sour face. "Be more specific, ya git. Everyone here is traveling ta Fremdos." I was barely paying attention ta what Handmaiden Blue Eighteen(?) was saying. Both girls I had encountered in Merchant Black's mansions were, well, silent, but they were also stoic. The lady yapping ta me wore her emotions on her sleeve, and though her face was the splitting imagea onea the servant girls garbed in bedsheets, it was too lifelike fer me ta accept that she was someone I had met before. I answered her inquiry inna delayed and half assed manner. "Oh. I'ma Sistera Fimat, so I'm heading ta Fremdos ta do my holy duties." "Ah! Yeah, yeah, Ordera Fimat, that's what the Collective Cities are all about, huh?" the happy girl said. "Thought they went bya different name, but then again, I ain't all that familiar with

the waysa the world.” She sighed. “Though I gotta say, itsa bummer you ain’t from around here.” “Er, why?”, I asked, my curiosity superseding my rationality. “Oh. I was looking fer someone.” “Who?” “See, that’s the darndest thing. I’m looking fer two people. One, if ya would believe me, is my identical twin sister. The second, some fella by the namea Axeman Red Four.” “Can’t say I know anyone like that.”, I coughed, my throat parched. “No, no, I don’t reckon you would.”, Handmaiden Blue Eighteen(?) said sadly. “But if ya see some girl who done look exactly like me, orra big nasty fella witha greataxe, please let me know!” “Er.... I’ll do that.”, I said, figuring that so long as I didn’t pick up a great axe and look in the mirror, my promise would still technically be a valid one. “Thanks!”, the green haired girl said, slapping me a bit too hard on the back. “By the by, what room are ya staying in?”, she asked. “Cabin 103.” I responded, against my better judgment. “And, uh, you?” “Oh, I’m here ta work.”, Handmaiden said. “So when I’m not sweeping the halls and such, I’ll be in the barracks on the...” she trailed off, and snapped her fingers, apparently having lost her traina thought. “Fourth floor, I think!” She grinned widely again. “Anywho, sugar, I gotta get going. Try not ta kill yerself on the way backta yer room or nothing.” “I’ll give it a go. See ya later, then.”, I gulped, hoping that later turned out ta be never. I waited fer the cheery girl ta get outta sight before I began walking back down the stairs. As I shakily stumbled down the steps, I tried ta piece together a reasonable explanation fer the girl’s appearance and name. Perhaps she wasa triplet, and was lucky enough ta be in the service of someone who didn’t cut the tongues outta girls mouth? Yeah, I thought, a triplet, she wasa triplet I had never met, looking fer her two sisters. But putting aside the statistical improbability of someone giving birth ta identical triplets, why woulda triplet be looking fer Axeman Red

Four? No, no, only one of the two girls in the fat Merchant's employ would have a reason to find me. Then again, if she was the other Handmaiden that Merchant Black had employed, how would she not recognize me at a glance? Disturbed, I yanked my hatchet out of my robe pocket, and tilted the flat side of it towards my face. The hood that had luckily stayed up even as Handmaiden Blue pulled me up covered my ears and my hair, but my face looked more or less the same, even with the cuts, the bruises, and the patch over my left eyesocket. I bit my lip nervously. Like most stuff around me recently, the girl was a puzzle to which there was no sensible answer. I resolved to ignore her. Telling her who I was and what happened to her sister wouldn't lead anywhere nice, I figured, even if she did save my life. My head filled with a good deal more questions than answers, I decided to go back to the cabin, and barricade the door shut before I could run into any other phantoms or oddities. Least, that was the plan. But as I marched back down the steps, the tips of my ears picked up on a strumming. Wasn't a complicated melody or nothing, but all the same, the music was the best thing I had heard in a while. The singing that came along with the music, on the other hand... "OUR NEIGHBORSH TO THE NORSH ARE BLESSED", a shrill, slobbery voice yelled out. "THEIR LANDS ARE WARM AND SUN CARESSING-" I winced at the cracking voice, but nevertheless decided to head down the hall where the cacophony was coming from. "AND IF YE DOUBT MY WORDS DON'T FRET-", the out of tone singer continued. "BECAUSE I'LL GIVE YA SOME PERSPECTIVE." I jogged up to the metal door that presumably led to the singer and- "YOU'LL SOON BE A BELIEVER YET-" "IN THE PEACE OF THE COLLECTIVE" pulled my hood over my head tighter. As the lyrics grew louder and I grew closer to the door from which the song had sprung, I



gritted my teeth. The wordsa the song rhymed, but the way the “singer” was sloshin em out didn’t match up with the rhythm, lagging a good deal behind the notes. “THE PEOPLE OF TRUNCHET WERE HUNGRY, SO THEY BEGGED FER SOME RELEIF-” I placed my hand on the door, and- “-OUR OLD ARE SICK, THEY MOANED AND CRIED, OVERWHELMED WITH GRIEF ” pushed it open, ta find that- “THE GENERAL CAME INTO TOWN, AND WITHA KINDLY SMILE-” the singer was none other than Sister Sabarene. She wasn’t alone, though. The white haired lady was sitting onna stool, playing a guitar and “singing” with a goofy smirk on her face while Shields and Claymore, still clad in their platemail but devoid of their weapons, haphazardly clapped along. “FED THE ELDERY TO THE POOR, SAVING EVERY HUNGRY CHILD-oh! Mish Axsishether Amelia!”, Sabarene exclaimed, noticing me slug my way into the room. “How are yaah doing?” she asked, knocking over about fifteen empty glass bottles as she sauntered off her seat. “Meee and the Swordarmss were jusst having a bite to eat!” “And playing some guitar, lass!”, Shields, or Claymore, interjected cheerfully. “I noticed. What was that tune y’all were, er, singing?” “Ya don’t know the “Peace of the Collective?!”, Claymore, or Shields asked, incredulous. “Can’t say I do.” “You’ve been deprived, lass!” “Shee”, Sabarene giggled, elbowing me in the stomach. “It seems like itsa shong about how great the Collective and the General are, but actually..” she whispered, leaning in towards my ear as what I dearly hoped was ale dripped outta her nose, “It’s about how bad the Collective and the General are!” “Ya don’t say.” I narrowed my eye. “Waita tick, why the heck wouldya sing a song about how bad the Collective is?” “Gotta laugh at yourshelf, from time to time.”, Sabarene said witha wave. “Ain’t that the truth!”, Shields, or Claymore concurred. “Now pass me my

guitar, I'm going to sing the songa the Swordarms." Sabarene tossed the instrument over ta the plate mail covered fella. Shields(it was probably Shields), started strumming the guitar. Poorly. I ain't a Bard or nothing, so I can't be all that technical about what he was doing wrong, but I'm pretty sure that the notesa a string instrument ain't supposed ta sound likea cat being skinned alive. He cleared his throat, and started humming. His voice, on the other hand, didn't sound bad at all.. "Hold up fera bit.", I said, interrupting the song. "Why don't you sing, and have her play that sitar or whatever?" The Swordarm looked at me, flabbergasted. "But it's my guitar...", he mewed. "Yeah, but songs are more fun when people play em together." "Good on ya, lass!", the other Swordarm said. "I'll provide the back-up vocals." The other Swordarm, most likely Claymore, began humming. His voice, on the other other hand, didn't sound good at all, sorta likea toddler being sodomized. "Nope! Nope ya don't need ta do that!", I shrieked. "Oh? And why not?", Probably-Claymore asked. "Cause... ya did sucha fine job keeping rhythm before!", I bullshitted, sweating. "So, uh, here's what we'll do. You sing," I said ta De-facto Shields, "You play the banjo," I said ta Sabarene, "and you and me will clap along.", I finished, pointing at myself and the man who might as well have been Claymore. "Wait," Sorta-Shields said, puzzled, "How the heck are you gonna clap-" "Soundsh great!", Sabarene said, snatching the lute back. She grinned widely, then frowned. "Uh, waAAAA-it!", she hiccupped. "I don't know the melody behinddd the Song of the Swordfoots!" "Swordarms", Claymore and Shields murmured. "Oh, oh, arms, not feet!", Sabarene said, her head shaking likea bobble-head doll. "In that case I sink I can wing it!" And wing it she did. I don't quite reckon she played the correct melody ta the ditty that Shields began ta sing, but she played a passable melody, one was decent

enough, and tame enough, for any old song to be sung over it. "The world was dark, and deathly cold~", Shields began. "The path was long and winding~" "The ale was poor, the bread had mold," the baritone voiced man continued, as Sabarene's fingers manipulated the instrument with precision and dexterity that the rest of her severely inebriated body lacked completely. "The circumstances binding~, Men to a life of struggle and strife, an existence harsh and fleeting~" "The vultures flew, the madness grew but from the cold there was no retreating." "Then from the dark emerged a spark, and from that spark another," "And thus were born the two bright suns, the first one and his brother." "The two light up the barren land, empowered all the sons of man, and bestowing them their names." "The bright ones would be Academics, locked away up in the towers. The dull but strong were dubbed Axeman, thugs with brutish power. The battle-dancers were called Lancers and the cleaners named Handmaidens, every one a proper term beladen. But the titles were given none too fast, the very best was saved for last. The brave, the bold, the kind, the cold, the smart, the tough, the smooth, the rough, the few with all these gifts and more. Why, the suns called them Swordarms, a name that yet endures!" With one final chord from the guitar, the hokey song ended. Not that I was complaining or nothing. There are worse things to do than listen to cheesy music and have a few drinks. "Hey, we weren't bad, lass!", Shields said, excited. "Exactly whaaaaaaht I was about a sha!", Sabarene... concurred. I think. "Oh! Oh, play the tale of the naughty pickpocket next!", Claymore said. "That the one about the Thief who gets hanged?", the somewhat vocally talented Swordarm inquired. "Nosh, noshh, that's the one about the guy who goes around fondling people's genitals through their trousers, and then claims to be a pickpocket when caught!" I'll spare you the intricacies of "The

Naughty Pickpocket”, but that too was sung decently enough, even if it was more or less an extended phallus gag taken a bit too far. All in all, we killed a good amounta time in that small room, drinking, and singing, and joking, though nonea our jokes were all that clever. Sabarene and Shields played about three more songs before Shields decided ta take a nap on his stool. “Is, uh, is he ok?”, I asked Claymore, unsurea how Shields was doing thanks ta the armor he was wearing. “Oh, he’s fine. Seventeen is just a lightweight.” “Yesh, is he ever!”, Sabarene squeaked. “I had ten more bottles than he did. Or wash it eight? She tugged on my wrist. “Wait, wait, how many bottles did I have?”, she asked me, witha pale face. “Cause I... I sink I had...” Sabarene paused, and gulped, once, then twice, thena third time. I just barely managed ta roll outta the way before she spewed the contentsa her stomach all over the floor. “Hadta happen sooner or later.”, I muttered, as the lady in black collapsed face first inna pilea of her own refuse. I turned ta Claymore, who damn near dida backflip ta avoid having his armor coated with horsesteak residue. “I think me and Sananaerene are done fer the evening.” I wrapped my arm around the collapsed Sister’s waist, and with a bitta effort, slung her over my shoulder. I almost left the room, then stopped, as I felta pinch ta my neck. “Waish...”, Sabarene muttered weakly. “Need to... tell..something.” I ignored her ramblings, and tried ta locate a towel or twelve. “Ya gotta mop or something?” “No need for that lass.”, Claymore said. “Our Handmaidens can take care of the spill.” “If ya say say. I need ta get sunshine here ta bed.” I reached inta my robes and fetched two Runiertian coins. “Give this to the Handmaidens, and tell em I’m sorry fer the trouble.” “Ah, the lads’ll appreciate that, they hardly ever get tips.” “Almost as much as they’ll appreciate having ta wipe up a buncha vomit, I’m sur- wait, did ya just say lads?”

Claymore tilted his head oddly. "Yeah, the lads. The five Handmaidens we hired, Handmaiden Orange Ten, Eight, Seven, Six, and Red Three. Think they're all brothers, or something." I felt my heart begin ta sink. "Ya only have those five?", I meeped. "Only need those five. The boys can clean up a mess hall quicker than the passangers can ruin it!", Claymore boasted. I quickly tossed Sabarene ontta the floor. "On second thought, I gotta go take carea something. Make sure smiley doesn't choke ta death on her own throw-up or nothing." Without waiting fera response, I left the mildly ill Sister in Claymore's probably capable hands. I briskly jogged outta the longue. I hadn't drank all that much, so my senses were fine... kinda. My head was racing some. Up until recently, I had lived under the impression that few inconsistencies here and there were nothing ta worry about. I reckoned that most folks, like me, were morons who barely had any clue what they were doing. So something like a Guard offa Caravan saying that all the Handmaidens onboard were blokes, while I had seen direct evidence ta the contrary, wouldn'ta riled me up none, usually. Neither would his listing of colors of the Handmaidens as Orange insteada Blue, usually. But as I frantically sprinted down the stairs ta get ta the cabin, I began ta think that maybe coincidences that stack up on each other weren't really coincidences at all. Wasn't long before I got back ta the hallway where the cabins were. Nothing seemed outta place, cept... Well, see, the door ta the cabin that me and Sabarene were staying in was closed tight. And I didn't recall closing it myself when I had left ta nearly kill myself via pull-ups. I tooka deep breath, and placed my ear against the door. The pointsa my ears twitched violently as they picked up on the sounda.... Blondie snoring, just like he had been when I left. Feeling a bit silly, I nevertheless burst open the door ta find... Lucas hogtied ta a rocking chair.

“Huh.”, I observed, “Probably notta good signAAAAAAAHAH!” My brilliant observation was interrupted by a sharp pain to my right shoulder blade. Yelping, I yanked out whatever had been plunged into my body. “Scissors?!” I asked as I rolled on the floor, voice cracking. “Ya stabbed me with a pair of scissors?!” “They’re shears, actually.”, a cold, strange voice retorted. I looked up to find Handmaiden Blue Twenty, gazing down at me with icy eyes and a face full of contempt. “And I just nicked ya.” I stumbled to my feet, and tumbled away from the girl. “As to what I’m gonna do with this, however...”, she began, waving around a sharp razor blade. I yanked out my hatchet, and glared at her. There was about five paces between us. If I had been wearing armor, I’d just bumrush her. But I only had robes on, and her razor, as inefficient a weapon as it was, was still more than enough to slice an artery or two. “So ya save my life,” I began, holding the hatchet up so she could see it clearly, “and less than a quarter candle-lengths later, yer fixing to end it. Can’t say I follow your line of logic much.” The green haired girl didn’t respond, instead, like a serpent, she struck forward. I leapt back some more, and immediately regretted my decision. “Fifteen cycles.” she said, her razor held to Blondie’s throat, “Fifteen cycles in the service of that fat bastard’s, and we weren’t allowed to say a thing, notta single word.” I bit my lip. Lucas’s Adam’s apple tickled against the edge of the razor, but he was still sleeping like a baby, completely unaware of the situation he was in. “Fifteen cycles of silence and servitude, and the only person who ever showed us the tiniest bit of niceness, was you.” I blinked, and lowered my hatchet. “So why the heck are ya-” “So when that fella with the skull-mask told me you were with my sister, I felt relieved. In the hands of anyone else, I thought, she’d be abused, but not with you.” Her hand started shaking, her eyes started to water. “B-but I

checked all around, and I can't find her nowhere." She grimaced. "I ain't gonna be nice. Tell me where she is, or I'll slit yer collaborator's throat." I let the hatchet fall ta the floor. "Ya really wanna know what happened ta yer sister?" I asked, forcing myself ta look her in the eyes. "Cause... she... she ain't around no more." All anger... no, all emotion faded from Handmaiden Blue Twenty's face. "W-what do you mean?", she asked, desperate. "I mean.." I said, my throat dry. "Uh... see. Me and Blue... we wanted ta-... we tried ta... help yer sister get outta the mansion. We didn't... we didn't succeed. The threea us were captured, and... yer sister... was... mur- she was..." I gulped down deep. "murdered." "No...", she said, stepping away from Blondie. "No, no, she can't be..." "She is.", I choked out. "I'm sorry." The scowl came back ontta her face. "You're lying!", she yelled, hysterical. "You kidnapped her, and were heading ta Fremdos ta sell her!" "Ta... ta sell her?", I asked. "Enough mind-games!", the Handmaiden screamed, her face demented. She quickly swiped her razor across the backta Lucas's neck. "Argh!", he screamed, jolting awake. "Tell me the truth!", she yelled. "Next time'll be his throat, I swear by the suns above and the seas below!" Lucas tried ta speak, but he wasn't exactly inna postion ta. The razor was placed right up against his throat, and a little bitta blood trickled down outta his neck. I was atta loss as fer what ta do. If I made even the slightest movement, Blondie would be breathing outta a hole in his neck. But I had already told the Handmaiden the truth she demanded of me, repeating it would just make her more inclined ta slice Lucas's throat open. "Heh. Ya got me. I lied.", I lied, while forcing my voice down a few octaves. "Though ta be honest, I ain't gonna fret if ya slice up Blondie there. He's just some oddball I took in onna whim, and besides..." I said, smirking as smugly as I could, " Beena while since I hearda proper scream." The

Handmaiden's face faltered a bit. "W-what?", she asked, horrified, but still holding the razor up against Lucas. "The last person I saw die... wasn't much a screamer." I chuckled darkly. "Course, it's not that she *wouldn't* scream, it's that she *couldn't*." "N-no!", the Handmaiden gasped out. Her hand wavered, for a bit, and her lips twisted in agony. I kept going. "The funny thing is that I was just gonna ransom her off, at first. The amount a metal some blokes'll pay to get their hands on a young girl..." I sighed. "But sadly for her, my plan didn't work out at all. See, she wasn't too keen on being a buncha old men's plaything. And so, while I was sleeping, she gave me a scar or two, under the belief that a dagger through the eye was all it took to kill me.", I said, pointing at my patch. "She was misguided, I figured. So I decided to teach her just how dang resilient the human body was, just how much it could take, before it expired." "S-hut up! Stop!", the Handmaiden said, the razor now closer to Lucas's collarbone. "Patchy, don't!", Blondie choked out, able to talk now that his vocal chords not being pressed up against by a sharp blade. I ignored him, and continued on with my spiel. "First I cut off her ears. She couldn't scream, after all, so there was no need for her to keep those. Then, her feet. Watching her flop around like a fish was funny, almost made me not wanna gut her." I blinked. "Almost. But all good things must come to an end, and so did she, eventually. Cut off her arm, and kicked her into the basement. The rats finished her off, I'd imagine. So you were right, I was lying." I acquiesced, grinning as wide as I could. "Yer sister wasn't murdered. She was butchered!" "AuuuuuuuuuuuegH!!" the Handmaiden screamed, charging at me with the razor blade. She had the speed and momentum of a wild beast, but the brain one too. She brandished her razor like it was an axe or something, raising it to slam it down on me. As a result, her stomach, chest, and



neck was completely unguarded. I dove for the hatchet I had dropped, grabbed it, and slashed up at the girl's torso. As I crashed into the Handmaiden, her razor cut deep across my left shoulder, once, twice, three times, many more times. But that didn't matter. My hand felt wet, and warm, and the frantic scraping of the blade across my back slowed, then stopped. With a grunt, I ripped my hatchet outta the intestines of the Handmaiden, and kicked her, back first, onto the floor. She didn't get up again. "W-what.... What the... what..." Lucas babbled, his face twisted in shock. I stepped over the green haired girl's body, and cut him free from the ropes, quick as I could manage. "You alright?", I asked, gazing at the wound on his throat. "I'm fi... fine.", he stutted, his entire body shaking. "Good, cause I ain't." I awkwardly stumbled outta the white-turned pink robes I was wearing, and collapsed on the bed. Wincing, I looked at my right shoulder, then my left. The right wasn't bleeding no more, though there was a deep puncture hole in it. My left shoulder, on the other hand, was worse than I thought it would be. There were a series of deep cuts on the back of it, but the Handmaiden had managed to nick my neck a few times as well. The nicks didn't hurt, but they bled, much more than the other injuries I had endured. "Cloth." I said, wincing at Blondie. "Cut up some cloth. Getta bucket of water." Wordlessly, he shambled out of the room. I gazed down at the girl I had... the dead girl. There was no tears in her eyes, and the way her lips were curled even made it look like she was smiling, but of course, she wasn't *really* smiling. My hatchet musta cut into her heart, or an artery, for her to expire so quickly. I shuddered. If she had been wearing leather armor, or anything thicker than the tunic she had on, things woulda turned out much different. Lucas returned much quicker than I had anticipated. Though he didn't have a bucket, nor did he carry with him any pieces of

cloth. Besides the rucksack on his back, all he had were two, small cylinders, made of porcelain, or so I thought at the time. "I toldya ta getta-" "Bucket of bacteria infested water, and some filthy bedsheets, sure.", he replied, tersely. "Trust me when I say these will serve you better." He set down one of his cylinders, and from the top of the other one, pulled a bunch of white, wet, cloth. Quickly, but not clumsily, he cleaned and dabbed at my neck, and my shoulders. "Geh.", I croaked, the cloth causing my cuts to throb with pain. "It's supposed to sting," Lucas informed me, sensing my discomfort. Once he had thoroughly wiped my cuts, he took the other cylinder, and turned it upside down. He squeezed the container with one hand, oozing a slimy-looking substance out of it into his other. That caught me by surprise. I had never known porcelain to bend before. He smeared the slimy substance all over my cleaned-up wounds. I gritted my teeth, as the slimy substance stung even more than the wet clothes did. Finally, he unzipped his rucksack, and fetched out four big, square bandages. Delicately, he placed them on me. The bandages looked and felt odd. They were all identical to each other, and had a strange, off-yellow color to them. The strange bandages, along with the weird wipes and the slime, were effective all the same. My wounds slowly stopped bleeding. Lucas shook his head repeatedly, then looked at me, his soft blue eyes cold as ice. "Was what you said before true?", he asked, his voice calm. "What do you mean?" "You know what I mean." "N-no. Of course it ain't." "Then why did you say it?", he asked, glaring at me. "Fera Sorcerer, ya ain't all that bright.", I wheezed. "That girl on the floor there, she was going to kill ya. I needed to make her try to go after me, instead. She had things worked out in her mind that I was a villain, so... I indulged her." Blondie seemed to accept that answer, if only reluctantly. "I don't blame you for provoking her.", Lucas

answered, then frowned. "But I can't understand why you had to kill her." He stroked his chin with a trembling hand. "Was she an assassin of some sort? A... a saboteur, perhaps? Or... the General of the Collective in disguise, pretending to be a Handmaiden?" I nodded my head at each and every one of his increasingly outlandish theories. "No. Just a girl looking for her sister." "T-then why?", he asked, distraught. "T- there was no need! You could have disabled her, or talked her down, or-!" "Tried talking her down. That mark on yer neck is the result." I rubbed my forehead. "As for disabling her...maybe I shoulda. But...", I said, choking up a bit. "I was scared." "And now you're a murderer.", Lucas said, quietly. That ticked me off. "Shut yer trap!", I yelled, curling a fist. "You ain't got no right to judge me! You were tied to a fricking chair doing nothing the whole time, ya navel-gazing nitwit!" "I.. suppose you're right.", Blondie acknowledged, then let out a forced, half-hearted chuckle. "This would be the second time you've saved my life." He looked down at the girl, and sadly shook his head. "Even so..." I gritted my teeth. "For a fella who was psyched at the prospect of a war, ya sure are upset about the death of a violent psychopath." "You seem more than alive to me.", he scoffed, bitterly. He massaged the bridge of his nose. "No.. no.. I'll stop, I'm grateful to you for saving me, truly, but..." He snapped his fingers. "Look. All that stuff about me being a Sorcerer, and hunting for magical items, it's true." Lucas blinked. "Basically. But I'm not after those artifacts because they look shiny. I'm after them because a great number of people are going to be hurt if I *don't* find them. And... harming some people, to save others... it... it just doesn't mesh with me, alright?" Lucas gazed at me with a weird sorta intensity, a face that looked hurt, desperate, and above all else, vulnerable. "If yer telling the truth... Then I'll help ya find whatever it is yer searching for.", I said,

then muttered the most abhorrent phrase I knew: "For free., even" I swallowed, and stared at him. "But lemme be clear ta ya. I'd do what I just did again inna heartbeat." Blondie chewed on his finger, then, removed a few more things from his rucksack. One was a weird black box, with metal prongs sticking outta one end. He took the black box, and strapped it onto his waist. The other three items were... weird looking blue slacks, an odd, black tunic with no collar and sleeves that only went up the elbows, and finally, a dark blue hooded robe... or halfa robe, anyways. He nonchalantly tossed them at me. "Why dida just throw yer pants at me?", I asked, confused. "You're not going to very well put that set of bloody robes back on, are you?", Lucas asked, his flamboyance back in full stride. "Besides, the clothing I just provided you with are invaluable garbs of arcane acclaim. The pants you see, were once worn by the infamous Pyromancer, Jean the Blue. The shirt is a very powerful ward, invented by the Alchemist Fitch and the Necromancer Abercrombie. And finally, the hooded piece of attire, the garb of choice for Dragonmancer Eli, the Giant." I looked at the clothing, and bit my lip. They didn't seem magical ta me, but it was hardly the time or place ta argue about that. "Er, ok. You should probably go now," I said ta Lucas. "Ah, so you can change, right.", he muttered. "So I can disposea the body.", I retorted. Blondie took one last, sad look at the Handmaiden, then stumbled away, outta the room. Disposing of the girl proved ta not be that muchuva challenge at all. I opened the wooden hatch in the floor, shattered the glass with my hatchet, and... shoved her into it. With little fanfare, the Handmaiden's corpse flew through the air, down to the frozen wastes below. I doubted anyone would find her, and if they did, would care enough to investigate how she ended up there. Covered once more in nothing but bandages and blood, I held my head in my hand.

Just moments ago, the girl had saved my life, and I had repaid her with a hatchet ta the stomach. I never fancied myselfa hero or nothing, but...- I suppose that don't quite matter now. The moment she plunged her sheers inta me, she forfeited her right ta live. I clumsily changed inta the garbs Lucas had left me. Magical or not, they were extradionarily comfy. And well-made, too. The pants, the shirt, and the robe weren't frayed at all, the seams and creases were sewed skillfully. Perfectly, I'd argue. Whoever had made the outfit hadta have had complete concentration, they musta been the equivalent offa Tailor Black, or something, ta make so little mistakes while crafting the garbs. After finally getting my arm through the sleevea the robes, I frowned. Perfectly made or not, the clothing didn't really offer too much protection. I tooka few steps around in em, and felta bit better. What they lacked in armor, the clothes made up fer in flexibility. I wiped off the blood on my hatchet with the useless left sleeve of Eli the Giant's robe, then used the somewhat clean blade ta cut off the sleeve entirely. I stumbled out inta the hall, intent on fetching Sabarene. She probably wouldn't be very happy that I ruined her robes, and even less so once she found how I ruined em. Maybe it was causea the bloodloss, but the entire hallway seemed ta be a blur as I walked through it once more. I barely got outta the cabin before my stomach started ta cramp. "Ain't the best time fer that." I groaned, though ta be honest, no time was ever a good time fer "that." Fortunately, the cramps were just my stomach deciding that if I enjoyed the sensation of ale swishing down my throat so much, that I would enjoy the taste of it spewing up even more. I rushed back ta the trapdoor I had shoved the Handmaiden through, and puked my guts out. As ta why I suddenly felt so nauseous, I don't quite know. I had only drank two mugsa ale. I musta had food poisoning, or something. I

resumed my travels, through the cramped hallway I had walked back and forth through far too many times. Walking unbalanced, I got back to the stairwell. Soon as I did, I heard more singing echo into the chamber, from about five or four floors up: "The Lancers of Cercentlet were strong and proud and brave. They beat off the General's forces, in the midst of a siege." The song seemed to be the Peace of the Collective again, but from the deepness of the voice, and overall adherence to basic musical integrity, I reckoned the singer was Shields, instead a Sabarene. "With the aid of a smuggler's vast supplies, victory was at hand. Meat to last a lifetime, and ale for every man. The Lancers feasted on beef and pork, portions hardly selective. But when they gasped, and clawed, and choked, they found, the peace of the collective!" That seemed to be the end of the song, judging by the applause that rang out as the singer finished. The.... loud, enthusiastic, applause. The applause that couldn't have been made by any less than seven or so people. "And that, ladies and gentleman, was the Peace of the Collective.", a familiar and insufferable voice rang out. Drawn to the voice, like a retarded moth to the flame, I sauntered up the stairs, doing my best to be as silent and inconspicuous as a one-eyed, one-handed person in flamboyantly colored robes possibly could. After cautiously climbing about five or so steps, and squinting my eye like there was no tomorrow, I managed to catch a glimpse of... well, not of the speaker, but of his audience. His heavily armed, plate-mail wearing audience. There were about six or so, minus the speaker, and they all were lugging around some sort of terrifying weapon. Two of them had warhammers, the heads of which were almost as big as I was. One of them was armed with a large spear, and the last four had... axes. Not great axes mind you, one-handed axes, each with their other hands occupied with

reinforced buckler. "Alas, though the song is a biting satire, every single word of it is true. The noble Lancers of Cercentlet did meet their end, not through honorable combat, but by the ingestion of poisoned contraban-" "Enough, Bowman.", a deep voice boomed. "We're here to slaughter Swordarms, not to see you sing and dance." "I'm afraid you're quite mistaken, Axeman Orange Seven. Merchant Black One was rather specific in his instructions. Our objective is to simply locate-" "I don't give a damn about what that hunk of lard wants us to do. Red Four and Blue Three are dead. Slain while they feasted on ale, and sated their thirst with stew." "I, um, think you might have that backwards, my good ma-" "Silence, Bowman. A piss color like you holds no authority over me. Me and my men are going to kill everyone aboard this vessel. If you'd like to stop us, then you're welcome to go ahead and-" "Stop you? Perish the thought.", the elegant voice responded. "You're welcome to do what you will with the Swordarms, but only AFTER we secure what we were sent here for. I can't say I knew either of your fallen Union members well, but they both had a degree of... promise." "Promise?", the booming voice snorted. "The withered old man didn't have much promise. Neither did Red, the honorless cunt." The deep voiced man sighed. "Even so, they were my name-sharers. I'd only be disgracing myself if I let their deaths go unanswered." "Oh, perish the thought.", I muttered, stepping up the stairs and exposing myself to the group. At once, my throat had the pleasurea being tickled by four axeheads, two hammers, and the edgea sharp spear. "Stop right there!", squeaked the speaker, who, judging by the face and the arrow shaft aimed at my gullet, was without a doubt Bowman Yellow Five. I rolled my eye and did as he commanded. "State your name!", he yelled, a good ways away from my weapon obscured body. "Sister Amelia.", I said, sarcastically. Yellow

looked me over. "A Sister of the Collective, huh?" His eyes were drawn to my stump. "But not quite the one we need. Hm." Bowman Yellow pondered. "Hammerion Red Two?", he asked. "Yes?", a lithe man with purple hair and a dumb looking smile answered. "Kill her." The dumb looking smile changed into a dumb looking frown, then a dumb looka indifference as the fella with the Hammer raised it high above my head. "W-wait!", I yelped. "It's me! Four! Red! Axeman!" The hammer damn near crashed upon my head, but luckily, I rolled backwards, away from the gigantic mallet... and down about twenty steps or so. "Axeman Red Four?!", Bowman Yellow called out in shock, as my head banged against the nice soft metal coverings of the staircase about fifteen times. He sprinted ahead of the others, and leapt ta get a close look at you. "Suns above!", he exclaimed. "You're alive!"... he said, then frowned. "...I think." "Don't worry, I'm shine.", I replied ta Bowmen Yellow Five. "I'm absolutely vine." "I'm not quite sure that you are, my good lady.", the Bowman with blue hair mumbled as he extended his hand. I grasped it, and got back on my feet. Yellow's six companions all rushed down ta where I was, weapons in hand. "No, no, we're not doing that anymore, Hammerion.", the youthful looking fella said, as he waved them down. "What on the continent are you doing here, Red Four?", Yellow asked, in disbelief. "Getting a ride ta Fremdos. That's usually the pointa this here Caravan, ain't it?", I responded, then licked my lips. "Seems like you and yer buddies got other plans though." Bowman Yellow Five smiled, and shook his head. "Indeed! We're about to deliver righteous judgment towards the cowardly Swordarms, among... other things." "Other things?" "Yes, other things, I just said that, there's no need to repeat it." The effeminate looking blue haired fella fiddled with the fletch of his arrow. "You see, Merchant Black One sent me and these fine



fellows to capture a high value target.” “YES.”, the pink haired woman holding the spear said, or rather, yelled. “We were sent here to CAPTURE a VERY IMPORTANT PERSON. We know that she is IMPORTANT, because we are to be paid GRATIOUS amounts of METAL for CAPTURING HER.” “She deaf or something?” “That’s simply the way Spearhand Blue Forty Two talks, I’m afraid.” “So who are ya fixing ta kidnap?”, I asked, even though I pretty much knew. “Some whore with black robes and a fake hand.”, Axeman Orange barked, then grinded his teeth as he stared me in the eye. “I hope you destroyed whoever did that to you, Red.” “Uh, do I know you?”, I asked, confused. The fella talking ta me wasa Axeman, but he didn’t look terribly familiar. He was a big bear offa man, with bulging, rippling muscles that rivaled mine- alright, fine, were slightly bigger than mine. He had crimson red hair, and a bushy red beard. In spitea that, his face looked fairly soft, free from the wrinkles of old age. “W-what?”, Orange stuttered, confused. “I mean, of course you know me. We both suckled from the same wetnurse.” “Oh yeah.”, I said, snapping a few fingers. “You were that scrawny kid who always wet his bed during thunderstorms.” I acknowledged, then frowned. “How the heck didya get ta Orange?” “S-squats and oa-“ he mewed, then coughed. “By doing my duty as an Axeman far better than you ever could, honorless whore.”, he uttered. “Uh, that’s nice, champ.” I rubbed the backa my head. “But as ya can see, I ain’t dead. Neither is Blue. So there ain’t any reason ta kill any Swordarms, or nothing.” “There’s plenty of reasons,” one of Orange’s three subordinates said. “Yes, one, they’re Swordarms.”, the other one of Orange’s subordinates said. “And two, if we kill them, we can take their stuff.”, the last one finished. “Why do you care about a few Swordarms, anyways?”, Bowman Yellow asked. “I don’t imagine you very well cut your own arm off,

after all." "Course I didn't", I lied. "And I ain't got any love fer the Swordarms, I'm on this dang Caravan because I murdered threea them. Or four. Last one was iffy." I lowered my voice. "But the Swordarms on this Caravan had nothing ta do with that darn bloody banquet." "Alas, it can't be helped.", Bowman Yellow Five said, with what I mighta thought was regret had I banged my head against fifty more steps. "The Swordarms here are tasked with protecting the passengers of the Caravan, and we intend to abduct a passenger. Fate has decreed that there must be blood shed on this day." I licked my thumb. "Hypothetically speaking," I said, slowly... "Say I were ta lead ya to who you were looking for. Would that mean you'd spare the guards on this here Caravan?" "Of course we wouldn't, cun-" "Why, yes, of course.", Bowman Yellow said, matter of factly. "Though I still don't know why you'd go out of your way to-" "Sparea few Swordarms?", I finished. "Ain't it obvious? I need those fellas alive fer this Caravan ta move, Bowman. Kidnap who ya will, but be subtle about it." "... suppose that does make sense." "VERY WELL," Spearhand said. "LEAD us to the LOCATION of our TARGET, and we shall NOT ENGAGE the SWORDARMS in ARMED COMBAT." "See...", I began, frowning. "That's the issue. I know exactly who yer fixing ta get and all... her name is Sister Amplifiene, right?" "Sabarene", Yellow Five corrected. "Uh, right. So, see, I've spent the last few rising periods watching her makea fool outta herself, and I definitely know she's here. But I'ma bit fuzzy on where she is. Either she's up... or bel-! Ah!", I said, smiling. "How bout this? I take Spearhand, and the Hammerions ta check one place, and you take Orange Seven, and... and..." "Blue Forty Five, Blue Seventy One, and Blue Seventeen.", Orange snorted. "What was the last name again?", I asked. "Blue. Seven. Teen." "Gotcha." I said, winking. "So you five go up ta capture whoever yer intend ta

capture, I'll head down with these three fellas." "Sounds like a plan.", Bowman Yellow Five said. "Though I'm surprised you don't want to be with your union brethren." "Aw, shucks. Ya said it yerself back at the banquet, didn't ya? Names don't matter anymore." "Very well. Though if we stumble across any of the Swordarms, we will be forced to play our hand." "That's fine.", I said, shaking my head. "Alright. So you should head ta the fourth floor.", I said ta Yellow. "There's a little longue there, and if my memory ain't messed up, the girl you want should be passed out drunk, along with two weaponless Swordarms. Just grab her and go." I turned my head ta the Hammerions and the Spearhand. "On the off-chance she ain't there, me and these fellas will check downstairs." "Lets go, time's a wasting." I sprinted fast as I could, down the stairs. The lithe Hammerion, his fat friend, and the Spearhand luckily managed ta keep pace with me. "I don't UNDERSTAND why you are RUNNING so QUICKLY.", the Spearhand yelled out, even though the running shoulda taken out alla her breath. "You are HEAVILY BANDAGED, and by the LOOKS of it, a RECENT AMPUTEE. RUNNING may IRRITATE your WOUNDS." I ignored her, and kept sprinting. Once we got ta the hall, I dashed aheada them, and kicked open the door ta my room. Sloppily, I flipped open the hatch I had thrown the Handmaiden's corpse out of. The moment I heard the heavy stepsa armor approach the room, I screamed. "AH!!!!!!!!!!", I yelled, loud and bloodcurdling as I could. "Heh...hehe...", the lithe Hammerion said, as he and his fat friend burst into the room. "WHAT is WRONG?", Spearhand asked, concerned. "It's... it's... I stuttered, pointing down the hatchet... "Look.... She... the person we were looking for... she..." "Fell?", the Lithe Hammerion said, smiling lewdly. "Lemme takea looksee." Nervously, I stepped back. Both Hammerions peered down the hole that led ta

the wastes below, their heavy armor clinking all the while. "Hey...", the fat one said. "I don't see anything strange." "M-maybe..." I stuttered, as I shaked in fear... "You... you..." I clenched my fist, and positioned myself behind their backs. "Need ta takea closer look!" With botha my feet, I kicked the two Hammerions, falling flat on my ass in the process. The kick was weak, and inefficient, but had enough force ta send the two armored fellas hurtling over, down the opening. They didn't even have time ta scream. "Wait, wha-?", Spearhand asked, her voice quiet for once. Gritting my teeth, I spun around, and desperately tried ta trip her. No good. The Spearhand dodge me with almost pathetic ease, and jabbed her weapon at my throat. She missed, but barely. I tried ta get back up on my feet, but the Spearhand knew better. She kicked me in the stomach, and pinned me in place. She raised her spear high, this time aiming fer my chest. And then, just as she was about ta lunge it inta me... I heard a crackling noise. The Spearhand froze in place, as the crackling continued fer a few moments or so, and then, her entire body convulsing, fell onto the floor. Behind the Spearhand was... Blondie. Blondie had in his hand the black box with metal prongs at one end, but the prongs weren't covered in blood. No, blue flame jumped, from prong, ta prong, ta prong, crackling aloud as it did. "What the-" I gasped, more amazed than grateful. "I'll explain later.", Lucas quickly said. "I take it there's more?", he asked, yanking me on my feet. "Yeah.", I said, running as much as my two legs could handle. "And they've got Sasaperene." "What?!", Blondie asked. "Why?!", "Because I told em where she was." "Why?!" "I'll explain later." I shoulda been winded, but just like when I was doing those death inducing pull-ups, a burst of strength came over me. So even though it was the fourth or fifth time, dashing up the stairs proved no problem at all. Me and Blondie ran

up to the fourth floor, and damn near leapt into the longue. Bowman Yellow Five was there, same with Axeman Orange Seven, and his three subordinates. The two Swordarms were asleep, in their chairs, and Sabarene, unconscious, was slung over Yellow's shoulders. "Y-yellow..." I gasped outta breath. "You were right! She was here!", the archer said, smiling. "And as promised, we will leave without harming a hair of these pathetic drunkards' heads.", he said, gesturing to the two Swordarms, one of whom was asleep in a chair, the other sprawled over a bar. "Sorry.", Lucas said, stepping forward, crackling pronged box in hand. "But I never made a promise. Let that woman go." Four Axes immediately pointed themselves at Lucas, who promptly began to sweat profusely. "O-on second thought...", he said, his hand shaking. "He's right.", I snarked, darkly. "You'll be wanting ta let that sister go, Yellow. Ain't gonna turn out well fer ya if ya don't." Axeman Orange Five rolled his eyes. "Oh, that's a laugh.", he bellowed. "And I suppose a crippled cunt and a dandy dunce are going to stop us?" "No, we won't.", I said truthfully, then smiled widely, baring my fangs. "But you will." I quickly took in a deep breath, and fast as I could, said: "'I, Axeman Red Four, being of both higher skill and nobler color, hereby command you, Axeman Orange Seven, and you, Axeman Blue Forty Five, and you-" "No!", Yellow screamed, panicked. "Stop her!" "Axeman Blue Seventeen, and finally, you, Axeman Blue Seven, to-" Blue Seventeen's axe crushed down on my left boot, and cut deep into it. "Ta kill yerselves!" I spat, spitefully. Orange's axe sped towards my head, and stopped. The bodies of the four Axeman froze completely still, and a look of horror spread across all their faces. "N-no...", onea them mewed out. Orange twisted his face at me. "T-take it back..." he begged, his face contorted. I glared at him. "You know damn well I can't take it back." Lucas looked on at

me, in complete shock. Then... mechanically, reluctantly... the four did as I asked. One attempted to cut off his own head, but only managed to sever a jugular, and writhing on the floor, expired slowly, and painfully. The other three took out hatchets, and with calm bodies, but terrified faces, slit their own throats. Bowman Yellow Five stared at me, his face just as blank as Lucas's. "T-they were your name-sharers...", he gasped. "Names don't matter anymore.", I said, drawing out my hatchet. Yellow backed away, his posse sprawled out on the floor besides. "N-no... don't come near me... demon!" His eyes grew demented, his shoulders shook, to the point where Sabarene and his quiver arrows just kinda slobbered off of him. "I... I won't!", he yelled. He drew his bow, but his bow didn't have any arrows. He wielded it in front of me with two hands, like a child would wield a stick in a game where he fancied himself a hero. "That bow ain't gonna save ya.", I leered, smiling, tilting my head back and forth, being deliberate, slow with my steps. Yellow Five turned his head up, and laughed. Loudly. "OH, BUT IT CAN! I AM A BOWMAN, **AND** THE VOICE OF MERCHANT BLACK ONE..." he hysterically sputtered, his body shivering. "THIS IS A BOW, **AND** A WEAPON DESERVING OF MERCHANT BLACK ONE!" "You've lost it," I chuckled, raising up the hatchet. And then his bow glowed. Red. Both of Bowman Yellow Five's hands disappeared, seemingly melding into the glowing red bow, though it looked more like a crimson, gooey sword than anything. "AHHHHHHHHHH!!!!", Bowman Yellowfive screamed, slamming the twisted looking appendage into one of the sleeping Swordarm. The Swordarm...no... Shields... was split into two. Head to crotch. With all of his heavy armor on. Bowman Yellow Five's demonic appendage cut through metal, bone, and flesh like it was butter. I wavered, and leapt back. "Fuck this!", I yelled, grabbing

Lucas's arm, tugging at it fiercely. But Lucas shrugged off my arm, even shoved me back outta the longue, a faint smile on his face, which, unlike when I dealt with the four Axemen, wasn't shocked or surprised in the slightest. He slowly began to move towards Bowman Yellow Five, who roared and screamed and shrieked like a rabid animal. "Ah.", Blondie calmly commented, amidst the bodies and the blood. "The anti-matter module. Good to see I've finally foun-" Don't let the dash confuse ya. Lucas didn't stop talking, as he walked towards Bowman Yellow Five. But he did stop making sense. His words became... gibberish. The way he spoke was harsh, and strange. But he went on at the same pace like he was speaking Continental all the same. "Fitting, that a demon's lackey would speak the devil's tongue!" Yellow gasped, and raised up his glowing sword to strike Lucas. Lucas... stood still. And was slashed not once, not twice, but three times by Yellow's appendage. Lucas opened his mouth, and... spoke more gibberish, until... "Mod...ule. Useful is?", He asked, cheerily., completely unharmed by Yellow's slashes. He was speaking Continental again, but it was broken Continental. Continental worse than any Offlander's attempt to speak it, slurred, lispy, and generally horrid. "W-what?!", the Bowman gasped , shocked. "Unfortunate, cancel other each out." Blondie put his hand over his mouth, and yawned, as the slashes hit him again, and again, and again. "Let me tell secret.", he said, taking out his pronged box, tossing it up in the air a few times. "This not module." Then, the blue flames leapt from prong, to prong, to prong, and Bowman Yellow Five, like the Spearhand before him, fell over, and convulsed. The glowing appendage quickly lost its luster, and, in a flash, the Bowman's hands unmolded from the bow. Lucas plucked up the bow, and tossed it over to me. I clumsily caught it. The blonde fella with the purple tophat stared at me with a serious

expression, and... started speaking gibberish again. "Uh... Blondie?", I asked, dumbfounded. "Up back.", he stated, in loose Continental. "What." "Back.", he uttered. "Up." Completely at a loss for words, I did as he said. As I did, Lucas started chanting, in gibberish, but a gibberish sentence... I, uh, guess, over, and over, and over again. Once I backed near the stairwell, the nonsense coming outta his mouth became Continental again. "Hear me now? Can you hear me now? Can you hear me now? Can you hear me now?" "Yes, I can hear ya.", I groaned, acutely aware of the pain in my foot. "Good.", Lucas said, then pointed his pronged box at me, glaring at me. "Would you mind explaining to me what the hell just happened?" "You first, demon lackey", I laughed, heavily intimidated by the crackling box, but trying my best not to look like I was. "You just killed four people.", Blondie snarled, not amused in the slightest. "Six, actually.", I mumbled. "Sent two of em outta the Caravan the quick way. But I had my reasons." "Those reasons being?", he asked, pissed. "They were jonesing to kill everyone onboard, plus they wanted to kidnap Samptafene." "Why would they want to do that?" "Hell if I know. Maybe some Merchant was fixing to rape her or something?" "Very funny.", Lucas responded. "Wasn't kidding." "If you honestly thought that..." Lucas began, calmly..."then WHY the hell would you tell them where she was?!", he furiously ejaculated. "Hadta. Couldn't very well have taken on eight of em at once, that trick I used wouldn'ta worked." "By trick, do you mean the thing where you forced four men to kill themselves, because that doesn't strike me as a trick, it strikes me as indiscriminate murder-" -" ARAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!", a bold, deep voice yelled. A very large, very hairy, and very naked man burst into the room, covered by two shields and not much else. "Are you alright, lass?", he asked, concerned. "I took off my armor to



use the privy, but before I could even take a pis-“ He stopped, as he gazed at the four corpses, the three unconscious folk, the two of us, and his one set of bifurcated armor. “Huh.” “Thank the suns!”, I blubbered, throwing myself onto the fella’s big hairy chest. “A buncha men with axes... they... they burst into the longue, and they... tried ta... they tried ta...” I burst into tears, as Lucas looked on with narrowed eyes. Shields patted me on the back awkwardly, at a loss for words. “But...”, I sniffled, “Lucas saved me. He fought them off before they could do anything.” “Is that true, lad?”, Shields asked, . “Yes.”, Lucas responded in a sarcastic monotone. “I killed four heavily armored men equipped with gigantic axes in a close quarters fight. I evidently did so unarmed, and without getting a scratch on me.” “That’s incredible.”, Shields said, staring at Lucas in awe. The fella in the purple tophat sighed loudly. “Yes, quite. Are me and this poor, honest, innocent woman free to go?” “Sure lad”, Shields said sympathetically. Blondie smacked himself in the face, and, shaking his head, grabbed Bowman Yellow Five, hoisting him on his shoulders. “Go ahead and carry the albino, Patchy, but make sure you keep that bow at least five fee-, sorry, six armlengths away from me.” I shook my head, and complied. There were a lotta questions that needed to be answered. Carrying Sabarene proved to be no easy feat, though, mainly because the wound in my foot didn’t seem too keen on being pressed against the ground. “Ow. Ow. Ow. Ow. Ow.”, I said, wincing with every step I took. “There’s no need to carry me, you know.”, a calm voice chimed from behind me. “Oh. Yer awake. How bout that.” I shrugged Sabarene off my shoulders. “I saw everything.”, she said quietly, getting on to her feet. “And I believe I owe you an apology, Mister Gandulfadore.” “An explanation would be better, Sabarene.” “An explanation?”, she asked. “Yes, an explanation, he just said that, there’s no need to

repeat it.”, I grumbled. “Why the heck did those fellas want ta kidnap ya?” “Hm...”, Sabarene pondered, resting her chin in her hands. “Well, I suppose there’s three possibilities.”, she mumbled, deep in thought. “The first would be that they were looking to kidnap gorgeous young women for... um, the usual reasons, I suppose.” Sabarene frowned. “But raiding a Caravan for that seems a bit much, even for someone as attractive as me.” She hit her left fist into her right palm. “Oh, oh, I know! They must have been an anti-Collective group! And seeing as I’m a sibling...” “Nah.”, I countered, “Those fellas were more focused on getting a buncha metal than they were trying ta mess with yer country or whatever. Plus they seemed ta be after you in particular.” “Oh! If they stood to make a bunch of money from kidnapping me... Then I suppose the third possibility is the correct one!”, Sabarene said, eyes gleaming. “And that would be?”, Lucas asked. “Um... now that... is a secret?”, the white haired lady nervously suggested. Me and Lucas glared at her. “Sabarene.”, he calmly stated. “There are two things in this realm I can’t stand. The first is when people hide critical information from me, especially after I save their lives” His fist tightened. “The second ... is when people co-opt my catch-phrase!”, Lucas said, referring to a catch-phrase that I later discovered he himself had co-opted. “F-fine! Fine, I’ll tell you!”, she said, sweating a bit. “Um... well, ok. It, um, kinda... has to... well, tangentially, I suppose, in a round-about way, have...to do with the General, maybe?” “Ya mean the fella who done killed yer friend, and all?” “Y-yes...”, Sabarene said wincing. “That... that person... might... be related to why those bandits wanted to kidnap me... p-perhaps.” “A-ha!”, Lucas said, a victorious grin on his defeated looking face. “You need not say another word, Sabarene, for I, Lucas Melloi Gandulfadore the third, Sorcerer Supreme, know the sordid truth you are

about to confess!" "Y-you do?", the white haired lady said, with a face torn between amazement, panic, and confusion. He twirled his baton, nearly dropping Bowman Yellow Five off his shoulders in the process. "Quite frankly, it was all too obvious.", he sighed. "The barely hidden resentment that sprang up in your crimson eyes whenever the gruesome General of the Collective was mentioned, the passionate hatred you harbored towards all of the General's acts, even the few acts of his that weren't comically evil, you weren't very subtle about it. You, Sister Sabarene, are clearly, the General-" "Y-yes...", Sabarene confessed, reluctantly. "-'s daughter. Wait, what?!" Lucas finished, flabbergasted. "Oh! Oh, the General's *daughter?*", Sabarene said, latching onto Lucas's theory a tad too late. "Yeah!, the, General's, uh, daughter! That's me!", she cheerily proclaimed. Three narrowed eyes glared at her. "You two aren't going to buy that, are you?", she asked, meekly. "Er, no, not really.", I muttered. "But I ain't terribly sure I buy the alternative, neither." I looked down at my feet, and at the man slung over Blondie's shoulders. "Let's take a rain check on the whole revealing our deep dark secrets thing, cause I'm pretty darn sure I just lost a toe or two." "O-oh no!", Sabarene said, gazing at my boot. "I-is it bad?", she asked, deeply concerned. "Depends on if the sticky stuff dripping on the soles of my feet is blood or not." It wasn't that bad, of course. We scurried over to Lucas's cabin, not for any special reason or nothing, it was just that he had a free bed, and we had a hostage to tie down and interrogate. "Alright.", Lucas said. "We're going to do the Good Cop, No Other Cop routine. I'm going to ask this fine fellow a few questions, and you two are going to go to your room and not do anything whatsoever." "Go nuts, Blondie.", I said, not particularly caring what Bowman Yellow had to say, least not as much as I cared about the wound

on my foot. It wasn't as bad as I had feared. The leather of my boot had absorbed most of the blade, and while Axeman Blue had cut a bit into my foot, he didn't render it useless or nothing. To be sure, it wasn't a nick, the blade had chopped two thirds the way into my foot, but all my toes were still attached, which was about as much as I could ask for. "You shouldn't have rescued me," Sabarene chided, poking the wound on my foot with a tweezer for some reason. "Better for me to be kidnapped than for others to die." "Wasn't about you, though," I said. "A bunch of fellas who thought I was dead found out I was alive. Was gonna kill 'em either way, just so happened that they decided to kidnap yer stupid ass for some reason." Just as Sabarene opened her mouth to respond, there was a knock on the door to the cabin. She opened it to find... Spearhand Blue Forty Two. My hand jolted for my hatchet. "STOP!", the pink haired girl squeaked. "I am NOT here to FIGHT YOU, or to obtain the TARGET I was offered GRATUITOUS AMOUNTS OF METAL to CAPTURE. My head HURTS and my stomach FEELS SORE. I would VERY MUCH like to GO HOME and TAKE A NAP. Please consider SPARING MY LIFE, as I DO NOT WISH to DIE." "Go on.", I whispered. "Git." The woman with the Spear hopped away. Sabarene stared at me with a mischievous smile. "Unless I'm mistaken, that girl seems to know you're alive..." "She don't count.", I grumbled. "Most folks probably'll think she's a retard once she runs her mouth, so her ramblings are worth about as much as the ramblings of a girl who thinks she's a General." Sabarene cringed at the word General. "But... I am. Well, I was. For a bit." "Yeah, sure.", I snorted. "I... I know it seems hard to believe, but..." "Darn right it's hard to believe.", I said. "I mean, no offense, but yer bonier than Axeman Orange was when he was a kid, and lemme tell ya, he was bony as heck." The guilt on Sabarene's face

vanished for a bit, replaced by confusion. "Um.... What is it that you think a General does, again?" "Didn't ya say that being a General was the Collective equivalent of being Axeman Black One or something?", I asked. "Um... yes... yes... I did, but...", Sabarene slowly said. "Then there's no way in hell that yera General.", I laughed. "The leader of any respectable fighting force is the toughest, the strongest, the buffest. You don't look like you could fight yer way outta a slightly crowded buffet table." "Believe it or not, Patchy, leading and managing an advanced military force doesn't necessarily correlate with one's ability to smash things good.", Lucas said, leaning against the door of the cabin. "Oh, yer back.", I mumbled. "How goes the interrogation?" "Poorly.", he sighed. "I attempted to converse with that bow-using gentleman, but alas, talking with him is impossible. He's overly verbose, flamboyant to a fault, and, quite frankly, seems a bit narcissistic." "Ya don't say.", I said. "Why do ya care about him, anyways? We already know why he went onboard this here Caravan. The fella wanted ta capture Sister Nanarene ta make a bitta metal." "Duh.", Lucas droned. "That's his motivation for doing so, sure. But the better question is the motivation of the person who hired Generic Henchman Tie-Dye Forty Five. No matter how you slice things, trying to kidnap someone from another country never bodes well, General or not." He swallowed. "But more pertinent to my interest is the subject of the gentleman's bow." "What, you mean this?", I asked, pointing it towards him. "Don't do th-", Lucas said, then began ta babble again. "Er, sorry.", I said, frowning. "I take it that this thingy is magical or something?" Blondie backed a bit out into the hallway, and nodded. "That, Patchy, is an anti-matter module." "I ain't terribly bright, mind telling me what that means?" "A module. One of those items I was talking about before.", Lucas off-handily explained, treating the lawsa

nature bending object like he would treat a discarded pair of britches. "So what's it do?", I asked, as Sabarene started to stitch the cut in my foot closed. "Nothing much, really.", Lucas said, a look of disappointment on his face. "It's a rather stupid item. To even utilize it correctly you need to give up use of a limb or two, and even then, all it serves as is a glorified melee weapon." "Y'know, maybe my depth perception was acting up or something, but I kinda saw it slice through armor like butter. That seems like a pretty big deal to me." "Oh, sure, to *you* it's a big deal", Lucas acknowledged. "But compared to the other artifacts, the anti-matter module is just a butter knife." "One helluva butter knife, though." I tossed the bow in my hand, and looked it over. "Probably should throw this dang thing out, huh?" "No no no," Lucas said, shaking his head fervently. "Keep it, guard it with your life. Trust me when I say it'd be disastrous if someone else got a hold of it." He sighed, and looked at Sabarene. "Speaking of disastrous..." "Uh, hold off on drilling Sanafene's face, Blondie." I said. "There's one thing I don't get. Why is this darn bow making ya talk so funny?" "Now that... is a secret-" Three eyes glared at him before he could even finish. "Uh.. hm.", he said, twiddling his index fingers. "Well, the bow isn't making me speak funny, so much as it is making me speak... normal?", he attempted to explain. "How the heck is that gibberish of yers anywhere near normal?" "It's not gibberish, it's my native tongue!", Blondie replied, angry. "The language of the Queen!" "What's a Queen?", me and Sabarene both asked simultaneously. "A band of talented musicians.", Blondie tersely responded. "But that's not the point. Toss me that bow, if you would." I aimed for his hand, so naturally the bow smacked him in the face. "Ow. See, is thing.", Lucas said in poor continental. "I can't speak Continental, somewhat." He tossed the bow back to me. "But I can't speak it terribly well, at least not

on my own merits.” Lucas smiled sheepishly. “I’ve had a bit of help.” The blonde haired fella twisted his bowtie, and inna flash, a weird, green miasma appeared around his face. “Well that’s fucking weird.”, Sabarene said aloud, then quickly covered her mouth. Lucas, despite having a menacing looking fog around his head, seemed fine. Or dead. I mean I couldn’t tell, all of his face was obscured. ‘You see, this vapor”, the apparently alive Sorcerer said, “is the byproduct of an artifact I have the privilege and arcane ability to possess. The official term for it is the language module, but I call it... the Universal Translator!”, he proudly proclaimed. I woulda golf-clapped sarcastically if I could. “As the name implies, it translates any language perfectly, both ways!” “Oh yeah? Howzit work?”, I asked. “Through magic, of course.”, the Sorcerer responded, then twisted his bowtie again, causing the miasma ta disperse. “Hey, waita tick.”, I said, my two or three brain cells starting ta figure stuff out. “So if that there bow causes yer bowtie ta stop working, does that mean-“ “That it works the other way around? Yes indeed!”, Lucas said, winking. “I’m brave,” he lied, “but I’m not stupid. I wouldn’t have walked into the path of the Anti-Matter module if I thought it could actually harm me.” “Oh, so one cancels out the other.”, Sabarene said, then frowned. “That seems kind of silly.” “Silly or not, it is what it is.”, Blondie not-so-helpfully explained. “Magic tends to work that way. Silly and fun one minute, and then, bam, the next thing you know your head swells up like a blueberry and explodes.” “Y-you don’t say.”, Sabarene stuttered, and nervously fiddled around with her hair. “Um, that was absolutely fascinating, Mister Lucas, but I’m a bit tired, so I think I’m going to go to be-“ “Not just yet, Lucy.”, he said, sternly. “You’ve got some s’plaining to do.” “Ehehehe... I... do?”, Sabarene asked. “About what... exactly?” “The whole being the leader of a massive paramilitary force hellbent on

subjecting an entire continent's worth of people to the rule of a quasi-religious economic order thing." "Oh..." Sabarene slowly said. "That..." She poked through my foot one last time, and, after being sure that the wound was at least moderately sewed up, cut the needle loose. "S-see... the Collective has... mandatory military service... and... t-two branches.", she said, her body calm, but her voice shaky and her words more stuttered than normal. "You've got the Patrician branch... and the Plebian branch. The Patrician bran-" "Stop, stop.", Lucas interrupted, exasperated. "I don't want to hear about the inner workings of your country's military, I'm a Sorcerer, not an Academic. No, I just want to know if you truly are, as you inadvertently blurted out, the General of the Holy Collectivr. Because from what I heard, the General is a blood thirsty psychopath with a rather cavalier approach to human life, and this little Caravan has enough of those types as is." "I...I am.", Sabarene said, firmly. "Um... well... was. Miss Axeman Red Four, do you remember that story I told you about Brother Brounde?" "Oh, yer friend or whatever? You didn't exactly skimp out on the details of his demise, so yeah, I remember.", I paused. "Aw, crap, really?", I asked, sorta disgusted. "What happened to the albino's friend, Patchy?", Lucas asked. "Died in an onion slicing accident.", I muttered, darkly. "That story I told you... it was true.", Sabarene said. "And the songs were true too..." "The songs?", I asked. "The one about the General giving poisoned supplies ta the besieged Lancers, or the one about the General ending the starvation problem in Trunchet by feeding em the main cause of their immigration problem?" "...Yes.", Sabarene said. "Y-yes?!". Lucas shrieked, nearly tearing his hat ta pieces in the process. "I'm...I'm not exactly a good person..." "To put it lightly.", Blondie quipped, more calmly, but only a bit more calmly. The white haired lady in black began ta tear up,



as she shakily elaborated. “I.. I did a whole bunch of horrible stuff... to a whole lot of people.” She curled her hand into a fist, and a burning hot anger almost immediately replaced her chilling sadness. “But... but I didn’t do so out of some sadistic whim! I did so because I thought that the bad I did would bring about an infinite amount of good!”, she declared. “That’s no excus-“ “I know it’s no excuse, that’s the point!”, the Sister screamed, causing me to cover one of my ears. “What I did in the past can’t be forgiven, and it musn’t be forgiven.” The fingers in her fist cracked as she suddenly stood up. “B-but... though the blame of what happened to Trunchet, Cercenlet, and... and all the rest lies firmly on my shoulders... my mission... still stands.” “Yer mission?”, I asked, confused. “Yer mission to stop the General? But you just said you are the General!” “W-was.”, Sabarene insisted. “I fled to Provesh a cycle ago. I... I intended to, as I said when I first met you, use the time to demonstrate that the Mark could be adopted through diplomatic means, but... but...” “But ya heard Blondie blab about a General plotting to attack good ole Provesh.”, I finished. “Y-yes.”, she choked out. “I thought fleeing to Provesh would solve most of the Collective’s problem... stop the majority of the bloodshed, at least.”, the timid Ex-General said. “I... I was wrong. All I did was run away from my own guilt.” “Hm.”, Lucas said, deep in thought. “From a moral standpoint, I should probably cut all ties with you, Sister Sabarene, if what you say is actually true. But...”, the boy with the purple cape said... “From a magic standpoint, it’d be a terrible idea to do anything like that in the slightest!” His face became animated, and flamboyant. “A repentant soldier, seeking to undo the sins of her past? Why, that’s the type of person that magical items are drawn to like magnets!” I nodded my head. “So what ya said is true, then?”, I asked. “Y-yes.”, Sabarene confirmed for the eighth time.

“Well, no one’s perfect.”, I yawned. “W-what?!”, Blondie and Sabarene both blurted out. I sat cross-legged. “General or not, Sister Masterene-“ “Sabarene.”, “Sabarene saved my bacon, sewed me up, and even emptied my chamber-pot when I was dying a blood-loss and the like.” I turned to the chamber-pot emptier in question. “I ain’t inna position to judge ya, and even if I was, it seems that you’ve done plenty of judging yerself anyhow.” “B-but it’s not just a matter of morals, Miss Axeman Red Four. If you continue to travel with me-“ “I’ll have to put up with the stigma of being yer pal? Eh.”, I said, rubbing my stump. “Worse things have happened.” “M-miss Axeman Red Four,” Sabarene tearfully choked out for the second time in three rising periods.. “I hate to interrupt this beautiful moment of Violent Thug and Warmonger friendship,” Lucas loudly announced, “But while the rather anti-climatic revelation of you being the General answers some questions, it also opens up a great deal more.” The Sorcerer brooded, and our cabin suddenly felt more cramped. “Specifically, the rumors I heard about the impending invasion of Provesh, and the letter I showed the two of you. The rumors... well, they may have just been rumors. But the letter... now that-“ “Is exactly as worrisome as it seems.”, Sabarene said. “T-this is merely conjecture on my part, but I think... that the Collective may be holding a meeting in Fremdos to appoint a new General.” “You believe?” “W-well... I still technically have another five cycles left in my term...” she said, twiddling her fingers. “But considering I went away without, um... telling anyone...”, Sabarene said... Lucas pulled the brimma his hat over his eyes. “Ah. So the big nasty war hungry country is going to appoint a new big nasty war hungry leader, causing a big nasty war to ensue. The problem is clear, the solution... not so much.” “What do ya mean?”, I asked. “It’s obvious, you idiotic elf.”, Blondie snapped.

“While I’m sure genocide girl here didn’t exactly help matters, the fundamental problem with the Collective is its populace.” “Nonsense!”, Sabarene squeaked, angry. “The citizens of the Collective are kind-hearted... and pure.” “Then there’s nothing to worry about.”, Lucas said, inna tone that suggested he believed anything but. “If your people are a good sort, then I’m sure a nice friendly General will be appointed in your stead.” “Geeh...”, Sabarene squirmed. “T-though all military and political appointments are decided by the citizens of the Collective as a... a collective, mistakes can happen... a- and a person who shouldn’t be in charge of the military... could end up as the new General... maybe.” Lucas pondered fera spell, tapping his cane against the floor. “Huh! Actually, wait, I think I may have thought of a brilliant way to save your entire realm.”, he said, humbly. “How many terms did you serve as General, Sister?” “I was on my second.. before I went...” “Wonderful.”, the blonde haired fella remarked, completely ignoring half of what Sabarene said. “I assume you were fairly popular, at least at once point.” “Yes, but for all the wrong reason-“ “That doesn’t matter.”, Lucas countered. “Popularity is popularity. All you need to do is exploit what leverage you still possess, and have someone who isn’t a war-mongering psychopath be elected as the new General, and then-” I snickered. “Never pegged ya as the delusional type, Blondie.” “Delusional?” “She just said that, there’s no need to repeat it, Mister Gandulfadore.” I slugged my way offa the bed, and putta bitta weight on my sewn up foot. Taking a single step was painful as heck, but besides the agony the foot itself worked fine. “I don’t know nothing about the Collective, but if the people there share even a sixteenth in common with the people here in Provesh, then yer little plan is doomed ta failure from the get go.” “Last time I checked you were a limb-lacking thug, not a psychologist.”,

Lucas remarked, upset. "A psywha-?", I asked, then nodded my head. "Nah, what I am and what I ain't don't matter. If you really were appointed as a General or whatever," I said to Sabarene, "Then rest assured it wasn't cause folks thought you were a wise leader or nothing. They wanted bloodshed, and you gave it to them. The moment you offer them something else, they'll leave ya." "Oh, then what do you suggest, you excessively edgy elf?", Lucas asked, annoyed. "Should the albino raise a host and murder the competition?" "Course not.", I mumbled. "Why kill folks when ya can lie about killing folks?" "What.", Sabarene and Lucas stated, confused and grossed out. "Alright.", I said, fixing my eye on Sabarene, as she sat down on the bed, holding her head like she had a migraine. "So ya wanna stop a blood thirsty General from being appointed, and ya wanna stop yer country's military from doing the continent's favor and burning Provesh to ash, right?" "I.. wouldn't put it that way, but yes.... I turned to Blondie. "And you heard rumors before about the big nasty General's impending triumphant return, right?" "Yes, but there were only rumors, obviously." "Don't matter." I grinned, baring my fangs. "All you gotta do, *General Sasnrene*,-" "Sabarene." "Er, fine, General Sabarene, is return to Fremdos, and play the part expected of ya." "Wha-", she said, confused. "You know. Act like a mean ole blood-thirsty General. Make over the top speeches about attacking Provesh, bout forcing us Union savages to adopt yer flimsy paper money, and such. In short, act like the you off a few cycles ago." Sabarene stared at me, horrified. "Why would I do tha-" "Cause that's what yer people seem to be fixing for.", I explained. "They want a scary type a General, notta pacifist give love a chance type a General." "B-but I want there to be a pacifist... give love a chance type of General...", Sabarene moaned. "And if ya follow my advice, there will be.", I smirked,

feeling pretty darn smug about my asspull offa plan. “Just *act* as mean and nasty as ya can. Make it *seem* like yer the most violent, war hungry General out there.” “Ohhhhhh~”, Lucas hummed, finally catching on. I licked my left fang and elaborated. “That way, if there’s an election deal or something, yer opponent will almost assuredly be a total peace loving wimp.” Blondie clapped his hands together energetically. “And all Sabarene has to do is lose, and then bam! Fantasyland version of World War Two averted!”, Lucas finished excitedly. “Fantasyland?”, “Sorcerer speak for the Continent, Sister.”, he unconvincingly explained. “Sabarene don’t even need ta lose.”, I smiled. “If she ends up as the General again, then she can just use the fellas under her command ta force-“ “No, no coups.”, she finished, reading my mind. “I won’t go against the rule of law of the Collective.” I frowned. “Really? Why not?” “Because the Collective is based upon the precept that-“ “Yeah, yeah, whatever.”, I pouted. “No coups. But even then it don’t matter. If ya get re-appointed as the General after doing yer best ta come off as a crazed lunatic, then you can use the greatest weapon of all ta bring peace and prosperity ta the continent.” “Love?”, Blondie guessed. “Nah, passive aggressive incompetence.”, I answered, then slapped Sabarene on the back. “Worst comes ta worst and ya end up as the General again, then don’t attack Provesh, have yer soldiers dig ditches or something instead.” Sabarene seemed shocked. “Y-you really think a plan like that can work?” “Not particularly, no.” I admitted. “Even if our assumptions about some sorta General election taking place in Fremdos is true, there’s about a million things that can go wrong with my little scheme.” I shrugged my shoulders. “But it’s worth a shot, ain’t it?” “Y-yes.”, Sabarene said, tightening her fist. “Yes!” she proclaimed, fire burning in her eyes. “I... I should have told you exactly who I was the moment I met you, Miss Axeman

Red Four.”, the white haired lady said. “I was so disgusted with my past that I tried to pretend it didn’t even happen.” She nodded her head violently. “I won’t hide from myself anymore. I’ll return to Fremdos, and I’ll make damn sure that no more blood is shed over marks again.” I walked over to the dresser, and fetched a hatchet, discretely another one into my robe. “That’s the spirit.”, I said with a smile. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I gotta go take care of our Bowman problem.” Both Sabarene and Blondie stared at me blankly. “B-by which I mean I’m gonna ask him a few questions, of course!”, I sputtered. “I wasn’t planning on killing him, or nothing...” “Be that as it may, I think I’ll be taking that for now,” Lucas said, plucking away the hatchet in my hand. “And, um, I’ll be taking the other one.”, Sabarene said, stealing the one I had not-so cleverly hidden. “You two ain’t fun at all.”, I whined, and left for the cabin where Bowman Yellow Five was staying. I snuck into the room as quietly as I could. Least, that was the intention. My recently stitched up foot, combined with my non-existent right eye, caused me to open the door with my head, as I tripped over nothing and fell face first into the cabin. Bowman Yellow Five stared down at me in disgust. The blue haired Bowman looked fine, all things considered. His four limbs were tied to the frame of a twin-sized bed by bits and pieces of the rope the Handmaiden had used on Blondie, but besides that, Bowman Yellow Five looked relatively untouched. He wasn’t wearing much anything, we had stripped him down to his britches just in case the fella had a dagger or something tucked away somewhere. The bare chested Bowman looked down at me in disgust. “How on earth did a crippled klutz like you kill a warrior like Hammerion Red Two?”, he asked, flabbergasted. “Looked down a trap door and pretended I saw something shiny.”, I answered, stumbling back onto my feet. “Let it never be said I

valued the Hammerions for their wits.”, Yellow replied, frowning. I gazed around the room. Unfortunately, there wasn’t anything that could be used as a weapon any sort. There was a big ole book, and a few pieces of furniture, but if I tried to beat Bowman Yellow to death with a broken leg table, odds are that Sabarene and Lucas would burst into the room and stop me before I could. Even worse, I’d have to recompense the Caravan for broken property. “So... how are ya holding up, sport?”, I asked, in a weak attempt to reach out to the fella I intended to gut with a hatchet. Bowman Yellow narrowed his eyes at me. “No, no, you’re supposed to be the mean interrogator, that pretentious git with the stupid looking hat was the nice interrogator.” “Yer tied to a bed naked.”, I responded. “It don’t matter who’s nice and who’s mean, the balance of power here is pretty well established.” “I... I suppose you may be right.”, Bowman Yellow Five said, sighing. “But if you were planning to ask me questions before killing me, I suggest you save us both some time and getting on with the pillow smothering.” “Shoot.”, I said, plopping down on a comfy cushioned chair. “Ya know that there stoic guy act ain’t gonna last by the time we start skinning yer fingers and such, right?” I chewed on my index finger and frowned. “I ain’t even trying to sound sadistic or nothing, I’m just-“ “No, no, you misunderstand, Axeman Red Four.”, Bowman Yellow Five answered, looking at me softly. “I’m not saying I refuse to answer your questions.” The blue haired fella shrugged his shoulders. “I just can’t. I’ll die, if I do.” “Oh. Another Bowman used his rank on ya, huh?” “Of course not, idiot.”, Bowman Yellow Five snapped. “The fifteen or so Bowman in Provesh that outranked me were killed at the banquet.” “Then I don’t see the problem.”, I blinked. “If ya weren’t ordered by name, number and color to keep mum, ya should be fine. “When I said I’ll die if I told you my mission, I didn’t mean that my lungs

would rupture on the spot if I disclosed certain details.” “Then what did ya-“ “I mean that if I cave in to the torture that is almost certainly about to befall me, a rather well-fed duck will find his way to Merchant Black One’s, and then-“ “Wait, hold on.” I interrupted. “How do ya know that the duck is gonna be well-fed?” “I’m using a figure of speech, you moronic-“ “Furthermore, how do ya know the duck will be a guy duck? He might be a girl duck. Or maybe even a hermaphroditic duck.” “The gender of the duck is irrelevant, you insufferable wench.”, Bowman Yellow Five snipped, then frowned. “Merchant Black One has ears everywhere-“ “No, he only has two a em, and they’re far too small ta be everywhere.” “You’re doing that on purpose, aren’t you?”, he asked, miffed. I rubbed my stump against my face. “Kinda. But only cause yer being stupid. Yer afraid that Merchant Fat Buns is gonna send a buncha assassins after ya if ya blab ta me about yer big secret, which, ta be honest, I probably already know anyways.” The Bowman floundered. “You can pretend to know all you want, but-“ “Oh, stop it.”, I snipped. “I know that the girl you were fixing ta kidnap is the Generala the Collective, fer one.” “Y-you do?!” Bowman Yellow Five asked, incredulous. “H-how?” “You just told me.”, I lied. “Alright, then.”, the blue haired fella said, the robes holding him ta the bed vibrating slightly. “You do realize how ridiculously valuable that girl is, right?” “Course I do.”, I said, shaking my head. “Well, actually, no, I don’t, I barely know jack about the Collective. But I reckon that tonsa people would pay tonsa metal fer a General’s head, even if I ain’t on good terms with any of em” “As it happens.”, Bowman Yellow began ta say, “I am on good terms with a certain wealthy individual, who would gladly-“ I held up my hand. “Ain’t gonna happen.” Yellow Five gazed at me. “Why? You have a life of luxury and leisure right at your fingertips, why won’t you just reach out and take it?”



“Cause it’d wouldn’t be enough.” I licked my lips. “A big old house, with nice warm beds, and tonsa meat and wine... can’t say I’m particularly adverse ta having that. But...”, I said, pointing ta my eyepatch. “Recent events have given me time ta think. And I’m far more interested in that bowwa yers, then I’ll ever be inna buncha metal.” “W-what of it?”, Yellow asked, as if there was nothing out of the ordinary about his weapona choice. “Where’d ya get it?” “I... I can’t tell you that.”, Yellow dodged. I raised an eyebrow. “I ain’t asking ya what the bow does, or even what it is. I just wanna know where ya got it.” “I told you.”, Bowman Yellow Five repeated. “I can’t tell you tha-“ “Ya can.”, I said, “And ya will. Cause otherwise, I’ll hand ya over ta the Swordsarms, and I guarantee ya that they won’t be nearly as nice as I am.” Bowman Yellow Five frowned. “F-fine.”, he pouted. “If you really must know, that weapon was given to me by Merchant Black One as a gift.” “Helluva gift.”, I said. “A weapon that could cut anything it touched, I was informed.”, Bowman Yellow Five said. “Misinformed, more like.”, I corrected. “Yer bow didn’t seem ta be able ta cut Blondie much.” “True.”, Yellow stated. “Then again, your friend did tell me... many, many times, that he was a wizard.” “Sorcerer.”, I stated. “Does it really matter?”, the Bowman asked. “Ta him it does.” I cleared my throat. “So ya got the bow asa gift.” “I didn’t get the bow as a gift, per se.”, Yellow answered glumly. “I received a crystal, which I embedded in the bow.” I frowned. “And ya found nothing weird about gettinga magical crystal?” “I was... slightly shocked to receive such an amazing gift, sure.” Yellow admitted, then smiled confidently. “But Merchant Black One is an amazing man.” “Not amazing enough ta prevent the vast majority of his recruits from getting slaughtered at dinner, apparently.” The Bowman nodded his head. “That little incident only happened because he was a great man.” Yellow stared at me intently.

“Only those who matter have enemies.”, he stated. “The Swordarms only attacked the banquet because they knew Merchant Black One’s vision, and were afraid of it.” I clucked my tongue. “And what makes ya so sure the Swordarms were the ones ta rain on Blacky’s parade?” “Who else could it be?” Yellow asked. I had a few answers ta that question, but I had about as much evidence behind em as the Bowman had clothes on. “...I don’t right reckon you should care about that.” “Do you care about anything, Axeman Red Four?”, Yellow asked, bitter. “Same stuff that most people care about, I reckon.”, I replied. “You’re wrong.”, Bowman Yellow growled. “Most people have principles, dignity, and-“ “Honor?”, I finished, half smiling. “Yes, honor!”, the Bowman declared, his usually smooth face crinkled. “Axeman Orange had honor-“ “And now he don’t even have a heartbeat.” The normally elegant Bowman gnashed his teeth together. “Because of you.” I smiled widely, flashing my fangs. “Shucks, is this the part where ya try ta take the moral high-ground? Go on, tell me how yer better than I am somehow.” “I don’t need to try to take the moral anything.”, Yellow spat. “You’re a deranged, demented, disfigured monster. Merchant Black One was going to-“ “Line your pockets with metal.”, I snarked. “Yes!”, Yellow said, surprising me. “He WAS going to line my pockets with metal! And yours! And that of everyone else in Provesh!” Yellow’s voice was shaky now, and his words sloppy. He hadn’t even one ounce of the dignity he had when he spoke at the banquet, yet was all the more genuine fer it. “Regardless of what you think of me, can you truly say that the current state Provesh is evenly slightly acceptable?” “Course I can’t.”, I admitted. “I’m on this Caravan fer a reason, after all.” “Then by the suns, why didn’t you aid me, aid your name-sharers?” “Yer interests didn’t line up with mine, is all.”, I answered gruffly. “A depraved jest if I ever heard one.”,

Yellow grimaced. "Depraved or not, it's the truth.", I insisted. "As stupid and wildly incompetent as the Swordarms onboard are, they ain't a bad sort. Neither is the girl you wanted ta kidnap." "Ain't a bad sort?", Yellow asked, softly. "Yeah, I just said that, there's no need ta- "AIN'T A BAD SORT?!", he yelled, the veins in his head bursting. "She's the General of the Holy Collective, you idiot! You and I could run around the streets of Provesh killing everyone we saw, for seven cycles, and we wouldn't even come close to matching a fiftieth of the body count she's racked up!" I shrugged my shoulders. "She feels sorry about it, though." Bowman Yellow Five's right hand struggled fiercely against the rope bindings. "I'm not trying to escape.", he assured me. "I'm trying to tear my ears off, because deafness would be preferable to listening to any more of your tremendous stupidity." "That can be arranged.", I mumbled. If Yellow heard my threat, he sure as heck didn't react to it. "Look. I understand why you might have certain sympathies towards that girl.", he said, diplomatically. "But Merchant Black One is a very informed man, and even he was unaware of the General's identity until recently." "Course he wasn't.", I mumbled. "Wouldn't make sense ta travel somewhere if ya thought people would kill ya on site." I nodded my head. "But ya got it all wrong. She wasn't in Provesh ta do anything bad or nothing." "Oh, my bad. She must have traveled here for the weather." "Nah.", I said. "Sabablene wanted ta replace metal with her weird paper currency." "At sword point.", Yellow countered. "Nope. She wanted ta do it all peaceful like." Yellow looked at me with disdain. "Peaceful-like? And who was the one who told you that, exactly?" the bowman asked, forcefully. "Have you ever considered that maybe, just maybe, the exceptionally brutal and infamously underhanded military leader of the Collective went to the heart of the Independent Kingdoms not to do some

sentimental soul searching, but to lay the groundwork for a massive invasion?" I didn't answer him. Instead, I reached down into the robes of Eli the Giant, and fetched the third hatchet I had stored between my breasts. I pressed it up against the Bowman's quivering throat. "Listen quick, and repeat after me.", I hissed, as the Bowman shut his eyes in fear. "I, Bowman Yella Five-" The blue haired man's eyes opened in terror. "N-no, I refuse to order myself to-" I cut him slightly on neck with the hatchet, causing the well-worded fella ta howl in pain. "If ya want it ta be quick, you'll repeat after me." The blue haired fella shivered. "N-no!", he whimpered. Tears started ta drip outta his eyes. "Yer crying?", I asked, inna amused tone. "Ya really want yer last moments ta be spent crying? Well, fine by me." I cackled, then slapped him across the face with the flatta my hatchet. "Now say what I say, or I'll start with yer toes and work my way up." "I, Bowman Yella Five..." "I... B-bowman Yellow Fuh... fuh... Five.", he half said, half wept. "Beinga equal skill and as noble offa color.." "Being... of... of equal skill, and as noble of a color..." "Hereby command myself ta..." "H-hereby command myself to... to..." he stuttered, sobbing. "Tell no one besides Axeman Red Four about any information pertaining ta the General that I know now or may come across in the future.", I finished. "T-tell no one besides Axeman Red Four about any information pertaining ta the General of the Holy Collective that I know now or may come across in the future." I shook my head serenely, and raised my hatchet high, causing the sniffing Bowman ta cower in fear. I slammed it down, severing... the piecea rope holding onea his arms ta the bed. "W-what?", Yellow stuttered, a bit of blood dripping down his throat. "I thought you were going to kill m-" I covered his mouth with my hand. "Course I wasn't.", I whispered. "Just needed ya ta think I was so you'd lose yer cool and repeat

any ole thing I said.” I tore up a bitta the sheets and wiped up the wound on his throat. “See, here’s the thing.”, I explained, quietly. “That girl that you wanted ta abduct.... She ain’t like you, or me. She’s kind, selfless, caring... the kinda girl that most whores pretend ta be fer metal.” I swallowed. “Least... that’s what my gut tells me. My brain, on the other.... uh, foot, is more inclined ta yer waya thinking.” I cut the binding holding Yellow’s left arm free. “So I’m going ta compromise. I’ll send ya on yer way, put some clothes back on ya , and even give ya some metal fer the time and lives ya lost.” I nervously licked my lips. “In exchange, yer gonna ask around the square in Provesh. Ask the folks in the stalls about what a white haired girl was doing with metal, and marks. Unassigned, Named, Swordarms, anyone and everyone. Find out where she got the metal from, and who she gave her little marks to.” Bowman Yellow Five stared at me, his expression neutral, no longer disturbed and frightened like it had been “If ya find out that she was just exchanging marks fer metal, then dumping the metal into the ocean because she’s retarded, then fine. Let that be the enda it.” I paused. “But if ya discover anything weird, then senda duck ta Axeman Black One in Fremdos with yer findings.” I cut Bowman Yellow’s legs loose as well, then pulled him up onto his feet. “Wait.”, Bowman Yellow said, confused. “After all that, you seriously expect me to perform an errand for you?” I shook my head. “Uh, yeah. Pretty much.” He opened his mouth to voice an objection, then let out a slight chuckle. “I suppose I was right about you all along, then.”, he said, “I’ll do exactly as you say, I swear on my name.”, the Bowman vowed, then extended his hand. I grasped it. After binding himself ta me by command and color, the bowman went ta put his leather armor back on. “Hold up”, I ordered him. “I’m gonna take custody of that.” “But you said you’d give me my clothes

bac-“No, I said I’d give ya some clothes back. Never said they’d be yours.” The Bowman looked at me with exasperated eyes. “Then what the heck am I going to wear, you idiot?” “These.”, I said, changing outta Lucas’s odd looking attire. “Wrap the hood around yer head tight, and look down at the floor until yer outta the Caravan. That way, if the Swordarms see ya, they might think yer me.”, I instructed him, reluctantly stripping outta the ridiculously comfy slacks of Jean the Blue. “You can keep the coin purses in the robes.” Somewhat awkwardly, Bowman Yellow Five and I changed into each other’s clothing. He made fer the door ta leave. “Wait.”, I blurted, then creaked the door open. No one was in the hall. “Alright, go.”, I quickly whispered. “Run like heck outta the Caravan.” “W-wait.”, he stuttered. “There was one thing I left out... about the bow I received, that is.” He swallowed. “I don’t know if this helps you or not, but... there was a guest, who stayed at Black’s mansion the night I received the bow.” “Er, so?” “The guest... he... he had brown hair. I didn’t speak to him, or even get a good look at him... but his hair was brown, that I know for sure.” I cringed. “Geh. Alright, anything else you forget ta mention?” “N-no... just that.” I swallowed nervously. “Alright, then go on. Git.” And, inna mild daze, Bowman Yellow Five did exactly that, stumbling off in the odd looking clothing I had given him. The armor he had fit me well enough, considering our height difference. The centerpiece of it was a leather breastplate, with firm, but thankfully detachable sleeves. The leg-guards and pants offered some degree of protection, not enough to take a hit from a thrusting or piercing maneuver, but enough ta absorb most of the damage from a glancing blow. There was no headpiece to it, though, and overall the armor seemed designed with mobility in mind. It wouldn’ta been my first choice, but it provided more protection than Lucas’s magical garments did, even if it was a lot less

comfortable. I looked at the edge of my hatchet. It was coated with a little blood, which was a step in the right direction, but not really good enough for what I had in mind. I gazed down at the leather slacks I was wearing. They were a bit tight on my thighs, but overall fit me fine. The slacks were more or less regular leather slacks, except for a rough patch over the knees, and a robust set of ankle guards. I took a quick breath, pulled up the right ankle guard, and sliced a bit into my exposed skin. Not enough to do any serious harm, of course, but more than enough to get a decent little blood flowing. I smeared a few fingers of my blood over half of the hatchet, then yanked the ankle guard down, compressing it over my self-inflicted wound as well as I could. Quickly as I could manage, I opened up the trapdoor in Lucas's room, and shattered the glass. I was tempted to cut myself a bit more and drip a bunch of blood on the floor, but given the beatings I had taken over the last few rising periods, I opted not to push my body any further. I stumbled out of the room, and into the nice looking, Hampton Innish hall. Right before I went back in the room where Lucas and Sabarene were, I decided to press my ear against the door and shamelessly snoop on em. "No, seriously!", a girlish and agitated voice insisted. "We haven't known each other for very long, but I don't think she's said my name correctly once!" "There there, Mister Lucas, I'm sure she doesn't mean anything by it." "That's sort of what bothers me, though." "Oh c'mon, it's just a name-" "No, no, not the name thing.", the girly voice clarified. "The not meaning anything by it thing. Did you get a look at Patchy's face, when she killed those four men?" "Um... no, but-" "She wasn't frowning. Or gritting her teeth. She was *smiling*. Like the whole thing was a game to her." There was a brief pause. "It probably was a game to her.", Sabarene softly replied. "G-good thing we took those hatchets from her before she went

to speak with Mister Bowman Yellow Five, right?" "I suppose, though I am a bit worried that she had a third hatchet hidden on her person somewhere." "And where would she hide that, Mister Lucas?" "Where most women hide stuff, I'd imagine." "Oh, you mean inbetween her breasts? Don't worry Mister Lucas, she's flat as a boar-" I chose that particular moment to kick the door open. "How's it hanging guys?", I cheerfully asked, waving around the bloody hatchet in my hand. Both Sabarene and Lucas flinched, the white haired girl at the edge of the bed, and Lucas sitting in a chair. "What happened to the clothing I lent you?", Blondie asked, staring at my armor suspiciously. "Uh. Alright.", I said, pretending to hide the hatchet I wanted them to see. "Don't freak out or nothing, but things gotta be outta hand with Bowman Yellow Five." "Miss Axeman Red Four, you didn't!", Sabarene gasped, horrified. "... I did.", I lied. "But he forced me into it." Lucas stared at me. "I don't entirely see how a half naked, immobile man could force anyone into doing anything." I swallowed nervously. "Wasn't exactly immobile when he attacked me, though. I... uh... I cut him free." "Why would you do that?", Sabarene asked, her face a mix of disappointment and confusion. "Cause I'm an idiot.", I muttered. "The fella said he'd tell me about his weird bow if I let him outta the ropes, so I did. Next thing I know, he's slashing at me with my own hatchet." Lucas's eyes became ice again. "The phrase "next thing I know" is almost always followed by fiction and falsehood." "What, ya think I'm lying?", I asked, pissed at his completely justified suspicion. "I know you're lying.", he coolly responded. "There isn't even a single wound on you." "You're wrong, Mister Lucas!", Sabarene passionately pointed out. "Look at her ankle!" Both Blondie and I looked down at my ankle in surprise. I had apparently done a bit too good a job at cutting near my right foot, cause there was a whole buncha blood dripping down from it.



"O-oh.", Lucas backstepped, with a guilty look on his face. "S-see", I winced. "I thought about what ya said. And I figured treating that there fella with a bitta kindness couldn't hurt me none." I bit my lip. "As ya can see, he hurt me some." Sabarene shook her head sympathetically, and... started yanking on my ear with her metal hand. "Well he wouldn't have hurt you *any* if you didn't bring a hatchet into the room, imbecile!" "Gah!", I winced, as she stretched out the inside of my cheek with two of her real fingers. "I don't get it!", Sabarene complained, flicking me across the forehead. "Why didn't you listen to me and Mister Lucas? We're your friends!" Lucas tilted a gloved hand back and forth at Sabarene's declaration of fraternity. "Ehhhhhhh.", he minced out, then started yanking my other ear. "Friends or no, trusting that fellow enough to untie him was a horribly stupid idea." He shook his head and smiled, in the weird way he did. "Though I suppose you weren't in the wrong, if he attacked you first." "Then why the heck are *you* yanking my ear!?" "As if I could resist touching an elf's ear!" , he said in utter indignation. "I ain'ta elf, goddamnit!" Despite the banter, there was a rather accusatory look in Lucas's eyes, a look that suggested he didn't quite believe the completely fabricated story about Yellow Five attacking me. That was fine. I wanted him and Sabarene ta think I had killed Bowman Yellow Five, them thinking I was *justified* in doing so, on the other han- er, foot, was a luxury I could live without. "A-anyways, my ankle is bleeding something fierce, so can ya putta bandage around it before I lose what little blood I have left?" "Put it on yourself.", Sabarene said coolly. "This is, what, the fourth time I've had to treat your wounds?" "T-third." "I don't care. Do it yourself." I pouted, but reluctantly began ta gather up a buncha bed sheets ta wrap around my ankle. Sabarene watched silently as I put down my hatchet and clumsily stretched out

the sheets. After stretching out the sheets to a reasonable length, I held em in place with my feet and raised my hatchet ta cut em off.” Course, toes ain’t really a replacement fer fingers, so my slicing was messy and inefficient. Eventually, I sliced off enougha the sheets ta go on and around the cut on my ankle. I smirked proudly at Sabarene, and began wrapping the first sheet around. It was at this point that I realized tying a knot with just one hand wasa exceedingly difficult operation. Still, through the use of sheer willpower, and by begging Blondie ta tie one end of the cloth while I tied the other end, I won the day, er, rising period. “Oh, stop that.”, Sabarene snapped, as I tightened the knot around my ankle. “That’s not a bandage you’ve slopped around your leg, it’s a tourniquet.” “A what?” “A tourniquet. It’ll cut off the circulation in your ankle, and then you’ll lose your foot.” She nodded her head, upset, and untied the bandage I had gone through such great lengths to put on. “Seriously, though,”, she chided as she began applying a bandage ta my ankle all proper-like, “why did you smuggle in that hatchet? Don’t you trust me?”, she asked, staring at me with hurt red eyes. “Course I trust you.”, my gut said. “And if you can’t trust the leader of an overly-aggressive, territory hungry fighting force, then who can you trust?”, Lucas asked cheerfully, if not a bit sinisterly. “F-former leader.”, Sabarene said weakly, her head down likea scolded mutt. Blondie observed her guilt-ridden face with narrowed eyes. “Now that won’t do.”, he scolded her. “If we’re going to give Patchy’s Scooby-Dooesque plan a go, we can’t have you be all mopey every time someone makes an allusion to the myriad sins of your prodigious past.” The ex-General made a face like she had chomped down on something sour. “-I know. It’s... it’s just hard.” “Hard? Howzit hard?”, I lazily put out. “Just act like ya did before, except this time, when ya make yer proclamations of death

and destruction, don't actually mean it." "Um that's another issue," Sabarene nervously , pressing her metal index finger against her real one, "I... um... I never did much public speaking..." Now it was Lucas who looked like he had chowed down onna lemon. "Just how the hell do elections work in your country?!" "Like they work in any civilized society.", Sabarene snapped back.. "First, the candidates give speeches. Then, they engage in a battle of wits." "Ah, you mean a debate, I se-" "After that, there's a trial by combat, and finally-" "What?!", Lucas sputtered, losing his cool yet again. "everyone in the Collective votes for the candidate they deem most fit, based on the results of the three competitions, of course." The blonde buried his face in his hands. Sabarene and I blinked at him. "Uh, you ok there, Blondie?" "Oh, I'm fine.", he murmured. "For a second there, I was under the illusion that at least one country in this reali-, uh, continent had a way of resolving conflicts that didn't involve wanton slaughter." Sabarene gently smiled. "Don't worry Mister Lucas, the trial by combat isn't to the death... just to first blood..." She paused. "Well, ok, sometimes second blood. Or fourth, occasionally." "Aha!", I boasted. "Then that's how ya lost yer hand!" Sabarene nodded her head. "No... no, the candidates themselves don't fight in the trial by combat, that'd just be silly." "Oh, a trial by champion." Lucas deadpanned. "How original." He massaged his forehead. "But all that doesn't really matter, does it? We just need to make you one of the two candidates for General, then we can just lose the three trials on purpose. Though I don't quite get how an unskilled orator became General in the first place." "It... it was easy, actually.", Sabarene said with a half smile. "I wore a large spiky set of black armor, while my brother Marston-" "Brother Marston?" "No, MY brother, whose NAME is Marston, did the talking for me." Lucas scratched his chin. "I... I don't quite think that strategy will work a

second time, especially after your prolonged absence.” “So?”, I yawned. “We ain’t looking ta get her elected anyhow.” “Obviously.”, Blondie replied. “But the albino can’t just flat-out bomb. She needs to become popular enough to be in the top two candidates, remember?” Lucas started pacing the cabin, deeply troubled. “But to do that, she’ll need to be at least a little charismatic... hm...aha!” He snapped his fingers, and ran outta the room, leaving his fancy baton behind. “Sit tight!”, he called across the hall from his cabin. “I’ve got just the thing!” Moments later, a somewhat disheveled but energetic Lucas returned ta the cabin, with four tomes stacked in his hands. “Here we are!”, he announced, looking confidently at Sabarene. “I hold in my hands four detailed accounts of the Land of Sorcerers most famous heroes!” He threw the books up in the air and started juggling them. “The first, of course, is an excellent historical account of General Sherra Grausherra’s tragic downfall, painstakingly composed by the venerable Archmage Kanzaka.” Lucas hit the smallest of the four tomes mid-juggle, sending it flying ontta the bed. “The second, naturally, would be a biography about Lord Vetinari; a just and noble mayor of a city beset by hardship and corruption.” The Sorcerer tossed it ontta the bed too. “Thirdly, I present to you the epic poem known as A Feast For Crows, written with blood and tears by the Dread Necromancer Martin. It mainly has to do with the triumphant return of the brave and honorable Captain Euron Greyjoy, though there are a few bits about dragons and political intrigue here or there.” Lucas headbutted the third book ontta the bed, and tossed one final tome up and down. “Finally, for your consideration, I hold the pictured account of Annie in the Forest, by the Chronomancer Siddel.” He looked at Sabarene and elaborated, talking with his hands. “It’s about a girl named Annie. She ventures into a Forest.” The pictured account joined the resta the

tomes on the bed. Sabarene frowned. "Um, Mister Lucas, what was the point of all th-"

"The point, my pigment challenged companion, is to teach you the right way to act wrong! Each one of these four tomes holds the secret to popularity, and in the words of the Giant Jeffrey: popularity leads to intimacy!" "Wha-", the white haired lady stuttered, as thrown fera loop as I was. Lucas patted himself on the head with one hand and sighed. "What I'm saying, Sabarene, is that I can teach you how to work wonders with words! Or rather, one of these four heroes can!" Sabarene looked at the tomes, then back at Lucas with doubt in her eyes. "You really think those books can teach me how to give a good speech, Mister Lucas?" "Of course!", Blondie responded, not even missing a beat. "How do you think I became such an outstanding orator?" Fer some reason, Sabarene didn't look terribly convinced. Nevertheless, she slowly shrugged her shoulders, and reached fer onea the tomes. With a gloved hand, Sabarene skimmed through the pages, and frowned. "Um.... Mister Lucas, I can't... I can't read anything in this." "Of course you can't.", he droned out impatiently. "The books are written in the language of the Queen, only a Sorcerer of my caliber can decipher the runes." "Th-then how am I supposed to-" "I'll read them to you, naturally." He paused. "Though mixing the accounts up would probably be ineffective. Which hero do you wish for me to teach you about?" Sabarene bit her metal pinky finger. "U-um... what happened to that General you mentioned?" "General Grausherra?", Lucas asked, brightly. "She was slain. Cut into multiple pieces by an exceptionally powerful murder-hobo." Sabarene wavered. "I-In that case... teach me about Mister Euron, then." "Absolutely!", Lucas agreed, energetically. "To be honest, I was worried for a second you'd pick Annie in the Forest. Fantastic tale, that, but not particularly relevant to the current situation." Lucas gleefully

picked up his tome about crows having lunch or whatever, then stared at me. "What?", I asked. "No offense, Patchy, but before I can begin tutoring Sabarene, I'm going to need you to leave the room." I frowned. "Why's that?" "I will need to focus in order to properly train our ruby eyed friend." "And?" "I don't quite think the making of a dozen or so smart-ass comments will be terribly conducive towards my concentration initiative." "Fair enough.", I conceded, and awkwardly made my way outta the cabin. It wasn't until after I shut the sliding door that I realized I had just been kicked outta my own room. I didn't fret none. I needed as much a break from Blondie as he needed from me. Fera moment, I considered going back ta check up on Shields and Claymore, but I had enougha walking up and down stairs fer one rising period. I decided ta go back inta Lucas's cabin, not ta fabricate another murder or nothing, but ta takea nap. The bed the Bowman had been on still had bitsa rope tied ta its four posts, and sections of the sheets were dotted pink by the blood that had dripped out when I had cut Yellow Five ta intimidate him. I was too tired ta care. Without even changing outta the ill-fitting leather armor I had confiscated, I plopped down on topa the bed, and slowly began ta close my eye. But just as I was about ta drift off inta a worlda somewhat milder discomfort, a glinta light shone inta my iris. Confused, curious, and with nothing better ta do, I re-opened my eye ta see what the sourcea the glint was. After moving my eyeball up and downa bit, I discovered the most likely causea the reflection. Lying innocuously onna small little dresser was the black rectangle Blondie was so fond of. The smart and responsible thing ta do would been ta take the rectangle, and give it back ta Blondie in some discrete manner, like, sliding it under the doora the cabin he and Sabarene were in, or smacking him in the face with it and running away. But I wasn't terribly

responsible, and sure as heck wasn't smart, so I picked up the rectangle and began examining it like I would a new axehead. It was a lot lighter than I had expected it to be. The rectangle sure as heck wasn't hollow, but it wasn't solid either. I gave it a shake. There was no sound or nothing. From that and the weight, I reckon Blondie's rectangle had a few stacks of thin wafers in it. Wafering was a common counterfeiting tactic in the Independent Kingdoms. You took one bar of metal, gutted half the inside of it, kept the shell, and with a skilled enough Smith, made another bogus bar. Course, most folks could tell when a bar was forged just by holding it, so usually the wafered bars were hidden and buried among a whole bunch of legitimate ones so as to rob idiotic Merchants blind. Though to be honest, I doubted Blondie's black rectangle had wafers stuffed in it as part of a counterfeiting scheme. I ignored the weird weight of his rectangle and turned it around in my hand. Now that I was actually touching the rectangle, I noticed that both the front and the back of it had a thin layer of glass. The front side seemed to have nothing but blackness beneath the glass, but the back side of the rectangle, now that was a bit more interesting. There were a few scribbles here or there, which naturally I couldn't understand, but embroidered at the top of the back side was a small, silver apple. "Why did someone take a bite out of it?!", I asked, deeply confused. I poked and rubbed the back side of the rectangle, but nothing happened, not even when I pressed up against the apple. I flipped the phone back over to the front side. I poked at the blackness beneath the glass, but couldn't get the rectangle to light up like Blondie could. But then, I noticed something on the front side of the rectangle, something I didn't see before. Near the bottom of the black rectangle, was a square, made of four small white lines. I pressed down on it with my thumb. Unceremoniously, Lucas's rectangle

light up. "Woah!" I gasped, impressed. I had expected the magical box's screen to just produce a bitta light, but beneath the glass wasa... portrait. But it was so much more thana simple portrait, it was the most amazing, most detailed, most life-like portrait I had ever seen, even though it was no bigger than the sizea my palm. The top halfa the portrait was mostly obscured by rows and columns of tiny boxes, though I could make out the bottom just fine. The first thing I noticed was strands and strandsa green, vegetable looking stuff, sprouting from the ground. It took me awhile ta realize, but I think the vegetable looking stuff was something called "grass." I had hearda "grass" before, cause Blue always called my hair grass-green, but I never had seen the stuff with my own two ey- I had never seen the stuff before. I stared at the grass fera good while, the strangeness of the strandsa green transfixing me. I snapped outta my trance quick enough when I saw what was on the grass. Three waists, six legs, and six boots stood on the grass. The boots were nothing outta the ordinary, but the slacks attached to the boots... Well, the slacks attached ta the boots were the ones that Lucas had lent me, the slacksa Jean the Blue. I guess Lucas wasn't kidding when he said Jean the Blue wasa big deal, cause his pants were apparently important enough ta be painted inna elaborate, detailed manner four times over. I bit my bottom lip. I wanted ta see the resta the portrait something fierce and see the top halfa the three individuals standing on the grass, but those darn boxes blocked everything. My thumb shook in frustration, and... fera instant, moved alla the boxes at once, ever so slightly ta the left. In shock, I removed my thumb from the glass, causing the boxes ta reset their position. I paused, puzzled. Though nothing bad had happened, I wondered if tampering around witha magical device was really the wisesta all things ta do. I shrugged my shoulders and



pressed my thumb onto the glass again. Wise or not, I was gonna see the resta that darn picture. I slid my thumb ta the left, causing the boxes ta slide ta right. I grinned. "AHAHAHAHAHA!", I cackled, my victory over the rectangle all but assured. With one final flamboyant movement, I banished the small boxes offa the glass, revealing the portrait in full. "Gah!", I shrieked, once I could actually make out the upper bodies of the three people in the painting. In the center of the hyper realistic portrait was Lucas. I wasn't terribly shocked by that. Blondie was exactly the sorta person who would spend copious amountsa time and metal getting an incredibly detailed portrait of himself painted. He wasn't wearing his usual attire, though. In addition to the slacksa Jean the Blue, Lucas had on the dark blue robes of Eli the Giant, though he wore it with the hood down. He was smiling slightly, but his smile was completely devoida the cheesy confidence and flagrant flamboyance I had grown so accustomed to. To the righta Lucas wasa shorter, tanner looking fella. The tan looking fella was smiling too, but his smile seemed more confident, more natural than Lucas's. He rested his right hand firmly on Lucas's shoulder. The confident fella wasn't a twig, like Blondie. He was pretty darn fit, with well-defined abs, thick, solid thighs, and muscular arms.. Not as muscular as mine, of course, but still pretty muscular. The confident fella was wearing a weird looking leather jacket, and a pink tunic, witha fancy buttoned down collar. Fer some unfathomable reason, the collars of the pink tunic were popped up, though that oddity was onea the last things on my mind. The confident, tan fella's hair was just really off. It was short, it was spiked, and preposterously, it was brown. But it wasn't the fella's brown hair that freaked me out, I had seen far too much weird stuff ta be unnerved by unrealistic hair colors. No, the main issue I had with the portrait wasn't how Blondie



get any slower, and my senses sure as heck didn't get any sharper, but steadily, my mind changed back from thata feral mutt toa dimwitted Axeman. The portrait, was justa portrait. Gazing at the rectangle on the floor, I knew the image I was looking at was harmless. The small painting wasn't gonna jump up at me or nothing, I knew that. But what I knew and what was true wasn't overlapping all that much anymore. I closed my eye, and took inna deep breath. This time, I managed ta calm down some. I picked up my hatchet, and placed the rectangle back on the dresser, exactly in the manner I had found it. There were three general explanations I had in my head fer the portrait I had seen. The most unlikely one was that the girl in the portrait was completely unrelated ta Swordarm Red One, and just so happened ta look exactly like her. I dearly hoped the whole thing wasa big coincidence, but I wasn't so naïve as ta actively bank on that. The second explanation was that Blondie and Swordarm Red One knew each other in some way. Finally, the third explanation was that Blondie's magical rectangle was just doing some magical bullshit. The image coulda been all symbolic of my life or something, with the Swordarm representing my past, Blondie representing my present, and the tan fella representing my future. In the end, the only way ta find out the significance of the portrait would be ta ask Blondie himself. But doing that... well, doing that would be too darn risky. Asking Blondie about the portrait would be the same as admitting ta him that I poked around his rectangle. That wouldn't really be that bigga crime ta fess up to, assuming Lucas wasa good sort. But if he had any kinda relationship with Swordarm Red One, then he might notta beena good sort, or even an ok sort. I didn't like doing it, but opting ta play dumb seemed ta be the most conducive thing ta my continued survival. Suddenly, as if reacting ta the finality of my decision, the pointsa my ears

began ta twitch. They twitched, and twitched, and twitched, though I didn't heara sound. I looked around the cabin in confusion. Nothing seemed off. But then I heard loud seriesa clinging clangs, and clanging clings. Shortly after that, the entire Caravan shook, the floor, the walls, everything. The shaking knocked me off balance, and flat onta my butt. I reached up and gotta grip on the top drawer of the dresser. With that as leverage, I slowly pulled my body back up, gradually getting ta standing postion, even as the entirety of the cabin rumbled like it was about ta explode. Almost as if rewarding me for my effort, the shaking stopped the moment I got back onta my feet. "Sheesh.", I panted. "What the heck was th-ack!" I had chalked up the shaking of the Caravan ta the fierce windsa blizzard, cause blizzards were pretty much the sourcea most property damage in Provesh, if ya exclude vandals and alcoholics. But looking down the trapdoor in Lucas's room, I discovered the causea the shaking. The glaciers below were moving, as were the mountainsa snow. Least, so I thought, before remembering that Glaciers don't tend ta move all that much. The frozen wastes LOOKED like they were moving, cause the Caravan itself had finally decided ta cut the crap and get going ta Fremdos already. The unfathomably large vessel wasn't going slow or nothing neither, it glided through the snow like a boat would water. As fer how the Caravan moved so efficiently, well, I ain't an enginee- Shipwright or nothing, but I suppose the two gigantic treads I saw steamrolling the snow below had something ta do with it. I heard tons and tons of footsteps, above me, out in the hall, everywhere. I reckon the two hundred and ninety seven other passengers were finally arriving. Being the social butterfly I was, I reacted ta the sudden influxa people by lying down in the bed, and pulling the sheets over my face. I didn't fall asleep, but I did manage ta shut off my brain some fera bit, which

helped. A feeling of dread welled up in my stomach. Now that the Caravan was moving, there was no going back ta Provesh, no return ta working asa bouncer, no falling asleep in my own bed, in my own apartment. “Geh.”, I growled, disgusted at my sudden bout of mopeyness. I ripped the covers off my body, and got back up. I put down my hatchet, and picked up Lucas’s rectangle. I marched out into the hall, shoving my way past two tired looking passengers as I did so. I knocked loudly on the door ta the Cabin that Sabarene and Lucas were in. I got no response, so I attempted ta open the door. Attempted, because no matter how hard I pulled, the sliding door wouldn’t budgea bit. “Sorry, the room’s being used at the moment!~”, Blondie sang out cheerily. “Just open the door ya git!”, I snapped back, frustrated. I didn’t getta response, so I pulled at the door as hard as I could. “GeeeyaH!”, I grunted, and with some effort, severed the door from the lock. “Ha!”, I exclaimed, triumphantly pushing the busted door open. “Oi, Blondie! I gotta bone ta pick with yaa-AAHHHHHH!” In the time it had took me ta run freak out over a rectangle and avoid basic social interaction, Sabarene and Lucas had switched places. The blonde Sorcerer sat happily on the edgea the bed, and the white haired lady shifted nervously in the cushioned chair. Not that I could blame her. Fer reasons known only ta him, Blondie had opted ta take off his cape, slacks, overcoat and tunic, and replace em witha pink bodice anda short frilly skirt. “What the heck are ya doing?!” I shrieked, immensely distraught. “Shhhh.”, Lucas shushed at me, ripping his bodice a bit to expose a bit of cleavage. “Scenario Seven, Sabarene!”, he declared with a pumped fist. “You make your grand re-appearance in Fremdos. You proclaim that the knowledge you’ve gained in your travels makes you the only acceptable candidate for General! A crowd forms around you, curious, but not convinced! Following Euron’s

example, you boast of the sites you've seen, the men you've killed, the women you've forcibly impregnated." "W-what!?", Sabarene asked, looking deeply uncomfortable. Lucas ignored her inquiry, and continued on with his rant. "With your charisma and wit, you begin to win over the crowd. But suddenly, right before you secure the nigh-unanimous support of the masses, a meddler arrives!" He cleared his throat. "General Sabarene is a menace!", he called out in a shrill voice that I suppose mighta sounded like that offa woman's, if you were deaf. "My husband died for her in the siege of Trunchet, but did me and my fourteen children see a mark as compensation? Absolutely not!" The, er, "widow" paused to sob for half an extremely uncomfortable second. "Now I've had to sell my body just to feed my family! What say you to that, General! What say you?!" Lucas extended his right arm at Sabarene dramatically, gesturing her former response. "U-um... well... seeing as y-your husband was killed in action, you should have received the standard compensation package, w-which is usually four hundred thousand marks or so, a-assuming that your husband paid the premium for the insurance. I-if he didn't, then you and your family should have received at least one hundred thousand marks, a-and also receive a dividend of-" "Stop. Stop.", Lucas complained, holding his right hand up. "You're doing it all wrong." "I-I am?", Sabarene asked, confused. "Honestly Sister, you need to take this a bit more seriously.", the man in the frilly white short skirt said. "We're aiming for charismatic ruthless adventurer here, the shirking stuttering bureaucrat approach needs to go." "I... I'm sorry Mister Lucas, it's just that what you're wearing is a bit-" "Distracting? What part of my outfit is distracting?" Sabarene fiddled around with her fingers "Um... well... you're cross-dressing as a widowed prostitute at the moment, r-right?" "No, I'm *role-playing* as a widowed sex

*worker.*”, Blondie insisted. “Sex worker or otherwise, why are you still wearing your top-hat?” Sabarene asked, confused. “Why aren’t you wearing your top-hat?”, Lucas countered, then cracked his knuckles. “Alright, let’s start at the top. Remember, sympathetic or not, I’m a hindrance to you and your goals. The crowd is about to go wild, do you really want your day under the sun to be hijacked by a heckler?” He cleared his throat. “My kids are dead, I’m working the corner, something something, what say you to that, General? What say you?!” Sabarene nervously pressed her index fingers together. “I’m... I’m sorry for your loss, but-“ “No, no, don’t apologize!”, Lucas groaned in frustration. Sabarene chomped down on her metal thumb, with a face far more guilty than the situation warranted. “What was his name?”, she finally asked, quietly. “His name?”, Lucas asked, out of character. “Your husband.”, Sabarene clarified. “What was his name?” “Oh!”, Blondie exclaimed, a bit slow on the draw. “Gregor! My husband’s name was Gregor, of the Black Vanguard! He was a brave man, a courageous man, a-CK!” Lucas’s monologue cut off suddenly, interrupted by Sabarene’s metal hand slapping him hard across the cheek. “Your complaints are as irksome as your accolades are repetitive, wench.”, Sabarene sneered. “You have fourteen children to feed? I have two and a half million.” The lady in black’s metal fist shook furiously. “If you wish to talk matters of recompense, then take up your complaints with the regional Sibling.” “Buw muw fawmiwy-“, Lucas said, still in character, but with a cut mouth. Sabarene stood up, and turned to glare at me with an intense fury I had never seen in the eyes... well, anyone. “You. Axeman.”, Sabarene barked. “Y-yeah?”, I asked, nearly toppling over at her gaze. “Remove this woman from the premises at once. She’s hysterical.” Her face reverted to normal. “Um... is that better, Mister Lucas?” “Ownwy swightwy.”, Lucas said,

wiping some blood off his lip. "Only slightly?", I gasped. "Sothereine damn near gave me a heart attack just now!" "I noticed.", Blondie said with narrowed eyes. "But that's not how Euron would do it." Lucas hitched up his skirt slightly, and looked down at Sabarene. "Do you remember nothing from the readings? Did you forget why Euron's rival felt so intimidated by him?" "Um.... Miss... Miss Yara..-" "Not Yara. Asha.", Lucas insisted. "Miss Asha Greyjoy felt scared... because of how ruthless and dangerous Mister Euron was, right?" "You're only half-correct.", Lucas answered. "Euron was ruthless and dangerous, sure. But he won the Kingsmoot-" "What's a Kingsmoot?", I asked. "An Election.", Lucas said, quickly substituting his words. "He won the election by rallying his countrymen around him. And he rallied his countrymen not by beating them down, but by raising them up." Blondie tilted the brim of his hat over his eyes and smiled deviously, the laces of his pink bodice blowing in the wind. "Raise them up? You just told me to act ruthless, you charlatan!" Sabarene complained. "I told you to be ruthlessly charismatic.", Lucas countered with a shit eating grin. "You need to defeat your enemies without crushing them. Dominate them, but never outright insult, demean, or belittle them." "Um... what?", Sabarene said, completely lost. "Find a happy medium!", Blondie advised. "Be a jerk, but be a likable jerk!" Lucas cleared his throat. "Alright! Onto Scenario Number Eight! Similar set up to before, but this time, your homecoming rally goes exactly as planned. Except... with one crucial difference! Right before you end your speech, a vicious thug-", he said, gesturing to me for some reason. "steals your prized necklace-" "I don't have a necklace, Mister Gandulfador-" "Fine, a vicious thug steals your fake hand or something, what she steals specifically doesn't really matter. What do you do?" "I, um... I try to get it back?" "No! No, YOU don't do



anything of the sort!" Lucas said, frustrated. "You act nonplussed about the whole thing, finish your speech and THEN do something about it, when everyone else is gone." "But if I don't act immediately, won't the thief make off with my hand?" "That's a rhetorical risk you'll just have to theoretically take, I'm afraid." He grabbed his baton and twirled it, nearly smacking Sabarene in the face. "Publically displayed stoicism is key! No one wants to follow a leader who gets miffed by a little theft. The more unconcerned about your own well-being you appear, the more people will like you!" Sabarene shook her head, slowly. "My... my brother Marston said something similar... About being silent and stoic, I mean. Hence the whole....dressing me in big black spiky armor thing." She frowned. "Can't we just do that, Mister Lucas? Can't you just speak for me, like my brother did?" I nodded my head. "Nah, he can't." Sabarene pouted. "And why can't he?" "Cause he's a foreigner who don't know jack about yer Collective.", I answered, bluntly. "Ya can talk as purty as ya like, but if ya don't know how the minds the folk inna place work, it won't do ya any good." I licked my left fang. "One time I smuggled a buncha weapons ta some Unassigned folks inna small town not too far from here. Damn near got lynched just cause I was from Provesh instead of their backwater trashpit." "I think the smuggling might have had more to do with it.", Lucas muttered. "Nah, the folks who put the noose around my neck were the Unassigned I had brought the weapons ta in the first place. Point is, people don't like strangers too much, Sister. Unless ya can get Brother Marshall ta reprise his role, it's gonna have ta be you that speaks. Onna unrelated note..." I made a fist and flashed a fangy smile at Lucas. "You and me gotta beef ta work out!" I wielded the black rectangle like I woulda hatchet, and tossed it over at Blondie, aiming for his lap. It smacked him in the face. "Urgh!", Lucas yelped, falling

on his back. "S-sorry.", I stuttered. "You, uh, you dropped yer wand or whatever, thought you'd want it back." "I see.", Blondie mumbled, removing the rectangle offa his eyelids. He clucked his tongue and wagged a finger derisively at me. "I'm grateful that you returned the device to me, but I must insist you never touch it again. This instrument contains magic beyond your wildest dreams. No mere mortal can touch it and hope to survive." I narrowed my eye. "I touched yer rectangle plenty." "Yes, but you're an elf!", Lucas explained frantically. "If the albino here were to touch the device-" "I'd be completely fine.", Sabarene interjected, smiling like a angel. "I inspected that device of yours earlier, Mister Lucas." "Y-you did?", Blondie gasped, looking mildly distraught. "When?" Sabarene leaned in close to his face. "Now that... is a secret.", she whispered in his right ear, then grinned like a demon. "Oh, speaking of secrets, I saw what was hidden away in that quadrilateral of yours." "W-what did you see?", the man who had put on a bodice without blinking an eye asked, his cheeks suddenly flushed pink. "Everything~", Sabarene taunted. She got even closer to Lucas's face, causing him to back away slightly. "There's no need to be ashamed of it, though. I think it's romantic~" "What.", the fella in the purple top hat babbled, confused. "Don't play coy.", Sabarene giggled, with a creepy face. "I'm actually pretty observant, when I want to be. And I observed that you have a tendency of gazing into that black box of yours, even whilst talking to people." "O..of course I do.", Lucas said, nodding his head. "I'm a Sorcerer. This device allows me to measure mana flows, and scans the area for any nearby module." "Maybe it does.", Sabarene considered. "Maybe it doesn't. But I'm sure you were looking beneath the glass for another reason, Mister Gandulfadore. Another more per-so-nal~ reason." Lucas looked at me, his baby blue eyes begging me for help. I

nodded my head sympathetically, and took two steps back. Sultry Sabarene scared me far more than angry Sabarene or haughty Sabarene ever could. “You’re a very lucky man, Mister Lucas~” “How am I lucky?”, Blondie asked, increasingly unnerved with every passing second. “And why on Earth do you keep fluctuating between calling me Mister Lucas and Mister Gandulfadore?!” “I saw the portrait, Mister Lucas.”, Sabarene confessed, huskily. “The.. portrait?”, Lucas asked, confused. “Yes, the portrait, I just said that. There’s no need to repeat it.” Sabarene swallowed. “The portrait of you, and that pretty red haired girl, and that handsome gentleman... I have to say... you’re a lucky man, Mister Gandulfadore.” “Red haired gi- Oh!”, Lucas exclaimed, pounding his left fist into his right hand. “You mean the background picture on my ph- on my magical device. Yeah, that’s me and my fri-“ “Spouses, right?” Sabarene asked energetically. “You commissioned that portrait as a wedding gift to your spouses!” “Spouses?!”, Lucas sputtered, the last remnantsa sanity gone from his face. “Yes, your spouses!” Sabarene confirmed, shaking her head eagerly. “Your husband and wife! That’s who those two other people in the portrait are, right!?” I raised an eyebrow. I didn’t quite know whatta spouse was, or even whatta husband or wife was, but from the way Lucas squirmed on the bed, I don’t reckon the words meant anything good. “W-WHAT?!”, Blondie squawked, nearly falling offa the bed in shock. “No! No, of course they aren’t my spo- my spou- spouses.” “Liar!”, the white haired lady insisted, thumping her fists onto Lucas’s bodice covered chest. “Liar liar liar liar liar!” “Ow! No, I’m- ow! Telling- ugh! You the truth!” Sabarene stopped assaulting the Sorcerer and looked at him with a vicious gaze. “Mister Lucas....”, she growled, inna very low voice,. “If you’re stringing that poor man and woman along just for larks...” “Jesus Chri- They’re my friends, you idiot!” “Your

what?", Sabarene asked, with poorly concealed disappointment. "My Friends! As in, people I love and appreciate, but don't wish to... don't wish to... um..." the Sorcerer quickly trailed off, and the redness on his face somehow managed to spread more and more. "Don't wish to what?", I asked, confused. "Well that's besides the point!", Blondie quickly snapped. "The people in that picture- portrait are my friends." He quickly glared at Sabarene. "*Just* my friends. And I can assure you, they have absolutely nothing to do with magic, elves, generals, genocide, or any other such silliness, so there is no need to speak about them any further." Lucas was resolute in his statement, and his blue eyes iced over. To be honest, he kinda reminded me of Blue Three... to a certain extent. Me and Blue ribbed on each other more or less all the dang time. Our humor was crass, insensitive, and no holds bars.... to a certain extent. Jokes about folks whose heads we had embedded greataxes into were fine, but calling Blue's Collaborator pleasantly plump was grounds for a dislocated shoulder and a black eye. Some folks were sticklers for keeping their private lives private. I respected that way of doing things about as much as I hated to make small talk, but I couldn't just let Blondie drop the subject of his friends so easily. I needed some confirmation that the girl in the portrait wasn't who I thought she was, and the only way to do that would be to get Blondie to blab about her. "So who are they?", I asked, completely ignoring Lucas's gag order. "My friends.", he repeated. "No, no," I muttered, "I mean what do they do, exactly?" "Why do you wish to know?", Lucas asked. "I just said they have nothing to do with anything, so-" "Ya ever hear a small talk? It's gonna be a long damn time until we get to Fremdos, so ya might as well indulge us some." "Yes, yes, Miss Axeman Red Four is absolutely right, Mister Lucas!", Sabarene energetically agreed. "So please, tell us all about your fiancées!"

“They’re not my- augh.”, Lucas groaned, resigned. “Fine.” He tilted the brimma his hat over his eyes. “Believe it or not, I wasn’t always the magnificent, brilliant, handsome, kind, compassionate, wise, and humble Sorcerer I am today. Like most great men, I had to crawl before I could walk.” He paused. “Not that we in the realm of Sorcerers actually walk, mind. We levitate.” “Yeah, yeah, whatever. Get ta the point.”, I demanded of him, then remembered I was the one who asked ta hear him go onna yarn in the first place. “Er, I mean, levitate? Where’d ya go ta learn that?” Lucas wagged his fingers. “I went to where all great Wizards and Witches go, my dear disabled dimwit! A prestigious place that accepts magi of all mindsets!” “Did you attend an elite Academy, Mister Lucas?”, Sabarene asked, stars in her ruby red eyes. “Absolutely!”, Lucas confirmed. “The most elite academy out there, for Sorcerers such as myself.” “And what was this school’s name, Mister Lucas?” “North Dakota State!”, Blondie boasted, proud asa pumpkin. “Nexta East Dakota, I presume.”, I muttered flatly. Lucas puffed his cheeks, indignant. “West, south, it makes no difference. North Dakota is the most fabled location in the Land of Sorcerers.” “Because of the academy you went to?” Sabarene guessed “Quite. Most of the Land of Sorcerers is a dreadfully dull place, but North Dakota.... Why...North Dakota is a utopia, a city o And it was at that esteemed Academy that I met the two people you saw in the portrait, the might magus Phillip, and the witch of wonders, Gregor!” “Um... the *girl’s* name is Gregor?”, Sabarene asked, skeptical. “Well, she wouldn’t be a witch if she wasn’t a girl, now would she?” “That’s not... well... Gregor seems like an unusual name...” Sabarene hesitantly murmured. “Name don’t seem all that off ta me.”, I said, then narrowed my eye. “What does seem off, is that there sworda hers.” Blondie’s face twitched a bit. “Y-you think something wrong’s with

her sword? W-why would you think that? There's nothing wrong with her sword!", Lucas sloppily slothered, his words as reassuring as those offa brain surgeon revealing he had Parkinson's disease right before the anesthesia kicked in. "Why would a witch even have a sword in the first place?", Sabarene inquired. "I mean... if you could use magic... why bother with any weapon at all?" Lucas's flustered face returned ta normal at Sabarene's latest question. "Ah! That's easy enough to explain. Gregor minored in fencing, just in case an anti-magic bubble were to cancel out her arcane ability, and-" "Cut the crap.", I interrupted, pointing my index finger all accusatory-like at Lucas. "That girl in yer portrait ain'ta witch.", I bluffed, deciding that if I was gonna bullshit Blondie ta find out info about his friend, I would go all out in my bullshitting. "O-of course she is!", he said, sweating some. "Nah, she ain't. Notta single bitta magic in her." I asserted, as confident as I was left handed. "But her sword.... Thatsa different story altogether, now ain't it, Blondie?" Lucas' right hand went ta his hip fer some reason. "Geh-", he gehhed, biting his thumb. "Why do you think that?", he asked, neither confirming nor denying my assertion. The easy and accurate answer woulda been: "I think that sworda hers is magical cause I saw her bleed in reverse back when she and my friend Axeman Blue Three fought ta the death." But that answer woulda rendered the entire pointa me being subtle moot. "It's simple.", I stated. "That sword is useless fer self defense. It's wirey as all heck. Might be able ta hurt someone if they were naked, or chained ta a bed, but it'd be sliced ta pieces by anyone witha half decent weapon." I paused, staring inta Blondie's eyes fer effect. "Unless, of course, there wasa another reason fer carrying it." "And what would that be?", Lucas asked, maintaining his poker face. "It's obvious, my dear Blondie!", I flamboyantly exclaimed. "Why, all one needs ta do is look at that there

sworda hers ta figure out that it is, beyonda shadow offa doubt, a genuine magical artifact!" I tossed an imaginary baton up in the air and caught it with an imaginary hand. "Now, I ain'ta betting Axeman, but that sword..." Blondie stared at me intently, like a cat abouta pounce onna mouse. "-lets her teleport, right?" Lucas fell onta the floor facefirst, or woulda, had Sabarene not caught him. I frowned. "Uh... alright. So it don't let her teleport. Gimme a few more guesses." I snapped my fingers together. "Oh! I got it! That there sworda hers... lets her change the color of her hair!" Lucas cringed and shook his head, which I had learned meant the opposite of what I thought it did. "Er... hold on.", I insisted, sheepishly. "Lemme try and think of something useful it could do..." I pretended ta think fera while, slowing moving my eye towards my stump. "Ah! I got it!" I declared, proudly. "That sword... takes a bloke's wounds...." The bodice wearing boy's eyes widened more and more with every onea my words. "And makes em asymmetrical!", I finished. "W-what?! What good would that even do?!", Lucas asked, at his wit's end. "Simple.", I smugly slushed., and stuck out my forearm. "See, the scar near my wrist is purty darn pretty, cause it ain't jagged or nothing. But look at the one near my elbow. It's jagged and sharp, intimidating. A fella sees a jagged scar, he's either gonna back away from ya, or hire ya because of how rough and tough ya look." Sabarene's eyes went from my wrist, ta my elbow, ta my wrist again. "Um, and what about the other two..... dozen...?", she asked. "They ain't relevant ta my deduction.", I offhandly replied. "Point is, that sworda Blondie's friend, if it is indeed magical, probably makes her scars look scary and asymmetrical." Lucas gave me the half retarded mutt stare again. "Of course it doesn't, you idiot!", he cried, my inane conjecture frustrating him more than I ever coulda dreamed. "No, no, that blade in Gregor's hand is a

recovery module. It heals people! It has nothing to do with symmetry!" Sabarene frowned. "A sword that heals people? I don't understand much about magic, Mister Lucas, but that seems a bit... um.... counterintuitive." "The sword doesn't heal people by stabbing them, of course.", the Sorcerer responded impatiently. "Think of the sword as a phylactery." "Um... what?" "A phylactery! Don't you have any liches around? Any Puella Magis?" "What?" "Ugh.", Lucas groaned, then looked at me, with a bored, mildly frustrated expression. "Alright. Let's say you engage in a duel with someone. Both of you are unarmored. Where would you try to strike your foe?" I played with a strand of my hair. "That all depends on what sorta weapon he's wielding, and how he guards himself, to be honest." Lucas quickly shook his head. "Um, sorry, my bad. Let's suppose you got to strike your opponent without him resisting, but only once. Where would you strike him?" "In the throat, of course.", I replied without a moment's hesitation. "Either I tear out the fella's jugular, crush his windpipe, or send his head flying. No matter how I slice it, it would be my win." "That's wrong!", Sabarene cried out. "You can't just slam a blade into a man's throat, Miss Axeman Red Four!" Lucas rolled his eyes at her hysteria. "It's just a little scenario, it's not like Patchy is actually-" "A throat wound isn't always fatal!", the white haired woman frantically declared, pointing her finger at me like she was Phoenix Wright. "You should at least try to stab him in the heart, or pierce one of his lungs, or-" "Sever one of his arteries, snap his neck, crush his skull, damage his liver, cut open his stomach, hurt his feelings, or suffocate him.", Blondie contributed. "There's far too many ways to die. The human... and elf body is about as resilient as a wet piece of parchment. We can't take much punishment before expiring, unfortunately."

Sabarene raised an eyebrow, looked at my stump, then at Lucas, then back at my



stump again. "Sure, sure," Lucas said with a flick of his wrist, "some individuals are able to shrug off injuries they shouldn't, but for every person that survives getting a lance through the throat, there are about fifty more that die from choking on a particular fatty morsel of mutton." He spun his black rectangle around on his left index finger. "But not with the recovery module.", Lucas said with a wink. "The recovery module... now that's where the money's at." He flicked his bowtie. "This Universal Translator of mine is neat and all, but all it does is make things a bit easier. You can become familiar with most any language over time, be you a Sorcerer, Elf, or otherwise. But regenerating from any wound... ah! That's a somewhat harder trick to learn." "W-wait." Sabarene stuttered, her metal fingers clinking nervously against each other. "You mean to tell me that the sword grants eternal life?!" "No, of course it doesn't." Blondie snapped, a look of mild discomfort on his face. "The wielder of the recovery module is very much mortal.... Just... less so than most people." "How much less so?", I asked. "I mean, and this is just a hypothetical, mind, suppose I chopped off the wielder's head, smashed her skull in, and tackled her outta a fifteenth story window. Would that do the trick?" "If by do the trick, you mean kill her, then... no. Of course it wouldn't." "Er... alright. Then what would do the trick, exactly?" Lucas gazed at me suspiciously. "Why on earth do you care?" I chomped down on my thumb. "Because it might be pertinent some time in the future, I reckon." "You don't say.", Lucas I threw my hand up in the air. "Don't give me that!" I just wanna know what I'd be up against in the off chance that some villain got his hands on yer friend's sword." "The odds of that are slim to none.", the sarcastic Sorcerer smugly stated. "Rest assured, the recovery module is still in Gregor's hands, and she's about as far away from here as is theoretically possible." "In the land of Sorcerers?",

Sabarene guessed. "Naturally!" Blondie smirked and started punching the air in front of him like he was a boxer with cerebral palsy. "You see...", he said with a pitiful jab. "All things magic originate in the Land of Sorcerers... and all users of the arcane reside there." He threw a long-winded, ineffectual upper cut at the air molecules in the cabin. "The reason I came to this shoddy excuse of a continent was simply to take back a few misplaced items." "Um, yes, we know that, Mister Lucas, but what specifically are you looking for?" "Modules.", he gleefully exclaimed. "I'm searching for the seven modules." "Ah! Now I see yer angle. If ya get all seven ya get ta make a wish, right?" Lucas narrowed his eyes. "No, if I recover all seven modules, your continent gets to keep on existing." "Um... how so, exactly?" Sabarene inquired, skeptical. "I mean... the item that terribly rude Bowman had defies all logical explanation, so I'm willing to accept the existence of magic to a degree, but I don't see an urgent need to recover those modules you seem so keen on collecting." The Sorcerer's eyes iced over a bit. "You should." Lucas's voice grew unusually somber. "Things like the anti-matter module, and the recovery module... they're not terribly dangerous, I'll admit. Oh, certainly they grant an edge in combat, but as items in and of themselves there's nothing extremely spectacular about them." Sabarene shook her head. "Right, which is why-" "However," Blondie interrupted, "there is a more abstract danger associated with these magical artifacts. You bore witness to it earlier." "I... I don't know what you mean, Mister Lucas." The boy, who looked much more glum than usual, rubbed his hands together nervously. He turned towards me. "Remind me of that man's name again.", he ordered more than he asked. "Ya mean Bowman Yellow Five?" "Yes, that's the one. Bowman Yellow Five. Now, I might be wrong, but Yellow isn't a particularly prestigious name, now is it?" "Of

course it ain't.", I yucked. "I got ranked yellow when I was thirteen cycles old." "And yet, the Bowman seemed to be in charge of that group of mercenaries, right?" "R-right.", Sabarene said. "But I don't-" "These artifacts I'm after.... They don't belong here.", Lucas said, oblivious to what Sabarene or I hadta say. "They're dangerous because of that fact alone. The natural way of things in this real- in this continent is being distorted by the modules' mere presence. The longer they remain undiscovered, the more of a problem we'll have." I shook my head, understanding a bit where Blondie was coming from. Strong or weak, having a flashy magical item on ya would probably make ya inta a pretty big deal. Though I didn't quite get how that threatened mucha anything. Incompetent but lucky idiots having a say in things they shouldn't wasa staple of Provesh culture, even back when the only magic I knew of was the type that came inna bottle. "In... in that case...", Sabarene said, "How many of these modules are there left to find?" "I have no idea!", Lucas boldly proclaimed. "Then why the hell are you making such a huge deal about it, you charalatan!", she screamed, pulling two fistfuls of her white in frustration. "The unknown quantity doesn't diminish the quality of my quest, Sabarene.", Lucas chided. "And besides, I'm not exactly going about this task blind. I have an elf and an ex-General by my side. You two are essentially magical magnets!" "I... uh.... I see." I stared up awkwardly at the ceiling. "Uh.... Onna completely unrelated note... Any chance ya know someone by the namea Swordarm Red One?, I murmured, trying not ta put any weight ta my words. Bodice Boy tilted his head. "Is he some comrade of yours?" "Uh... he ain't quitea he, exactly." "Yes, well forgive me for not being able to guess the gender of you Union people just by hearing a epithet. But no, I don't know anyone by the name of Swordarm Red. Nor do I know anyone by the name

Swordarm Blue, Swordarm Green, or Swordarm Turquoise.” He blinked. “Why do ask?”

“No reason in particular.”, I casually muttered.. Lucas cleared his throat. “Ah. If that’s all you wish to talk about, then... SCENARIO NINE!”, he yelled, causing Sabarene ta leap up in her seat. “You wake up in an inn after a long night of campaigning! But your opponent has played a diabolical trick on you, and placed a naked dead child in your bed! What do you d-“ “What happened to Scenario Eight, Mister Lucas?”, Sabarene asked, more confused than put off by Lucas’s curious choice in hypotheticals. “You’re not ready for scenario eight!” “I think I’m gonna getta breatha fresh air.”, I mumbled, and sauntered outta the room before the conversation could get dumber. I, uh, I also left cause I had some thinking ta do. See, one advantage ta lying ta folks all the time is that ya can usually pick up on when someone is being legit. And as I awkwardly shut the door I had so separated from the hinges before, my gut and my brain told me that Blondie had been telling the truth, more or less. There’s a pretty reliable way ta separate bullshit from what’s legit. If someone actively and enthusiascally volunteers information ta ya, chances are that the words they’re feeding ya are bogus, or at least highly biased. Getting the real deal froma bloke should be like yanking out onea his teeth. The process should be painful for him, awkward fer you, and last far longer than it should. Lucas’s discomfort and unwillingness ta talk about his friends was far more convincing ta me than any show of sorcery ever could be. But him being honest wasa problem. If I suspected he had been lying ta me, then figuring out how he was related ta Swordarm Red One woulda been as simple as tying him ta a chair and flaying him alive. Unfortunately, that didn’t seem ta be the case. I quickly nodded my head. It didn’t matter what his relationship ta that psycho was. He was the one traveling with me, not her. So

long as Lucas wasn't out ta kill me, or dress me up as a maid, then all was well. Once more, I pushed all thoughtsa magic and the like ta the backa my head. There were more normal things ta concern my five or so brain cells with, like getting a bite ta eat fer the evening, or figuring out a way ta help my pal make up fer her whole genocide thing. The sudden growling of my stomach and the scenta something flash fried and greasy lenta bit more support ta the former option. I stumbled through the hallway following the smell, my gait exactly as focused and steady as you'd expect a half blind, wound covered idiot's ta be. The aroma came from the other end of the hall, opposite the stairwell. Likea starving mutt, I followed the smell without really paying too much attention ta my surroundings. Oh, I didn't elbow anyone in the face or nothing, but I did sorta just... meander from side ta side. The scent led me ta a door at the far end of the hallway, about twenty cabins away from where Lucas and Sabarene were. The door didn't seem any different from the door ta my room, but it had some markings on it. Course, I had no idea what the markings actually said, but my nose knew that whatever had smelled so scrumptious was behind the door, meaning that in all probability it wasa refractory or something. I turned the handle of the unlocked door and stepped in. I frowned as I did so. The room I stepped inta wasn't a refractory, cafeteria, or otherwise. Nah, it was just another cabin, identical looking ta mine, with two notable exceptions. The first was that this cabin was stacked with tons and tonsa tomes. Not like the tomes Blondie had either, nah, I'm talking leather bound books, each of which had ta be half an armslength tall and wide, perhaps even moreso. The second notable exception was by far the most important one. Smack dab in the middle of the room wasa large bowl, fulla what hadta a hefty amount of spiced centipede. I ain't a glutton, I wanna make that

clear ta ya. I only eat when I'm hungry. Thing is, folks like me get hungry a lot, especially after we kick the crap outta folks. And spiced centipede is really tasty, especially when the skin is roasted ta a nice crisp. Crunchy on the outside, savory on the inside... ain't much better grub than that. There's this one dish that I tried, once, called a "hot dog", that came close, but- Uh, sorry, I think I got off track there. So, without putting too much thought into my actions, I went up to the bowl in the center of the book covered cabin, and started shoveling as much spiced rattlesnake into my mouth as I could. It tasted just as good as it looked, of course. "Is good, yes?", a deep baritone bellowed. I jerked my head around, to see... no one, and nothing. Well... not nothing, exactly. The cabin door was closed, even though I had never touched it, nor heard it shut. "Whdmn Dmd Fhf?", I asked aloud, mouth fulla crispy anthropod. "Yes, seems to be to liking.", the baritone voice rang out again, behind me once more. I did another one eighty, and this time... actually saw someone. The fella I saw was wearing... white. White trousers, white shoes, a white shirt, and as if to hammer the point in, a white cape. The only articlea clothing on him that wasn't completely white was a bandana that covered the lower half of his face. The bandana was black, with a white jawbone painted across it. His hair, of course, was brown. "Gah!", I screamed, and jerked my hand towards where a hatchet wasn't. "Did friend drop this?", the man with the skull mask asked, holding up onea my hatchets in his right hand. "Or did friend drop this?", he asked, holding up another, much shinier looking hatchet in his left.

"GAAAAAAAAAAAH!", I screamed, and bolted for the door. Naturally, it was locked. I lowered my shoulder and bum rushed it, hoping the weight of the leather armor I was wearing would be enough to break it open. My panicked cross check managed to crack

the wood in the door some, but it didn't unhinge it or nothing. I quickly jumped back, and ran ta slam open the door again. I got alla two steps towards the exit before being jerked, braidfirst, onta the ground. But instead a my skull slamming into a hard wooden floor, the back a my head bounced a few times against something soft and not concussion inducing. Ta my utter shock, the man in white had taken the time ta place a pillow on the floor before slamming me down. The brown haired fella with the skull mask looked down at me and shook his head. "Calm down, friend. Am not here to chop you up!", the fella spoke out affably. "Izzat so.", I babbled, the room spinning. "Is so, yes!", he happily harped, pulling me back onta my feet. "Am friend! Friend-" "Thief, right?", I finished, bitsa chewed up insect falling outta my mouth. The brown haired man in white seemed to smile. He nodded his head. "One and only!" He flipped both hatchets in his hand, holding them by the blade and pointing the handles at me. "Once more. What hatchet did friend drop?" Very confused and on edge, I answered him. "The crappy one." "Ah!", the fellow with the skull mask exclaimed. "Friend Brown girl tells lie!" "Ain't a lie. My hatchet is the one in yer right hand." The man with the black skullbone mask wagged his finger at me. "That statement, yes, yes is no lie. But this...", "Friend" Thief said as he offered the hatchet ta me, "this not crappy. Is worn down, is ugly, yes. But crappy... no. Does what it is supposed to do." I yanked the weapon outta his hand. "That supposed ta be some kinda metaphor, or something?" The man with the broken continental's face changed, though how it changed I can't tell ya. "Is just way of saying appearances not too important. So long as thing does what it should, then all is well." "Great ta know.", I slushed out sarcastically. "I take it ya didn't trap me in here just ta offer me a buncha clichéd platitudes though, right?" The brown haired man's face

drooped a bit. "Is not trap... is lunch!" He looked down at the empty bowl. "Well, was lunch." The brown haired man scratched the chin of his mask, in confusion I guess. "Friend Thief knew that flavored invertebrate was Friend One Eye's favorite dish, but did not know Friend One Eye would eat favorite dish like starving, menstruating pig." I stared at the weird man, more put off by the details of his words than his curious choice of em. "How the heck didya know that spiced centipede was my favorite?" "Little green haired Fremdosian girl told me.", he answered, with a casual wave of his hand. "But is not important detail. More pressing lunch time conversation to make." I sighed, and flicked my eyepatch some. "And I take it I ain't gonna be allowed ta leave this here room until we have this conversation?" "Very yes!", the language challenged stranger confirmed. "Have a seat!" I looked around the cabin. There were tonsa books, but not so much furniture, and by not so much, I mean none whatsoever. "There, uh, ain't any ta take, champ." The skullfaced fella snapped his fingers. Immediately, I found myself about three feet higher in the air, and on topa a nice, cushioned seat. "Oh, right, magic.", I mumbled. The man who called himself Thief wagged his finger. "Is not magic. No such thing." "All evidence ta the contrary.", I grumbled, staring at the table that had come outta nowhere. "Am telling the truth.", Thief insisted from across the table. "Magic is liar. Magician, too, is liar." "What, ya mean that blonde git?", I asked. "One and only!", Thief answered. "Is part of why I lured you into room like one eyed fly to honey. Stay away from Magician boy. Is bad news, untrustworthy." "Yeah, cause you sure seem like a standup fella." "Am sitting at moment.", he stated. "Figure a speech.", I muttered, then nodded my head. "Just what the heck do ya want from me?", I asked. "Nothing.", the unworldly man in front of me responded. "Only want to give friend advice, in order



to-“Cut the crap!”, I yelled, slamming my fist onto the table. “If ya wanted ta give me advice, then ya coulda just talked ta me like a normal person!” “Am busy man, Friend Easily Frustrated Axeman.”, Thief responded. “Tons of things happening on continent. None good.” “And what’s that got ta do with me?”, I asked. “Not much.”, the masked man in white spoke out. “Not much, but enough. Enough to warrant lunchtime.” He snapped his fingers, causing a bottle of wine and two glasses ta appear on the table. He uncorked the bottle, and tilted it over, filling my glass, then his with ruby red wine. I picked up the glass and sniffed at the liquid, suspicious. “Oh, don’t worry.”, the brown haired man said. “Is not Fremdosian wine.” I reluctantly took a sip from the glass. The drink was surprisingly... sub-par. It wasn’t bad, or nothing, but it tasted a lot more runna the mill than I had imagined magical wine would taste. “Alright.”, I said, taking a huge gulp of the mediocre beverage, “Speak yer piece.” The brown haired man raised the glass ta his face, and... well he didn’t quite drink any of the wine, but poured a bit of it on his black mask, as if it were part of his mouth. “Is simple enough, but listen carefully.”, he instructed, ruby red liquid dripping down his painted jawbone. “Do not listen to any men who wear hats.” I gagged a bit on my wine. “Hats? What’s wrong with hats?” “Tacky. Hats very tacky.” He dribbled some more wine on his mask. “But tackiness is not problem. Men with hats, will be problem. Will cause you problem, white haired girl problem, and even boy in purple hat problem.” I narrowed my eye. “Ya finally showed me yer weirdass mug just ta warn me about hats?” The man in white pondered a fer a spell. “More or less.” “Buh... wha?!” I spat, nearly knocking over my glass of wine in the process. “But what about all those letters of yours? Y’know, the ones telling me ta go ta Trunchet, instead a Fremdos, and all that?” Thief emptied the last bit of wine onto

his mask, and then grabbed the bottle ta refill his glass “No men with hats in Trunchet. No women with hats either. In Trunchet, the wearing of hats is punishable by death.” “Izzat so.”, I said, rubbing my stump awkwardly. “Yes, is so.”, the weird man said. “Would not say were it not so.” I dribbled all five of my fingers on the table. “So what’s the big picture?”, I asked. “I mean... according ta Sister Sanbterene-“ “Sabarene.”, Thief corrected. “Right, Sabarene, you were the fella who done saved my life. If that’s the case-“ “Is very much the case!” “If that’s the case, then surely there’s gotta be some reason fer it.” “Is reason for everything.”, the Brown haired man said. “My reason for saving cripple girl is whim.” My ears twitched at the word whim. “What?” “Whim.”, the brown haired man repeated. “Means sudden urge to-“ “No, I know what whim means. But there ain’t mucha a reason ta save someone like me.” “Ah, but there is. There are more reasons than Friend Brown Girl could ever know.” “And those reasons would be?”, I asked. “A secret.”, the brown haired man cheerfully chirped. “But do not lose hope!”, he quickly said, looking at my completely resigned face with passion. “As confusing as world around Friend Cripple girl may seem, so long as she stays true to self, all will be well!” “Izzat so.”, I said, fer the third time. “Is so!”, Thief confirmed, sticking up his thumb fer some unfathomable reason. He snapped his fingers, causing the table, bottle, and glasses ta disappear. “Two things left to discuss before letting Friend One Eye Brown Girl go.” I sighed and moved my hand inna circle., signaling him ta say what he would. “First!”, Thief boldly declared. “First is matter of lost and found.” He looked at me. “You lost something, no?” “Yeah, about five fingers and all sensea depth perception.” “No, no, not talking about limbs. Talking about item. You lost very precious item, no?” Thief’s eyes seemed to smile as he talked. My heart skipped a beat. “Y-you ain’t saying that ya

have... that ya have my-" The masked man snapped his fingers once more. With a unceremonious clunk, a huge, somewhat chipped greataxe with a runierian reinforced handle manifested in thin air and fell onto the floor. "No way!", I cried out in shock. "That darn Swordarm psycho took that away from me, how didya get it?!" "Name is Thief, Friend Brown Girl. How do you *think* I got oversized impractical weapon?" I ignored the fella with the white cape, and inspected every last bit of my axe. The handle was completely fine. The blade though... well, as mentioned previously, it was chipped. And the chip wasn't one of those inconsequential kinda chips, neither. No, were I to swing my greataxe at anything firmer than solidified butter, the entirety of the blade would break into two. "I'm gonna need to repair the shit outta this.", I complained, extending my arm to lift the darn thing up. Only to find that... I couldn't. The greataxe mine was just too heavy. I could barely even lift the handle a few inches off the ground. "Why can't I-", I blurted, then smacked myself in the face. "May be shocking to Friend Brown girl, but two arms are more powerful than one." "Ya don't say.", I muttered. "Yes, is big tragedy. Juggling, too, will be hard." He stuck his thumb at me again. "But do not lose hope! Even crippled brown girl can juggle, if she tries!" I stopped trying to lift up the greataxe, and rubbed my sore forearm with my head. "Great to know.", I uttered, flatly. "One more matter to take care of before let brown girl run free like rabies infected mongrel.", the masked man said. "Be wary of-" "Men in hats, yeah, yeah, I get that.", I grumbled, my patience wearing thin. I probably shouldn't have snapped at someone who could quite clearly alter the fabric of reality with the snap of a finger, but his constant insults and completely nonsensical statements were beginning to take their toll. "No.", Thief uttered. "Already warned about men in hats. This warning much more specific, much more dire." He

stared at me, with cold, calculating eyes. Eyes like those you would find on a corpse. Eyes that seemed apathetic to the world, and the inhabitants thereof. Thief looked at me with those cruel, merciless eyes, and delivered his final warning. "Be wary of discount street food." "Discount street food.", I uttered. "Just said that, is no need to repeat." "I take it that normal priced street food is still fair game?", I inquired instigatingly. "Yes, as is free samples. But discount. No. Avoid discount. Is matter of life and death." I rubbed my eye, then winced, as one of the many nicks and bruises on my shoulder started to ache. "Fuh!", I fumed, the pain sudden and sharp. "Is Friend Brown Girl alright?", the masked man asked, with what I might have construed as concern if I didn't know any better. I opened my mouth to respond with a sarcastic retort of some kind, but all that came out was a pained "Gaeh." Wincing, I looked at my shoulder, and cringed. Leaking from the frays and gaps in Bowman Yellow Five's leather armor was a liberal amount of blood. I suppose the wound that Swordarm Red One had given me broke open, because the severity of the pain was far more than the cuts the Handmaiden's razor had caused. I say "I suppose", because I don't honestly know what particular affliction of mine came home to roost, all I do know is that my head became fuzzy, and the room dizzy. "Oh. Oh Friend is bleeding.", Thief observed. He paused. "Is not good thing." "Fehnedhnedneg.", I contributed, struggling to keep my balance. The man in white shook his head. "What do... What do..." he said to himself, right as my face slammed firmly into the floor, this time without being intercepted by a pillow. "Bandages... no.. no bandages not suitable for task..." he said, as I dragged myself towards the door. "Hm.... Oh! Got it!", the skull masked man decisively declared. He snapped his fingers, and... suddenly I felt completely fine. No, seriously. All the pain in

my shoulder disappeared, and blood stopped dripping down my leather armor. My vision returned to normal (Well, the new normal, at any rate), and the room stopped spinning. I stopped dragging myself towards the door, and looked up at Thief. "What the heck did you just do?" "Is not particularly important.", he answered, dodging the question as skillfully as a morbidly obese. "Any rate, have stayed here for too long. Must be going now." The masked man grabbed my arm and yanked me onto my feet. "Remember, avoid men with hats! And discount street food!" With those idiotic instructions and another snap of his fingers, the masked man in white was gone, leaving me, a bunch of books, and a chipped greataxe behind in the cabin. I remained lying on the floor for a bit, in stunned silence. I was... well, I guess I was scared, a bit. Swordarm Red One's regeneration, and all of Lucas's tricks... they were nothing compared to the crap that Thief had pulled. It... it seemed like he could literally do anything he wanted with the snap of his fingers. A million thoughts poured through my brain. Was he some sorta God? Was he an anthropomorphic force of nature? Or did the Fremdosian wine not wear off after all? Given all the implausible stuff I had experienced, it was more than possible that I was just a nutter. Though me being a nutter... maybe that woulda been for the better. Cause if I wasn't crazy, if I wasn't imagining everything that was happening to and around me, then... then it woulda meant that- I shrugged off my doubts, if only because I didn't wanna stay cooped up in a creepy cabin filled with big black tomes and little else. I made my way to leave the room, then turned around. My chipped greataxe lay on the floor, a glorified paper weight. But it was a glorified paper weight with a Runiertian reinforced handle, so I went to pick it up. To my surprise... this time I was actually able to lift the darn thing. Only about an inch off the ground, mind ya,

but an inch is better than nothing at all. Maybe it was endorphins from being able to lift something I couldn't, but my entire body felt pretty good, like I just had a decent night's sleep and a nice hot bath. Troubled, but nowhere near as troubled as I should have been, I opened the door and sauntered back into the hall. Luckily, there wasn't anyone around to see me drag my busted greataxe along. Chipped or not, the weapon was a dead giveaway as to who I was. And while I was somewhat sure that I was in the clear for my little rampage in the Swordarms' dungeon, the knowledge that no one would see an eyepatch wearing idiot dragging a busted ass axe down the hallway of a Fremdos bound Caravan was a small comfort. What wasn't a small comfort, though, was the sound of a gross, inarticulate sobbing echoing from the other end of the hall. The cries were shrill, phlegmy, and pathetic, like the whines of an infant lying in its own refuse, or the tears of a Goldman Sachs Executive after only getting a half a million dollar bonus for Christmas. I rolled my eye as I slowly made my way back to my cabin. The cries just got louder and louder the closer to the room I got, to the point where I was tempted to just blabber aloud to shut out the sound. All thoughts along that line of reasoning stopped right quick, because to what probably-shouldn't-have-been my surprise, I realized the sobs were coming from the cabin Sabarene and Lucas were roleplaying in. "Buwwwah!", a voice that had to belong to the ex-General rang out, right as I was about to knock on the door with the handle of my greataxe. "Itsh... itsh all my fault. Itsh all my fault, Misters Lucash!" "I... I wouldn't quite say that.", the somewhat shaken Sorcerer replied. "Of course it is!", Sabarene bawled. "If I had just paid attention to her.... If I didn't play that completely stupid game of yours-" "Role-playing.", Lucas gently insisted. "Who gives a shit what it's called, you narrow minded twat! A friend of ours is dead!" "Two things,

Sister.”, the agitated voice the Sorcerer rang out. “First and foremost, while that sadistic nutjob might be what you consider a friend, she certainly isn’t one of mine. And secondly, if she did decide to kill herself, then I can assure you we had nothing to do with it.” I winced at the sound a glass shattering against a wall. “Shut your trap, you conceited charlatan! Of course we have something to do with Miss Axeman Red’s suicide! She probably felt lonely, and-“ I kicked open the door. “My what?!” I sputtered, my mind beginning to melt. Sabarene’s cabin... our cabin seemed to have changed, in the fifteen or so minutes I had been gone. Oh, the bed, seat, and furniture was all in their proper place, but the entire room was littered with half empty bottles, filled with yellow liquid that I sincerely hoped was mead. Sabarene was wearing the same black habit she always had on, but Lucas had changed from his bodice and frilly skirt into his, uh, “normal” outfit. More notable than that, though, was the way they looked at me like I was some kinda disfigured fre- a ghost. They looked at me like I was a ghost. “Oh.”, Lucas stated, with a tinge of disappointment. “You’re-“ “Alive!”, Sabarene finished, joyfully tackling me onto the floor. “I was so worried!”, she huskily mumbled, the stench a little thick on her breath. “Seriously! I thought you had taken a leap through one of those windows outta shame or something.” “Could you please get off me?”, I squeaked, the tip of Sabarene’s nose rubbing against mine. “Nope!”, she scolded. “Not until you tell me where you’ve been!” “Where I’ve been- I just went to get a bite to eat, is all.” I gently pushed the white haired woman off my chest. “And what’s all this yakking about me offing myself?”, I asked as I pushed myself up. “You’re kidding me, right?”, Lucas asked with narrowed eyes. “We haven’t seen you in eight rising periods.” “Yeah!”, the white haired woman said, the joy on her face replaced by a drunken frown.

admonishment. “Feeling peckish ish fine and all, but spending eight rising periods eating ish a bit gluttonish.” “Eight rising periods?”, I asked, my stomach feeling like it hadn’t digested those centipedes after all. “Yesh, I just shaid that, there’s no-“ “EIGHT RISING PERIODS?!” I screamed, interrupting Sabarene’s spiel. “There ain’t no way!”, I frantically sputtered, and jerked my head towards Blondie. “I was only gone fer a few moments, right?” “If you measure each moment as two or three rising periods, then yes, you were only gone for a few moments.”, the Sorcerer asininely agreed, playing around with his cape. I backed up a bit, and pointed accusatorily at him and Sabarene. “Y’all... y’all are messing with me. This is onea yer stupid scenarios, right? Trick the idiot inta thinking eight rising periods have passed.” Sabarene sobered up, slightly. “No- no of course we’re not messing with yo-“ “Ya gotta be!”, I screamed, tearing my hair in frustration. “I was only gone fera bit! I just had some spiced centipede, and-“ I paused, as the obvious reality of what happened finally hit me. “GAH!”, I yelped, tripping over the handle of my chipped greataxe. “N-no way!”, I gasped, as the weighta my dumb ass snapped the blade off the handle. Lucas looked down at the broken weapon, curious. “Where in the world did you acquire that?” “F-from onea the four fellas I had kill themselves, of course.”, I instinctually lied, then nodded my head. “N-nah... nah that ain’t true.”, I admitted, then gulped. “It’s, uh... it’s mine. I just, uh, I just picked it up now.” “You mean you got it eight rising periods ago, right?”, Sabarene not-so-helpfully interjected. “Yes.”, I blurted. “Uh, actually no, probably not.” I mumbled. “M-maybe?”, I nervously compromised. “You don’t remember when you came across that six foot long monstrosity?”, Lucas asked, skeptical. I massaged my rapidly drying throat. “No... no see I remember just fine... but... uh....” As I babbled, Sabarene and Lucas stared at me



like I was some sorta crazy person. “Uh... well, it’s like this. Remember that Thief fella, Samteane?” “You shaid my name right for once!”, the white haired lady shaid, overjoyed. “No she didn’t.” “Oh. Well yesh, of courseh I remember Mister Shief. Quite the handshome gentlemen.” “Thief....” Blondie repeated... “Ah yes, the charlatan who left you that silly little letter. What about him?” “I think he has dominion over time and space.” “Oh.”, Lucas casually responded. “WAIT WHAT?!” the Sorcerer screamed, his hat falling off his head. I tooka deep breath, and explained the entire encounter I had with the masked fella, even detailing stuff I didn’t need ta, like how he had poured wine onta his jawbone insteada drinking. “How nice of him to save you!”, Sabarene slushed, completely taken in with the story. “Don’t right reckon he was being nice about it at all, given what happened.” “A good deed is a good deed, Miss Axeman Red Four.”, she lectured, causing me ta narrow my eye. “And just what about making me disappear fer eight rising periods is good, exactly?” “I’m sure he had his reasons...”, Sabarene meekly said, twiddling her fingers. Blondie remained unusually silent. He stared at the wall of the cabin, his teeth chomping on his right hand’s index finger. “Um... you dropped your hat, Mister Lucas.”, Sabarene said. “O-oh.”, the Sorcerer stuttered, somewhat shaken out of his daze. “W-why yes... yes I did.” He didn’t bother ta pick it up. Instead, he reached for onea the half finished bottles of ale on the floor, and chugged down the contents like it was the only antidote fera deadly fast acting poison. After finishing the first halfa bottle, he reached fer another, only ta be stopped bya black metal hand. “Drinking too much ish a shin, Mister Lucas.”, Sabarene chided. Blondie didn’t retort witha not-so witty comeback, nor did he point out the clear hypocrisy in Sabarene’s statement. His blue eyes dulled over, and his entire body seemedta freeze

up. He just sat on the floor, cross legged, like he was a statue. "A skull mask, you said?", he whispered, with the face of a sexually abused puppy. "Yeah, the fella was wearing a skull mask, round the lower halfa his face." I paused. "Kinda stupid looking, if ya ask me." "I don't think Mister Shief's mask looks stupid!", Sabarene pointlessly protested. Lucas took inna deep breath, his body shaking. "You're not lying to us, are you Patchy?", the Sorcerer desperately spoke out. "You... you didn't just murder someone and lay low in a closet for eight rising periods, did you?" "That's completely retarded!", I exclaimed, deeply offended. "I woulda hid inna pantry." Lucas buried his head in his hands. His shoulders started ta shake, some. "Um... are you okay, Mishter Lucas?", Sabarene asked, poking his ear with her metal index finger. "Oh, sure, sure, I'm fine.", he said with glazed over eyes. "Totally fine." He slowly stood up, and walked towards the exita the cabin. He almost immediately tripped over fivea the half empty bottles on the floor. "Woah!", I exclaimed, catching the bewildered looking blonde right before he kissed the glass covered ground. "Oh no!", Sabarene said, rushing over ta us. "Is Mister Lucas alright?" I jabbed the catonic looking Sorcerer's face a few times with my stump, but got no reaction outta him. "Don't seem that way, couldya turn him over?" "Sure, sure. Oh dear, perhaps I should have tidied up the room a bit..." The white haired lady turned Lucas around in my arm. "Hm...", she said, resting two of her black metal fingers on his throat. "It's terrible! He doesn't have a pulse!" "Yer using yer fake fingers." "O-oh.", Sabarene nervously giggled, switching hands. "W-well... alright, he seems to be breathing, so, I guess that's a good thing." I waved my hand a few times in fronta the git's face, ta little avail. "Good or bad, we should probably get Lucun inta bed or something." And so, like two wacky butchers disposing offa animal carcass, Sabarene

and I dragged Lucas outta our glass bottle littered cabin, and into the his much cleaner one. We tucked him into bed or something, then left. "I... I think he passed out from shock.", Sabarene said, as I began to pick up all the trash in the cabin. "Shock? But he didn't lose any blood or nothing." "Not physical shock, imbecile. Emotional shock!" "He ain't the one who had eight rising periods taken away from him in the blink of an eye.", I grumbled, bitter. "Oh, stop whining.", Sabarene snapped. "They weren't particularly eventful rising periods anyways. I'm just glad you didn't jump out of a window." I brushed some shattered glass into a pile. "Trust me, if I ever decide to off myself, you'll be the first to know." "Wouldn't I be the last to know?", the lady in the black robes asked, picking up a few dozen bottles. "Nah. I'd probably have to let Blondie know, too. It'd only be proper." I scratched at my shoulder some. "Why is it so dang hot in here?," Sabarene looked at me funny. "Feels just fine to me. Then again, I'm not exactly wearing much." She walked over to the trapdoor in the floor, and opened it. A surge of heat came swooping outta it. "GAH!", I yelled, falling over on my butt. "What the hell!?" "What the what?", Sabarene asked, as she threw a bunch of empty bottles out the trapdoor. I didn't respond to her, instead, I inched my way towards the open trapdoor, all the while feeling like I was crawling further and further into a furnace. "Where'd all the snow go?!", I blurted, gazing down the hatch. The giant rubber treads of the Caravan steadily trudged through tons of the stringy vegetable stuff I saw in Lucas's portrait, without a patch of ice or pond of slush to be seen. "Woah.", I murmured, mesmerized by the sight of the luscious green plains. The shade of the Caravan obscured the full color of the grass below, but just seeing the stuff with my own eye made my mouth hang agape. Sabarene smirked at me like a cat presenting its owner with a chewed up pigeon.

“Welcome to the Holy Collective, Miss Axeman Red Four.”, she ostentatiously announced. “So we’re in yer turf now, huh?”

“Oh, we’ve been in Collective lands for about five or so rising periods.” “Sheesh, that long?”, I asked, surprised. “How much land do you sacred twits got, anyways?” “Um.... the Collective constitutes about eighty percent of the Continent, I’d say.” “Sheesh, all that land, and y’all want more?” “It’s precisely because we have all that land that we want more.”, Sabarene stated, sorting the open bottles from the closed. “Do you run, Miss Axeman Red Four?” “Only when I’m being chased.” “No, no, I mean for fitness purposes.” I doubled over laughing. “Of course I don’t!”, I cackled. “If ya waste yer time running then ya can’t lift!” “Lift... what, exactly?”, Sabarene asked. “Weights, of course.”, I said matter of factly. Sabarene snuck a quick glance at my bicep and frowned.

“Topsided workout regimes aside... I think a good deal of the pressure the Collective is experiencing can be likened to running a race.” “What do ya mean, exactly?” Sabarene clasped her hands together. “Imagine that you’re running a race. Fifty thousand armlengths long. For the first thirty thousand armlengths, everything is fine, you’re moving along at a good pace. But right around the forty thousand mark, your stomach starts to cramp, and your throat starts to feel queasy. Do you finish the race, or do you retire for the evening?” “Finish the race, of course.”, I yapped. “But why? Why finish? Why not stop and rest, and make sure everything is ok?” “Cause I already ran mosta the damn thing, I might as well run the res-“ I paused. “Ah. I see yer point.” Sabarene shook her head solemnly, carefully stacking the sealed bottles on top of each other. “Unfortunately, the mentality of my siblings is a shining example of the Sunk Cost Fallacy.” “I’m guessing that don’t have much ta do with ships.” “Not exactly, no. The

Sunk Cost Fallacy exemplifies our natural inclination to push forward with a venture, even if pushing forward with that venture is completely fucking retarded.” “Sunk cost, huh.” I licked my lips. “I’m beginning ta think my entire life issa sunk cost.” “Oh, you’re a junk bond for sure.”, Sabarene laughed. “J-junk!?”, I stuttered. “I ain’t junk! And what the heck issa bond, thata fancy word fer cripple or something?!” “Don’t worry about it too much, Miss Axeman Red Four.”, the white haired lady said witha smugass smile.”

Before I could respond ta her jape witha gentalia centered jest of my own, the Caravan shook something fierce. “Again?!”, I gasped, barely managing ta steady myself.

Sabarene stayed calm and cross-legged, even as the shaking caused her neatly stacked bottles ta shatter all over her. “Why the heck does this darn thing shake so much?”, I complained, stomach queasy. “I wouldn’t say that.”, the spirit splashed Sister spoke, same smugass smile still stuck solidly on her face. “This vehicle only shook once before, remember?” “Course I remember, it was only a few moments ago.” I paused. “Fer me, anyways.” “And why did the Caravan shake?” “Heck if I know.”, I yawned. Sabarene rolled her ruby red eyes. “It shook because it began moving!” “Oh, yeah. Forgot about that.” I scrunched my nose. “So what does that havta do this current statea affairs?”, I asked. Without saying a word, my companion pointed down the trapdoor. Wincing at the heat, I never the less mustered the courage ta gaze down the hatch again. The scenery had changed, somewhat. The rolling grassy plains were still below us, but they weren’t exactly rolling no more. “We’ve stopped?”, I asked. Sabarene smiled and shook her head. “Oh thank the suns!”, I blathered. “This stupid-ass trip is finally over!” “You... you only spent a few evenings onboard, though.” “Yeah, and they all sucked.” Sabarene didn’t say nothing. With the grippa dead woman, she grabbed me

by the wrist and started dragging me outta the cabin. "Let's get going, Miss Axeman Red Four." "Couldya loosen yer hold, please?" "I could~", she sing-songed, firmly leading me out into the hallway. Sabarene walked briskly, her strides short and precise. She didn't quite sprint through the corridor, but she didn't quite walk neither. "Oi! What's the rush?". "There's no rush.", the sister said, violently shoving her way past a morbidly obese woman, "No rush at all." The red eyed girl moved through the hall with the concentration and efficiency of an OCD riddled actuary filing his taxes. Before I even knew what was going on, we were halfway up the Caravan's giantass stairwell. "Gah!", I whined. "What about my Runiertian Reinforced greataxe?" "I'll buy you a new one." "But yer broke!" "Only for the moment." "What about Ruckus?" "I'm sure he'll catch up." My litany of concerns didn't seem ta trouble Sabarene none. She led me up the resta the stairs and back into the narrow hallway without so much as blinking an eye. This time, the narrowness of the corridor didn't prove ta be mucha an obstacle... fer Sabarene, at least. I, on the other foot, kept on smacking into the walls and tripping on steps I couldn't quite make out. Which woulda been fine, had Sabarene not been dragging me along likea ragdoll. "Please-ack! Slow-Gah! Down-Arggh!", I pleaded, metal structures repeatedly smacking me in the face, chest, and shins. "Oh hush, we're almost at the exit." She said that, but we walked, and walked, and walked, without even seeing a glimpsea light at the end of the corridor. That's not ta say things remained the same as we proceeded towards the exit. The more we ventured through the cramped corridor, the hotter and hotter it became. Right before the heat became almost unbearable, Sabarene stopped me. "Um, hold on for a moment." "S-sure," I panted, massaging a tuft of my sweat drenched hair. She turned and looked at me, scratching her chin. "Can...

can I ask you for a small favor, Miss Axeman Red Four?" I smirked. "Ya finally gonna take me up on that fifty percent offer?" "N-no! Of course not.", Sabarene stuttered, mortified. "I mean a literal favor." I paused fera bit. "Ya mean ya want an article of clothing from me?" "Yes!", she said, smiling. "Fine with me.", I responded, the heat making me not too reluctant ta part with some clothing fera while. "What parta my armor are ya fixing ta wear?" The white haired lady's cheeks flushed a deep red. "I'm... um... not exactly looking to wear any part of your armor, per se..." "What, doya want my boots?" "Not quite..." the habit girl answered evasively, gazing up at the ceiling. "Then what the heck do ya want, Sister?", I asked, agitated. Meekly, and witha quivering finger, Sabarene pointed towards the left sidea my face. "You can't possibly be serious." The red eyed sister gazed at me likea kitten begging fer milk. "Please? I swear, I'll make you a new one soon." "Why?!" I blurted, flabbergasted. "I'll explain later.", she not so assuringly assured me. "Geh. Fine." I reached ta take off the patch I had grown mildly accustomed ta wearing, but Saberene's hands were quicker on the draw. Gently, she removed the leather eyepatch from my face with her black hand and stroked my cheek softly with her real one. "What the heck are ya-" "Hm. Your wounds haven't quite disappeared yet.", Sabarene declared, poking my forehead some. Fer the first time inna long while, I blinked my left eyelids. "Oh, no, no. That won't do.", Sabarene said, pressing her palm against them. "No, keep those closed. Getting an infection there would be problematic." Sabarene pocketed the leather strip and frowned. "I think you should probably cover that up, actually." I glared at the concerned lady, as amused asa mutt in the process of getting spayed. "Gee, if only there wasa PATCH of sorts, one I could put over where my EYE used ta be." "P-point noted," she said apologetically. "Oh!

Oh, I've got it!", the white haired lady announced, smile on her stupid face. She roughly grabbed a tuft of my sweaty hair, and placed it over my left eyesocket. "There! It's not exactly a permanent solution, but it'll do for the short term." She paused. "I hope." "What the heck do ya even need my patch fer anyways?", I asked, determined ta make sense outta her completely nonsensical actions. "Now that...", Sabarene began, waving her index finger. "is a very valid question." Her face took onna exasperated look, as if she had just swallowed something dry and bitter. "You'll see why soon enough." And thus, we continued walking ta the exit again. Every step I took heralded more heat, and the temptation ta scratch my mostly uncovered eyelids grew stronger and stronger with each passing moment. I won't say the walk was arduous or nothing, cause it wasn't, but it sure as heck was annoying, in the same way that getting sore knuckles was annoying. Sooner or later we did reach the enda the corridor, but there wasn't an open door or nothing. No, the hole that shoulda hada bridge extended out of it was sealed up tight. And in fronta the sealed up exit was Claymore and Shields. "Oh! If it isn't Sister Amelia!", Shields said happily. "Are you feeling better? Sister Sabarene told me you had come down with the shits!" "Shakes, you mean.", Claymore corrected. "No, I'm fairly certain it's called the shits." "It's the shakes. You shake a lot when you get it." "Aye, but I presume you shit a lot as well, it's a stomach infection of some kind, innit?" "The proper term is still the shakes." Shields looked down at me, tapping his aegises together. "Didya shit or didya shake a bunch, lass?" "Bitta column A, bitta column B.", I answered. "Feeling better now, though." "Good ta hear, good ta hear.", Shields answered, affably, then paused. "Uh... lass... what happened to your robes?", he asked, confused somewhat by the leather armor I had on. "They got dirty.", I said, sorta telling the truth.



“Y’know, causea the shakes.” “Don’t you mean the sh-“ “Matters of illness aside,” Sabarene suddenly coughed, “is there a reason why the exit is all sealed up?” “Fremdosian Customs.”, Claymore groaned, nodding his head in mild irritation. “They won’t let us dock until they’ve checked our papers and poked around through all the wares.” “Wasn’t like this six cycles ago,” Shields chimed in. “Back then, all ya needed to dock was a Caravan and a few pieces of metal.” “Aye, and there was no fussing about the type of goods you brought, either.”, Claymore reminisced, dreamily. “Now we have to declare what cargo we’re going to bring before we even leave Provesh.” “But isn’t having everything accounted for more efficient?”, Sabarene asked, not so subtly butting in on the conversation. “This way, payments can be arranged in advance, and the reimbursement process for damaged goods becomes much more transparent.” “Who said it needed to be transparent in the first place?”, Claymore snorted. “What’s so bad about us selling what we want to sell, and folk buying what they want to buy?” The white haired girl nervously licked her bottom lip. “There’s nothing wrong with that *per se*, but-“ Before Sabarene could finish her lukewarm rebuttal, the exit to the Caravan opened, or perhaps more accurately, fell open. The metal wall that Shields and Claymore were standing in fronta collapsed, hitting the ground outside witha oddly soft sounding thud. The two Swordarms looked at each other and stepped ta the side without saying a word. I gazed through the open exit, mouth agape. The light from outside was damn near blinding, but I couldn’t stop looking. I probably woulda just kept staring if a metal finger hadn’t gently poked my cheek. “After you, Sister Amelia.”, Sabarene said witha bow. “Woah.”, I said fera second time, as I carefully navigated my way off the Caravan. The exit turned plank didn’t lead acrossa chasm, nor did it connect ta a big icy building.

All it did was lead outside. But what “outside” was, well, it damn near took my breath away. The green grassy plains I was on, really weren’t plains at all, no, far from that. I was onna mountain top! Er, well, technically speaking it wasa hill top, but mountain sounds more majestic. Whatever it was, the view from the peak was unforgettable. I could see alla what was presumably Fremdos from the altitude. The city was right on the ocean, and when I say on the ocean, I don’t mean nexta the ocean, I mean on TOPA the ocean. The city was comprised of ten large squares in five rows of two. Each of the squares were separated by canals. Though ta be honest, Fremdos being semi-flooded was onea its more mundane aspects. See, even though it was two anda half the sizea of Provesh... it didn’t smell, at all. I sniffed, then sniffed some more. There wasn’t a single scenta blood, urine, fecal matter, semen, or vomit ta be smelt. Oh, and the architecture of the city was pretty neat too, I guess. Lotsa marble buildings and stone pillars. Though what caught my eye the most was the long trail that led down ta the city. The trail itself was nothing special, justa dirt road that turned into a wooden bridge once it hit the ocean, but running parallel ta both sides of the trail werea series of stakes. The stakes ran alongside the trail, then split off in various directions, lining the sides of the canals. This had the effect of making the city look likea cake that had been cut up into ten squares, and littered with toothpicks, about five thousand toothpicks or so, maybe more. “Oi, lass!”, Shields called out from behind me. “The trail’ll lead you right to the depot. Keep your wits about you though, those Fiatists don’t think the same way us Unionists do.” “Sure, sure,” I muttered, then turned around inna panic. “Wait, whatta ya mean, *us* unionists?” Shields just chuckled, and headed back inside the Caravan. Before my brain could process the full implications of the Swordarm’s words, Sabarene

grabbed my wrist, though this time with her actual hand, thank the suns. “Alright, Missister Amelia!”, she said cheekily. “Just a short hike down, and we’ll finally be in Fremdos!” “Uh, ain’t we forgetting someone?” “Nope!”, Sabarene declared with glee, turning our brisk walk into a jog. “Wait up!”, a flamboyant familiar voice yelled behind us. Sabarene broke out inna sprint. “No! I said wait up!”, the voice yelled out again. “Wait up does not mean run faster! Running faster is precisely what I do not want you to do!” Frustrated at being treated like a ragdoll, and feeling no particular need to avoid Lucas, I grabbed Sabarene’s wrist, and pulled back, stopping her dead in her tracks. “Ha... ha.... ha...”, Blondie panted as he caught up to us, a complete mess inna mess of ways. Besides him being generally sweaty and outta breath, his clothing was all wrinkled. Even his purple tophat seemed to droop, slightly. “Christ!”, he gasped, outta breath. “I thought you two had left me behind!” “And I thought you had passed out from shock.”, Sabarene replied, not doing much to hide her disappointment. “I was only out for a few minutes.”, the disheveled boy wheezed defensively, then quickly shook his head. “But that’s not terribly important right now.” He fumbled through his pockets for a bit, and pulled out a translucent circle, no bigger than the size of a thumbnail. “You forgot this, Sister.”, he said, placing the small little thing in Sabarene’s reluctantly open palm. “The heck is that supposed to be, Ruckus?”, I asked, squinting suspiciously at the transparent fabric. “Just a little illusionary conduit.”, he explained inna way that didn’t explain anything at all. Sabarene gulped, and placed the transparent circle on the tip of her index finger. Then, as if it were the most natural thing in the world to do, stabbed her finger into her left eye. “AAAAAAAAAAH!”, I shrieked, nauseated. “What the... why didya... what?!” “Relax, Miss Axeman Red Four.”, the girl who had just gouged her own

eye out laughed. "I'm fine." "Like hell ya are- oh.", I stated, as Sabarene quickly blinked botha her (thankfully intact) eyeballs. There was something off about the left one, but I couldn't make out what, mostly cause Sabarene kept it shut after her little blinking bout. Blondie loudly cleared his throat. "Now that this little misunderstanding has been cleared up, may I ask you for a small favor, Pat-" "I've already taken care of that, Mister Lucas.", Sabarene curtly clarified. With a look of mild discomfort, Sabarene placed my sweaty leather patch over her closed left eye. "Um..." she bashfully began, her back ta the city, "how do I look?" "Likea fucking retard.", I answered, half-thinking that she did far more than *look* the part. "Can y'all just tell what the heck yer up to?" "Don't worry about it too much.", Lucas said, dismissing my frustrations witha twirl of his baton. "You're merely witnessing the tail end of eight rising periods of practice and planning. Everything will make sense to you soon enough, I swear to Christ." My ears twitched at that last word, and even though I was pissed off at Sabarene and Lucas fer cutting me outta the loop, my curiosity took over. "Ya keep saying that word. The heck does it mean?" Lucas frowned and fiddled with his bowtie. "Oh dear, you can't understand me? There must be something wrong with the universal translator..." "No, no, I understand ya just fine, except fer that last worda yers. What does it mean, and why do ya keep saying it?" Blondie's droopy face became substantially less droopy, and fer the first time inna while his eyes light up. "Ah! Allow me to clear things up for you, Patchy! Christ isn't a word, so much as it is a name." "Why would ya mentiona name so much?" "Why would you mention the suns so much?", he retorted, with mild irritation. "It's because where I'm from, a substantial amount of people worship Christ." "Oh, let me guess.", Sabarene said, rolling her uncovered eye. "This Christ was a Pyromancer of great

renown?" "Nope! Actually, he was a Transmutationist!", Lucas said with a bit too much enthusiasm. "Izzat even a word?" "It is now.", the Sorcerer concluded, proudly rubbing the bridge of his nose. "Transmutationist..." Sabarene repeated.... "So this magician that everyone in your homeland worships... could he turn dirt into steel?" "Eh... not quite. He was very skilled at multiplying perishable food, for example, and had this neat little thing where he could turn water into wine." Sabarene let out an audible gasp at the last parta Lucas's sentence. "O-oh my...", she stuttered, struck with awe. "I can see why the man is worshipped." The Sorcerer quickly shook his head. "Actually, no. The Transmutationist wasn't worshipped for his acts, so much as his philosophy. He was a big advocator of pacifism." "What happened ta him?", I asked, a bit put off by the word was. Lucas rubbed the back of his neck. "Er... he, uh, reached an impasse with some of his detractors, unfortunately." "And what was that impasse?", Sabarene asked, far more attentive ta Lucas's yarn than she had been before. "Well, he wanted to live," the yellow haired Sorcerer began, "and his detractors wanted to nail him to a-" Lucas stopped suddenly, glancing at onea of the many stakes that lined the trail down ta Fremdos. His blue eyes went wide with shock, then returned ta normal. "Forget it, the story doesn't matter.", he muttered, sounding tired. "Let's just enter the city before the rest of the passengers do." And that's just what we did; there was little reason not ta. A nice seabreeze blew inta my uncovered face as I strolled down the trail, making the heat somewhat bearable. All thoughtsa Thieves, magic, and missing body parts vanished from my mind as I walked down the stake bordered trail. The warmth and beauty of the landscape granted me strength, and caused a gut feeling ta form, and take a holda me. Somehow, my soul knew that everything would work out just fine. My soul wasa

complete dipshit. The three of us finished walking down the hill in no time at all, and came to the part of the trail where it turned into a bridge. Now that I was at the bottom of the hill, I had a better sense of scale. The wooden bridge that led into Provesh was much longer than I had expected it to be, going a good way out into the ocean. Rough waves crashed into the sides of the bridge repeatedly, making the darn thing rock back and forth. "Guh... ya think this darn thing would be a bit more sturdy," I complained, my good vibes dashed about like the contents of my stomach. "Sturdiness isn't always what you want in a bridge.", Sabarene said, strolling across the shaky thing with little trouble. "This bridge has to bend a little, otherwise the waves would cause it to capsize." "Geh. Then why not just make the darn thing outta stone, then?" "Easier said than done. Constructing a bridge like that would require digging a strong foundation in the seabed, and would require at least four cycles to come to fruition. It would be a massive undertaking with costs far outweighing the benefits." "Yeah, but it'd replace this cheap piece of crap." "Cheapness isn't necessarily bad, Miss Axeman Red Four.", the girl in the black habit said. "A successful public policy is one that gets the most utility out of the minimal investment. And while this bridge may be a bit rickety, it's perfectly functional. It's hardly something that should be torn down!" Sabarene tripped over nothing, and slammed her face against one of the bridge's planks. "That..", she gasped as a shit-eating grin spread on my face, "that wasn't due to the waves! I only tripped because of your imbecilic eyepatch, imbecile!" "Whatever ya say, Sister." "I-... I mean it! The bridge is perfectly fine!" While Sabarene and I bantered, Lucas remained completely silent. He walked slightly in front of us, head down, shoulders swaying with the breeze. I imagine he woulda kept walking that way, were it not for the sudden sound of... "Bongo

drums?”, Blondie breathed out in surprise, raising his mopey, mournful mug at the rhythm. His guess wasn’t wrong. Right where the bridge ended and the marble foundation of Fremdos began, were three shirtless fellas, beating the crap outta tall leather drums. But y’know what? Even though the barechested guys were hitting the drums likea alcoholic would his wife, the sound produced wasn’t half bad. The drummers weren’t doing performing alone; standing a few armlengths away from the bottom of the bridge’s exit ramp were three dancers. The dancers, lithe little things with green hair and brown skin, moved their limbs in tune with the beat of the drums and the crashing of the waves. Like the percussionists, the dancers hada carefree smile on their faces. Also like the drummers, the dancers didn’t seem to see much value in covering their chest with mucha anything. “Oh wow...”, Lucas gushed, alla his angst and melancholy suddenly gone, “Those girls are pretty good performers.” “They have nice looking tits, too!”, Sabarene added, broad smile on her face. “Gah!”, I cringed, covering my eye. “Why don’t nonea them gotta shirt on?” “Seventichilli!”, the centermost dancer called out as we walked off the bridge’s exit ramp. “Seventichilli, and welcome to Fremdos!” “Er... thanks, I guess.”, I muttered, trying ta keep my eye on the girl’s eyes. “Seventichilli...” Sabarene said ta herself “What does that phrase mean, exactly?” “It means no worries for the rest of your days!” Lucas explained with his usual enthusiasm, then flipped his baton. “Actually, the word translates to “warm welcomes”, at least in this context.” “You speak Fremdosian?!”, the dancer gasped, thankfully crossing her arms in fronta her chest. “I speak a bit of everything.”, Lucas answered witha wink. “Wow! I’m impressed, sir!”, the welcoming girl exclaimed, throwing out her arms and causing me ta take a sudden and passionate interest in my boots. “I only know the phrase

Seventichilli, and that's only because Mister Marston said it would amuse the tourists—"Hush, Nielente.", one of the tubby drummers whispered. "They're not tourists, they're travelers." "Oh, sorry, sorry!" the girl wearing a skirt made of grass and not much else spat. "I didn't mean anything by it!" "There's no need to apologize, Miss Nielente.", Sabarene said, pointedly not trying to keep her eye on those of the dancers. "We greatly appreciate your warm welcomes." "Yay! I didn't screw up this time!", Nielente said, jumping up and down. "Great for you.", I choked out. "So, uh, we clear the way into the city, or is there some sorta check in we gotta do first?" "Yes!", the dubiously dressed dirty dancer ditzily declared. "The small gate behind me leads right into Fremdos's Depot. Once inside, all you'll need to do is go through a very brief screening, and then you three will be good to go." "Alright, sounds good!", I quickly blurted, then made a mad dash for the gate. "Wait wait wait!", Nielente called out, right before I was home-free. "Geh... what is it?", I asked, reluctantly turning around. "I forgot to give you this." The shirtless girl shuffled in front of me, and with a sharp little tack, pinned a long blue piece of fabric onto my leather chestpiece. She bent over, hands on her hip, and shook her head in satisfaction as she straightened the weird blue ribbon onto my armor. Then, quickly, but not nearly quick enough, repeated the process on Lucas and Sabarene. "Did we win an award?", the Sorcerer asked, staring at the blue sash with confusion. "No, not quite." Nielente giggled. "This is just for this evening's festival." "Oh, what's the occasion?" "You don't know?", the bare-chested girl asked, slightly befuddled. "It's the third anniversary of the Great Unification!" "Something about that phrase seems sinister and cultish.", Blondie murmured. "There's nothing cultish about the Great Unification!", Nielente and the others announced simultaneously. "The Great Unification gave us our



names!" "Y'all are Unassigned?", I blathered in disbelief. The six musicians had all their teeth, didn't have any blemishes or boils on their skin, and most surprisingly, smelled just fine, despite not wearing much anything. In Provesh you'd be hardpressed to find a Unionist who met that criteria, let alone someone without a name. "No, we're not Unassigned." Nielente scoffed, offended. "We're citizens of the Holy Collective, like everyone else in Fremdos.", she declared, proudly puffing her chest. "The General and Mister Marston saw to that three cycles ago." She rubbed her hands together energetically "But here I am, blabbing again. The three of you should attend the festival this evening! We'll be performing this really neat play that'll tell you all you need to know about the Great Unification." Nielente looked from side to side with a crooked grin. "Don't tell anyone I said this," she whispered, "but Mister Marston himself might be making an appearance, too." Sabarene's uncovered eye went wide with shock. "R-really?" "Maybe, maybe.", the dancer teased. "The only way to know for sure is to attend~" The Unnamed girl with a name covered her mouth. "Oh my! There seem to be more tourists, I mean, travelers heading this way, I need to get back to work!" The green haired dancer muttered a quick farewell, and fell in line with her companions. "Nice girl.", Lucas wistfully whispered as the drums began to beat again. "Course she's nice," I snorted. "She's paid to be, just like every other whore out there-ack!" "Oh hush.", Sabarene said, flicking my ear. "As a visitor to this city, you've no right to make snide insinuations about anyone, especially a girl who has been nothing but kind to you." "S-sorry.", I weakly stuttered, wiping some sweat off my forehead. "I'm, uh, I'm a bit on edge at the moment." "Yes, well, so am I," the moral highground hogging sister admitted, "but you don't see me calling random people prostitutes." "The proper term is sex workers.",

Lucas interjected. “Whatever.”, Sabarene snapped, then sighed deeply. “We’re going to need to attend that festival, it would seem.”, she said, nauseated. “And why the heck would we needta do that?” “So we can meet up with my brother.”, the red eyed girl unhappily concluded. “Oh, right, Brother Marston.”, Blondie murmured, immediately getting the stink eye from Sabarene. “No, no, my brother, whose NAME is Marston! He’s not a Sacred Sibling!” “Then what is he, exactly?” “I’d, um... I’d rather not say.”, Sabarene rather did say, her cheeks flushed pink with shame. “C’mon, now ain’t the time ta be all super secretive, Miss AWOL.” “F-fine..., I’ll tell you.” Sabarene nervously acquiesced. “Marston is a... um... he’s a...” “Oh come on, just spit it out already.”, Lucas impatiently insisted, tapping the marble pavement with his baton. “Surely he can’t be worse than a sadistic self-interested elf and a militaristic megalomaniac.” The white haired girl took a deep breath. “He’s a sociologist.” “I immediately take back my previous statement.”, Blondie blurted. “The heck issa sociologist?”, I asked, as we crossed through Fremdos’s small unassuming gate. “Sociologists are people who complain about how society is corrupt without offering any advice on how to improve it.”, Lucas explained. “So they’re a buncha babbling drunkards?”, I asked. “Yes, but they get a salary and benefits for their ramblings.” I massaged my sweat drenched neck some. “If yer brother’s such a nut, then why the heck would we wanna meet up with him?” “Because as eccentric as he is, Marston knows Fremdos better than anyone else. And from what that nice young dancer said, I have reason to believe that he holds a position of power here.” Sister Sabarene smiled sadly. “A-also... I need to... no, I *want* to... apologize to him.”, I rubbed my stump, and frowned. “I ain’t touching yer personal issues with a ten arm length pole, but if we wanna meet up with Brother Marston, then

we should probably head ta customs, before we get raped or mugged or something.” I paused. “Where the heck is customs?” “Are you blind, Patchy?”, the Sorcerer asked. “The building is right in front of us, it even has a giant sign spelling it out.”, he grumbled, pointing atta gigantic looking structure with his beloved baton. Even if Blondie hadn’t taken the time ta gesture ta the building with his baton, I probably woulda found my way over there eventually. See, the gates of Fremdos led inta a narrow alley way, inta a narrow way marble street split in half by a very small canal. The only other buildings besides the depot were small little townhouses, the type ya’d see in San Francisco or something. There were a few people walking through the alleyway besides us, but they were either leaving through the gate or heading inta the big stone building that I reckon served as the true processing point of the city. The stone building wasn’t particularly wide, but oh gosh was it tall. The architecture of the building seemed nowhere near as malevolent as Provesh’s all ice depot was, but it was still pretty bizarre. The method of going up and down the stoney, moss covered skyscraper seemed ta be trekking up a spiral staircase, which wouldn’t be too bigga deal if the staircases weren’t on the outside of the building as opposed ta the inside. Luckily fer me, Lucas, and Sabarene, it seemed like there was a ground level entrance ta the customs. The three of us strolled inta the building with the grace and swagor of a balding obese middle aged man showing up early to an orgy. The interior of the tall stone building was... pretty mundane. All there was to it was a wooden desk, an exit at the opposite end of the hall, and a small set of staircases that led up ta the exterior of the building. Heck, the (unremarkable, white plastered) ceiling was only three or four armlengths above Lucas’s tophat, so ya wouldn’t even know how darn tall the building was just by standing inside

it. Behind the desk was a gray haired, pale skinned fella. He wore a sleeveless tunic and a pair of shortened beige slacks, which, given the heat, I couldn't really fault him for. What I could fault him for, though, was a white choker wrapped around his throat. That white choker, along with a buncha ill managed peach fuzz on the bottom of his chin, made the man look less like a respectable young bureaucrat and more like the type a bloke that would hire a whore to throttle his throat and yell hurtful words at him. "Howdy," I said to the masochistic looking man. "We were told we needed to go through a screening or something?" The gray haired man looked at us with vacant gray eyes. "Names.", he said, in a distant, dreary voice. "Wha-" "I need your names.", he gloomily explained. "Oh, right. My name's Axeman Orange Eight, and the blonde fella behind me is-" "Chef Red Fifteen.", Lucas interjected, staring at his black rectangle again. "And my name is Sister Sabarene.", the white haired lady said with a shy smile. "And what is the purpose of your visit to the city?", the collared fella asked. "Shucks, can't ya tell just by looking at us?", I responded with a smile, wiggling my stump. The man with dull looking eyes looked at me, Sabarene, and Lucas for a brief moment, then nodded his head. "No, I can't.", he stated. "Guh... we're here to get onea those fancy shmancy metal limbs, of course." The slobbily shaved man bent over, and slowly, mechanically, fetched a piece of parchment and a quill from under his desk. "A medical visit, then.", the receptionist concluded as he jotted scribbles onto the paper. "Duration of visit?" the man asked, his gray glazed over eyes still staring at the parchment. "No more than half a cycle, I reckon." "Alright." The poorly shaved paper pusher neatly folded up the scribbled scrawled parchment, and cleared his throat. "My name is Clerk Red Five.", he announced with the energy of forty dead puppies. "I am the Chief Volunteer here at

Fremdosian Customs. As Chief Volunteer, it is my responsibility to brief all travelers on prohibited goods and restricted items.” The morose looking man let outta soft sneeze, and continued, snot still dripping outta his nose. “First and foremost, no metal currency is allowed into the city. This includes, but is not necessarily limited to, metal bars, metal bricks, metal coins, metal blocks, metal bracelets, metal necklaces, and metal rings. Of course, the punishment for bringing metal currency into the city is death, via... via...” the gray haired man trailed off, and snorted. “One moment...”, he yawned, and lethargically retrieved a giantass scrawl from underneath his desk. The gloomy guy unwrapped the scroll, and lazily dragged his finger down the length of it, like a stoner would with a convenience store shopping list. “Death via immolation.”, the man concluded, rubbing his eyes before tiredly continuing. “If any of you have any metal on your person currently, you may exchange it for up to two hundred and fifty thousand marks.” I patted my armor some, making sure that I didn’t have any purses stored away in places I had forgotten about. “And what about our weapons?” “Unionists are permitted to carry one weapon on their person, so long as it reflects their name. No other weapons may be wielded without a license. The punishment for failing to meet this standard is... a five mark fine.” “Bitta a step down from being burnt alive.”, I mumbled. The Clerk continued with his spichel. “Finally, no bottles of Fremdosian wine are to be allowed in or out of the city. Failure to comply will result in three cycles of compulsory volunteer work.” I blinked. “Run that by me again, champ?” “The punishment for the smuggling of Fremdosian wine is three cycles of compulsory volunteer work. “*Compulsory* volunteer work?”, Blondie repeated, adjusting his bowtie. “That’s what I just said, yes.” “How the heck can volunteer work be compulsory?” I asked, confused.

“Um... this might not clear too much up...” Sabarene cautiously prefaced, “But volunteer work in the Collective is not necessarily work that people volunteer to do.” “Then what is it?!” I squawked, the double speech throwing me off. “As, um, as Mister... Mister...” “Clerk Red Five.”, the receptionist apathetically added. “As Mister Clerk Red Five said, volunteer work is assigned to those who disobey various rules and regulations.” “So it’s just a fancy waya saying he’sa indentured servant then, huh?”. I looked oddly at Clerk Red Five. “Wait, izzat why ya referred ta yerself as Chief Volunteer, cause ya done committed a crime or something?” “Yes.”, the Clerk said, bluntly. “I am currently performing my third and final cycle of labor as a volunteer.” “Three whole cycles? Ya musta solda lotta wine.” “No, I did not.” “Huh, alright. Then what did ya- actually, no lemme guess, lemme guess.” I pondered fera spell, then pointed excitedly at the gloomy clerk. “I got it! You assaulted a whore!” “No.” “You raped a whore?” “No.” “You robbed a whore?” “No.” “Killed a whore?” “No.” “Paida whore with counterfeit money?” “No.” “Tried ta whore yerself?” “No.” “Shoot, I’m outta guesses. What did ya do, then?” The shortened slack sporting sad sack sighed sadly. “Can we please just proceed with the screening?”, he pleaded, looking more glum and dejected than I thought possible. “Fine, fine.” “Fantastic.”, the unwilling Volunteer murmured. “I’ll need to see your birth certificate, then your passport, Union identification card, medical papers, and work Visa.” “Sure thing.” I said, shaking my head right before realizing I had no papers on my person whatsoever. “Uh, actually...” Clerk Red Five turned to Sabarene. “As for you, I’ll need to see all the documents I requested of the Unionists plus a Writ of Absence. Failure to produce a Writ of Absence in a timely manner will result in-“ “Public stripping, public shaming, and summary execution via public stoning, right?” Sabarene finished for

the man, . “Well, I can’t say that I have the Writ on me...” the white haired girl mused aloud, “but maybe this will suffice?”, she innocently inquired, placing a small black and yellow ring on the Clerk’s desk. The gray haired man scooped up the ring, and casually looked it over. “Oh. Interesting.”, he disinterestedly observed. “Your signet ring looks almost exactly like the General’s.” “It... um... it *is* the General’s.”, Sabarene gently corrected the man. “Really?”, the man with patches of peach fuzz asked, a spark of something resembling curiosity in his sleepy eyes. He lazily rocked the striped ring back and forth in his palm, looking at it from every angle. “Oh. Yeah, this is the General’s ring, alright.”, the clerk concluded, then scratched his head. “How did you get a hold of this?” “I was given it.” “By the General?” “By Supreme Sibling Desion.” The bored bureaucrat scrunched his nose in confusion. “Why would the Supreme Sibling give you the General’s-” Clerk Red Five’s half closed eyes jolted open, bloodshot. “Oh crap.”, he squeaked out, realizing something I bet he woulda preferred not ta. Sabarene smiled sweetly. “Is there something wrong, Mister Clerk Red Five?” “No.”, he croaked out hoarsely, clutching the left sidea his chest. “There’s nothing wrong.” The ruby eyed girl walked straight up ta the scared bureaucrat, sporting the same sweet smile even as she placed her face against his. “That’s wonderful to hear, Mister Clerk Red Five.”, she gushed supportively, then clasped her two white gloved hands together. “I take it we’re clear to enter the city, then”, Sabarene chirped, as if the threea us getting through Customs was lessa strong possibility and morea immutable lawa nature. “I’ll... I’ll get the papers ready right away.”, Clerk Red Five choked out, jittery asa cokehead on five cansa Red Bull. Three hastily stamped pieces of parchment anda brisk walk out the backa of the customs building later, me, Sabarene, and Lucas emerged, out onta a sun

drenched patio which overlooked a big wide canal. "Where the heck are we supposed to go now?", I asked, looking left and right but seeing no bridge leading over canal separating us from the rest of the city. Sabarene shaded her eyes with her left hand, and gazed out at the ocean. "The festival is a celebration of the Great Unification, so odds are it'll be held in the...um... square." "The square? Which one?", Lucas asked. "Oh... you know..." Sabarene airily blabbered, "the squarey square." Blondie narrowed his eyes and gazed across the cavernous canal. "There's at least eight or nine squares I can see from here, and none of them seem any more perpendicular than the others. Could you perhaps be more specific?" "You'll... um... you'll know what square I mean when we get there Mister Gandulfadore." The Sorcerer shrugged his shoulder. "Then by all means, lead the way." "Ok.... Let's do this!", Sabarene shouted, then sprinted to the ledge of the patio. "Come on, you guys, this way!", she called out to me and Lucas. "Whatta mean, this way?!", I gasped out. "There ain't nothing that way besides a buncha water!" "Yes, precisely!", Sabarene laughed, then dove into the ocean without even bothering to put down her hood. I ran up to the ledge, and looked down. The seasalt soaked Sister treaded the water below with ease, her lithe figure bobbing up and down with the waves. "Jump in already, you'll like it, trust me!" "Why?" "Because the water's warm!" "No, why go in the ocean in the first place?" "To get to the festival, of course!" I faltered. Certainly, swimming across the canal to get to another part of the city was possible, the water didn't seem terribly rough or nothing, but the nearest parcel of land looked pretty far away to me, about halfway towards the horizon. Normally I wouldn't be too reserved about swimming such a length, but I had about fifty pounds of armor on me, which would make the crossing of the canal less a mild inconvenience and more a



ordeal. There was also the fact that I was missing an arm. "I.. uh, I ain't sure if I can swim like this..." Blondie walked up to me with a smug smile. "I'll carry you on my back, then." "U-uh... I think I'll just wait for a boat, or someth- gah!" With a surprising amount of strength, Lucas grabbed me by the waist and jumped into the water, cape, overcoat, and all. But in spite of the fact that he was carrying me, my heavy leather armor, a rucksack full of crap and a metal baton, we didn't sink below the waves at all. Actually, his backpack, stuffed as it was, seemed to serve as a flotation device. "Woah!", the blonde fellow complained, "You're heavy!" "And you're a jackass!", I pathetically pattered, clinging to his rucksack with all my strength. The white-haired lady backstroked her way over to us, with a relaxed face. "Isn't the water nice?" "It sure as hell ain't!" To Sabarene's credit, the water was warm, and Lucas did a semi-competent job of carrying me, but I wasn't exactly a fan of the method the three of us used to cross over the wide canal. Leather armor ain't the kinda thing you wanna get wet; liquid'll push out the natural oils in it, and make it stiff as a board. The entire point of wearing leather armor instead of plate mail (besides being a cheapass) is to have some mobility, so having what would usually be light armor become constricting and tight on you is kinda the worst of both worlds. As we sloppily swam towards the opposite end of the wide canal, I felt something soft touch the top of my head. "Don't touch me, ya git!", I groaned, not wanting to be pushed under the water by the blonde fellow's hand. "Relax Patchy," Lucas breathed out in between strokes, "I'm just making sure that my hat doesn't get wet." "Oh, good thinking Mister Gandfuladore.", the swimming sister gushed, shoving a bunch of paper under my chest armor. "What the heck was that?!" "Just the three certificates Mister Clerk Red Five gave to us. It'd be a shame if they got wet." "My body ain't a rucksack,

goddang it!” Somehow, the three of us managed ta cross the canal without drowning. We dragged ourselves outta the water and climbed up ontta another patio, one that was a mirror image of the patio connected ta the customs building. “Was...” I wheezed, spitting out a mouthful of seawater ontta the marble pavement. “Was anya that really necessary?” “No, but it was fun, wasn’t it?” “If ya call ruining a perfectly good seta armor fun, then sure, it wasa blast.” “Oh, your armor’ll dry out soon enough, don’t be so grumpy.”, Sabarene said, waving my complaints away dismissively, least until her left hand madea loud creaking sound. “Though maybe we should pick up a bottle of moistening oil.”, she sheepishly said. Lucas yanked his hat offa my dry green locks and placed it on topa his soaked yellow mop. “Thanks Patchy, I owe you one.” “Enough with the Patchy nonsense, I ain’t even wearing that right now.” Lucas placed his thumb on his lips thoughtfully. “... Would you prefer if I called you Stumpy?” “Patchy’ll do.” “Let’s keep moving!”, Sabarene declared witha raised and rusty fist, and ran off the patio and inta an alleyway before me or Blondie could getta word in edgewise. We snaked througha series of small allyways, going this way and that way as we ran through the canals of Fremdos. What shocked me was the utter lacka people. There were tons of small houses and apartment buildings, but the threea us didn’t seea soul as we navigated through the series of twists and turns. Nonea the buildings seemed dilapidated or abandoned, so the lacka any folk whatsoever in the alleys made the whole rushed experience seema bit eerie. “Where the heck is everyone?” “At the celebration, I’d imagine.” “Alla them?” “Why wouldn’t everybody attend a celebration?” “Don’t they got work?” “Of course they don’t, it’s a holiday.” “Whatsa holiday?” “Oh dear.” Our romping about through the backalleys of the city didn’t last too long. We

emerged out into a big open plaza before our clothes were even halfway dry. The plaza was dug into the ground some, giving it a nice amounta shade. There were tonsa folks bustling about in the Plaza, heck, I think there were damn near three thousand, all pressed together likea buncha cochroaches. Halfa them looked like the dancers and drummers did, with brown skin, green hair, and pointy ears. The resta the crowd wasa uneven split betweena buncha gaunt looking folk, and the more swole sorta fellas you'd see in Provesh. That ain't ta say they were standing apart from each other likea buncha Mormons atta highschool prom or nothing, nah, the three groups were quite interspersed, ta the point that I'm hesitant ta even divide em into groups. Cause, gaunt, swole, green haired, or round eared, damn near everyone was wearing the same typea outfit. With a few exceptions, most people in the plaza were wearing pastel colored robes, wooden sandals, and long blue sashes. The sashes, of course, were the same as the ones me, Lucas, and Sabarene were wearing, cept they werea bit drier and, if you'd believe it, covered with flowers. All typesa flowers really; roses, sunflowers, some forget me nots, a whole lotta others I don't know the name of. Before I could even take five steps into the plaza, a pale black haired girl no more than six or seven cycles old ran up ta me, yankeda white rose offa her sash, and shoved it into my palm. "Happy Unification...", the young child squeaked, then ran back into the crowd. "The heck am I supposed ta do with this?" I said, fingering the petals of the rose. "You're supposed to wear it, of course.", Sabarene said, grabbing the rose outta my hand and sticking it ta my sash. "And what if I don't wanna wear it?". "That wouldn't be in the spirit of the holiday.", she snapped, flicking my ear. "Imagine if that little girl sees you later without the flower on. She'd be heartbroken." "C'mon, it's just a stupid flower." "No, it's a white

rose.”, the slightly annoyed Sister scoffed. “That sweet girl gave it to you out of respect.” Lucas raised an eyebrow as we moved our way into the plaza. “Respect for what, exact- Oh, thanks!”, he blurted, as a handsome dark skinned fella in a pink pastel robe confidently handed him a crimson chrysanthemum. “Here, have this!”, Lucas happily harped, plucking the white rose off my sash and placing it in between the good looking fella’s fingers. The gorgeous green haired man gazed at the flower in his brown hand, and... ran away, crying hysterically. “I knew I was ugly!”, the pink robe wearing man sobbed, his cries overpowering the noise as the crowd fell surprisingly long time. “Er... what did I do wrong, exactly?” Blondie asked Sabarene, with a face half confused and half ashamed. “You... um... you gave him a white rose.” “Yes, as a sign of respect.” The red eyed girl laughed nervously. “Quick clarification... the white roses are a sign of respect, but it’s a very, um, specific sign of respect...” Sabarene looked at me for half a second, then tilted her head down at the plaza’s pavement. “For the elderly and disabled.”, she rapidly finished. I bit my lip, slightly confused. “Wait, but I ain’t old- oh. Gotcha.” I snapped two of my five fingers together and smirked. “So if that girl gave that rose to me cause I’m a tripod, does that mean Blondie gotta chrysanthemum because that good looking fella thought he was retarded?” “Well...” Sabarene began to say, right before a cute little blue haired boy ran up to me. “Happy Unification.”, he stuttered, and then, sheepishly, handed me a yellow sunflower. I looked at the child skeptically. “Uh... thanks kid... I guess...” “Ehh...” The small boy covered his face, and dashed off, just like the handsome man and the little girl before him. I blinked a few times and turned to Sabarene. “So what the heck does getting a sunflower mean?” “Oh... well... just as the white flower is a show of respect for the weak... the yellow flower is a gesture of

affection for the strong.” I made a muscle and grinned. “Ha, guess that means I’m one fer one.” “Right, but I still have no idea what this means.”, Lucas said, turning over the crimson chrysanthemum in his hand as if rotating it five times would divulge its meaning. Sabarene looked at Lucas and smiled, her teeth shining bright. “Isn’t it obvious, Mister Lucas? Red flowers signify... love!” “Love?”, Blondie repeated, slightly surprised. “LOVE?!” I screamed, recoiling away from the red flower in abject horror. “Hm... well, alright, not “love”, per se, so much as infatuation and primal carnal attraction...” Sabarene said, adjusting her declaration before pumping her fist again. “But infatuation and primal carnal attraction can lead to love!” “That ain’t the point!”, I yelled. “A fella can’t love a nother fella, least not in *that* way!” “In what way?” “In the... y’know... in the naked sorta way.”, I mumbled, blushing furiously for some reason. “Is it true, Sister?”, the Sorcerer with the purple tophat asked, his blue eyes ice once more. “Did that man really just attempt to court me?” “Um... yes” “He has surprisingly refined taste.”, Lucas concluded, non-chalantly tapping at his black rectangle. “W-what?!” I gagged, “Yer fine with him wanting ta rut with ya?!” The blonde boy raised his head and blinked at me. “Why wouldn’t I be?” “Cause it’s wrong, of course!” A sadistic smile slowly spread on the Sorcerer’s face. “Oh? And just what’s so wrong about it, exactly?” “Everything!”, I shrieked, causing a whole lotta pastel robe wearing people ta turn their heads in my general direction. “A fella like that... a fella like that ain’t nothing.... ain’t nothing butta....” “Miss Axeman Red Four, you need to calm dow-“ “Ain’t nothing butta filthy degenerate!”, I spat, covering the marble ground with a hefty amount of mucus. Lucas and Sabarene just stared at me, mouths agape “Ha! Ain’t got nothing ta say?”, I taunted, proud that I had made my two contrarian companions shut up for a change. My

sensea accomplishment lasted about two anda half seconds. See, Sabarene and Lucas were staring at me less because they were impressed by my ardent defense of heteronormative relationships, and more because two tight metal wires had managed ta wrap themselves around twoa my limbs. “Huh.”, I blurted, right before the steel strings went taunt and tossed me about forty five feet inta the air, pulling me away from my fri-companions and right towards the center of the plaza. I crashed inta the hard marble ground, the backa my shoulders absorbing the brunt of the impact. I probably woulda been absolutely fine had a black leather boot not stomped down hard on my stomach. “Gouah!”, I coughed, the air in my lungs abandoning me quicker than my whoorea a mother did. A vicious androgynous face stared down at me, and barked a buncha harsh sounding words inta my ears. “I am Sister Kundare, Chief Protector of the Layfolk. On behalf of Master Marston, Acting General of the Holy Collective and Lord Regent of Fremdos, I hereby place you under arrest!” “Under Arrest?”, I wheezed, trying and failing ta lift the weighta the woman’s leg off my chest. “Fer what?!” “For spewing out hatred and bigotry in the presence of children, Unionist.”, the very angry blonde woman growled, cracking two metal lassos against the ground. She was dressed the same way Sabarene was, cept, her robes were gray, insteada black. “I didn’t do nothing ta no kids!”, I protested, asa large crowd a flower covered folk gathered around me and the unhappy whip wielder. “I love kids!” “So you’re a pedophile as well.”, the blonde woman snarled, putting even more pressure onta my stomach. “Of course I ain’t, ya goddamn moron!” “It doesn’t matter.”, Sister Kundare callously concluded. “Fremdos has no need for backward minded bigots.” The rage filled lady did something with her lips that might have been misconstrued asa smile, as she raised her two steel strings high above her

head. "I think forty lashes and three cycles of volunteer work will be a fitting punishment for a Unionist like you." "But I didn't even do nothing...", I whined, wincing away from the sharp looking whips. "Stop this idiocy at once." an agitated voice called out, right before the lady in gray reenacted the enda Roots on my face. Everyone in the crowd turned their heads in shock at the sounda the bold baritone, including Kundare. A grim, gaunt man with hair black as the lens of the spectacles he wore emerged from the circle of festival goers. He wore a grand white tunic, silk white slacks, polished white shoes, anda long white cape. His skin was blemishless, like polished ivory.. He wasn't boyish like Blondie, nor was he tough and rough looking like Blue. He hada... huh... I guess the best way ta say it would be he hada handsome beauty about him. The black haired man looked as effeminate as Bowman Yellow did, but he walked inna way that just kinda oozed presence and pizzah, lending to him a powerful masculinity that ya wouldn't be able ta sense if ya just gotta glimpse of his face. In short; he looked likea complete tosser. "Oh, Master Marston!", the blonde girl on topa me gushed, as the crowd made room fer the very serious looking man. "Happy Unification!" The white cape sporting fella looked down at me witha neutral expression. "Is there a reason you're pummeling this poor girl to a pulp, Sister?" "Yup yup!", Kundare cheerily chimed, yanking my head up by the hair and smacking it into the ground "This cretin violated your five hundredth and fifty fifth edict, Master Marston!" The lanky fella frowned. "She butchered a goat without washing it?" "No, that's your five hundredth and fifty fourth edict. Your five hundredth and fifty fifth edict is the one that bans hate speech on the basis of sexual orientation." "And just what did this woman say, exactly?" "She called a man a filthy degenerate." The black haired man straightened his glasses. "And you

arrested her for that? You really are a perpetual disappointment, Sister Kundare.” The gray robed woman’s face faltered, as the shade sporting man walked right up ta me.

“But Master Marston! You yourself said that anyone who violated the edict should receive a mandatory punishment of-“ “Look closely at this girl, Kundare. Notice anything unusual about her?” The blonde lady gazed at me fera good while. “She’s wearing ill-fitting leather armor.” Marston nodded his head. “Her arm, Kundare. Her left arm.” “What about it, Master Marston?” “She doesn’t have one.” “And?” “And?” Marston repeated, mockingly. “You know exactly what that means, Sister. This woman is severely unprivileged. Arresting her for making a homophobic comment would be oppression in and of itself.” A few beadsa sweat started ta run down the handsome looking blonde lady’s face. “L-let me explain my actions, Master Marston! First off... I believe this woman is a Unionist, s-so... so even though she may not be able-bodied, she certainly possesses a higher degree of privilege than most! S-secondly... she also violated your fourth hundred and thirty seventh edict!” “She sodomized a dog?” “No... the Unionist desecrated the plaza with her bodily fluids.” “You can’t arrest someone for incontinence, Kundare.” “N-no! No, I mean she intentionally spat on the General’s plaza!” “Ah, she violated two edicts. Carry on then.”, the black haired man said, turning around witha sweep of his white cape. “Hold it right there, ya goddang lunatic!” I shouted, forcing the gray robed woman’s leg off my chest witha bursta strength. “All I did wasa saya few words! They might notta been smart, or nice, but it ain’t like I hurt anyone by yakking em out! This crazy broad ain’t got no right ta whip me fer em!” The shaded spectacle sporting authority figure turned around, and stared at me. “She actually has every right to whip you, girl. Flagrant violation of the law is not something that can be overlooked,



no matter how disabled and unprivileged one i-“ Marston paused. “Is there something wrong with your face?” “Course there ain’t.”, I spat, entirely outta spite. “Be that as it may...” The dignified man got on his knees, and reached ta brush aside the green tufta hair Sabarene had padded over my left eyelids. “Don’t touch me!”, I snapped, moving my palm ta smack away the fella’s encroaching fingers. “Sister.”, Marston curtly commanded, causing the blonde woman in gray ta stomp down hard on my arm. “Hm...”, the black haired man muttered, freely fondling the jagged scar beneath my bangs. “You appear to missing an eye.” He got back up on his feet and dusted off his white tunic. “Release this woman at once, Kundare.” The grey clad lady wavered. “But you just said I had every right to-“ “The circumstances have clearly changed, imbecile.”, Marston hissed through clenched teeth. “An arm is replaceable, an eye... not so much. It would be a miscarriage of justice to punish this woman for the mere violation of an edict or two. Her circumstances allow her leeway to break at least three more.” Sister Kundare wavered, then grinned wickedly. “Ah, then there’s no problem, Master Marston, no problem at all!” Marston’s no-nonsense nostrils flared fera brief moment. “What do you mean?” “It’s simple, Master Marston! This girl actually broke four edicts of yours... just a few moments ago!” Marston tilted his head at the blonde lady, two fingers firmly fixed on the frame of his glasses. “She did?” Kundare shook her head enthusiastically. “Yes, yes, she did! She broke edict Two Hundred and Seventy Five, edict Two Hundred and Fifty Eight, and edict Four Hundred and Fifty Three.” “You listed three edicts, Kundare, not four.” “The Unionist broke the last edict twice.”, Kundare said, winking slyly. “She called me crazy, and you a lunatic.” I jerked my head up and scowled. “And what’s so wrong about that?!” “Ableism, girl.”, Marston grumbled. “Using the word

lunatic as an insult persecutes the mentally disadvantaged.” “W-what?!” “Yes, precisely Master Marston!”, Kundare chimed, running her fingers across her whip. “Add that to her blasphemy and misogyny, and you’ll see her crimes far outweigh her lack of privilege!” “Hold on, Sister Kundare.”, Marston interjected. “While I agree that this girl is misogynistic, I don’t think we can lash her forty times for it.” “W-why can’t we?” “Because she’s a woman, of course.”, the cool headed man explained. “With all due respect, Master Marston... women can still be misogynistic.” “I’m aware of that, Kundare. But her misogyny is internalized. A reflection of discrimination she suffered in those barbaric Independent Kingdoms. She is as much a victim as those whom her wicked words wounded.” Sister Kundare clenched her teeth. “Alright then... twenty lashes.” “No lashes will be given to anyone this afternoon, Sister Kundare.” The black haired man calmly concluded. “Release the Unionist at once.” “But Master Marston!”, the blonde woman whined, stomping on my chest like a frustrated child. “This girl...” “Guoh!” “is nothing but-“ “Ack!” “a bigot!” With a quick thrust of his right hand, Marston grabbed Sister Kundare’s ankle and flipped her leg over her shoulder, before she could smash into my stomach a seventh time. “Enough, Sister.”, he commanded Kundare as she fell on her back. “Touch the Unionist again, and I’ll have *you* whipped.” The blonde woman glared at me scornfully, then bowed her head. “Understood.”, she whispered, reluctantly holstering her metal cords. The black haired man extended his left hand out to me, a blank expression on his face. I caught my breath, and grasped it. With a short grunt, the white clad man hoisted me onto my feet. “Uh... thanks for that, I guess.”, I murmured, and started to make my way back to where I had been pre-lassoing. “I did not give you permission to leave, Unionist.”, Marston coolly commented, tugging on my

braid. "Guh... What do ya want now? Cause if yer fixing ta fondle my face again, you can just forget it, I'd rather be whipped." Marston straightened his glasses. "I'd like to see your papers, please." I blinked. "Papers?" "Your passport." "And if I give ya this passport mine, you'll let me go?" "Yes." Kundare recoiled in horror. "But Master Marstomph!" As the black hair man held his hand over the gray robed woman's mouth, I searched through my slacks fer the certificate. "Ehehehe... just wait a tick, it's a round here somewhere." "Take your time. I can wait." "Izzat so... ah! Ah, whoops! I had it tucked under my chestpiece." I removed a surprisingly dry piece of parchment from my torso, and handed it over ta Marston. Marston gently took the parchment from my hand, and started reading it from top ta bottom. "The stamp seems official....", he muttered aloud, "There's no issue with the signature, either. Hm..." Marston stopped reading, and looked up at me. "Before I continue... tell me your name, Unionist." "It's... uh... Axeman Orange Seven!", I quickly quipped. I felt a rush of pride at being able ta bullshit so spontaneously, a rush that left me quicker than a lottery winner would be in Detroit, as I realized the pseudonym I had told Clerk Red Five was Axeman Orange *Eight*, not Seven. The dignified fella looked through the details of the certificate, as I subtly started ta lose my shit. "There are some discrepancies in your papers, Unionist." Marston curtly stated. "T-there are?", I stammered, reaching fer the grip of my hatchet. "Yes. This lists your hair color as blonde, your eye color as blue, and your profession as..." Marston's voice drooped suddenly "...Sorcerer." I stopped reaching fer my hatchet, and rubbed the back of my neck. "Ehehe, sorry. I gave ya one of my buddy-companion's papers. This one should be mine, I reckon.", I sheepishly chuckled, handing Marston another piece of parchment. The man in white ripped the second passport outta my hand and stared at

me with an unamused frown. "You... reckon?" "I can't... uh... do that thing where ya look at a piece of paper and discern meaning from the stuff scribbled on it." "You can't read." "Not so much, no." Marston blinked, then scanned the second certificate I had gave him. "This is not your passport.", he drily determined, as Kundare let out more muffled protests. "Oh yeah? Why ain't it?" "Because your hair isn't white, your ears aren't rounded, and your name isn't Sister..." Marston trailed off. Before he could finish reading the passport, a solemn sounding bell boomed out. It chimed throughout the plaza, each ring lower and more ominous than the last. "Oh no.", the black haired fella whispered, looking up at what I presumed was the bell-tower. "No... no... it's too soon... far too soon...", Marston mumbled, stumbling slightly. "What's wrong, Master Marston!?", Sister Kundare nervously asked. "It's supper time." "And?" "The unveiling ceremony is scheduled to begin at supper time." "And?" "Thanks to your whim to whip an amputee, I haven't gathered the necessary personnel.", he snipped. He turned to me and straightened his glasses. "Unionist. Perform a few tasks for me, and I shall overlook your crimes and fabricated passports." "They ain't fabric-Wait, what do ya want me ta do?", I asked, thinking that if what he wanted me ta do was messy enough, I could sucker some cash from him. "I want you to take heavy things and lift them." "Ya gotta deal!", I gushed, all thoughts of marks and crimes far from my mind. "This way then, Axeman Orange Seven.", Marston tersely instructed, making his way back into the crowd. He moved like a postmodern day Moses, parting the folks in the crowd merely by waving his hand at them. Kundare and I followed Marston as he walked towards the middle of the square. It wasn't much of a mystery as to where our destination would be. The center of the plaza had a tall structure in the middle of it, easily half the size of the

Customs building, perhaps more than that. I say structure, because whatever gigantic architectural feat was located in the plaza, the exterior of it was covered by a ridiculous large red tarp. "Holy crap, just what the heck is that?" "You'll find out soon enough, Unionist.", Marston quipped, climbing onto an elevated scaffolding about a quarter of the way up the obscured structure. Wordlessly, he extended his hand to help me up. I clasped it, my palm oddly sweaty. With a troubled grunt, the black haired fella yanked me onto the platform, then collapsed on his knees, panting for breath. "You weigh far more than your frame suggests.", he exhaled, winded. I curled my bicep and smiled. "Shucks, yer making me blush." I then looked down at the gigantic crowd below, halfa whom seemed to have their undivided attention on me and Marston. "So whatta ya want me to lift? A piecea wood? A log? A plank?" "I want you to lift this rope.", Marston said, pointing at a small wirey knot embedded in the bottom of the scaffolding. "Heh. That ain't no big deal at all. I could do that one handed!" Marston just stared at me. "It's a joke. Yer supposed to laugh." He didn't laugh. "Go ahead and lift the rope, Unionist, but do NOT let go of it until I give you the signal." "What signal?" The morose man twirled both index fingers and thrust them towards me. "This. When I do this, let go of the rope." "Easy peasy." I cracked my neck, and inna breezy manner, hoisted the small piecea rope off the ground. About halfa inch off the ground. "G-guh!", I grunted. "This thing... gah! This thing is heavy!" "Lift it higher, up to my waist." "Easier... uh!... said.... Guh!... then....Gargh!" It took putting a lotta the burden onto my thighs, but with a few pained grunts and some adrenaline, I managed to lift the rope to the height that Marston wanted. "Now what?", I panted, already sweating, arm already cramping. Marston ignored me, and gazed down at Sister Kundare. "It's time.", he barked. "Understood,

Master Marston!", the blonde lady saluted with a proud, predatory smile. She unholstered her two metal wires, flung one around a red brick chimney and took off, swinging herself from rooftop to rooftop like a sycophantic Spiderman. As I struggled to keep the rope at waist level, the black haired fella reached into his grand overcoat and retrieved a small pink mirror. "Hold onto this.", he instructed, extending the handle of the mirror to me. "Hold onto it? With what-muh!" "Keep that balanced.", Marston instructed, shoving the handle of the mirror in between my fangs. "Ruh hiks?", I asked, holding the reflective surface in my mouth like a dog would with a tennis ball. "Not ideal, but it'll do." Marston glanced at the mouth mirror, and began grooming himself. First he wiped his sleeves clean with a pink, vanilla scented handkerchief, then applied a light blue cream to his cheeks. He parted his hair with a black comb with ivory teeth, then rubbed a strong, cinnamon scented oil to his neck. Finally, the serious fella removed his shaded spectacles, which caused me to fumble with the mirror and rope alike. His eyes... well, I guess I should tell ya that they were colored a ruby red, but that wasn't particularly surprising, or offputting. The issue with his eyes, the thing that made me almost swallow the mirror outta shock, were the wrinkles all around his eyes, and how damn sunken into his skull the ruby red orbs were. They made Marston look less like a human and more like a walking corpse. Marston bit his lip, and rubbed a off white colored cream around his eyes. The cream did a okayish job at covering up the dark circles around his blood red, blood shot eyes, but he still looked like he could pass out at any given moment. The black haired man looked deeply into the mirror I was holding in my mouth, and quickly nodded his head. "Horrid.", he determined, then thrust his glasses back onto his face. "Bullshit!", I spat, causing the mirror to smack down against

the scaffolding. "You just used more make up inna moment thana Proveshian whore would inna lifetime, you best keep them glasses off!" "I did not hire you to advise me on my aesthetical appeal, Unionist.", Marston snipped, taking off his shaded spectacles anyways. His glasses weren't even halfway folded when the bells rang out once more. This time, though, the bells rang out a different... almost jolly melody. Ta be sure, the individual rings the bells made were just as gloomy and deep as they were previously, each note causing the entire plaza ta tremble and vibrate, but when taken asa whole the notes the bells made sounded tolerable. Far more than tolerable, the notes the bells played sounded familiar. "W-wait... just what song is playing right now?", I asked, continuing ta hold the rope up as high as the muscles in my arm would allow. Marston ignored me completely and stepped towards the very edge of the scaffolding, spreading his arms wide. Immediately the entire crowd, which had been yakking uppa storm even during the bells little jingle, became completely quiet. Thousands upon thousands of eyes stared at the black haired man, the only sound present in the plaza being the crashing of the waves. Marston scanned everything and everyone in his peripheral vision, looking down at the massive gathering of people with ruby red eyes that didn't seem so tired no more. "Fremdosians.", the black haired man bellowed, reading off of the large scroll. "You are gathered here to honor the third anniversary of the Great Unification, to pay tribute to the sacrifices made by the brave men and women who liberated this city from the cruel, Oligarchical Unionist rule, to.... to...-" Marston frowned, looked once again at the scroll in his hands, and tore it ta bits. The dignified fella ripped his scroll to shreds, inta twenty or so pieces that fell onta the crowd like bland, vanilla colored confetti. "I apologize for the theatrics.", the black haired man boomed out ta the

confused crowd below. “That scroll was given to me three cycles ago by the General, after we accepted Bowman Black One’s surrender. In the battle for Fremdos, the Plebian branch lost three thousand Brothers and Sisters of Fiat, the Patrician branch... even moreso. These losses devastated the General, they gnawed at his conscious, kept him up through long nights and sober mornings. He felt compelled to ensure that their sacrifice never be forgotten, that a narrative be made to enshrine the fallen members of the Plebian branch as heroes, liberators, saints.” Marston nodded his head, and, arm shaking, slammed his fist down on the bannister. “That is not the case. Fremdos was liberated. But not by the Collective. Not by me, not by Brother Brounde, the commander of the Patrician branch. Not even by the General. The ones who liberated Fremdos were Fremdosians. Unassigned and Unionists alike. In other words... all of you.” The crowd, which had been staring up at Marston like fifty thousand deer caught in forty thousand headlights, erupted into a wild, raucous cheer, a cheer that, I kid ya not, caused a slight smile to form on the emotionless tosser’s mouth. The faintly smiling ruby eyed man waited for the applause to die down, then loudly cleared his throat. “That is not to say that the Holy Collective had no part to play in the matter. Without our interference, it is a near certainty that half the people gathered here today would still be slaves, still be members of a working class so despised by the Unionist Oligarchs that they were denied even a name. But to say that the General, Brother Brounde, Sister Kundare and I led the joint forces of the Collective into the walls of Fremdos to free you from oppression would be an abject lie.” Marston’s ruby red eyes harshened almost as much as his voice. “The General marched upon this city for the same reason he marched upon Cercentlet, upon Trunchet. To enforce the only law the Collective imposes upon



its people. Supreme Sibling Desnion sent a duck carrying extremely generous arrangements for the induction of Fremdos into the Collective, extremely generous arrangements that the rulers of this city immediately accepted. And yet, not even half a cycle after the first shipment of barley, oats, and wheat came in, the rulers of this city saw it fit to allow metal currency again. The Collective was toyed with. The General and I saw it fit to punish this city... no... not punish... to *crush* it beneath our heels for being so insolent. Our ambitions were tapered. The Unionist Forces outnumbered us, and though they were much less equipped, had the advantage of hiding behind these sturdy, seabound walls. The siege and naval blockade did little good, and while our trade pact with Provesh provided us with food barely fit for horses, the gardens and fisheries in the city gave the Unionists provisions to last a life time.” Marston clutched his head. “It was a debacle. Continuing with the siege would be foolishness, returning to Merchenze would be cowardice. Brother Brounde urged the General to launch an all or nothing strike into the city, while I urged him to wait for reinforcements. The General took a third option. He snuck into the city, masquerading as an Unassigned street urchin. The disguise was strictly one of convenience; the General posed as an Unassigned simply to spot weaknesses in the city walls, to observe and report the guard schedules, to take notes of the ebbs and flow of the tides.” The black haired man shook his head. “What the General did was a gamble, but one that more than paid off in the end. Through his time as an Unassigned street Urchin, the General was able to learn of Fremdos’s greatest flaw, a flaw far more fatal, far more devastating, than any weak section of drywall or time discrepancy could have ever been. The General learned of this city’s cruelty. Of how not only the Unassigned were maligned, but how most of

the Unionists were, too. Of how everyone who didn't have the color Red or Black in their names were doomed to destitution, to mockery. Of the tools used by the Oligarchs to oppress those at the bottom, of the rampant racism, misogyny, and bigotry perpetuated by cowards like Lancer Black Four and Axeman Black One." A strong urge to drop the rope I was holding and throttle Marston to death suddenly came over me, but I managed to restrain myself. "The General learned all of this, and in less than half a rising period, organized forward thinking Fremdosians to overthrow the Unionists, to overthrow the tyrants masquerading as meritocratic authority figures. But all he did was organize. The true work was done by you. All of you, in one fashion or another. The General wanted me to focus on the sacrifices made by the Collective forces, but the General left us cycles ago, some cynics say for good. The Great Unification is no occasion to mourn the dead." Marston raised his arms high above his head, and deeply bellowed down to the crowd: "It is a time to celebrate the living!" The crowd erupted once again into thunderous, overwhelming applause. Some men in the plaza raised their fists in solidarity with Marston, while the women and children cheered as high and as happily as their lungs could allow. "And so, in this spirit of affirmation, of honoring those who still draw breath, I will reveal to everyone present a closely guarded secret, to come clean about a lie that I have spoken countless times." The crowd became completely silent again, and thousands of eyes looked up at Marston expectantly, as if what he were about to say could reveal the secret of eternal life. "The General... The General was not, as I have said in the past, a wise old man. Nor was he really ever a he to begin with, in sex or in gender." The crowd let out surprised gasps, and excited whispers spread from person to person like a infectious disease. "No. The General

was...”, Marston slowly said, lingering on every word... “my Sister. My sister, Sabarene.”, he somberly finished, then quickly gestured to me. I rolled my eye at having to be part of such a cheesy affair, but I did as the fellow asked of me and let go of the rope. The thing shot out of my hand the moment I did, zipping off the scaffolding and up and around the red tarp covering the structure behind us. The red tarp collapsed off of the structure, landing instead onto an unoccupied section of the Plaza. “Woah,” I breathed out, looking up at what had once been hidden. The obscured structure...well, it was a statue. A giant, larger than life statue. And that statue just so happened to be in the shape of a white haired idiot I knew. The statue wasn’t made out of marble, like I had expected. Nah, it seemed to be made out of metal, out of what looked to me to be a combination of shiny white Runertian and pitch black Cercentlian Steel. Despite being more luminescent than a supernovaing star, the statue managed to look like the spitting image of Sister Sabarene, with the exception of her black fake hand, which the sculptor had made to be the statue’s right hand instead of the left. “This statue was built by a group of Fremdosian masons, all of whom wished to honor the General for his... or rather, her, contributions to the liberation of the city. I declined their offer at first, on grounds of preserving the General’s identity... but gradually, I realized that what we need as a people is more transparency, not less. Transparency is to unity what air is to our lungs. It is impossible for people to be one without knowing who their leaders are, who their friends are, and who their family are, and perhaps even who they themselves are. This statue, I hope, will serve as an eternal reminder of Fremdos’s independence from the forces of bigotry and ignorance.” The cheers of the crowd rang out, loud, so loud that I was forced to cover one of my ears. But this time the cheers of the crowd

weren't directed at Marston, or at themselves. No, the cheers that rang out all had a single word in common, "Sabarene." Countless times, the name the girl was repeated. "Sabarene, Sabarene, Sabarene." With each repetition, the exhalations of her name seemed less a cheer, and more a chant, hell, almost a prayer. Her name was spoken by the folks in solidarity, in the same exact volume, in the same exact pitch, with a fervor and focus more fitting of a . "Sabarene, Sabarene, Sabarene.." "Sabarene, Sabarene, Sabarene." Slowly, the chants got louder. "Sabarene, Sabarene, Sabarene."

"SABARENE, SABARENE, SABARENE." And then, just as I thought the pastel robed gits would keep chanting the girl's name til their faces went blue , all the noise, all the chants, cheers, and prayers in the Plaza stopped. The bells rang out again, but this time they rang quickly, frantically, haphazardly. Marston lowered his arms, and wildly thrust his head towards the erratically ringing bells. "Are we being attacked?!", he gasped under his breath. The sound of five hundred perfectly coordinated footsteps stomping into the Plaza answered his question. The intruders entered the square slowly, and firmly. Most of them looked to be men of about twenty five cycles or so, though there were also a few women of a similar age. The demographics of the intruders paled in comparison to their appearance, though. Male, female, old, or young, all the folks pouring into the plaza looked like complete freakshows. It wasn't what they were wearing; the disciplined men and women all had on black robes, identical to the ones that Sabarene wore. It wasn't what they were wielding; the battalion that had interrupted Marston's keynote speech were armed with little more than short swords and daggers, weapons that even the most improvised Unassigned idiot in Provesh would have access to. What made the group intimidating – besides their emotionless faces, perfect

synch, remarkable discipline and eerie similarity to the third Reich -, was that, without even a single exception, all their limbs were made of a cold black steel. The intruders marched right up to the bottom of scaffolding, pushing and shoving any festival goer dumb enough to get in their way. "Woah!", the center most fella with fakeass limbs exclaimed. "That is a nice statue! A bit gawdy, but it's good to go gawdy sometimes." The hooded man fell out of line with the rest of his fellow androids, and pulled himself up to the top of the scaffolding. "Yes! Yes, I like it!", he said approvingly, rubbing both his black metal hands against Sister Statuerene's stomach. "I think the masons exaggerated a bit on the bust, but on the whole, a fitting tribute to our dearly departed General." The hooded man continued to fondle the giant monument to alcoholism, then stopped, as he caught wind of me. "The hell are you looking at, cripple!?", he barked, scowling at me with harsh hazel eyes. "Dunno." "Dunno? Dunno? You don't know who I am?!", the suddenly raged fella snarled. "Nope." "Oh! Then allow me to introduce myself!", the hooded head honcho hucked, his face back to being bright and jovial. "I am Brother Gino, head commander of the Holy Collective's Plebian Branch." "Izzat so?" "Somewhat so, but not fully so. Feel free to call me Gino, though, I'm not picky about names." "Aight." "Aight?", the orange haired man repeated, irritated. "I just gave you my name, it is common courtesy for you to reply in kind." "Name's Axeman Orange Five.", I replied. Gino looked shocked for a moment, then grew furious. "Wait, you're a Unionist?! And an Axeman at that?!" "Ayup." "Brother Gino.", Marston calmly stated, his shaded glasses back on his face. "Why are you here?" "To relieve you of your duties, Acting General Marston!", Gino laughed, hugging the black haired fella and slapping him on the back. "Supreme Sibling Desnion gave me the go-ahead. You're out, I'm in!"

“Nonsense, I have fifteen rising periods left in my term.”, Marston grumbled, struggling ta get freea the orange haired man’s strong metal arms. “Nonsense, fullsense, half-sense, that’s just the way things are!”, Gino remarked , tousling Marston’s hair. “Desion doesn’t want you serving any longer, so I’m the new General now.”, he stated, voice lower than usual. “And sheesh, no offense Marston, but you’ve really let this place go, haven’t you?” “I’ve done nothing of the sort.” “Nothing of the sort?”, Gino snorted. “I’ve heard of what you’ve done here. Pardoning Unionists? Doing away with crucifixion? Letting people wear tacky clothing? Fiat be damned, you’ve taken experimental governance to a bit of an extreme, haven’t you?” “I am Regent of Fremdos, Brother Gino. So long as I ban the use of metal, it is my prerogative to run this city as I see fit.” “Yes, you always did have somewhat of a god complex, didn’t you Marston?”, Gino asked venomously, then smiled again. “No matter. If you wish to be Regent of this city, then Regent you shall remain, but I demand you step down as Interim General of the Collective.” “I will do no such thing.”, Marston said between gritted teeth. “I was appointed Interim General by Sabarene and Desnion themselves. I will need to see a handwritten letter with both of their seals before I can even consider prematuring abandoning my post.” “Sheesh, buddy, really? You’re going to demand to see proof? What kind of man demands to see proof? Isn’t my word good enough?” “No.” “I don’t need to show you anything, Marston!” Commander Gino yelled, angry. He snapped his fingers, causing the two hundred and fifty so lobotomites below ta draw their short swords. “The brothers and sisters of the Plebian branch are all the proof I need.” Marston gazed down at the menacing looking folks at the bottom of the scaffolding, then up ta Brother Gino, and clutched his head. “You’re really doing this.” “I’m really doing

this.", Gino repeated. "I'm really doing this, and that, and a whole slew of other things, if you don't back off and grant me my rightful position, Marston!" Marston continued to clutch his head in agony... then... shrugged his shoulders. "You're right, Brother Gino.", he acquiesced. Brother Gino, smiled, scowled, smiled, scowled again, then tilted his head in confusion. "So you agree to relinquish your position as Acting General of the Collective?" "No, no, not that. You're right about me being a liberal ruler. I must confess, Brother Gino, I've been extraordinarily loose with my policies." "Damn right you have. You're standing next to an Axeman and she isn't bloody dead!" "Ah, true, Brother Gino, true.", Marston seemed to sigh. "But my leniency towards the Unionists pales in comparison, to, say, my policy towards the personnel of the Patrician branch." Gino's eyes harshened. "What do you mean? Have you been letting them slack off?" "I have, I'm afraid.", Marston exclaimed wistfully, walking around the orange haired man in a circle, his head hung low. "Why, just this morning I granted them leave to attend this very festival." Suddenly, the soft kaplunk of swords being drawn from their leather scabbards was heard, one time, two times, five hundred times. In an instant, half the pastel robed fellows in the square were holding long swords and kneeling in a fighting position. "Marston..." Brother Gino growled, sweating some "I'm in no mood for games. Tell your men to put away their swords, now" "I suppose I could, Brother Gino, but that wouldn't solve the problem." "Like hell it wouldn't!" "No, honest. I have the authority to command the Patrician branch to lay down their weapons, but I'm afraid I'm quite powerless to revoke Edict Four Hundred and Thirteen." "And just what is Edict Four Hundred and Fourteen?", Gino inquired softly, cracking his neck and raising his right arm slightly. A slight smile formed on Marston's face. "The layfolk's right to bare arms."

With no more prompting than that, the other halfa the crowd all drew weapons, shoddy looking weapons, but weapons nonetheless. Alla a sudden, the emotionless folks with fakeass limbs didn't look so emotionless no more, outnumbered fifty ta one by pointy objecting wielding people in pastel. A look of pure malice flashed across Brother Gino's face. He wheeled his right metal arm backwards, and likea piston on full burst, punched Marston straight in the face, sending the black haired man crashing against the giant statue. "Guah!" I jumped on the metal armed man's back, choking his neck as well as I could with my arm. "What the?!", Gino gasped, thrown offbalance by the weighta my body on his back. I grappled with the orange haired fella, as the crowd below us broke inta a complete and utter frenzy. My wild movements proved extremely ineffective: not only were my attempts at crushing the fella's windpipe weak ta say the least, the shock and awe I had inflicted on him wore off almost immediately. Brother Gino quickly regained his posture, and with inhuman strength and speed, knocked me offa his back, sending me topping ta the edgea the scaffolding. "Seems like I get to kill a Unionist this evening, lovely!", he snarled, his eyes spinning. "No....", I gasped, winded. "No... ya don't." Gino gazed at me, confused. "What do you...", he began ta say, then collapsed, flat on his face, the bladea my hatchet stuck deep inta the backa his neck. I regained my breath, and walked towards Marston, reaching ta pluck the hatchet back outta the dead man's neck. Cept, he wasn't dead, which wasa bitta hiccup in my whole murdering him plan. "UNIONIST!!!!!!!!!!!!!" the orange haired man sobbed, tears pouring down his face as he stumbled to his feet, plucking the hatchet out from his neck like it was a splinter. "I'M GOING TO DESTROY YOUUUUU!" He pounded down on the scaffolding, causing the entire thing ta collapse. Me, Gino, and Marston slammed ontta the marble



pavement below. Before I could regain my bearings, I felt a hard, metal grip tighten on my forehead. "Like a grape...", Gino whispered, crying. "I'm going to crush you like a grape..." I reeled my head back, to try and escape his grasp, but nothing I did did crap. Marston sat up, dazed, and face cut up some by his now-shattered glasses. The black haired man looked at me with concerned red eyes, and extended his hand towards me, as Brother Gino continued to cry and crush my face with his absurdly powerful black hand. "Brother Gino, high guardian and Lord Commander of the Plebian Branch. As General of the Holy Collective, I hereby order you and your men to stand down." "Too late for that, Marston!", Gino whined, sniffing as he hoisted me off the ground, his palm compacting my nose. "You let the Unionist hit me! You let her cut me! You meanie! You monster! You jerk!" "I didn't say anything.", Marston said, his voice wavering slightly as he straightened his shattered glasses. Gino let go of my face, causing me to collapse onto the pavement and dislocate my left shoulder. "Really?", Gino asked curiously. "Then who-" "Who do you think, imbecile?", a low, guttural voice asked. Walking through both Gino and Marston's men alike, with an authority I had never seen no one wield before, was... Sabarene, an unpleasant frown on her face. "Typical.", she spat, looking at the wrecked scaffolding with disdain. "I leave a city for less than four cycles, and my idiot brother manages to destroy it by fighting with my psychologically disturbed subordinate." Brother Gino looked at Sabarene, then at the statue, then back at Sabarene again, and... immediately kneeled before her. "My sincerest apologies.", Gino exclaimed, melancholy. "I had thought you gone, so felt it appropriate to-" "You're kneeling before an imposter, Brother Gino.", Marston loudly announced, yelling so the entire plaza could hear him. "This woman is not my sister. Nor is she the General of

the Holy Collective. This girl is simply a charlatan, playing at greatness.” Me, Gino, and Sabarene all looked at Marston like he was having a seizure. “Huh? She’s the spitting image of that statue, ain’t she?”, I spoke out, acting like I was confused. “No, she is... she is not.”, Marston responded, his body shaking some. “L-look. Her hand. Her left hand.” “What about it?” “It’s a fake!”, Marston loudly announced once more, a desperate quality attached to his usually confident voice. “Fremdosians! Members of the Patrician Branch and Plebian Branch alike! Simply gaze at the statue above! The General’s lifemetal hand is her right hand! This faker thinks she can fool us, but we all know the truth, do we not?!” “You’re right, Master Marston!”, a voice that sounded suspiciously like Sister Kundare’s called out. “Another trick by the Plebian Branch, how typical!”, another person shouted out. The rest of the pastel robe wearers blinked, then, quickly, and most importantly, *angrily* sided with Marston. The points of fifty or so swords found their way to Sabarene’s neck swifter than I could blink. “O-oh my...” she stuttered, nervous. “Impersonating the General...” Marston choked out. “What a heinous, despicable crime.” “But I’m not-” “Silence, charlatan!”, Marston shouted, drowning out Sabarene with his unusually loud voice once more. “Only a monster would attempt to impersonate our General on a rising period like this. Fremdosians? Is this woman not deserving of the most severe punishment imaginable!?” “She sure is!” “Crucify her!” “:Immolate her!” “Crucify her, then immolate her, then stone her!” “All valid suggestions!”, Marston boomed out, his ruby red eyes demented, an unusual amount of sweat pouring down his face. “But I think a quick and painless execution is more than fitting a sentence! Patrician branch, quickly, decapitate this imposter!” “Have you lost your mind, Marston?!”, Brother Gino sputtered, then quickly nodded his head. “Plebian

Branch, defend that girl at all costs!” What followed just might have been the most spastic mortal struggle in the history of the continent. Sabarene quickly ducked under the fifty or so swords pointed at her neck, stumbling away from the danger while Gino and his half metal men bum-rushed Marston’s pastel robed lunatics. Gino’s folk tossed the armed members of the crowd out and up, their metal fists literally punching people into the air. But for every two lightly armed and lightly dressed people Gino’s folks pushed to the side, five or six took their place. I lost sight of Sabarene in the confusion, and tried dashing to where I last saw her. “Stay away from her, Unionist.”, Brother Gino fearfully cried, swinging both his fists into my stomach. “B-uh!”, I coughed, the force of Gino’s blow knocking me back. With weak, buckling knees, I raised my arm to guard my face from the orange haired fellow’s follow up strike, but a follow up strike never came. Nah, the man with the fake limbs left me in the dust, sprinting over to Sabarene, who had managed to get herself surrounded by four of Marston’s multicultural murderers. The woman in the black habit looked at the four encroaching figures and laughed. “Hm. Four swords? You think you can hurt the General of the Holy Collective with four swords? You’d need at least eleven to even inflict a paper cut.” The white haired girl gazed down her attackers confidently enough, but her shaking body betrayed what her words and demeanor had tried so hard to cover up. “L-leave her alone, you monsters!”, Brother Gino sobbed, smashing into the four robed warriors like a wrecking ball. The metal armed man clasped two of the pastel robed ladies’ throats with his firm metal hands. “W-wait!”, Sabarene called out, all haughtiness gone from her shaky ass voice. “Don’t-“ With a sickening crunch, the orange haired man turned two of Marston’s men’s necks into jelly, throwing their bodies at Sabarene’s feet like a twisted little tribute. The

other two robed fellas, a green haired fremdosian anda gaunt looking fella with gray hair receptively, looked at each other nervously, then fled the scene, leaving their companion's corpses ta rot on the pavement. "Don't worry, imposter.", Gino confidently assured Sabarene, shielding her with his two black arms. "I won't allow these cretins to besmirch someone with even the slightest passing resemblance to the General. On the count of three, I want you to make a break for the ocean. Ready? One, two..." "Three~", a familiar, yet deeply unsettling voice sing songed. Sister Kundare arrived on the scene, flinging herself down from the roofa building. She moved with an incredible sorta speed, one moment she was ta the bottom left of my admittedly limited peripheral vision, the next she was ta the right. Brother Gino didn't movea muscle, instead his black eyes followed Sister Kundare's movement, his pupils squirming likea insect that had just been sprayed with pesticide. Inna quick movement, Sister Kundare moved straight up ta Gino, her nose inches away from his lips. With a in articulate shrieked, the orange haired man tried ta smack Sister Kundare away with another piston punch, but his movements were too slow, too sloppy. Kundare launched herself inta the air and dodged the strike likea acrobat woulda flaming bat, then immediately lassoed Brother Gino with her metal whip wires. The small, tight, taunt metal cores didn't target Brother Gino's metal muscles, or his metal fingers, rather, they wrapped around the spot where metal met flesh, around Brother Gino's joints and elbows. "What the-", Gino breathed out, then flinched as Kundare's wire manipulation rendered him completely unable ta move. Oh, sure, he flailed and wailed and whined, but the way Kundare wrapped her wires around the orange haired man's body made him unable ta do anything of much significance at all. "I've subdued Brother Gino, Maston Marston!", Sister Kundare

proudly reported. "So?", the black haired man bellowed back, still wearing his shattered glasses. "I ordered you to kill the imposter. I won't give the command a second time."

"Understood, Master Marston!", Kundare said with a salute. "One execution, coming right up!" Her left hand still keeping a thrashing Gino in check, the blonde haired lady took out a small but sharp looking dagger from her grey little robes. "Stay still, imposter.", she coldly commented to Sabarene. "I can't guarantee you a quick death if you move."

Sister Kundare, with a wicked grin stuck to her face, raised the sharp, stainless dagger, right above Sabarene's paralyzed body. "Git away from her, ya idiot!", I desperately, uselessly, called out, reaching towards Kundare's dagger as if doing so would enable me to stop the swing of her weapon. No such luck. Kundare began a wicked tangent, as she raised her dagger higher and higher above Sabarene's stomach. "And those that commit sin, shall be judged by all the forces of Fiat, and lo, will they freeze in the desolate pits ofAAAAAAAAAAAAH!" Sister Kundare, her arm at a seventy three degree angle, suddenly shivered like a naked child out in the streets in Provesh, and collapsed onto the pavement, her arms and legs quivering uselessly. Seemingly out of nowhere, Lucas cartwheeled onto the scene, baton in one hand, and a tight, taunt piece of string in the other. "Pro tip.", he whispered to the neutralized blonde lady, yanking the string to pull his pronged black box off Kundare's posterior. "Stab first, speak later." "What... what in the world?!", Kundare managed to choke out, even as she shivered and spasmed on the ground. "Wroooooooooooooong Questionooooooooooooon Sssssssssssssssteeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeer Kundare!", Sabarene loudly, very loudly, cackled, leaping up and raising her black metal fist towards Marston and his multitude of pastel robed warriors. "You shouldn't whimper "What in the world?!", instead, you

should be asking.... "What sort of sorcery is this?!" Kundare's distressed face curled up with confusion, and her limbs stopped squirming so much. "H-huh?", the lady in gray asked, shaken up by Sabarene's statement almost as much as her body was by Lucas's blue flames. "HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!", Sabarene manically laughed, perfectly imitating the pose of the statue behind her. "Oh Marston! Yooooooooou incompeteeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeent moron! Did you seriously think I was an imposter? Did you seriously think I, Sister Sabarene, the General of the Holy Collective, the most brilliant, talented, and capable mind on the continent, would allow someone who looked even an eighth like me to take a single step into our bountiful lands?" "Yes.", Marston responded bluntly, raising his arm and pointing it towards Sabarene, Lucas, and Gino. "Patrician Branch, destroy that melodramatic faker, and her cohorts." The orange haired man grabbed Kundare's dropped dagger, and pressed it against her neck. "Do it, and I'll kill this woman, Marston." "Go ahead.", the black haired man bellowed back, his ruby red eyes fierce and unyielding. "Come on now, be reasonable ya stupid git!", I said to Marston, desperately searching for my hatchet. "If that idiot is an imposter, then let her be, she ain't gonna hurt no one!" My words were wind to the red eyed fella, he simply pointed at Sabarene and closed his fist, sending tons of pastel robed people sprinting towards her, Gino, Kundare, and Lucas. "So much for the diplomacy check.", Blondie half heartedly commented, quickly jabbing Gino's left metal arm with his blue flamed box. As both Gino and Kundare fell onto the pavement like a bunch of shaky epileptic bricks, Lucas reached for something on the belt of his slacks. His fingers fondled... a thick, metal ball. Or egg. Yeah, Lucas's hand grasped a metal egg that was, for some weird reason, strapped to his pants. He grabbed the metal egg,

and, with his shiny white teeth, bit the top off it. “Okie dokey...” the Sorcerer said calmly as the horde of tackily dressed maniacs known as the Patrician branch rushed him.. “Uno.... Dos.... Tres!” The metal egg went flying towards the rapidly advancing crowd. It hit the top of some poor girl’s head, and then bounced, rather harmlessly, on the ground, about an inch or two away from my feet. Then it exploded. “G-ah!”, I screamed, the noise of the canister’s explosion deafening my ears, the brightness blinding my eye. My world became little more than a burning white light and a horrifying ringing noise, I might have yelled out a whole bunch of stuff, but if I did I suck as heck didn’t hear any of it. After about thirty seconds of being deaf, dumb, and blind, I slowly made it back into the world of the living. I looked around. The entire horde of Marston’s folks were kneeling on the ground, some of them with bleeding ears, some of them with covered eyes, but all of them in a way. Half of the crowd had even dropped their cheap looking short swords. “WHAT JUST HAPPENED?”, Marston shouted, though I don’t think he realized he was shouting. “I DON’T GOTTA CLUE!”, I whispered back, the ringing noise not fading away at all. “What just happened?”, the red eyed fella with the shattered glasses repeated, oblivious to my utterly useless explanation. “Magic just happened, my dear older brother!”, Sabarene bombastically responded, resting her right leg on Kundare’s back. “Magic?”, Marston choked, stepping and stumbling towards his sister. “Don’t be absurd, Sabarene.” A vicious smile spread on the eyepatch wearing girl’s face. “Oh, so NOW you acknowledge me, BROTHEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEER!”, Sabarene bellowed, almost certainly realizing she was shouting. “I thought you had FORGOTTEEEEEEN me!” “N-no... that was a mere slip of the... die already, imposter!”, Marston growled, taking out a dagger of his own and sprinting towards

Sabarene as quick as his frail, tall figure could manage. I stuck my right foot in front of his left ankle. "Whoops. Uh, sorry champ, didn't mean to trip ya.", I apologized, watching the serious man's face smack against the marble ground with a slight degree of satisfaction. "Floor's yours, General!" Sabarene smiled and winked at me, then redirected her focus to the completely captivated crowd. "Patrician Branch! Plebian Branch! Cease your mindless, idiotic, and wildly incompetent attempts at fighting each other! Drop your weapons, and be at peace. I am no imposter! I am exactly who my resemblance to that decadent, woefully excessive and almost certainly extensively expensive statue suggests I am. The one who smashed the Lancers at Trunchet, the one who conquered Prenonix without even having to draw a single sword. I am General Sabarene, and I have returned." "Nonsense!", Marston called out, stumbling to his feet. "My Sister isn't some one-eyed nitwit!" "Oh, you think I wear this to cover up a wound, Marston?", Sabarene menacingly inquired, then chuckled darkly. "I assure you Marston, The General of the Holy Collective would never allow herself to be scratched, let alone maimed." The black-haired man began to sweat. "Then... then why would you wear-" "Why INDEED would I wear it?!", Sabarene boomed out, the loudness and deepness of her voice almost matching Marston's. "Why WOULD I wear a patch over my eye, if it was perfectly functional? The answer is simple: to HIDE MY POWWWWWWWWER!" I suddenly felt a deep sense of shame, which I guess made up for Sabarene's utter lack of it as she continued on with her routine. "To... to what?!", Marston screeched out, then quickly nodded his head. "Fellow Fremdosians! General or not, this woman is clearly mad, she needs psychiatric help!" But if the fellows and the Fremdosians heard Marston, they didn't seem to heed his words none. Nah, like flies to a pitcher plant, the crowd



was drawn to Sabarene, even the folks who had been blinded by Lucas's metal canister. "I said I wear this eyepatch to conceal my power, BROOOOOOOOOOOOOO THEEEEEER!.", the white haired lady firmly explained. "Behold!", she shouted, to the point that her voice started cracking a bit. With an overly elaborate sweep of her black metal hand, Sabarene pulled my brown leather eyepatch off her face. Damn near everyone, Marston and myself included, took a step back and gasped at the sight of Sabarene's exposed left eye. It was... gold. Her left pupil, her left iris, was colored a brilliant solid gold, and shone like a small little star. "This is the all seeing eye!", Sabarene declared, spinning around so that everyone got a glimpse of her golden iris. The folks in the plaza gawked at the white haired lady, skeptical, yet still captivated by Sabarene's over the top demonstration. "It is but one of the many treasures I accumulated in my travels to the Independent Kingdom, and it is more powerful than any of you navel gazing nitwits could ever imagine." The white haired lady put her other leg on top of Kundare's back, perhaps to use the blonde lady as a bench to stand above the crowd, or perhaps to be a little bit of a dick. "The eye does many things... but above all, it grants me visions of the future." Sabarene smiled predatorily as members of the Plebian and Patrician branch alike began speaking out excited whispers to each other, folks with metal limbs conversing to pastel robed fellows as if they hadn't just been fighting to the death with each other. "And I have seen a dark, dismal, disgusting future for our fair Collective. One where the Unionist scourges are left unconquered. One where we fail to unite people of all creeds and colors under our loving embrace. One where people are still persecuted for their sexual preference, for their gender identity. And above all else..." Sabarene grimly put out, grinding her feet

against Kundare's back for emphasis, "One where metal currency holds sway over the mark." The entirety of the crowd shivered, gasped, and moaned in sheer terror. "Fear not! I have returned precisely to subvert such a joyless fate! I have come to resume my appointment as General of the Holy Collec-" "No.", Marston interrupted, his composure regained, his shattered black glasses pressed firmly atop the bridge of his nose. "I am the General of the Holy Collective, not you. You forfeited your position when you left your post three cycles ago." "Oh, Marstooooooooon." Sabarene loudly sighed, nodding her head in an exaggerated exasperated motion. "I did not come here expecting the position to just be handed to me. It is my understanding that your term as General is coming to an end, correct?" "...Perhaps.", the black haired man conceded, staring at Sabarene with intense, burning eyes, less ruby red and more smoldering magma. "Then... I would like to formally declare... to all citizens of the Holy Collective both present and absent, my official campaign for the position of General!" The metal limbed members of the Plebian branch immediately burst into loud, raucous cheers, followed by two thirds of the folks in pastoral robes. A look of relief came over Sabarene's face, relief that was instantly replaced by arrogance and a raised fist. "Seems like the yays have it, wouldn't you say, Marstooooooooon?!" The red eyed man made two tightly shaking fists. "You know as well as I that Supreme Sibling Desnion is the only one who can appoint someone General of the Holy Collective, even if the preponderance of citizens are in favor of you." "And I'm sure he'll gladly confirm me once word reaches his ears of my return and near unanimous acceptance." Marston didn't lose his temper or nothing, but a bit of sweat began pouring down his cheeks. "No.", Marston blurted. "He won't." Sabarene rolled her now mismatched colored eyes. "I don't suppose you intend to try

and kill me a third time, do you?" "No." Marston cleared his throat. "Brother Gino! Stand up, Brother Gino!" The orange hand man at Sabarene's feet slowly got himself up, groggily standing at full height even as his limbs swayed from side to side like a creaky run down ferris wheel. "Save your words, Marston. My allegiance is to the General!" "No, your allegiance is to the Collective." "It's the same thing, Marston." "It is absolutely not." Marston, his body shaking slightly, approached Brother Gino, apathetic to the metal limbed soldiers who pointed their swords at him as he did. "You took an oath to protect the interests of the Collective to best of your abilities, and to uphold the Collective's ideals in the most earnest way you understood them." "Half the people here took that oath." "Yes. Which is why, as Commander of the Plebian branch, it is your responsibility to stake a claim against Sister Sabarene." "Nonsense.", Gino snorted. "Who would support me over her?" "I would!", Marston loudly proclaimed, passionately clutching his heart. "You, Brother Gino, represent the future of the Collective! We are a progressive society, not a regressive one! We cannot be held back by old has beens like Sister Sabarene! We need a reasonable, passionate man like you to lead us to the future the first of us envisioned when they threw off the Unionist coils! Fellow Fremdosians! If you have ever loved me, if you have ever agreed with me, then lend me your support! Lend Brother Gino your support! Make him the rightful commander of the Collective forces!" And just like that, the spell Sabarene had cast over the crowd was broken. Nearly all the Plebian branch, and the majority of Marston's men, started chanting.... "Gino! Gino! Gino! Gino! Gino!" The orange haired man frowned, smiled, frowned again, then sheepishly rubbed the back of his neck. "W-well... If you all want me so much.... Then I accept!", he loudly roared. "I, Brother Gino of the Plebian corps, am

honored to take my place as Sister Sabarene's opponent! And while I respect her vision and ability, I vow to go even farther! As General of the Collective, I will destroy each and every last Unionist foolish enough to remain in our land, I will ensure the effective and potent administrative of social, martial, and legal justice, and I will ensure that the two faced Independent Kingdoms adhere to past, present, and further contracts, by any means necessary!" "Very well, Brother Gino.", Marston resolutely responded, walking right up to the orange haired man and kneeling before him. "I, Marston of Fremdos, offer you my full support." The blonde haired lady below Sabarene's feet rapidly rolled away, and scrambled up to Brother Gino. "Me as well!", the former footrest said with a salute, as Sabarene struggled to stay balanced. "Use me however Master Marston sees fit!" Brother Gino bent over, and stared at Kundare and Marston. "Hm.", he hummed to himself. "Hm.... Ok! I accept your aid! And I shall make the two of you my speaker and champion, respectively." Still kneeling before the fella I had stuck a hatchet into, Marston raised an eyebrow. "Respectively?" "Yes, respectively, I just said that, there's no need to repeat it, Marston. You shall serve as my champion for the trial by combat, and Kundare shall serve as my speaker for the dual of wits." "That's completely absurd!". Sister Kundare shrilly protested. "Master Marston served as the former General's Speaker, he has no traditional military training! Make me the champion, you-"...Very well.", Marston said, before the girl in gray could finish. "What little combat ability I possess is yours to utilize, Brother Gino." "Hahaha! Great, Marston, great!". Gino laughed. "I'll teach you how to fight no problem! And if you should die... well, worse things have occurred on this continent." Gino laughed boisterously as he looked around with a smile, then bowed his head meekly when his eyes met Sabarene's. "Um...", he softly meeped, twiddling

two large metal index fingers... “ who will you nominate as speaker and champion, Sister?”, he asked, somberly. Then quickly frowned, embarrassed. “N-not that someone of your caliber would need a speaker or a champion, G-g-general!” “She’s the rival candidate, she’s not the General anymore.” “Shut up, Marston.”, Gino growled, his meekness and embarrassment instantly replaced by rage and loathing. “The General is still the General, even if she’s not the General.” “I nominate my personal Sorcerer as speaker, of course.”, Sabarene said without missing a beat, sticking a black metal index finger at Lucas. “And as for my champion.... Hm. You there! Girl without a left arm!” “Who... me?”, I asked, trying, but failing, completely failing, ta sound surprised. “Yes, you.”, Sabarene called out, a regal tone ta her arrogant voice. “How would you like to serve as my Champion?” “Oh. I’d love it.” I drolly stated, feeling the eyesa thousands focus in on me, the sensation not unlike that offa itchy sweaty rash. “It would bea honor and, uh, stuff.” “What is your name, girl?” Sabarene asked me, looking at me with intense multicolored eyes. “Axeman Red Four.”, I conversationally coughed, causing a whole lotta gasps and hushed mumurings of the word “Unionist” ta resound throughout the crowd. “Then you, Axeman Red Four, shall serve as my Champion!” Sabarene announced, ta the wild applause of about four people, threea whom were Sabarene, Blondie, and Gino. Marston got up from his kneeling position, and walked back ontopa the wreckage of the scaffolding. “Then it is decided, Fellow Fremdosians!”, the black haired man boomed out ta the heavily disheveled and confused crowd.. “The election for the new General shall begin in four rising periods hence. It will be between Brother Gino, Sister Sabarene, and any other Sacred Sibling who considers themselves worthy. As with all elections, each citizen, layfolk and Sacred Sibling alike, is entitled to three

votes, one for each of the three trials. You may use these votes progressively, after the completion of each individual trial, or all at once, after the trial by combat. Of course, volunteers and men under the age of fifteen cycles may not vote, along with any current or former Unionists. The speaker and champion of the candidates forfeit their right to vote as well." Marston took inna quick breath through his nose. "Finally, the attempted murder, maiming, or hindering of one candidate by another will be grounds for instant disqualification and will, in fact, be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law. In the event that all candidates pass away from illness or otherwise, then an interim General by Supreme Sibling Desnion shall be appointed, until such a time occurs where it is safe to hold elections for General again. Furthermore-", Marston began ta say, then stopped, stopped, as if he were noticing the dead and wounded fer the first time. "Explanations can wait. Nielente!", the black haired man loudly called out, only getting silence and tired panting in return. "Nielente!", Marston called out again, not missing a beat. "Y-y-yes, Mister Master Marston?", a meek, terrified voice called out, from the far backa the plaza. Shaking likea scared little mouse, the brown skinned and barechested girl reluctantly approached the man with shattered shaded glasses, a small cut across her cheek. "The remaining festivities for the Great Unification are cancelled." "Is.. is that so?", the distraught girl squeaked. "C-can I please go home now?" "No.", Marston responded, looking inta Nielente's wet eyes with completely dry ones. "You are to escort Sister Sabarene and her... companions to the guest house." "The guest house?" "Where you and your musicians performed for Supreme Sibling Desnion last cycle, Nielente." "Okay..." Nielente said, head bowed. The green haired girl slowly stepped over the various unconscious folks, wincing at those with bleeding ears and shying

away from those with broke looking arms. The dismayed dancer made her way ta me, then, still downcast, tugged gently... nah, not gently, weakly, on my hand. "This way.", the green haired girl whispered, no pep ta her voice. "Sure, sure. Just gimme a moment.", I responded, though I don't think Nielente particularly heard me. I opened and shut my hand, then, taking inna deep breath, I pressed down hard on my left shoulder. Witha "pop" anda hefty amounta pain, I lodged my dislocated shoulder back where it belonged. Then, no hatchet, sword, or other typea weapon on my person, I followed the crestfallen girl, as she slowly caught up ta Sabarene and Lucas. No words were exchanged, not between Blondie and me, not between Sabarene and Blondie, not between Nielente and anyone. Quietly, the foura us left the plaza behind, bidden farewell by only the slow steady breaths of the ocean. "Um... what happened to your cheek, Nielente?", Sabarene asked of the green haired girl the moment we turned into a small abandoned looking canal. "Nothing.", Nielente responded, her voice soft and scared sounding. Lucas looked at the green haired girl, witha mildly concerned expression. He didn't open his mouth or yak none, instead, he reached into onea his pants pockets and pulled out the same sorta adhesive bandage he had used on me back on the Caravan. "Hey, er, Nielente, was it?" "Y-yes?", the green haired girl responded, maintaining a good distance from all threea us. The cape wearing fella with the purple tophat swallowed nervously, "Er... Take this, and put it over your cheek.", Lucas said as he held out the weirdly wrapped bandage, a meek softness ta his voice. Nielente looked up at Lucas, then at the adhesive bandage with distrust. "This... this isn't magic... is it?" "It's a band-aid. People from my country use it to cover up scratches, nothing more." The green haired girl slowly reached out for the offered band

air, her hand twitching like she was about ta petta tiger. "Don't worry, Nielente."

Sabarene kindly assured the girl. "You can trust Mister Lucas." Instantly, Nielente's hand snapped back. "I don't need it.", she nervously quipped. We turned the corner of the canal, and came across a big, isolated looking building, a townhouse witha bitta moss attached on onea its sides. Nielente turned around and looked at the threea us, and by the threea us I mean she looked at me and completely ignored Lucas and Sabarene. "This... this is the guest house.", Nielente announced, her words enunciated well enough, but her delivery somewhat off. "There should be a servant or two inside. Have a nice stay." Nielente walked us up ta the entrance of the townhouse, then dashed off, sprinting away into the canals likea startled rabbit. I moved up ta the doora the townhouse, and witha sloppy tug, yanked it open. The insidea the house looked like crude. But where as the wooden buildings and cramped apartments in Provesh were madea cheap rotting crap ta begin with, the cruiddiness of the stoney townhouse seemed ta be the result of a remarkable amounta neglect. The parlor of the townhouse had a whole buncha furniture that mighta been very valuable atta time, a whole lotta couches, chairs, and tables that would sold fera heckuva lotta metal had the cushions not been chewed up bya buncha moths. "Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck.", Sabarene repeated as she plopped down on the nearest seat, rocking back and forth onna faded pink cushioned chair likea heroin junkie determined ta make the demons go away. "That was... that was a complete disaster, in almost every way imaginable!", the girl complained, stretching out tuftsa her pristine white hair in frustration. "I'm sorry that your brother tried to kill you, Sister Sabarene.", Lucas said softly, stretching out onna half eaten silk couch. "Oh please, if I fussed about and pulled at my hair every time Marston



tried to murder me I'd be bald by now." Sabarene snapped back at the Sorcerer, a hint of dismay on her incredibly agitated face. "The issue lies with Brother Gino." "Yeah, fella's pretty strong.", I muttered, recalling the way the fella had collapsed a structure with no more than an angry punch. "Strength has nothing to do with it, imbecile.", Sabarene scoffed at me, her mismatched eyes both conveying a sense of annoyance and disappointment. "Brother Gino is a warmongering lunatic. He'd kill hundreds of thousands of people on a whim, and he has many, many whims." "The gentleman didn't seem all that well in the head, true.", Lucas said, gazing at the screen on his black rectangle with disinterest. "But is it really such a problem?" "Of course it's a problem! Now we actually have to try and win this stupid election!", Sabarene screeched. I fanned my face and smiled. "Shucks, that don't seem like it'll be too hard.", I breezily said, rubbing my sore shoulder. "The crowd seemed to like ya plenty, Sabarene." "That particular crowd did, sure, up until they didn't.", the white haired girl irritably acknowledged. "But the election isn't just confined to this city, the entire Collective is going to vote on it." I blinked. "So?" "So? So? So it means that if we screw up and let Gino and Marston beat us in those trials, the entire military wing of the Collective might be run by someone almost as crazy as I was!" "By crazy, do you mean loony, or do you mean evil?" "Yes." "Then I suppose we'll just have to complete those trials, then.", Lucas concluded, eyes still glued to the screen on his rectangle. "No, no, that's stupid", I interjected. "You don't really wanna go back to being a General, do ya Sister?" "Of course I don't.", the white haired girl admitted, a combination of loathing and fear in her voice. "But what choice do we have? If the alternative is Brother Gino, then better me than him." "Right, but who says it's gotta be either you?" I put out. "Brother Marston—"

“My brother, whose name is Marston.” “Right, yer brother Marston seemed like a reasonable sort, well, right up until he tried ta kill ya and all. Maybe we should find a way ta keep him in charge.” “Too late for that, Patchy.”, Lucas countered. “That glasses wearing gentleman already threw in his lot with Brother Gino.” “Then maybe we should have a chat with him and let him know what’s up. I’ve seen tonsa idiots kill each other over misunderstandings and a lacka communcation, let’s not do the same.” “That won’t work at all.” Sabarene said softly. “Once Marston makes a vow, he commits to it a hundred percent. Even if we could tell him our true intentions, he wouldn’t listen to us.” Sabarene bit on her right index finger. “More... more pertinently, only a Sacred Sibling can become General of the Collective.” “Huh? Didn’t that blonde girl call yer brother a General?” “Sorry... I meant to say that only a member of the Order of Fiat can be *elected* General. I appointed Marston General when I fled to Provesh, so-“ “Ah! Then that’s it, ain’t it?”, I said with a fangy smile. “All we gotta do is get ya elected, then have ya pulla disappearing act again. Leave a letter putting Marston back in charge, and then, voila, ain’t no war gonna happen.” “That’s a temporary solution at best, Miss Axeman Red Four.”, Sabarene responded, a bit more calm, but still very much on edge. “Even if Supreme Sibling Desnion accepted Marston as my replacement, he would only be entitled to one term as General. Four cycles later, and we’re right back where we started.” “Four cycles are better than nothing, ain’t they?” “No. They’re not.”, the white haired girl on the faded chair scowled. “How long is the average lifespan of people in Provesh, Miss Axeman Red Four?” “Bout thirty five, or so.” “Oh dear... that low?”, Sabarene asked, eyebrow raised, then nodded her head. “Regardless... there are roughly two hundred and fifty thousand people living in Provesh. Multiply that by thirty

five, and you have eight million, seven hundred and fifty cycles of life. What are four measly cycles compared to that?" I hacked up some phlegm and spat it outta a half shattered window. "Yer equivocating here, and ya know it." "M-maybe, but four cycles of peace.... It's nothing. Compared to the death and destruction that will occur if a war breaks out, it's absolutely nothing." Lucas stopped looking at his rectangle and narrowed his eyes. "In other words, you don't view your brother as capable of stemming the tides of war." "I don't view anyone as capable of doing that.", Sabarene said, clinking her metal fingers against her chair's termite bitten arm. "Changing a culture... doing that would take a lifetime. N-normally, at least.", she said with a nervous smile. "But... if it's me... if I go back to being the General... then... then it would be possible. Making citizens of the Collective change their mind, that is." I squinted my eye at the nervous girl. "Oh?" "Ehehehe... um... do you remember how Brother Gino acted around me?" "What, ya mean like a goddamn lunatic?" "No... well yes, but no. Remember how he treated me, specifically?" "The man worshipped the very ground you walked on.", Lucas observed dryly, opening and closing his hand, squeezing on an imaginary ball. Sabarene softly shook her head at Lucas's conjecture. "M-more or less, yes. So... so, here's the thing. Brother Gino's treatment of me... it's not exactly atypical for most members of the Collective." "What, ya saying most Collective folks worship you like a God?", I snorted. "Yes.", Sabarene bluntly answered. "W-what?!", I blurted, almost falling down on the filthy stone floor. "I was worshipped as a God when I was the General." The red and gold eyed girl scratched the bottom of her chin. "There's a group in Trunchet that I think still offers me a tenth of their earnings each cycle. They originally wanted to give me their firstborns, but there's not too much you can do with firstborns." "Guh...." I gulped,

taken aback. "Wait, but if folks worship ya likea God, then why even worry about all this trial nonsense?" "Gods are infallible, Patchy.", Lucas answered in lieu Sabarene.

"These trials, at least to my understanding, are competitions of a sort. Lose just one, and it would show weakness." "So?" "So it would mean that radical transformations of collective identity would be off the table.", the Sorcerer explained. I frowned. "But that would mean that not only would we havta win this stupid election thingy, we'd have ta really whoop Orange haired guy and Brother Marston's butts something fierce." "Yes, hence the dilemma.", Lucas tiredly tiraded. "No room for last minute hail maries, no catching of the golden snitch. We need to perform from the get go, and win each of these three trials decisively. To do otherwise, well, that would be imperfect. Is that what you're trying to get at, Sister?" "Y-yes... pretty much... though I have no idea who Mary is. The only shot at fixing the Collective again would be internal reform, and the only way the Collective can be reformed internally would be if I reinstalled myself as General." Sabarene stuttered, biting on her thumb. I let outta large breath. "Then let's give it a go. Ain't no harm in trying." I looked inta Sabarene's eyes and squinted. "Why is yer left eye gold alla a sudden?" Lucas poked me in the cheek with his baton. "It's not all of a sudden, Patchy. Don't you remember what I gave to Sabarene as we deboarded the Caravan?" "No, of course I don-" I thought back ta the plastic circle that the sorcerer had shoved inta Sabarene's hand. "W-wait, THAT small little thing is the all seeing eye you were making sucha fuss about?" "Ehehehe... this isn't exactly an all seeing eye.", Sabarene nervously explained, pointing a non-metal finger at her golden iris. "It's actually-" "A charm, a spell I designed to change one's eyecolor.", Lucas quickly finished for the white haired girl. "Wait, that's all that little thing does?" "Of course.", the

sorcerer said. "It would be dangerous to give someone an actual all seeing eye. Being able to see glimpses of the future isn't particularly useful. You get a vision of drowning, so you set up a system of levies to account for a flood, setting up the levies makes you become filthy rich, you get a huge estate with a pool, and then end up drowning in the pool. The contact lens- uh... charm, I mean, the charm I gave to Sabarene serves our purposes just fine without the whole ironic death thing." "And its purpose being tricking that whole crowd into thinking Sister Santebe is more a bigshot than she actually is, huh?" "I like to think of it as a way of speaking truth to power.", the Sorcerer said with icy blue eyes. I sucked in a deep breath, and started wiping the sweat off the eyepatch Sabarene had returned to me. "So when is the first one of these trials, anyhow?" "Four rising periods from now, or at least that's what Marston said." "Ugh, so what the heck are we supposed to do now?", I complained, clumsily attempting to strap the sweaty brown eyepatch back onto my face. The white haired girl got up from her off-pink chair and walked behind me. "Well, we do have some time to kill, so I guess the answer would be whatever we feel like doing." Sabarene answered, gently tying the strings of the brown leather patch together and placing it firmly over my empty eyesocket. "Though I don't think going back into the plaza would be a good idea... given how we were partially responsible for destroying it." "By we, ya mean you and Blondie, right? Cause all I did was lift a rope a bit." "R-right... Sabarene reluctantly acknowledged. "Hmmm... oh!", she exclaimed, punching me in the back a bit harder than necessary. "I got it! How about we go to get you a new arm, Miss Axeman Red Four?" "Sure, sounds good to... w-what?!" I nervously stuttered. "That was the original point of us coming here, wasn't it?", the red and gold eyed girl asked. "I mean... I thought I might

have had to put it on hold in order to prevent something terrible from happening, but given how something terrible has already happened, I see no need to put off the attachment of a lifemetal arm to your left limb any further.” I grinded my lower fang against my top right one. “Uh... y’know what, sure. let’s go get mea magical limb.” I looked around the dilapidated house fer anything a value and found nothing. “But how the heck are we gonna pay fer the damn thing?” Sabarene gave the strings a my eyepatch one final pull, then smiled softly. “There’s no need to worry about that. Trust me, it’ll all make sense to you once we get to the lifemetal clinic.” I gazed uneasily at my stump. It had only been about three rising periods or so (sorta), since I had lost my arm, the thought that I was gonna getta new one... the thought that I *could* getta new one was a bit unreal. I flicked the leather patch one my face and grabbed the red eyed girl by her right wrist. “Let’s mosey, then.” “You two go ahead.”, Lucas called out as I dragged Sabarene towards the door by the wrist. “I’m going to meditate for a rising period or so.”, he yawned, stretching out on the couch, using his rucksack as a pillow. “Ya do that.”. I said drily, then stepped outta the ruined townhouse. “Sorry our accommodations aren’t up to snuff...” Sabarene apologized, an embarrassed look on her slightly red face. “A-ah!”, she suddenly exclaimed, rubbing the back of her neck. “Ow!”, the white hair girl whimpered, rubbing her face all over. I tilted my head at the girl, her face still pink as a lightly cooked chicken. “Something wrong?” “I got burnt by the suns.” she whined. I looked at the medium rare Sister with a mixa pity and amusement. “That’s whatcha get fer wearing black all the dang time.” “Easy for someone without a strict dresscode to say, you leather wearing bitch.”, Sabarene angrily huffed, tugging her hood over her face as much as it could go. I smiled broadly at the agitated and slightly sunburnt girl,

and followed her down a mostly shaded alleyway. "What is it?", she snapped, irritated at my goofy little smirk. "If you're going to brag about your superior melatonin count then forget it, you're not the first to poke fun at my unfairly fair complexion and you certainly won't be the last." "Hehehe, no, that ain't it, yer reminding me offa kitten I had once." "And what was the kitten's name?" "Didn't have one, he was a runt that found his way under the floorboarda my apartment. Real cute, though." "C-cute?", Sabarene stuttered, her sunburnt face suddenly becoming a lot more sunburnt. "Yup, he was a cute little fella. Bitta a jerk, though. I'd reach ta pet him, and he'd take a chomp outta my fingers." "I don't see what's cute about that at all." "His usual jerkiness made his cute moments stand out, is the thing. The lil'tabby of mine... he'd usually be a selfish git, sure. One time I gave up seven rising periods pay ta buy him a whole buncha milk, only fer him ta hiss at me before and after he drank it. But some evenings... only some... he'd brush his little neck against my leg, and allow me ta pet him. And those moments, rare as they were... they were kinda nice." "So why didn't you name the cat?" "Cause he died, of course.", I snorted. "The cold got him, or maybe it was disease or something. All I know is that one morning I woke up ta find the fella stiff as a board." "Oh. So did you bury him?", Sabarene asked, reluctantly turning from the shaded canal into a wide open sunny street. "Nah.", I answered. "I ate him." "You... you what?!" "I ate him. Sliced his dead kitty body open and used his guts ta make a nice hearty stew." "W-why would you do that?!", Sabarene screamed, her hood falling down for a brief moment. "Cause I was hungry, of course." "But he was your pet!" "Ain't like he cared. And I had ta make up my seven rising period salary deficit somehow." "By... by EATING a cat?!" "No, by eating a kitten, a cat woulda been much meatier." "I... I see.", Sabarene said, turning her face

away from the suns. "Um, the clinic shouldn't be too far away, follow me and we should be there at any moment." We turned another corner, and this time came out onto a street that, despite being split into three segments by two canals, was completely packed with people, all scrunched up together in a long, zigzagging line, a line that snaked across bridges and was four people wide. The folks in the line, though... hm. Well, they weren't from the plaza, that's for sure, cause they were wearing actual clothes instead of bathrobes. But not a single one of them had brown skin or green hair, heck, most of them were as pale (well, almost as pale) as Sabarene. I walked to the back of the line and lightly tapped an old looking man on the back of his bald, sunburned head. "What's this here line for, Mister?" "This? This is the line for the health clinic." "Huh. So how long do I gotta wait before I get to the front of it?" The old man raised an eyebrow. "You? Young man, you don't need to wait at all." I let the young man comment slide and blinked a bit at the old fella. "Er... and why don't I, exactly?" "You're Fremdosian, aren't you?" "Uh, technically speaking, sure, but-" "Then this isn't your line. The line for Fremdosians starts inside the building." I looked at Sabarene and flashed her a sheepish smile. "Guess we lucked out, huh?". We started walking to the front of the line, and got all of two paces forward before the kind old man grabbed Sabarene by her hood and roughly pulled her back. "You're not a Fremdosian.", he growled, his bald pate purple and veiny. "No, no, I am, I am.", Sabarene nervously assured the old impatient fella, as five of the other folks in the line looked at her with hostile, angry eyes. "I recognize those robes, girl!", the balding fella blustered. "You're a member of the Plebian branch." The old man's lips slowly curled into a spiteful grin. "Well, if you're thinking of cutting ahead of us layfolk, then think again. Master Marston abolished



military privilege more than a cycle ago.” “Just who do you think I am?”, Sabarene asked, darkly. “An entitled little shit.”, the old man spat, his saliva barely missing the slightly sunburnt sister’s smug smiling face. “Oh my... you poor fool.”, the white haired girl chuckled ta herself, darkly. “You insolent, wretched old man. I am none other than...” “Uh, Sister, it might not be the besta ideas ta reveal yer identi-” “This girl’s wife!” she proudly proclaimed, wrapping her body around my arm. “Wife?!”, I sputtered, my face as red as Sabarene’s, though it certainly wasn’t sunburnt. “Girl?!”, the old man ejaculated, his face a good deal less purple anda great deal more dizzy. “Yes, wife. Collaborator. Spouse. Etctera, ectera. The two of us were wed four rising periods ago. And as the spouse of a Fremdosian, I am, by Collective Law, a Fremdosian.” “You might be adhering to the letter of the law, but you sure as sin aren’t honoring the spirit of the law, young lady.”, the old man said. “Master Marston set up these lines for a reason, in order for Fremdosians to catch up with us Collective Citizens, they must be afforded some-“ “I’m only getting some oil, Mister.”, Sabarene interrupted the man, moving her creaky metal hand back and forth fer emphasis. “I’m mostly here to give my wife some moral support.” The old man opened his mouth ta question Sabarene some more, then looked at my stump and let out a defeated sounding sigh. “Fine. Fine, go ahead. But if I see you walk out of that clinic with any more lifemetal than you walked in with, I swear to Fiat I’ll write Master Marston a heavy handed letter!” “That’s a risk I’ll just have to take.”, Sabarene said with some melancholy, then tightened her grasp on my arm. “Let’s head over to the line for Fremdosian citizens, dear.” About as embarrassed as I ever had been in my entire egregiously embarrassing life, I nevertheless complied with the white haired idiot, briskly jogging ta the entrance of the building that all the other folk were

lined up ta get into. The medical clinic building seemed pretty innocuous, at least from the outside. Whereas the customs building was ridiculous tall and absurdly circular, the building that contained the medical clinic was pretty much just a small townhouse, albeit far more maintained than the manor Marston had sent us ta. There was a sign above the clinic, and while I couldn't make out what the words said fer obvious reasons, I was able ta getta decent look at the illustration on the sign. The illustration on the sign was a simple comparison of two pictures. The picture on the left parta the sign was a heart, and notta candy heart, no, I meana biological textbook sorta heart, with the valves, arteries, aorta, and all that. The left heart was shriveled, and onea it's valves was severed. The heart on the right was also super realistic looking, with one exception. Where the left heart's valve had been separated, the right heart's valve had been connected with a shiny silver metal band. Sabarene still clinging ta my arm, I walked inside the clinic. The insidea the building that hosted the clinic was weird, even by Fremdosian standards. The walls and such were all madea shiny black metal, and the windows, what little there were, were comprised of shaded glass, as dark and ashy as the lens of Martson's glasses. This, of course, led ta the interior of the building becoming pitch black as soon as ya took about four steps inta it. "You can let goa my arm now, Vatarene.", I mumbled in the pitch black darkness, the girl's chest beating softly against my unusually sweaty tricep. "No, no, it's ok, it's ok.", she cheerily whispered in the dark, pressing up against my arm even more. "Like heck it is!", I loudly complained, but didn't make mucha an effort ta shake her offa me. Stuck in the blackness, and witha ninety pound accessory stuck ta my arm, I bumbled about the room, feeling up the walls fera passage way or something. Right as I was about ta give

up and head outta the excessively dark cave, I heard a buncha loud clangs, and a hellalotta clangs. My ears twitching like they had just drunk a gallon of espresso, I sprinted in the directiona the clangings, and straight inta hard, but curiously cool metal wall. "Ow.", I coughed out, head feeling fuzzy. "Oh my, your depth perception still needs work huh?", Sabarene said, patting the backa my head like I wasa dog. "It ain't that, there's no light in this goddang clinic. Why the heck ain't there any light?" "Oh... oh... probably because of temperature regulation." "What?" "Life metal needs to be forged at a very specific temperature, or so I'm told. Torches may give off light, but it's difficult to make them burn at a consistent level of heat." "Soa course the optimal solution is ta have no light at all." "The world doesn't operate with optimal solutions, Miss Axeman Red Four. The world operates with functional ones." "I'll operate my fist inta yer face if we don't get ta this clinic soon." I groaned, lightly tapping Sabarene on the backa her head. She responded by jabbing her elbow inta my stomach, not so lightly. "Guoh! Whatcha didya do that fer?!", I coughed, bent over. "You threatened me, so I simply made a preemptive strike~" Sabarene taunted, inna sing songey voice. "Ya smug little git!", I cackled, and tackled the smug Sister ontat the floor. I started squeezing the girl all over, pinching down hard on a soft bitta her flesh. "A-ah!", she cried out, sounding far more pained than the amounta pressure I was putting on her back warranted. "S-stop!" "Nah, I ain't gonna stop. Imma keep squeezing yer neck until ya apologize fer elbowing me." "Um... You're not squeezing my neck." "Then what am I- oh." I coughed awkwardly, and removed my hand from the chesta the suddenly silent Sister. As I got up on my feet, I noticed a faint light in the ceiling. Er... perhaps it was lessa light, and morea glow. The ceiling of the otherwise pitch black interior had green, glow in the dark arrows painted

on it, very clearly pointing the way to get to what I presumed was the clinic. "Were those arrows always there?" "Yup!", Sabarene said happily. "Then why didn't ya tell me?" "Because you never ask-ack!" "Did I get yer neck this time?" "No... no... you got the left one this time." I felt guilty, then didn't. "Chalk it up as a one of the cruelties of a functional world." Guided by the glowing arrows, Sabarene and I eventually wandered our way into a room that wasn't completely dark. Oh, to be sure, it was shady as all heck, but we could actually see stuff now. The dimly lit room we walked into looked like the entrance to the clinic did; black metal floors, black metal walls, black metal ceilings, and some tinted glass windows here and there. Cept, unlike the entrance, the dimly lit room we walked into was freezing. Freezing by even Proveshian standards, and freezing by Proveshian standards is gangrene frostbitten arm tier freezing. The cold made Sabarene cling to me even tighter than she had before, and while I wanted to complain, the shared body warmth made the chilliness of the room somewhat more bearable. "No. I refuse.", a high pitched, but firm sounding voice echoed out from the back of the room. "But Madame Marcela-" "I said no. I won't accept it. Give it to someone else!" I squinted my eye. A small, blonde girl wearing a white sundress was sitting down at a black metal table, fussing with a young scuzzy looking man clad in an inoffensive dark blue tunic and black slacks. In the center of the table was a black metal foot, fit for a child. Even in the dim light, I could see all around the room. Like a bunch of demented drapes, various limbs hung from the walls and the ceilings. Limbs made out of a gray porcelain looking kinda material, mind, but limbs none the less. Arms, legs, hands, feet, they all dangled here and there, like a ton of marti gra beads. "Sure are a whole lotta body parts here, huh?" "Those are molds, unfortunately.", the man at the black metal table stated, then

held up the small shiny foot, not so much at me and Sabarene, but at the little girl at the opposite end of the circular metal table. "Lifemetal limbs look like this." "The color of the steel and splendor of the engineering are truly magnificent," the girl in the sundress gushed, then pouted. "Which is why the appendage mustn't be wasted on the likes of me." The scuzzy looking man with opaque glasses sighed. "Madame Marcela. This foot was custom made for you. I couldn't give it to anyone else if I wanted." "Then wait for someone who you can give it too!", the small girl protested. "I am far too privileged to accept such an extravagant luxury." "It's not a luxury, it's a foot. You need it to walk." "I get along just fine with crutches, Mister Harynthen.", the small girl said, her lips curled up stiffly. "And I appreciate the work you and your people do, Mister Harynthen, but you'll find that when you get to my age-" "You're six cycles old.", Harynthen interjected, a little avail. "-That when you get to my age, you begin to see the true nature of things. That economic suppression leads to social oppression, that the geopolitical realities of this wretched continent are, at times, more overwhelming than you could even begin to imagine, that-" The small blonde girl stopped her tangent, her soft hazel eyes slowly falling upon me and- "Auntie Sabarene!", she cried out, a happy, childish tone in her haughty as heck voice. The blonde girl leapt out of the table, and hopped, literally hopped, over to us. She excitedly wrapped her arms around the white haired girl with a great deal of enthusiasm. I shook off the white haired woman and took a few steps away from her and the one legged blonde girl. "Hello, Marcela..." Sabarene warmly said, patting Marcela's head softly with her right hand. "I thought you were dead, Auntie Sabarene!", Marcela cried out in shock. "Why would you think that, Marcela?" "Daddy said that you died three cycles ago." "He did?" "Yes, yes, he did! Daddy said that you

were crushed by a giant rock, thrown off a cliff, stabbed fifteen times, shot with arrows nine times, trampled, and then pronounced dead by five separate licensed and highly respected Medics.” “I... I see.” “Oh, and mommy, mommy said that you accidentally hung yourself while making her a new whip, and-“ Sabarene held her hand up and poked the little girl gently on the cheek. “Um... well... as you can see, Marcela, I’m alive and moderately well.” “Great! Great great great! I can’t wait to tell daddy and mommy you’re back! We can go fishing like we used to, and-“ “Your parents already know I’m back, Marcela.” “They do?!” the little hazel eyed girl asked in amazement. “They never told me!” “Yes, well... I just got back.” “Oh! Oh, I guess that explains it, then!” The happy little girl turned to me and covered her mouth in shock. “Um.. um... Oh.”, Marcela said, her face glowing pink even in the dark. “A Fremdosian!”, the little girl exclaimed, covered her mouth in shock. Her surprised face froze for but a moment. “I mean... Greetings, fellow Collective citizen. I apologize for my rambunctious behavior, I acted out of-“ “Don’t sweat it, kid.”, I remarked, then looked down at the blonde haired, hazel eyed girl with crutches with a good deal of confusion. “What happened to your foot?” “It was bothering me, so I cut it off.”, the child in the sundress explained. “W-wha?” “Hahaha, no, no, forgive me, I was just joking.”, Marcela quickly clarified with a friendly wink. “Only a complete fool would cut off their own limb!”, the blonde girl giggled. “Huh, then how did you hurt yourself?” “I’m not entirely sure.”, Marcela said, resting her chin thoughtfully on one of her wooden crutches. “Daddy told me he found me like this.” I looked at Sabarene, then to Marcela, then to Sabarene again. “Your daddy... found you?” “Of course he found me.”, Marcela said, wagging her index finger at me. “All mommies and daddies find their children. To get a son, or a daughter, or a son that identifies as a

daughter, mommies and daddies search through war-torn cities and pull the child they want out of the rubble. That's how babies are made, isn't it?" "Er..." "Yes, my daddy and mommy are great people.", Marcela said, shaking her head thoughtfully. "They could have pulled anyone out of the rubble, but they had were charitable enough to pick me." The educated, exasperated man at the opposite end of the table that Marcela had been sitting at sighed. "Your parents also asked me to make you a new right foot, roughly four cycles ago." If you care about what your father and-" "Address him properly, Harythen!" "If you care about what *Master Marston* and your mother-" "Address her properly, Harythen!" "If you care about what Master Marston and Sister Kundare want, then please, let me begin the procedure." "I refuse. And besides, there's a Fremdosian present, you're obligated to treat her before me." "No, I'm obligated to treat five Fremdosians for every one Non-Collective Citizen. And I've treated twenty Fremdosians this rising period, so do not fret, Madame Marcela, you are more than approved to undergo the operation." "N-no.. no, Harythen, it's of no consequence, I'm fine, I don't need it, give... give it to someone else.", the elegant sounding little girl stuttered, looking at the small black metal foot with a slight hint of fear. Sabarene bent over and patted the backa Marcela's head. "Don't worry, it doesn't hurt. They put you to sleep before attaching the limb to you." "Y-you sure?", the scared looking little girl asked Sabarene, all pretenses of maturity out the window. Sabarene shook her head and smiled. "Yes, I'm sure. You won't feel a thing." "Then... then I suppose I'll undergo the operation after all, Harythen. N-not because I want a right foot... only... only because obtaining a right foot will help me help the people of Fremdos." "I wouldn't dare think otherwise.", Harythen said drily, then got up from the table, and dragged both the black metal foot

and the small crutch using girl away into a side room. "Auntie Sabarene?", I said, a bitta fangy grin on my face. "It's a term of affection, or so I'm told." "Heh, I'll take yer word fer it. Though it's kinda odd, that Brother Marston just lets his daughter walka around on her loneso-" "Sorry for the delay.", Harythen said, emerging from the side room. "Madame Marcela can get somewhat fussy at times. Five rising periods I had to administer a suppository to her, and-" "Whatsa suppository?" "Don't worry about it, Miss Amelia.", Sabarene said warmly. I raised an eyebrow. "We're back ta that now?" "Back to what, Miss Amelia?", the white haired girl said, stressing the pseudonym. "Back ta... aw, nothing, I suppose." "Take a seat, you two.", Harythen instructed us. Soon as we were settled in, the mousesh looking man took out a small metal rod and without even the slightest bitta warning, wacked my stump with it. "Gah!", I yelped, the pain from the small rod unexpectedly sharp and pronounced. "Good, so that's not a gangrene riddled piece of garbage.", Harythen said, perhaps more to himself than anything. He looked at Sabarene and stared at her face intently fera good moment. "Hm. And how did you first get that eye infection?" "Whatever do you mean?" "Your left iris is so swollen with pus it looks yellow." "No.. no, the discoloration is harmless, in fact... my left pupil has always like this.", the white hair girl half lied. "Right, and I'm the General of the Holy Collective. Look, do yourself a favor and wash out your eye with this.", Harythen said, pushing forth a small glass bottle offa clear translucent liquid. "It will severely sting, but stinging is preferable having to gouge your eye out with a spoon." "T-thanks, Mister Harythen, but I'm not here for my eye." "You should be." "Even so... do you have a bottle of oil? My lifemetal hand has gotten slightly stiff." "Let me see it." Sabarene put her black metal hand on the table. Harythen moved each of the joints on



the red eyed girls left hand, then cringed at the loud creaking noise each one made.

“Right, so I’m just going to go for a conservative estimate here – You haven’t checked into a lifemetal clinic in over a cycle, have you?” “Three cycles.” “Three cycles?”, the beady eyed man asked, confused. “Yes, three cycles, she just said that, there’s no need ta repeat it.” “Three cycles...”, Harythen continued, oblivious or apathetic ta what I had gabbed about. “No, there’s no way. This model of lifemetal was released to the public just a few rising periods ago. I don’t think even the Plebian branch had access to something like this until two cycles ago, and even then...” “I just need some oil, Mister Harythen-“ “Yes, yes, I’ll get to that.”, Harythen said, playing around with Sabarene’s hand like it was a toy. He pressed down on her pinky, causing the metal cylinder she had used ta pick the locka my apartment ta pop up. “I see you’ve customized this slightly.” He gave the black metal ring finger a quick twist, causing its top ta fall off entirely.” “Perhaps more than slightly.” Harythen said, then sniffed Sabarene’s slightly smaller finger suspiciously. “Do you have a liquid of some kind inside this?” “Just a few drops of scrubbing aid.”, the white haired girl answered briskly. The curious man turned Sabarene’s hand over, causing the contents of her finger, a bitta queer smelling brown liquid, ta spill out on the table. He scooped up somea the brown liquid with his index finger and licked it. “This is rum.”, Harythen noted, then casually screwed the top of the white haired girl’s ring finger back on. He poked and prodded her middle metal finger. “Um, you might not want to do tha-“ Before Sabarene could finish her warning, her metal middle finger shot off her hand, and flew around the room at rapid speeds. The stupidly fast finger turned projectile bounced from wall ta wall ta ceiling ta wall, likea methed out spider. “Fer frick’s sake!” Quickly and clumsily, I leapt ontopa the fingerless

Sister, tackling her and rolling under the table. The renegade bird kept on flying around the dark cool room, before settling down about three inches into my left shoulder.

“Gah!”, I groaned, the impact the ejected finger like onea Brother Gino’s punches. “Oh... oh no!”, Sabarene cried out. “Miss Ax-melia, your shoulder-” “Is fine.”, I mumbled, plucking her detached finger from my armor inna sloppy fashion. “Hurts like heck, but it’s fine. Thank the suns fer armor.” I tossed Sabarene’s wayward middle finger back onto the table. “Are you some kind of idiot?”, Harythen questioned Sabarene, carefully reloading the renegade digit back into her hand. “A spring loaded middle finger? Why would you even- No, no, I’m not even going to ask.” He reached into robes and pulled out a big glass bottle, and quickly doused Sabarene’s swiss army knife offa hand with its content. “You should be set for the next half cycle or so, at least when it comes to your hand’s flexibility issues.” Harythen turned to me. “As for you, Miss Axmelia, I can provide you with a lifemetal arm, but the quality won’t be as good as that of your spouse’s.” “She ain’t my spouse!” “Sorry, your wife. Madame Marcela made a fuss of my use of gender specific words, so-” “Aw, whatever. How much will the dang thing cost?” Harythen blinked at me. “It’s free.” “Free?”, I said, staring at the man across from me suspiciously. “Yes, it’s free. Haven’t you been to a clinic before?” “Come on, there’s no way something like that is free. Makinga arm outta metal hasta be pretty expensive.” Harythen looked at me all queer like. “Pretty expensive would be understating it.”, Harythen remarked. “It runs us about one hundred thousand marks to produce an ounce of the stuff.” “But you just said the darn thing was free!” The modestly dressed man clutched his head. “It’s free *for you*.” “Why me in particular?” “Not you as in you you. You as in, the person receiving the lifemetal arm.” “Wait, so everyone who walks in

here can getta shiny new arm fer free?" "That's what I've literally been saying this entire conversation." "Then who the heck pays fer all it?" "The Holy Collective does, natura-" "Where do they get the money from?" "Taxation, grants from Supreme Sibling Desnion, subsidies, among other things." I shuddered slightly at the t word, then swallowed some spittle and smiled. "Guh, alright. Let's begin the procedure, then." I narrowed my eye. "And yer sure this is all free?" Harythen shook his head, looking a bit exhausted. "Yes, it's free. And you're in luck, I have just enough lifemetal left to make an arm. If you had come any later you would have had to wait for a new shipment to arrive." I raised my eyebrow. "And how long would that have taken?" "A new shipment? No longer than half a cycle, assuming the ships and Caravans ran like they should." "Wait, wait, wait, hold up. What about all those folks outside in that line?" "You mean the non-natives?" "Yeah, the folks who ain't Fremdosians. Will they havta wait halfa cycle?" "To get healthcare? No." "To get a new limb, yes." "Er... y'know what.", I stuttered. "I... I don't wanna go ahead with this." "The procedure is painless, I promis-" "It ain't about that." Sabarene flicked me on the head with twoa her fingers. "I know what you're thinking, Miss Amelia, but-" I ignored her and stood up from the table. "Nah. Nah, I'm good.", I said, staring down Harythen. "Give that thing ta someone else. I've got better things ta do." Irritated fer some reason, I walked away from the table and began making my way outta the clinic." "Wait, Miss Amelia, that's a w-" "No, I ain't getting it, and that's fina-ugh!" My head smacked against something hard and metallic. "Wall. That's a wall.", Sabarene finished meekly, grabbing a small bottle of oil and daintily walking away from Harythen and the chilly ass room. "You really should get the arm, you know.", she chided, pulling me ta my feet and guiding me outta the clinic. "S'my body, I'll do what I want with it.", I

muttered, disoriented, the light from the suns outside causing me to cover my eye with my hand. "Right, but didn't you come here to become whole again?" I stopped straight, and glared at the white haired girl. "The heck does that have to do with anything?" "Um... well... it's not like you'll be able to wield an axe with just one hand, right?" "A great axe, no. But I can use a normal one no problem. Ain't like I chopped off my weak hand, y'know." Sabarene's lips curled up some. "Yes, but there's no need for you to remain handicapped, so-." I gestured to the giantass line of people gathered outside the clinic. "There ain't no need for these folks to remain handicapped, neither. See that fella, about five or six spots down? He's missing an arm and a leg, literally, he ain't gotta arm, nor a leg. Now why the flying frick should I be able to cut in front of him? Don't give me any of that Fremdosian bullcrap, neither." "You should be able to cut in front of these people because you actually matter.", Sabarene answered, bluntly and with a bit of spite. "You agreed to be my champion, didn't you? Four rising periods from now, you are going to engage my brother in combat. If you are unable to perform, not only might you die, you'll humiliate me and weaken my influence." "Gee, wouldn't that be a shame?" "It would be, imbecile. If a war breaks out, none of these people will get a life metal limb. You've seen the Plebian branch, the distribution of resources will become skewed." I gritted my teeth. "Look, I ain't exactly what you'd call a moral authority, on just about anything, but cheating folks outta stuff they paid for and I didn't... it don't feel right." Sabarene glared at me, an incredulous look on her face. "Doesn't 'feel' right? What, you think doing the right thing is supposed to 'feel' a certain way?" I shook my head. "Yeah, I think it is." "Then you truly are an imbecile.", the red eyed girl all but spat, stopping short in the midst of the harsh sunlight. "The root of all the world's suffering can be traced to the

blind adherence of personal truths, the idiotic elevation of subjective experiences. Think. Don't feel, think. Feelings are what leads a family to sell all their worldly possessions for a rapture that never comes. Feelings are what convinces a rapist that his victim actually wishes to be violated, a murderer that the child before him deserves to die. Feelings are what injured soldiers get right before charging targets of little strategic or symbolic value. Feelings are what makes authority figures believe their undeserved and unwarranted hype. Feelings justify anything and everything. I'll respect whatever decision you choose to make, Miss Axeman Red Four, but you need to give me a better justification than your feelings." I opened my mouth to voice an objection, then threw out my fist in surrender. "Fine. I'll get the stupid magic metal arm. But only cause yer making such a big deal about it." "Then let's hurry back in the clinic, before someone else can get the lifemetal limb." "Somehow I doubt that'll be a problem, *General*.", I grumbled, marching back into the clinic as the folks in the non Fremdosian line stared at me with a combination of loathing and resignation. I walked a good deal ahead of Sabarene, keeping my palm stretched in front of me in the off chance another wall decided to appear out of nowhere. But something felt off. "Wait, hold up a bit Sister." I said, stopping short of the room where Harythen and the tables had been. "Don't tell me you're having third thoughts about this!" Covering the white haired girl's mouth with my hand, I crouched down some. "Shut yer trap.", I whispered, stepping back a bit into the darkness. I felt a slimy wetness on my palm, and instinctively retracted it away from Sabarene's mouth. "There's no need to be worried!", Sabarene exclaimed, her tongue sticking out slightly. "Everything's fine-" "No, it ain't.", I hissed back, trying to speak as little as possible. "The temperature's all messed up." "What do you mean? It's perfectly

comfortable in here, not too hot, not too cold-“ Sabarene paused, uneasy. “Oh my.” I shoved the black hooded girl down onto the floor, accidentally making her lips kiss the cool black metal. “Genuflect on that last bit and shut the heck up ferawhile, alright?”, I whispered, then slowly ventured forward, into the dimly lit room that shoulda been freezing cold, but wasn’t. Worryingly, Harythen was nowhere ta be seen, not sitting at the table, and not taking stock of the many molds dangling from the walls and ceiling. The molds, too, looked off. Er, well, more off than a buncha dangling detached limbs would usually look, anyhow. The gray leg molds were cut... no, smashed, in half, like someone had tooka sledgehammer ta each and every onea them. The arm molds, on the other.. guh... hand, were completely intact but burnt, and by burnt I mean smoldering black marshmallow burnt. Despite that, the air in the small fake-limb lined room was fine. I couldn’t smell or taste even the slightest bit of smoke, and I could see things just as crappily as I could before. Keeping my head down low and breathing almost exclusively through my nose, I slowly crawled around the circular metal table, but didn’t see any sign of Harythen, or Marcela. I waited in silence fera few moments, leaning against the circular table, but I didn’t hear nothing, didn’t feel nothing, didn’t see nothing. The small parta me that wasn’t a complete dumbass suggested I bolt outta the dark spooky clinic lickity split, but the nigh all-encompassing parta me that *was* a complete dumbass urged me to press forward with my investigation. Silent and steady, I approached the sideroom that Marcela had been ushered to, then grimaced. The entrance ta the sideroom had the same darn double handle system that had given me trouble on the Caravan. But unlike the Caravan’s inconsiderate door, the two handles were close enough ta each other fer the amounta hands I had or didn’t have ta matter.

Using my teeth ta pull the left handle of the sideroom one way, and my five fingers the other handle the other, I managed ta open the door without having ta sacrificing much besides my dignity. "Oh no.", I whispered, as I gazed inta the side chamber. Inside of the small, snug room was... Harythen. Well, half of him, at least. The conservatively dressed man leaned against the other end of the side chamber, missing everything below his torso. His eyes were open, but not wide with shock or nothing. Hell, he even had a slight grin on his face. More offputting than the man's faint smile, though, was the nature of his dismemberment. I had only severed two people in half at the waist before, and whenever I had it was never a clean experience. See, ta cut someone in half ya need a lotta force, and a big weapon ta most effectively apply that force, say a greataxe, orra broadsword, something that can force its way past a whole mess of stuff. Cause when ya cut someone from side ta side, yer going ta have ta make yer way through three or four feet of skin, blood, muscles, and bone. That's a heckuva lot of resistance ta deal with, even if the fella yer carving up ain't wearing armor. The end result of cleaving someone in two should be you, the walls, the floor, and the ceiling being splattered with yer victim's insides. But there was not even the slightest bit of blood present in the sidechamber, not even a small hint of Harythen's legs, hips, and feet anywhere. He had definitely been sliced inta two, cause the wound at the bottom of his torso was jagged, but it wasn't bleeding. No... the wound... the wound was cauterized. From how the wound sizzled, from how Harythen's bottom smelled vaguely of fried pork, it was clear that some kind of flame had stopped the flowa blood from oozing outta the poor fella's body. I paused fer a moment, then bolted outta the sidechamber, and started sprinting, quick as I could, away from the dimly light clinic. Before I even cleared

the metal table, a soft sounding voice called out in the darkness of the clinic. "There's no need to run. I'm not going to hurt you, Marcela." I slammed my body down, kneeling under the cover of the table. "No, really, I'm not.", the soft, androgynous voice continued, echoing out in the darkness. "That man was trying to hurt you, Marcela. He was, he truly was.", the almost gentle presence insisted. "I had to do what I did. Master Marston would never have forgiven me if I let you fall into harms way." The moment the man said "Master Marston", I heard a short, sudden breath. I snapped my head towards the source of the noise. Leaned against a darkened corner was Marcela, her small body shaking, the hinges of her white sundress burnt black. Her crutches lay in front of her, discarded haphazardly in the middle of the room. The blonde girl's right hand was pressed firmly against her mouth, twitching. Her left hand clutched the foot Harythen had prepared. I don't reckon she saw me, or if she did, I don't reckon she gave my presence much thought. "Come out, Marcela. Your father's here.", the soft voice echoed out. "Your mother's here as well. They're looking for you. So step out into the light. There's nothing to fear." Marcela removed her hand from her mouth, and pushed herself up. The small girl's lips began to move. "A-are you sure?", I cried out, before Marcela could say a word. "Are mommy and daddy really here?", I asked, forcing my voice up about fifteen octaves. "Of course. Of course, sweet child.", the soft sounding figure answered, their voice getting closer and closer to me. "W-where are you?", I responded, accenting the stutter. "It's dark... I can't see..." "Come this way, child. Follow my voice.", the androgynous presence answered. I deliberately paused for a few seconds, then pointed at Marcela and pressed my palm towards her, like I was trying to shove her into the wall. "O-ok, then.", I answered, making my voice sound as vulnerable



as I could. "I'll... I'll be right over." Heart pounding rapidly, I crawled over to Marcela's crutches. They were made of a light sort of wood, enough to support a forty pound child, but definitely not suitable for inflicting blunt force trauma on anyone. Even so, I picked one of them up, and pressed my back against the circular table. "Don't worry Marcela..." the voice coaxed, "This way... come this way, and everything will be alright." The voice came closer, and closer, till I was almost sixty percent sure he, or she was at the opposite side of the table. I breathed in deep, then roughly chucked Marcela's crutch to the left of me, at which it suspended, burnt arm molds. The moment the crutch left my hand, I sprinted to the right, not caring about the noise I was making, just pushing my body to move as fast and as rough as it possibly could. "Burn, Marcela!", a triumphant, deranged sounding voice cackled, as a fierce burst of flame devoured the crutch and the dangling limbs in an instant. "Burn, you useless whelp!" Heart pounding, my boots punching against the metal floor, I came upon the exposed back of the flame producing figure. The figure turned its head towards me, shocked. "What the-", the figure let out, right before I crashed into it, using my left shoulder as a battering ram. The two of us hit the ground, hard, but I didn't pause to worry about little things like concussions or dislocated shoulders or the like. No, in the dark room, without even seeing what the thing I was on top of looked like, I pummeled the thing, over, and over, and over again. Whatever I was on caught my hand just as I was about to administer my fifth punch, then kicked me hard in the crotch. "Burn, interloper!", the figure hissed, raising its left hand to my face. I had a gut reaction to yank my head away from the thing I was attacking's palm, but its words and the state of the room around me quashed that instinct almost immediately. Instead of retreating from the figure, I instead crashed my skull

straight into that of the silhouette below me, just as a fierce beam of heat blasted out of its left palm. As my vision grew blurry, the figure below me moved its head up slightly, groaned, and collapsed fully onto the metal floor, motionless. I stumbled up onto my feet. My head hazy, my shoulders aching, and the smell of smoke thick in the air, I grabbed one of the arm molds from the walls. It was heavier than I had expected, which was a pleasant surprise. I limped my way back over to the fallen figure. Through blurry vision and a pounding headache, I managed to make out the details of the silhouette I had pummeled. The figure on the floor was a man with short powdered hair. His build was short and stocky. He was wearing an ash-colored outfit, made of linen. I rubbed my finger against his face, and felt something thick and oily on top of his cheek skin. The ashy man with powdered hair seemed to be wearing face paint, but in the dimly lit room I couldn't quite make out what color the messy stuff smeared on his cheek was. The man with the powdered wig's chest moved up and down, up and down, rhythmically, gently even. I shattered his windpipe with my boot. The fellow with the powdered hair spat up a bit of phlegm, and hacked out a whole lotta blood. He choked and gasped for air, but with the heel of my boot embedded in his throat, all the gray-clad man could do was swallow back in some of the stuff that had come out of him. Don't know if he suffocated, or his heart gave up or something, but after one last pathetic sounding gurgle, the ashy man with the powdered wig expired. I stared at the fellow's body, I stared at the bits of him that lay on the cold metal floor. Everything remained as it was, the man's neck didn't reconstruct itself, his blood didn't slither back into his body. I stumbled a bit, then steadied myself against the table. I felt tired, very tired, but the frightened gasps from the girl in the corner kept me up. Without saying a word, I grabbed Marcela by the nape

of her neck and slung her over my shoulders. I was too exhausted ta talk, and there really wasn't much that could be said anyways. Marcela didn't offer any resistance ta me, but I reckon that was less out of trust and more ta do with how she was petrified and on the vergea havinga mental breakdown. I crept outta the dimly light room and towards the darkness. "Lancer Blue Five wouldn't take another step if he were you, Fremdosian." A man, much thinner than the other, but dressed in the same fashion and wearing the same powdered sorta wig, stepped outta the darkness, blocking me and Marcela's exit. He held his left palm towards me, threateningly. "Move but a measure, and you will regret it." I stared at the man in front of me. He didn't look terribly threatening at all, but like the other fella, there was a red ruby embedded in his hand. "Alright. Ya got me. I give up.", I said, uselessly glancing around the room fera trapdoor or hidden exit ta duck away inta. "What do ya want?" "Lancer Blue Five wishes for you to lay down the girl, and to go on your way." I narrowed my eye. "And if I don't?" The thinner man in the powdered wig shotta brief burst flame at my feet. "G-gah!" "Then Lancer Blue Five will turn you into cinder.", he answered, firmly. "The Mournful Remnant has no quarrel with native-born Fremdosians, but will not let the fear of collateral damage get in the way of justice.." "And somehow justice involves ya murdering a crippled child, huh?", I asked, inna vain hope of distracting the second fella. "A child for a thousand children, an murder for a million murders.", the powdered wig wearing man responded. "Leave now, or be destroyed." "There's no need for that, Mister Lancer Blue Five.", a calm voice called out. Sabarene emerged from the darkness, her hood down, the gold gone from her left eye. Her face bore neither malice nor fear, her lips curled in a way that was not quite cold, yet far from warm. "If it's vengeance that you seek, then

do not bother with the girl, or the Unionist. They are but a pittance compared to me.”

The thinner man in gray kept his palm pointed at me and Marcela, and looked at Sabarene, hesitation disrupting his resolute face. “A Unionist? This girl is a Unionist?”

“She is. Her name is Axeman Red Four.” Lancer Blue Five stared at me. “Will you not leave, then?” “Not without these two, no.” “Then I truly am sorry, Axeman Red Four.”, the man in front of me and Marcela choked out, his words shaky as he raised his palm up at me. A small clink rang out in the darkness. “I am sorry too, Mister Lancer Blue Five.”, Sabarene spoke out, her words dry, her face a featureless mask. The man with the powdered wig and ruby embedded hand fell softly onto the ground, a metal middle finger embedded in the back of his skull. The white haired girl walked up to the fella, and plucked her finger from the man apparently known as Lancer Blue Five’s head. “Are there any more?”, she asked me, her face still not conveying much emotion. “Don’t think so. There was one other fella, but I took care of him.” “You killed him.” “Yeah.” “A mistake. Now we won’t know why they were here.” I wiped some sweat from off my forehead. “Did you catch the part where he shot fire out of his hand?” “Yes, I did. More worryingly is how this man managed to do it without using a fuel source or a match.”

“Er, it’s as Blondie says, ain’t it? Magic and the like.” Sabarene’s face faltered. “I... I know... and I don’t deny... but I can’t understand...” she bit her index finger. “Perhaps we shouldn’t be wasting our time here.” “Here in the clinic?” The girl in black nodded her head, and stared into my green eye with solemn red ones. “In Fremdos.” “But what about that whole stopping war stuff?” “If there’s no continent left to save it won’t matter too much if we stop wars... or... or...” Sabarene became lost in her own thoughts, and gazed down at the man she had just impaled with, as if staring long enough at him

would give her an answer of some kind. Marcela started sobbing. “Harythen!”, she sobbed, tears and snot flowing freely down her face. “Mister Harythen! It’s my fault! It’s all my fault! If I had... if I had just gotten the limb....” Marcela’s tears broke Sabarene out of her stupor. She clutched the blonde child by the shoulders and shook her, a bit more than was strictly necessary. “Marcela. Marcela, calm down. You need to calm down. There will be time for tears once we get you back to your mother and father. For now, keep quiet.” The blonde child looked up at Sabarene, her hazel eyes fulla tears. “O-ok, Auntie Sabarene. I... I lost my composure. I apologize.” She sniffled, then her face stiffened up, resolute. “A life... it’s just one life. But Mister Harythen! I... I.... aaaaaaaaaaugh!!!!!!!!”, Marcela cries resumed, her stoicism lasting roughly two and a half seconds. Sensing that the trauma afflicting Marcela wouldn’t be cured by a inspirational speech or a pat on the back, I picked the girl up and sprinted for the exit, Sabarene following close behind me. If there were other powdered wig wearing psychos in the building I wouldn’t have known, because I put all my heart and soul in getting the hell outta the lifemetal clinic. Head pounding, chest pumping, and boot covered in blood, I stepped out into the light. The line of folks waiting ta git treatment had vanished entirely, replaced by a crowd of folks with metal arms and metal legs. At the front of the line was Brother Gino, his bulky metal forearms shining in the light of the suns. “Ah, well met Gene- Sister Sabarene!”, he boomed out. “I was just in the midst of maintaining the Plebian Branch’s limbs. Some layfolk tried to force us to the back of the line, can you even imagine such nonsen-“ “Silence!”, Sabarene bellowed out ta the gathering of folks clad in the black habits. “Save your idle talk for another rising period. This building had been compromised, by a sect calling themselves the Mournful Remnant. Though I am a

mere candidate for the office of General, I beseech each and every able bodied citizen to do what they can to secure the lifemetal clinic. Lives and resources are at stake.”

Sabarene blinked and turned her attention ta the orange haired man specifically.

“Brother Gino. This girl is the daughter of your champion. Take her to him at once.” The orange haired man shook his head firmly. “I’ll have five of my best men bring her to Marston.” “Do it yourself, Brother Gino. The safety of this girl can’t be left to chance.”

“O-ok...” Gino mumbled meekly, his cheeks flushed, looking away from Sabarene and down into the water of the canals. He gently took Marcela offa my back and put her onta his, then sprinted off at breakneck speed, taking occasional glances back at Sabarene, glances she didn’t seem ta notice. “And what are you imbeciles standing about for?”, Sabarene barked to Brother Gino’s soldiers. “Didn’t I just ask every able bodied citizen to secure the lifemetal clinic?” Fifty or so of the metal limbed folk dashed into the darkened clinic, their shortswords drawn and their metal limbs exposed for all ta see.

The white haired girl then looked at me. “As for you, Axeman Red Four, it seems we will have to-“ Alarm washed over her ruby red eyes. “Y-your hair!”, she cried out, distressed. “We’ll havta my hair, alright, gotcha.” “No, no, your braid! It’s gone!” I patted the back of my head. Where my pigtail shoulda been, wasa scorched little stub. “Huh.”, I muttered, brushing strainsa slightly burnt green hair between my fingers. “Reckon I’m pretty lucky then, ain’t I?” “Lucky? How are you lucky? Your braid was burnt off!” “Beats getting a boot ta the throat orra finger ta the brain, don’t it?” “But isn’t your hair part of what marks you as a warrior?” “Nah. S’just hair.” “O-oh... alright then.”, Sabarene said, still looking uneasy. I rubbed the backa my somewhat burnt head. “So what was the deal with those powdered wig guys?” “Hm...”, Sabarene pondered “I’m not entirely sure, but I think

they're an insurgent group of some kind, most likely the remaining vestiges of Unionist power here in Fremdos." "I suppose that would explain things somewhat, sure." I frowned before the last of my words even pattered out. "Actually, wait, no it wouldn't. Brother Marston-" "It's just Marston." "Yer Brother, whose name is Marston seems to have an iron grip on this city. How could there still be a remnant of much of anything with all the heavily armed military folk here?" "A thousand blades mean nothing to those willing to be cut.", a cheery voice chimed out. Dressed in a pink pastel robe, and missing everything from his usual outfit besides his purple tophat, Lucas stepped up onto the small stone bridge Sabarene and I were standing on. "Thought you were meditating.", I muttered. "I was,", the blonde boy answered with a wave of his hand, "but the search for inner enlightenment got boring quick. Plus I just saw a large amount of soldiers rush into that dark building, so I presume there was a magical mishap of some kind." I eyed the Sorcerer suspiciously, then told him something I reckon he already knew about anyways. "As a matter of fact, there was. Two fellas shot flame outta the palms of their hand." "Blue flames or Red flames?", Lucas inquired, a certain academic quality about him. "Normal colored flames.", I answered. "And normal colored flames here would be-" "Orange, of course." "Right, right, orange." The sorcerer adjusted the brim of his tophat. "And what device did the flamethrowing gentlemen seem to be using?" "I don't know if they were using it or something shoved up their bum, but the two fellas had a red ruby embedded in their hands." "Oh, may I see the two gems?" "Er, no can do on that. The rubies dissolved the moment the fellas died." "Oh no.", Lucas meeped out, my words shaking his smug confident face some. "What, were the crystals not supposed to dissolve?" "No, no, they're working as intended.", Blondie said, then

grimaced. "But that's not a terribly good thing." "I wouldn't consider crystals that cause men to shoot fire out of their hands to be a terribly good thing in most circumstances, Mister Lucas." "It's worse than that. So much worse than that.", Blonde said, scratching the top of his left hand. "Those crystals that you two claimed to have seen... they're not too much of a problem on their own. Getting scorched by a little bit of flame now and then never hurt anyone." "I knew a Swordarm who would disagree with ya on that, but go on." "Right, the issue is not so much crystals that turn people into human flamethrowers, as it is the device that makes these crystals." Sabarene's face seized up. "A device that makes- You're saying there's some kind of magical object that's manufacturing those horrid crystals?" "Er.. yes, pretty much.", Lucas half coughed. "But I'm fairly sure there needs to be a catalyst of sorts to make the Munitions Module function." "And what would that catalyst be, exactly?" "I haven't the slightest clue.", he admitted, his cheeks as pink as the robes he was wearing. "That doesn't help us at all, you charlatan!" The sorcerer sheepishly tugged on his right earlobe. "Does it really matter? We're here to get you appointed General, right? Who cares about a few flame producing crystals?" "Are you out of your mind?!", Sabarene shrieked. "Assuming I'm not deeply intoxicated or suffering from a bout of severe schizophrenia, you just told us that there's some kind of magical device that not only enables men to fire flame from orifices flame was never meant to be fired out of, but that the device mass produces stuff like that!" "That is what I said, yes." "So of COURSE stopping that thing from becoming an issue is an issue! A device like that could arm an entire military!" "Orra few pissed off powdered wig wearing weirdos, huh?" I cracked all fivea my fingers and smiled. "Oi, Sister Saparene. Let me and Ruckus take carea this fer ya. We'll find out what's the deal with that Mumbling



Remnant group, and smash that crystal making thing ta bits.” Sabarene stared at me, her face uneasy. “No, I should come with you and help-“ “Don’t.”, I said, placing my hand firmly on her shoulder. “There’s a giant statue of ya in the center of the city. Yer not really inna position ta be a agent of subterfuge.” “Ah, don’t look so glum, Sister!”, Lucas harped. “This is actually a fantastic opportunity for you!” The blonde boy rubbed his hands tagther like a happy merchant and grinned lewdly at Sabarene. “Remember scenario five hundred and fifty seven?” “Was that the one where I defeat the evil overlord through the power of love?” “No, that’s scenario five hundred and fifty six. Scenario five hundred and fifty seven is the one dealing with domestic terrorism.” “Right, right, sorry.” “Don’t be sorry, just be charismatic!”, Blondie enegergetically assured the red eyed girl, slapping her so hard on the back she almost tumbled off the small stone bridge into the canal. “This city has suffered a great tragedy. A radical insurgent group ruthlessly attacked a medical center. In these darkest of times, a hero must rise in order to help Fremdos move forward.” Lucas smiled deviously, looking far more sinister than anyone wearing a pink robe had the right ta look. “You, Sister Sabarene, will be that hero. Go and help, and by help, I mean yell at others to help. Find out if there were any victims, and then ooze excessive praise on the victim and vow to provide for his or her family. But most importantly, remember to-“ “Right, right, do alla the low life stuff Blondie taught ya.”, I mumbled offhand as I started sauntering offa the small stone bridge off into an alleyway. “Wait up, Patchy!”, Lucas called out, jogging ta catch up ta me. “So, we’re doing an investigation, huh?”, he yakked, skipping from marble sidewalk ta sidewalk like he wasn’t worried about falling in the canals. “More or less.”, I murmured, under my breath. Lucas gazed at me, puzzled. “Er, what?” “Don’t worry about it.”, I said,

once I was sure I was far outta Sabarene's earshot. "Do ya know where the nearest duck stall is?" "A duck stall?" "Yeah, the duck stall. The big tower where the messenger ducks all perch." "Oh god, not the ducks again. Why do you people use ducks? They're waterfowl, it doesn't make any sense for them to-" "Have ya seen a big tower where ducks fly inta, yes or no. It ain'ta hard question ta answer." Lucas stared at me, a bit of disbelief on his face. "Well, yes, I have seen a tower that can be described as such, but-" "Then let's go ta it. Quick as we can, too." "Fine, fine.", the boyish looking Sorcerer acquiesced, blowing bangs of his blonde hair with curled lips. "No need to be so pushy, you erratic elf." The Sorcerer stared at me with narrowed eyes. "Your head's covered in blood." "Don't worry, it ain't mine, I think." "Nevertheless..." Lucas pulled out a purple handkerchief from his pink robes, and dampened it with a splasha the salty canal water. "What are ya-mph!" Casually, the blonde sorcerer wiped my forehead, scrubbing my scalp with his finger nails. "Ah, as I thought. You sustained a small abrasion." Before I could even raise an objection, Lucas had slapped onea his "Band-Aid" thingies onta my face. "Right, there we go. Eat this, too." He said, shoving a small pill inta my mouth "You can bite down on the aspirin. It's a chewable." "The heck issa aspirin?" "Just swallow it already, you despicable dark elf." I did as I was told, figuring that if it was poison spitting it out wouldn'ta done me much good anyways. "Tastes like chalk.", I grumbled, gulping down the pasty remnants of the pill Blondie shoved onta my tongue. "Yes, but it will help clear up your head. Here, drink this as well.", Lucas said, pouring a small bottle of pink stuff inta my mouth. "A-absolutely disgusting!", I spat, coughing a bit of the liquid out. "Drink the pepto bismol, accept the pepto bismol, love the pepto bismol.", Blondie instructed me sternly. "It cures nausea, heartburn, upset stomach, indigestion, and

diaherria.” “Like hell it do- huh.” Perhaps it was just the powera suggestion, but sure enough, as the weird pink liquid sept into my stomach, I began feeling a whole lot better. “Uh... thanks fer that, I guess.” “You’re welcome then, I suppose.”, Lucas responded, tilting the brim of his hat over his eyes. “The mallard mail tower is somewhere in the distance, I believe.”, the Sorcerer said as his sandals pressed lightly against the marble pavement of Fremdos’s canals. We walked briskly and in silence, the ever enduring ebbs of the ocean and the murmuring of folks in the townhouses taking up most of the airwaves. I dida inventory of my armor. Thankfully, the leather set I had confiscated from Bowman Yellow seemed ta be in semi functional order. The flames that had taken off my pigtail didn’t seem ta have done much ta ruin the integrity of the protective clothing I had strapped on my back. There was a deep hole in my left shoulder pad, but that wasn’t causea the flames or nothing, it was causea one red eyed idiot’s detachable digit. Frankly, I was fine. What bothered me the most physically wasn’t the state of my armor or the itches and stings of my battered body, nah, it was the heat. Fremdos’s suns may not have been able ta burn me much, but they sue caused me ta sweat more than I ever had before. I was almost completely mystified as ta how anyone could bare ta live in sucha absurdly hot city. Lucas and my crawl through the canals ended almost as soon as it began. We emerged out into a wide open square, a square that thankfully lacked both gigantic statues anda absurdly large crowd of rose bearing people. Smack dab in the center right of the square was what I was looking fer, the Duck Tower. Cept it was much nicer looking than the Duck Tower in Provesh, that was fer damn sure. Provesh’s Duck tower was pretty much a glorified treehouse with tonsa letters and such at the top. The duck tower in Fremdos, however, well, it was

madea pure white marble, and had a damn near constant flowa ducks coming in and outta the tower's pinnacle. "Ducks. Why ducks? Why not ravens? Why not owls?" "Oh, sure, like owls make sense. Yeah, that's how ya deliver messages, by birds who sleep all the damn time." Stop insulting owls, Patchy..", Lucas warned me. "I won't warn you again.", he warned me again. "Ain't here ta argue nohow, Blondie.", Is aid, than strided into the towera Mallards. Like with all institutions in Fremdos, there wasa glum looking bureaucrat sitting in the center of it. She hada black collar around her neck, and looked nearly as glum as the Clerk Sabarene, Lucas and I had met when we entered the city. She looked ancient, about forty ta forty five cycles old. Her hair was as white as Sabarene's, but nowhere near as well maintained and pretty."Name.", the bureaucrat asked, all warm like, in the same way that sitting in yer own stool is all warm like. "Axeman Red Four.", I quickly said, "I'm looking ta see if any letters from-" "One moment, Miss.", the clerk w. "Oh, and I'll require the Unionist fee from you." "The unionist fee?" "I just said that, dear.", the female burecareat droned inna bored sounding snooze. "All Unionists must pay fifty marks per letter addressed to them." "Ehehehe... I don't, uh, got any marks on me, is the thing." "Then I can't give you your mail.", the old lady replied ta me witha throaty sorta cough.. "Er.. I'm not a Unionist.", Blondie said ta the collar wearing woman. "My name is Lucas Gandulfadore Melloi the Third, Sorcerer Supreme, is there any chance I could receive this elf's mail?" The elderly woman put one of her wrinkled white hands on topa the other. "Oh, bless your maldeveloped brain, dear. I'll waive the fee for your paraprofessional, but you simply must keep it a secret from Kundare's City Corps." "Paraprosesi- Hold on here, I'm not mentally disabled!", the blonde Sorcerer protested, as duck soared into the rafters above us, quacking all the

while. "I'll have you know that I have an IQ of one hundred and seventy five and that I graduated top of my class in the-." "Yes, yes, whatever you say dear.", the elderly woman with a black collar around her neck said to Lucas with a kind, highly put on smile. "Aight.", I said to the old clerk. "Canya check to see if there's a letter from Axeman Red Four?" "Sure, sweetie, sure. Though it may take a few moments." It took a few moments, and the squacking of about five different mallards, but soon enough the old woman returned with a simple looking package, about as wide as my hand and as long as my stump. "Thank ya kindly, miss.", I mumbled, then dashed out of the Duck Tower quick as I did the Lifemetal Clinic. "Woah, woah, wait just a minute.", Lucas said, grabbing me by the collar and yanking me back into the tower full of avians. "What's the rush, Patchy?" "Ain't it obvious? We gotta go find out about those Mournful Remnant fellas and stomp em something fierce!" Lucas narrowed his icy blue eyes at me. "You didn't bungle the sect's name, Patchy.", boy in the frayed purple top hat said, slowly, apprehensively. I sheepishly rubbed the back of my shoulder. "Shucks, even an idiot gets stuff right once in a while, right?" "Right, but you are not an idiot, Axeman Red Four.", the blonde boy spoke out, his voice low, lacking any of its usual enthusiasm. "You're nowhere near as intelligent as you think you are, either. So drop your act, if only for an instant, and tell me what's troubling you." "I ain't putting on no act, Blondie." I said, being truthful in a literal sort of way. "I just came here to get a letter, is all." "Which would make complete sense if you were literate.", Lucas said, getting close to my face. I bit my lip. "What, ya wanna see the letter?", I asked, then shoved it into Blondie's hand. "Go ahead, read it. I ain't got nothing to hide." The Sorcerer took the envelope, and opened it. He looked over it, and raised his eyebrow, some. "Do you have a five year old son I don't know

about, Patchy?" "A five what?" "Five *cycle* old son, sorry. Universal Translator's not doing her job today." "No, I don't gotta son." "Right, well, this letter certainly reads like it was written by a child. The handwriting is complete garbage." "But can ya make out what it says?" "Yes, of course I can." Blondie stated sharply, "Being able to understand even the most sloppily laid out languages is pretty much my thing.", then cleared his throat. "Dear idiot.", he began, not enunciating the insult. "Your contact sent me a letter. I don't like reading letters. I don't like writing letters. If I were in Fremdos I'd beat you senseless. Seeing as I'm not, I suppose I'll pass along the message your Bowman lackey asked me to." Lucas looked at the letter all funny, then continued reading it, slowly, and slightly thrown off. "The Bowman reports that the individual you inquired about has, as you suspected, moved metal around. About fifty purses of Runiertian coins were given to Unassigned filth, and roughly five hundred bars were thrown into the ocean. That is the intel your contact reported, I do not believe him for a moment. Bowmen are as cowardly as they are inefficient, weak willed as they are flimsy, dead in the waist as much as they are-" "That's enough, Ruckus.", I said, stopping the Sorcerer from reading any further. "Oh thank god. The man who wrote this letter goes on for another four paragraphs about how back in his day people knew how to treat their betters." "Yeah, that's Axeman Black One fer ya.", I said with a half smile. "He don't like people much." "Truly a paragon amongst patriarchs," Lucas remarked drily. "But what was that letter about, Patchy?" "S'nothing too serious, Blondie.", I lied. "I was just making sure a frienda mine was on the up and up." "And just who might this friend be, Patchy?", Lucas inquired, his gaze uninterrupted by the sudden landing of seven large ducks. "Ah, justa wino I know. And ya know how winos are. Ya find em lying in the

street covered in their own vomit, ya help em get clean onna whim, or cause it's the right thing ta do, or just cause they're someone you can shoot the shit with when yer bored. And once they get sober, they swear ta ya that they're gonna put the past behind em, that the demons ain't gonna havea hold on em no more, that they're gonna do nothing but good in the future." I licked my lips. "But it ain't inna wino's nature ta do good." I started pacing the insidea the tower nervously, likea schizophrenic inna camera store. "No... it's inna wino's nature ta bea wino. Andya can't trusta wino." "Sabarene.", Lucas realized, slowly. "You're talking about Sabarene." "Know any other winos that we're friends with?" "I'm not her friend, nor am I yours.", Blondie insisted. "But that's besides the point: why did you send someone to check on Sabarene?" "Shucks, yer dumber than I am, Ruckus. Didn't ya hear Sadpandarene go on about how bada a person she used ta be? Even without all this General nonsense, I'd havta be some kinda moron not ta get someone ta look inta her actions" "But you pledged your support to her." "And I am supporting her, more or less. But there's no harm in seeing if she's secretly a psychopath, is there?" The blonde haired boy was silent, fera while. "Do you trust anyone, Patchy?" "Do you?" "There's one person...", Lucas answered vaguely, avoiding my eye. I cracked my fingers. "One ain't much better than none. And there's no harm in keeping tabs on someone." "Right, but this letter is far from a damning indictment. It just says that the albino threw a large quantity of Runiertian coins into the ocean, probably because she's mental. What's so terrible about that?" "Nothing.", I said, feeling a surprising amounta relief fer some reason. "There's nothing wrong bout that. I guess my suspicions were just a loada hot air after all.", I repeated, doing something with my mouth that resembleda smile. "Perhaps, perhaps.", Lucas said ta himself,

sounding reserved. "I must confess, I've been a doubting Thomas myself in regards to the albino, but so far I've seen little cause for alarm." "What, ya don't think a whole lotta people trying ta kill us is cause for alarm?" "That seems about par for the course, actually.", the Sorcerer wistfully slurred. I grabbed the piecea parchment from Blondie and stuffed it in the middle of my breastplace. "Gah. Let's get going and do the thing we said we'd do." "What, look into the sect that torched your hair?" "And killea guy. And tried ta killa little girl." "That too, I suppose." Lucas loudly cleared his throat. "Very well then, Patchy. I will help you investigate this Mournful Remnant sect, or cult, or rebellion, or whatever. Where's the nearest tavern?" I tilted my head at the suddenly resolute Sorcerer. "What, ya thirsty or something?" "No, of course not. I'm no wino," Lucas said, straightening the pink pastal robes he was wearing. "But the best place to find information on conspiracies, sinister plots, and insurrections is a tavern." "Yeah, maybe if yer retarded.", I snorted. "Must you really use such hateful language, Patchy?", the boy in the purple tophat complained. "And there is nothing stupid about my proposition, taverns are a great venue to discover the deepest and darkest aspects of-" "No, we're not going ta a tavern, that won't get us the information we want quick enough." I tightened my fist and looked grimly at the Sorcerer. "We're going toa brothel." "W-what?!", Blondie sputtered, his hat nearly falling offa his head. "We're going ta a brothel." "We're going to a what?!" "A brothel, I said it two dang times already. A brothel.", I repeated without there really being a need fer me ta do so. "Y'know, a whorehouse, a home of ill repute, a bordello, a bagnio, a place where whores go." Lucas covered his face with his palm. "I heard your suggestion, I just don't have the faintest idea as to why you would make it." "Brothels are the best, Blondie.", I cackled



with a good deal of confidence. "All sorts of lowlives go to brothels, so all sorts of dirty secrets can be found in 'em. Dirty laundry too, but that's besides the point." "Lowlives go to taverns too!", the pinked-robed boy squeaked, not doing a whole lot to hide his reluctance. "Right, but we're looking for a certain sort of lowlife, a lowlife that wouldn't be dumb enough to risk being seen at a tavern." Lucas narrowed his eyes at me. "And not be smart enough to care about being seen at a brothel, huh?" I tapped my forehead a few times with my index finger and smiled. "Smart and dumb don't apply when it comes to brothels, Ruckus. See... whores are what those economic types would call inelastic goods, ain't they?" "I'd call sex workers people, Patchy, not goods." "Well ain't you a sweetheart.", I snorted. "Alright, sure, sure, we'll call whores people, if it soothes your conscience some. The fact of the matter is that the demand for whores is always going to be high, and the supply is gonna be relatively low, er, assuming a famine don't happen or nothing. And while ya can get some booze, wine, rum, and other drinks at a whole variety of places, there's only so many places ya can get a decent quality whore." "Hm. In summary: you view people as objects, you think taverns are passé, and are of the opinion that even the most devout men cannot resist sexual temptation." the Sorcerer repeated, nodding thoughtfully to himself. "Yeah, more or less." There was a brief pause, and the flapping of feathers. "So fucking what?!", the blonde boy loudly shrieked, confused, offended, and heavily discombobulated. "What does any of what you just said have to do with anything?!" I patted the stressed Sorcerer on his shoulder. "Sheesh, calm down, there's no need for foul language. And the point, Blondie, is that it doesn't matter if those Mumbling Remnant folk are holed up in a sewer or living under the sea, odds are good that a few of them followed their loins to a nice, venereal disease laden

homea ill repute. We won't find signsa them inna tavern, but we sure as sin will inna brothel. It's far easier ta transport barrelsa booze ta a hideout than it is ta traffick some women" "Right, and we're just going to walk into a whorehouse and play a game of twenty questions with the prostitutes, huh?" Lucas threw out his hands and spoke out like he was being asphyxiated. "Excuse me miss, I know you're preoccupied with having your soul shattered into a million pieces, but might you take some time off from sating the indomitable lusts of men who don't appreciate, respect or even acknowledge your existence to answer some questions?" I patted the blonde fella on his shoulder and leaned in close ta his rounded, non-pointy right ear. "We ain't gonna do it that way.", I whispered, needlessly. "We'll pay the whores fer their time and information." "And how are we supposed to do that without any money?", Lucas whispered back, there still being no need fer subtlety. "We don't got no money?", I snarled. "The heck happened ta ya paying me a bara Runiertian every seven rising periods or so?" "I lied about that, obviously.", Lucas curtly hissed, still being quiet. "I figured I'd grow on you and Sabarene before I had to pay you another bar." "Gah, fine. Fine, I reckon we'll just pay the whores another way. I think I sawa few bottlesa wine back at the ruined townhouse, we'll find the alcoholic and teetotaler whores and tempt them with that." Lucas stared blankly at me, then walked out of the duck tower without sayinga word. I was tempted ta just let the moralizing git stew in his own scruples, but then I realized I sorta needed a bloke ta make my whole brothel infiltration thing work. "Wait up Ruckus!", I cried out, stumbling outside after him. The pink robed boy lifted his nose up and scoffed, then walked off into a narrow canal, scoffing ta himself. There was another fella at the other enda the canal, a big bloke decked inna light pastel blue robe. "Hey, watch out!", the big

brown skinned man yelled ta the sky minded Sorcerer. His warning didn't do all that much; Lucas slammed into the blue robe wearing man's stomach. There was a brief moment of silence. The folds of the man's belly bend inward, inward, inward, and then, like a sweaty, lipid filled bottle of champagne, burst out, sending Lucas backfirst into the mildly murky waters of the canal. "Buwah!", the Sorcerer sputtered, splishing and splashing about like a fish that had just been gutted. "Oh... oh I'm sorry!", the portly man pouted, bending over ta try and scoop Blondie outta the salty water. Lucas grabbed hold of the man's wide wrist, and, water dripping from the brimma his purple hat, flopped out on the marble sidewalk, heaving a heckuva lotta saltwater as he gasped fer air. "Is there anything I can-" "Get out of my face, you big bloated bastard!", Lucas choked out, spraying the guilty guy's double chin with salty spittle. The voluminous man retracted from the Sorcerer, and, like a puppy that had just been fixed, wobbled away from him. "Is he gone?", Lucas asked me, his lips placed firmly on the marble sidewalk. "What, the big brown fella? Yeah, he's gone." "Right.", Lucas, straightening himself up. "Here, take this.", he instructed me, extending out a single, soggy mark. "This is the entry fee for a game you're going to play with me." "And why would I do that?", I asked, skeptical of the wet billa currency. "Because you're going to win, Patchy.", the Sorcerer explained, wringing out water from four other bills. "When didya get all that dosh?" "Just recently.", Lucas said, looking innocently at the marks in his hands. "Sometimes you find fortune, and sometimes fortune bumps into you. And sometimes your hands find fortune when a man with extremely loose pockets bumps into you." His robes still soggy and his blonde locks still dripping bitsa liquid onta the pristine streetsa Fremdos, Lucas tightened a fist and stood up, a looka determination on his face. "Brace yourself, you egregious excuse

for an elf. You're about to witness magic." He walked briskly down the canal, his blue eyes focused forward. We walked for a good while, navigating the canals in an even more schizophrenic manner than we had before. "The heck are we going Ruckus?", I asked after we had turned right into our fifth creepy looking alleyway. "You'll see when we get there.", Lucas answered tersely, still staring straight ahead. He held out his hand when we were about to turn another corner. "Hear those voices?", he asked. My ears twitched, some. Sure enough, I heard voices around the corner, but they weren't evil sounding or nothing. Nah, actually, they just sounded like the murmuring of a crowd, to be honest. Nothing messed up or cryptic about them. "Er, sure, but-" "Go ahead then, Patchy. Ask the people you find around the corner for directions, or strike up a conversation with them, or stare at them. Just be sure that they notice you." I was a bit confused as to what Lucas intended to do, but seeing no better way to go about things, strolled around the corner. The corner led to a patio, like the one Lucas, Sabarene, and I had emerged onto after going through customs. Unlike the one we emerged onto, it was a complete mess. I mean, clearly it was designed to be scenic and what have ya – the tables, chairs, and benches were made of marble like the first patio, and the area overlooked the sea in a nice but non-intrusive manner. The issue, so to speak, wasn't with the construction of the patio, but the color of it – Splattered all across the rest area was a bunch of thick red paint. The paint wasn't arranged in a meaningful way, either, just splashed here, there, and everywhere, like someone had butchered a pig and forgot to clean up the blood. All the same, as scuzzy looking as the patio was, it was still quite packed. There were about fifteen or so people just chilling out on the benches, gazing out on the sea and basking in the light of the suns. The defaced benches didn't trouble

them, none. Least, so I thought, at first, but then three folks with leather armor and sharp looking lances stomped into the plaza, two tan blokes, and one brown skinned girl that looked a whole lot like Nielente, minus the whole not wearing a shirt aspect. "Oi!", the centermost of the thugs called out ta me, a scowl on his tan face. "No loitering!" "Loitering? Ain't this a public area?" "It is, and it isn't, you ugly cad.", the left thug answered. "To stick around here, you need to pay your taxes." I gritted my teeth, but opted ta try and be all diplomatic about the situation. "Sorry, I'm more a tourist than anything, don't reckon I'm all that liable fer that sorta thing." "There's two sets of taxes around here.", the thug that looked and sounded a whole lot like Nielente said. "Taxes to the Collective, and taxes to us. We don't care about the first category too much." I narrowed my eye, noticing a cut on the green haired girl's cheek. "Is that you, Nielente?" "N-nielente?", the brown skinned girl wearing a light yellow tunic stuttered. "No... no I'm not- That's besides the point! You owe us money, interloper!" "Alright, then how much do I owe ya?" "Three-" "Four-" "Five marks!", the trio said all at once. "Izzat so.", I muttered, as halfa the folks on the paint splattered patio left, and the other half ignored me completely. "Well, will this cover it?". I asked, holding out the soggy bill Blondie had given me. "Can't you read?", the girl who denied being Nielente spat. "That's one mark." "Take it or leave it, it's all I have." "You're lying.", onea the male thugs growled, dropping a dagger from his sleeves into his palm. "Give us everything you've got, interloper." I stepped back, some. I was wearing a full seta leather armor, but lacked any sorta weapon. Taking on three folks, even untrained, unarmored folks like the two bit thugs in fronta me, would almost certainly end in disaster. I pressed my toes tightly against the ground, preparing myself ta book it if Lucas didn't- "Cease your harassment of that

horribly deformed woman at once, criminal scum!” show up inna flamboyant, needlessly over the top manner. Doing a buncha frontflips, twirls, anda few dips, the pink robed boy dived inbetween me and the three thugs. “I understand that as a “street gang” you “young bloods” feel a need to defend your “turf”, but at least give this young woman a chance to win some money before you mercilessly pummel her to death.” “I don’t know who you are,” the first thug said cautiously, “but no one uses this patio without paying us our dues.” Lucas tilted the brimma his hat down and stared the three thugs in the face. “Sure, sure, understandable. And rest assured gentlemen, I’ll pay you your fee soon enou- Oh, hey Nielente!”, he said, suddenly. The green haired girl grimaced “But I’m not-“ “So please” Blondie boldly continued. “give this girl a chance to win herself enough money to pay your clearly non-coerced fees. Then, if she can’t pay you, feel free to beat her, kill her, rob her, or whatever other pleasantries you have in mind.” He turned ta me and smiled. “Care to play a game, Miss?” “Er... sure.” “Alright. Behold, young lady! In my hands I hold three cards! The fool, the magician, and the tower. Pick whichever card you wish.” I moved my hand over the three cards, then pointed ta the one in the middle. “I’ll go with the tower or whatever ya call it.”, Lucas narrowed his eyes at me. “You would pick that one, wouldn’t you?” “Ayup.” “Very well! Allow me to explain the rules of the game! I shall place these three cards down onto the ground, and shuffle them. If you pick the Tower, then you win.” “Win what?” “Why, win five marks, of course.” “Right, and if I pick the other two?” “Then I get to keep your entry fee.” “Fine.”, I said. “Reckon I don’t havea choice in the matter anyhow.” Lucas slammed down the three cards, and swiftly, very swiftly shuffled them around. The movements of the cards were impossible ta follow, heck, even the folks who had two eyeballs in their sockets

seemed ta git lost. It was about "Alright then, Miss. Pick a card." "I'll take the one on the right." Blondie bent down, and turned the card over. "Congratulations! You win the prize!". He reached into his pink robe, and pulled out five soggy marks. I grabbed em, and extended the five marks out ta the thugs fixing ta stomp me into the ground. "Am I allowed ta exist, now?" "Wait... wait...", the dagger wielding man stuttered, ignoring the marks in my hand completely. "Why did you just give this cow five marks?" "Because she won, of course.", Lucas explained inna condescending tone. "It's my obligation as game master to hand out rewards to winners." The three thugs got together inna huddle, and murmured a whole buncha stuff ta each other. "Oi. Pinko.", the daggerless thug said to Blondie. "I want to play this game of yours, now." "You... you do?", Lucas asked, sounding slightly surprised. "But the probability of winning are one in three. Even if you have a quick eye, the odds are against you." "No matter. Here." The obstinate man pushed over a stack of fifty or so bills. "If I win, I get five times this amount, right?" "Yes, I suppose you do, but-" "Then let's play. Go on, shuffle the cards, pinko." "You have to pick one first." "I pick the one with the funny looking face." "The fool, then." Lucas shuffled the cards around the pavement again, but this time he did so inna very very slow fashion, almost patronizingly so. Even with my complete lacka depth perception, I was able ta follow the shuffling perfectly. The fool card moved from the middle, ta the right, ta the middle, ta the left, and ta the middle again. And that was that. It didn't move no more. The fool remained firmly in the center. "Alright. I pick this one.", the daggerless thug announced, tapping the middlemost card fer emphasis. "Are you sure?", Blondie asked him, his blue eyes twinkling. "I'm sure. Enough stalling. Show the card and pay me my money." Lucas shrugged his shoulders, and flipped over the

middle card. It was the tower. "It seems that fortune worked against you this time.", the Sorcerer said with a sigh. "N-nonsense!", the thug without a dagger gasped. "You switched out my winning card!" Lucas looked up at the incensed man innocently. "Would you care to play again?" "Very funny.", the man with the small, but still sufficiently sharp dagger growled. "Give my friend his marks back, or else." "Or else what?", Lucas asked, smiling confidently. "You're going to stab me?" The man with the dagger stabbed him. "A-ack!", the blonde boy bellowed, clutching his stomach and hitting the pavement with a tonna force. Shocked, but very much alert, I limped as fast I could towards Blondie, hoping that the dagger didn't make a mess of his intestines or nothing. "I don't think so, bitch.", the daggerless thug snarled, sweeping my legs from under me and effortlessly slamming my skull against the marble floor of the patio. "N-no!", a shrill, feminine voice protested. "S-stop that at once!" I didn't manage to see much, what my tongue currently tasting all the germs the patio had to offer, but as Lucas lay clutching his ruptured stomach, and as I lay hoping my skull wasn't shattered, a series of brut cracking sounds rang out, accompanied by several groans of pain. "S-stop!" the green haired girl shrieked loudly, a long metal rod present in her hands. "Assault of Fremdosian Civilians will not be tolerated!" "Etnelein ...", the daggerless thug mewed out, clutching the back of his bruised head... "Why?" "Why?", the green haired girl in the yellow tunic asked, rhetorically I reckon. "I'm... I'm not Etnelein at all!", the nervous girl holding the long metal rod in her hands said. "I'm... I'm...."- The girl with the same complexion as me sucked in a deep breath, and finally spat out her words, a fresh confidence in her voice. "I'm Nielente, Prime Saboteur of Fremdos. And you two are under arrest for assault and attempted murder." "A Saboteur? You were a Saboteur



the whole time, Etnelain?!” “Of course.”, the green haired girl said, wiping some sweat off her forehead and flashing her teeth at the two bruised men. “Why else would I join up with you two unsophisticated halfwits?” The girl turned to Lucas. “Are you alright, Sorcerer?” “I’m absolutely fine.”, the blonde boy responded cheerily, standing up with the dagger still clearly embedded in his stomach. “G-gah!”, I coughed out, stumbling to my feet. “There ain’t no way yer fine, Ruckus, there’s a dagger in yer guts!” “No, there’s a dagger in my vest.” Lucas pulled his pink robe open. Underneath the pink Fremdosian robes he had acquired somewhere, was a weird, cushiony vest. And stuck in the middlemost black cushion, was the sharp as heck dagger the discontented thug had thrust into the Sorcerer’s chest. “W-woah.”, I coughed out, fingering the handle of the dagger. “Yer lucky that cushiona yers absorbed the blow.” “Cushion? Please, Patchy.” Lucas scoffed. “This vest is no collection of pillows. It’s comprised of Kevlar.” “And that means?” “It means that you’d need much more than a dagger to touch my fleeting heart.” “Will a reinforced Runiertian rod do?”, Nielente asked, a dangerous glint in her eyes. “Gambling is as heinous an act as assault.” “Oh, no, no, ya ain’t gonna pull that card.”, I spat, resting my aching forehead in the palm of my hand. “Ya just tried to extort me outta some marks, remember?” “R-right, but that t’was merely an act!”, Nielente answered, squirming. “I was only PRETENDING to be Etnelain the delinquent.” “And that makes threats a violence ok?” “Exactly! I’m a Saboteur! I’m allowed to break the law, as long as it’s for a greater good.”, Nielente said, shaking her head and smiling, oblivious to me and Lucas’s increasingly discombobulated expressions. “Is that how that’s supposed to work?”, I asked one of the two thugs on the pristine marble pavement of the patio. “Of course no-mph!” “Ok.. ok, so technically, I’m not officially a Saboteur.”,

Nielente explained, her hand firmly covering the mouth of the fella that stabbed Lucas. "But I'm trying, like, super hard to become one!" "Are ya freaking kidding me?! Yer trying ta arrest folk despite not having even the slightest bitta authority ta do so?" "You've hit the nail right on the head, Unionist! "Are you retarde-" "Woah, woah, no need for the ablest language, Patchy.", Blondie chided me, then smiled gently at Nielente, of Etnelein, or whoever the heck she was. "Let's take things from the top, shall we?", Lucas said, rubbing his head softly. "First off, what is a Saboteur?" "Someone that sabotages things, I reckon." "I'm not asking you, elf." "You seriously don't know what a Saboteur is?", Nielente asked Blondie, her eyes shimmering brightly. "Saboteurs are the finest agents the Collective has to offer! They're brilliant, smart, intelligent, and clever!" Nielente stood tall, stepping on onea the thugs she had smacked around a whole bunch with her Runiertian reinforced rod. "They stop bad guys through a combination of spying, subterfuge, smoothing-talking, and seduction!", Nielente went on, the redundancies troubling her little. "And do you want to know the best part about them?" "Uh, not particularly, no-" "The best part about them... is that they're the youngest organization in Collective history! The Saboteurs were founded by the General himself!" Nielente paused and rubbed her suddenly pink face. "A-ah! Herself, I mean, I'm sorry if what I said came off as misogynistic, it's just that up until recently I always thought the General was a guy, and, still being burdened with the patriarchal overtones from my time living in a Unionist city, must have accidentally assumed that-" "Gotcha, gotcha.", I said, cutting Nielente's overly long apology short, then frowned. "Waita tick, if ya wanna join the Saboteurs so bad, why didn't ya just talk ta the idiot albino about it when you were walking us ta that terribly maintained townhouse?" "I was shy...", the

green haired girl said, rubbing her face nervously. "I mean... I've heard of the General before, but to see her in person... it was, like, completely overwhelming!" Nielente licked her lips. "It was so overwhelming, that after dropping you three off, I just had to change into my delinquent disguise right away." I looked down at the two motionless fellas at Nielente's feet. "And why didya play at beinga delinquent anyways?" "Because I'm a Saboteur! In spirit, if not in reality." Nielente said, then winked at me and wagged her finger. "Besides, now that the General's back, I need to use my powers of subterfuge to bust open a big conspiracy. If I can impress the General with my cunning, then the Saboteurs are all but certain to come back!" "You keep calling Sister Sabarene the General...", Lucas observed, resting his chin on one end of his baton, "I was under the impression that she was the former General." "Oh, well, sure, technically Master Marston is the current General, but there's the General, and there's THE General.", Nielente said, waving around her hand. "Master Marston is super smart and nice and all, but he's known as Regent first, and General, like, forty second." "Ya sure about that?", I asked the girl with the slightly cut cheek. "I mean, the folks in the plaza seemed pretty darn into him, least, before that firecrouch showed up and ruined everything." Nielente winced. "O-ok... so maybe I'm not being completely honest when I say that... the Patrician branch loves him, clearly, and so does nearly everyone else in Fremdos, but... but..." Nielente made a fist. "Master Marston dismantled the Saboteurs! The moment he took power, he disbanded the organization and forced all of its members into Volunteer work!" "Volunteer work, otherwise known as slavery, right?", Lucas said, glaring at Nielente. "Volunteer work isn't slavery!", Nielente said, her arms shaking. "Volunteer work is a necessity for the unification of all Fremdosians... is what I'd usually

say.”, the brown skin girl said, awkwardly. “I mean... I’m told to say that, as chair of Tourism. But not only did Master Marston make the Saboteurs become Volunteers, he placed black collars onto all of them!” I wiped a bitta sweat from under my eyepatch. “Er, alright, what’s so wrong about that, exactly?”, I asked, as onea the bruised thugs started crawling away from us. “The collars we force Volunteers to wear come in five types of colors-OH NO YOU DON’T!, white- TAKE THAT!, yellow-AND THAT!, blue- ARGH!, orange-WHY DO YOU MAKE ME DO THIS TO YOU?!, red-WHY?!, and black-STAY DOWN!.”, Nielente explained, punctuating the mention of each color by smacking the man at her feet with her Runiertian staff. “Six. Ya just listed six colors.” “Oops! Sorry, I’m not too good at counting...” the green haired girl said sheepishly, clutching her slightly bent metal rod loosely. “w-wait, that’s not the point!” “Then what is?” “It’s like, super simple! The colors of the collars signify how long someone has to serve as a Volunteer. White is usually about a quarter of a cycle, blue is about three cycles or so, but black...” “Lemme guess. Black issa lifetime sentence, huh?” Nielente’s eyes opened in shock. “Yes! Yes, how did you know?” “Tooka guess, I guess.” I licked my lips. “So fer some reason, Brother Marston saw fit ta make all the Saboteurs slaves.” “Because of resentment towards Sabarene, no doubt.”, Lucas said, straightening out the marks he had received and folding em inta a neat stack. “Wow, that’s totally it, Master Lucas!”, Nielente said, hitting her fist inta her palm. “Master Marston must have been jealous of the Saboteurs brilliance, and he punished them for being so great!” I looked at the girl in the yellow tunic and opened my mouth, hesitant. “Do.. do ya really think it’s that simple?”, I asked both the wanna be Saboteur and Sorcerer. “A fella afflicts an entire division of people witha lifetimea servitude, and ya think he did it outta jealousy?” “What

else could it be besides jealousy? The Saboteurs were the only reason the Collective was able to liberate this city, after all.” I felt a bit of unease, but, not having an answer that wasn’t complete conjecture, shrugged my shoulders. “Er, well, thanks for the history lesson, and also thanks for deciding not to mug me, but Ruckus and I gotta go. We’re actually on a mission to sort ourselves out... kinda.” “Oh yeah? And just what is this mission?”, Nienete asked us, her nostrils flaring suspiciously. “We’re off to find out about and stop a group called the Mumbling Remnant.” “Mumbling Remnant...”, Nienete said to herself. “Sounds dark and secretive! Can I come with you?” “No.”, I stated, flatly. “Please? Please please please? I promise you I won’t be a hindrance!” “The last Fremdosian girl who insisted on hanging out with me ended up with a hole in her neck.” “Oh, don’t worry, I totally don’t value my life at all!” “That ain’t the point!”, I coughed out, angrily. “If you follow me and Blondie you’re gonna get hurt cause you’re naïve, incompetent, and a bit of a ditz.” Nienete looked down at the patio’s floor and brushed her feet against the marble bashfully. “I... I know. But... but if there’s a conspiracy or some sort of criminal ring going on, I need to stop it! Because if I do, I’ll restore the good name of the Saboteurs, and maybe even become one myself if I impress the General enough.” “Yeah, well, tough, that ain’t enough of a compelling argument.” “I... oh! I can’t believe I forgot to mention! In addition to the persona of Etnelien the delinquent, I’ve adopted two other personas and infiltrated two other social groups!” “Guh.... The answer’s still gonna be no, but go on, tell me what you’re part of.” “Ok dokey! Firstly, after half a cycle of work, I managed to set up the identity of Lentenie, single mother doing whatever she can to make ends meet! I also set up the identity of-” “Hold on.”, Lucas interrupted the girl. “What does your Lentenie persona do exactly to make ends meet?”

“Anything!”, Nielente answered. “Anything including secretariat work, dancing, and tourism!” “That’s exactly what ya do anyways ya useless twat!” “I.. um... well I also set up the persona of Baker White Four Hundred and Fifty Two.”, the green haired girl said with a bitta shame. “I.. I can only bake slightly burnt scones, and so far the only Unionist who trusts me is a man with brain damage, but-“ “No, don’t come with us.”, I said, firmly. “You’ll end up dead or raped or killed or something horrible like that.” “But I want-“, Nielente began ta say. “Don’t worry about what ya want and what ya don’t, I’ll put in a good word fer you when I talk ta that albino.” “No, I can’t accept that.”, Nielente snapped back, and tightened her fist. “I made a promise to myself, three cycles ago, that I’d become a Saboteur, and that I’d do so legitimately, with my own skill, my own cunning.” Something Nielente said struck a nerve with me. “Legitimately? There ain’t no such thing as legitimate! Legitimacy issa illusion! Legitimacy issa philosophy that the folks in power sell ta the idiots who ain’t! And ya wanna become something nameda “Saboteur” legitimately? Do ya realize how completely idiotic that sounds? Ya wanna be a honest liar? A legitimate crook? Itsa oxymoron, ya moron!” “You’re wrong.”, Nielente said, stoically. “You think you know all these things, because you’re scarred, and tough looking, and jaded. But you’re wrong. The Saboteurs are a force for good.” “Just how the heck can ya be so surea that?”, I asked, incredulous as the naïve girl’s confidence. “Because I was saved by the Saboteurs.”, Nielente said, glaring into my eye. “Back before I had a name, back before the Collective liberated this city and granted everyone citizenship. Back then, Fremdos was ruled by a Merchant with the Color Black and the Number Five. He raised the price of meat to five sacks of Runiertian coins, but my family didn’t mind, because we never had meat anyways. But

then, one rising period, Merchant Black Four raised the price of wheat, the price of fresh water, of fruits, of everything that an Unassigned family would need to subsist. No matter what job my father, my mother, my sisters, my brothers did, we couldn't afford food. It got so bad that my younger brother fell ill, and-" I clenched my teeth. "Spare me yer sob story and get ta the point.", I spat, angry at the self-pitying dancer. "This story of mine is no tragedy, Unionist. Because just as my younger brother was about to die of malnutrition, a young boy with black hair arrived, a sack of bread, ale, cheese, and wine slung over his back." Nielente half smiled, looking wistful. "And he gave all of it to us!", she shouted, her subdued serious tone shattered inna instant. "The young boy gave us every last bit of food, every savory morsel of cheese, every thirst quenching drop of wine. He gave it all to us, and asked for nothing in return. And he promised us that he'd return later with more supplies. And then.... Not even a quarter of a cycle later, he totally did return! With food, but also with furniture, chairs, cups, knives, hammers, and even, like, toys for the younger kids in my family." "Was this boy's name Santa Claus, by chance?", Lucas asked, the blonde boy much more engaged in Nielente's story than I was. "Getting his name was a hassle. I, um, like, asked him for his name the first time, and he completely blew me off." "No... no... he wasn't a jerk about the whole thing, he... like..." Nielente blushed a bit. "...He said he wouldn't tell me his name until me and my family were given ours.", she finished, twiddling her fingers nervously. "But on his third visit, after I pressed him five times, he gave in. The boy with messy black hair... he said he was a Brother of the Holy Collective, a member of the Plebiam Branch." The blush on Nielente's face only intensified as she continued. "I totally didn't believe him. He wore rags, and lacked the dignity I had thought that a member of the Order of Fiat

was supposed to have. But then he explained the situation to me, and it completely made tons and heaps and bunches of sense!" "Huh huh." "Yes! The boy, the black haired boy.... He said he was a Saboteur. A spy who used his cunning and disguises to sneak food past the eyes of Merchant Black Four and his guards! And so that, Unionist, that is why I want to bring the Saboteurs back. To honor that boy, to honor the Saboteur's whose name was-" "You ain't coming with us.", I said, bluntly. "Yer dreams don't mean jack compared ta yer skills, of which ya don't got-" "That boy whose name was Brother Brounde!", Nielente screamed into my ear, pulling at her tunic so hard that the fabric almost ripped offa her chest. "On second thought, what's the harm in ya coming with us, we're just investigating a brothel, ain't like anything bad could happen ta ya there.", I said, adjusting my decision immediately. "You're investigating a brothel?", Nielente said, her brown cheek somehow flushing pink. "Er, not investigating it, so much as going there ta ask a buncha questions." "O-oh wow! That's genius! That's all super smart and stuff!" "I'm beginning ta suspect that it ain't.", I grumbled, rubbing my stump some. "Smart, dumb, or otherwise, I think it's high time we begin our investigation.", Lucas said with a smile. "Yup yup! Our secret mission begins now! We can't let ANYONE know about it!", Nielente bold announced at the top of her lungs, causing the folks hanging out in the patio ta turn their heads ta look at us. The brown skinned girl looked around and grimaced. "Sorry!", she whispered, and by whisper I mean the kinda whisper folks incapable of whispering whisper. "Guh, let's just getting.", I said, and marched outta the patio, Lucas and Nielente trailing right behind me like a buncha stray dogs I had made the mistake feeding. "Wait a second, Nielente, are you sure it's wise to leave those two men on the ground over there?" "They won't be a



problem. I think I cracked six of their ribs, and bruised their stomach muscles.” “That’s what I’m concerned about.”, the Sorcerer squeaked, causing Nielente to wave her hand around airily. “I’m sure they’ll walk it off. Besides, they’re bad guys, who cares what happens to them?” Nielente hummed a littlee tune, then stopped suddenly, as we crossed over a large canal into a different segment of Fremdos. “Oh! Oh, I’m still wearing my delinquent disguise, aren’t I?”, she said, snapping her fingers together. Lucas looked at the girl and raised an eyebrow. “Disguise? You look the same as when we first met you.” “Don’t be so coy, magic man.”, Nielente said, puffing her cheeks proudly. “I worked a long time on this disguise of mine, and it was instrumental to the two delinquents back there accepting me.” “I don’t sea disguise. Besides, after that stunt ya just pulled with yer rod, I don’t think those two fellas are gonna be too keen on letting ya back in, even if they survive their interal bleeding or whatever. Nielente looked at me, frowned, then smiled. “You’re absolutely right, Unionist! My disguise, well-crafted as it was, is, like, totally useless now. I’ll destroy it right away, so that no physical traces of Etnlein the delinquent can remain.” The green haired girl grabbed the yellow tunic she was wearing, and, in one swift movement, ripped it ta shreds. “And there it goes.”, the half naked girl wistfully commented as bits and pieces of her yellow shirt flowed through the waters of onea Fremdos’s canals. “ My wonderful disguise, laid to rest underneath the waves of the ocean.” I tooka quick glance and Nielente, then grimaced. “Yer idea of a disguise is putting on a shirt?” “Yeah! Why else would I wear one?” “Basic dignity?”, I guessed, keeping my eye on at the ultra violet spewing orbs in the sky instead a the more approximate pair. “I’m a Citizen of the Holy Collective, I have all the dignity in the world.” I didn’t respond ta Nielente, instead, I continued ta walk, following the slowly

setting suns. Finally, after walking fer about forty minutes or so, I stopped. “Er....  
Nielenti?” “It’s Nielente.” “Right, Nielente. Can ya answer a question fer me.” “Sure  
thing!”, the would-be Saboteur responded, perhaps a bit more energetically than was  
strictly necessary. “Where are the brothels around here, exactly?” “Y-you don’t know  
where any of the brothels are?!” “Uh... not quite, no.”, I admitted. “Then... like... why did  
you walk me and the magic guy around the city and stuff?” I rubbed my boot on the  
ground a bit, cleaning somea the grime and blood and bone offa it. “I was kinda hoping  
that I’d just sorta wander inta a fella who owneda brothel or something. Or that we’d just  
stumble upon one or something.” “I never pegged you for an optimist, Patchy.” “I ain’t.”  
Nielente tilted her head at me and Lucas and tapped her forehead for a bit. “I don’t  
know if there’s a brothel nearby, but we’re totally about to enter a seedy area of the  
city.” I looked around. Nothing seemed off about the location we were in. The houses  
looked as tall and proper as they had before, and the canals looked about as clean as  
you could reasonably expect a canal ta look. There wasn’t any sewage or vomit or urine  
around us either. “This is the seedy parta the city?” “Oh, not here, here. North of here.”,  
Nielente answered. “If we go across the next two bridges, we should enter the Volunteer  
district.” The green haired girl pointed cheerily towards the horizon. The sectiona the  
city she pointed towards... from a distance it didn’t look all that unusual, at least relative  
ta the resta Fremdos. But as I squinted my eye, I did manage ta notice something  
siginificant about the district Nielente was pointing out. The various crossed wooden  
stakes that lined the canals and of the city converged at the Volunteer district. “Just  
what the heck are those stakes fer, anyways?”, I asked Nielente. The brown skinned girl  
fell silent. “Er, Nielente? I asked ya a question. Wouldya mind answering it?” The

repetition of my inquiry did little to move the green haired girl, who continued to ignore me, even as the points of her ears twitched with every word I said. “Here in Fremdos, there are some issues that our citizens are very sensitive to.”, she finally said after a long moment of silence. “Please be considerate when inquiring about matters that seem strange to you.” “The heck is that supposed to mean?” “Please be considerate when inquiring about matters that seem strange to you.”, Nielente repeated, all glitz and glimmer drained from her voice. “G-guh... yer creeping me out Nielente!” “Please be considerate when inquiring about matters that seem strange to you.”, Nielente repeated for a third time, her eyes glazed over. Lucas quickly slapped her in the face. “O-ow!”, the green haired girl whined, rubbing her right cheek. “Why did you do that, magic man?” “Could you please repeat what you just said, Nielente?”, Lucas asked the girl, smiling cheerfully. “If we go across the next two bridges, we should enter the volunteer district.”, Nielente moaned, rubbing her somewhat red looking face. “Oh, thanks.”, the blonde boy said, folding his hands behind his head. “By the way, what’s the deal with all the crosses that line the canals?” Nielente’s eyes glazed over again. “Please be considerate when inquiring about matters that seem strange to you-ow!” Nielente stumbled out of her trance into a daze, a bump on the side of her head. “Why did you hit me again!?”, she groaned, swinging her Runertian reinforced rod at Lucas with a hefty degree of force. “Woah, woah, easy there.”, I said, blocking Nielente’s swing with my stump. “There’s no need for violence.” Lucas glared at me. “Er... I mean, there’s no need for *senseless* violence.” “Senseless violence? Magic man just slapped me and stuff!” The blonde boy stopped fuming at me, and scratched his chin. “How many times did I slap you?“, he asked the bare-chested girl, tilting his head in an inquisitive fashion. “That doesn’t

matter!", Nielente moaned, rubbing her twice slapped cheek. "One time is as bad as three!" "Right, but did I slap you once, or twice?", Lucas inquired of the girl, his voice much lower. "Or was it three times?" "Easy!", Nielente answered, raising her runiertian reinforced rod high in the sky again. "You slapped me... um..." The green haired girl frowned, then cradled her head in two hands, like she was having a migraine. "You slapped me.... once?" She massaged her temple. "I... I think you slapped me once.", she said, her lips curled inna nervous frown. "Actually... wait. I remember a sharp pain on my cheek.. but I don't... like... did you even slap me at all?" the brown skinned girl said, as we crossed a bridge that went over a wide swatha ocean. "Don't worry about it.", Lucas said, then pointed to his right cheek. "Feel free to slap me back if it makes you feel better." "No... there's no need for that. If you're sorry, then I accept your apology fully!", Nielente responded, beaming. I bit my bottom lip. "Er, wait, Nilentil, do ya remember what ya just said before, or-" Lucas pressed twoa his fingers against my lips and leaned in close ta me. "Please be considerate when inquiring about matters that seem strange to you~", he whispered, his blue eyes twinkling. "G-guh...", I stuttered, my face all warm fer some reason. "What were we doing again?", Nielente asked, still holding onta her head in confusion. "You were guiding us to the Volunteer District, Nielente.", Lucas said witha good deala cheer. "O-oh! Oh, right! It's right over the next bridge. You'll be able to tell because of all the crosses congregated there." Nielente paused, and scratched her head. "I wonder *why* there's all those crosses in the Volunteer Distric- PLEASE BE CONSIDERATE WHEN INQUIRING ABOUTS MATTERS THAT SEEM STRANGE TO YOU..", the green haired girl loudly commanded... uh... herself. Lucas pulled back his hand ta slap the glazy eyed girl

again, but I caught his wrist. "Don't. At this rate ya might give her brain damage." Lucas looked at me oddly. "Er... more brain damage." "Fine, but if she doesn't snap out of it in a few moments we're leaving her." "It is not necessary to slap this girl to revert her to normal.", Nielente suddenly spoke up in a monotone. "A light stimuli to the ends of her ears will be more than sufficient to restore her mental acuity and well-being." "Oh, thanks fer that, Nielentil.", I said, reaching to flick her left ear. "W-aita tick, you can talk when yer all glass eyed and such?!" Nielente just stared at me with her dull, lifeless eyes. "Please be considerate when inquiring about matters that seem strange to-" "You ain't pulling that crap again!", I yelled, making a fist towards Nielente's creepily robotic head. "Rulea three! Ya only get ta say weird stuff three times before providing some kinda explanation!" "A light stimuli to the ends of this girl's ears will be more than sufficient to restore her mental acuity and well-being.", the girl who was, yet almost certainly wasn't Nielente responded. I groaned, then flicked the green haired girl's left ear. "Ow!", she immediately yelped, her eyes looking like a normal person's again. "Why did you just flick my ear?" "Because ya just told me to." "What?", the green haired girl asked, highly, highly confused. "Just forget about it. Either ya know and yer messing with me, or ya don't and wouldn't believe me if I told ya. So let's put the ear flicking and the cheek slapping behind us and getta move on." "Cheek slapping? Did someone, like, get slapped or something?" "So ya said across this bridge is the Volunteer district, right?", I asked the oblivious looking girl. "Yes! You can tell by all the crosses congregated in the middle of the district." Nielente paused. "Hm... though I don't know *why* the crosses are congregated there. I wonder why-" "Tourism.", Lucas quickly blurted, before Nielente could be interrupted by Nielente. "The crosses are there for

tourism. Problem solved. None of us ever need question the presence of the crosses again.” “Yeah! Tourism! That’s totally the answer!”, Nielente said, skipping across the second stone bridge with a carefree smile. I turned to Lucas. “What the heck just happened?” “It would seem that Nielente suffers from Dissociative Identity Disorder. Or schizophrenia. Or dementia. Or she’s taking the piss out of us.”, Lucas said, resting his head in his chin. “Er, right, yeah, I got the bit about her being crazy, but usually craziness ain’t something you can just turn on and off like a light bulb.” “Let’s put Nielente’s malformed mind on the backburner for now, Patchy. We promised Sabarene we’d find out about that group, right?” “Yeah, yeah, yer right, I guess, but it seems like things just keep getting more and more strange.”, I grumbled, figuring that dealing with a demented dancer shoulda been the last of my worries. Following Nielente’s cheerful, lucid lead, we crossed over the second stone bridge into the square of the city that had all the crosses gathered up in it. Course, the crosses, while fairly prominent, were not the first thing I noticed about the square. The architecture style of the Volunteer Square sorta reminded me of Provesh. I say sorta, because the foundation of the square was clearly Fremdosian in nature, with thick marble arches and solid stone foundations and sculptures. But scapped over the Fremdosian style buildings, placed sloppily on top of the walls, the floors, the roofs, were crude scraps of wood, arranged in a way that... kinda resemble the rotting pieces of junk that passed for homes and houses in Provesh. I shuddered. See, the placement of the pieces of wood over the various marble buildings was to me like the act of topping a hotdog with ketchup... ya can do it, but why would ya when there’s already mustard, onions, relish, pickles, peppers, tomato slices, and salt on it? I scrunched up my nose in disgust. While the Volunteer District’s attempts at

emulating Unionist architecture were dubious at best, the wood littered shanty town was more than a smash hit when it came to copying the scents and smells of the snow surrounded city. As to where the awful smell came from... I ain't got a clue in the slightest. There was no sewage out in the streets, thank the suns, but that almost made the smell kinda worse. See, it's one thing when ya pass by a piss drenched drunk and smell a buncha urine, but it's another thing altogether when ya see a reasonably well put together bloke and are floored by the stench of his taint. "Uh, Nielente", I said, using my thumb and index fingers to pinch my nostrils shut. "Ya sure this is the only part of town that has brothels?" "I'm pretty sure, yeah!", Nielente answered, the points of her ears twitching erratically. "Master Marston told me to avoid this part of the city when I lead tours, so if there's no brothels, there should at least be some human trafficking centers or something." "Lucas stepped over a pile of sawdust and frowned. "Yeah, but how do we go about finding these brothels?" "I have no idea!", Nielente said, smiling broadly. "But I guess we could, like, ask around and stuff. Knock on people's doors and ask them, "Is this, like, a whorehouse or something?" "Nah, we ain't gonna do that. Mostly cause it's retarded, but also cause it'll be too much work." "Then what should we do, Patchy?", Lucas asked, scratching his cheek as we passed by a run down looking shack. "Hm. Hold on, I'm thinking." "There's a first." "Go frick yerself.", I muttered, then looked around. Most of the people in the Volunteer district were, uh, as I reckon you can guess, Volunteers. From where Lucas, Nielente, and I were standing, I was able to get a good look at three fellas. The first fella I saw was nothing special, just a pale upset looking man with a white collar strapped to his neck and eyes as dull as Nielente. The second fella I saw was handsome as handsome comes. His chocolate brown skin was flawless,

he had toned triceps, built biceps, a developed six pack, short green hair a pretty face, and a bright smile. Besides a somewhat ripped pair of pants, the man wore practically nothing at all besides a black collar around his neck. The third fella... er... he had nice eyes? Yeah, he had nice eyes, and his stomach was almost as big as Merchant Black One's. He didn't look depressed like the average looking fella, but he sure as heck didn't look anywhere near as happy as the handsome bloke. The... uh... less than stellar-in-the-looks-department man had a yellow collar tied around his neck. "Alright.", I said to Nielente and Lucas. "We're gonna follow that fella. He looks like the sort to indulge in the pleasures of prostitution." "Um, like... what fellow, exactly?" "The morbidly obese man, obviously.", Blondie snapped at Nielente, sounding somewhat impatient. "No, we ain't following that fella." "W-we're not?", Lucas stuttered, surprised, then smiled. "Ah, I see! Perceptive of you, Patchy. We're going to follow the depressed looking man." "Ya mean the one with the white color?" "Naturally." "No, we ain't following him neither." Lucas stared at me in disbelief. "Then who are we going to-" "The happy one." "The happy one?!" "Yes, the happy one, I just said that, there's no need to-" "You honestly think the dark elf version of Ryan Gosling is the type of individual who would visit a whorehouse?!" "Whatsa Gosling?", I asked. "Like, what's a dark elf?", Nielente inquired. "It doesn't matter!", Lucas yelled, burying his head in his hands. "If we're going to stalk someone, we should at least stalk someone whose sexual market value isn't in the ninety ninth percentile!" I placed my hand over the exasperated pink robe wearing boy's mouth. "Shush. Quiet down some, they'll hear ya if ya yack any further. Trust me on this, outta those three fellas, the one with the goofy grin is the sort who'll be most likely to visit a brothel." Lucas pushed my palm off his mouth with two



thrusts of his warm, wet tongue. "And how do you know that, precisely?", he hissed, keeping his voice down but the level of animosity in his voice as high as ever. "Oh! This must be that detective's intuition I heard so much about!", Nielente spoke up, looking at me with twinkling eyes. "You observed the callouses on the man's hand and concluded that he was a frequent mast-" "No, no, that ain't it either, ya DID riddled nutjob. Tonsa folks got callouses on their hand. It's the collar." "What about his collar, Patchy?" I blinkeda few times at Lucas. "Er... it's black." "So?" "Dontcha remember whata black collar means?" "Nope!", Lucas said, smiling and tapping his head with both his index fingers. "My magical mind merely makes memos about magical mementos. Everything else might as well be white noise to me." "Right, Nielentil, remind Ruckus what the black collars mean." "Simple! They mean... um... they like... they mean..." the barechested brown skinned girl tried her hardest ta remember a factoid she herself had told us, then failed. "I forget what they mean.", she said softly, rubbing her undeveloped bicep. "Guh. Lifetime servitude, remember?" "Oh yeah! That! I'm trying to undo that!" "Yeah, so follow me on this one, you two. What wouldya do if ya only had one rising period ta live?" "Oh! Oh, that's easy!", Nielente energetically answered me. "I'd seek out the Nameless Saboteur." "The what?" "The Nameless Saboteur!", Nielente said, getting really into it. "The most notorious, skilled, and secretive Saboteur to ever sabotage! Everyone knows that" "Er, if he's so secretive, then how come everyone knowsa bout him?" "O-oh.", the girl stuttered witha slightly open mouth, a wavea depression washing over her face. "Well even so, the Nameless Saboteur is my hero! I'm sure he, or she, or it, could give me lots of advice on how to become the best of the best, even if I just had one rising period left to live." "Right, sorry, lemme rephrase my question. Assuming you werea

normal person without this whole Saboteur obsession, what wouldya do if ya had one rising period ta live?” “I’d say farewell to my friends and family.” “They’re dead.” “My family and friends are dead?!” Niелente screamed, covering her cheeks inna panic. “In this hypothetical scenario they’re dead, they ain’t *actually* dead.” “Oh. Then I guess I’d just get really drunk and have a lot of sex, then.”, the green haired girl answered without giving my inquiry a second thought. “Exactly.”, I said, smirking confidently. “Cause when ya ain’t gotta future, ya becomea degenerate. Ya numb yer pain with booze, sex, gambling, drugs, anything that’ll provide ya witha cheap thrill. Cause if there ain’t no point ta anything, why not do what ya feel like?” I thrust my finger at the fella with the black collar. “See, that man... that man issa degenerate. He hasta be.” “No he doesn’t, you idiotic elf.”, Lucas snapped, a good deala anger in his voice. “Simply because he’s enslaved by Marston’s deranged atonement policies doesn’t mean he’s given up on life.” The blonde Sorcerer paused, and squinted his eyes at me. “Furthermore, the enjoyment of casual intercourse does not make one a degenerate.” “Yeah, and I reckon ya think there ain’t nothing wrong witha woman raising a kid on her own, too.” “I do! And there isn’t!” “Yeah, yeah, whatever ya say, degeneracy enabler.”, I scoffed. “But that’s besides the point. I gurantee ya that if we follow this fella we’ll reacha brothel in no time.” “I guarantee you that you’re off your rocker.” “Off my rocker, ya say?”, I asked, leaning in close and breathing down Lucas’s neck. “If yer so sure about that, then why not make thissa wager?” “I thought you said gambling was a form of degeneracy.”, the Sorcerer said ta me with narrowed eyes. “Oh, it ain’ta typical sorta wager. Ain’t no money involved.” “Good, because you have none.” “So here’s the deal.”, I said, flashing Lucas a fangy grin. “If that fella doesn’t lead us straight inta a brothel, then I’ll do

anything ya ask me ta.” “A-anything?”, the blonde boy stuttered, his voice about fifteen octaves higher than normal. “Any~thing~”, I slurred, curling my lips. “But in return, if I’m right, then *you* gotta do anything *I* ask you ta do.” “And how can I trust you to uphold your end of the bargain, Patchy? What’s to stop you from flaking out the moment you’re proven inexorably incorrect?” I frowned and blinked my eye innocently at the skeptical Sorcerer. “Shucks, do I look like a liar ta ya?” “Yes.”, Lucas answered flatly. “Fine, fine, how about this?”, I grumbled. “I, Axeman Red Four, being a equal skill and as noble a color, hereby command myself ta obey any one command given by Lucas Gandulafadore the Third, Sorcerer Supreme, in the off chance that I’m wrong about that handsome looking fella leading us inside a whorehouse.” “You said my name correctly.”, the blonde boy blurted, surprised. “Yeah, yeah, now you. Cast a spell of binding on yerself or whatever.” “There’s no such incantation, I’m afraid.”, Lucas said cheerily. “We magic types don’t really see a point in spells which bind the caster to much of anything, a promise least of all.” He looked at me and smiled. “But have no fear Patchy, I’ll surely uphold my end of the bargain, if you somehow win this wager.” “Ya better!”, I barked, without much a bite. “In fact, if ya don’t, I’ll-“ “Like, I don’t mean to interrupt you two.”, Nielente said, tugging slightly on my wrist. “But the Volunteer you’re talking about is on the move.” Lucas and I turned our bickering heads away from each other. Sure enough, the handsome looking fella in the black collar was beginning ta walk away. Lucas and Nielente immediately moved ta follow him, but I held my arm in front of the two. “Hold up. Ya gotta wait a bit. Can’t be too obvious when ya trail folks, they’ll get all nervous.” “But he’s getting away.”, Lucas hissed, impatient. “What’s it ta you? I thought ya didn’t think he could lead us ta a brothel.” “If we’re going to make idiots out of ourselves,” Lucas

said with gritted teeth, “then we might as well put some *effort* into making idiots out of ourselves. “ “Relax, I’ve trailed folks before, I know what I’m doing.”, I reassured Lucas and Nielente. And I had trailed folks before. Cept, uh, well, usually they were drunk, or elderly, or pregnant, and I wasn’t so much trailing them as I was tracking em down ta ensure they paid their debts, or however mucha the debt the metal in their pockets could pay. But I figured that what worked in Provesh could work in Fremdos, assuming I was all subtle about it. Once the tall, well built (but not nearly as well built as me) fella was almost outta my eye sight, I started tiptoeing after him. I wasn’t quiet. I was subtle, but not quiet. See, sneaking up onna bloke ain’t always a matter of not stepping on a twig or nothing. Nah, sometimes the best approach is ta hide in plain sight as it were, walk normally but carefully. The trick is just ta make sure ya don’t stand out too much. Course, I DID stand out quite a bit, what with the missing eye, missing arm, and the ill-fitting leather armor, but that didn’t really matter. The Volunteer District wasn’t much besides wood cluttered squares, vagrant filled alleways, and canals with needless amountsa crosses lodged in their waters. All the awkwardly placed pieces of wood served asa hedgemaze of sorts, which gave me, Lucas, and Nielente a decent amount of cover. Not that we needed it. The handsome looking man with the black collar around his neck kept walking straight ahead, oblivious ta our attempts at trailing him. We walked slowly, partly so as not ta alert him, and partly because the streets were so darn crowded that we mighta tumbled into the ocean if we didn’t watch our step. The handsome looking fella passed bya shack, then another shack, thena slightly nicer looking shack, before finally coming ta a big dilapidated looking hall of some sort. Unlike the shacks, and the resta the buildings in the Volunteer district, the hall was made

entirely out of wood. Crappy, sawdust covered rotten wood, offa quality so poor that you wouldn't even find inna Proveshian apartment, but wood nonetheless. The handsome looking fella seemed ta walk right past the big hall. Seemed ta, being the operative phrase. Cause what he did was take about three steps past the front door, turn his head left and right a couplea times, then, under the misguided assumption that no one else was around, doubled back ta the door and knocked on it. His knocks were rhythmic, deliberate, and above all else, quick. Quick, like if he didn't knock fast enough the world would come ta a screeching halt. After a moment of silence, a piecea plywood... the door, I reckon, creaked open. . The handsome looking fella quickly dashed inside wretched wooden building the makeshift "door" swiftly slamming shut behind him. "What just happened?", Nielente asked, staring at the condemned building with all sortsa confusion. "Shucks, ya really are naïve ta the waysa the world, ain't ya?", I said, sauntering up ta the plywood board. "See, this here issa secret doorwaya sorts." "It doesn't look too hidden to me.", Lucas said, tilting the brim of his tophat up ta getta glance at the weird entrance. "Sure, up close it don't. But if you were just walking by this dump ya wouldn't give this piecea plywood a second thought." "Obfuscated from the masses, but obvious to a select few, huh?" Lucas said, resting his chin in his hands. "Interesting enough, but how do we get in?" "We input the password, of course." I said, wiping some sweat offa my forehead. "That man didn't say a word." "Right, cause the password ain'ta word, or a seriesa words." I madea fist and walked up ta the piecea plywood the handsome man with the black collar had disappeared inta. "See, all I gotta do is bang on the door like so, and-" Before I could finish my spehiel, the plywood door creaked open, revealing a behemoth offa man behind it. And unlike Shields and

Claymore, this fella looked anything but friendly. "You three aren't club members.", the big bulky man grunted, stepping outta the building and getting far too close ta me fer comfort. "We ain't members yet, ya mean." I said, doing my best ta put on a smile. "Hopefully you'll find in yer heart ta let us join." The sour looking man gazed at us. "Fifteen marks.", he snorted. "In total?" "Fifteen marks per person. And that's for a visitor's pass. We'll discuss membership fees once you're inside." "Visitor's Pass? Ya mean ya wanna fleece us onna bullcrap walk in fee.", I snarled. "Non-members need to pay for a Visitor's Pass to enter the clubhouse.", the big guy grunted, not budging an inch. "Unless this here visitor's pass gives us access ta the services inside, we ain't gonna pay fer one." "Then you aren't getting inside." "Then you ain't getting our money." The big man stared inta my eye. "Seven marks per person for the pass.", he breathed out. "Ten marks fer alla us.", I hissed back. "Ten marks fer alla us, and I keep mum ta yer boss about ya skimming off the top a few rising periods back." "...Fine.", the big fella said, his rage filled face not changing in the slightest. I tilted my head towards Lucas,, who pulled out a stacka bills and handed em ta the giant bouncer. The huge man slowly examined each of the ten bills, then, after doing everything ta the piecesa paper short of licking em, shuffled ta the side. The piecea plywood led downa dirt staircase, and inta a sparsely lit tunnel, with nothing butta few planksa wood ta keep our boots from getting all defiled. "How did you know that man was skimming off the top, Patchy?", Lucas asked, as we made our way through the dark damp dirt tunnel. "I didn't. Just reckoned he was." "Wow, you must be like, psychic or something, Unionist!" Nielente said, her eyes twinkling. "Nah, that ain't it.", I muttered, cautiously navigating the damp dirt tunnel. "I skimmed off the top all the time back in Provesh, it wasa decent way ta makea extra

bitta metal." Blondie rubbed his hands together and shivered, some. "By decent, you mean profitable, not "morally sound", correct?" "Ain't like I hurt anyone by it." I grunted, ducking my head down ta avoid a tufta nasty looking green moss. "Yeah, no one except for the sex-workers and their patrons." "Ain't like I hurt anyone who mattered.", I said, adjusting my statement some. "Besides, I hada kitten ta feed." "A what?" "Forget it.", I grumbled. The dirt tunnel led ta a seta creaky stairs, which went up about six or so feet. The stairs led us up into a cushy looking parlor, one fulla tacky velvet couches, flamboyant crimson drapes, anda rug so furry I coulda sworn it was the backa some cat or something. The parlor was octagon shaped; witha different colored door corresponding ta each side. Starting from the door we came outta and going clockwise, the colors of the doors were white, purple, blue, turquoise, green, red, orange, and yellow. "Christ, it's even worse looking on the inside.", Lucas muttered, poking atta polka dotted sculpture offa elephant. "Wow! There's so many colors!", Nielente gasped, spinning herself round and round in the middle of the room, her eyes transfixed by the differently painted doors. I put my hand on the shirtless green haired girl's shoulder. "Yer gonna throw up if ya keep spinning like that.", I warned Nielente, then gazed skeptically at the green and brown colored carpet. "Not that it would make mucha a difference." As the blonde sorcerer fiddled with worksa art so incomprehensible and inane they would give Andy Warhol's crap a run fer their money, I madea attempt at opening the red colored door. It was locked. As was the yellow, blue, orange, and purple door. Before I could give the turquoise door a go, a chime rang out, behind the white colored door. The white door slowly creaked open, ta reveal... a cart. A small metal cart, witha table cloth wrapped around it, anda nice looking teapot on toppa it.

The cart was wheeled neatly into the center of the octagon room by the very same fella that Lucas, Nielente, and I had trailed to get into the tacky looking brothel. He was still wearing his black collar, but had put on what looked to be a... maid outfit. Complete with a bonnet. "Sincerest apologies, beloved guests.", the dress wearing man said with a warm face. "Currently, the majority of our staff is preoccupied in the rainbow suite." Lucas put down the polka dotted elephant and raised an eyebrow at the man in the maid outfit. "The what now?" "The rainbow suite. This host club prides itself in representing a diverse set of interests." The man with the black collar smiled in a sultry sort of way. "You may have noticed the many colored doors. Each color corresponds to a different emotion, to a unique, yet peerless host club member capable of fulfilling even the wildest of fantasies. The chamber beneath the red door houses Thenzenion, known for his red hot passion and burning sensuality. Behind the turquoise door you shall find Lancer Blue Forty Two, her wiles unrestrained by the Volunteer Collar forced upon her, like a river which flows fast and free. And behind the yellow door you shall find-" "Yeah, yeah, I get it.", I mumbled, then raised an eyebrow. "Wait a tick, did you just say all of them were gathered in one room?" "At this precise moment, yes. The rainbow suite, the room in our Host Club reserved to customers with the drive to sample all the colors and passions we have to offer." "Huh. Whoever is in there must have a libido the size of a small planet, then." "The individual currently occupying the rainbow suite is one with an incredibly refined palette." "And an incredibly large wallet.", I mumbled. "Most guests who utilize the rainbow suites are men of means, yes, but this host club practices a strict confidentiality policy. Everything that happens in here is our little secret~", the well chisled man whispered. "So all the other "employees" are busy "servicing" the fella in



yer queer colored suite, izzat it?.", I inquired, put off by just about everything in the octagon shaped room. "Unfortunately, yes. But fear not, beloved guests. There should be at least three hosts ready for you soon. Feel free to indulge in these scrumptious baked goods and handmade tea in the meantime." "Handmade tea, huh? Then wheredya get the muffins?" "We bought them from a vendor in the General's Square, admittedly with a discount.", the good looking man in the maid outfit explained. "But rest assured, the quality of these muffins are sublime. See for yourself~" he oozed, scooping up a bitta frosting from onea the pastries and pushing it towards Lucas's lips. I grabbed the man's wrist hard as I could and bent it away from Lucas. "O-ow!", the green haired man yelped. "Please... I'm not a host, I'm just a secretary, don't do-" "The pastries. How much did they cost?" "What?!", the fella whose wrist I was bending yelped. "I said the pastries, how much didya buy em fer? Didya getta fifty percent discount on em?" "I... I don't know! Please let go of my wrist!", the strong looking, but not strong acting man pleaded. "Oh, I'll let goa yer wrist alright. But first takea bite outta onea these here muffins.", I said witha smile, keeping my grip on the distressed and confused looking fella's arm. "What?" "Eat the goshdarn muffin, maidman.", I demanded. "It's against the Host Club's policy to-" "Eat the darn muffi-" In the midsta my demands and coercion attempts, Nielente sauntered up ta the cart, and flicked a muffin in her mouth. She chewed the pastry inna mechanical manner, then swallowed it, icing and all. "Arsenic.", the girl stated, her eyes glazed over. "This dessert item contains fatal doses of arsenic, cyanide, and sulphur." "W-what?!", Lucas and the handsome looking man sputtered. "Nielenti!", I shouted, rushing towards the shirtless girl. "No, no, ya idiot! Stick two fingers down yer throat, quick!" "There is no need for that.", Nielente responded, inna

dry monotone. "The autoimmune system in this body is rigorously fortified against four hundred and twenty two varieties of toxins and venoms. The individual known as Nielente would need to ingest at least fifty three point three muffins in order to be negatively affected." The glassy eyed green haired girl pinched a small crumb off another muffin. "However, the toxin present in this sample would be more than enough to kill the three of you fifteen times over." I jerked my head towards the fella in the maid outfit. "Ya sonnouva bitch!" I snarled, grabbing a muffin and slamming it towards the out of sorts man's lips. The green haired girl deftly grabbed me by the wrist and slammed me into the carpet before I could even get the muffin halfway to the fella's face.

"Attempting to murder a bellhop is not the appropriate response to the current situation, Unionist." "But he tried to kill us with his poisoned pastries!" "Conjecture.", Nielente stated, pulling me back onto my feet. "The facts of the situation are as follows: The pastries are poisoned. This man brought the pastries into the room." "Right, so that means-" "Nothing.", the glass eyed girl answered, stepping in between me and the horrified looking man in the maid outfit. "There is no decisive evidence that definitively implicates this man as the culprit. Your actions are at once rushed, uninformed, and reckless." "I'm with schizo girl on this one, Patchy. It's a bit premature to jump to conclusions.", Lucas interjected, then turned to the terrified man in the maid outfit. "Did you poison these muffins, Mr. Secretary?" "O-of course not!", the good looking fella with the black collar said, falling onto his butt. "I'm a Clerk, not an assassin!" "It's more than possible that yer both.", I growled. "No! N-no, this is a misunderstanding! I swear!"

"Then who hadya bring in this carta baked goods?" "I... I can't answer that.", the brown skin man responded, evasively. "Ya mean, ya don't wanna answer that.", I said, taking a

step towards the fella. “Ya *can* answer it, though. Nice and proper like, too.” “I... I refuse.”, the Clerk said, a bitta firmness coming back ta his voice. “I may be a Volunteer, but I am a Clerk, first and foremost. And I swore, on my name, on my color, to honor-“ “Ya know...”, I began, cutting the fella outta his life-affirming speech. “That icing on yer finger is probably chalk fulla poison. Probably won’t be too long before it starts seeping inta ya.” “A toxin is not the same thing as a venom.”, Nielente quietly said. “A venom seeps into the skin, but a toxin is absolutely harmless, unless it is ingest-“ I casually flicked the glass eyed girl’s ears. “What the- Oh no!”, the dementia afflicted dancer suddenly shrieked. “Someone, like, spilled all the muffins!” The girl reached down ta pick up onea the desserts. “Oi, don’t do that Nielentil. The muffins are poisoned. If ya touch em, the poison’ll seep inta yer skin.” “A-ah! Thanks, Unionist! I could have been a goner!” “Don’t mention it.”, I said, flashing the fella on his buttocks a fangy smile. “That girl is safe, but whatta bout yerself? That toxin might be flowing inta yer bloodstream any moment, y’know?” “But I commanded myself not to-“ “It don’t matter what ya commanded yerself ta do or not. That arsenic is gonna stop yer heart any moment if ya don’t tell me who had ya bring the poisoned pastries in here.” The terrified man in the maid outfit seemedta agonize fera few moments, then, with the face a fella pulling outta a knife outta his thigh, swallowed somea his spittle. “My employer asked me to bring out those pastries, of course. B-but even if these pastries are poisoned, I swear, they were not intended for you. They were supposed to go to the guest in the Rainbow Suite. I... I felt bad for you three, and figured that you would enjoy them much more than that rich idiot would.” He cringed. “I s-swear, I wasn’t trying to hurt anyone!” I bit my bottom lip. “But yer... but yer wearing a hat-“ The fella with the black collar curled up in agony. “A-

ah! AH! AAAAAAAAAAH!", the fella in the maid uniform screamed, his limbs contorting unnaturally. "Aw, crap!" Lucas looked at me, concern and confusion running rampant in his blue eyes. "What's wrong, Patchy?", he asked, taking one step forward towards the panicking fella. "Doya got some rope or something on ya?", I blurted, quickly. "No, of course I don't." "Then find some!", I barked. "A-ah!", the fella I had tricked into thinking was poisoned yelled. He raised his hand towards his teeth, then, thrust it into his teeth. Hard. He began punching himself in the face, with wild thrusts, striking his cheek, forehead, eyes, scalp, any and all parts of his head with frantic unpredictable movements.. I leapt over and tried restraining one of his arms, but he broke free of my grasp and continued to pummel himself. Lucas stared at the man, completely shocked. "What the..." "Don't just stand there, Ruckus! Use that blue flame thingy of yers!" "My tazer... right, right!", the blonde boy said, snapping out of his daze and running towards the inarticulate man, his box of blue flame ready to go. The blonde Sorcerer quickly jabbed the near feral fella in the chest. The Clerk started shaking some, but he didn't let up with his self-harming hits. Even as he spasmed on the floor, he kept on punching himself in the skull, screaming inarticulately as he did. Nielente reached out to try and stop him, but was hit right in the stomach before she could do much of anything. "Ah.... AH!", the man on the floor screamed, his blows beginning to draw some blood. I reached for the ceramic elephant Lucas had played with, and raised it over the man's head. "Are you nuts?", Blondie bellowed, knocking the sculpture out of my hand. "Hitting him with that could kill him!" "He's doing a mighty good job that already, Blondie!", I snapped back, then, seeing no other viable alternative, leapt on top of the self-harming man. The good news is that the weight of my body managed to stop the fella from hurting

himself. The bad news is that, uh, where as the man had been hitting himself in the face before, his blows were now sorta directed at me. Mosta his wild flails bounced offa the backa my leather armor, butta fewa em managed ta hit me on the noggin. I was completely fine, until I wasn't. See, maybe it was the other bumps and bruises I had suffered before, or maybe it was the panicked feral fella just hitting an area on my skull that he shouldn'ta hit, but with the third blow ta my head, I felt the rainbow room start ta spin, some. The head ache I had gotten from my spat with the powdered wig fellas back at the limb depository returned with a vengeance, and I began hearing a loud ringing noise in my ear. But before my vision got fuzzy again, and before the blowsa of the fella I had pinned ta the floor knocked me out completely, a small, popping sound rang out. With no more than a brief, pained grunt, the man in the maid outfit I was straddling stopped struggling, and collapsed on the fur carpet, absolutely motionless. As I tried ta catch my breath, the smella smoke entered inta my nostrils, thick and pugniant. "W-what the heck?", I coughed, pushing myself off the limp man. "The room isn't on fire, if that's what you're worried about.", Lucas quipped, but his heart just wasn't in it. The blonde fella stood straight in the center of the room. He looked a lot different than he usually did. Oh, he was still wearing the same pink robes and everything, but his shoulders were slumped, somewhat. Furthermore, the boy looked tired... nah, tired ain't the right word, he looked weary. As fer why he looked weary, I only had two guesses. One coulda been that his lacka sleep was catching upta him. The other, more probable hypothesis of mine was that Lucas' exhaustion stemmed from the weird looking device he had in his right hand. There was nothing particularly ominous looking about the contraption in the fella's hand. The object he was holding was silver, and madea some kinda steel, but it

wasn't sharp, or blunt enough to pose a danger. It seemed like some weird sculpture, I suppose. The metal on the top of the object was forged into a small hollow pipe, with a metal cylinder behind it. Connected, and below the metal cylinder was a grip, like you'd see on an icepick or a hatchet, except it was much more rectangular, and ran perpendicular to the hollow pipe, instead of parallel to it. There was a trigger attached to the grip, , nowhere near the size of a trigger you'd see on a crossbow, or a ballista, but a trigger all the same. Much more pressing than the size of the trigger, though, was the smoke coming out of the hollow metal pipe of Lucas's contraption. The blonde Sorcerer raised the pipe to his lips, and blew the smoke away. He spun his weird object on its trigger, then holstered it, putting it right next to his pronged box. "What just happened?", Lucas asked me, a stern look on his face. "Ain't you got eyes?" "Yes. Twice as many as you have, in fact. Why did this man just attempt to kill himself?" I looked away from Lucas, and down at the motionless fella. To be honest, I didn't know if the Clerk was alive or dead. He had stopped moving, and I didn't hear any breathing from him. There was a little blood leaking out of his thigh, but the man in the maid outfit didn't seem all that cut up or bruised, well, below the head, that is. "Why did this man just attempt to kill himself?", Lucas asked again, forcefully. "Cause he disobeyed a command, of course." I said, not turning away from the fella on the ground. "What?" "He disobeyed a command. I reckon that his superiors had commanded him to keep mum about some of the things he just told us. If you disobey a command, then this is what happens." "Why would he even allow himself to do such a thing in the first place?", Lucas sputtered, his right hand twitching. "Because the Unionist tricked him.", Nielente responded, her eyes glassy again. "Or more accurately... the Unionist fabricated a

situation in which disobeying a command would be preferable to not.” “How would certain suicide be preferable to anything?” “It ain’t certain!”, I protested, almost tripping into the yellow door. “Just cause ya disobey a command, it don’t mean yer gonna bite it. If ya finda fella ranked higher than the one who gave ya the command ya disobeyed quick enough, he can save ya before ya bash yer own brains out.” “The probability of such an event occurring is one in fifteen million.”, the green haired girl responded, her delivery so dry and robotic sounding I couldn’t even begin ta guess if she was being sarcastic or not. “The moment this man wakes up, he will attempt to curtail his existence once more.” “Yeah, that’s why I wanted the gosh darn rope, so that we could tie him up and-“ “Restrain him?”, Nielente answered, finishing my statement fer me. “Moot. We restrain his limbs, he’ll bite down on his tongue. We elevate his tongue, he’ll refuse to breath. A Unionist who has disobeyed a command is dead from the beginning.” “That ain’t true. If we find a Clerk witha higher number orra color-“ “Furthermore, this man is already on the brink of death. He appears to have suffered a high velocity impact to the thigh. A projectile has broken through the skin.” “A projectile? What projectile? I didn’t seea projectile.” “This girl did not either.”, the eerily composed green haired dancer declared. “But the fact remains a small, coin sized projectile smashed into this man’s thigh with an enormous quantity of force.” “I did that. It was me.”, Lucas said, almost immediately. “I shot this man in the thigh.” “Ya what?” “I used a Colt Single Action Army Revolver to shoot this man in the thigh.”, the blonde boy stated, witha eerie sorta calm. I had absolutely no idea what the hecka Colt Single Action Army Revolver was, or howa small thigh wound could knock someone out, but the logistics behind the matter tooka backseat ta the reality of the situation. “Why wouldya do that?”, I sputtered. “I had

everything under control!" "You most certainly did not!", Lucas yelled, his voice loud and angry. "He was beating the snot out of you, you asinine amputee!" "I had armor on, it wasn't like I was gonna be-" "Bullshit!", Lucas cried, pounding the door once more, an unexpected amount of force delivered by his undefined arm. "Always! You ALWAYS do this shit!", he screamed, slamming his fist into the orange colored door. "You always refuse to just take things slow, you always escalate a situation, and... and..." the blonde boy stopped. He stopped shaking, and slumped against the door, drained. "... and in the end, you hurt everyone. Yourself most of all." "The heck are you babbling on about?", I growled, as Nielente began attending to the man with the wounded thigh. "Nothing. Forget about it, Patchy.", Lucas spat, bitterly. "No, I ain't dropping this.", I snapped back, my blood starting to boil. "Yer always going on, and on, and on about how much a scumbag I am, about how I'm a bigot, a moron, a monster, a murderer." I rubbed my stump and grimaced. "And all that may be true, but if I bother you so much, if my actions disturb ya so much, then why the heck are ya still following me around?" Lucas remained silent. "Why the heck don'tcha find someone else to help ya with yer magical item crap?" Lucas remained silent. "And why didya shoot this man?" Lucas remained silent. I turned away from the moping man, nodding my head in disgust. "Oi, Nielentil, tie that wounded fella up." The glassy eyed girl turned around, and stared at me. "I have already informed you, restraining this man will do no good. The moment he awakens he will curtail his own existence. It is the inexorable fate of every Unionist who disobeys a command. Surely you knew this?" "Yeah, yeah, I know, I just don't particularly care. I metta Clerk at the Duck Tower, There's a chance she outranks this fella, and if I hurry, I might be able to..." "A promise.", the blonde boy suddenly mumbled,



still slumped against the orange door. "I made someone a promise.", he breathed out, like he was inna trance. "To protect them. To guide them. To advise them. And if need be, if for any reason, I felt that nothing could be done to... to change their path... to...."

Lucas sprung his head up at me, and glared, his face fulla malice. "To kill them." , he declared, witha firm sense of finality. He wrapped his hand around the grip of his revolver, and raised it, slowly, deliberately, at my head. I froze up. Not outta fear. The small metal contraption in Lucas's hand looked far too silly ta cause me fear. No, I froze up, cause there wasa certain sorta... misery in Lucas's eyes. Misery, beneath the malice, behind the frustration, the flamboyance. Misery so infectious, and so heavy, that it wrapped around my body like a weave of iron chains, tethering me in place. But Lucas sure as heck wasn't tethered in place. His pointer finger moved ta the trigger of the metal contraption in his hand, and that finger slowly squeezed down, as he continued to glare at me, the gaze of his icy blue eyes unrelenting. "Waita tick Ruckus, don-" The orange door Lucas was leaning against suddenly burst open, smacking hard into the backa his head and causinga flasha lighta ta explode from the enda his revolver. "I'm sorry, were we too loud?", a polite sounding voice inquired. "I heard a loud pounding on the door..." A half dress man with messy blonde hair emerged from behind the orange door, witha sheepish smile on his face. He was pretty short, no bigger than five feet and nine inches, and was somewhat pudgy. Not fat, by any means, but far froma healthy weight. And I could tell that he wasn't onea those bear mode typea blokes, there didn't seemta be much developed muscle hiding behind his jelly rolls. Even so, in spitea his chubbiness, his shortness, and his slightly receding hairline, the man hada weird charm and affability about him. But his smile and warm-hearted disposition disappeared the

moment he gotta look at the statea the octagon shaped room, a look at the man with the wounded thigh, and at the recently created hole in the ceiling above Lucas. "By the will of Fiat...", he gasped, stunned. "Brother Christopher! Sister Julia!", the disturbed half-dressed man cried. "To my side at once!" Almost instantly, two fellas, a guy anda girl respectively, dashed ta the side of the messy blonde haired man, both in relative statesa undress, and both wielding impossibly heavy looking halberds, which they crossed protectively in fronta the chubby fella. "What trouble doth thou face, my liege?", the white haired man asked, glaring at me and Nielente likea pitbull would ta a Cop. "Yeah Dez, what's the problem?", the black haired girl inquired, an easy going quality ta her words. "You're all tense and stuff, man. This Fremdosian chick giving you trouble?" "The matter is more grave than that.", "Dez" said, grimly. "Look at this room. Notice anything wrong?" The two halberd wearing folks looked around the octagon shaped room, their eyes gazing at the wounded man, the damaged door, and finally resting at the ceiling above Blondie, wherea chunka the plaster had been blasted away. "Yes, I doth seeth that a tragedy most foul hath occurred, sire.", the white haired retainer said, still keeping his halberd in front of the chubby fella. "Brother Christopher.", the chubby blonde man stated, his voice composed, "as you and Sister Julia can clearly observe...", the man with the receding hairline began, "Someone ruined our pastries!" he cried, a looka deep sadness and regret on his pink cheeks. "You're right, Dez." the black haired girl half gasped, not looking that mellow no more. "The cart's all tipped and topsy turvey. Plus the dude who was supposed to deliver the snacks looks kind of out of it~" "He is clearly deceased, my noble companion.", the white haired man said ta woman across from him. "These vile villains must have murdered him to abscond with

our lord's delectable desserts." "No! No, that ain't it at all!", I protested, the strangeness of the situation shaking me outta my stupor. "First off, that fella ain't dead, and second off, those muffins are poisoned. Well, according ta the shirtless chick behind me, anyhow." "What shirtless chick, man?", the black haired chick asked me, firmly grasping her halberd. "The one right over-" I turned around, and saw a whole lotta nothing where Nielente shoulda been. "-there. Er, well, regardless, the muffins are still poisoned. Don't eat em." The white haired man narrowed his eyes at me. "Is what you speak true, worthless wench?" he growled, the words slushing through clenched teeth. "As far as I can tell, yup." "Oh! Why didn't thou sayeth so in the first place, noble lady?", the white haired man asked, a happy smile on his face. "You have our thanks for the warning.", he said, slowly raising up his halberd, then stopped, the momentum of his weapon curtailed entirely. "Chill out for just a bit, Chris, don't get too caught up in the mellow of the moment." Julia chimed in, forcing the white haired man's halberd back down. "This little puppy might be performing a trick." "Come now, Sister.", the messy haired man said, slightly exasperated. "I don't think this girl is an assassin." The somewhat short man smiled, inna sultry sorta way. "And even if she was, I'm far too confident in your and Brother Christopher's protective prowess to care." Both the white haired man and the black haired girl blushed, providing little resistance as the messy haired man pushed their halberds up and stepped forward. "But what happened to this Clerk? Did you get into an altercation with him?" "K-kinda.", I stuttered. "Kind of?", the messy haired man repeated. "Uh, see, after finding out that the muffins were poisoned, I, uh, I asked that fella who had given the pastries to him." "And that led to him collapsing on the floor and losing several pints of blood?" "Guh... er, kinda. See, I got some info from him, but in

doing so I forced him ta disobeyda command. And, uh, if yer Unionist, like myself, and ya disobey a command, ya start beating the crap outta yer-“ The somewhat undressed chubby fella held up his hand. “No further explanation is needed. Brother Christopher, bring a Clerk out here at once.” “Which Clerk?” “All of them, if you would.” “Right away, sire!”, the white haired halberd honer hummed, and dashed back into the orange room, a confident grin on his clean shaven face. I stared at the backa the halberd wielding brother with a bitta disbelief. “The heck is that fella on, talking like that?” “Oh, that’s just a quirk of Brother Christopher’s. He’s really into antiquity era plays.” “Inta what?” “Antiquity era plays, .”, Sister Julia said, leaning gently on her halberd. “Those plays where historically significant rich people wear powdered wigs, plot against each other, and speak verbosely. Chris loves that stuff.” “Right, but don’t he know he sounds weird?” “Oh, I’m sure he knows, but I doubt he cares~”, the easy going girl slushed. “Once Chris gets into something, he takes it very seriously. He’s a total square, man.” “He’sa perpendicular shape?” “No, no, he’s totally lameo. A stick in the mud.” Dez looked at the black haired girl curiously. “If you really feel that way about Brother Christopher, I could arrange to have him replaced.” “N-no!”, Sister Julia shrieked, then quickly tried ta regain her composure. “I mean... whatever you say, Dez. I don’t really care one way or the other.” She flipped her long black hair over her shoulder. “It’s just... that Chris cat balances us out, you dig? His lameness helps sort out our feng shui.” “Oh, is that so?”, the messy haired man said, smiling slightly as the black haired girl almost fell over on her halberd. While Sister Julia mighta failed ta come across as apathetic, Lucas succeeded with flying colors. The boy in the pink robes and purple tophat remained slumped against the orange door, seemingly dead ta the world. His blue eyes

were dull, lifeless, like Nielente's whenever she randomly gained fifty points of intelligence. "I hath returned!", a proud sounding voice declared. Brother Christopher returned to the octagon shaped room, dressed in a monochrome habit with gold linings. He handed a folded up square of fabric to the black haired girl. "Here, my courageous companion, your garments." The undershirt and underskirt wearing woman frowned. "Aw, man, I liked the casual look we were rocking. Those habits make us look way too stuffy." "Tis a mark of honor to wear these noble uniforms." "I just don't dig these threads, that's all.", the black haired girl yawned, shoving her right arm through the sleeve of the monochrome habit. "Perhaps I should look into having more casual habits be fashioned, the coloring on these *are* somewhat tacky...", Dez said to himself, then quickly nodded his head. "Wait, that doesn't matter right now, does it? Brother Christopher, were you able to find a clerk?" "As luck would have it sire, seven out of the eight prostitutes-" "Sex-workers.", the messy haired man gently corrected him. "sex-workers we commissioned were Clerks. I hath brought the one highest in rank, noblest of color, out with me! Clerk Orange Thirteen! Your countryman needs you!" An embarrassed looking girl with a white collar around her throat emerged from the orange door, looking extremely nervous. "O-oh no!", she gasped, staring at the man with the wounded thigh. "Orange Thirty One!" "Yes, your co-worker hath met a fate most foul, dear lady.", Brother Christopher uttered, a grim frown on his perpetually serious face. "But fear not! My liege knows a way to save your companion, but you must lend him your power to do so." "Lend him my... my what?" "It's not quite that complicated.", Dez said, smiling sheepishly at the awkward girl. "For reasons unknown, your friend ended up disobeying a command. But you can take care of that, right?" "Y-yes! Yes I can!", the

girl said, then without a word of resistance, rushed over to the wounded man in the maid outfit. "Orange Thirty One! Please, get up!" The girl's coaxing awakened the black collar man with the damaged thigh easy enough, but just as Nielente predicted, no sooner had the fella regained consciousness than he started wailing at himself again, even as his knuckles bled red. "O-oh crap!", the girl cried. "U-m... I.. Clerk Orange Thirteen, being of higher skill and nobler color, hereby command Clerk Orange Thirty Seven to... to stop hurting himself!" There was an audible silence in the room. And, then... the green haired man in the maid outfit stopped. He stopped pounding himself in the face, and, with little more than a short gasp, slumped over. Sister Julia walked over to the green haired man, and rested two of her fingers on his neck. "He's dead.", the raven-haired girl said, morose. "W-w-what?!", Clerk Orange Twenty Nine gasped, mortified. "But I... but I commanded him and-" "Relax! I'm only kidding, little lamb~", Sister Julia said with a happy grin, cradling the unconscious Clerk in her arms. "This crazy chinchilla should be just fine, given time to rest and proper medical attention!" "Some things can't and shan't be joked about, Julia.", Brother Christopher hissed, withdrawing the back of his hand from the black haired girl's cheek. "The death of one's comrade is no laughing matter." "I'm sorry...", Sister Julia said meekly. "Very well, so long as you learn from my reprimand, I shall forgive your- Ugh!" "It isn't very kind to assault one's co-worker, Brother Christopher", Dez said, flicking the white haired man on the nose. He turned to the scared looking clerk. "Thank you for your effort. Your actions have saved your friend's life." "Can I please go back to my room?", the scared looking Clerk asked, staring at me and the halberd wielding folk with apprehensive eyes. "Of course, of course.", the chubby blonde man assured the Clerk. "I will see to it

that this man is taken care of.” The scared looking clerk slumped back towards the orange door. “Wait.”, Dez suddenly said, grabbing the clerk by her wrist. “Brother Christopher, my quill. Sister Julia, the parchment.” Without even a bitta banter, and inna manner so simultaneous it mighta been choreographed, the white haired man and the black haired girl reached into their monochrome robes and produced a snazzy looking quill and a nice strippa parchment respectively. The quill, though... well, it certainly looked nice and all, with polished oak as its handle, but something was off about it. The reason folks use quills ta write, as opposed ta their fingers or a piecea wood, is that the quills are all hollow in the middle, being madea duck feathers. The hollow bone in the feather holds the ink, and drips outta the sharpened end of the feather, enabling ya ta write inna way that’s fairly accurate, without having ta constantly dip yer writing implement inna potta ink. Course, there’s actually much better waysa writing, such asa ballpoint pen, a typewriter, or Microsoft Word, but that’s pretty much about three hundred centuries down the line fer you fellas, so I wouldn’t worry too much about it. Er, oh, so the issue with Dez’s quill was that instead a hollow bone in the middle of the feather, there was instead a razor sharp, uh, razor. He raised up the raised, and fingered the blade with his right thumb, not taking a whole lotta care around the sharp edge of the quill. Dez looked at the razor quill with a satisfised smile, and then, without even a care in the world, stabbed the blade deep into his left wrist. I recoiled away, but couldn’t take my eye offa the big blonde fella as his white feathered quill turned pink, then a deep crimson. Even Lucas, mopey as he was, looked up and stared at the spectacle with a mixa disgust and interest. Course, Dez paid me and the sad looking Sorcerer no mind as he scribbled away on the paper, casually jabbing the razor back

into his arm when he needed more, uh, "ink." After what was only a very brief period of time but what felt like forever, the messy haired man stopped the self harming scribbling... and flicked the razor blade of his quill across Brother Christopher's forearm, his eyes still transfixed on the paper in front of him. "C-can I please go?", the Clerk Dez had grabbed by the wrist asked again, as put off his behavior as Lucas and I was. "Oh, no, no, just a few more moments and I'll be done.", Dez reassured the Clerk, besmirching the parchment with Christopher's fresh blood. Without bothering to wipe Brother Christopher's blood of the edge of his razor, he dug his the point of his quill into Sister Julia's left wrist, not exactly being conservative about the size of the cut he made. Using the mellow minded girl's blood, the messy haired man made a few more circular strokes with his quill, then, as if to put an end to the painful looking process, wiped the razor point clean. "Here you go.", he said, warmly, extending the blood splattered paper to the Clerk who had saved the fella in the maid outfit. "This should cover our visit, plus any medical expenses that man might need." "T-this is a mark.", the Clerk stuttered, staring at the blood drenched parchment in her hands in disbelief. And, to an extent, she was right. I mean, I couldn't make out any of the words, naturally, but even though the "ink" that had been placed on the paper was both unorthodox and nauseating, the crinkly brown piece of paper looked every bit like a mark. Except, instead of a solemn old man being present on the mark, there was a suit of intimidating looking armor, with needlessly spikey pauldrons. Despite the choice of liquid used to paint the mark, the picture was clear as crystal. "Yes, it's a mark.", Dez said, wrapping some cloth around his wrist. "Actually, it's ten thousand marks, if you want to be technical. I'd spend it as swiftly as possible if I were you, there's going to be a nasty bout of inflation in the next quarter of a



cycle.” “W-whatever you say, sir.”, the freaked out Clerk blurted, jerking her wrist out of the messy haired man’s grasp, and dashing fast as heck back into the orange room.

“Huh. She must have another customer to attend to.”, the messy haired man muttered, as the Clerk slammed the orange door behind with a great deal a force. “Er, something tells me that’s not quite the case, champ.”, I said, as Brother Christopher and Sister Julia nonchalantly wrapped some bandages around their sliced up arms. “Hm. Was I too forceful with the girl?”, Dez asked me, concerned. “No, I, uh, I think it was less yer attitude, and more how ya, uh, damn near splattered her from head ta toe with yer bodily fluid.” “I was under the impression she was paid to do that.”, the half dressed man said, a look a confusion in his eyes. “She didn’t seem to mind it before.”, Sister Julia yawned, reclining onna pink colored couch. “No, no, not *that* ya degenerates, yer blood! No one is gonna just watch ya slice yer wrists open and not react to it!” I squelched, and covered my mouth, the sight a the folks cutting away at their arms bringing back some unpleasant memories. “...Haven’t you ever heard a ink?”, I managed ta meekly mumble through the nausea. Brother Christopher wrapped his arm around my neck and chuckled. “Of course we have, fair lady! But to use ink on such a work of art as the ten thousand mark would be to rob it of it’s beauty!” “Ya lost me.” “It’s art, man.”, Sister Julia chided. “You know... it has deeper meaning to it and stuff. The blood is symbolic. A hidden symbol, something you don’t see at first, then you do, and your mind goes all “woah, that’s deep.” I narrowed my eye at the black haired girl. “Only thing the three of yous blood on that mark is symbolic of is latent insanity, and I’m beginning ta doubt the “latent” part.” “Is it really so odd, though?”, Dez asked me, a curious look on hi- “Yes.”, I blurted. “Yes, slicing yer wrist open is odd, pretty much regardless of the context.” “So

sayeth the one armed, one eyed stranger.”, Brother Christopher snorted. “...Ya don’t havta go out and say it.”, I mewed, awkwardly rubbing my stump. “G-guh, waitta tick!”, I protested, quickly nodding my head. “Me being a crippled wrecka human being don’t change the fact that ya just sliced yer damn arteries open ta painta letter! That don’t makea licka sense no matter howya slice it.” I paused, then elaborated outta basic necessity: “By “it”, I mean yer linea reasoning, not yer wrist. Don’t slice that no more.” Brother Christopher opened his mouth ta voice a rebuttal, but was silenced by a soft, bandaged hand on his shoulder. “I don’t know your name, Miss, and I don’t think you’d be terribly inclined to tell me it.”, Dez stated, some reservation in his voice. “My name, however, is Desnion.” “Good fer you.”, I muttered, not really caring what the weird fella called himself. The man in the gold robes smiled nervously. “Good, bad, my name is my name. And I share it freely with everyone I meet. Do you want to know why?” “Not particularly, no.”, I grumbled, gazing at the hole in the ceiling Lucas’s metal contraption had made. “I tell everyone I meet my name because I believe in honesty.”, Desnion said, a bit more firmly than before. “I abhor lies, I despise trickery.” “Izzat so.” “Of course. To conceal the truth from others is to deny them their existence, their life.” “Think thatsa bittuva reach, champ. Folks lie all the time, ta each other and themselves. They get by all the same.” “They get by, yes.”, Desnion said, somewhat irritated with my response ta his overly simplistic platitude. “But getting by isn’t living. Getting by is getting by.” “And the first rulea the tautology club is the first rulea the tautology club, do ya gotta point or areya just rambling about random nonsense?” “The point, miss, is that when I use my blood, and Brother Christopher’s blood, and Sister Julia’s blood, to draw up a mark, I am not doing it just because I have a dubious sense of aesthetics. I am

attempting to tell the truth.” “What truth? That yera psycho?” The chubby man in the gold robes bit the knuckle of his pointer finger and frowned. “It’s not nice to insult strangers.” I clenched my teeth, the man’s mopey mug making me mildly mournful. “Guh, I’m sorr-” “-Then again, who am I to chide you for insulting me, after giving you a lecture on honesty?”, Desnion said, cupping his chin in his hand. He nodded his head, and tightened the bandage on his wrist some. “I’d take one honest roughnecks over fifteen courtiers any rising period.” “I might be a roughneck, but I sure as heck ain’t honest.”, I said, letting my guard down. “I lie ta just about anyone and everyone. Makes life a heckuva lot easier.” “Right, but do you lie to yourself?”, Desnion asked, looking deep into my eye like it meant something. “Course I don’t.”, I snorted. “Ain’t no point in running a con if yera victim of it.” “I see.”, the man in the gold robes said. “I knew someone like you once. Confident, self-assured, and with an undeniable cleverness.” His face contorted, and for the first time I saw a bit of malice on Desnion’s face. “She was the most vile creature I ever had the displeasure of knowing.” I grimaced a bit, which the chubby fella picked up on immediately. “But don’t worry. There is one key thing separating you, from her.” “An arm?”, I snorted. Desnion’s lips curled into a gentle smile. “You still have time to change.” “W-who the heck are you ta tell me that?”, I half growled, half stuttered, the fella’s words getting ta me more than I’d liked ta admit. “None other than the Supreme Sibling of the Order of Fiat, knave!”, Brother Christopher declared, defending Desnion decisively. “W-what?!” I sputtered, shocked. “The man who stands before you is none other than the Supreme Sibling of the Order of Fiat, cowardly cur!”, Christopher boomed out, the deepness of his voice rivaling Marston. “My liege is the foundation of the Holy Collective! His words aggravate mountains, and his

aggravations mount words! He is the alpha, the omega, the be all and end all of this sordid society, he is the highest, grandest person in all the la-“ Nah, Dez just writes up a bunch of bills and stuff.”, Julia interjected, lazily. “He makes money, and in return gets to wear those tacky gold threads.” I looked at Desnion with a raised eyebrow, not terribly sure if Christopher was embellishing or Julia was understating. “Oh, yeah, that’s my job description, I guess.”, the messy haired man said sheepishly. “Supreme Sibling of the Order of Fiat. But Sister Julia has the straight of it, all I do is wear silly hats and make sure money flows like it’s supposed to.” “Tis true,”, Christopher said, “Thou profession demands nothing more than the management of marks, but...” The white haired man trailed off. “But!”, he said, with a good deal more vigor. “BUT BUT BUT!”, he boisterously shouted. “SUCH SELECTIVE ACTIONS, AS BUREACRATIC AS THEY APPEAR, ARE FAR FROM BENIGN! YOUR PROFESSION IS THE CORNERSTONE OF THE ENTIRE CONTINENT, LORD DESNION!”, Brother Christopher shouted, screaming to the high heavens. “The economy is the cornerstone of the entire continent, Christopher. Not me.”, Desnion stated, in a neutral tone. “True, I exert some degree of control over the economy, and that in turn gives me more authority and influence than most. But in the grand scheme of things, I am nothing more than a mere middleman.” “Nothing wrong with being in the middle~”, Sister Julia said, giggling like a infant. “W-wait, hold up a bit!”, I stuttered, pointing my index finger at the gold robed man. “If yer this Supreme Sibling fella, then what the heck are ya doing in a brothel!?” “Same thing you were doing, I’d imagine.” “I wasn’t doing nothing of the sort!”, I protested, defensively. “G-gah, wait, that don’t matter to begin with! Don’tcha got some kinda code against indecent behavior. “The Supreme Sibling is required to take an oath of chastity

when appointed by the the Order of Fiat, yes.”, Desnion said. “But I don’t adhere to it.”

“W-why don’tcha?” “The answer is simple, noble woman!”, Christopher boomed. “My liege, my compatriot, and I are-“ “Progressive?” “Horrendously corrupt!” “WHAT?!” , I coughed, losing a fair bit of my saliva. “We’re horrendously corrupt.”, Brother Christopher said, sagely. “Out of the fifteen ethical vows we took, we have broken a dozen.” “I thought ya said ya valued honesty!”, I screeched at Desnion. “I did.”, the messy hair man said. “But I never said anything about valuing integrity.” “It’s not like people don’t know we’re corrupt, man.”, Sister Julia explained. “I mean, we keep a pretty well detailed list of our expenditures, and a super straightforward list of our illegal expenditures.” “And ya haven’t been impeached or hanged or nothing?!” “What sick body of legislature would expel a leader for his morals?”, Christopher asked, horrified.

Before I could respond ta the white haired degenerate, there was a sudden knock on the door, the white door we used ta enter the unfortunately decorated octagon room. “Excuse me?”, a posh sounding voice inquired. “I heard a loud noise, is there a disturbance? I simply can’t have disturbances in my brothel, it’s unhygienic.” Desnion and his two halberd wielding bodyguards looked at the door witha great deala confusion. “Hello? Still no answer? Alright, I’m coming in. I do hope you’ve all taken the time to make yourselves decent.” The door creaked open, anda very posh looking lady with green hair, brown skin, anda gorgeous looking white dress walked in. “Oh my!”, the petite woman gasped, covering her mouth with her hand as she looked at the passed out man in the maid outfit. “I do declare, this is a travesty! The ceiling is ruined! And my precious guests seem disturbed beyond belief!” Desnion looked skeptically at the dignified looking woman. “No offense, madame, but I don’t believe we’ve met.” “Why of

course we haven't met!", the dignified looking woman declared, running a few fingers through her impossibly elaborate head hair. "I am the owner of this here establishment, and I do so enjoy doing my business dealings through proxy." The man in the golden robes scratched his head. "I was under the impression that Clerk Black Fifteen owned this warehouse..." "I work with a proxy, I just told you that." , the posh girl answered without a moment's pause. "In any event, I demand to know what is going on here. Why is my dear friend Clerk Orange Sixteen-" "Orange Thirteen", Brother Christopher corrected the dignified lady, "Why is my dear friend Clerk Orange Thirteen on the floor? Is he sick?" "No, he was attacked." The woman in the fancy looking dress gasped. "Attacked? By who?" "By himself.", I said, truthfully. "Dumb fella disobeyed a command." "Oh my. Is that true?", the fancy female gasped. "Yeah, it's true. What the heck did you command him to do, anyhow?" "I didn't command him to do anything.", the green haired lady in the fluffy white dress protested, defensively. "My employees, however..." "Your employees did what?" "It doesn't matter now.", the dignified lady scoffed. I need everyone in this room to leave, now!" "But-" "Now!", she demanded. I shrugged my shoulders and turned to leave, glad to go. "Not you, disabled girl. I need you to sign an affidavit." "A what?" "An affidavit.", the gorgeously dressed woman explained. "For insurance." She looked at Desnion, Sister Julia, and Brother Christopher. "Out! You three need to get out!" "Um, what about this dude, m'amm?", Julia asked the easily offended brothel owner, pointing at Lucas. "He needs to stay, to cosign the affidavit." "I wasn't aware of such stringent legal requirements. We certainly didn't have to deal with such nonsense the last time we visited here", Brother Christopher snorted, staring at the well put together women with disdain. "Aw, bless your heart, dear.", the green haired

woman responded, in the condescending way that only people who said “bless your heart” could. “The paperwork for a place like this, hun, well, it’s rather thorough. And regardless of how many times you’ve been here, I doubt you’ve ever been in the middle of the situation like this.” “But this is partly our fault, good woman, I insist that me and Sister Julia do our part to rectify-“ “You’ve done enough.”, the owner said, snarling at the white haired man. “Just leave here, and never return.” “But-“ Brother Christopher began to protest. “Enough, Christopher”, Desnion stated, placing his hand on the monochrome habit wearing man’s shoulder. “We have a rally to go to anyways.” I frowned. “A rally?” “Yes, the celebration of the great Unification.”, Brother Christopher responded, heading to the door, his giant halberd in hand. “Uh, ya might be a bit late fer that, champ.”, I said. “That rally already happened.” “Nonesuch!”, the white haired man yelled. “For the celebration to have occurred... t’would imply that me, my liege, and my noble cohort overslept!” “We totally did oversleep, Chris.”, Sister Julia yawned, sitting on top of the handle of her halberd like it was a bench. She turned over her non-sliced up wrist, revealing a small, circular piece of metal strapped to her wrist with a strand of leather. “According to this, we’re about a rising period or so late for the rally.” I stared at the piece of metal with some degree of interest. “The heck is that?” “A time checker.”, Sister Julia said, lazily waving about her hand. “A what?” “A time checker. It takes time, and checks it, man.” Desnion grabbed the black haired woman’s wrist like it was his own, and looked down at the top of the circular piece of metal. “I think the man who gave you this device called it a “watch”, Sister Julia.”, the messy hair man said, the name of the device weird, and damn near incomprehensible. That caused Lucas to rise out of his stupor right quick. “What did you just call that?”, the blonde boy barked, stumbling up

onta his feet, leaving his hat crumpled on the rug besides him. "I called it a "watch.", Desnion said, repeating the strange sounding word. "That's what the man who gave Sister Julia this piece of jewelry called it." "No, no, that's impossible.", Lucas growled, enraged and frustrated. He twisted his bowtie. "Watch.", he said, aloud. "Watch. Watch.", the blonde boy repeated, like it was a mantra that would grant someone immortality. Brother Christopher, Desnion, Sister Julia, and the well put together green haired brothel owner looked at the boy in the pink robe like he was outta his mind. He twisted his bowtie yet again, causing the miasma ta come forth. "The word I just repeated... is it what you used to describe-" "The word, "watch" is what I just called Sister Julia's piece of jewelry, yes.", Desnion said, then frowned, puzzled. "Is "watch" an offensive word in Fremdosian, or something?", he asked Lucas, nervously pressing the tips of his pointer fingers together. "If so, I meant no offense by what I said, it's just-" "Let me see that!", Blondie snarled, grabbing the black haired woman by the wrist. Lucas stared at the piecea jewelry on Sister Julia's wrist, and slowly, his mouth opened, like he was abouta takea bite outta onea those hoagies ya get from from Quiznos or Subway or something. "No way...", Lucas wheezed, his tense muscles deflating. "That's Phil's watch..." Likea statue, the blonde boy just stood there, mouth wide open, hands still clenching Sister Julia's wrist. He mighta stood there forever if it wasn't fer the grace and kindness of Desnion. "You cock sucking piece of shit!", the gold robed man roared, socking Lucas in the face witha surprisingly strong right hook. Caught off guard by the blow, Lucas slammed against the purple door, the backa his head banging hard against the painted plywood. Course, he didn't have much time ta recover. Baring his teeth likea ravenous wolf, Desnion stormed up ta the blonde sorcerer, and grabbed him by the



collar with a firm right hand. "KEEP-", he barked, slamming his left fist into Lucas's face again, causing the cartilage in his nose to crumble- "YOUR HANDS-"the chubby fella bellowed, bashing his skull against Lucas's-"OFF-" I backed away from the enraged man in the gold robes, and quickly scanned the octagon shaped room. There were no weapons laying around, save for the two halberds, which Sister Julia and Brother Christopher had a good grip on. "MY-" Desnion let go of Lucas's collar, and winded up his left arm for one final punch. "WOMAN!" I just watched, useless, unarmed, as the man in the gold robes swung his fist towards Lucas's dazed face. But in spite of my cowardice, my complacency, the messy haired man's strike stopped, right before it turned Lucas' face to paste. "That's enough, Desnion.", Brother Christopher stated, placing his halberd in between the messy haired man and the beaten up blonde boy. "Any more and you'll kill him." Desnion jerked his head at the white haired fella, and... calmed down. His arms stopped shaking, and his face, which had gotten red as a tomato, turned back to its normal, mellow look. The brothel owner took note of the lull in hostilities immediately. "Out!", she screeched. "You got blood all over the carpet, you fat lunatic!" Desnion half smiled, and put his hands up. "Fine, fine, we'll take our leave." He turned to the black haired woman, who had watched the entire altercation with all the attentiveness of a sedated sloth. "Carry the Clerk on your shoulders, Sister Julia. We'll have our Medic treat his wounds." Then, without any fuss, Sister Julia and Brother Christopher left the room, Christopher carrying the halberds, and Julia carrying the fella I had almost murdered through gross negligence. The two sacred siblings left the room, while Desnion left behind. He looked at me and smiled. "It was nice meeting you, Miss-" "Axeman Red Four.", I muttered, idiotically neglecting to use a pseudonym. "Yes, and I

am sorry for any trouble I caused, Miss-“ Shandare.”, the dignified brothel owner scoffed. Finally, Desnion looked down at Lucas, and the smile faded from his face. “As for you... if you ever lay a finger on Sister Julia or Brother Christopher again... I’ll bash your fucking skull in.” The smile went back on Desnion’s face quick as it left. “Well, have a good rising period guys, it was great meeting you!” With a friendly wave, the chubby blonde haired fella skipped outta the room, presumably ta catch up with his bodyguards. The white door creaked shut, leaving me, Shandare, and Lucas ta our thoughts, and broken bitsa nose cartilage. “In the future, try to avoid provoking the Supreme Sibling of the Holy Collective into a physical altercation.”, Shandare said, all the haughtiness and dignity gone from her voice. “The chances of coming out of such a scenario in a more robust physical state are slim to none.” I gaped my mouth open in disbelief. Perhaps it was sorta obvious in hindsight, but the well dressed, well mannered woman... her eyes were all glassy and junk. “Suns above... izzat you, Nielentil?” “No. I am not Nielente.”, Not-Nielente answered. “But I am also not Shandare, or the owner of this brothel.” Heavily confused, and somewhat discombobulated from seeing Lucas get socked in the face by a fella more fit fera buffet than a battle, I sorta babbled: “Wait, so areya Nielentil or not?” “No, I am not Nielente, I am-“ “Fine, yer not Nielentil. But are ya currently inhabiting Nielentil’s body, oh vague spirita autism?” “Please be considerate when inquiring about matters which seem strange to-“ “That settles it.”, I said, fiddling with the burnt backa my hair. “Ya really are Nielentil.” “I am not Nielent-“ “I mean fer all intents and purposes yer Nielentil, ya pedantic schizo-freak.”, I blathered, then smirked in spitea my, uh, spite. “Dang, you ain’t so bad at this whole Saboteur thing after all, huh? I didn’t even recognize ya! Heck, I actually thought you were a Brothel owner ferawhile

there.” “I am moderately skilled at the art of deception.”, Not-Nielente said. “However, such skills are useless and irrelevant in the grand scheme of things. There are much more important endeavours worth investing in.” “Like learning how ta fight?” “No. Dancing. Dancing is far more important than deception.” “I thought ya wanted ta be a Saboteur?” “No. Nielente wishes to be a Saboteur. I wish for Nielente to be a dancer. She is far more adept in that capacity, anyways.” I groaned. “But ya *are* Nienetil, ya dumb git!” “No, I am not Nielente.” Sensing that my conversation with the incredibly skilled and almost certainly psychopathic dancer was about ta go in circles, I switched gears. “Alright, then if ya ain’t Nielentil, who are ya?” “Please be considerate when inquiring about matters which seem strange to you.”, the glassy eyed girl stated, causing me ta groan and flick her in the backa her ears. “W-woah!”, Nielente suddenly said, shocked. “Where did this pretty dress come from? And why is my hair all made up and stuff?” “Ask yerself that.”, I grumbled. “Ask myself?”, Nielente asked, then smiled, somewhat smugly. “That’s, like, what a crazy person does, Unionist.” “Ya don’t say.” “O-oh! Oh, wait!”, Nielente said, pounding her fist inta her palm and staring at me with starry eyes. “Unionist, did you discover a grand conspiracy yet? Did you catch a dastardly mastermind?” “Er... not quite.”, I muttered, then turned ta look at Lucas. He had gotten the crap kicked outta him something fierce, but beyonda bent nose, and a swelling right eye, he seemed ambulatory enough. The blonde haired boy was wheezing a whole lot, but his eyes seemed ta stare off inta nothing. “Phil’s watch... that woman had Phil’s watch...”, Lucas repeated, sounding doubtful of his own words. “Oi, Blondie!”, I called out. “You ok?” Lucas didn’t respond ta me. “C’mon, c’mon.”, I said, kneeling down and extending my hand ta the battered blonde boy. “We gotta get going.

I don't feel comfortable staying inna place witha buncha poisoned pastries." "It doesn't matter.", the blonde haired boy spat, bitter. "The heck doya mean it don't matter? Whoever arranged fer those pastries ta be poisoned is gonna come back ta if they worked, and-" "It doesn't matter if they come or not.", the blonde boy repeated, malice mixed in with his misery. "This realm is a lost cause." "This what?" "This realm.", the bloodied boy wheezed, weaking pushing against the wall behind him. "What, ya mean the Holy Collective? Of course itsa lost cause, but that's why we're helping out Sister Sasparilla." "Sabarene saving the Collective by being elected General is no more plausible than a butcher saving a cow by carving out its throat.", the blonde boy huffed, humorlessly. "Not that it matters. Everything's fucked, and can never be unfucked." "What, didya just detecta magical anomaly or something?" "There is no such thing.", Lucas hissed. "Asa anomaly?" "As magic." The blonde fella looked up at me, his blue eyes burning. "There never was." Lucas wiped some blood off his lips, fondling his broken nose. "It's technology. All of it, the modules, my I-phone, my taser, my revolver, they're all just a bunch of trinkets, nothing more." I paused, and just nodded my head in confusion. I mean, I wasn't shocked by Lucas being a phony, I picked up on that the moment I saw him. But his sudden confession, his dropping of any pretense, that was what had me stuck inna rut. "Then why the heck didya say you werea magician, Ruckus? Why the heck did ya make sucha big fuss about magic and the like, if it didn't exist ta begin with?" "Convenience.", he responded, though it was less like he was talking ta me and more like he was just saying stuff ta say it. "It's impossible to explain what a microprocessor is to a people whose literacy rate is lower than their infant mortality rate. I narrowed my eye. "Izzat a dig at me?" "No, it's not.", the blonde boy

spat. "Not everything is about you, Axeman Red Four. There are more important things at stake here than the ego of a pointy eared sociopath, believe it or not." "Like what?" "The fabric of reality, to start with!", Lucas choked out, trying to push himself off the green and brown rug, but falling on his back. "The fabric of what?" "Of reality, you deaf moron. This realm doesn't make any sense." "It's you that ain't making sense, Ruckus." "Don't you think it's strange?", Lucas inquired, once again avoiding my gaze. "You live in a world with no electricity, but travel long distances on motorized vehicles. There's no anti-biotics to be found, but people walk around with fully functional metal limbs. The Order of Fiat is an economic organization, but has an inexplicable religious bend." He glared at me. "Don't you find it strange?" "Find what strange?!", I sputtered. "The heck is electricity? Orra anti-biotic? I ain't gotta clue what yer gabbing about!" "You don't, no. But as I said before, it doesn't matter. This realm- this world is done for. It's been tampered with. Even if I find the modules, and remove them, things like lifemetal, and the watch... they'll remain." Head aching, I slammed my fist into the wall. "So what!? So what, if folks got metal limbs, or if Caravans don't make a licka sense? They ain't hurting no one!" "It is not YOURS.", Lucas raggedly huffed. "The development of civilization needs to follow a specific pattern. There must first be hunter-gatherers, then agrarians, then tribes, then countries. Man must make tools from stone, then bronze, then iron. But it is clear to me... it is clear to ANYONE, that this continent has been tampered with. You all are sprinting full force ahead, without even the slightest clue on how to crawl." "Like, so what?", Nielente chimed in. "I don't mean to be all preachy and stuff, but isn't that just, like, your opinion, man? Just because you think things need to, um, work one way, don't mean they can't work another." "I don't care about the customs

of this world.”, Blondie said, bluntly. “If I arrived here, and everyone has eyes all over their bodies, I wouldn’t miss a beat. If I discovered you all were cannibals, I wouldn’t even lose the slightest bit of sleep. But this realm... this world is a sham.” I shook my head. “I don’t care if it’s a sham or the real deal. If the world’s in danger, then I’m in danger, and if there’s anything I won’t stand fer, it’s me being in danger. Ya think the world we live in corrupt? That it’s been tampered with ta the point of uselessness?” I took inna deep breath, and flashed Lucas a fangy grin. “Then all the more reason ta get the heck up and save it. Ya literally have nothing ta lose otherwise.” “You don’t know anything, Axeman Red Four.” “I’m well aware.”, I said, sharply. “But I’m gonna go and do what I set out ta do, Ruckus. And yer gonna be there ta help me.” Lucas looked up at me incredulously. “You want me to come with you? After I tried to shoot you?” “Course I do.”, I said, breezily. “Folks get angry at each other all the time, you mouthing off and trying ta sock me in the face witha stunning spell ain’t a dealbreaker by any means.” “Stunning spell? I tried to shoot you with my revolver. A revolver doesn’t stun, it kills-“ “It stuns.”, I said, firmly. “That metal contraption of yers stuns folks. You might claim otherwise, but that’s just the concussion settling in.” I ripped a tacky blanket offa a tacky sofa, and tossed it ta Lucas. “Now come on, wipe the blood off yer face and get up already. Those magic devices that aren’t actually magical ain’t gonna find themselves.” Lucas looked up at me. He didn’t smile, he didn’t frown, he didn’t laugh, he didn’t even speak. But what he did do was grab my hand and get back up on his feet, which is more I can say for most folks that fancy themselves heroes. “Alright, Patchy. Alright. Let’s get out of this den of inequity, and go find out about those men in powdered wigs you talked so much about. I can’t imagine a bunch of lunatics with flamethrowers doing this realm

much good.” “Oh, oh, I can think of something more volatile!”, Nielente chimed in, then .

“A volcano, is like, totally volatile!” Lucas looked at the delusional dancer with soft blue eyes. “You might want to head home, Nielente. I don’t think things from here on out are going to be terribly safe.” “I already told you, Foreigner man, I’m not tagging along with you and the Unionist to be safe. I’m doing it to uphold the good name of the Saboteurs! And if I die, then I die a hero!” “No, you’ll die a moron.”, I interjected, not sure if I preferred the energetic versiona Nielente over the glassy eyed edition. “But Unionist...”, the green haired girl whispered ta me, smirking like she had caught me and Lucas kissing, “All great heroes are morons!” I opened my mouth ta say something snarky, then chuckled despite myself. “Shucks, then we’re the greatest heroes in history.”

Surprisingly, we were able ta abscond from the bloodied brothel with little ta no hardships. I mean, Lucas moaned a whole bunch about his messed up nose, and Nielente started fussing when she was unable ta rip the front parta her dress off, but all in all we were able ta get back out inta the Volunteer district without any further trouble. Or, uh, so I thought. Waiting just outside of the illegal brothel wasa what I can only describe asa small standing army, of about fifty five folks or so. Only a couple of them had metal limbs, praise the suns, but what the fellas lacked in augmentation they made up fer in armor. Like all Collective fighters I had seen, the members of the small groupa mercs wore habits, but the habits of these folks were clearly reinforced, with so much Runiertian it looked like they were all wearing metal dresses. “Stop right there, Unionist.”, an insufferable voice shouted. Standing in the fronta the raiding party, and lacking the armor and weapons of the rest, was Sister Kundare, her stupid metal whip in hand. “You are hereby under arrest!” “What, fer not being a degenerate?” “No, you

putrid pile of filth. For the attempted assassination of Supreme Sibling Desnion!” “W-what?”, I stuttered. “Says who?” “The man himself.” “Bullshit!”, I shouted. “He just left this darn building a moment ago, there ain’t no way ya coulda seen him!” “So you admit you were within striking distance.”, Sister Kundare snarled. “That settles it. Siblings, execute this Unionist at once!” And then, swords drawn, they moved towards us, all fifty something of them. There was no opening ta be found, even Christian Bale as he was in the Machinast wouldn’ta been able ta squeeze through the armored Collective soliders. “Hey Kundare!”, I yelled, struggling to keep my composure. “Marcela sends her regards!” The blonde woman froze up. “H-how do you know that name?!”, she gasped. “How the heck do ya think?”, I said, grinning viciously at her, baring my fangs best I could. “She’s your daughter, right?” The gray robed woman didn’t say nothing ta me, but she did hold up her hand, which caused the advancing ta stop atta instant. “Er, adopted daughter, right?” Kundare didn’t respond, instead opting ta just stare at me, eyes as hateful as I’d ever seen. “Shucks, I suppose the details don’t particularly matter, huh? Uh, yer daughter, she’s safe – relatively. I mean, like, she’s completely fine, and healthy, and such.” I scratched my chin, and looked up at the sky like I was pondering a buncha stuff. “But, uh, the trouble is... well, it’s sorta like this. Ever makea deal with someone, where, ya know, ya hadta give someone yer shoe in order ta use their hoe, or shovel, or whatever? Ya know, and when yer done using the shovel, ya get yer shoe back? Well, this is sorta onea these situations. You can choose ta summarily execute me, and Ruckus, and Nielentil right here and all – Ain’t nothing stopping ya, but that might cause ya to, uh...” I smiled a bit wider. “Lose yer shoe.” Sister Kundare glared at me, and inna instant, unraveled her whip, causing the entire platoon of folks ta raise



their swords. "Siblings!", the blonde haired woman yelled. "Prepare to attac-" The sentence was never finished. Kundare, who began barking her order inna bold and boisterous voice, ended it in a mumble. She looked aghast fera insant, then tried again. "Prepare to atta-" This time, Kundare didn't even begin her sentence with the slightest bit of confidence. "Prepare...", she choked out... "Prepare to... to..." the gray robed woman stuttered, and mumbled, and poorly enunciated her words, until at last, in almost a whisper, she said "Prepare to... st-stand... stand down. P-please.... Stand down." "Oh, wow!", I said, doing my best Nielente impression. "You fellas ain't mad at me anymore? Ain't that a turna luck!" Walking briskly, I moved through the ranks of Kundare's soldiers, fearing that like the wavesa the red sea, they could come crashing right back down any moment. I had gotten a little more than two thirdsa the way through the execution squad, when a deep voice boomed out from up above. "Don't fall for the Unionist's ruse, Kundare. Marcela is at home, where she belongs." Standing onna nearby rooftop, his back towards the setting suns, was Marston, white cape blowing obnoxiously in the wind. "Brother Gino delivered her to me safely a few moments ago. The Unionist's threat is an empty one." Sister Kundare's frightened expression vanished inna instant,, replaced bya predatory scowl. "Then all sibilings... attack!" "Do so and perish.", a cold, cruel voice bellowed out. Standing on the rooftop opposite of Marston, and clad in her black habit, was Sabarene. The white haired girl had done away with Lucas's golden contact lens, but beyond that looked the same as she ever did, clad in her smooth black colored habit. "Is that a threat, imposter?", Sister Kundare hissed between her teeth. "A threat? No, of course it's not, imbecile. If I wanted to threaten you, I would have brought an entourage with me." Sabarene squeezed her metal hand into a

fist. "But the summary execution of my retainers will not bode well for Brother Gino in the election." The white haired girl leered at the man in shades across from her. "Especially if the citizens find out that my brother was too afraid to fight a crippled Unionist." "I'll fight whomever you wish to throw at me, Sabarene.", Marston responded, nonplussed. "But I'm not going to spare an assassin out of political convenience." "Wait a minute!", Lucas stuttered, some bloody phlegm falling outta his mouth. "Don't you have to have a trial, before you execute someone?" "No.", the man with shaded spectacles said, bluntly. "The General before me established a precedence authorizing discretionary executions in exceptional circumstances. The attempted murder of Supreme Sibling Desnion qualifies as an exceptional circumstance." Sabarene flinched at the black haired man's words, if only for a moment. "But Marston-" "KILL THEM ALL!" Now... in the interest of fairness, I should mention that Marston didn't shout those words, and neither did Kundare. But there's just some phrases that can cause a ruckus no matter who says em, and as it turns out, people wielding primed pointy things are very willing to go along with instructions that involve shoving said pointy things into other folk's gullets. "Aw crap!", I cursed, ducking away from a panicked flustered looking fella's sword strike, only for my cheek to get nicked by the swing of someone else's. I didn't really think much at the time. See, in a crowded close quarters combat situation, ya don't have a heckuva lotta time to reflect on a course of action. Yer brain tends to focus on the little stuff, like, how to avoid getting impaled, crushed, or carved up. This is usually for the best, cause that short term strategy is kinda critical towards a "not dying" endgame, but what it meant in that specific instance was that me, Lucas, and Nielente were gonna bite it. "Patchy! Get down!", Lucas yelled, oblivious to the four or five

swords heading for his back. I opened my mouth in shock, a few swords scrapping hard against my leather armor, but I couldn't say nothing. The blonde haired boy tackled me and Nielente onto the pavement, robbing the two of us of any movement and guaranteeing all three of our deaths. Or, uh, not. Lucas and the ditzy dancer on top of me, and the dirty pavement below, I suddenly felt a large amount of warmth, more so than the hot climate of Fremdos usually gave. With my nostrils, I smelt a rustic smokey aroma. My eye couldn't see nothing, what with my face pressed against the pavement and all, but the points of my ears twitched a whole bunch. Mostly to the sound of pained screaming. I think "screaming" might be underselling it, what I heard were shrieks of agony. Long, sustained guttural groans, shrill squeals, terrified tantrums, I heard them coming from about everyone around me, like the fifty or so Collective soldiers around me had turned into pigs, pigs being butchered in the most brutal way possible. As for what they said... well, none of them *said* much of anything. They couldn't, any semblance of speech was drowned out by animalistic screeches and yelps. I think I vaguely heard some words from Sabarene and Marston above, but that could have just been the wind in my ears. At any rate, the pavement below me started getting hot, like a burner on a tea kettle. Out of reflex, I jumped up, pushing Nielente and Lucas off my back. I rose up to find a hellscape. The wooden brothel behind me had been torched, along with the fifty something soldiers in front of us. Or, at least, I think the fifty soldiers had been burnt, through the thick smoke in the area I couldn't see more than ten or so burnt up bodies. Flames shot here, there, and everywhere around us, crashing from side to side. I winced, and looked up at the roof where Sabarene had stood. I didn't see anyone, or anything, my lack of depth perception combined with the smoke obscuring the scene.

Inna panic, I steadied myself and tried ta sprint, feeling a weird compulsion ta check out the roof fer some reason. "Patchy!" Lucas loudly yelled, grabbing my hand. "Nielente! Whatever you two do, do *not* let go of me!" I opened my mouth ta say something clever, but was interrupted by a sudden, large burst... or more accurately, beam of flame, directed right at my head. The flame didn't crash against my face, nor did it whiz past me. It stopped. The fire just dissipated, the moment it seemed it would change my skin tone from a dark mocha to a crisp charcoal. That was a relief. What wasn't a relief was the second burst of flames directed right at my face, or the third, fourth, fifth, or sixth. Hot and heavy, none of the flames touched me, Nielente, or Lucas. They just ceased ta exist the moment they reached us. The folks around us where nowhere near as fortunate. A man... maybe it was a woman, the person was so scorched I couldn't right tell, shambled onto his feet, hair gone, skin crumbled and scrunched up. The figure limped away, over countless bodies, through the stench and soot, wandering, weird as it was, towards the burnt up building, as opposed ta away from it. She, or he, didn't make it two steps, before being blasted by three bursts of fire. With a disgusting sounding squelch, the burnt black body fell apart, bit by bit by bit. I kneeled over and vomited. Not causea the sight, but the stench. You can train yer mind ta be immune ta all sorta images, and ya can shut yer eye if there's something there that ya don't wanna see, but ya can't shut off yer sense of smell. And the smell was disgusting; like a twisted combination of rancid fat, crushed up tonsil stones, and rotten meat. The smoke, the stench, and the heat got ta my head. Choking, and coughing, I collapsed on the pavement. They say that if yer caught inna fire, and can't escape, the best thing ta do is get down on all fours, or threes. The idea is that since smoke rises, the air near the

ground will be nice and clean. But even prone, I couldn't breathe. The pillars of flames weren't able to touch me, but that didn't particularly matter. Even though my body remained unscorched, the oxygen around me was devoured in a flash. I held my breath, and waited for the beams of fire to stop shooting, for a brief respite, an opportunity for me to grab Lucas, Nielente, and run. A lull never came. Physical necessity overcame my lucidity, and despite knowing how stupidly self-destructive it'd be, I opened my mouth wide and greedily sucked down some of the carcinogen-laden smoke. I passed out immediately.

I woke up standing, and in the cold. The wind blew hard and heavily, chilling my flesh, my bones. Crossing my arms in front of my chest, I realized I wasn't wearing my leather armor anymore. No, I still had leather strapped to my torso, but the material was lighter, comfier, and much better tailored. I had somehow reclaimed the pants of Jean the Blue, too. I had boots on, as always, but the boots on my feet were also of a higher quality of craftsmanship, fitting my feet perfectly. That much was odd, more odd still were my surroundings. To my left, and my right, I saw snow, and buildings, buildings made not out of wood, or marble, but steel. Buildings which pierced the heavens which rose, thick and strong, out of the ground below. The towers around me scraped the sky, their presence one not of beauty, or of strength, but of efficiency, of an inhuman design. But what caught my attention, what made my eyes bug out, wasn't the towers, but the structure above me, around. A mirror, but a mirror that arched above me, a mirror that was as tall, and as wide, as the largest buildings you could find in Provesh, a mirror with no entrance, or exit. I squinted both my eyes to look up at it. My reflection was distorted, but even with my fingers looking like ten little sausages, and my thighs being thicker

than a sundae, it was clear that I had been dragged a long way from Fremdos. In my right hand I held the handle of a big bright yellow duffel bag, in my left I held a big, metal contraption of some sort, with a trigger similar but distinct from Lucas's revolver. "That's the cloud gate.", a friendly voice called out to me. I turned around quickly, and raised a heavy contraption at the intruder. The man, muscular and tan, raised his arms in the air. "Cloud Gate is the official name, at least. The people here call it "the bean." "Ugly, amorphous blob gate would be a more fitting title.", I said, my voice cold, and distant. "Hey, I didn't design the thing.", the brown haired man said, stepping towards me in spite of the weapon in my left hand. "I find it tacky too, but beauty is in the eye of the beholder, right?" "No.", I said, my fingers starting to squeeze the trigger. "There's no beauty here." The brown haired man stopped, keeping his hands high up in the air. "No beauty? It's Chicago, of course there's no beauty. Have you seen what passes for pizza here? The people here think you can just take some dough, fill it with five cent tomato sauce, throw a bunch of crap in, and call it a day." "Is that so?", I said, softly. "Oh, yeah, totally.", the muscular tan man said, daring to inch a bit closer to me, speaking as he stepped. "Don't even get me started on their hotdogs. They pile on every condiment known to man; it's a fucking travesty.", the tan man responded, taking another step towards me. "It's cold as balls, too. You watch Boardwalk Empire and they make it seem like Chicago is some badass place filled with Mafioso and gang bangers, but in reality it's just a frozen shithheap." "Then I suppose you wouldn't mind me destroying it." The man's friendly face darkened considerably. "You-" "Don't worry. I couldn't, even if I wanted to." The built man just shook his head, his left hand lowering somewhat. "Given the shit you've pulled lately, I wouldn't be surprised if that duffel bag contained a

thermonuclear device.” “It does not.” “Well Halle-fucking-lujah.”, the man in the wife-beater and leather coat grunted. “Why are you here, then?” “Didn’t you get my letter?” “I got your letter. And ”, the brown haired man confirmed, inching towards me some more, hands still in the air. “An end to things”, huh? I couldn’t tell if you came here to kill yourself or blow up half the block.” I shook my head, and took a solitary step towards the brown haired man, the shotgun still raised at his chest. “Have you ever run a marathon before?”, I asked, the wind blowing against the tips of my ears. The man in the leather jacket smiled, slightly. “I don’t do cardio. Hurts my gains.” I didn’t address his input, not in the slightest. “Running a marathon is tough. You need to train for months in advance. You need to pick out locations to run. The location, the temperature, the pavement, all of that matters. Running twenty six miles on gravel is not the same as running twenty six miles on sand, on dirt. To succeed in a marathon you must replicate the marathon, down to every last street and corner. Your diet, that matters too. Your body needs tons of complex carbohydrates, omega acids, supplemental vitamins.” “And a powerband too, so you can focus your chi.”, the brown haired man snarked, then furrowed his bushy eyebrows. “I’m pretty sure you don’t need a shotgun to run a marathon.” “Tons of work go into a twenty six mile run. You train, and you train, and you train. And when you actually run the damn thing, it hurts. It hurts like a son of a bitch. Your stomach cramps, your throat contracts, your spchlinter tightens, you feel like you either want to die, or to throw up. But you do it. You run the race because you know at the end of the day, you’ll be all the happier for it.” “But what if you’re not?”, the brown haired man asked, staring into my eyes with a sad looking face. “It doesn’t matter. If you’re on the twenty fifth mile, you will finish the race. There is no point in trying to quit

near the end. To do so would make a mockery of your entire existence.” “Sounds like a bad case of the sunk cost fallacy to me.” I tilted my head and smiled, without feeling much happiness. “A dear friend said the same thing to me, long ago.” The brown haired man stared at me with a degree of apprehension. “And what happened to her?” “I cut off her head with an axe.” The broad man in the wife beater just shook his head. “Why?” “Because her ambitions were incompatible with mine.” “So you killed her.” “Yes. Her ambitions were incompatible with mine.” I narrowed my eyes. “As yours are, too.” I reached into my leather jacket, and took out a small handgun – a Glock semiautomatic. I placed it on the ground without turning off the safety, and kicked it over towards the brown haired man. “If you wish to accomplish your goals, you’ll need to destroy me, before I destroy you.” The man in the leather jacket gingerly picked up the gun, and with a carefree smile, removed the magazine, and ejected the chambered bullet. “Sorry, but I’m not motivated enough to fight. Hoffman, Stoli, and I beat the bad guys already. We’re too exhausted to spend any effort smacking sense into you.” Wordlessly, I walked back to the large blue duffel bag. I unzipped it, slowly, steadily, so that the brown haired man could see the front of the bag just fine. Inside the bag, scrunched up tight and restrained by tight little pieces of rope, was a red haired girl, no older than eighteen or so. She was breathing, but only barely. “S-stoli!”, the tan man cried out, his confidence shattered. I lowered the shotgun, and pressed the end of the barrel against her skull. With a steady squeeze of the trigger, I blasted the girl beneath me, blood and brain splattering the inside of the duffel bag. “Do you feel motivated now?”

I woke up standing, and in the cold. “G-gah!”, I sputtered, terrified. I quickly glanced at my left arm. The grotesque looking stump was still there. With a shaking right hand, I



reached up ta my left eye... and founda patch over it instead. "Aw, thank the suns.", I sighed, staring serenely at my fifty percent off arm. Then I noticed the ropes. Wrapped around my torso were three thick ropes, which pinned me ta a wooden plank with a good deala force. Not only was I tied ta some upright plank, I was also inna small concrete room, with little inside besides a small wooden door and a dim, flickering torch. "What the heck-" Alla a sudden, the plank I was strapped to fell backwards, and a damp cloth was shoved over my face. "Buwah!", I gagged, my lungs filling up with moisture. Or so I thought, fera brief second. See, when ya capture someone in a skirmish, an enemy or the like, often times it's a good custom to question them, you know, grill them for information. But folks ain't so talkative, especially if they're yer enemy. Usually that's not a big deal, ya just have ta skin their fingers some, or threaten to chop off a nose orra ear, and odds are they'll talk soon enough. The issue, though, is that sometimes ya capture someone who folks will actually pay fer, and if that's the case, cutting off bits of their body is gonna net you less of a profit. It's gonna hurt ya ta hurt them. So here's the dilemma: You wanna learn some information from someone, but it wouldn't behoove you to damage them too much. The solution, then, is simple. Ya stimulate torture. Ya make it *seem* like something terrible is happening, when it ain't. And that's what was happening ta me. Water was dripped all over the cloth covering my face. Not a single droplet of moisture entered my mouth, but because the cloth was so thin, and because I was lying down on my back, my body couldn't tell the difference between breathing and choking; ta me, it felt like I was drowning. After fifteen seconds of intense psychological agony, the cloth was yanked off my mouth. "Ah..Ah!", I sputtered, getting inna much needed gaspa breath- "G-guh!" The cloth was placed over my face again, and the

stimulated drowning continued anew. I shoulda expected that; giving someone a bitta relief only ta snatch it right back is really good way ta make their mind toss and tumble. I sputtered and struggled fer fifteen more mortifying moments, when the cloth was ripped offa my face once more. “Did you try to kill Supreme Sibling Desnion?”, a bitter voice barked at me. “W-wha?”, I started ta say, my lucidity shot ta crap. “Did you attempt to kill Supreme Sibling Desnion?”, the dark voice asked, coldly. “Of course I didn-” My denial was cut short by the forceful reintroduction of a damp cloth ta my orifices. The sudden overwhelming physiological anguish gave me some time ta reflect on my situation. It was clear that whoever had tied me ta a wooden plank wasn’t a very nice fella, but it was odd that he or she would demanda confession from me. After all, Sister Kundare was pretty content ta just declare me guilty, and Marston was more than fine with having me bite it without a trial. The cloth was removed from my mouth.. “I’m only going to ask you one more time, did you attempt to assassinate Supreme Sibling Desnion, or not?” ....“Yes.”, I barely managed ta breathe out, hoping my oxygen deprived brain had made the right call. “I... I did.” “Are you telling me the truth?”, the dark sounding voice demanded. “Yes,”, I lied, “I’m telling you the truth.” I put a bitter inflection inta my words. “Do what ya will ta me, ya fiatist bastard. My only regret is that I didn’t kill morea ya!” The ropes around my torso fell offa me, and the plank I was lying down on slammed upright. “A-ah!”, I screamed, catapulting face first inta pilea dirt. “It’s going ta take me forever ta clean this crap off my armor, ya know?”, I complained, pushing myself off the ground. “You’re not wearing any armor.”, the dark voice responded. I glared down at myself, and groaned. I wasn’t wearing any of Bowman Yellow’s leather armor, that much was true, but I wasn’t wearing anything else, neither.

Cold, naked, and covered in dirt, I turned around, ta face the dark voiced fella that had found it fit ta waterboard me. “Was it really necessary ta take away my- ah!” I had intended ta just mouth off towards my captor, y’know, ta compensate fer my complete vulnerability, but the sarcastic words had barely left my mouth when I got a good look at him. He wasn’t a particularly tall fella, orra particularly muscular looking fella, or a fat looking fella, orra skinny looking fella, no, in almost every way, from his pale skin ta his light blue hair, he was normal. In *almost* every way, he was normal. He wore a light linen vest, and black leather trousers, his outfit completed by functional black boots. But his trousers didn’t quite cover his ankles, and his vest, cut with a v neck, exposed his chest fer all ta see. That, too, wasn’t terribly weird, not by itself. But the dark voiced man had, on his ankles, on his wrists, on his palms, and in the center of his chest; small, wide open sores, sores which oozed a sickly combination of blood and pus. In addition, the man looked like an insomniac; his eyes sunk inta his skull, and bags of purple shaded skin drooped beneath his pupils. “Are you afraid of my wounds, girl?“, the dark voiced man asked, staring at me with an expressionless face. “In the same way I’d be afraid a syphilis, I guess.“, I blurted. The light blue haired man didn’t seem to react much to my quip. He walked behind the plank I had been strapped ta, and tossed me my breastplate, leather slacks, and boots. “Where does a crippled Fremdosian girl come across such a well-made set of armor, I wonder?“, the man with open wounds asked, his voice low and predatory as it had been when I was strapped ta the wooden plank. “Ain’t Fremdosian.“, I muttered, sticking my arm through Bowman Yellow’s ill-fitting breast plate. “I’m Proveshian, through and through.“ “You’re rather brown for a Proveshian.“ “And you’re pretty pale fer a Fremdosian.“, I stated, awkwardly thrusting

my legs through the leg-guards and trousers. "So am I free ta go, or is this just onea those things where ya lift me up then ta push me down harder? Cause honestly, if ya really wanna mess with my head, I suggest ya bring in a platea food or something and eat it in fronta me. I'm starved." Without saying a word, the wounded man left, quickly opening then shutting a wooden door which led outta the holding cell turned torture chamber. I sighed. I had a pretty good idea of who had captured me, and why, but what sounds fine in theory ain't always true in practice. Misdirection is key to getting someone ta spill the beans about something, and though I put up a stoic front ta the light blue haired man, I was terrified. Fer myself, of course, but also for Lucas, Nielente, and Sabarene. Not cause I cared about em or nothing; it was just that I didn't wanna be alone inna city where half the folks wanted me dead. Still, whether the light blue haired man was leaving ta unsettle me or ta take carea some business was irrelevant, he gave me a bitta time ta plan stuff out. I looked around the cell I was in. There really wasn't much in it besides the wooden plank, and the... rope. I grinned likea giddy little girl. Rope, as random instruments go, is mighty useful, especially when yer in precarious situations. Tie it inna knot, and you can use it asa bludgeoning tool, wrap it around someone's neck and you can strangle em ta death without even working up mucha a sweat. I was leaning towards option B when the light blue haired fella returned, a tray of tea, lambchops, and toast carried in his wounded hands. There were no utensils on the tray, least, none that were sharp enough ta pierce skin. Black Five placed the meal down on the waterboarding board. "The lamb isn't of too high a quality, but it's the all the meat we have." I blinked my eye at the wounded man. "Wait, what?" "You asked for food, didn't you?" "That's besides the point!", I sputtered. "Ya just tortured me!" "You

must be very weak to think a few drops of water constitute torture.”, the wounded man muttered, a slight tinge of amusement present in his voice. “The Collective would have flayed the skin off your fingers by now.” I paused, and opened my mouth in as dopey a manner as I could manage. “Wait... yer saying you ain’t a member of the order of fiat?” The light blue haired man furrowed his brow. “If I were a Brother, you’d have been put to the torch the moment you confessed.” I picked up a lambchop, and started chomping away on it, my hunger legitimizing what I had reckoned would be an act. “So why use a, uh, “enhanced interrogation technique” on me, if you’re not onea those Holy Collective folks? Who are ya associated with, exactly? What’s yer name?” I knew full well the answer to mosta my questions, but I asked em anyways. Being an idiot is hard work; if ya slip up justa bit, folks might get the wrong idea and think yer smart. The best way ta prevent any misunderstandings about yer intellect is ta keep acting like ya don’t know anything, cause ya *don’t* know anything; yera idiot. “My name is Axeman Black Five.”, the wound covered man muttered, staring me down. “And this is the headquarters of the Mournful Remnant.” I gulped nervously, then quickly chugged down a buncha tea. “And you, girl? What is your name?” “Swordarm Red One.”, I blurted, panicking at the identity of the fella in fronta me. “You don’t have many arms, for a Swordarm.”, he stated, neutrally appraising me. “Your body structure seems to emphasize brute force over finesse, which is odd, given your gender and height.” “Fine.”, I grumbled, masking my fear with machismo. “If ya wanna be technical, I ain’t gotta name no more. But I was called Swordarm Red One, once.”, I lied. “Yeah, I was the shit, morea less. Tonsa contracts, even more commissions, my peers respected me, and my enemies feared me.” I forced my head down. “But then I met Sister Amelia.”, I said, darkly. “Who?”,

Black Five asked, the slightest hint of confusion in his serious, sullen face. “Sister Amelia. A girl from the Order of Fiat, blonde, smug, and with a metal left foot. She came ta us Swordarms witha bullshit sob story; something about how she had been exiled causea her link ta some General. My Union took her in as treasurer.” “Why would they do that?”, Black Five asked me, gruffly. “Because she wasa far better accountant than anya us. Those damn Fiatists know their numbers, I gotta admit that much.” I grimaced, then expanded on the lie. “Fera while, everything was fine. Folks thought she was one heckuva treasurer, cause our profit margin kept going up and up and up, despite our contracts staying the same.” “Sounds too good to be true.”, Black Five said, referring ta the actions offa person I had completely made up. “It was too good ta be true.”, I spat, bitter at a girl who never existed. “She was cooking the books, skimming off the top. I gathered evidence on her and was about ta expose, but she got the jump on me.” I shuddered. “Her, and twoa my name-sharers.” I tapped my eye-patch, then my stump. “It didn’t end well for me.” I flashed Axeman Black Five a fangy smile. “It ended even worse fer the Sister. I bashed her skull in with the flat of my claymore.” I paused, and gauged the gaunt’s man reaction to my words. His sullen eyes stared at me. I couldn’t tell if he believed the crap I was slinging at him or if he was about ta start waterboarding me again, so I went balls out with my bullshit. “And y’know what? It felt good.”, I said, licking my lips. “I was bleeding outta every orifice, I had lost everything, my arm, my eye, even my name, but watching the light leave Sister Amelia’s eyes... it gave me a purpose.” I grinned in the creepy way Swordarm Red One had when she stabbed me through the shoulder. “A mission, ta kill every Fiatist I could find, ta snuff out their livelihood, their happiness, their influence, ta break them just like Sister Amelia had

broken me.” “And that’s why you attempted to kill Supreme Sibling Desnion?”, Black Five asked, quietly. “Of course.”, I said, shaking with manufactured rage. “I knew I’d end up dead, or something, but... but if I could just... if I coulda just killed him, I woulda... I woulda been able ta...!” I was interrupted by a swift slap across the face. “G-gah!”, I cried, recoiling backwards from the force of the strike. “Disappointing.”, the sullen man stated, wiping off the back of his left hand. “I dragged you out of the soot expecting a revolutionary. I find instead a murderous mongrel.” “How dare you!”, I shouted, ecstatic that Black had bought into the angle. “Murderer? Yer calling me a murderer?... I ain’t no murderer.”, I spat, venomous. “Murder is when ya kill another person. These Fiatists... they ain’t human. They’re nothing but pests, fit fer the slaught-ack!” Black Five slapped me again, the back of his hand drawing blood. “Whyda hit me?!”, I blathered, indignant. “Speak like a child, and you shall be treated like a child.”, Black Five stated, the wounds in his palms glistening. “The Fiatists are not to blame for your misfortune.” “But Sister Amelia-“ “Was one woman. An individual. A renegade, acting alone.” Black Five glared at me, a hint of fury in his sullen, sad looking eyes. “In your quest for vengeance, you have become a far worse monster than Sister Amelia ever was.” I did my best ta resist laughing, and tilted my head down like a scolded puppy. “I... I know that.”, I whimpered. “I... I know I ain’t supposed to do the things I do, but...” I paused, and allowed my voice ta crack, “But I ain’t got nothing left! Alla my friends are dead, and the ones that ain’t... they... they hate my guts!” I gulped, and, acting like I was disgusted at the very sight of it, deliberately moved my head towards my stump. “I... I was left handed, y’know? Most folks ain’t... but I was.” I was right handed, of course, but that didn’t make for as good of a story. “At first... at first it was a pain in the butt. I couldn’t swing a sword worth a crap.

No one knew how ta train me right... I hadta learn everything on my own. It was tough... there was no one there ta help me, no one around ta teach me the proper movements, or even how ta talk ta folks. I wasa burden, an embarrassment... accepted into the Swordarms only due ta the nature of my parents." I let a slight, broken looking smile form on my face. "But I did learn. And... heck... the biggest barrier ta me learning how ta fight, ended up being my greatest strength. The Swordarms didn't know how ta fight left handed, and they ddin't know how ta defend themselves from a left handed person. I rose up through the ranks like a meteor. Fer a while... fere a brief moment... I was somebody." I shuddered, and slumped down again. "And now I ain't nothing butta hateful little cripple." The sullen man looked at me for a while, then, with dull eyes, stared past me, away from me, gazing into the side of the cell's wall. His attention elsewhere, I took the time to coat the broad side of my index finger with saliva.

"...You're not broken.", the sullen looking man said, after a few moments of silence. "You are more than what you think you are. At least, you can be." I stared up at Black Five. "W-what?", I stuttered. "You can be more than a vengeance obsessed cretin." I sniffled, and rubbed my eye, smearing the bottom of it with my spit. "Ya... ya think so?", I asked, angling my head up at an angle that would best emphasize my crocodile tears.

"How?" "By serving the Remnant.", the light blue haired man stated. "We are in short supply of many things, but conviction is not one of them." "The Remnant?", I repeated, sounding confused at the word. "The Mournful Remnant. The organization that will save Fremdos, or die trying." I hadta resist the urge ta laugh. In the span of no more than four minutes, the dark voiced man went from trying to drown me, to reading me his club's brochure. This, of course, was no coincidence. Every Military Organization out there,



from the Unions, ta the Collective, ta the US Marine Corps follow the same dang modus operandi when it comes ta breaking in new recruits. Ya make some idiot feel worthless by wearing him down with insults and physical labor, then build him back up, in the process making damn sure that he conflates his own happiness with loyalty ta the organization. It's not really a bad thing. Sometimes folks gotta fight, and iffa psychological trick or two helps em fight better, why not try a bit of mindfudger? But like understanding a Magician's trick, once you know how indoctrination works, it won't wow ya like it did before. Oh, you'll be able ta appreciate the method, sure enough, but ya sure as sin won't be fooled by it. "Save Fremdos?", I asked, slowly. "From who, the Collective?" "No.", Black Five said, surprising me. "From itself." I paused fera bit, and reached down ta grab another piecea lamb. "...The heck is that supposedta mean?", I muttered, chewing noisily. The dark voiced man picked up the tray of food and walked towards the exit of the cell, before I could takea sip of the peppermint scented tea. "Some things are better seen, than said.", he said, quietly, then without another word, went out into the hallway. I futilely reached towards the tray, then got up and followed my name-sharer. Black Five had his back turned ta me, and since he wasn't wearing a helmet, I coulda wacked him hard on the backa his head. But I chose not to. Firstly because there weren't any blunt objects in the immediate vicinity, and secondly because there almost assuredly were more people in the weird dungeon like complex I had woke up in. Even if I somehow killed the light blue haired man in front of me with a silent solitary strike, it would eventually end up causing me more problems than I would be able to handle. Oh, uh, and I guess it woulda been the wrong thing ta do, morally speaking. So, faced with little other choice, I walked quickly through the compressed, ill-

light corridors, reminding myself constantly that I was Swordarm Red One, and that the only Axeman nearby was the sullen looking man in front of me. The small, dimly lit concrete corridor we walked through gave way to a grand hall. And by grand hall, I mean a sewer. Sorta. See, there were tons of big wooden tables and seats, and a lectern and a stage in the hall I had walked into, but even though the area was dressed up as nicely as it could be, the fact remained that Black Five had led me into an open sewer. Water rushed below our feet, putrid, murky brown water, smelling of salt, urine and other pleasantries. There were a few pieces of ply wood which served as makeshift walkways over the running sewage, but they weren't laid down in a particularly complete fashion. As I walked out with Black Five, two men clad in black leather armor and white powdered wigs approached us. One was brown skinned like myself, the other as pale as Sabarene. The brown skinned man was slim and slender, with a snake like face and a piercing gaze. Strapped to his left thigh was a well-worn looking crossbow, a bolt primed and ready to go. His face was pretty, almost girly, even, with the exception of a nasty, fresh gash on his left cheek. The paler man, in contrast, had a dopey enough smile on his face, and was more muscular and manly. Strapped to his back was a long blue lance. "I thought you intended to dispose of this girl.", the brown skinned young man said, a snide quality to his somewhat androgynous voice. "Intentions can change, Orange Four.", the sullen man stated, then frowned. "As can faces. You look a bit worse for wear, Bowman" The snide, sneering man scoffed. "A few of Kundare's dogs escaped our righteous inferno. I picked them off with my crossbow, but one of them managed to scratch my cheek." "That isn't what I meant. Your cheeks look plumper than they did before. I recommend you lay off the fatty foods, Bowman, lest your chin double in size."

The snide man blushed a bright red. “N-nonsense. You must be imagining things, sir.”

“He caught you, Blue.”, the man with the lance on his back said. “Your slacking off will be your end. You almost let four of those Fiatists get away.” “S-shut it, Lancer. I don’t recall you taking down many of Kundare’s hounds when we absconded from the scene.”

The pale man raised an eyebrow and smiled. “You must not have been paying attention, Bowman. I skewered ten men and three women in the time it took you to pick off two charred corpses.” “An easy enough task when stabbing from behind.”, the crossbow wielding man snapped, his voice cracking an octave or eight, making him sound like a little girl. Black Five extended both his wounded hands, and flicked the two bickering Unionists on the forehead. “Enough arguing. You’ll both have plenty of Fiatists to contend with come the rising of the suns. As for now, leave me and the girl alone.”

Both the pale man and the dark skinned bowed their heads in submission, and allowed the sullen man and I to pass. We walked across a couple of planks, passing dining tables, bunkbeds, and even what seemed to be a couch, all mildly submerged in sewage water. “Wait, so you really live down here?”, I asked the dark voiced man, bewildered by the amount of people just sitting in sewage water like it was nothing. “Not down. Up.” I opened my mouth to question what Black Five meant by “up”, but the sound of rushing water answered my inquiry right quick. Tiptoeing on top of the planks, I followed the fast moving sewage water to the end of the hall, and stared out, slack jawed. Through a big open hole at the end of the hall, I saw the half the city of Fremdos, hundreds of feet below my leather covered boots. It was night time, but lights flickered on the canals of the marble city “Just where the heck are we?”, I asked, genuinely awed. “In a place where Sister Kundare’s guards could never find us.”, Black Five

answered, wisely opting ta not mention specifics. “We lived underground for a while, but the whims of the tides soon proved more than we could handle.” I scratched my head. “So y’all just live inna watertower or something? I mean, it’s scenic and all, but ain’t a plumber orra urban explorer gonna come up ta check on ya eventually?” “By then, it won’t matter.”, the dark voiced man said. “Before the rising of the suns, Fremdos will be saved.” “From itself, right?”, I said, then narrowed my eye. “I don’t reckon ya plan on saving the folks down there with flyers about friendship, huh?” “No.”, Black Five said, then walked over to one of the long tables in the half flooded hall. “With this.” The man with the wounded palms picked up a shining red ruby from the center of the table. My face tensed up. The jewel was, unsurprisingly, the same type of jewel the two powdered wig wearing men had used on me and Sabarene in the clinic. “T-the heck does that do?”, I stuttered, trying very poorly to feign ignorance. The sullen faced man blinked, and touched the crystal. It glowed bright red fere brief moment... and then... duplicated. Where there had been just one oval ruby, there were now two. “W-woah.”, I gasped. “How the heck... what the... huh?!” I didn’t even havta pretend I was fascinated; even with all the crap I had seen I never expected an object ta duplicate itself. “The Remnant is not large at all, Proveshian. In fact, our numbers are one sixtieth of the Collective forces present in Fremdos. But numbers mean little, when compared to the might...” the sullen man paused, and with a sickening squish, jammed one of the ruby in the center of his left palm, pointed his hand down to Fremdos, and shot a burst of bright red flames out. “...of the suns.” “G-gah...”, I stuttered, dumbfounded. The burst of flames didn’t disturb me, least, no more than it did back in the depot or outsidea the sex workerhouse, but the fact that Lucas had been spot on in how the flame crystals were

being mass produced like nothing did. The sullen man gazed at me, and mistook my apprehension for admiration. "Impressed? Or are you simply flabbergasted?" I snapped back into place, and remembered I was supposed to act like I had just seen magic for the first time. "How in the heck didya do that!?", I yelled, perhaps a bit too forcefully. "The suns.", Axeman Black Five answered, without missing a beat. "The suns have blessed the Mournful Remnant with their divine favor." "T-the suns?" "One of the suns, at any rate. He came down to me in human guise." "Is that so.", I muttered, skeptical. "Sounds absurd when I say it, but yes. One of the suns came down to visit me, and the Remnant. I remember him well. His eyes and hair alike were an unnatural brown, and his outfit was bizarre beyond belief." A sinking feeling welled up in my gut. "Did this Avatar of the sun happen to be wearing a face mask, by any chance?" Black Five stared at me with a shocked expression. "He... he did, yes. How did you know?" "Call it an educated guess.", I grumbled. "Uh... look. Those rubies you have on ya... it might be a good idea to ditch em." "Nonsense.", the sullen man barked. "Why would I even consider doing that?" "Cause whoever the fella that gave those flame producing rubis is, I can guarantee ya he ain't a good sort. He's onea those machination manipulating types, with his hands involved in this, that, or the other thing. And he definitely ain't onea the suns." The sullen man stared at me. "It doesn't matter, Proveshian. Be he an Avatar of the sun or eccentric Merchant, the tools he has given me are far too valuable to simply do away with. The Mournful Remnant would be nothing without his intervention." The man with a ruby embedded in his palm gestured out towards the city below. "The liberation of an entire city is no easy undertaking. We need all the aid we can get." He turned around, and extended his ruby encrusted hand out to me, and for

the first time, smiled. "Can the Mournful Remnant rely on your support?" With the speed and ferocity of a ravenous mutt, I snatched a hold of Black Five's hand, and jerked him towards me, so that my lips were practically kissing his left ear. "No.", I whispered, and with a fierce thrust of my right leg, kicked the wounded man in the flat of his chest. "W-wha...", Axeman Black Five barely managed to stutter, then, without so much as a whimper, fell, plummeting hundreds of feet to the well-lit city below. I tensed my ears and waited to hear a splash, or a thud, but the points of my ears remained untwitched. I quickly gazed over the edge. No hands clung to a wayward ledge, and there was no sign of a safety net to be found. As sure of the wounded man's demise as I could be, I quietly stuffed the red ruby I had stolen beneath my chestplate. With a carefree smile, I turned around and made my way back to the center of the sewage filled hall. The seven or so powdered wig wearing folk didn't seem particularly perturbed. They were still doing what they had been when I first saw em, sitting on the long wooden tables, talking amongst each other, and picking at very dubious pieces of mutton. I guess I had the sound of rushing water to thank, cause no one in the hall seemed to notice the dark voiced man's abrupt departure, least, not yet, anyways. Calmly, I strolled past one of the tables, and as naturally as I could manage, picked up a sharp steak knife that lay discarded. This, too, I stuffed beneath my chestplate. Doing my best to appear at ease, I approached the brown skinned Bowman and the pale Lancer, both of whom glanced at me with a good deal of skepticism. Sensing their unease, I turned my smile upside down and pressed in my cheeks, making it seem like I was about to vomit at any second. "Uh... hey...", I slowly breathed out to the pale man with the lance. "Do ya,.. do ya gotta room with a chamber pot or something, somewhere?"

The dark skinned Bowman tilted his head at me. "A chamber pot? We're in a water tower, if you need to relieve yourself then find an isolated spot near the edge." "G-guh...", I groaned, covering my stomach with my hand. "N-no... I don't need ta relieve myself, exactly, I... uh... I need some cloth, and some clean water... anda little bitta privacy..." The Lancer raised an eyebrow at me. "Privacy? Why do you need privacy-" realization dawned on his face. "Oh. I-in that case, there's an antechamber tin the hall to your left. It should have everything you need." I winced, and bent over, like a sudden ramp had just wrecked havoc on my stomach. "T-thanks. I'll just bea moment..." I barely managed two steps before my left shoulder was grabbed. "Wait. I'll escort you to the room.", the smug sounding Bowman said, staring at me with suspicious eyes. "Black Five may trust you, but I sure as hell don't." "F-fine.", I gasped, tersely. "Just get me ta the dang antechamber already." With a not quite gentle pull of my arm, the powdered wig wearing Bowman with the cut cheek pulled me off to a narrow corridor, opposite of the one which I had woken up in. As we walked through the corridor(or rather, as I was dragged through the corridor), I looked around fer stairs, orra door, or something. The facta the matter was that I needed to leave. My heart was pounding a million miles a minute, and my vision was getting blurry, but I knew more than anything that I hadta go. It wouldn't be very long at all before folks started wondering where Black Five had gone, and the moment they got even the slightest bit suspicious I knew I would be the one on the chopping block. I knew that, and at that moment, as I was being dragged through the corridor, I regretted killing the sullen looking man. I had been too reckless. I didn't make any plans fera escape, and I didn't have nothing on me besides a knife, anda ruby. Using the ruby was outta the question. Fer one, it was magic, orra module, or whatever,

and for two, one person can't beat seven others in an open space projectile match. It doesn't matter if your aim is the best in the world, at most you'd be able to blast two or three people with fire before getting incinerated yourself. No, the only shot I had at getting out of the watertower where I had been waterboarded alive was to divide and conquer. "Alright.", the suspicious sounding Bowman said, letting go of my arm in front of a damp looking cell. "This is the anti-chamber. There are strips of linen and a few scented flowers for you to refresh yourself. Once you've finished freshening up, I would like to speak with you, about-" He never got to finish his sentence. The brown skinned Bowman's back exposed to me, I ripped the knife from beneath my chestplate, and lunged it straight at his neck. He sidestepped my strike with a casual air. "Nevermind.", the Bowman stated, punching me in the side of my head. My skull slammed straight into a damp, stone wall. "G-gah!", I yelled, putting a buncha force into a desperate elbow strike to the powdered wig wearing man's stomach. He deflected my elbow with pitiful ease. "You shouldn't telegraph your strikes so much.", the Bowman said, all emotion evaporating from his voice. "Not only do you alert people to your presence, your yells also lack confidence." The androgynous crossbow wielding man grabbed a fistful of my green hair, and pulled me close to his face. "In short: You exert an unnecessary amount of effort, and gain no psychological edge." The knife in my hand clattered uselessly on the ground. The Bowman picked the rusty steak knife up, and examined it with a casual glance. "You assaulted me with a dining apparatus? An inoffensive decision in its own right, but you should have at least taken the time to sharpen it. With the blade this dull, you probably wouldn't have been able to pierce my skin even if you did manage to hit me." Tossing the knife aside, the Bowman threw me on the ground, and with a wicked



speed, drew his crossbow, pressing the end of it against my forehead. "Kaplunk.", the powdered wig wearing man whispered. "You died." He blinked a bit at me, then holstered the crossbow on his back. "...Huh?", I gasped out, as the slender fella yanked me onto my feet. "Come on. We need to save Lucas and get out of here.", the Bowman said, emotionlessly. "How the... how the heck do ya know Ruckus?" The powdered wig wearing man stared at me with glassy green eyes. "Was that an attempt at humor, Unionist?" My jaw fell open in shock. "Suns above... izzat you, Nielentil?" "I am not Nielente.", the girl dressed up as a Bowman answered, removing the wig to reveal her well brushed green hair. "Nielente woke up strapped to a wooden plank. I took over for her right before she was waterboarded by an excessively talkative Bowman." I scratched my head a bit, as I tried to figure out what Not-Nielente had said. "Oh, so ya woke up, got tortured, put on yer serious face, then killed the git and dressed up as him. Good thinking." "No.", Not-Nielente corrected. "I did not kill the Unionist. I stole his clothing, wig, and crossbow after incapacitating him. And I was not tortured, I was water-boarded." "Er, oh. Ok." The glassy eyed girl's facial expression changed, if only slightly. "We must not tarry. The complex we are in seems to be a headquarters for the Mournful Remnant, an extremist sect which wishes to overthrow the existing order in Fremdos. Additionally, I have reason to believe they've acquired a device which mass produces-" "Rubies that shoot flames at people, yeah, yeah, I gotcha. Yeah, well, as it turns out, that's the thing me and Ruckus were after when we first bumped into ya, Nielentil, so-" "I am not Nielente." "Sure, sure, whatever. Don't worry about that magical ruby.", I said with a smile. "I got it right here." I reached into my chestplate, and showed Not-Nielente the gem I had pilfered. The glassy eyed girl stared skeptically at the jewel.

“How did you acquire that, Unionist?” “I stole it from the leader of this Rebel Group. Axeman Black Six or whatever.” “He didn’t notice you stealing the device, did he?” “No, he did.”, I said, tensing my ears ta listen fer the signsa footsteps. “But, uh, I kinda kicked him offa five hundred foot ledge, so it ain’t mucha a problem.” “YOU WHAT?!” Not-Nielente sputtered, tons of agitation present in her normally emotionless voice.

“That’s... that’s totally NOT what you were, like, supposed to do! No... no you were supposed to, like, flounder about for a while, stumble upon that blonde foreigner, and then escape with me! My cover is going to be completely ruined now, you sadistic, murderous, moron!” I narrowed my eye at Not-Nielente. “Fer someone who claims to not be Nielentil, you sure sound a whole bunch like her right now.” The glassy eyed girl winced. “I am not Nielente.”, she assured me, her voice back to its unemotional drawl.

“In any event, your current actions have resulted in a a ninety two point three four five six-“ “Yer just making up those numbers as ya go along, ain’t ya?” “-chance of us losing our lives. We need to leave immediately.” “Not until we find and free Ruckus.”, I grumbled. “Ya said he was tied up somewhere, right?” “At the end of this corridor. But freeing him from his bonds will take time.” She gazed at me. “If you’re ok with losing your life, then I will lead you to him.” I half smiled, putting on a façade of bravado like I did long before. “Lead me to the dumb git. No one I care about is gonna lose their life, though, and if there’s anyone I care about, it’s myself.” The glassy eyed girl didn’t respond ta that statement, she just slumped her shoulders, placed the powdered wig back on her head, and quickly but quietly walked further down the corridor. She passed about three or so doors before stopping atta cell identical ta the one I had woken up in. Not-Nielente straightened her black leather armor, and patted the powdered white wig

over her head, some. She knocked on the door of the cell. "Hello?", Not-Nielente called out as she knocked, strapping a smug, presumptuous tone ta her voice. "This is Bowman Orange Fifteen. Black Five asked me to check up on the prisoner." The door creaked open, and a confused looking pale girl with a powdered wig anda slingshot emerged ta look at us. "What's up, Bowma-argh!" Without giving her a second look, Nielente grabbed the slingshot wielder by the wig and slammed her skull against the door. The powdered wig wearing woman went out likea light. "Well that was needlessly violent.", an elegant voice remarked. Strapped ta a plank by four piecesa rope was, of course, Lucas. He... uh... he was completely naked, except fer his tophat, and bowtie. "Oh, hey Ruckus.", I muttered, pretending ta look away from his crotch. "I didn't, uh, see ya there." "Hmph, your wandering eye would suggest otherwise, Patchy.", the shirtless sorcerer scoffed. "Ogle my beautiful body if you must, but get me out of these ropes first." I grabbed a bolt out of Not-Nielente's commandeered crossbow, and used the serrated edges of it ta saw Lucas free. "Ah, now that's better.", the blonde boy yawned, stretching his arms high in the air, exposing his flat, unmuscular stomach. Besides lacking any clothes whatsoever, Lucas looked fine. His nose wasn't bleeding no more, and the bruise Desnion had left on his cheek wasn't terribly pronounced. He looked around his small, compact cell, then gazed down at the powdered wig wearing woman. "She tortured me, you know.", Lucas said, slightly irritated. "No, she waterboarded ya.", I corrected him, then frowned. "Anywho, we ain't got time fer chit-chat. We gotta get outta here fast, so put on some pants or something so we can git going." "We don't have time for that, Patchy.", the naked boy scoffed. "I've reason to believe that we've been abducted by a terrorist sect, the very one we were investigating, called-" "The Mournful

Remnant.”, I impatiently interrupted. Lucas blinked at me, slightly shocked. “Well yes, but they-“ “Have a magic ruby which mass produces flame-throwers. Don’t worry, I took care of that.” “You.. you what?” Not wanting to waste any time explaining, I reached into my chestplate and removed the ruby from it. “See?”, I said, waving the weird round crystal in front of Lucas’s face. “It’s all gravy.” “I’ll be damned. Did you steal it from that stigmata-riddled gentleman’s pocket when he wasn’t looking?” I bit my bottom lip. “Uh... something like that.” Lucas smiled and nodded his head for a second, then paused. “Wait. Wait, hold on. You understood me, just now.” I raised an eyebrow. “Well, duh. You’re wearing your magical translating bowtie.” The top hat sporting nudist shook his head. “Right, but that shouldn’t matter. If you were truly holding the module in your hand, I wouldn’t be able to speak your barbaric, faintly German sounding language, at least not well.” I grimaced, and gazed at the ruby. “No, no, I’m pretty darn sure this is a magical module mechanism, it shined like a light and duplicated itself and everything...” I started poking and prodding at the ruby, trying to get it to replicate itself. Nothing happened. “Aw, crap”, I cursed. “It’s a dud, Rucku-GAH!” The ruby I was fumbling around with suddenly blasted out a hefty burst of flame, straight at Lucas’s forehead. The fire stopped short just off his face. “Huh.”, the blonde boy remarked, looking intrigued. “Do that again, Patchy.” “Do what again?” “Make that crystal shoot fire at my face.” He turned to the glassy eyed girl next to me. “While Patchy attempts to incinerate me, try to listen to my voice, Nielente.” “I am not-“ “Nielente, yes, yes, but I can’t bloody well call you Tyler Durden, can I? Well, whatever. Just try to pay attention to what I’m saying as the elf shoots fire at me.” The points of Not-Nielente’s ears twitched, some. “Elf?” “Gahaha, get ready, Ruckus!”, I chuckled, perhaps a bit too eager to fire the, uh, fire at

Lucas again. I poked and fingered the ruby in my hand, pointing the end the flame had shot out of at the naked blonde boy. Like so many times before, the flame shot out inna huge burst, but dissipated right before it hit his head. Lucas's lips moved up and down as the fire approached him, but I paid his words little mind, my ears primed on detecting any approaching footsteps and the like. "Hmph.", the self-important Sorcerer exhaled. "As per usual, the presence of my Universal Translator cancelled out the fire from that gem." "Yeah, uh, why do modules do that?", I asked, confused as ta the mechanics of the whole affair. "Fuck if I know.", Lucas said, shrugging his somewhat sweaty shoulders. "Might be Quantum Mechanics or Linear Algebra or the like. Probably something mathy, I'm sure." He threw his hands up in the air and smiled at Not-Nielente. "But that's neither here nor there. Did you catch what I said, Keyser Soze?" "Who are you referring to?", the glassy eyed girl inquired. "Were you able to make out what I said or not, Nielente?" "I am not-" Lucas just glared at her. "Yes, I heard what you said.", the glassy eyed girl said, dropping her usual denial "You said that David Tyree was an angel sent by God to punish sinners." The blonde boy frowned, and cupped his chin in his hand. "Drat, you really did hear me. I'm confused now." I narrowed my eye. "Ya wake up butt-naked and strapped ta a plank, and you only get confused when someone is able ta articulately repeat yer inanities?" "Think about it for a bit, Patchy.", Lucas said, wagging his finger. "Modules are supposed to cancel each other out. But just now my Universal Translator managed to both block your flames and butcher the beautiful language of the Queen." Not-Nielente frowned. "A logic defying object acting illogically seems fairly logical." "Wrong.", Lucas snipped. "Even things that seem arbitrary have an inner consistency of some sort. An intoxicated man in the streets who

babbles incoherently isn't that way by chance, he rants and raves due to an overabundance of ethanol enzymes. Likewise, there has to be some reason that my Universal Translator can still function and cancel out the flames from the ruby at the same time." I paused, and thought about it for a second. "This ain't the complete package.", I finally said, turning the ruby over in my hand. Lucas got uncomfortably close to me. "It's what?", the vest lacking fella said. "It's a piece of a larger pie. See... I thought this was a ruby that made other rubies, but I was wrong. This is a magic ruby that was made from the original magical ruby." Not-Nielente frowned. "And so, because the ruby in your hand is derivative of another gem, you think that it cannot negate the effects of the foreigner's bowtie?" I licked the bottom of my lips. "I... I guess so, yeah." The nude boy took the ruby from my hand and turned it over. "Hmph. Your theory seems sound, but for all we know it could be the temperature of the room that's giving my bowtie the advantage." I narrowed my eye. "Why would the jailer let ya keep yer hat and bowtie on?" Lucas scratched his left ear. "Why wouldn't she?" He stood up and made a fist. "But that's besides the point, Patchy. Regardless of the mechanics of that crystal, it's not the one we're after. The module we're looking for is the one that-" "Mass produces the fire gems, yeah, yeah. Don't worry, it's taken care of, more or less." A look of slight concern slowly spread across Lucas's face. "What do you mean?" "I mean it's take care of.", I grumbled, knowing the blonde boy would flip if he found out about the particulars. "The magical mass producing piece of crap you're looking for is currently lying about five hundred measures under the sea." Lucas glared at me. "Who did you push out a window?" "Er... no one. I didn't push anyone outta a window." I did, of course, *kick* someone out of a window, but it was less a window and more a big opening

in the wall anyways. “Anyways, we gotta git going. I don’t care about yer lacka clothes or nothing, but where the heck are all of your trinkets?” Lucas smiled, and tipped his tophat over. Lying at the bottom(or, uh, top, I guess) of Lucas’ hat was his tazer, revolver, and his apple encrusted glass square. There were six or so metal cylinders lying amongst the tazer and revolver too, each about the size of a thumb. The Sorcerer removed the tazer from his hat, and with a deft flick of his wrist, flipped the hat and its contents back on the top of his mop. “Alright, let’s flee.”, Lucas said, his tazer crackling. Not-Nielente blinked. “It... it would not take all that long to put on armor...” “No, we’ve wasted enough time talking. We can worry about accessories later.” Fer just a moment, I saw a hint of a blush form on the glassy eyed girl’s face. “...Very well.”, the green haired girl said. “Follow me, and stay close.” Without saying another word, Not-Nielente briskly walked out of Lucas’s cell. I plucked the dagger from the wigged woman’s unconscious body, and followed suit. We walked through the corridor, but the direction we opted ta take... “Hey, waita tick. This’ll just take us right back ta the big hall, we’ll be sitting ducks if we venture back there.” “No.”, Not-Nielente hissed underneath her teeth. “We’ll be fine so long as we remain quiet. There is a partition in the main hall of this group’s base, if we duck down low we’ll be able to get to an exit undetected.” Not seeing a point in protesting, I followed the girl and tried to emulate her best I could. It was difficult. My armor and muscle made me much more clunky and cumbersome than the saboteur, and the naked slender man next ta me. Still, in spite of me being as quiet as an infant with acid reflex, and in spite of Lucas’ flaccid, floppy penis, we managed ta get back ta the main hall without anyone noticing us... for like two and a half seconds. “Hey!”, the pale Lancer I had passed by before shouted, noticing me, Lucas, and Not-

Nielente exit the corridor two point five one seconds later than he should have.

“Bowman Orange Fifteen, what the hell are you doing?! That prisoner belongs in his cell!” The pale man drew his lance, and pointed it at Lucas’s throat. “Wait...”, he muttered. “Why does the prisoner have a dagger on her? Black Five was explicit in-“

With a quick swipe of my hand, I sliced the fella’s jugular vein apart, causing him ta choke and drown on his own blood. Least, that was what I had hoped ta happen. What *actually* happened was... “Guhah!”, the Lancer yelled, parrying my sloppy slice with ease. “Huh...rah!”, he growled, stabbing me right in the chest. I wheezed, and collapsed onta the ground, wincing from his strike. From the lack of searing pain in my torso, I was fairly sure my leather armor had managed to absorb the blow. Not-Nielente quickly drew her crossbow, and aimed it square at the man’s feet. “I apologize for the inconvenience.”, she said, softly, then squeezed the trigger. Nothing happened. “Oh... the bolt...”, the glassy eye girl gasped, right before the lance skewered her stomach. With a sickening squelsh, the pale man ripped the lance from out of Nielente. Blood sputtered out of her chest, and the green haired girl collapsed on the ground, motionless. “AAAAAAAArgh!”, Lucas shouted, tazer drawn and sparking. Lucas jabbed the Lancer in the face in a frenzy, shocking him over, and over, and over again, until the pale man, convulsing, let go of his bloodied lance, and collapsed on the ground. It was a meaningless effort. While the pale lance wielder was down, the five other wig wearing folks were up and alert. None of them had weapons on em... least... not conventional weapons. All of them had in their palms the stupidass flame throwing rubies, primed and ready to go. “Get behind me, Patchy.”, Lucas said with gritted teeth, taking a step forward. I nodded my head. I knew his plan, but it wouldn’t work. It didn’t



matter how long he could block the fire with his module, eventually the smoke would cause us to pass out again, and this time, our captors would not be so kind as to take us prisoner. I put my hand on Lucas' left shoulder. "Hey, Blondie...", I whispered, as the flames blasted towards us. "Do you trust me?" "Not in the slightest.", Lucas hissed back. I softened my voice. "Well, trust me, alright?" The blonde boy didn't say anything, but his shoulders slinked, relaxing at my touch. Assuming his silence meant consent, I gently untied his bowtie from his neck, and, gingerly as I could, stepped in front of the naked boy. Another blast of flames hurtled at us, and stopped. "What... what?!", one of the white wigged fellas coughed, a bit of the smoke choking him up some. "Why isn't it working?!" "Cause yer magical crap don't work against us, idiot.", I called out, putting on a fangy grin. "You can blast away at us until the ducks come home, it just won't work." "Nonsense!", he growled, and blasted us again. "See?", I snarled, soon as the smoke cleared. "We're still here! We're still alive! And I know it seems unfair, and nonsensical, but that's just the way it is! Leave us! Let us go, dang it! Else I'll kill the lot of ya!" One of the white wigged fellas paused. "Would it really be so wrong to let them go, Fourteen?" "Of course it would.", Fourteen hissed. "Look at Lancer Red Seven, they've murdered him." He grabbed the leg of a chair, and began hoisting it over his head, as the four folk besides him each readied their stupidass rubies ta blast us again. I plunged my hand into my chestplate, and fetched my stupidass ruby out as well, then... waited. The chair crashed into my torso, and splintered on impact. It felt like someone had punched me on the bottom of my chin, then elbowed me in the eyesocket. That didn't matter, it wasn't what I was waiting for. No, what I was waiting for was the burst of flames ta come hurtling towards us. One burst shot out, I did nothing. Two more shot out, I

remained still. But as the fourth and final burst of flame shot out, I took the bowtie in my hand, and chucked it. The piece of neck pompery cut through the flames like a knife, extinguishing the fire. The tie fell softly at the end of the hall, fifteen measures past the last of the white wig wearing folk. "Hmph. So that's how you've been clinging on to life", Fourteen scoffed. "But now there's nothing you have that can block our flames." I raised my hand, and aimed it at the five remaining members of the Mournful Remnant. "That's the point, moron." The ruby in my hand let out a burst of fire, which caught everyone besides Fourteen directly in the chest. As for Fourteen... his wig was set aflame something fierce. Screams of pain and distorted, terrified sounding gurgles rang out all through the hall. "Pick Nielentil up and go!", I yelled, gesturing to Lucas, then the exit, hoping to high heavens that if he didn't understand my words, he would at least be able to understand my intentions. The blonde haired boy hoisted the motionless girl onto his back, and sprinted across the hall, scooping up his discarded bowtie in the process. I probably should have followed him. He was defenseless, naked, and carrying a wounded girl who, while exceptionally weird, hadn't done nothing wrong. I should have prioritized their safety over everything else, but I didn't. No, instead of helping the folks I actually cared about, I walked over to the random smuck that had survived my attempt to incinerate him. Fourteen frantically splashed sewer water over his wig, in a fairly poor effort to extinguish the flames from his head. I grabbed the back of his wig and submerged him completely in the rancid sewer water. Once I was sure the fire has been put out, I lifted his head right out of the water again. "Here's how this is gonna go.", I growled, placing my boot on his back. "I'm going to ask some questions, and you're going to answer. If you comply, I'll let you go. If you don't, then I'll drown you." The man

underneath squirmed, and tried ta trip me. I stepped to the side and kicked him in stomach, his slightly scorched leather armor not doing much to absorb the blow. “U-ugh!”, he wheezed, then collapsed. I slammed his head underneath the sewage water. He struggled a heckuva lot, but nowhere near enough ta break my hold. I let him thrash about fer about fifteen seconds, then yanked him up again. “Last chance ta play nice~”, I sing-songed, as screams of pain and moans of agony rang out from the four people I had burnt. “I... I refuse.”, Fourteen gasped out, a complete wreck. “Do what you will to me, Saboteur. Black Five and the Remnant will prevail.” “Aw, shucks.”, I laughed, light heartedly. “I ain’t a Saboteur, and Black Five won’t be doing much of anything. He done slipped onna ledge and fell.” “You... you killed him.”, Fourteen croaked. “Why... why would you-“ I stomped on the fella’s back, and forced his lips down into the sewer water witha inelegant splash. “Good question, why would I push someone outta a fifty story window?” I tilted my head and scratched the bottom of my chin. “Maybe yer boss had a bounty on his head. Maybe he raped me, or killed my parents, or owed me metal. Maybe I lied about not being a Saboteur.” I put more pressure on his back. “My motives don’t matter. You knowing em won’t change the situation yer in. So unless ya want ya want ta join yer extra-crispy friends over there in the after-life, I suggest ya start yapping.” At first, there was silence. And then... “Auh...auh...”, the man below me blathered. “AUUUUUUUUUuH!”, he sobbed, breaking down completely. “Oh! Oh, it’s so simple, isn’t it?”, Fourteen shouted, convulsing. “I should tell the person who murdered my friends everything I know, huh? I should just open up, and then, and then... you’ll let me go on my merry way? Hah!”, he laughed, lacking any semblance of confidence, of humor. “Hah! HAH! A...wugh!” The white wigged man cried even more. I

shoulda felt disturbed, but the only thing that welled up in my heart was disgust. “Aw, shut it.”, I snarled, kicking the man in the stomach. “Auuu-!” “Don’t try ta play the victim here, you ain’t. The folks you burnt outsidea the brothel, that little girl you tried ta kill, they were the victims, not you and your queer-ass dress up club.” “Ha... ha! Ha! Victims?”, the pale man coughed, his sobs slowing down. “You think the military branch of the Collective are victims?! Are you kidding me, girl?” He narrowed his eyes at me, and a sudden fury came over him. “Wait-wait... that... I get it... I get it now.”, he snarled, his words full of venom. You’re Unassigned.”, he hissed. “You... you think... you think that... that just because you were treated like the useless rats you were, that makes... that makes what *they* did ok.” I thought about correcting the fella beneath my feet, but held my tongue. “The heck are you talking about?” “As if... as if you don’t remember. Three... three cycles ago, when... when we surrendered, to the Collective. In the.. ha... ha... Union District, around the city, on the patios, near the ocean. You and the rest of your ilk were all there... picnicking!” I raised an eyebrow, the word a bit too silly sounding fer me ta be shaken up by. “Picnicking?” “Picnicking... with blankets, with sandwiches, mutton, it was a giant celebration.. You gathered in your filthy, unwashed, nameless groups, and watched. You *all* watched.” The pale Lancer’s body convulsed even more. “I remember... I remember... the sheets of paper. We were all given sheets of paper, all fifty thousand of us. Even... even the young ones, the infants.” “Oh no, sheetsa paper, anything but that.” The Lancer’s eyes glazed over, and he stared off into the murky water below him, shivering. “There were numbers, on the papers, one to fifty thousand. We... we weren’t stupid. We lost. They won. Decimation... decimation was what we thought, what we figured. One life for nine, one for nine was custom. But it

was not one for nine. It was odds, and it was evens, and if the number was odd... then up. You. Went.” The air around me chilled, and I slowly began to feel a bit ill. “What... what do ya mean, up you went?” The Lancer ignored me, or maybe, maybe he had forgotten I was even there, as he blathered on. “My collaborator... and I... we got evens. But our children... odds. They got odds. She, and I, begged. We begged, and begged, and begged, and begged, and *begged* to take their place.” The Lancer’s voice started cracking, and snot poured out of his nostrils like water. “No. No, that’s not how it worked, we were told. If we wanted the luxury of choice, we should have surrendered earlier. No, with swords at our throats, we were made to watch. Our son... five cycles old... he went up first. Then our daughter.” The man’s body tensed up. “Our daughter... it only took three rising periods. She was younger. She got dehydrated more easily, she didn’t have much muscle, she... she was skinny as sin.” A weird demented smile came across the Lancer’s face. “Our son, though... our son... it took him seven rising periods. I... I don’t know why. Most people can’t last more than three without water. M-maybe.. maybe it was the way he was tied up. His wrists weren’t tied as tightly as our daughter’s were, so perhaps... perhaps his blood circulation let him last longer.” “Last longer on *what!?*”, I yelled, inadvertently taking a few steps back. “Please be considerate when inquiring about matters that seem strange to you.”, a weak sounding voice echoed out. “Don’t question things which might disturb you.” I jerked my head away from the Lancer. With a shaking hand over her bleeding stomach, Nielente limped towards me... no, not towards me, towards the man who had run her through with a lance. “Y-you...”, the pale man stuttered, as if seeing Nielente for the first time. “You’re-” “A Saboteur. A saboteur, that participated in the Great Unification, and acted under the orders of Master

Marston.” The Lancer’s eyes smoldered with rage. He lunged towards Nielente, which woulda beena problem if I didn’t kick him in the face. “N-no...”, Nielente protested, falling onto her knees... “Leave him... leave him be.” “No.”, I growled. “You gotta git yer ass up so me and Ruckus can get ya to a medic. The blood loss is making ya act all fuzzy and nonsensical.” Nielente just nodded her head. “Thre-Three cycles ago... during the Great Unification... I took a portion of the defeated Unionists that drew odd numbers in the lottery... and... and...” the green haired girl seemed to space out for a bit, then regain her focus. “...crucified them.” The room suddenly became very cold, and very quiet. “W-what?!”, I spat, distressed. “Cruci... cruciwhat?!” Nielente stared at me, with cloudy green eyes. “Crucifixion. I took a portion of those who had drawn unlucky numbers, and tied them to a cross, where they hung, until they died. From hunger... from thirst... from muscular dystrophy, from asphyxia... the average Unionist lasted five rising periods up on the cross.” “But... but why?!”, I gasped, my head beginning to hurt. “If the Collective and you won... and if the folks in Fremdos surrendered, why would ya... why would do that to em?!” “Master Marston... ordered us. He arrived with the Patrician Branch... far ahead of the General, and Brother Gino, and the Plebian Branch. He... he claimed to be acting in the interest of Nielente responded, swaying. “In order to discourage any further rebellions, he- ah-... he decreed that half of the Unionist forces in Fremdos would be put to death, and the other half forced into Volunteership. B-brother Brounde showed up, hot on Marston’s heels, and tried to stop him, saying that.. that he lied, that the General had ordered nothing of the sort, and...ack!-” The cloudy eyed girl stopped, and coughed... no... vomited up a mix of blood, and phlegm. She tumbled over face first into the sewer waters.“N-nielentil...!”, I stammered, and let go of

the Lancer. I picked her up best as I could, her body alarmingly light. Nielente raised her left hand, and... flicked me on the ear. "I am not-", the glassy eyed girl began to say... "-Nielenti." She tried to take in a short breath, but ended up coughing out some more red mucus. "M-My name is, and always has been... Nielente." She swallowed a bit of her bloody spittle, and licked her lips. "... I pretended that I wasn't. For the longest time, I acted as if I were two souls, in one body. Nielente didn't hurt those people, her emotionless split personality did." Her face wavered, and tears started flowing freely from her green eyes. "That... that was a lie. It was... like, totally, a lie. The things I've done... can't be forgiven, or forgotten... no matter how many imaginary friends I make up." Nielente's temperature began lowering, more and more. She stared at me, her expression faint and unfocused. "You... you're not the best person to ask this of, but..." her body shivered, and her breathing slowed down even more. "But please... stop... you need to stop... Master Marston. Brother Brounde was right. For... for all of her flaws, the General... she would never... have..." Nielente didn't finish her sentence. With one final gasp, the green haired girl fell out of my arm, and into the murky gray waters. She didn't get up again. With a strangely shaking hand, I clutched the ruby in my palm, and pointed it at the pale man. He winced. "No... no, I won't." I dropped the jewel on the floor, and turned around, away. I looked around the room a bit. Didn't take me long to find what I was looking for, lying underneath the legs of an upturned bench was the pinkish lance, its tip red with Nielente's blood. I picked it up. Wasn't exactly easy to lift the lance, but it wasn't terribly hard, neither. The weight didn't matter, I didn't plan on holding it for long. I did a one eighty, again, and took heavy steps, my boots splashing heavily in the water. I was slow, and deliberate, and loud. I got on my knees,

and turned Nielente over. She had been stabbed about three inches or so above her stomach. I measured the distance with three of my fingers, then moved over to the pale man, and raised up the lance, aiming its point about two inches below his chest. With gritted teeth, I slammed the bloodied lance down into the pale man's torso, with as much force as I could muster. It... the lance didn't even come close to penetrating his chest. No... the point it went no more than half an inch into the pale man's black leather armor, perhaps less than that. "I s-s-spared yer life f-fer now.", I choked out to the Lancer, feeling queasy. "If... if I w-wanted to, I coulda... I coulda taken out onea yer lungs!" I fell onto my knees, and bawled. "GUH... GUUUUUUUUUUH!" As I cried, and blubbered like a baby, the room slowly grew colder, and began to turn silent, like the world itself was going to sleep. And my tears seemed to slow, to descend so slowly that they didn't even hit the ground. But... then I glanced at the pale Lancer below me. His face was... frozen. Completely still, like he had lockjaw. And then I realized... my tears were suspended in the middle of the air, and the running sewage water had stopped moving altogether. "Odd.", a relaxed, affable voice remarked. "Usually it's the victim's job to cry, not perpetrator." I didn't turn around. I didn't need to, to know what was going on. "The heck do you want?", I choked out, wiping away the wetness under my eye sockets. "To teach a lesson.", the friendly, foreign voice chimed. A series of small, splashing steps echoed out, and Thief walked in front of me, clad in his cape, and skull covered mask. He looked down at Nielente, and shook his head, hands on his hip. "Funny. No matter what situation may be, this girl makes the same mistake, over, and over, and over." "Only mistake she made was sticking around me.", I remarked, bitter. The man in the black skull mask stepped towards me, stepping around my suspended tears like they were



pillars of smoke. "No, no. Life of this girl always fated to end this way. If a desire for self-destruction exists, desire will be fulfilled.", Thief said, an eerie cheer present in his voice. "Those with guilt seek absolution. Absolution carries price, carries punishment. Greater guilt, greater the need for absolution, greater the punishment given." I made a fist, and glared at the skull masked man. "What, you saying that Nielentil taking a lance redeemed her, or something? You saying this is justice, that she deserved this?" Thief tilted his head at me, and... and I think he mighta narrowed his eyes, slightly. "This girl desired death. Not deserved death. No one deserves death, not even Friend Brown Girl." He shut Nielente's eyes. "Still... desires, deserves, death comes all the same. For this one, fate was inevitable. Born into poverty, involved in Invasion cum Revolution... such unstable individual never could last. If not death by lance, suicide or starvation a certainty." "Yer wrong.", I growled. "She... she absolutely coulda lasted.", I barked, rising to my feet. "Even with alla that Saboteur crap, even with... whatever the hell she was involved with... she coulda lived." "No. She couldn't. She didn't.", Thief stated. "A sword neglected rusts. A flower without water withers. A human without absolution dies." I clenched my teeth. "I don't need absolution." "Am talking of humans, not monsters.", the brown haired man said, darkly. "All Friend Brown Girl needs is food, and water, sleep, perhaps sex. Matters of life, and death... do not matter." "I... I ain't a monster.", I protested, weakly. Thief turned around, and gestured towards the burnt bodies of the white wig wearing folk. "Not sure if others would agree." The mask wearing man paused, then shrugged his shoulders. "But am not here to moralize, am here to-" "Saya buncha cryptic crap that goes nowhere and means nothing.", I bitterly remarked. "Why can't ya just leave me alone?" The masked man let out a long exhale.

“Because am fur Trapper.” “I thought ya said yer name was Thief.” Thief rolled his eyes. “Is metaphor, Friend. Metaphor of fur Trapper. Say fur Trapper goes out into the snow, and run across bear. Bear is wounded, foot stuck on trap fur Trapper laid down. Out of compassion, curiosity, or whim, fur Trapper save bear. If bear later goes on rampage, and devours fifteen children, who is to blame?” “The children, of course. What typea idiot would go neara bear?” “No, not children. Trapper. Trapper would take blame. Is in bear’s nature to fight, to harm, to maim. Bear bears barely bit of blame, bear is animal. Trapper, on other hand, has mind, has heart, has conscience. Has responsibility to watch over bear moment he decide to spare it.” Dumb as I was, his insult didn’t go over my head. “Thought you weren’t gonna moralize.” “Am explaining motivation. Might be hard for Friend Brown Girl to comprehend, but sometimes morals factor in to motivation.” I tried to steady myself, and not focus too much on how still and lifeless the world around me was. “And just what might yer motivation be? Ta mess with me, outta some sense of self-righteousness?” “No. Am not sadist.” “Then just what the heck do ya want?”, I spat, my body beginning ta spasm. Thief walked towards the opening in the enda the hall, and looked down at the city surrounded by crosses. He pulled down his mask. “I want to stop something like this from ever happening again.”, Thief said, his heavy accent diminishing slightly. “Crucifixion, genocide, revolutions... legacy of hatred runs deep in city, in continent, in world. And won’t stop. Won’t stop, unless Friend Brown Girl does her part, and make it stop.” I weakly rose ta my feet, and lifted my head. “The heck do ya want me ta do? I’m justa crippled moron.” “Crippled, yes. Moron, no. Friend One Hand not dangerous due to muscle, or axe. All Friend need do, is listen to last words of dancer’s last words. Her plea, accept it. If Friend One Eye does not,

then world, and much much more than world, is lost, for good.” Then, without even a sound, the brown haired man was gone. My tears, suspended in midair, fell down ta the rushing sewer water below. Everything was moving again, and the hall felta bit warmer. I glanced down near my feet. Nielente remained cold and motionless.

Eventually, after meandering through various hallways and corridors of the derelict water tower, I caught up ta Lucas. He was just fine, minus a slightly bruised cheek, and had commandeered the black leather armor offa wayward sentry that he had knocked out. “P-patchy.”, he stuttered, guilty. “Nielente... she punched me, and...” “What, she got away?”, I snorted, making it seem like it wasn’ta big deal. “Y-yes...”, Lucas mewed, head looking down. “I... I don’t know why, but she limped off, and-“ The blonde boy trailed off. His eyes watered, and his cheeks looked gaunt. “And... and I think Nielente might be... might be-“ “Don’t worry about it.”, I grunted, interrupting the depressed blonde boy right quick. “I just saw Nielentil a moment ago. She’s fine. That lance wound didn’t hurt her none. She said she’d meet up with us later, or something.” “Really?”, the blonde boy said, a bit of surprise washing away an ounce of misery from his mug. “Yeah.”, I grumbled, acting annoyed. “See, I got inta a whole lot of trouble with some morea those masked- uh... I mean, wigged wearing fellas once y’all went ahead me. I didn’t holler or nothing, cause I thought I could take em, but soon enough I found myself overwhelmed.” I licked my lips. “But just as I thought I was gonna be a goner, there comes Nielentil, with her staff and everything, knocking out folks like it ain’t nothing. I gotta admit, that topless bimbo might be crazy, but she’s also competent. Ain’t nothing gonna keep her down.”, I finished, flashing the newly clothed Sorcerer a fangy grin. Lucas looked hesitant, the guilt still plastered firm ta his face. “Regardless, we should

go back and make sure she's ok." "What, and risk our own hides?", I scoffed, trying to keep my tone light. "Yeah, nah. We ain't masters of disguise, so let's just trust in Nielenti's skill and hightail it outta here." Lucas softly shook his head. "I'm sorry, Patchy, I know it's selfish, but I wouldn't feel right if we just left her here." He turned around, and started to head back to the hall. I quickly jammed two fingers down my throat "Buh... buh!", I vomited, chucking up the lambchops I had eaten. I threw myself onto the ground and sprawled out like a ragdoll. "Four!", Lucas cried out, distressed. "Are you alright? Four?!" I was alright, of course, but I didn't let him know it. I couldn't. If we remained in the complex, we'd be done for. And if Lucas saw what had happened to Nielente, to the weird girl that tried to live life with a smile on her face, he mighta been done for. I coughed up some more semi-digested lamb, and pretended to pass out. "- Fuck!.", Blondie cursed, and quickly scooped me up. He didn't sling me over his shoulder, though. Nah, he opted for one of those bridal carries, which was odd. Using both his arms to hold me was a dumb idea for sure; if he ran into trouble he wouldn't have any free hands to fight with. Still, it didn't matter. Lucas carried me, and by necessity, himself, away from the hall full of corpses, and out of the water tower, down to safety and blissful ignorance. Once we got outside, Lucas laid me down. "Patchy. Wake up, Patchy.", he said, lightly brushing my cheek. "W-wha?!", I gasped, acting like I had just been jolted outta a deep sleep. "Where... where am I?!" "We're outside. You passed out." "Aw, good.", I said. "Let's meet up with that alcoholic sister, there's something I gotta talk to her about." The blonde boy shook his head. "No. We need to lay low for now. Marston ordered our summary execution, remember?" I made a fist. "Yeah, but we didn't do what he accused us of doing. Truth of the matter is that that

glasses wearing jerk was just looking for an excuse.” “The truth of the matter *doesn't* matter, Patchy.”, Lucas hissed. “So long as people think we tried to kill Supreme Sibling Desnion, you and I are in hot water, regardless of how transparent Marston’s motives are.” “So all the more reason to find Sasaparene.”, I whispered back. “The last place they’d look for us is by her.” Lucas scratched his head. “That doesn’t make any sense. Even if it did, I wouldn’t have the slightest clue how to get to her. The layout of this Venice ripoff confuses and confounds me. The odds of us finding Sabarene are slim to none-“ “MISTER LUCAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAS!” a shrill voice cried out. The phony Sorcerer was suddenly slammed onto his back by a black and white blur. “Mister Lucas! Mister Lucas Mister Lucas Mister Lucaaaaaaaaaaaaas!” Sabarene shouted, pounding Blondie’s chest with her fists. “I searched all over, Mister Lucas! I searched the sewers, the catacombs, the pubs, the bars, the wineries, and the ale houses, but I couldn’t find you anywhere!” “Ain’t those last four the same thing?” “No, you imbecile, of course not. There’s a clear difference between pubs and bars and wineries and ale houses and... and...” the white haired girl paused, and slowly turned her head towards me. “Miss Axeman Red Fouuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuur!” she screamed, leaping off Lucas and tackling me to the ground. “I thought you were dead!” Sabarene sobbed, crying into my chest. “Gah! I’m fine, I’m fine!” I said, the weight of the red eyed girl’s head pressing up on some of my wounds. “And why you sobbing? Ain’t no need for you to be sobbing.” “I’m not crying because I want to! This is the second time you’ve gone and done this, imbecile!” Lucas patted himself off and got off the ground. “This isn’t the time to squeal like a schoolgirl, Sister. Patchy and I are still wanted for attempted murder.” The white haired girl puffed her cheeks. “No, not anymore you’re not. Brother Gino

searched around and managed to clear you two of all charges.” I raised an eyebrow. “Wait, why the heck would he go and do that?” “Because Marston is a jerk!”, a nasally voice whined. With heavy steps, Gino appeared, looking crestfallen. “I wanted a nice, fair, election, but he had to engage in that stupid cloak and dagger stuff!” A sudden rage burnt up in Gino’s brown eyes. “He’s MOCKING me! He knows I need him, but he wants to do things all sneakily because he doesn’t think I’m capable!” Gino shifted his legs nervously. “I’m capable, right?”, he asked me, sounding unsurea himself. “I mean, in a fight, I could probably take you, right? I was able to beat you up just fine before, wasn’t I?” I stared at the man with four metal limbs, and scratched my head. “Uh, I stucka hatchet in ya and you shrugged it off like nothing, I think yer fine on the whole fighting thing, champ.” “Yes.”, Gino scoffed, sounding arrogant alla sudden. “A crippled Unionist is no threat for the likes of me. So naturally, naturally, I suspected Marston was up to something when he said you tried to kill Supreme Sibling Desnion.” The orange haired man crossed his arms in front of his chest and smiled warmly. “After all, you two are nice people! You’re good people, you would never try to kill someone like Desnion!” I blinked. “Now why in the world would ya think me and Blondie are good people?” “You’re friends of the General, right? So you must be good people!” Lucas took off his tophat and started taking the various items he had stored outta em. “I don’t think you’re right on either of your assertions, but thanks for the help, I suppose. How did you manage to clear us, Brother Gino?” “Oh, it was simple enough.”, the orange haired man said, pointing at his noggin. “I found Supreme Sibling Desnion and asked if you two tried to kill him. He said “no.”” A bitta melancholy came over Gino. “It’s a shame, I was hoping for more of a challenge.” Gino’s eyes opened wide. “Wait!”, he shouted, causing

my ears to twitch violently. "It... it must be a set up! Supreme Sibling Desnion just told me what I wanted to hear! You two really did try to kill him!" The orange haired man winded up his arm, and rushed at Lucas. "Die, you murderers!" "Stop it, Gino.", Sabarene said, softly. The orange haired man stopped dead in his tracks. "I'm s-sorry.", he stuttered, then puffed out his chest. "I'm passionate.", the orange haired man explained, patting me on the shoulder with a heavy metal hand. "I'm a very passionate person." The white haired girl tiptoed inbetween me and the passionate psychopath. "Um... there's nothing wrong with being passionate, Gino, but you need to control your emotions better. Remember what Brother Brounde always said?" Hatred flared up in Gino's eyes. "Why would I listen to that traitor?!" "Remember what Brother Brounde always said?", Sabarene repeated, a bit more firmly. "Focus... he said I need to focus.", the orange haired man breathed in, coming to as much of a calm as he could. "Right, focus." He stared into Sabarene's eyes, slightly more sober. "As always, I appreciate your guidance, but I *will* defeat you in the next election, General. On my terms, not Marston's." He stared at me, and Lucas. "You two should be safe from the Patrician branch's clutches now, but I'd be watchful of any dark alleyways, and hesitant when offered free drinks." And with that, the metal limbed man walked away, limbs clinking as he headed down a dark canal. Lucas glared at Sabarene. "Why on earth would you appoint that guy as leader of an entire military branch?" "He was good at what he needed to be good at.", Sabarene answered, bluntly. "Despite his psychosis, Brother Gino is an extremely efficient tactician." Lucas frowned. "Really? I don't think that man could formulate a concrete plan to get dressed in the morning." "I said Gino was a good tactician, I never said he was a capable strategist.", the white haired girl snorted. I

rubbed my stump, and embraced the opportunity to forget about what had happened in the water tower. "Is there really a difference?", I asked, desperate for some white noise. "Of course there's a difference, imbecile.", Sabarene said, wiping the bottom of her nose with her index finger. "A tactic is a collection of actions to achieve a specific goal. Like, "take that hill from those Lancers", or "burn down that rural village." Doing either takes skill, bravery, and guile, all of which Gino has, more or less." She fiddled with her hood a bit. "One time he managed to deter an attack on a camp of injured siblings by hastily dressing up our deceased in spare battle regalia. He propped up their bodies with sticks and rope, and made our numbers seem two times bigger than they actually were." The black habit wearing girl tapped herself on the head. "But strategy is what caused him to defend the camp, to burn the livestock rich village to take the chokepoint of a hill in the first place." She smiled at me and winked, her red eyes gleaming. "In other words, strategy is the "why", and tactics are the "how." For some reason, my cheek muscles relaxed a bit, as Sabarene finished up her spiel. "Is that so.", I said, staring up at her with a faint smile. "Um... y-yes.", the white haired girl responded, blushing for some reason. "B-but I don't think we should just keep standing here out in the open. Quick, let's go back to the townhouse!", she mumbled all flustered-like, grabbing me and Lucas by the wrist and yanking us along with her. It didn't take us all that long to arrive back at the decrepit old manor. Sabarene bolted through the canals of Fremdos like a cat that had just been spayed with a rusty hatchet. Though I knew there was no danger, I felt a bit frightened, as we ran through the city. It was the shadows. Fremdos wasn't well lit at night. There were braziers at every corner, but those braziers caused shadows, which danced alongside the canals in an eerie, haunting



fashion. The shadows weren't amorphous, neither. They looked humanlike, with rigid outstretched arms, and straightened necks, and heads, and they eclipsed us wherever we went. But in the end, all they were were shadows.

"I understand that no one has lived here for a while, but are the flea bitten drapes really necessary?", Lucas asked, stepping into the ruined townhouse Marston had put us up in and flopping down on the same pink couch he did the last time. "I mean, we're about one embittered spinster short of a Dickens novel here." "Dickens?", I muttered, removing the flame throwing ruby from my chestplate and placing it on the table. "He some kinda Sorcerer or something?" "Sure was, if you consider the ability to put freshman in highschool to sleep a magical power." "Sleep... I probably could use some sleep right now.", I grumbled. "But I don't wanna risk it." Sabarene looked at me, slightly concerned. "Are... are you alright?" "I'm fine.", I lied. "It's just that every time I go ta sleep I end up naked or tied ta a bed, or plank, or something." "Oh. Um... I suppose your insomnia's for the best, then.", the white haired girl said, sounding nervous. Lucas narrowed his eyes. "How so?" "Ehehehe...", Sabarene laughed, in the way that folks who don't got nothing funny ta say laugh, "Remember, that whole election thingy? You know, our plan to not have Brother Gino be elected General in order to prevent a continent wide war?" "Cut to the chase, Sabarene.", Lucas said, not looking terribly amused. "Um... alright. Well... it's one rising period from now. As in, the next rising of the suns." "Jesus Christ, really?", Lucas complained. "How the hell did you let that happen?" "Supreme Sibling Desnion happened.", the white haired girl answered. "After learning of my, um, resurgence, as it were, and the drama between Marston and Gino, Desnion demanded that the elections be held immediately." "Then we're not going to

participate in them.” Lucas insisted, glaring at the white haired girl. “The election process has three ordeals we need to conquer, right?” “I w-wouldn’t call them ordeals, per se, but yes...”, Sabarene said. “As I mentioned before, the election begins with a battle of wits, then ends with a trial by combat and a speech by both of the candidates.” “Right. See, it’s that last one I’m worried about, Sister.”, Blondie said, pulling the brim of his hat over his eyes. “There’s no way on earth Patchy and I can fight, at least not in the condition we’re in-” “Speak fer yerself, Ruckus.”, I said, interrupting the tophat wearing boy. He glared at me, and shook his head. “Be reasonable Patchy. Even a lanky pile of skin and bone like Marston would mop the floor with you as you are now.” “I ain’t in as badda state as you think I’m in.”, I grunted, kicking off my boots. “Give me food, a bath, and decent metal armor, and I’ll be able to take Brother Marston no problem.” Sabarene cringed. “Um... that isn’t exactly correct-“ “Yeah yeah I know, his name ain’t actually *Brother* Marston, he’s yer brother, whose name happens ta be-.” “That’s not what I was going to say at all, imbecile.”, the white haired girl snapped, angry. “There’s been another change of plans. Brother Gino changed his representative for the trial by combat.” “So?”. I snorted. “I can beat up that blonde whipping girl just as easily as I could yer brother. Probably even easier if we work out that armor bit, a whip ain’t going do any good against me in full plate.” Sabarene winced. “Yes, well... about that. Sister Kundare isn’t Gino’s champion either.” “Then who is?” The red eyed girl grimaced. “Supreme Sibling Desnion’s retainer.” I winced. I hadn’t seen Sister Julia and Brother Christopher put their halberds ta that much use, but what I had seen made the prospect of fighting onea them a bit frightening. “Uh... alright.”, I said, swallowing a bitta spittle. “So who am I fighting? The girl, or the guy?” “Yes.”, Sabarene answered, gritting her

teeth together. "Yes.", I repeated, staring into Sabarene's face with a unamused glare..

"By that, I mean... Brother Gino's champion is... um, rather, *are* Brother Christopher and Sister Julia. Both of them." "Then, uh, who's gonna help me out?" Sabarene chomped down on her real index finger. "No one.", she squeaked. "Then I'll fight them.", Lucas said, taking out his revolver. "You can't.", Sabarene said, gazing down at the floor like a cat that had just been forced into a bath. "Desnion didn't allow me to switch around any of my retainers." "On the basis of WHAT?!", I yelled. "How the heck is that fair at all?" "Desnion said that, given that Marston is still technically the acting General of the Collective, he and Gino should be given an advantage to reflect that." "But that's bullshit!", I protested. "That's, like, clearly, clearly, CLEARLY a buncha bullshit!" "Yes, well, Supreme Sibling Desnion is known to be slightly corrupt.", Sabarene meeped. I collapsed my head into my hand, then smiled. "Aw, wait, the heck am I complaining about? We got all that magic crap, right, so all we gotta do is use Ruckus's Revolver or that crystal Bowman Yellow had." Sabarene opened her mouth to respond. "Nooooooo, Miss Axeman Red Four, we caaaaaaaaan't do that!", Lucas said in a falsetto. "Supreme Sibling Desnion ALSO said that the weapons used would be regulated and apply to all combatants." The blonde boy stared flatly at Sabarene. "Or something like that, right?" "R-right...", Sabarene stuttered, sounding defeated. "Then sorry, we're not going to win the trial by combat. We'll have to just hope your speaking skills and my uncanny intelligence are enough, Sister." I stared at one of the manor's ruined walls. "Speak... speak for yourself, Ruckus.", I said, hesitantly. Lucas stared at me with a mix of anger and concern. "No, you're not going to fight, that's suicide. Even if you magically grew your arm back you'd be dead meat." "S-shut it.", I stuttered, then turned to

Sabarene. "Look...look lets put this while talk of elections and combat ta the side, fer justa moment. I wanna get some fresh air." "We were outside just a few moments ago, though..." Sabarene said, confused. "I wanna get some *more* fresh air, alright?", I said, harshly. "I'll grab my coat.", Lucas said, starting ta get up from the couch. "No, you stay there. This is, uh... uh..." I snapped my fingers fera bit, trying ta think of an excuse. "Girl talk. Discussion between girls, and stuff." Lucas stared at me with narrowed eyes. "Girl talk.", he repeated. "Ijustsaidthatthere'snoneedtarepeat," I quickly yammered, then, without much dignity or grace, grabbed Sabarene by the wrist and hurtled outta the manor and into the cold night. "W-wait!", the white haired girl gasped. "Where are we going? Why did you leave Mister Lucas behind?" I didn't respond. I wasn't heading anywhere in particular, instead I was searching for a place where no one could see us, or hear us. I settled onna alleyway about five blocks away from the decrepit townhouse that Marston had put us up in. The alleyway wasn't next ta any canal, and the buildings which surrounded it looked rundown, and uninhabited. It wasn't too well lit, and the acoustics, at least judging from the sound of our steps, didn't seem terribly capable of projecting any sound. Sabarene put down her hood and looked around the alleyway. "Um... what did you want to talk to me about, Miss Axeman Red Fou- ah!" I twisted around and grabbed the white haired girl by the throat. "Shut it.", I growled, mustering up as much malice as I could manage. "You ain't gonna say a goddamn thing unless I ask ya to, got it?" Sabarene suddenly started to blush a whole bunch, which was weird. "Okay...", she breathed out, huskily. "I got you, I got you... what do you want to know?" I wavereda bit at Sabarene's apparent struggle ta breathe properly, but tightened my grip on her neck. "Yer going ta tell me...-" "If I'm wearing anything underneath the habit?"

the white haired girl cooed. "Because the answer is no~" I angrily slammed Sabarene against a wall. "Yer going ta tell me who it was that had all those folk puts up on those crosses." "Oh, that.", Sabarene pouted, sounding disappointed. She grabbed my wrist with her metal hand and removed my fingers from her neck without exerting herself much at all. "I was hoping you wouldn't find out about that." "Was it you?", I choked out, my voice shaking more than I had intended it ta. "Was it you, that done it? Did you have all them folks killed?" The red eyed girl stared me in the eye and frowned. "Of course I didn't.", she breathed out, sounding offended. "I've... I've done terrible things, but I would never do something like *that*." "Then... then who did it?" Sabarene flinched. "I... um, Miss Axeman Red Four, I'm not so sure I should tell you, it might-" "Who did it?", I asked again, my vision going blurry. "...Marston.", she answered, reluctantly. "His Patrician corps got into the city before me, Brother Gino, and the Plebian corps could, and they-" "I know.", I said. "They got here aheada you, and... and started stringing people up on... up on those...." I couldn't finish the sentence, the very thoughta it made me sick ta my stomach. The red eyed girl tilted her head at me. "Wait, if you knew about that, then why did you even ask me about it in the first place?" "Cause I'ma... cause I'ma scumbag.", I choked out, then fell onta my knees, the alleyway spinning "I... I didn't believe in ya, Sister. I didn't trust you. I thought... I thought that since you've been so kind to me... that you were working an angle." "Wait, you don't trust me because I've been *nice* to you?", Sabarene said, sounding confused. "It's... it must sound stupid, specially ta someone learned like you, but... but I ain't ever hada free meal before. Everything... everything hada price to it. I mean, with the exceptiona Blue, if someone smiled at me, if someone talked ta me and joked around with me, it was cause... it was

cause they wanted something, or that they were using me inna way, or something.” I felt a bitta wetness well up in my eye, but resisted the urge ta bawl. “And... and ya know what, I treated folks the same way. I used em, abused em, and viewed em as nothing more than obstacles and objects. The world was wrong, I thought. Ta me, the world was a messed up place where the only way ta win was ta be as brutal and efficient as possible.” I tried clearing my throat. “But... but these past few rising periods, with you, with Ruckus... I’m starting ta think... maybe it ain’t the world that’s the problem. Maybe... maybe it’s me.” Sabarene slapped me across the cheek with her real hand. “Don’t be absurd, Miss Axeman Red Four. Of *course* it’s you that’s the problem.”, she scoffed. “You’re a self-centered bully with nearly as bad a temper as Brother Gino.” “I... I know.”, I said, head down. “I... I don’t gotta right ta-“ “Exist? To live?”, Sabarene guessed. “Because that’s not right either. You may be part of the problem, but you’re nowhere near as much of the problem now as you were when I first met you.” “How... how the heck do ya figure that?”, I breathed out. “I just throttled yer throat with my hand.” “Yes, but your heart was in the right place about it.”, Sabarene said. “Although I wish you’d have been a bit more forceful, my neck isn’t even bruised.” I raised an eyebrow. “What?” “Oh, nothing, nothing!”, she said, raising her hands in front of her chest defensively. “The point is, the fact that you’re finally questioning yourself is enough, for now.” I rubbed my stump. “Do... do ya honestly believe what that? That me being aware that I’m a scumbag is enough? Cause... cause I don’t agree with ya. Me knowing that I’m a scumbag doesn’t change the fact that I’m a scumbag. I... I can have as many spiritual journeys as I want, refine my identity in as many ways as I see fit, in the end.... In the end it’s my actions that determine who I am, not my attitude.

And... and by all accounts I haven't done much ta-" Sabarene slapped me across the face again, this time with her metal hand. "I don't care.", the white haired girl said, smiling at me. "You matter to me, Miss Axeman Red Four. And as much as I'd love for you to become a better person, at the end of it all, I don't really care. My morals, my principles, my standards, my preferences... I'll bend them to accommodate you." She wrapped her arms around my torso, and pulled me towards her chest. "I'll bend them every time. So please... believe in yourself. Because... because even if you won't, I will. No matter what." I winced, and closed my eye. "Why, though?", I whimpered. "I... I don't deserve it." Sabarene cupped my chin with her metal hand, and tilted my head up ta look at her. "Deserve doesn't have anything to do with it.", she said, stroking my cheek with her real hand. "Guh... guh...", I grunted, trying not ta cry. "It's ok to cry.", the red eyed girl whispered, gently rubbing my back. But I didn't cry. Instead, I wrapped my arm around Sabarene's back, and pulled her in close. And fer some reason, as the two of us stood there, arms draped awkwardly around each other... all the sadness, the doubt, the shame... fer some reason, that all faded away. "Alright.", I muttered, after a long moment of silence. "Alright, let's go back." "I don't want to.", Sabarene pouted, tightening her grip on me. "No, we gotta.", I whispered, wiggling outta her embrace. "Why?" "We need to find me some armor anda helmet anda weapon." "W-what?" "You heard me.", I said. "If I'm gonna fight Sister Christopher and Brother Julia, then I'm going to need some degree of protection." "Why... why the sudden change of heart?", Sabarene asked, looking befuddled. "There ain't no changea heart. I told ya this way back in Provesh; I'm gonna try and becomea decent sort. And ruining yer brother's plot is as good a way ta become a decent sort as anything else." "Are... are you sure you're

willing to fight?" "Of course I ain't sure. I'm terrified at the thought. But I can't just keep angsting and promising myself that I'll get better. No... this is a chance, fer me not ta be a person that ruins things fer everyone." Sabarene glanced at me skeptically. "I'm... I'm glad to see that you've gained some resolve, but Mister Lucas was right. How on earth do you think you'll be able to beat Sister Julia and Brother Christopher?" "Frankly, I don't gotta clue. But I gotta try." I licked my lips. "So how does this trial by combat process work? First person ta die loses?" "It's not to the death.", Sabarene said, then frowned. "Although... although it can be. The fight doesn't end until the official of the trial declares a winner, and, um, as it might happen, the official for this duel is..." "Supreme Sibling Whateverhisface, huh?" "Y-yes.", Sabarene sighed. I half-smiled. "I reckon he wasn't kidding when he called himself corrupt, then. But it don't matter. So long as he ain't planning ta enter the bout himself, he ain't gonna be able to stop me." "Are... are you sure, Miss Axeman Red Four?", Sabarene inquired, her teeth chattering. "Of course I'm sure.", I lied. "So long as you get me some quality armor, that trial by combat's as good as yers, Sister." Sabarene smiled. "I know a blacksmith five blocks from here. He's asleep, I'm sure, but I'm also sure he'll make an exception for me." "No need for that, Sister.", a cheery voice chimed. "Remember lesson five hundred and forty two?" The white haired girl's face went from serene ta sour in two seconds flat. "No, I don't, Mister Lucas.", she said, flatly. "Well, you should.", the blonde haired Sorcerer said, walking into the alleyway and bopping Sabarene on her nose. "Always pick style over substance." The white haired girl smiled, though the veins above her left eye started to twitch. "Why are you here, Mister Lucas?" Blondie rubbed the back of his head. "Uh... To be honest... I was worried." "About Miss Axeman Red Four?",



Sabarene asked, still annoyed for some reason. "No, I was worried about *you*. I thought Patchy was going to try to strangle you or something." He looked at us and shrugged his shoulders. "But I suppose my fears were unfounded. I don't see a single bruise on your neck." "Only because she didn't try hard enough.", Sabarene muttered, bitter.

"What did you just say?" "Nothing, nothing!", the red eyed girl squeaked, then quickly changed the subject. "So what's up, Mister Lucas?" "I found some armor for little miss lacks a limb.", he said, soberly. "You... you did?!", Sabarene gasped. "Where?" "In the manor, of course.", Blondie said, smirking. "I found it a while ago, back when you and Patchy were off on your day trip." "Then why didn't ya say anything about it?" "There were more pressing matters to attend to.", Lucas explained, looking out towards the sea. "And to be honest, I don't like the idea of sending a crippled elf into a lopsided battle." "Tough, Blondie. I'm gonna fight." "I know, Four.", he said, tossing a pebble on top of the waves. "You wouldn't be you if you didn't fight." The blue eyed boy smiled, and for once, there wasn't a hint of sarcasm, flamboyance, or self-loathing present on his face. "But if you get yourself killed, I won't ever be able to forgive you." "Don't worry about forgiving me.", I said, firmly. "Worry about winning yer event, Blondie." "You mean the battle of wits?", Lucas asked, an ounce of smugness contaminating his pure smile. "I've no need to worry about that. I'm quite clever." I walked up to Lucas, and flicked him on the ear. "Ack!" "No, ya *think* yer clever. You ain't actually all that bright." "Per... perhaps..." he said, clutching the brim of his big purple hat defensively." I grabbed him by the shoulder and smiled. "But thinking yer clever is enough to pass as clever, and that's enough, sometimes." Lucas's face became red, for some reason, but he put his hands on his hips and smiled confidently again. "I'm far more than just a faker, Patchy.

I'm the finest faker the world has ever seen." "Then let's just go ahead and do this, then!", Sabarene yelled, pumping her fist in the air. "We might be fakers, but we're fakers who believe in justice! And come tomorrow, we're going to-" I covered the white haired girl's mouth with my hand. "Don't jinx it by making predictions, Santearene. We'll do what we gotta do, and we'll do it well." A sudden wetness covered my palm, causing me to recoil my hand away. "There's no such thing as jinxes, Miss Axeman Red Four!", Sabarene damn near shouted. "We make our own fate, for better or worse!" "Didya really need to lick my palm?" "Life isn't about needing, it's about wanting!", the girl in black insisted, her saliva dripping off my hand. "And right now, I want to win! And I want you, Mister Lucas, and you, Miss Axeman Red Four, to help me win! And I want you to want me to want you to help me win, too!" "Uh, Sister, are you feeling alright?" "I'm feeling great, Mister Lucas! Nothing can bother me now, not Marston, not Desnion, nothing! Nothing except Miss Axeman Red Four mispronouncing my name again, because the next time she does that I'll punch her in the tits!" "You'll... you'll what?" "I believe in us!", Sabarene said, continuing with her shtick. "I believe in you, Mister Lucas, and you, Miss Axeman Red Four, and the people of the Collective, and I also believe in the power of believing!" I and grabbed the excited almost-albino by her hood. "Well, enough gabbing about it. Let's go back to the manor and find that armor. Time to put our complete lack of money where our mouth is." And, we did, sorta, well, we got to the manor just fine. Wasn't much of a walk, after all, and it's not like the armor Lucas found would just disappear in the five minutes or so he had spent outside the dilapidated townhouse. "Alright, alright, just follow me, and I'll show you where I found the armor.", Lucas assured us, opening the door of the ruined townhouse and strolling swiftly

inside. He led us past the foyer fulla old moth bitten furniture and swiss cheese patterned drapes, to a set of rickity wooden stairs which led down about teen feet or so ta what looked ta bea basement, though the lighting was so poor that I couldn't particularly tell. I bit my bottom lip at the lacka a bannister ta grab onta. Perhaps he sensed my apprehension, cause instead a going down the stairs, Lucas extended his hand out ta me. My face warm fer some some reason, I accepted it, and slowly, carefully, made my way down the seta stai-. "W-wait up, guys!", Sabarene cried, barreling inta us from behind. "Gah!", I groaned. "Christ!", Lucas sputtered. "OH FUCK!", Sabarene screamed. The threea us tumbled down the stairs, the wooden steps smacking us in the face about five separate times in five uniquely angled ways. "Gah... goddang it." I babbled, a bit dizzy. "I fricking hate stairs. I hate em so much." "I'm... I'm sorry about that, guys.", the white haired girl apologized. "I got kind of caught up in the moment." "Hmph, no matter, everything's fine.", Lucas said, getting ta his feet and dusting himself off. He reached towards his head. "My... my hat!", the blonde boy yelled out, panicked. "Where the hell is my hat?!" "It's right here, Mister Lucas!", Sabarene chirped, clasping the brim of Lucas' silk hat with her clunky metal hand. "I caught it when it fell off your head." "Oh thank god.", Lucas sighed with relief. "Um... you're bleeding from your scalp, Mister Lucas." "Don't sweat the small stuff, Sister.", he said, placing his hat on topa his mop. The blonde boy in black leather armor brushed himself off and got onta his feet. "And if you'll look to your left, you'll see the armor I mentioned." "Uh, Ruckus, this basement's completely dark." "Hmph.", Lucas scoffed, taking out his glass rectangle. "This all encompassing darkness is no match for a Sorcerer of my caliber! I merely have to cast a spell of illumination, and then-" He pressed down on his

glass rectangle; but nothing happened. “And then... huh. Whoops. I think my iphone’s out of charge, guys.” “His what?”, Sabarene asked me, confused. “I ain’t gotta clue, Santrparene-gah!”, I yelped, feeling a sharp pain in my chest. “There’s no need to fear!”, Lucas said confidently. “My phone’s battery life might be completely depleted, but with this handcrank, it should only take about five hours or so before we have some light in this room.” “There’s no need for that.”, Sabarene said, removing her metal fist from my chest. The white haired girl unfurled her black hand, and pushed down on her thumb. A little flame came outta it. Lucas and I glared at her. “What?”, she asked, innocently. “I like crème brûlée.” She turned to me with an authoritative stare. “Fetch me a piece of wood, Unionist.” With a grunt, I ripped off the bottom most step from the rickety wooden stairwell. “Here ya go, Fiatist.”, I said, bowing. Sabarene pulled up her hood, and set the pried up step on fire. The basement was steadily illuminated, as the makeshift torch burnt. And what I saw was... a whole buncha crap. Not actual crap, mind ya. No, I mean crap in the sense of clutter. But it wasn’t the normal typea clutter; the basement wasn’t littered with litter, it was littered with weapons. All typesa weapons, there were rapiers, daggers, claymores, shortswords, longswords, broadswords, thin swords, pleasantly plump swords, lances, bows, arrows, crossbows, bolts, scimitars, machetes, halberds, it woulda been a wet dream if not for the fact that all the weapons were rusted and dull, and thus, completely useless. “I, uh, I hope the armor ya found ain’t as rusted as this crap, Ruckus.” “It’s not crap!”, Sabarene protested. “These weapons are hundreds of cycles old!” “So they’re crap.”, I stated. “No! These weapons were used by the founding members of the Collective, when they liberated themselves from the burdens of the oppressive Independent Kingdoms. Their value is symbolic.” She picked up a rusty little

knife, with a broken handle. "This dagger alone would go for five thousand marks, maybe even more." "Ah, I get ya. So whoever was storing these weapons was keeping em as de facto rainy day money. Ain't such a bad idea, I reckon, especially considering y'all have that ban on metal and what haveya." "That's not it either, imbecile!" I ignored Sabarene's protests and glanced around the room, looking for the armor Ruckus had promised. It took me all a two seconds ta spot it. "No. No, ya gotta be kidding me." Sitting in the lefthand corner of the basement, behind a glass display case, was a set of solid black armor. Covered in spikes. Oh, and when I say covered in spikes, I don't mean that the pauldrons were spikey, I mean that the entire surface of the armor, from the armguards, ta the chestpiece, ta the pants, ta the helm, ta the boots, had short, sharp, spikes sticking out of it. Y'know, like a hedgehog, except much more stupid. I saunted up ta the glass case, and tried sliding it open. It didn't budge. I picked up a rusted broadsword and slammed it into the case. The glass stopped being a issue. "Huh.", I grumbled ta myself, fingering the armor. I couldn't see it too well, but the texture told me two things about the platemail Blondie had discovered. One, that the spikes weren't there just ta make the armor look retarded, they were actually there ta cut the fingers of whatever idiot was dumb enough ta grope em, and two, that the material the armor was made outta was some sturdy stuff. "Woah.", I said, my thumb bleeding slightly. "What the heck is this made outta?" "Life metal, of course.", Sabarene said, glancing at the oppressive looking suit of armor with a melancholy expression. "Wait, then that means-" "That this armor belongs to me, yes.", the white haired girl said, softly. She approached the somewhat intimidating, but mostly very stupid looking set of black platemail, and stroked it with her metal hand. "When I was drafted into the Plebian

branch, they put me into logistics. My... my job was to write up plans, proofs, strategies, you know... figure out how to cutoff the enemy's supply lines, how to distribute troops properly along choke points, that sort of thing. And... well, obviously, I was pretty good at it. I mean, my plans were nothing to write home about, but they consistently solved the problem presented, if not in the most ideal manner." "Good fer you I guess, but what does that havta do with this abortion offa chestguard?" "Um... I... I never was a good talker. I would... um, I would often... pause... when I spoke, and people tended to cut me off before I could finish my senten-." "Oh yeah.", I said, shaking my head. "So when ya went ta get elected ya wore a big seta spikey armor and stayed all quiet like while yer brother pontificated for ya. I guess that makes sense." "What? It makes absolutely no sense, Patchy.", Lucas quipped, staring at Sabarene. "Even ignoring the obvious issues little miss lacks melanin here would have running as a mute, the odds of her getting elected without any credentials are slim to none." "I did have credentials, Mister Lucas. I just told you about how I worked on strategy with the Plebian corps." "But no one *actually knew that*.", Lucas countered, his blue eyes icy. "When your brother unveiled that retardly gigantic statue of you in the square, he said that no one knew the identity of the General." "That's not exactly true.", Sabarene said, twiddling her fingers. "People did know the identity of the General. It's just that it was an identity Marston and I made them know." Lucas scratched his head. "So you lied?" "No, no, we didn't lie, we were just... excessively vague." "So you lied." "No, I never lie.", Sabarene lied, drumming her metal fingers nervously on the stupid spikey armor's pauldron. "Tell me, Mister Lucas, when you look at this armor, what do you see?" "Something a clichéd JRPG villain would wear." "What?" "Oh, you know the type Sister, the whole evil

overlord schtick. Dark, brooding, prone to antagonizing teenagers with spikey hair. No weaknesses except for the power of love, but only at the end of the game.” Lucas, uh, “clarified.” “Um... ok.”, Sabarene said, rubbing the back of her hood. “And what do you see when you look at this, Miss Axeman Red Four?” “I see fantastic quality armor ruined by a toddler’s sense of aesthetics.” “And what type of person do you think would wear this armor?” “A degenerate sexual deviant.” I muttered. The white haired girl pressed her black metal index fingers against my mouth. “You’re correct~”, she hummed, circling her cold finger around my lips. “W-what-”, I meeped. “I said you’re correct.”, Sabarene whispered, leaning her face in towards mine. “I *am* a degenerate sexual deviant.” “G-gah!”, I coughed, tripping over a discarded rusted lance. “I’m also an evil overlord, a brilliant artist, a stern but fair father figure, a progressive revolutionary, and a compassionate conservative.” Sabarene folded her arms and smiled a tad smugly. “When I wear this armor, I can be anything, and everything.” Lucas rolled his eyes. “I take it you mean that in a figurative sense, Sister.” “Exactly, Mister Lucas. With this armor on, I’m however people choose to perceive me. People look at me, in this armor, and see what they want to see. The elderly see someone willing to defend tradition, the young see a maverick capable of transcending social norms. The hawks see a fighter, the doves a peace-maker. Wearing this, I was able to-“ “Appeal to both sides of the aisle?”, Lucas guessed. “Yeah, maybe. I think *play* both sides of the aisle would be a more appropriate way of putting it.” “Ehehe... well, I suppose you’re right, Mister Lucas. When he spoke for me, Marston picked his words carefully.” “He seems to do that when he speaks for himself, too.”, Blondie sighed. “Yes, well, Marston...”, Sabarene began, a dull look in her eyes, “Marston always was...

excessively clever.” I pushed myself up off the floor, and grabbed the spikey helmet.

“He’s gonna need more than cleverness tomorrow.” I pushed the helmet down onto my head. It fit me just fine, all things considered. The spikey metal helmet was a bit tight, but better tight than loose. I could move it around without too much trouble, and my neck muscles were more than able to support its weight. I guess the only complaint I had was that the eyeslot of the helmet was too narrow. I could see left and I could see right just fine, but up and down wasn’t all too clear. Or in other words, it was like seeing the world in widescreen, if ya cut off the right side of the screen and putta eyepatch over it.

“Alright.”, I breathed out, my voice muffled slightly by the helmet. “How do I look?”

Sabarene and Lucas both stared at me for a while. “Ridiculous, yet at the same time, terrifying.” Lucas commented, cupping his chin. “Aw, you look like a puppy who got her head stuck in a bucket!”, Sabarene cooed. “Izzat so.”, I said, my voice echoing, some.

“Alright, then. One of ya go and find something big, blunt, and heavy.” “Whatever for?”, Lucas asked, apprehension in his voice. “Just go and do it, alright?” The boy with the purple top hat looked hesitant, but began ruffling through some piles of litter anyways.

“Will this do?”, he said, holding up a detached plank of wood. “No. Go for something made outta metal, Ruckus.” “Alright, how about this?”, he said, holding up a big, rusty flail. “Yeah, that’ll work. Go and hit me over the head with it.” “W-what?!” , Lucas spat. “I gotta find out if this helmet can protect me worth a damn. Go and give my head a big ole wack.” “Absolutely not, Patchy!” “Fine, you do it, Sister.” “N-no, there’s better ways to go about this, and I wouldn’t feel comfortable-.” I grinned beneath the helmet. “Aw, what, ya afraid, Sister Sabarene?” The white haired girl ripped the flail outta Blondie’s hand and swung it across my face. “It’s Sabarene.”, she hissed, bitter, then covered her



face, alarmed. "Oh- oh no! Miss Axeman Red Four, are you-" "I'm fine.", I said, my ears ringing some. "You're fine.", Lucas said, flatly. "You got smashed in the head with a flail, and you're fine." "Alright, by fine, I mean I don't reckon I've suffered a concussion. My ears are ringing some, and imma bit dazed, but I ain't as shook up as I should be." I turned my head ta Sabarene. "Now hit me in the face without holding back." "I, um, I didn't hold back." "Bull. I wasn't even knocked onto the ground or nothing." "That's because..." "Yer arm's a twig?" "N-no...", Sabarene stuttered, looking at her left bicep with a bitta shame. "No, it's because the helmet you're wearing is designed to negate the force of any blow that hits it. Upon being struck, the lifemetal expands, and distributes the impact to the rest of the helmet." "Huh, nifty.", I muttered. I grabbed the left eyeslit of the helmet, and pulled it off my head. "Alright, the helmet's fine, at least. Now I need you two to help me put on the rest of the armor." "Isn't it a bit early for that, Patchy?", Lucas said, looking at the rest of the black spikey armor with apprehension. "I don't imagine you'll be able to get much of a rest wearing this." I nodded my head. "Ya misunderstand. I'm just gonna put this on ta see if I can move around in it." "That's... that's not such a good idea, Miss Axeman Red Four.", Sabarene squeaked. "Course it's a good idea, I gotta get used ta wearing this armor if I've any chance at using it well." "You'll be good at wearing the armor.", the white haired girl assured me. "Look, I appreciate the support, but I won't know unless I wear-" "I'm not encouraging you.", Sabarene barked, darkly. "It's an objective fact that you'll be able to wear this armor just fine. Anyone could." "What, so it's user-friendly?" The red eyed girl winced. "Not... not exactly, no. It's actually... somewhat dangerous to wear." "How dangerous?" "Significantly.", she said, then waved her hands about. "But only if you wear it for long durations! If you wear it

during a skirmish, you should be fine!” “Should be isn’t will be.”, Lucas cut in. “If this armor is dangerous to wear...” “It must be pretty darn powerful, or something, right?”, I guessed. “Y-yes, it is, Miss Axeman Red Four, but...” “Then I’ll wear it.”, I cut in. “It might be dangerous, but what would be even more dangerous would be going into a fight against two halberd wielding weirdos without taking advantage of all the tools at my disposal.” Lucas opened his mouth to voice an objection, but shrugged his shoulders. “Fine.”, he said, sounding resigned. “But the moment things start to go south, and you feel like you’re in danger, you better give up.” “Ain’t gonna.”, I snorted. Lucas clasped his hands together. “Please!”, he begged. “Please, if you feel like you won’t be able to win, if you feel like you can’t continue on, then don’t! Throw your life away if you must, but don’t do so pointlessly!” Lucas stared at with me with watery blue eyes. His gaze was firm, and intense, but his body, and his hands convulsed. “Shucks, Ruckus, are you alright?” “No! No, of course I’m not alright!”, he cried out, his voice cracking. “And I won’t be alright, until you promise me that you won’t needlessly risk your life!” I bit my bottom lip. “F-fine, Blondie.”, I stuttered. “I promise ya I won’t take any undue risk.” “Please don’t.”, he said, softly. “I... I can’t bear losing you, not again.” “Again?”, Sabarene inquired, looking puzzled. “Uh-“. Lucas blathered, caught off guard. “Uh... I just said that, Sister! There’s, uh, no need to repeat it!” The red eyed girl didn’t back down. “What did you mean by “again”, Mister Lucas?” The blue eyed boy looked up at the ceiling and twiddled his fingers. “N-nothing in particular.”, he said, his voice shaking some. His eyes darted around the room, then settled on the black leather armor he was wearing. “O-oh! Oh, yeah, see, back in the water tower, we got separated. I was naked, at the time, so it was quite the hassle.” He folded his arms and flared his nostrils. “In the future, I would

prefer not to be left alone when there's danger about, Patchy. I'm very delicate." "No.", Sabarene said, her voice low. "That's not it at all, is it Mister Lucas?" "Of course it is.", he snorted. "Sorcerers are like glass figurines. Beautiful, valuable, but fragile. We should be treasured and protected, not left alone to be shattered." "If that's the case, then why did you want to fight in place of Miss Axeman Red Four?" Lucas's face froze up. "Heat... heat of the moment.", he breathed out, flimsily. Frowning, Sabarene grabbed him by the wrist, and pulled him towards the stairs of the basement. "Excuse me, Miss Axeman Red Four. Mister Lucas and I are going to have a talk." She paused. "In private." Before I could even react, the dainty lady in the black habit dragged the blonde Sorcerer up the stairs, an unpleasant looking scowl on her face. Instinctively, I began ta follow them, then stopped. Oh, I didn't stop outta respect fer their privacy or nothing. No, I stopped cause... cause my back began ta hurt, some. Then my ribs ached, then my arm, then my stump arm. The cuts on my back started stinging, and the wound Swordarm Red One had inflicted on my shoulder began to burn. "G-gah.", I barely managed to breath out, and collapsed onto the ground. I shouldn't have been surprised. When you're in danger, your body pumps ya fulla adrenaline, letting ya ignore a whole buncha pain, and in some circumstances, enabling ya ta pull off super-human feats of strength. But it's just a kick. It's a burst, and when it's gone; it's gone, and you're done, you're drained. Limitations exist on our bodies for a reason, and while we can surpass those limitations, doing so certainly ain't conducive towards our health. "Guh...", I moaned. My body didn't hurt so much as it ached. I just felt sore, all over. Lying on the ground wasn't comfortable, but it was all I could do, the energy to do anything else just wasn't there. And it was then, at that moment, in the cellar of a rickity

old townhouse, inna picturesque sunlight city littered with crosses and inhabited by slaves, that I realized: there was no way in hell I would be capable of changing anything. “If... if I play fair, at least.”, I groaned, babbling ta no one in particular. With a dubious resolve, I placed the flat of my hand against the cool, cluttered ground, and pushed myself up. I was shocked that I was even able to do that much, but like a wave, the pain and soreness receded, only to come back stronger an instant later. “A-ah!”, I shrieked, losing my balance. I collapsed onto the table I had rested the helmet on. “Hah... hah...”, I panted, drained. I glanced around the room. There was so much random crap in the basement, so many old relics, weapons, and rusted armor, but none of it was any use to me, none of it would give me even the slightest chance of winning a dual duel against Brother Christopher and Sister Julia. The table I was resting on started ta creak. “Oh fer frick’s sak-“ The table supporting my bulky body snapped into two. The spikey helmet brushed across my left cheek, creating a nasty gash. “N-no..”, I whimpered, my stomach starting to curl. I don’t know why that of all things made me upset. The gash hurt like heck, but it was nothing major, there wasn’t that much blood coming out of it, a bitta linen cloth would fix it, mostly. There’d be a scar, but what kinda idiot would get upset over a scar? “Ugh... ahhhhhh!”, I sobbed, catching my face reflected inna bitta broken glass. The door that led down ta the basement creaked open immediately. “Miss Axeman Red Four? Are you alright?” I bit my bottom lip. “I’m fine!”, I called up. “Just fell down, is all.” “Um, are you sure?” “I’m fine, so leave me along alright?!.”, I angrily barked. The concerned sounding voice let out a sigh. “If... if you say so, Miss Axemen Red Fou- ACK!” A shattering sound echoed above me. “I called time out, you imbecile!” “You most certainly did not.”, a furious voiced responded. “That...

that's besides the point! I think Miss Axeman Red Four fell down and hurt herself." "O-oh.", the furious voice stuttered, simmering down considerably. "Are you ok, Patchy? Be honest now, don't put on that whole stoic front like you usually d-AH!" The sound of a crash bellowed above me. "You two faced harlot!" A sudden cacophony of thuds, crashes, and clashes started to ring out on the floor above me. For some reason, I didn't feel so bad anymore. I don't know how, but I was suddenly able to stand up, and this time, I remained standing. And that's when I saw it: precisely what I needed to defeat Brother Christopher and Sister Julia in combat. In the corner of the basement there was a sword. A brilliant, shining sword, with a golden hilt, embedded with glowing runes. I flung it to the side and grabbed the empty glass bottle behind it. The glass bottle was about the size of a flask. The glass was semi-transparent; if ya looked at the bottle you could probably tell if it was filled with something or not, but discerning just what that "something" was would be much more tricky. As I turned the bottle over in my hand, another shattering sound rang out from above. I ignored it, along with the rough sounding cracking noise that echoed immediately after. I had a plan, and I needed much more than an empty bottle to pull it off. I gazed around the basement some more. There was tons of weapons, and arrows, and crossbow bolts, but they were all rusted and frayed. I grabbed the makeshift torch, and waved it around the room, in a desperate attempt to find something else of value. I couldn't see much of anything on the walls, they were covered with a sickly green moss. I set the torch down, and tried to brush some of the moss away. No such luck. The moss was sticky, and turned to a green paste the moment my fingers rubbed against it. The paste acted like paint, and colored the tips of my fingers a bright green. Irritated, I began scratching the moss off my five

digits, then paused. The color of my finger tips was almost the same as my hair. I had always hated my hair. Grass green just ain't the type of color that goes unnoticed, especially inna snowy city like Provesh. In the light of a torch, or a brazier, grass green hair will stick out like a sore thumb. And when part of how you make a living is not being noticed, having yer hair stick out like a sore thumb just ain't productive. But it was precisely because the moss in the basement stood out, that I scooped up a handful of it, and clumped it into a little leather pouch I found lying near the spikey helmet. I almost had everything I needed, which was pretty good, cause I heard a pained shriek cry out from above. Time being of the essence, I quickly scanned the cellar one last time. All I could find was a roll of linen cloth, which, while pretty much useless fer what I had in mind, seemed like it would be fairly pertinent ta the gash on my cheek. I ripped off some cloth from the roll with my teeth, and pressed it against the gash. Then, without waiting another moment, I sprinted up the cellar stairs, being sure ta compensate fer the step I had ripped off of the staircase. I thrust the door open. "Are y'all alright?!", I cried out, only to find... they weren't. At all. No, the scene I saw at the middle level of the townhouse was as grisly as it was retarded. Every bit of furniture, from the flea bitten couch, to the fettered pink chair, to the rickity old table, was overturned and broken. The five dusty vases, once the saving grace of the ruined townhouse, lay on the floor, shattered into hundredsa pieces. And sitting cross-legged in the middle of all that destruction, sipping at glasses fulla... something, were Lucas and Sabarene. Lucas didn't look so hot. His right cheek swelled up, and his leather armor was ripped, to the point where his left shoulder was exposed, and swollen a bright red. Sabarene looked no better. Her right eye was swollen black and blue, and bits of shattered pottery were

strewn all about in her white hair. "Oh! Miss Axeman Red Four!", she said, cheerily. "Mister Lucas and I are enjoying some wine, would you care to join us?" "W-what the heck happened?!", I cried out, panicking. "Are... are y'all alright? Were you attacked by assassins or something?" "Don't be so melodramatic, Patchy.", Lucas chimed, nonchalantly wiping a bit of blood from his lips. "Sabarene and I were just having a pleasant discussion." "Yer bleeding out of yer face." "By fiat, you're right Miss Axeman Red Four!", Sabarene gasped, covering her mouth in shock. "I guess that must have happened when you fell, Mister Lucas!" "He what-" "It was the strangest thing!", the white hair girl exclaimed. "Mister Lucas and I were having a nice, spirited discussion, when suddenly his forehead fell onto that lovely wooden centerpiece three consecutive times!" "So what happened to your eye?" "Oh, that's simple.", Sabarene said with a wave of her metal hand. "When I bent over to help Mister Lucas up, I tripped and crashed into his fist." "You sliiiiiiiiiid into my fist.", Lucas corrected her. Sabarene shook her head sagely. "Right, right, I *slid* into Mister Lucas's fist. Oh, and then a bunch of pots tipped over and shattered on the back of our heads three or four times." I briefly stopped pressing the cloth against my cheek. "And botha ya feel fine? Nonea ya havea concussion or nothing?" "We're great, Miss Axeman Red Four!" "Ya... ya sure? Positive that ain't just the brain damage talking?" "We're fineeeeeeeee.", Lucas slushed, taking a small sip of wine from his glass. "There was a little bit of turbulence," the blonde admitted while tilting his hand from side ta side, "-but Sister Sabarene and I have come to, one of those, uh, mutual, mutual sharing of knowledge thingies, a, uh,..." "An understanding!", the white haired girl boasted, her non-swollen eye sparkling. She chugged down her entire glass of wine, and began refilling it. "Oh, sure, we might have

had a minor disagreement or two, but that's water under the bridge." She held up her glass and raised it towards Blondie. "To our understanding, Mister Lucas." The boy in the tophat smiled. "To our understandingses." He clinked his glass against Sabarene's, and took another small sip. "Wait, wait, hold onna tick here!", I sputtered. "What the heck kinda understanding did the twoa ya come ta?" The bruised blonde boy and the laceration laced lady looked at me with shit eating grins. "Now that...-", Lucas began, "- is a secret~", Sabarene finished, circling her metal index finger around the rim of her wine glass. She downed her glass in one big gulp, then reached for the wine bottle again. "Gah! Wait, wait, stop!", I cried. "Ya can't get sloshed tonight, Sister!" The girl with the black eye scratched her hair, causing a few shards of pottery ta fall outta her habit. "Um... why not, Miss Axeman Red Four?" "Cause yer supposed ta givea big speech tomorrow." "Oh, don't worry about that.", Sabarene said with a wave of her hand. "I'm a functional alcoholic." She twisted around the top digit of her metal index finger, removing it with ease. Lucas raised an eyebrow. "Wait, waaAit!", he burped. "What... what are you doing, Shabarene?" "Just preparing a pick-me up for tomorrow.", she said innocently, pouring a bit of wine inta her hollowed out index finger. I paused fera moment, and watched, as the girl in the black habit nonchalantly screwed the top of her index finger back on. "Aw, what the hell.", I grumbled. "Pour me a glass too. I ain't gonna spend the last nighta my life sober." "Certainly, certainly!", Sabarene said, cheerfully producing another glass from god knows where. She turned her wine bottle over, and frowned. "Seems like we're out of wine.", she said, patting the bottom of the glass bottle. "Oh Christ, no!", Lucas whimpered, sounding terrified. "No biggie! I think I saw some other bottles down in the cellar, so I'll go fetch a few." She stopped, and



winked at Blondie. “Be sure to take care of Miss Axeman Red Four while I’m gone, Mister Lucas~” The boy in the purple tophat stuck his thumb up at Sabarene, who returned the gesture, for some reason. “Alright, c’mon.”, I whispered, nudging Lucas in his stomach. “What did the twoa ya talk about?” “If I told you, then it wouldn’t be a sheeecret.”, the blonde boy sing-songed, his face excessively pink. “Guh... well... what if telling me yer secret becomes our little secret, Ruckus?” “Not gonna happen, Patchy.”, Lucas yawned. “I made a promise, after all.” “Ain’t nothing stopping ya from breaking that promise, Blondie.” “Nothing but my conscience.” I folded my arm over my stump and pouted. “F-fine, I didn’t wanna know yer stupid little secret anyways.” Lucas looked at me with gentle blue eyes, and started twiddling his thumbs. “Do... do you really want to know, Four?”, he asked, his voice sounding surprisingly meek, and shakey. “No.”, I scoffed, resolving ta put myself above such silliness. “-yes.”, I blurted out the very next moment. “Well... well how about this?”, Lucas said, his cheeks becoming even pinker. “Once... once I’m sure that I was able to keep my promise, to my f-friend..., and, uh, and also, once I make sure that this dimension and my dimension won’t collapse under the weight of their own stupidity, I’ll, uh... I’ll tell you. About, uh... everything. If you’ve got the stomach for it, Patchy.” “Ain’t much I don’t got the stomach fer, Blondie.” He laughed. “Yeah, well, unless it’s ketchup. You never had the stomach for ketchup.” He cringed. “Uh, I mean, I bet you *wouldn’t* have the stomach for ketchup, *if* you happened to try it.” “The heck is ketchup?” “A tomato based paste with sugar infused in it. Goes great on hotdogs.”, Lucas said, telling perhaps the most heinous lie I had ever heard in my nineteen cycle life. “I’m baaaaaaaaaaaaack~”, Sabarene chimed, or, uh, grunted. Oh, don’t get me wrong, I’m sure she meant ta chime instead a grunt, but the dainty lady in

black was over encumbered. Cupped between her two flimsy arms were about twenty five glass bottles. Twenty four of em were small, but there was one big bottle, much larger than the rest. The white haired girl dropped all the bottles onto the floor with the grace of a catnip laced cougar. "These were all I could find-", she panted. "Ya didn't havta take em all up in one go, ya know." "If a trip is worth doing five times, it's worth doing once." Sabarene said, then popped the cork off one of the small bottles. She took a small sip from it. "Bleh!", she coughed, gagging. "This tastes like blood!" My eye opened wide with shock. The small glass bottles were filled with a blue liquid, the large one was filled with a translucent type of brew. With a shakey hand, I reached for the large bottle. "Ugh, I guess the wine must have gone bad.", Sabarene said, pouting. "Wine can go bad?" "Of course wine can go bad, Mister Lucas. Especially poor quality wine, which this evidently is." I bit my bottom lip. Slowly, nonchalantly, I unscrewed the top of the bigger wine bottle, and took a small sip from it. It tasted like nothing. "Gah!", I exclaimed, trying to sound shocked. "This... this tastes sweet!" "Sweet?", Sabarene asked, confused. "Y-yeah!", I stuttered. "It's, uh, super sweet." "Oh! Oh, I get it!", the white haired girl said, shaking her head sagely. "This blue stuff must be the bitter, and that big bottle must be the sweet component. I guess this wine hasn't gone bad after all!" I paused and pretended to think of a spell. "So yer saying we gotta mix the blue stuff and the clear stuff?", I said, trying to sound confused. "It's worth a shot.", Sabarene said with a serious gaze. "Waaaait up.", Lucas said, holding his hand up. "I don't think drinking from random glass bottles is that good of an idea. For all we know that blue could be anti-freeze, or poison, or Four Lokos." I gritted my teeth. Lucas's skepticism was entirely justified, but it also was a giant hindrance. "Aw, shucks, live a little Blondie!" I

said, with a smile as manufactured as the snow in Dubai. "If these bottles were poisoned, wouldn't there be a warning label on 'em saying so?" "That doesn't make any sense in the slightest, Patchy." "Yer thinking too much.", I grumbled, pouring some of the translucent liquid into Sabarene's glass. I grabbed one of the small bottles, and added its blue-colored contents to the glass. "Here ya go, Sister." Sabarene smiled, but her ruby-red eyes wavered as she accepted the mixed drink. "You're never going to call me by my full name, are you?" "Patchy doesn't 'do' names, Sister.", Lucas said with a woozy wave of his hand. "It took her two years to learn mine, and to do that, Phil and I had to-" His happy, pink-tinted face froze. "Never mind that.", Lucas said, soberly. "Er, ain't ya gonna drink yer drink?", I cut in, staring at Sabarene. "Weren't we going to toast?", she asked, confused. A lump formed in my throat. "I, uh, I don't feel like drinking no more." "Then neither do I.", Sabarene pouted. Lucas scratched his head. "Wait, I thought you were going to drink with us." "I changed my mind.", I blurted. Lucas's eyes turned to ice. "Then why did you just encourage Sabarene to drink?" "Fine, fine!", I snapped, poorly concealing my panic with irritation. "I'll toast with y'all, but only one glass. I ain't gonna risk getting hung over or nothing." I snatched Lucas's wine glass out of his hand, and mixed him up the same drink I had mixed for Sabarene. "Here ya go.", I said, then picked up my own empty glass and raised it. "To our health and sanity-" "There's nothing in your glass, Miss Axeman Red Four." "Oh. I guess I musta forgot to fill it," I lied. My brain began to race. Lucas's painfully astute observations and Sabarene's need for camaraderie had driven me into a corner. I either had to drink the wine, or divulge its true nature. The former option would be moronic, but the latter option was unthinkable. If I told Lucas and Sabarene the truth, they'd think I was dishonest, or manipulative, or

something stupid like that. So it ain't really mucha a surprise, then, that I poured the blue colored contents of one of the small glass bottles into my own cup. I reached for the larger bottle, so as to mix the small bottle's blue stuff with its translucent stuff, then stopped. "Hey, Ruckus. Pass me that big bottle, would ya?" "It's closer to you than it is to me, Patchy." "It... it is?!", I said, trying to sound baffled. "W-where is it?!" I reached for the bottle, and deliberately moved my hand about two inches to the left of it. "Gah! I can't grab it for some reason! My hand's going right through it." "No, no.", Lucas said, "It's to your right. Move your fingers a bit to your right." With all the force I could muster, I slammed my arm into the side of the bottle. The large glass bottle shattered, and all of the translucent liquid inside it spilled onto the ground. "Gah!", I yelled, feigning shock. "What the heck just happened?!" Sabarene frowned. "Um... I think your lack of depth perception just caused you to spill that bottle of wine, Miss Axeman Red Four." "Aw... dang it.", I complained. "Now I can't toast with y'all." "Oh, don't worry!", Sabarene said, smiling. "There's four other big bottles down in the cellar. I'll go fetch another." "No need for that.", I quickly cut in. "I'm fine with just the blue stuff." "But it tastes bitter.", the white haired girl pointed out, frowning. "I'm a bitter person.", I countered, sprouting my Dubai smile. I raised my non-mixed glass. "To our health.", I toasted. "To everyone's health.", Lucas added with a semi-stern gaze. "To those who *deserve* their health." Sabarene finished. We clinked our glasses together, and downed em. "Ack!", I coughed, gagging on the blue liquid. "This... this tastes like blood!" "Sabarene did warn you, Patchy.", Lucas chided, then frowned. "Though I daresay the wine I just had wasn't much better. It's far too wet." "Course it's wet, it's liquid, ain't it?" "I mean it's too sweet, you plebian." "You're right, Mister Lucas. This does taste too sweet.", Sabarene said, scratching her

cheek. "It, it almost tastes like Fremdosian-" Her eyes jolted open in shock. "Oh, crap!"

The girl in the black habit immediately got on her knees, and started sweeping the glass covered floor, trying in vain to get rid of all the trash and debris. "Fuck it!" she cursed, grabbing Lucas's wrist with her right hand and a tuft of my hair with her left. "We need to go upstairs NOW!" With a surprisingly strong grip, Sabarene barreled up the stairs, and pulled me and Lucas into a small, snug bedroom. "Lock the door, Mister Lucas!", she hissed, her ruby red eyes darting around the room in a panic. "A-ah!", she yelped, noticing a single quill in the center of the room. "Get that out of here!", she barked. I pretended to be confused, then picked up the quill and tossed it out of the room. "What's going on, Sabarene?", Lucas asked, looking a bit more confused than concerned. "I'll explain later! Quick, rip those sheets off the bed, Mister Lucas!" Lucas tore off the sheets and handed them to Sabarene, his hands shaking slightly. "Alright, good, good."

The white haired girl breathed out, winded. "Now wrap the sheets around my mouth!"

"What-" "What we all just drank was a drug, Mister Lucas. It's called Fremdosian Wine, it's a potent hallucinogenic." The color drained from Lucas's face. "So... so we're going to die?!", he shouted, hoarsely. "Because- because I have some syrup of ipecac in my backpack, if we need to induce vomiting, or something, or-" My ears twitched at the blonde haired boy's panicked proclamation. He always seemed to have something for every situation, magic or not. Usually, that was a good thing, but if he had a way to undo the effects of the Fremdosian wine, it would be problematic. "Throw-up syrup?!" I shouted, deliberately over-reacting. "Are you nuts? That stuff could kill us just as easily as the poison we drank!" "We haven't been poisoned, and we're not going to die, imbecile.", Sabarene spat. At me "Fremdosian Wine just causes severe dementia, and

temporary euphoria. So long as we don't touch anything sharp, and so long as we don't put any small objects into our mouths, we'll be fine." "Oh. So that's why you want me to gag you." Sabarene nodded her head. "No, I want you to gag me because I say very offensive things whilst under the influence of Fremdosian Wine. Now hurry up, before the effects kick-" The white haired girl's pupils swole to about four times their regular size. "-in." Lucas rubbed the back of his neck. "Effects? I'm not feeling much of anythi-" his eyes dilated. " oh, there it goes. Yeah, just saw a snake crawl out of Patchy's eye, probably not a good sign. And the snake has a tongue, which seems to be... yeah, yeah, the snake's tongue's is another snake. But *that* snake's tongue seems to be normal, so I guess that's good. Wouldn't do to have a recursive snake tongue snake loop." I turned my head down, partly cause I didn't wanna spook Blondie none, and partly cause I felt immense shame at making him even morea babbling mess than he usually was. "Miss Axeman Red Four!", Sabarene hissed, tugging at my wrist. "I need you to gag me. Mister Lucas clearly isn't in the right mental frame." I pressed my tongue against my teeth. "Just takea nap. If we go ta sleep the bad effects from the wine'll go away, right?" "Yes, they will, but not before I end up saying something terribly offensive to you, or Mister Lucas." "I ain't the type ta get offended easily." "Oh please. You daddy issue types always get offended.", the red eyed girl snorted. "How could I have daddy issues if I never knew my father?" "Not knowing your father is why you have daddy issues!" "Never knew my mother neither, that mean I have mommy issues?" "No, you'd only have mommy issues if you knew your mother. Though, um, I guess it's possible you have abandonment issues." "Yer starting ta sound like yer brother, Sister." "Psychology isn't sociology, Miss Axeman Red Four! It's a completely different, yet

equally useless field of study!” “So why bother yapping about it?” “Because I say stupid stuff when under the influence of Fremdosian wine. So gag me already!” “There ain’t no need, though. Nothing ya say can mess me up non-“ “Unrelated note, but I think that you’re pretty lucky, Miss Axeman Red Four. Your hair isn’t long or smooth or nice looking at all, so you don’t have to worry about maintaining it. Plus with your skin tone you could get dirty and not need to wash-mph!” I shoved onea the sheets around Sabarene’s mouth and held it there. “Er, Blondie? Could ya help me tie this?” Lucas shook his head. “Sorry, I can’t. I’m seeing spiders crawling down from the ceiling... And, yup, they’re going into your ears.” He jerked his face back in disgust. “Oh dear god, they’re laying eggs.” I clenched my teeth. “It’s just yer imagination, nonea what yer seeing is real. Stop being so shaken up by it.” Lucas rolled his dilated eyes disdainfully. “It doesn’t matter if what I’m seeing is real, or fake. The fact remains that I’m seeing it, Patchy.” He glanced at me, his swelled pupils softening some. “Are you holding up alright? I mean, you’re not having those nightmares again?” “I ain’t asleep, so of course I ain’t having no nightmares. And I haven’t hada dream about Blue in quitea while, mostly cause I’m a craphead.” “Blue?” “Forget it. You wouldn’t know him.”, I mumbled, then paused. “Wait, what didya mean by me having nightmares again?” “Mphm, mphm, dpmh mhph mphm.”, the girl with ruby red eyes explained. “Er... ya sure ya can’t help me tie this gag Ruckus? I’d do it myself, but, uh, y’know... Uh, the point is, I could really-“ Sabarene quickly yanked down her gag. “Use an extra hand?” I shoved my elbow into the uninhibited girl’s uninhibited mouth. “Something like that, yeah. So, uh, mind helping me out, Ruckus?” The blonde boy didn’t respond. He slumped over, and collapsed onto the floor, motionless. All the warmth drained outta my body, least, it

started ta, but then Lucas let outta loud snore from his nostrils. “Ha! He fell asleep!”, Sabarene cackled, swaying from side to side. “What a light weight! Hahah, hah- oh wow, that’s fucking hilarious, he looks like... like a little Lucas, lightweight, lovely, lady... some other word with an L, hah~” The woman in the black habit let out a few more chuckles, then collapsed backwards onto the floor, a drooling, drugged, alcoholic mess. I stared at her limp body fera bit, and waited. Soon as I saw her chest begin ta move up and down, I nudged her onto her side. I did the same ta Lucas, though the odds of him choking on his own vomit wouldn’t be nearly as high. I stared at botha em, bruised black and blue by each other. “Idiots.”, I growled. Nonea their wounds seemed grievous, or substantial, but that didn’t particularly matter. The issue was that given a punch landing a few inches lower, a knee strike being a bit more on point, Sabarene’s black eye coulda easily beena shattered windpipe, Lucas’s bloodied nose a broken jaw. I didn’t know what the two had fought about, or over, but it didn’t matter, nothing warranted em beating the crap outta each other, friendly drinka wine aside. I stood up, and looked around. The small bedroom was still a small bedroom. The walls didn’t start leaking blood, the floor underneath my feet stayed firm. I wasn’t inna trance, and if I was, it wasa Matrix kinda trance which made me think I wasn’t inna trance at all. “Alright... good.”, I whispered, quietly unlocking the door. I had feared that drinking the bitter blue component of the Fremdosian Wine would inhibit my higher cognitive functions, but I felt no dumber than normal. I creaked open the door a few measures, but I didn’t leave the room. I stepped towards Sabarene. “Sister?”, I asked, my voice soft, but sharp. The girl in the black habit didn’t respond, she was out likea light. I tiptoed close ta her, and slowly lifted her metal hand. The girl with ruby red eyes didn’t respond. Swallowing



nervously, I reached for her index finger, and twisted its top digit to the left. Nothing happened. I twisted it to the right. The top metal digit moved. I kept twisting the top metal digit of Sabarene's index finger, until, like the cap of a bottle of Green River, it came off. I tilted the rest of her index finger upside down. About one and a half ounces of wine dripped out of Sabarene's hollow index finger, and onto the floor. Cupping the red-eyed girl's detached digit in my palm, I tip-toed out of the small bedroom, and headed down to the parlor of the ruined townhouse. It took me a while, due to all the broken glass and pottery shards, but I eventually found what I was looking for – Lucas's rucksack. I unzipped the front pocket and looked inside. Irritatingly, the only stuff in Blondie's backpack were four books, some disinfectant, some band-aids, a bottle of what I guess was his throw-up syrup, and a few bottles of water. There were no weapons, or poison, or flashy looking baubles to be found anywhere in the damn rucksack, just stuff that made folks feel better. You know, useless crap. I gritted my teeth. Lucas having a spare shocky square in his backpack would have made my life a whole lot easier, but it wasn't a necessity. I grabbed a broken table leg, and slung it over my shoulder. A blunt piece of wood wouldn't do me much good against any of the Holy Collective soldiers, but it would be enough to guard against pickpockets, thugs, and other lowlives. With that in mind, I went downstairs, got one of the rusted relics from the cellar, and headed out of the townhouse, and towards... the Union District, uh, towards somewhere. To make a long story short, I went back to a place I shouldn't have gone back, purchased something that I wasn't allowed by law to purchase, and got back to the townhouse before Lucas and Sabarene woke up from their wine-induced stupor. As for what I got, where I got it, and why, well, that ain't terribly important. Well, actually it's incredibly important, but

trust me when I say the details of what I did on my midnight excursion don't matter, and are, in fact, extremely boring. I didn't run into any assassins, I didn't make any dark discoveries, and I didn't even see the smallest hint of a module. All I did was sell one of the rusty weapons from the cellar pawn shop for some marks, and then used those marks to buy something I probably wasn't allowed to, by law, to buy. I'm sure all that sounds dark, and intriguing, but trust me when I say the transaction was about as exciting as a trip to buy lowfat milk and Sriracha from a 7-11. All in all, I spent three and a half hours mucking about in the middle of the night, maybe more. Anyways, I managed to return to the townhouse well before the first sun started to rise, and well before Sabarene and Lucas awoke from their wine induced stupor. Which was a good thing, I reckon, because one of the many things I had to do when I returned was put the top digit of Sabarene's metal hand back on her index finger. Course, I had to make up for the wine I had dumped out of her hollow finger, otherwise when she woke up she would have suspected that I tampered with her artificial extremity. Instead of pouring more wine in her hollow index finger, I poured in a bottle of..., uh, something that wasn't wine. The white haired girl didn't seem to stir or wake up as I fiddled around with her mechanical metal hand, which was good. What wouldn't be good, of course, would be if she happened to drink the liquid I had put in her hand, so I removed a black glove from Blondie's right hand, and put it on Sabarene's left. Oh, I didn't think the presence of a glove would prevent her from drinking what she would have thought was wine, but it was a buffer, of sorts. So long as she was still wearing Lucas's leather glove, I'd know my plan wouldn't be about to backfire in a Romeo and Juliet type of way. Now, if the glove came off without me noticing... well, I guess I'd have to act quick, before my hamartia got the

besta me. I had intended ta go down ta the cellar and prepare some more, but, fer some reason, I felt tired. I didn't wanna fall asleep, I couldn't afford ta. But, but in spitea the fact that there was moss ta crush, in spitea the fact that there was so much more that I coulda done ta tilt the odds in my favor, I felt my energy being drained. My eyelids became heavy, my focus faded. I collapsed ont a the floor. With the liveliness of a dying sloth, I rolled on topa Sabarene's gloved hand, then passed out.

I woke up inna coffin. At least, it felt like a coffin, I couldn't tell fer sure. I couldn't see nothing, but I felt my arms compressed, and my neck forced inna fixed position. The wooden walls around me seemed ta be made of polished pine wood, or at least rubbed down oak. There was more than enough air in the coffin, and I didn't feel any pressure on my ears, so I didn't reckon I was buried. But the fact remained that I had awoken, somehow, inna coffin, orra box. To make matters worse, my legs were dangling out of the box, exposed ta the chill of the wind. The incredibly uncomfortable position I had awoken in was only half the problem. Loud, booming music exploded from the corea of the wooden coffin I had awoke in, and swole ta a crescendo. The sounda cheesy, electronically synthesized thunder crashed outside of the coffin too, causing what sounded like a crowd a people ta gasp in fear. "Now I ain't gonna try and fool ya, folks.", an odd, incredibly annoying sounding voice outside of the coffin announced. "This is pretty much the oldest trick in the book. Houdini, Blackstone, Penn and Teller, any magician worth his salt knows how ta pull this one off; the ole "sawing a woman in half" shtick. First, ya take a box, like this...", the insufferable voice called out, knocking on topa the coffin I was in, "and ya putta pair a fake legs in it, and rig em up ta dangle, through a mechanism, like this..." There was a small knock on topa the coffin, and fer

some reason, I jiggled my legs soon as I heard it. "See, as alla ya can probably guess, I didn't *actually* saw Miss Angela in half. She just contorted her legs up, some, and folded herself up in this *other* small box." I heard the sounda someone stepping outta something near me, causing the crowd to let out a few cheers. "See, it was all just a simple little trick. But come on folks, give Miss Angela a hand! She's been one heckuva assistant, hasn't she?!" The crowd let out a series of small, much less enthusiastic golf claps. "Jeez, izzat it?!", the grating voice grumbled. "I come here, on national television, trying ta make a name fer myself, and all I get is this milquetoast reaction? I know this is the windy city, but I never imagine y'all would be so cold!" Despite its choicea words, and bashful attitude, the incredibly annoying voice didn't seem all too flustered. On the contrary, everything I heard the idiot outsidea the coffin say sounded rehearsed to a tea. "Well, shucks! Sorry, Miss Angela, but I think this is the enda our little act. Time ta back it up, and go backta college, maybe get a degree in accounting or something." There was a pause. "Don't give me that look, Miss Angela.", the punchable sounding person outsidea the coffin pontificated. "Don'tcha dare give me that look! Ya knew signing on with me there was a chance we wouldn't make it. It's showbiz, strong eat the weak! We just ain't up ta snuff, performing this amateur hour garbage!" There was another pause, filled in by laughter from the crowd. "Gah, fine, pout all ya want. I'm leaving." The flamboyant voice loudly stepped away from the coffin, and down what sounded ta be a few stairs, ta the chuckles and jeers of the crowd. "She didn't pay me enough anyway.", a mousey voice squeaked, after a few seconds of silence. "That corny magician expected too much of me! Miss Angela, please fold yourself in a box, Miss Angela, please topdeck an ace of spaces for the card trick, Miss Angela, please wear this bunny

costume!", the significantly less annoying voice ranted. "Well, I've had it!" the mousey voice declared. "Miss Angela is going solo! Who needs the great and powerful Fortuna anyways? I'm going to leave this dump, and head for New York City!" The crowd let out a very loud series of boos. "Oh, before I go... anyone want this hat?" "He'll take it!", a loud, boisterous voice from the crowd declared. "You'll take it?", the mousey voice asked. "No, no, not me.", the boisterous voice boomed. "My friend! He'll take it!" "Your friend will take it? Alright, alright... then please, the gentleman in the ill-fitting hoodie, come on stage!" "I don't really want to-", a shy sounding voice mewed. "Don't be a faggot, Hoffman!" "O-oh... alright, then..." Small, reluctant steps made their way towards the small coffin I was in. "Well then, what is your name, sir?" "I... it's... um..." "Your name is um?", the mousey voice asked, amplified somehow. "N-no, it's not um, it's, um... my name... it's..." "Lucas!", the boisterous voice from below boomed. "His name is Lucas!" "Alright, then, Lucas!", the mousey voiced woman announced. "I have here a purple trim top hat, lightly worn. It's yours, for however much cash you've got in your pocket!" "I've... I've only got four dollars and forty five cents, though...", the meek sounding voice squeaked, causing the crowd to laugh wildly. "That's fine~!" the mousey voice responded, adding a subtle inflection on her voice. "That's more than Fortuna pays me in a week!" "H-here you go, then...", the nervous sounding voice stuttered. "Wait! Hold on! Before I take your measly money, would you mind marking down your initials on each of the bills?" "I... I guess I can mark my initials down, s-sure." "Okie dokey!", the mousey voice proclaimed in a unnecessarily loud manner. "As you can see, Lucas here has written an "L" and an "H" on all four of the bills! Now you didn't lie to me, did you Lucas?" "L-lie? Lie about what?" "You didn't try and undercut me, right?"

These four dollars and forty five cents are all the money you have, right?" "Y-yes.", the embarrassed sounding person muttered, causing the crowd ta laugh uppa storm. "Oh, Lucas, now you're making me feel bad! You know what, I'll also throw these plastic leg props, for free!" There was another tapping sound on the topa the coffin, which caused me ta kick out my legs again. "I.. I don't really want these, thoug-" "Nonsense! Now go on, and pull the legs from the box!" Ushered by the mousey voiced woman, the nervous sounding person approached the coffin I was in, and, witha shaking hand, pulled gently on my left leg. "Hey!", I yelled, kicking out my leg melodramatically "That hurt!" I used botha my hands ta push the topa the coffin open, and saw, as a spotlight glared against my eyes, a stage. But it wasn't the normal kind of stage,. No, it was a circular stage, a core, so to speak, surrounded by a loop of seats, the auditorium was likea donut, and the stage was the hole. From the center of the donut hole I could see thousands upon thousands of people, their attention fixated on me, a woman in a rabbit costume, and a shy looking boy in a hoodie, with blonde bangs covering his left eye. "Miss Angela!", I yelled, somersaulting outta the small pinewood box, and onta the center of the stage. "You've got some explaining ta do!" The crowd gasped, then applauded wildly. I waited fer the cheers ta die down, and continued with my rehearsed speech. "I leave fer halfa minute, and you go hawking my stuff!" Keeping my front ta the parta the crowd where the camera was, I turned to make an indignant face atta nervous young man with blonde hair. "You've got halfa mind, trying ta take my hat away from me!" The blonde boy winced. "I.. I didn't mean t-" "Didn't mean ta take my hat?! Ya got yer grubby little fingers all over its brim!" "S-sorry...", the conscripted volunteer stuttered. I smiled, thus far, the entire routine was going great. "What didya say yer name was again?" "It's... it's

Lucas.”, the boy with the bangs mumbled, avoiding my gaze. “Lucas Hoffman.” I put my hands on my hips, and grinned, being sure that I was looking into one of the cameras. “Well... Ruckus, how about we make a trade?” “A... a trade?” “Yeah, a trade! After all, you got my hat, but I...” I reached into the waist of my pocket, and pulled out.... “I got four dollars, and forty five cents!” I waved the four bills in front of the bashful looking boy, showing him and the audience the bright purple marker dashed across each of the bills. The crowd erupted into loud sounding applause, the lights spark, the obnoxious music took on a triumphant tone. The bashful looking blonde fella looked me in the eyes, flabbergasted. “How... how did you do that?”, he asked, his tepidness gone almost entirely. “Now that...”, I whispered, placing my finger on the shy looking boy’s lips, “is a secret~” “Wha-” Confetti exploded up outta the stage, breaking apart in a burst of glitter “Thank ya, thank ya, yer too kind! Thanks for coming out tonight, y’all been great!” The applause continued on, and on, and on, to the point where it started cutting into time reserved for the act’s finale. “Shucks, yer making me feel a bit embarrassed. Is this what they call an encore?” “Encore, encore!”, a booming voice demanded. “Encore? Ha, alright, if it’s an encore ya want, then it’s an encore ya get. Any requests?” A white haired woman in the back row stood up, and raised her hand. “Ah, yeah, you, the albino in the back. What do you want?” “Um... could you get off my arm?” I raised an eyebrow. “What?”

“I said, could you please get off my arm, Miss Axeman Red Four?”, someone asked, tapping me lightly on the head. I jolted up. “W-what?!” I woke to find that I wasn’t on stage, or in a coffin, or in an antechamber. Nah, I was precisely where I should have been: sprawled out on the floor of a small, snug bedroom. And, apparently, still on top of the girl

in the black habit. "Guh...", I groaned, rolling off the white haired girl's clunky metal extremity. "What time is it?" "Mid-rising, I think.", Sabarene said, wiping a bit of spittle off her mouth. She squinted at me with a squinted, somewhat less swollen black eye. "You're not a figment of my imagination, are you?" "If I was, do ya really think asking me would make a licka difference?" The white haired girl suddenly swiped her tongue across the bridge of my nose. "G-gah! The heck didya do that fer?!" "Making a lick of difference." Sabarene said, smirking. She brushed off her habit and rose to her feet. "At any rate, we've not that much time. We're due to report at the stadium by noon." "Stadium? I didn't see any stadium when we came ta this city." "You'll be seeing it soon enough.", Sabarene said, sorta ominously. I gazed around the small bedroom, as the rays of the first sun started ta seep into the windows. "Uh... where the heck is Ruckus?" Sabarene grimaced. "... I don't know. I woke up, and he was gone." Her cheek muscles contorted, and she took a nervous step towards the hall. "Maybe we should go look for—" The door to the small bedroom slammed open, and knocked Sabarene flat on her ass. "...him" "I'm baaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaack~", a flamboyant voice announced. With his usual energy, Lucas strolled into the room, dressed ta the nines. And by dressed ta the nines, I mean he was dressed up exactly the same as when I first.(Fer a given definition of first, anyways) met him. The blonde boy had done away with the black leather armor, and was back in his purple cape, coat, and tophat. He carried his stupid looking baton in his right hand, and a brown sacka something in his left. "Mister Lucas!", Sabarene called out, her mouth against the floor. "Don't just run off randomly! At least leave us a note!" She paused. "Actually, leave me a note. I don't thinking leaving Miss Axeman Red Four a note would do much good." I blushed a bit, then gritted my teeth.



“Yer saying I’m dumb, Fiatist?” “No, I’m saying you’re illiterate. Your aptitude has nothing to do with it.” Lucas saw our bickering and rubbed the back of his head. “Well anyways, I thought I’d wake up early and get us some bagels and locks for breakfast.”, the blonde boy explained. He crossed his arms and scoffed. “Except, as it turns out, bagels and locks don’t actually *exist* in this universe, so we’ll have to make do with baguettes and butter instead.” “Ooh! Baguettes!”, Sabarene squeaked, snatching the brown burlap sack out of Lucas’s hands. “Hm... no mold... the bread seems firm, but not stale...” Sabarene snapped one of the baguettes in half, spilling a heckuva lot of crumbs on the floor. “And would you listen to that crunch! Mister Lucas, you have fantastic taste!” “Naturally.”, Lucas said with a smug smile. “If I didn’t have great taste, I’d be Lucas Gandulfadore Melloi the third, mediocre mage, rather than Lucas Gandulfadore Melloi the third, Sorcerer Supreme.” I rolled my eye. “I don’t see what one’s taste in bread has to do with magic.” “Here, here, taste it!”, Sabarene said, offering me a bite of the warm baguette. “It’s really good!” “I don’t do carbohydrates.”, I snorted. “Cuts into my gains.” “Come on, please?”, Sabarene said, staring at me with the eyes of a kitten. “Fine.”, I grunted. I took the loaf outta her black metal hand, and took a big ole chomp outta it. “G-gah!”, I coughed, caught off guard. This... this bread, it’s-“ “Poisoned?!” Lucas gasped. “Ok, I guess.”, I mumbled monotonously. “I mean, it don’t got no protein so it’s a waste of nutrition, but as wastes of nutrition go it’s alright. Plus it ain’t sour or bitter or nothing, so I reckon that’s a plus.” Sabarene snatched the loaf outta my hand, and, without even wiping off where I had bit, popped the rest of it into her mouth. “Don’t undersell it just to appear tough, this bread is fantastic.”, she mumbled, chewed up bits of saliva soaked bread falling outta her mouth. “Where did you get this

bread, Mister Lucas?”, she asked, shoving tonsa the bread inta her mouth without eve  
“In the plaza.”, the blonde boy lazily elucidated. “There was a vendor selling pastries  
under your right ass cheek.” “Her... her what?!” “My right ass cheek.”, Sabarene cut in,  
then frowned. “I’ll be honest Mister Lucas, I haven’t the slightest idea how that would  
work.” “Your statue.”, Lucas said, flatly. “There was a vendor selling bread under your  
statue.” “Then it was the statue’s right ass cheek, not *my* right ass cheek. You need to  
be more precise about these things, Mister Lucas.”, Sabarene chided witha wag of her  
metal hand. Lucas raised an eyebrow. “Sister, why are you wearing my glov-“ “So why  
the heck would ya buy some bread froma fella underneatha statue anyways?”, I quickly  
interjected, hoping that Lucas wouldn’t put much more thought inta Sabarene’s  
mismatched wardrobe. “I mean, don’tcha think the bread coulda been poisoned, or  
something?” Lucas winced. “In... in retrospect, yes, that could have been very possible,  
but... but the guy selling the bread... he was one of the most fantastic showman I’ve  
ever seen!” “He was what?” “No, seriously Patchy, the charisma on this guy!”, Lucas  
gushed, his blue eyes sparkling. “He had energy, he had poise, he just knew how to  
draw in a crowd. He went on and on and on about how the bread he had was locally  
made, but with exotic, top quality ingredients.” “Andy bought stuff from him just causea  
that?” “No, not just “causea” that.”, Lucas huffed. “There was a gigantic line in front of  
this guy’s stall. And if everyone wants something, then it must be good, right?” “Ain’t  
that an appeal ta popularity?” “It’s a piece of bread, Patchy, not an Iphone.” “Not a  
what?” “Forget it. The crux of the matter, Patchy, is that this bread seller guy was kind of  
a big deal.” “Ya mean he was able ta trick folks inta thinking he wasa big deal.” “That’s  
what made him a big deal, Patchy!” Lucas tossed his baton inta the air, and clenched it

in his hand. "Showmanship is everything! Even if his bread was bad, his ability to woo a crowd would have had me buy these baguettes anyways." I narrowed my eye. "Sure, but you'd probably be salty as heck once ya realized you'd been tricked." The blonde boy smiled, softly. "Sometimes it's fun to get tricked." He shrugged his shoulders. "But I wasn't even tricked! The bread was cheap, delicious, and exotic~" Lucas puffed up his chest, and put his hands on his hips. "Baked locally by Bakers, made out of handpicked grain and mortar grounded flour from the fields of Forcuna!" Sabarene suddenly dropped her half eaten baguette on the ground, and looked at the floor dejectedly. "Are you alright, Sister?" "I'm fine!", the white haired girl chimed. "I'm... I'm just not feeling all that hungry anymore." Lucas glanced into his bag. "Holy shit Sister, you ate five baguettes!" "Hence why I'm not hungry anymore.", she hissed, strangely aggressive sounding. "Yeah, yeah, well, hungry or not, don't drop pieces a bread on the floor. Food ain't something you can just waste." "It absolutely is something you can waste, imbecile.", Sabarene snapped. "The agriculture in the collective is subsidized. We produce five times the amount of grain in a cycle than your Independent Kingdoms do in three. We produce so much food that we actually *burn* half our crops, just to keep prices competitive." "Yeah but-" "But nothing!", Sabarene snapped. "Don't go lecturing me about food, and waste, and-... and public policies, when you don't even know how to read!" I felt a ache in my stomach. "I... I wasn't trying ta insult ya or nothing, Sis-" "Finish your crappy bread, or don't, I'm going to take a bath!", she barked, storming out of the room. Lucas glanced at me. "The hell was that about?" I scratched my head. "Ain't got the slightest clue. Maybe carbs make her pissy." The boy in the purple coat and cape frowned. "Perhaps we should go after her." "Nah. Folks get hot and steamy from time ta

time, the best thing to do is ta stand back and let em fume.” Lucas’s shoulders relaxed.

“True, true. I’m always so anal about these things, but you’re right, sometimes you need to leave people alone. Just like with Nielente, right?” I immediately stood up and dashed towards the door. “We were so worried about her, but she ended up being just fin-”

Lucas looked up, surprised. “-Where are you going, Patchy?”

“Gonnagochangaintamynewarmor”, I lied, then dashed out into the hall. I shouldn’ta felt scared, but I did. I shoulda felt guilty, but I didn’t. For all my planning, all the effort I had put into rigging things up for the trials, I had failed to put two and two together when it mattered most. Sabarene going off ta angst was, by itself, notta big deal. Sabarene going off ta takea bath was also, by itself, notta big deal. But Sabarene going off ta takea bath, while angsting, while having what she thought was wine stuffed in her metal index finger was a big deal, like, a huge deal. I grimaced. At first, I didn’t know where the functional alcoholic had fled, but a piece of black cloth hanging outta half rotten wooden door gave mea clue. Walking briskly, I gently opened the door. It wasa closet. A broom closet, consisting of little more thana broom, some old decript bottles of what seemed ta be fermaldehyde, and... a sulking white haired woman, sitting down inna fetal position. “Come on. Get outta the closet, Saperidot.” “Please leave me alone.”, she said her face buried in her knees. I glanced at her left hand. Lucas’s glove was still on it. “Oh, I will. I just wanted ta make sure you were alright.” “I’m fine.”, she said, bitter. “It’s just... it’s just...” “Say it or don’t.” “It’s just that I don’t think I deserve any of this.”, the red eyed girl breathed out, shaking. “What, this about you scarfing down all those loavesa bread? It was only a bitta bread, if ya feel so bad about eating it then you could always just save up some marks and pay Blondie back whenya have the time.” I

narrowed my eye. "But no whoring yerself. That's just retarded." "No... no... it's... it's not about that.", Sabarene said, with a sigh. "Do... do you have a moment, Miss Axeman Red Four?" "I actually got no idea if I have a moment, are we supposed ta be heading to some coliseum or something now?" "No, we... we have a bit of time before we need to make our way to the arena." "Then sure, I have some time.", I muttered, keeping a firm eye on Sabarene's covered left hand. The melancholy looking lady got up onta her feet, and, tugging on my wrist, led me down stairs, back down into the parlor. She stopped right in front of a slightly faded portrait. "What do you think of this painting?", she asked me, twiddling her thumbs nervously. I glanced at the painting. It was decent enough, I guess. It was one of those portraits. "Er... it could do with a bitta touch-up. Did yer father pay tona money fer this?" "My... my father?", Sabarene asked, sounding a bit disarmed. "Well, this issa painting of him and yer mum, ain't it?" Sabarene nodded her head. "No... no... that's... that's a painting of me. And my brother." "W-what?!", I sputtered. Ta be sure, the girl in the painting did look like Sabarene, except fer the fact that her hair was different. "The heck happened ta yer hair?" "It grew." "No, the color." "O-oh.", Sabarene said, licking her lips. "Well... sometimes, when you get older, your hair starts to lose it's color." "Ain't you only two cycles older me?" "Some people go gray quicker than others.", she evasively responded, then frowned. "But having white hair isn't all that bad. It's a distinguished look!" She wavered. "R-right?" "Eh, maybe. Least yer hair ain't brown or nothing." "Like Mister Thief's?", Sabarene said, her cheeks flushing pink. "If only I were so lucky..." She stared off into space, and started giggling inna insufferably giddy sorta way. "Is.. is that so?" "O-oh! But don't get me wrong, I only like Mister Thief in a superficial, physical

sort of way!” “Like who ya wanna like, it don’t concern me none.” I said off-hand, tightening the strap of my eyepatch. The white haired girl punched me in the shoulder, stirring up onea my wounds. “Gah! The heck you do that fer?” “You’re supposed to get upset when I say something insensitive like that!” “Like *what?*”, I coughed out, flabbergasted. “Like... like... like nothing, imbecile!”, Sabarene hissed, then looked away from me, her cheeks even pinker than before. “It’s just... just that I think I may have misunderstood matters.”, she said, her voice cracking. I winced. I was completely confused as ta what was going on, and I was pretty sure that Sabarene was the one being unreasonable, but nevertheless I felta bit guilty. “Gah... gosh, I’m sorry. I, uh, I didn’t mean ta hurt yer feelings or nothi-” “You can’t hurt what isn’t there, Unionist.”, a sullen sounding voice announced. Sabarene’s face changed instantly, from that of a flustered, distressed young woman ta that of something cold, and distant. “Brother.”, she said, neutrally. Her ruby red eyes hardened, her gaze pierced through me, towards the end of the parlor. I turned around. Standing alone, at the entrance to the ruined townhouse, was Marston. He was dressed up in an outfit that managed to be even more sanctimonious than his last: the tall, black haired man was clad in white silken robes, sprouting a long white cape on his long white back, and wearing shoes, seemingly made out of ivory. His eyes were still covered by a pair of black tinted glasses, and from the way the bridge of it was sloppily taped together, I reckon it was the same pair that got broke back in the plaza. He didn’t have any weapons on him, but that didn’t stop me from picking up a broken table leg and raising it towards him. “You better git the hell outta here, Brother Marston.”, I growled. “Else I’ll bash yer skull bloody.” The man in white tilted his head, slightly. “My name isn’t-“ “Brother Marston, yeah, I know. I just

don't give a darn." Sabarene forcefully lowered my arm. "Is there something you wish to discuss, brother?" "You're on a sinking ship, Unionist.", Marston stated, ignoring Sabarene completely. "The trials will cost you your life." "Was that an attempt at intimidation?", I asked, coldly. "No. That was an observation of objective fact.", the black haired man answered, bluntly. "Brother Christopher and Sister Julia are the most skilled fighters in the Collective. They've killed four hundred and fifteen Unionists combined, many of whom were more skilled than you, and all of whom were more able-bodied than you." "Bull. They ain't nothing but a buncha bodyguards. Yer just talking em up ta scare me." "Ask that creature behind you, if you think I'm lying.", Marston said, icily. "You might not live to see another rising if you persist." "Well ain't you just a sweetheart!", I hollered, putting on a big ole grin. "Yeah, it's my health yer worried about, huh?" I asked, then, flashed my fangs. "Funny how yer magnanimity didn't manifest itself back in the Union District." The black haired man clenched his teeth. "I did not come here for your health. I came for the health of the Continent as a whole. I came here to tell you to leave. Leave this city at once, I'll arrange transportation for wherever you wish to go. If you desire marks, or metal, I'll give that to you too-" "GAAAAAAAAH!" I violently swung the chair leg an inch in front of the black haired man's sandals, causing it to snap in two. "A-ah!", Sabarene cried out. Marston didn't budge an inch, but he stopped running his mouth. "Shucks, so I guess we're skipping bribery now, izzat it?" I curled my hand into a fist. "What's next, are ya gonna try and appeal to my conscience? Tell me about how yer ideals'll lead to some sorta utopia, or something?" I breached the distance between me and the man in black tinted glasses, and brought my face as close to his as I could. "Cause... cause ya know what?", I said, breathing into his face. "Ya know what,

Brother Marston? It ain't gonna work. I know what ya did, and I know yer mindset." I grabbed the black haired man by his collar, and with a mild exertion of my arm, lifted him up in the air. "You're one of them fellas that ain't just evil, yer so damn evil that ya think you ain't." The black haired man remained unperturbed, even as his feet dangled six inches off the ground. "You sound like you're describing yourself." "I *am* describing myself.", I growled. "That's why I can't let ya have yer way. More importantly, I made a promise." "If it was to Sabarene, you need to break it." "It wasn't ta her.", I hissed. "I was tempted ta sock Marston in the face, but it wouldn't have done much besides make me somewhat happy fera spell. Instead, I lowered him back on the ground. "I think you should leave, before I decide ta forgo any sense a decorum and just kill ya on the spot." "I didn't come here just to speak with you, Unionist." "Izzat so." The shade sporting man reached into his robes. I leapt back and picked up a half of the broken chair leg. "Marcela wanted me to give this to you.", he said, casually. I dropped the chair leg, and with a shaky hand, snatched the piece a paper from the black haired man. Marston did an about face, and strolled towards the door, the end of his cape dirtied by the dust in the ruined townhouse. He stopped, just before turning the knob, and turned around ta face me. "Unionist!", he boomed, his voice deeper than usual. "Before the suns set, you shall learn the truth. Of this city, of the Collective, and..." he ripped his glasses, and glared at me with ruby red eyes, "-of that creature cowering behind you." Without saying another word, the black haired man stormed out of the ruined townhouse, leaving Sabarene and I to our lonesome. "God, what a dick.", a voice from on high commented. I looked up. Hanging upside down, his ankles wrapped around the bannisters was Lucas, still dressed in his overcoat, cape, and tophat, which in spite a all logic and



reason stayed strapped to his head. He dropped down from the second floor, and landed gracefully on the wreckage of a coffee table. Sabarene narrowed her eyes. "Was that really necessary, Mister Lucas?" "Style and flair is *a/ways* necessary.", he said, waving around his right hand. I don't know why, but as Lucas brazenly wove around his right hand, I felt compelled to pay attention to his left. As I did, I saw, for just a second, his hand quickly sneaking his revolver back into his purple coat. I grabbed his left wrist and forced the revolver back out into plain sight. "Wait, the heck did ya just try to do, Ruckus?" The boy with blue eyes jerked suddenly, but kept his finger off the trigger. "I... I was concerned.", he confessed. "I thought you were about to get into an altercation with that man, so I decided to try and cover you. I would have only fired if worst came to worst though, Patchy." "No, no, I ain't upset about you covering me, that was pretty good thinking." Lucas raised an eyebrow. "Then what are you-" "You call what ya did with yer revolver a palm? That ain't a palm, yer dang revolver was sticking out clear as day. Don'tcha remember? A good palm is one where the only one who can see what yer trying to hide is you. I mean, yer misdirect was ok, I guess, and yer load was fine, but ya didn't ditch, or stimulate, or steal. Ya didn't switch, neither." Lucas backed up a bit, and glanced at me, uneasy. "You... you just recited the seven principles of sleight of hand.", he stammered. "Uh... duh. Course I did." "How... how do you know the seven principles?", Lucas asked. "Ain't it common knowledge? I mean, it was kinda obvious you were sneaking yer revolver back into yer overcoat, wasn't it?" "Um... I didn't see Mister Lucas sneak anything into his coat...", Sabarene said, blushing a bit. "Well, maybe it's a matter of depth perception." Lucas stared at me, slightly disturbed. "How do you know the seven principles of sleight of hand?", he repeated. "Gah, yer still on that."

“Yes, I’m still on that!”, Lucas shrieked, then took inna deep breath. “Please, just tell me how you knew them principles, Patchy.”, he said, somewhat calm. “If ya insist.”, I said witha exasperated sigh. “The reason I know the principles of sleighta hand is, cause... uh...” I paused, and realized I didn’t . “Huh. Alright, waita tick, it’s on the tippa my tongue.” I snapped my fingers. “Oh! Oh, I musta read em inna book or something.” “You learned to read?!” Sabarene gasped, then tackled me onta the floor. “I’m so proud of you, Miss Axeman Red Four!” “Er... actually, wait.”, I muttered, pushing the enthusiastic white haired girl offa my chest. I unfolded the pieca paper Marston had given ta me, and glanced at it. “Nope, no, I’m still illiterate.”, I concluded, unable to make sense of any of the scribbles. Sabarene’s jaw droppeda bit. “Um, ok, that is a bit weird. Maybe you absorbed the knowledge via osmosis?” I snorted. “I already told ya Sister, I ain’t a degenerate.” “That’s not what osmosis means you imbecile!”, she shrieked then calmed down. “I mean... maybe-“ “It’s corruption.”, Lucas answered, bluntly. “Hey! I ain’t corrupt! I might bea liar anda cheat, but I sure as heck ain’t corrupt!” “I’m not saying you’re corrupt in the moral sense, Patchy, though as a matter of objective fact, you are.”, the boy in the purple tophat snorted. “I’m talking about corruption in the data management sense.” “You’ve lost me, Mister Lucas.” “Hmph. It doesn’t matter.”, Lucas said, sounding apathetic, but looking somewhat shaken up. “We need to go make sure Mister Progressive doesn’t get his way, right?” “M-martston getting his way isn’t the problem, Mister Lucas.”, Sabarene squeaked. “The problem is Brother Gino. He’s the one trying to become the new General, not my brother.” “Yer right, but Firecrouch ain’t the one who resorted ta bribery.” Sabarene’s eyes lit up, a crimson red. “What, so you think that just because Brother Gino is straight-forward, that makes him weak, or

predictable? Because I can assure you, he is not to be underestimated. Directness is sometimes more dangerous than secrecy could ever be." I scratched my neck. "Er... well, dealing with Ginoza is up ta you, then, ain't it? Yer the one who is gonna be giving a grand old speech, right?" "Right.", Sabarene said. "I've practiced it fifteen times over." Lucas beamed brightly. "Good, good, I like that attitude. Do you want another colored contact lens, because if you do I can-" "No, I'm good Mister Lucas.", the lady in the black habit said, firmly. "I'm not going to pretend, when I give the speech. I'm not going to emulate Mister Greyjoy, or Miss Grausherra, or Miss Carver. I'm just going to be myself." "By yerself, do you mean the you that ya said was the worst person ever?" "Yes.", the white haired girl answered. "Yes, I'm going to be speaking as me. As all of me. I will not whitewash my past, nor will I view the present in a cynical light. I shall give my honest thoughts on the matter, and I will prescribe the platform I feel would be appropriate." Lucas smirked. "Be yourself, huh?" "Well, what else is there to be?" "A winner.", I said, smiling. "A what?", Sabarene sputtered. "A winner. I just said it, but I don't mind repeating it. We're gonna win, Sister. Yer gonna give a grand old speech, Blondie will do something stupid that folks'll mistake as smart, and I'm gonna beat the piss outta those two corrupt degenerates. And we're gonna make things better fer everyone, at least just this once" I stood up, and made my way ta the cellar. "It's time ta git going." "Um... actually, no, it's not.", Sabarene said. "I've arranged for a small escort to pick us up, but that won't be for a while." "Shucks, then what the heck are we gonna do in the mean-time?" Sabarene scratched her chin, then smiled. "I could read that letter from Marcela for you." "There ain't no time fer that.", I muttered. The girl with ruby red eyes raised an eyebrow. "But I just told you, we've plenty of-" I took the letter in my

hand, and tore it ta pieces with my five fingernails. “There’s no time for it.”, I repeated, softly. “We... we can’t afford ta be sentimental anymore, not towards our enemies, or towards ourselves. That stuff can come later. Fer now, we gotta win. That above everything.” Lucas and Sabarene stared at me with hesitant, apprehensive faces. “Unless y’all havea better idea.”, I said, sheepishly. “No, you’re right, Miss Axeman Red Four. It very well may be that this contest ends up being far more dangerous than we could ever imagine. My brother... Once he sets his mind out to do something, he does it. Regardless of the consequences.” “Then I reckon we just gotta make sure he don’t get ta do what he wants... regardless of the consequences.” “We’re not going to kill anyone.”, Lucas said, flatly. “What?” “I said we’re not going to kill anyone, Patchy. I see the direness of the situation, and I agree, trying to play touchy feely with Mister Crucifix is a strategy doomed for failure.” He tightened his fist. “But I refuse to become a monster to beat a monster.” I clenched my teeth. “It ain’t you that’s gonna fight.” “I know. I don’t care. Regardless of how it seems, there’s a right way to go about things, and a wrong way.” He looked at me with icy blue eyes. “Pick the right way, at least just this once.” I wavered. “I’ll... I’ll try, alright?” “Alright.”, Lucas pattered, his blue eyes softening. “I... uh... I need ta be alone fer awhile.”, I mumbled. Overcome with some sort of pressure, I fled the parlor of the ruined townhouse, and stumbled down awkwardly ta the cellar. My words ta Lucas were useless, regardless of whether or not I had intended ta honor them. There’s no such thing as a fight without a real risk of fatality. And above all else, my intentions were ta win. But I couldn’t tell him or Sabarene that. They’d just be confused by the concept, they wouldn’t understand the way a mind under duress manages itself. But I didn’t run down ta the cellar ta reflect on the

situation. I had had enough reflecting. No, there was still some stuff ta take care off. Everything in the cellar was just as I left it. There was a bag of moss, a glass bottle filled with mud, and a few bloody bandages. I took the bag of moss, and stuffed it in my chestplate. I didn't think it was something I would have ta smuggle, per se, but I didn't wanna raise suspicion when I got ta wherever the trials would be held. As fer the bloody bandages... I took em, and dipped em into the bottle of mud, being sure ta smear em good with dirt. I gulped a bit, then, killing off my sense of fear and taste, placed the bloody, muddy bandages over my cut up cheek. With that, my preparations were finished, the physical ones, at least. I glanced over at the suit of black armor. It looked as stupid as ever, but, perhaps because of the situation, seemed a bit foreboding. With a hesitant hand, I reached fer the helmet. I didn't need ta wear it, of course, but I wanted ta, just to see how things would look through its eyeslit. I inched my hand towards the spikey helmet, and- "Um... I wouldn't do that, if I were you." Sabarene strolled down the stairs, an anxious look in her eyes. "This... this armor isn't exactly the safest. To touch, or to wear." I smirked. "And yet, you did both." "R-right, but I did so out of necessity. And I rarely wore this specific set of armor... usually it was just a tin replica, which acted as a ceremonial outfit." "So when did ya wear this? And why?" "W-well... what leaders do you think are the most successful, Miss Axeman Red Four?" "The leader who provides the biggest paycheck." "Money? How plebian.", the white haired girl snorted. "No... no, a good leader isn't one who indulges people's negative traits... a good leader is one who can draw out their best traits. A good leader provides purpose, belonging, a sense of identity." "And how does that have anything ta do with this armor?" "Simple.", Sabarene said. "A great leader... one who is truly exceptional, is one whose followers

believe is part of their family. By necessity, a great leader must be a patriarch, and the unambiguous locus of authority and power, but beyond a doubt a leader still needs to be considered part of the family. If I was viewed as an outsider, or as a third party... I would never have respect, or loyalty. This armor enabled me to do what most of my soldiers did." "What, did it let ya piss inna bush?" "No. It let me kill people.", Sabarene stated, coldly. "I'm no fighter. I have minimal self-defense training, a weak constitution, and the reflexes of a geriatric. But to be part of a family... to be the patriarch, you need to lead from the front. You need to do what your subordinates do. Stain your hands with the same blood they did." "So ya learned how ta fight?" "Of course not, don't be ridiculous.", the white haired girl said dismissively. "What I did in this armor was far too brutal and inelegant to be called fighting. It was more like... flailing around in an overly violent fashion." She wiggled her frail little arms about for emphasis. "Gahaha.", I chuckled. "I killed five people like that! I did!", Sabarene protested, indignant. "I mean... the suit, it amplifies your strength, and I have a natural affinity for life metal, so-" I held up my hand, and tried to stifle my chuckles. "I believe ya, I believe ya.", I said, as Sabarene puffed her cheeks at me. "Ya just look silly as all heck like that." "S-silly? You think I'm silly?" "Excessively so, yeah.", I said, smiling. "I'm... I'm not silly...", Sabarene said, rubbing her arm. But she didn't look embarrassed. She looked sad... maybe even a bit guilty. "I'm... I'm a bad person, you know? I... I didn't just kill people on the battlefield, I also..." "Yeah, I know.", I said flatly. "You took that Brother Brounde fella, and burnt him to death. And I bet you didn't do it because of some weird type of drug, right?" "Right.", Sabarene said, her face morose. "There's an evil in me, Miss Axeman Red Four. A black pit which I don't think I'll ever be rid of. Everything I did, I thought was

right, but looking back upon my past... looking at what I was through the lens of who I am now... I... I just don't understand how I am still allowed to exist." I took inna short breath. "Allow don't have nothing to do with it. You're here, so you're here. Matters of karma, of justice... they might exist inna philosophical sense, but they ain't forces of nature, like the wind, or the snow. Evil, or good, you're here. And if you're truly bothered by the evil in you, then you might as well try and bring out what ain't." "I... I hope I do.", Sabarene said. She turned away from the armor. "Do you want to know why I had Brounde killed?", she asked, her voice distant. "No, I don't.", I answered, curt. "You... you don't?", she stammered, flabbergasted. "I already told you, Sister. There's no room left fer doubt." I placed my hand firmly on her left shoulder. "And I don't know what would happen to me if I had to doubt you." "N-no.", Sabarene stuttered, looking completely disturbed. "Nothing would happen- you're strong. Something as silly as that couldn't- it wouldn't break you down." I stared at the woman in the black habit, her face , her lips cracked, her eyes twitching, and elaborated, not wanting ta burden her any more with my nonsense, but not wanting to deceive her more than I already had. "I... uh... I think I mighta broke down a long time ago, Sister. No... no, that ain't it, I've always been... empty, on the inside. I never felta mucha anything, and I never acted on my own initiative. I just did what I thought someone like me was supposed ta do; talk tough, act tough, and on occasion, be tough." I swallowed, and allowed my verbal diarrhea ta continue to flow. "My attitude, my job, my living quarters, my wardrobe... heck, even the tonea my voice... alla it wasa justa reflection, a crude mirror of the stuff around me. I tried telling myself I was unique, that I was in control of my fate, but all I was, wasa whisper. A half formed shadow offa city without a soul." I blathered, staring

at the spikey black armor. "But... but now, fer the first time in my life...", I said, staring into Sabarene's beautiful red eyes. "I think I feel whole." "Minus the arm and eye, you mean.", she snipped, smirking. I opened my mouth ta say something, but stopped, cause it sounded too dang corny. I said it anyways: "I'd give em up all over again for the chance to meet someone like you." The disturbed look flashed across Sabarene's face again, but only fera second. "Don't... don't say things you might regret, ok?", she said, warily. "The heck is that supposed ta-" "Uh, guys?", Lucas bellowed from above. "Guys, there's something I think you need to see." Sabarene and I shook our heads at each other, then headed up the stairs. I saw what Lucas was talking about immediately. "Oh, crap!", I yelled, then, tucking Sabarene close ta my chest, dived underneath a couch. Outside of the townhouse were thousands – literally thousands, of men and women wielding swords, lancers, and spears. "Gah! I thought that Brother Marston said he came here on his lonesome!" "Apparently not, Patchy.", Lucas hissed. "I checked upstairs. We're surrounded for miles!" "Oh no. Whatever will we do." Sabarene droned, robotically. "I've got an idea.", Lucas said, sweating. He reached fer his belt, and pulled out a canister, similar ta the one he had made explode in the plaza. "This will produce a miasma of smoke, approximately three seconds after I throw it." He spun the canister around. The label on it was marked with lettering I couldn't read, which is a fancy waya saying it was marked with lettering. "We should be able to escape the crowd, if we use the smoke as cover.", Lucas said, reaching his fingers towards the pin of the canister. "Of course, I'm pretty sure one of us will have to be caught by the crowd for the other two to get away, so, you know, just give it an honest go and no hard feelings if you're the one that falls behind." "I've got a better idea, Mister Lucas." Sabarene suddenly



stood up, broke out of my grasp, and, without hesitating in the slightest, walked out of the townhouse, to the very edge of the battalion that had besieged us. "You're late.", she called out, sounding slightly annoyed. The crowd of soldiers, thousands in number, immediately dropped their swords, spears, and lances, and genuflected. And by genuflected, I mean they all bowed down and kissed the pavement. I wasn't being figurative with that last sentence, the soldiers outside the ruined townhouse literally bent over, pressed their lips against the pavement, and kissed it. The soldiers' make out session with the marble pavement woulda looked kinda funny if it wasn't so well synchronized. Though... I reckon calling the folks outsidea the townhouse "soldiers" would be pushing it, some. To be sure, they all had weapons of passable quality, and with only a few exceptions, all seemed physically fit enough. But they lacked any sort of armor. Moreover, they weren't wearing the habits Brother Christopher, Sister Julia, and Sister Kundare wore. Nah, all the massive group of people had on were robes. Linen robes, silk robes, patchwork robes, whatever the case, the folks outside the townhouse lacked any real armor. It was like they had just got outta bed and threw on the first thing they could find, there was absolutely nothing which the thousands of folks outside the townhouse had in common when it came ta their attire. Absolutely nothing, besides the color black. Oh, it varied slightly, I guess. Some folks had robes which were midnight black, some wore a more rugged, ashy kinda black, and a few even had robes which were arguably justa very dark shadea gray, but there wasn't a single soul out of the horde of thousands who had a article of clothing on em that was light, or festive, or brown. All black, from front to back. Lucas glanced at the crowd, then at Sabarene's habit, then back to the crowd. "Jesus Christ...", he gasped, putting two and two

together. As the blonde Sorcerer and I awkwardly took our places behind Sabarene, one of the floor fondlers rose to his knees. He was of a fairly lithe build, but, like a child in a cheesy Halloween costume, was wrapped from head to toe in bandages, to the point where the only parts of his body that weren't covered were his big green eyes. "My apologies for being so tardy, General.", the kneeling man rattled, raspy. "More people showed up to be part of the escort party than anticipated... I had to turn half of them away." My eye opened wide. "This... this is only half of them?!", I coughed, utterly floored. The white haired woman in the black habit paid my outburst no mind, directing her attention towards the kneeling man instead. "When I wrote the order for you to pick me up in the morning, I expected the entourage to arrive on time. Not earlier, and certainly not later. The raspy voiced man lowered his head "Once more, I apologize. We were also harassed by Kundare's dogs along the way." The red eyed girl clenched her teeth. "Don't insult dogs like that. Dogs are useful. The Fremdos City Guard is not." The raspy voiced man allowed a slight smile to come across his face. "More useful than you might think, General. One third of Sister Kundare's company have renounced their allegiance, and stand ready to support you." At the raspy man's raspy words, a few hundred of the pavement kissing folks rose up, and thumped their arms across their chest. "Trunchet stands with you too, General!", an effeminate voice cried. Three hundred more people rose to their feet, their spears glistening in the light. A pale faced girl with metal arms and metal legs quickly stood up, her movements clunky, and loud. "We of the Plebian Branch swore an oath to obey Brother Gino, regardless of personal preference..." She closed her fist, and increased the deepness of her voice by two octaves. "However, he ordered us to follow our hearts. While we respect Brother Gino, we love only you,

General!" With that, one hundred and fifty metal limbed soldiers rose, casting a shadow twice as large as the groups before them. "The Cercenlet Militia stands with you too, General!" "As does Frencheze!" Again, and again, and again, group after group after group rose, proclaiming their loyalty, love, and devotion to Sabarene, until the only one still kneeling was the raspy voiced man. "It goes without saying...", the raspy voiced man wheezed, "but the Saboteurs will forever be at your beck and call, General." He rose to his feet. "What's left of us, anyways." The white haired girl didn't smile, but the harshness on her face waned, slightly. "Your loyalty was never in question, Corcoran." Sabarene pulled her hood down, and stared out into the crowd with blood red eyes. "You are all to be commended!", she yelled, her voice deep, and bold. "Showing up to support me was more than just a calculated risk; it was an act of tremendous faith! For cycles, I have been absent, and for cycles, you all have operated under me, ignorant of my true visage! But to so quickly, and so readily assemble... everyone here has gone far above and beyond the call of duty! Your conviction and resolve is noted, and the risk you have taken will not be forgotten. But this is not the time to speak of personal glory, or of virtue. You have all assembled here to support a better future for the Collective, and the Continent as a whole. You have looked into the eyes of my brother, and found his resolve lacking. You have looked at Brother Gino, and found him weak and irrational. You have heard the concerns of the Supreme Sibling, and have seen through them as the slanderous equivocations that they are!" The crowd before us cheered. No... cheered ain't the right word. They *roared*. Sabarene closed her metal hand into a fist, and raised it high in the air, Lucas's white glove still draped over it. "Yes... I feel it!", she shouted, a raw passion present in her voice. "It's scorching every single bit of my

body! The fire of a firm resolve! I've missed that fire. That fire burned bright when we smashed the Lancers of Trunchet. The unrelenting heat of its flames carried us through the ambush at Merchenze. When Cerenletian steel clashed against our spears, we spread across the enemy's ranks like a blazing inferno. And when the Unionists of this city tried to keep us out, when they destroyed their bridges and cowered in their sea fortress, did the ocean waves extinguish our fire?" "No!", the crowd roared. "Did their stone walls damper our blaze?" "No!" "Did their so-called meritocracy hold even a flicker to our flame?" "NO!" Sabarene smiled, her teeth bare, sharp. "But of course. And do you want to know why that is? Why time after time after time, we've won, while the Unionists have lost? The answer is simple: Our merit is *real*. It is as natural a force as the winds, and the tides. We need no colors, no numbers to signify that we're strong. We ARE strong." She paused, and allowed the smile to fade away from her face. "Now, note that I did not say any of you were strong. You are *not* strong. You are normal, average. Full of potential, but also full of doubt, laziness, and vice. Under the command of Marston some of you have even grown complacent, and weak." There was an awkward lull, and the energy in the crowd, which had seemed so virile, suddenly became impotent. "That is, of course, of no consequence. Because I *am* strong.", she bellowed, no hint of doubt present in her voice. "I am the strongest person in the Collective... no... on the Continent! I have the firmest resolve, the sharpest mind-" she yanked off Lucas's glove and displayed her metal hand... "the most adaptable body!" The uncomfortable silence continued, and the glances and gaze of the crowd seemed to fall off Sabarene. The lull in the crowd's energy felt like the five seconds of stillness a snake allows its prey before striking; it was something that just couldn't be allowed to last, a discomfort which

heralded disaster. Sabarene took note of it, but she doubled down. “That *is* why you are here, is it not? Not out of nostalgia. Not out of obligation, or pride. You’re present because you wanted see that which you do not see in my brother, in Gino, even, perhaps, in Desnion. You have gathered here to witness power, to catch a glimpse of what you could never see around anyone else.” She cleared her throat. “Mark my words. Before the second sun sets, you won’t just witness power ... you will KNOW power. When I speak my piece to the Supreme Sibling, you will know power. When my retainer, Lucas Gandulfadore Melloi the third, outwits Kundare the halfwit, you will know power.” Sabarene turned to me, anda fera brief, brief instant, smiled, then placed her hand firmly on my shoulder. “When my champion- this crippled, imbecilic, half-blind, Unionist mutt standing - when she effortlessly trounces Sister Julia and Brother Christopher in combat... you will know power.” Sabarene rose up, and pressed her metal fist across her chest. “And when all is said and done, when the votes are tallied, when all the pomp and puffery of this rising period’s pointless procedures are at an end, when I retake my rightful place as the ultimate unquestioned commander of our beloved Collective’s military... YOU WILL KNOW POWER!” There was a moment of stunned silence. The horde in front of Sabarene didn’t talk, but neither did me, or Lucas. “Power.”, the spokeswoman for the Plebian branch breathed out, slowly. “Power.”, repeated the bandaged man. “Power.”, added the man with the spear. “POWER!”, chanted more and more people. “POWER! POWER! POWER! POWER!” With a vicious looking grin on her face, Sabarene pumped her fist in the air, each of her thrusts accompanied by a cry of “POWER! POWER! POWER! POWER!” I glanced at the crowd, a bit nervous, but, not wanting ta be a stick in the mud, raised my fist in the air,

too. "Uh... power, power, power.", I muttered, caught up in a phenomenon which blurred the line between stupid and terrifying. Lucas, however, didn't raise his fist in the air. His body remained rigid, and his face froze over, with a grim, resolute expression. The chanting continued for a solid two minutes, and probably would have lasted an hour, if not for- "Enough.", Sabarene shouted, swiping her hand across the crowd. "The time for words has past. The time for action has begun!" Another roar ripped through the horde gathered outside of the ruined townhouse, more fierce and fiery than before. The sharp smile came across Sabarene's face, as she turned her focus away from the crowd at large, and down towards the bandaged man, who remained at his knees. "Corcoran.", she stated, staring at the bandaged man. "Have you picked up the item I requested?" "Of course, General, but..." the bandaged man glanced skeptically at me, "I don't know how your champion will be able to utilize it properly." "You don't need to know that, Corcoran. Just be sure to have that which I requested present and ready to go before the beginning of the ceremony." Sabarene yanked her habit back up, her black hood casting a shadow over her pale face. "Sister Louisa!", she barked, with a harshness to her voice. The metal limbed woman clunked her way over to Sabarene. "Yes, General?" "You and two of your fellow transhuman monstrosities are to march down into the cellar, and transport my platemail to the stadium." The black haired woman with metal limbs seemed a bit hesitant. "Is... is that really all you want us to do-" "Of course it's not all I want you to do, imbecile.", Sabarene spat, spitefully. "Fiat only knows how many marks were spent attaching those lifemetal limbs to your torsos, to use the Plebian corps in just a logistical support capacity would be a misstep, not to mention retarded. But a normal person might get cut up if they carried my armor. You and your comrades in

metal arms don't run the risk of slashed wrists or sliced knees, so swallow your pride and act as a packmule, packmule." The black haired woman faltered, then narrowed her eyes. "Y-yes General!", the black haired woman squeaked, suddenly ten times as demure as she before. "Brother Dirk! Brother Doug! Help me carry the General's luggage!" She, and two other people with metal limbs clumsily clunked into the ruined townhouse, presumably fetching that which we had unintentionally left behind. "Heh.", the bandaged man grunted. "It's like you never left, General." "And how would you know that, Corcoran?", Sabarene scoffed. "This is the first time I've ever spoken to you with my own voice." "Physical form mean little to Saboteurs.", the raspy voiced man wheezed. "Voices change, muscles atrophy, hair grays, health falters. But the mind and resolve of the truly great never weaken." "Their minds do decay, actually.", Lucas cut in, rolling his eyes. "It's called Alzheimer's disease, and-" Sabarene covered the blonde boy's mouth with her right hand, and stared Corcoran down. "Your flattery disturbs me, Corcoran. It makes me think you're hiding something." She paused, and thought it over for maybe half a second. "Where are the rest of the Saboteurs?" The bandaged man with green eyes wavered. "D-dead.", he throatily breathed out, his voice up an octave. "Dead, or fled." "Dead?", Sabarene questioned, calm. "Yeah, dead. He just said that, there ain't no need to repeat it-" the white haired girl pressed her hand over my mouth as well. "They're all dead? Then I suppose they weren't very good Saboteurs." "They're not all dead. Some escaped to the Independent Kingdoms-" "Cravens are less useful than corpses, Corcoran. How did *my* Saboteurs die?" "The false General slaughtered them all." "W-wait, really?", Sabarene gasped, her voice cracking. "Marston killed them?!" "Yes.", the bandaged man hacked out. "He assigned them the same black

collars he had placed on the Unionists, and sentenced them to manual labor... on the bridge. Not a single soul lasted more than a cycle before the waves got to them.”

Sabarene looked taken aback, but only for an instant. “I didn’t think Marston had it in him.”

she stated, calmly, then removed her hand from Lucas’s mouth. “Are you sure you’re the only Saboteur left, Corcoran?” “As sure as I could reasonably be.”, the bandaged man grunted. “Though it’s always possible that the Nameless One is around,

somewhere.” “She is, but she’s playing the role of an imbecile at the moment.”

Sabarene snorted. “She’s pretending to be a dancer. I’ve no need for someone so

useless.” I ripped her hand off my mouth. “Dancers ain’t useless.”, I hissed, angry for some reason. “They’re an integral part of a healthy, culturally diverse society.” The

white haired girl ignored my outburst, but kept her hand off my mouth. “In any event,

General, I am yours to command.”, Corcoran said, each of his words sounding like a

sheet of sandpaper being rubbed against another sheet of sandpaper. “My body isn’t what it used to be, but-“ “Physical forms mean little to Saboteurs, right?”, Sabarene repeated. “I

doubt the veracity of that claim, but you’ve always served me well, Corcoran. You, by yourself, is enough. But I doubt I’ll have need of your services any time soon. So long

as Marston plays fair, then so shall I.” “But your Brother isn’t playing fair, General. He’s

rigged this tournament against you, and your champion. I wouldn’t put it past him to do

something drastic.” “If he does something drastic, then I’ll do something drastic. But as it

stands, there is no way Marston can defeat me. He is an incompetent, emotional half-wit, almost as much as that whip obsessed freak which he consorts with.” The

bandaged man shifted his green eyes to me. “I’m not sure, General. Your champion...

she definitely seems like she has resolve, but-“ “Is a half-blind cripple? Of course she is.



And that will make it all the more humiliating for Marston and Gino when she wins.”

“That’s not what I was going to say, General.”, the bandaged man corrected her, as politely as someone with a tumor in his throat could. “Though everyone in this horde respects and understands your choice of champion, the fact that she’s a Unionist might not go over well with those in the other Collective Cities.” “That is irrelevant. My hands are tied as to who I can pick as my champion, Marston saw to that last rising period.” “I know that, General.”, the bandaged man gasped. “I was not suggesting you petition Desnion for a replacement champion. I do, however, think you need a better angle to work. The image of a Unionist triumphing over the Supreme Sibling’s personal entourage will not go over well, that much I can assure you.” Sabarene flared her nostrils. “And what alternative do you suggest, Corcoran?” The raspy voiced man coughed, and stuck his hand into his tattered old costume. He shuffled through a variety of old, sticky, bandages, and produced... a small, black collar. “Have her wear this.”

“What?!” I coughed. “Onea the slave collars? Like hell I’m wearing that!” Lucas shook his head at the small leather accessory. “Yeah, black really isn’t your color, Patchy.”

“That ain’t the issue, Ruckus!” Sabarene stared at the collar, and briskly nodded his head. “There’s no need for that, Corcoran. This Unionist is not just my Champion, she’s my friend. I won’t degrade her for the sake of a gimmick.” I don’t know why, but soon as she said that, I snatched the stupid collar outta the bandaged man’s hand. “You won’t, but I will.”, I grumbled as I slung part of the collar across my neck, pissed off at myself.

“So what is this angle yer yakking about, Cocoa-rin? Should I act likea moron ta make Sister Suthenbrene here look smarter? Or is this onea them noble savage thingies? Tell me what ta do and I’ll do it, but it sure as heck better be constructive ta the overall

effort.” “All you need to do is wear the collar, champion.” I frowned at the bandaged man, and blushed a bit. “Don’t call me champion, it sounds weird.” “Is Unionist acceptable?” “It ain’t, but that sounds a heckuva lot better than champion, so I reckon I can roll with it.” The bandaged man adjusted one of his many bandages, and shook his head, shortly. “Unionist, all you need to do is wear that collar. By doing so, you signify that you are a volunt-“ “Slave.”, I interrupted, cutting off the bandaged man without a care in the world. “Means I’m a slave. Call it Volunteer all ya want, it means I’m a slave.” “Yes.”, the bandaged man answered, bluntly. “Gah, well, if it’s a slave I gotta act like ta make Firecrouch and Brother Marston eat it, then I’ll act like a slave. Emphasis on the *act*, I better not wake up on a slave ship with my kidneys missing once this is all over.” I narrowed my eye. “Hey, wait a tick, how come you ain’t asking Blondie ta wear one of those stupid collars?” “Because I’m the exotic act, Patchy!”, Lucas boasted, throwing his baton high up in the air. “I’m supposed to be foreign, and strange. That’s what people seeking to be entertained *want*, a bit of mystery, some spice to their mundane life.” “If folks care about the exotic, then why do I gotta be the one ta emasculate myself?” “It’s different venues, Patchy. I’m theatre, and you’re sports. Sports fans are much more territorial.” “Really, Ruckus? Cause I think that’s a load of bullshi-” As Lucas and I exchanged words and talked about the nuances of performance, I focused some of my attention on the plaza outside of the townhouse. To be sure, the scene by itself was somewhat disturbing, what with the thousands upon thousands of soldiers and all. In Provesh, one rule of thumb was not ta enter a bar with more than fifteen people in it. It don’t matter how disciplined someone is or not; give a whole buncha people weapons and keep them in the same spot long enough, and someone is gonna end up stabbed in

the kidneys. That wasn't the issue, though. There just was an unsettling feeling in the crowd, an unsettling feeling that transcended the normal fear of being in a place with lotsa pointy things. It felt like there were more than just friendly eyes upon me, that there was something dark, and evil, closer to me now than it had ever been before. Then I glanced at Sabarene's face, and all the worry and doubt faded away. For some reason. "Um... Are... are you sure you want to wear that?", the red eyed girl asked me, her voice and disposition gentle again, like it was supposed to be. "I mean.... It wouldn't be that much of an issue if you didn't. If you manage to defeat Sister Julia and Brother Christopher, that by itself should be enough." I half-smiled. "I don't *want* to wear this. It's humiliating, offensive, and tacky. But if wearing a black slave collar is what takes to get an audience of jingoistic geezers to not freak out when I pummel those two halberd wielding hacks to a pulp, then I'll wear it." A soft smile formed on Sabarene's face. "Thank you.", she said, sounding somewhat relieved. She tied the collar around my neck, and, with a small metal clip of some kind, locked it in place. "I'll make this up to you later, I promise.", she babbled, her face pink. "You don't need to make anything up to me, Sister. All ya need to do is win." I said, then grimaced. The collar felt ridiculous. It was itchy, it was tight on my neck, and it made me look like even more of a freak than usual. But not wearing it was outta the question. There's a rule of thumb when it comes to dealing with people of a higher status than you; ya don't go out of yer way to make them feel threatened. All the qualifications in the world mean nothing if the fella who pays yer bills hates yer guts. Sometimes you need to swallow your pride and degrade yourself, so as to not seem as too much of a threat. There's a fine line between knowing you're place and being a pathetic weakling, but as a rule of thumb, people are more

lenient towards an affable idiot than a disagreeable smartass. That ain't to say you need to *be* weak, ya just need to *seem* weak, sometimes. Or maybe not, I dunno. I'm an idiot, so sometimes I say stuff that ya shouldn't pay much mind to. "I hate to come across as impatient," Lucas chimed, "but I think if we loitered here any longer we'd ruin all the hype. Now might be a good time to get-" He suddenly glanced at the leftmost part of the horde, where there were thirty or so morose looking men, muscular, bald, and dressed in robes which looked rugged and makeshift even by the standards of the crowd. "Ah!", the blonde boy remarked. "Are those gentleman carrying drums, Sabarene?" "Yes, Mister Lucas, they are." the white haired girl answered, with a light hearted smile on her face. "I should probably have them flogged." Blondie ignored that remark, and cupped his hands over his mouth. "Hey! Hey, Merchenzians! Yeah, you bald dudes with the drums! Lay down a beat, yo!" The bald men looked up at Lucas like they had just discovered love for the first time, but faltered as they saw Sabarene's disapproving glare. The girl with blood red eyes glared at the bald men, whose eyes became like that offa buncha baby sloths. A few moments of intensity passed, until... "Fine, fuck it, play the drums!" And boy, did the drums *play*. Thirty men amongst a crowd of thousands, but their rhythm, their coordination.... their VOLUME, it drowned out all auxiliary noise. Strong, bold, and intense, the noise of the drums began matching the beat of my heart. I wavered, some, but Sabarene... as the snares crashed, and banged, and spat... she smiled. Once more, she yanked down her hood, and with a wild expression on her dainty face... "All divisions, forward march! Our destination is the Coliseum by the sea!" Immediately, without the slightest bit of hesitation, the horde of soldiers formed perfectly arranged ranks, and turned forty five degrees, away from the townhouse, and

towards the sea. Sabarene grabbed my arm, and Lucas's, and walked, briskly, through the ranks. And, as the drums ripped and roared, as the soldiers in our path stepped to the side like we were the second coming of John Lennon, I began smiling, too. It's amazing how easy a trip through the city can be when you have an army backing you up. Every step is invigorating, every fearful look you get from the passerbys is almost orgasmic. The streets seemed to bend, and to fade, and to blur. I don't know if it was because of the excitement, or because Sabarene was leading the way, but it felt like no time at all had passed before the three... thousand of us ended up out of the canals of Fremdos, and right up on the docks. The docks of Fremdos were a far cry away from the docks of Provesh. There were no wrecked ships, and no bodily fluids ta be found anywhere on the piers. And it wasn't abandoned, neither. Nah, the complete opposite, in fact. The docks were over-crowded, pushed past the point of capacity. Hundreds of ships lined the piers, big ships too, ships three times the size of the wooden wrecks you'd find in Provesh. They were made out of metal, and, without a single exception, looked identical ta each other. "Holy crap.", I gasped out, floored at the design of them. Sabarene caught my dumbfounded face, and smirked, confidently. "I bet you never saw ships like this back when you were a smuggler, Miss Axeman Red Four." "If I had a ship like this I wouldn't have had ta become a smuggler in the first place." There was one difference, though, between the hundreds of ships. The sails. One third of em had white sails, another third had gold, and the last third, their sails were... "Black sails. Now whoever chose them has good taste. Ya can't be spotted at night if ya sail with black sails." "Those are mine, naturally.", Sabarene boasted, taking long strides with her dainty legs. "Oh really? Wouldya mind giving me one?" "Sure, as soon as you

pronounce my name correctly. "Ain't happening, it's too much fun messing with ya, General." "She's not the General yet, Patchy. Right now Sabarene's just an Ex-General." "Aw, shucks, ain't you ever hear of positive thinking, Ruckus?" "I've heard of it aplenty. I place absolutely no stock in it!", Lucas said, twirling his baton around merrily. "You succeed, or you fail. You wow the crowd, or get booed off stage. There is no middle ground." The girl with eyes the color of ripped intestines tilted her head at Lucas, and smiled, her teeth sharp. "Is that so, Mister Lucas? But what about mediocrity? Isn't that a middle ground between success and failure?" The Sorcerer in the frayed purple tophat chuckled. "Not a chance. Mediocrity is just a fancy word for failure, Sister." "You're wrong, Mister Lucas~", Sabarene sing-songed, as we passed through the docks. "Mediocrity exists. It's probably behind us, and it's DEFINITELY in front of us. And it *is* distinct from failure." "Oh? How so?" "Failure can be noteworthy, Mister Lucas. But *no one* remembers mediocrity." I licked my lips and grinned. "Izzat so? Then let's make sure we either succeed like crazy, or fail so hard that the bards sing of our incompetence fer cycles ta come." We came ta the end of the docks, and were greeted by a big behemoth of a building. Gigantic, circular, and made out of coarse black stone, I could only assume the structure in front of us was the coliseum. And boy, outta all the retardly large buildings I had seen, the coliseum mighta been the retardiest. Besides it's sheer size, the coliseum was about a mile out in the water, which at that point was so deep that it looked purple compared ta the water near the canals. There were four long wooden bridges leading into the coliseum, but the bridges were small, and thin, ta the point where Lucas, Sabarene, and I could barely manage to stand side by side by side. What this meant, of course, was that the folks behind us were scrunched up into a

compact line, which led all the way back into Fremdos. Not that that mattered. Standing at the north entrance to the coliseum, metal whip in hand, was Sister Kundare. She wasn't wearing her usual grey get-up though. Nah, she had traded in her old grey habit for a pristine looking white one. Course, I reckon her wardrobe was besides the point, seeing as she cracked her whip at our feet the moment we made eye contact with her. "Not one step further, imposter.", she hissed at Sabarene. "You're seriously still pushing that story, Kundare? It was a clever enough ploy at first, but no one is dumb enough to buy into it now." "Master Marston does not lie. You *are* an imposter, Sabarene. You're a snake in human skin." The girl with ruby red eyes closed the distance between her and Kundare in an instant, and cupped the blonde woman's chin in her metal hand. "Maybe so, Kundare, but I've every right to enter the coliseum. And unless you want one of my fingers embedded in your thick, stubborn skull, you'll let me and my entourage inside." The blonde haired woman flinched, but stood her ground. "You and your retainers are allowed inside, but your army of cultists will have to wait and see if Fiat is generous enough to bestow upon them a ticket." "Oh, the seats inside are being raffled? How fortunate for my brother!" A fury came over Sister Kundare's face, and she slammed her skull against Sabarene's. "Don't you DARE call Master Marston your brother. You disgusting, presumptuous-" With a casual sweep of her leg, Sabarene tripped the whip-wielding woman, and sent her splashing into the ocean. Lucas and I peered over the bridge. "Uh... is she going to be ok, or-" "Just wait for it.", Sabarene said, calmly. "AH! You honourless bitch!", Kundare gasped, thrashing and flailing about. "Is something wrong, Sister Kundare?", Sabarene asked, goofy-ass grin on her face. "You look a bit damp." The blonde haired woman scowled, her anger outweighing her shame. "You're

not going to win, you hear me?! Marston will stop you, just like last time!” Sabarene stopped smiling. “Be happy you’re the mother of my niece, Kundare.” The woman with long white hair did a about face. “It seems that Brother Gino doesn’t want an audience which might speak out against him!”, the girl with ruby red eyes shouted, to the thousands of folks behind her. “T-that’s not true!”, Kundare gasped, furiously treading water. “It has always been tradition to have the seats of the election be raffled out to-“ Jeers, boos, and general murmurings of discontent drowned her out more than the water did. “It is of no concern!”, Sabarene shouted. “The crowd may support me, or the crowd might condemn me, but they will NOT stop me. As for those of you who might be left out... do not despair! Be it the cheers of victory that ring out or the tears of defeat which bellow, you will know of my triumph BY THE VOLUME!” She lowered her voice. “Corcoran.”, she said to the bandaged man. “Regardless of if you win the raffle or not, I expect your presence inside of the Coliseum.” “I’ll... I’ll try.”, the man with green eyes wheezed. “My body isn’t what it used to be, and the amount of disguises I can wear is limited.” “Then don’t wear a disguise.”, Sabarene snipped. “Just make sure that you’re inside, and that Marston doesn’t try and pull any tricks.” “You don’t trust yer brother much, do ya?” “I trust him to have a chip on his shoulder and do everything in his power to stop me.” “Yeah, see, that... that’s sorta the exact oppositea trust.” “No, no, it’s trust.”, Lucas chimed in. “A perverse, messed up kind of trust, but trust nonetheless. When you can rely on someone to be unreliable, that’s a comfort in it’s own way.” “What?! No it ain’t!” Lucas shrugged his shoulders. “To me it is, Patchy. For the longest time I’ve been missing someone... and to see them act just as self-destructive and irrational as ever makes it seem like they were never gone.” “Yeah, well, you need ta git



yer head screwed on straight, Ruckus, someone like that ain't good fer ya ta be around." "Christ you're dense.", the boy in the purple tophat sighed. "Duh. I'm wearing armor, of course I'm dense." "I wasn't being literal." "I know. I wasn't, neither. All this stuff that's been going on... perhaps I've been overstepping my place a bit, by questioning it. I ain't the type ta question stuff, or ta mull it all over. It's my job ta do the fighting and the lifting. Sister, you and Ruckus should be the ones ta exercise yer minds. What happens next is all on you." And that was mostly true, what I said. I mean, I wasn't trying ta lie to Sabarene and Lucas. What would happen in the coliseum... it wasn't nothing a moron like me could really influence. Too much. But I could affect it a bit. Just a bit, if I played my cards right, and used the stuff I had prepared earlier. I reckoned that if I did affect things a bit, well, then there was no need fer Lucas or Sabarene ta know of my intentions. After all, ya don't tell yer friends when yer going out ta get a gallon of milk. Ya just do it, and if they see ya doing it they don't mind, because they understand that something as mundane as getting a gallon of milk ain't something that needs ta be common knowledge. It ain't like I was hiding a secret from em, I was just not telling em something which they didn't really need ta know. I patted my chest plate, then my cheek. The glass bottle, the bag fulla moss, and the muddy bandage was still where I had placed em. Sabarene said a boastful farewell ta the folks behind her, and, me and Lucas in line with her, marched into the coliseum. The atmosphere changed immediately. What was bright, warm, and open suddenly became dark, cold, and cramped. The coliseum's inside was wet, and poorly ventilated. Moss grew on the ceiling, which dripped with seawater. It was made entirely out of a dark blue stone. "What sorta morons would build a place like this?", I asked. "Unionists.", Sabarene

responded. "This place was used for death matches between Unassigned and all sorts of beasts. I believe one match in particular had Unassigned Children five cycles of age try and run away from a pack of malnourished wolves for as long as they could. I believe the last child alive won a heavily coveted prize." "And what prize was that?", Lucas asked. "An arrow to the neck." "G-guh...", I stuttered, feeling guilty. "Oh, oh, don't feel bad, Miss Axeman Red Four!", Sabarene quickly interjected, waving her hands around all flustered-like "The coliseum was out of use for one hundred and fifty cycles, so that whole child killing thing happened waaaaaaaaaaaaaay before the Collective took this city over. You contemporary Unionists aren't *that* bad." Visions offa man with a red lance flashed before me. "No...", I muttered, darkly. "we're worse." "Balderdash!", a loud, boastful voice cried out. "There is nobility and valor in all peoples, Unionist! To judge the souls of some by the wickedness of others is nothing more than short-sighted cowardice!" Standing at the end of the damp corridor, halberd in hand, was Brother Christopher. The white haired man stared at Blondie and covered his mouth in shock. "In the name of Fiat! I knew my lord gave your face a pummeling, Sorcerer, but I didn't imagine it to be so severe!" "The bruises on Mister Lucas's face were my doing, Christopher." Sabarene said, staring at the man in monochrome robes. "Sadly, that doth not surprise me in the slightest, Ex-General Sabarene." "So what, are you here ta try and ambush us, or something?', I asked, deeply regretting not hiding a hatchet or six on my person. "Doth I look like an honourless cad, Unionist? My lord hath ordered me to see to your safe travels through this watery catacomb, that and nothing more."

Sabarene glared at the monochrome clad man "You mean he's ordered you to keep an eye on us, right?" "Hmph, I suppose he wished for that as well. But remember, my lord

is, after all, corrupt.” “Very well, Brother Christopher. Lead us to wherever Desnion wants us to be. If you try to and harm us, I assure you there will be consequences.” Sabarene yanked me towards her as we followed the halbered wielding man deeper into the coliseum . “Why is Brother Christopher talking like that?”, she whispered. “Like what?” “Like an imbecile.” “I think he sawa renaissance fair or something, and got really into it.” “For the love of Fiat... three cycles ago the man didn’t even talk! He just followed orders and slept, and I’m not too sure about the sleeping thing.” “People change, Ex-General Sabarene.”, the white haired man commented, apparently a mite more perceptive than I had given him credit fer. “Desnion and Julia’s light hath vanquished the darkness within me.” He glared at Sabarene, and fer the first time, looked angry. “And that darkness will never return.” I took advantage of Brother Christopher’s sudden scrutiny, and pulled out from my leather breast plate the small bag of moss. Casually, but so the white haired man could see me clearly, I smeared the moss on my face. The application of wall fungus ta my face caught Brother Christopher’s attention right quick, along with Lucas, and Sabarene. “The hell are you doing, Patchy?”, Blondie asked, confused. “S’justa tradition.”, I blurted. “ Don’t pay it no mind, Ruckus.” “What, is that war paint or something?” “War paint?”, I snorted. “Why the heck would I wear warpaint when I’m about ta put onna helmet? No one would see it.” “Then what the hell is that stuff?”, Lucas said, his completely justified skepticism making him the perfect pasty. “Oh, itsa deadly poison.”, I said inna monotone. “It... it’s a what?!” , Sabarene shrieked, looking very alarmed. “Poison. Y’know, the stuff that goes into yer skin and stops yer heart.” “Then why the hell are you applying it to your face?!” , Blondie ejaculated, looking just as alarmed as Sabarene. “It ain’t a poison ta ME, Ruckus.” “It’s... it’s not?” “No. Us

Axeman have been using this stuff since we were five cycles old.”, I lied, looking away from Brother Christopher, but making damn sure he saw the consistency and color of the moss. “We’ve built up an immunity to it, cause we started out only putting a pinky full of it onta our mugs.” “Um... that’s all very well and good, but why would you put poison on your face in the first place?” “Er... tradition, fer one.”, I said, lying through my teeth. “And, uh...” I turned my head towards the white haired man, and made a face like I had just been caught with my pants down. “Don’t tell anyone about this, but this poison gives yer mind a bitta kick. Usually that doesn’t matter, cause even a teeny bit of it will cause ya ta vomit uppa storm, then die, but if ya build up an immunity to it ya can do some pretty kickass things. Yer perception gets heightened, and all that.” “Ah, yes, I’ve heard of that before!”, Brother Christopher boasted, then glared at me. “It’s called the placebo effect.” “No, no, it’s legit!”, I said, then stuck out a finger of the moss and offered it ta the man in monochrome robes. “Do ya wanna put some on yerself, and see?” The white haired man smirked. “I apologize, Unionist, but it will take more than that to poison me.” “W-what?”, I stuttered, sounding shocked. “I wasn’t trying ta poison ya! I was just offering ya a gift, y’know, in the spirit of good natured competition!” “It is of no use, Unionist. I sympathize with your plight, and I recognize that you having to fight me and my noble confidant at once is unfair to say in the least. But it is only fair that one serving one so unfair be given an unfair situation to deal with.” I didn’t say nothing, but, I grit my teeth, stomped on the ground angrily, and, inna elaborate manner, jerked my hand back, and let my shoulders slump inna defeated fashion. “Christ, Four.”, Lucas hissed to me, as we followed Brother Christopher deeper into the coliseum. “You need to think these things through a bit more. I mean, not only was that the most half-assed attempt

at poisoning I've ever seen, it was about as well thought out a plan as McClellan's Peninsula campaign." "Uh, what?" "What you just did was very stupid, ok?", the blonde boy sputtered with a scowl. "If you HAD succeeded in poisoning that overly theatrical git – And thank god you DIDN'T - you, me, and Sabarene would be arrested on charges of conspiracy. And unlike before, those arrests would have been ENTIRELY WARRANTED." "G-guh...", I stuttered, acting like a kid with his hand stuck in a cookie jar. "S-sorry, Ruckus. I'm... I'm just scared, is all." Lucas's eyes softened. "I understand, Four. But please, believe me when I say this: The election means nothing in the grand scheme of things, nor does the continent, the modules, magic, or anything. The only thing that matters is-" "You keeping yer promise ta yer friend, yeah, I get it." "No, that's not what I was going to say.", Lucas said, softly. "The only thing that matters, is you. To me, at least." I smirked. "Very funny, Ruckus." "I wasn't kidding.", he said, soberly. "Guh-" "So for Christ's sake, stop fucking around with poison and the like, you differently abled piece of shit.", he hissed, flicking my left ear. I spent the rest of the walk through the damp corridor looking dejected... partly cause I felt like a gigantic piece of crap for jerking around Lucas and Sabarene so much, but mostly cause I knew Brother Christopher was watching me. Emotional states are weird; even if you're the biggest hardass around, you can't stop yourself from getting sad, or angry, or tired once in a while. Even billionaire CEOs get upset from time to time, hormones and Sometimes ya gotta power through a certain emotional state ta git something done, but more often than not it's a good idea to use the way yer feeling to yer advantage. Like, say yer happy that ya got a raise at work, and yer husband or wife or significant other asks ya why yer in such a good mood. I mean, you can be straight up with em, and say it's

because ya gotta raise, but why the heck would ya wanna waste yer emotional state? It would be better ta tell em that yer happy because of how beautiful they are or something – You being happy will let ya sell the lie much better than if you were sad. Shucks, I ain't really being all too clear, am I? Tell ya what, I'll try and talk all fancy fera minute, maybe it'll clear things up fer ya. To put things simply – words and actions are easy to fake, but emotions aren't. While you should never leave a deception up to chance, it is for the best to try and run with your current emotional condition, rather than attempt to work against it. In retrospect, the ploy I utilized in the presence of Brother Christopher was moronic, but not for the reasons Lucas had assumed. It didn't matter if the man with white hair had dropped dead from poison or not – my attempt in and of itself was ample grounds for him to run a halberd through my chest. The fact that he didn't was a complete and utter miracle. From the beginning I knew I would have some leeway when it came to interacting with Brother Christopher, due to his demonstrated tendency towards honor and mercy, but his decision to let what I did slide was, in hindsight, overly generous on his part. And foolish, but sometimes it's best to act the part of a fool. Least, I reckon so, anyways. Being a dumbass never hurt me none. The white haired man led me, Lucas, and Sabarene through a set of stone doors, into the center of the coliseum. "Aw, crap.", I cursed, looking around. We had emerged out of the damp corridor into a section of stadium seating, and the view was the type you'd see if ya were lucky enough ta have box seats at Wrigley field. Thousands upon thousands upon thousands of seats circled around the inner part of the coliseum, all centered in on, not a diamond shaped field, but a stage. A circular stage, just like the one I had had in my dream, except ten times as large, and completely made of brown,

sea-washed stone. And standing right in the center of the circular stone stage, was Sister Julia, Desnion and Brother Gino. "Ah, General! You made it! I'm so glad to see you!" the orange haired man called out, looking pumped. "I understand that it might just be reflex for you at this point Gino, but Sister Sabarene is no longer the holder of that title, Gino. You shouldn't be speaking so deferentially" the chubby blonde Supreme Sibling said, sternly. "O-oh. Did I mess up?", the orange haired man asked, meekly. "Somewhat." "O-oh.", Gino squeaked, then scowled up at us. "Ah, General! You made it! Go fuck yourself!", he shouted, angrily. "Dude, that's not what Dez wanted you to go for at all, man.", the black haired woman with the halberd said, sounding half-asleep as always. "I know.", Gino glumly mumbled, as Sabarene, Lucas, Brother Chistopher and I walked down to the stage. The moment we got onto the stage, Sabarene knelt. "It is an honor and a blessing to see you in good health, Supreme Sibling Desnion." The blonde haired man in monochrome robes rolled his eyes. "It's a hernia to see you again, Sabarene. I was under the impression you had died." "Nope!", the girl with ruby red eyes said with a smile. "I'm just as happy and healthy as ever!" "The rising period you show genuine emotions is the rising period I give up food and drink.", Desnion scoffed, staring at Sabarene with a cold gaze. "Why did you decide to return?" The girl with ruby red eyes smiled gently. "Why do you use the public coffers on whores, Supreme Sibling Desnion?" "They're called sex-workers, Sabarene, not whor-" "Shut up, Mister Lucas.", Sabarene growled, and returned Desnion's intense stare with a glare of her own. "If you really must know, I returned because I felt like it. Evidently, there was somewhat of a demand for me." "Demand reflects what the people want, not what they need.", the somewhat-short chubby man said, keeping his voice firm. "I have no power to stop you,

Sabarene, but do you really think your return is warranted, or needed? Your brother was doing just fine as General.” “My brother isn’t a member of the Order of Fiat. Furthermore, if I didn’t step in when I did, he and Gino would have killed each other.”

“That’s right!”, Gino chimed in. “If not for the General, I would have murdered Marston!”

The orange haired man raised an eyebrow. “Wait, why is that a bad thing, again?”

“Cause murder isn’t groovy, man.”, Sister Julia said, leaning on her halberd. “Didn’t your mom teach you that when you were a cub?” “Of-of course she did.”, Gino said, rubbing his metal hands together lamely. “But she’s dead, so who cares what she thinks?” “I doth not think that was the point my noble confidant was making, lord Gino.” “Enough!”, Sabarene bellowed, causing Brother Gino, Brother Christopher, Desnion, and Sister Julia to wince. “I didn’t come here to listen to you imbeciles insult each other, I came to win back my rightful place as commander. So are we going to get the election process started, or not? Because I’ve already got an army behind me, and I’m not so committed to tradition to allow the idiocy of a corrupt cabal to get in the way of my return to power.”

The man in the monochrome robes narrowed his eyes. “There’s no need to be so impatient, Sister. You will have your election process soon enough, wine drinking, speech making, and all.” Sabarene curled her metal hand into a fist. “Right after you make a few last moment amendments, no doubt. What else do you plan on doing, I wonder? Handicapping the speech event by ripping out my tongue? Fixing the battle of wits by giving Mister Lucas a lobotomy?” An unfamiliar fury came over Sabarene’s face.

“Let me make this clear, Desnion. If you try and make things any more uneven for my champion, I’ll raze this city to the ground.” Desnion glanced at Sabarene and smiled, his white teeth shining. “Do I look like the kind of man who would do any of that, Sister?”



“Yes.”, me, Sabarene, and Lucas said, simultaneously. “Fair enough, but don’t act like I’m being completely *unfair* here.”, Desnion said, diplomatically. “Think of how odd this is for your brother and I, Sabarene, then think of how much odder still it would be to the common citizen. You go missing for over three cycles, and then you return out of the blue, demanding your position back. What’s more, you insist that one of your retainers be a Unionist, of all things, and that the other be a man who thinks he’s a wizard.”

“Sorcerer.”, Lucas said, through clenched teeth. “Whatever. The point is, Sabarene, I’m actually being very generous by allowing this election to occur. Your champion having to fight both Brother Christopher and Sister Julia at the same time means absolutely nothing compared to the nonsense I’m permitting.” “You’re not permitting anything, Desnion.”, Sabarene countered, her voice low. “You’re just reacting to a force you know you can’t control.” “Everything can be controlled, Sabarene.”, Desnion responded, a hint of irritation mixed in with his diplomatic tone. “Even one’s nausea, and disgust.”

“Aw, heck, c’mon, stop fighting, the lotta ya.”, I said, making eye contact with Desnion.

“I’m an outsider, it’s true. So is Ruckus, in like, a bajillion ways. But I think alla us... even you, Sister, need ta calm our heads, some, and remember why we’re having this whole election thingy.” I sucked inna deep breath. “It’s so folks don’t die.” I glanced at Sister Julia and Brother Christopher. “Er, other folks, that is, I might bite it, and so might you two, y’know, given the fact that we’re gonna be smacking each other around with axes later on. But if we didn’t have this election thingy running, we’d have ta have an out and out brawl. Sister Sanetharene-“ “Sabarene.” “Sabarene here would have all them folks in black fight all yer folks in white, gray, and monochrome, and it would all bea huge mess. So if nothing else, let’s just play this situation as it is. Cause the lives of

us nine ain't nothing compared ta the lives of all the people here in Fremdos, Union folk, Fiatist, and the like, there ain't no sense in risking them because we don't like the rules that have been laid out." Desnion looked at me for a long while, and scratched his chin. "You don't seem to be lying, Miss Axeman Red Four, so I'll take what you just said at face-value. Yes, it is for the best we all play... and ACT nice. Fairly soon the spectators and moderators will be allowed in the Coliseum, so once that happens, we should leave all our grudges behind us. It wouldn't do for this little power struggle to extend beyond these walls." The economic arbitrator smiled, and extended his hand to Sabarene. "Do I have your cooperation, *General*? Can I trust that you'll accept the election results, and not try and pull a coup?" Sabarene grimaced, "You have my cooperation insofar as I have yours, Supreme Sibling. And yes, of course I'll respect the decision of the people, whatever it may be", the white haired girl said, shaking the chubby blonde man's hand with her metal one. "Then it's settled. I'd wish you good luck, but if it isn't obvious enough already, I'm hoping for Brother Gino's victory." "You don't need to hope.", a deep baritone bellowed from above. I glanced up at the sound of the voice. Making his way down from the top of the stadium was Marston, his white cape scrapping across the stone benches as he made his way down to the stage. "If you truly wish for Brother Gino to be the next General, then it can happen. It can happen right now, without any chance for failure." Desnion looked up at the gaunt man with a dry grin. "What, you want me to fix the election, Marston? I might be corrupt, but I'm not unprincipled. The will of the people is the will of the people. Besides, these little conflicts of interest are never so easy to resolve. It's not like we'll be able to wrap everything up neatly if we just pay off an official here, stuff a ballot box there, or-" "Kill Sabarene." "E-excuse me?!", Desnion

coughed, thrown outta his rhythm. "Kill Sabarene.", the black haired man repeated, calmly. "Take a sword, or a lance, and shove it through her throat. Or cut her head off with a halberd, or strangle her, the method does not matter. Kill her, right here, and right now, and there will be nothing to worry about." "There'll be something ta worry about, alright!", I shouted, stepping in fronta Sabarene. "You wanna lay a hand on her, yer gonna havta go through me!" "Kill her champion as well.", Marston stated, his tone dry. "Sister Kundare has locked all the doors, and I've posted No one will know besides the six of us." The chubby blonde man winced. "People will ask questions-" "We can lie to them. As for the fallback, I'll bear the full brunt of responsibility. If you wish, I'll do the act myself." "M-marston...", Sabarene stammered, her voice cracking. "You disgusting cretin!" Brother Gino shouted, his metal arms glistening as he stepped towards the man in white. "To speak so insolently towards the former General.... Towards your own sister!" "SHE. IS. NOT. MY. SISTER!" Marston bellowed, causing Brother Gino ta shrink away from him. The black haired man took in a short breath, and adjusted his glasses. "The word "sister" is part of the concept of "family." Family is nothing more than a social construct.", he stated, his voice calm sounding. "It is an arbitrary definition that individuals with the same progenitors use to strengthen their psychological bonds, a survival strategy based upon the foundations of similarity, convenience, and circumstance." "That doesn't mean it doesn't exist, Marston!", Sabarene cried, clutching her chest. "Can you really look me in the eyes, and tell me that you don't consider Sister Kundare your wife? That you don't consider Marcela your daughter?" Marston turned his back towards Sabarene. "*They* are my family. But you... you're the ghost of a girl that died long ago. Along with mother, and father." "M-marston...", Sabarene

stammered, clutching her chest. Marston grabbed the chubby blonde man by the collar, and pulled him in close. "Time's running out, Desnion. If we're going to kill these two and dispose of them, we'll need to do it quickly. Otherwise there may be complications." "Are you out of your mind, Marston?!", the man with the mildly receding hairline spat. "I am not going to sanction the cold-blooded murder of anyone, your sister *least* of all!" "Very well.", the black haired man said, calmly moving his hands towards his waist, and taking out a knife. "I'll do it myself." The blades of two halberds quickly crossed themselves, half an inch away from Marston's neck. "No dude, you won't." Sister Julia said, holding her halberd firmly in place. "T'would be a wise move to remain still, Regent.", Brother Christopher commented, icily. "Any more empty threats, and my noble confidant and I just might slice your throat." "They're not empty.", Marston said, his head stuck inbetween the two halberds. "What?" "My threats- they aren't empty. I will give you till the count of five to release me. After that... I cannot assure your safety or well-being." Brother Christopher glared at Marston. "Now is not the time to run your mouth any further." "One.", Marston counted, calmly. "Two.", he said, moving his hand towards his waist. "Three.", he said, directing his attention towards me. "Fou-ack!" the black haired man suddenly convulsed, then collapsed, face first, onto the floor. "I'm sorry, was I supposed to wait until you were finished?", Lucas asked, sparks of electricity flying offa his tazer. "Uh... ack...", Marston coughed, the currents running through his body inhibiting his motor skills, some. "I take that as a no.", the blonde boy in the purple tophat said, smiling as he jabbed the black haired man a few more times in the back. "Alright, let's see what we have here, Mister Marston man..." As the resta the room looked on in stunned silence, Lucas patted down the man in white, searching from his

crouch to his shoulders, until... “Ah! Here we go!” Lucas beamed, holding up a small blue sapphire, as far away from his bowtie as he could manage. “This is the vacuum module... I think! It... uh... I think it creates a vacuum of air around people’s heads, or something..., huh. Well, whatever. Here Patchy, catch!” He jabbed Marston one more time in the back, and tossed the bright blue sapphire over to me. I fumbled with it a bit, but managed to catch it in my palm just fine. “What did you just do to Marston?!” Dension barked, looking distressed, but also highly confused. “I just stunned him a bit.”, the blonde sorcerer explained, his blue eyes icy. “Mister wants-to-kill-his-sister here should be fine, assuming he doesn’t get up and make me taze him agai-“ A purple light suddenly glowed, emanating from Marston’s left fist. “Another module?!” Lucas gasped, panicked.. There was a bright flash, and before I could make sense of anything, I was lying on the ground, looking up at Sister Julia and Brother Christopher’s halberds. “W-wha-“, I sputtered, wildly glancing around the coliseum. From my lopsided point of view, it took me far too long to realize what happened: Somehow, standing where I had been, less than an inch away from Sabarene, was Marston, a long, sharp looking knife in his right hand, the glowing purple crystal in his left. “Die as you lived, general.”, Marston rattled, dropping the purple crystal, and raising the knife up high with both hands. Sabarene had an open shot at Marston... the way he was raising up the blade was such that she coulda just punched him in the neck, or shot him in the eye with her finger, or something, but she just... stood there, in shock. No, not in shock. Her shoulders slumped, and, looking towards the ground, the white haired girl seemed to just accept what was gonna happen, making no efforts whatsoever to resist. But Marston had dropped the purple crystal in his hand, so I took the blue sapphire in mine, raised it at

his face, and with nothing more than pipedream and a silent desperation, willed it to destroy him. Nothing happened. Prone on the ground with my arm outstretched, I could only watch, uselessly, as Marston plunged his knife deep into Sabarene's chest. "S-sabarene!" a high pitched voice shrieked, sounding mortified, and broken. "Suns above, no!" "Grrrrrrrrragh!", Brother Gino shouted, his black metal limbs shining as he kicked off the ground, and tackled Marston off the stage. The two men crashed into the stone stands, the impact of Gino's body cracking one of the concrete benches. I didn't care about that. With as much strength as I could muster, I pushed myself off the floor, and frantically rushed over to the white haired girl, lying on her back with her eyes wide open, Marston's long knife still stuck deep in her chest. The blood veins in my head began to tighten. I felt like I was having a migraine, I felt like I had a fever, I felt like I wanted to throw up, I felt a whole buncha things, nonea em good. The room spun, and even my thoughts became scattered and nonsensical, as I stared at the hilt of the long sharp knife, embedded deep in Sabarene's chest. Desnion shouted something, but his words were like echoes to me, sounding bizarre, and far away. Lucas just stood in the center of the coliseum, stunned, not reacting even as his baton slipped outta his hand, and clattered on the stone stage. Everything seemed so still, so locked in place, that I moved my fingers towards the hilt of the knife stuck in the girl with the black habit... feeling that if I could just yank it out, I could somehow avert the inevitable. My fingers inched closer and closer to the knife, but right before I could yank it out- "Don't pull it out, you... imbecile!" A cold, metal grip closed around my wrist, and fiercely ripped my hand back. I looked down. Sabarene was still alive. Her ruby red eyes were open, and her chest moved up and down... not like normal, but she was breathing. My wrist

shoulda hurt like heck with the way her metal fingers were pinching it, but I didn't feel any pain, fer some reason. "Are... are you ok?", I choked out, my voice oddly hoarse. "There is a knife... in my fucking... chest.", Sabarene wheezed, pushing herself upright with her free hand. "Does it look like I'm alright?" "Don't say nothing, then! Just sit still, and lay there or something, I'll go run and-" "There's no need for that.", the white haired girl groaned, letting go of my wrist, and putting pressure on the handle of the knife, sinking it into her chest further. "He stabbed me in the right side. The.... The heart.... It's on the left." "S-so?!", I cried out, panicked. "Ya still gotta knife in yer freaking chest!" "Yes, but at this moment... it's stopping the bleeding." Sabarene paused, and her eyes widened. "A-ah!", she yelped, falling back onto her back. "Not... not here.", she whispered, sounding scared. "Not now. I'm... I'm so close." I opened my mouth to reassure her, but... but there was nothing to reassure her about. There was nothing I could do, or say, I could only watch, like a useless, impotent waste of flesh. "Brother Christopher!", Desnion yelled, his face firm in spite of all the panic and chaos. "Take the General to a medic, immediately!" "No!", I shouted, baring my teeth. "You and yer cronies ain't gonna touch her, just so she can "accidentally" die during an operation or the like!" The chubby blonde man's face softened. "I'm... I'm not trying to trick you, miss. I have medics on standby, and all I want is to see that Sabarene gets the best possible care -" "Bull.", I hissed. "Bull, I don't trust you. Get your medics out here and have them operate on her where I can see them." "There isn't enough time for that!,, Desnion countered, forcefully. "There are several medical bays set up in this coliseum, with tools and instruments catered to performing even the most intricate of operations. But the time it would take to bring them out would be far too-" "No. No. I don't trust ya.",

I said, glancing around the room wildly. "I don't trust nonea ya, yer all liars, and killers, and-" "That's enough, Four.", Lucas said, placing his non-gloved hand on my shoulder. "Now ain't the time fer yer stupid moral lectures, Ruckus." "It *isn't* the time for that, Four.", the blonde boy said, looking almost as messed up as I was. "But it isn't the time for you to be paranoid and hot headed, either. Right now Sabarene needs swift and thorough medical attention, and that is something which you and I cannot provide, no matter how angry we get." "Y-yeah, but these fellas... they ain't nothing butta buncha snakes!" "Yes, but so are we." Lucas said, soberly. He jerked up his head at Desnion. "We accept your offer, Supreme Sibling, but on one condition. Allow me to accompany Brother Christopher and Sabarene to the medical bay.", "Of course I'll allow that.", Desnion said, quietly. A wavea fear shook through me, as I stared at Desnion's benign looking face. It was too benign, it looked too authentic... it was the exact sorta look I'd give someone if I wanted ta pretend I wasn't gonna try and murder em. "N-no, Ruckus!", I cried, terrified. "Don't! What if they end up gitting ya, too?!", A half smile formed on his face. "Nothing will happen to me, Four.", the boy in the elaborate purple overcoat said, patting his holstered revolver for emphasis. He gazed at Brother Christopher, and locked eyes with him. "Let's get a move on, then.", the white haired man said, sounding withdrawn. And, quickly, but gently... gently as they could manage, I guess, the white haired man and the blonde haired boy lifted up Sabarene, and carried her off into a corridor, off to who knows where. "Um... Dez? Was that really such a smart idea?", Sister Julia asked, leaning on her halberd. "I mean... when two feral cats get into a fight, and one of them claws out the other's neck, sometimes it's best to just chill and let the injured kitty bleed out." I jerked my head and scowled at the raven haired woman.



“She’s a person, not a cat, ya apathetic, asinine-“ “Easy there, doggy.”, Sister Julia warned, glancing at me with half open eyes “The vets are going to try and pull the thorn from your master’s paw. Though I don’t think there’s much they can do about a thorn that large~” I shuddered, and clenched my fist. The full weight and reality of the situation just wouldn’t sink in, to the point where I felt if I strongly willed it, if I could think the right thoughts, I could go back in time, and snap Marston’s neck before he even got within so much as a meter near Sabarene. But my thoughts were useless, and my despair and regret were nothing but obstacles in the way of an increasingly elusive resolution. I had to stop thinking about what I couldn’t affect, and turn my attention to what I could. I walked off the stage and into the busted up front row of the coliseum. Brother Gino stood tall in the wreckage of a broken stone bench, his black metal arms keeping the black haired man locked in a half nelson hold. Despite that, despite one man being subdued, and the other standing stalwart and strong, it was Gino that looked distressed and defeated, and Marston who looked calm, satisfied even. I didn’t particularly care for that. “Do what you must, Unionist.”, the man with ruby red eyes said, plainly. “I’ve done what I set to do.” “And what makes you so sure of that?”, I asked, in a calm, careful tone, matching the black haired man’s serene state best as my grief stricken mind could manage. “She might live.” “She won’t.”, the restrained regent responded. “I almost certainly severed an artery. She’ll be dead before the suns set.” “Almost?”, I repeated, keeping my voice stable. “Where I’m from, almost don’t mean definitely.” Marston stared at me, blankly. “Even in that case, I have a back-up plan.” “Is that so?”, I questioned, staring deep into the eyes which looked so much like Sabarene’s. “Because I don’t think you do have a back-up plan, Marston. I think you’re just bluffing.” The black haired man

didn't respond, he simply stood there, locked in Gino's arms. I wanted ta lose my shit and pummel him ta death. Even the most stoic fella out there can't keep up a brave front when brain matter is leaking outta the top of his skull, and even a one armed person can beat the crap outta someone that's caught inna chokehold. But that wouldn't do anything, besides make me feel mighty satisfied. I let my shoulders slumped, and turned my attention to Desnion. "Y'all have laws against violent stabbings, right?" "Of course we do.", the green eyed man said, then glared down at Marston. "Regent Marston of Fremdos, Acting General of the Holy Collective. With the authority bequeathed to me as the Supreme Sibling of the Order of Fiat, I hereby strip you of all titles, lands, powers, possessions and privileges." Fury flashed across Desnion's face. "You are now under arrest for the attempted murder of Former General Sabarene. You will be detained and held in captivity until such a time when a proper trial can be scheduled, in which you'll be judged by three representatives from your home town." "Very well.", Marston commented, like Desnion had just told him about the weather. "What?!", I shrieked. "A trial? Yer giving this fella a trial? There ain't nothing ta determine, we all just saw him stab someone, clear as crystal!" "It won't be a trial to determine his guilt. It'll be a trial to determine his sentence." "He just tried ta kill his own sister!" I yelled, angry. "The only sentence he should be getting is an axe to the face!" "We don't practice summary executions in the Collective.", Desnion countered, maintaining a stern disposition. "What?!?" I screamed, my throat beginning ta feel sore. "Yes ya do! Last night me and Ruckus were almost put ta death by that four eyed monster! And we sure as heck didn't get no trial!" "Calm down, Miss Axeman Red Four.", Desnion said. "Marston will pay for his crimes... and I can assure you, for what

he just did, he will pay quite dearly. But I will not disrupt the Collective's rule of law just to placate the rash feelings of an emotional foreigner." I sucked inna breath, and stopped arguing. Not only was it unfair that Marston was gonna get the luxury of a trial fer what he did, it was unwise. The fella had just used magic right in fronta everyone... fer them ta just think they could throw him inta a cell and be done with him was stupid bordering on braindead. "Fine. Fine, detain him.", I breathed out, exhausted. "Don't kill him fer what he just did... Give him a trial. Fine. Fine, I'll accept that, it makes me want ta vomit, but I'll accept that. But only if ya let me throw him inta a dungeon myself." Desnion rolled his eyes. "What, so you can just kill him on the way to the holding cell?" I winced. "F-fine.", I stuttered. "Same compromise as before, I'll drag that murderer ta a holding cell, and you can-" – come with me, is what I was going to say. After all, the best way to deter Desnion's suspicion would be to walk with him as I dragged off Marston ta a place where he couldn't hurt anyone else. But I stopped with my proposal. Remember what I said before, bout using yer emotional state ta yer own advantage? Well... at the time, I don't think I made an adjustment to my suggestion asa conscious decision, but... "-and you can send Sister Julia with me, ta make sure I don't bash that soulless monster's skull in.", I finished, hoping that the chubby blonde man would take me up on my offer without questioning why I was so willing to walk with the woman who had a strange fixation on comparing folks ta felines. "Fair enough.", Desnion acquiesced, then glared at me, the sternness in his face replaced by something a mite more terrifying. "If you lay a single hand on Sister Julia-" "I only got a single hand in the first place, I ain't gonna waste it on yer narcoleptic nympho.", I countered. "But if you wanna be the one ta come along with me instead, then fine, it don't matter ta me which onea ya decides ta

tag along.”, I lied. “No, Dez, it wouldn’t be hunky dory if you held this mutt’s leash.”, the black haired woman with the big halberd insisted, stretching. “She’s smelly, and I don’t think she’s been spayed. I’ll go and make sure she doesn’t do anything uncool.”

Desnion shook his head, but frowned, looking a little bit worried. “Be careful Jules, ok?”

A shade of pink flushed across the black haired woman’s face. “D-don’t worry about my safety, Dez! That’s not how our dynamic works!” I ignored the corrupt duo of degenerate’s exchange, and stared up at Brother Gino. “Alright, hand him over.” Brother Gino hesitated, but with a firm resolve, let go of Marston. And punched him in the back of his head. “W-what are you doing, Brother Gino?!” Desnion screeched. “It’ll be easier for the Unionist to detain this murderer if he’s unconscious.”, the orange haired man offered as an explanation.. Now, let me set one thing straight. When ya hit someone in the back of the head, it ain’t exactly a sure thing that they’ll fall unconscious. If yer too weak... then all you’ll do to the fella you’re trying to knock out is make his head hurt a whole bunch. But if you’re too forceful... well... ya just might kill him. Or give him brain damage, orra concussion. The brain isn’t all that strong of an organ, even the slightest bit of disruption might cause it to go kaput. Going by the blood dripping out of the top of Marston’s skull, it seemed like Brother Gino might have been a bit too forceful. That was the moment when I began to really like Brother Gino. “Oh, man...”, Sister Julia said, staring down at Marston’s motionless body. “Fremdos blows, Dez.” Marston’s chest began to move up and down at a normal, healthy, rate. “Crap, he ain’t dead.”, I mumbled, bitter. I grabbed his left arm, and, slinging him over my back like I would a sack of manure, began dragging him along. Sister Julia rolled her eyes, and nudged me in the stomach with the handle of her halberd. “Here. You hold this. I’ll carry the

stray.” “I’m fine with carrying him.” “It wouldn’t be groovy of me to let a cripple do heavy lifting.”, Sister Julia said, which pissed me the hell right off. “It’s fine. I got him.” “And you’ve dragged his feet over fifteen stone benches so far.” “I reckon he’s lucky I’m carrying this way instead of the other way, then.” “Fine, doggy, fine.” Julia yawned, unperturbed by my comments. “But things might be more psychedelic if you focus on carrying that cat properly. There’s no need to scruff up his feet.” I thought about hissing an insult out at her, but we were both still within Desnion’s earshot, and eyeshot. “If ya say so.”, I mumbled, and begrudgingly adjusted Marston’s unconscious body. I let the raven haired woman lead the way to the holding cell, all while suppressing my heavy desire to smash Marston’s skull apart against the stone floor of the domed coliseum. No... I couldn’t let my emotions get in the way of what I had ta do in the next few moments. Sister Julia and I walked down a lonely damp corridor, not making eye contact, and not talking ta each other. We walked down a flight of stairs, then another, and another, to the point where I think we might have actually gone down below sea level. And I waited. When I say I waited, I don’t mean I remained stationary. No, I followed Sister Julia’s brisk pace, but I waited. Even as I carried the man who had just stabbed one of the few people who cared about me on my back, I waited. I waited, and waited, and waited, as we walked through a damp, dim corridor, one that led ta a room full of small cells, full of rusted metal bars. Sister Julia unceremoniously pulled one of the cell doors open. “Put that cat in here, doggy.”, she said, unamused. I stopped waiting. “AAAAAAAAAAAAARGH!”, I shouted, inna over the top manner. Like I was slinging a bag of coal into a furnace, I threw Marston onto the ground, not particularly caring about where or how he landed. Quicker than I thought possible, Sister Julia

twirled around her halberd, and slammed me into a wall with its handle. "You need to chill out." the woman in the monochrome habit hissed, her eyes fully open. "Chill out?!", I shouted, not really having to fake my anger. "Chill out? That fella... he ain't nothing but a murderer! He stabbed Sister-" "It doesn't matter.", Julia hissed, irate. "Crying and moaning isn't going to help save your friend any more than killing Marston will. You'll work yourself up for nothing" Julia furrowed her brow. "But to be honest, I don't care about your mental well-being, Unionist. Dez does, and Christopher seems to pity you, but they don't have even the slightest clue about toxic personalities, about how like attracts like, about how evil begets evil." "I don't care what typea person ya think I am." I half-lied. "At this point, the only thing I care about is seeing that this piecea crap pays fer what he did." With that, I moved my hand to my cheek, and lifted up the bandage with the mud under it. I scooped up a fingerful of the mud, and jabbed it at Sister Julia like it was a big ole spear. "Look... move away, alright?", I warned. "You ain't a bad sort... and I don't wanna hurt ya." Sister Julia stared at the mud on my index finger and raised an eyebrow. "What do you have there, doggy?" "Look... just imagine this, fere moment.", I breathed out, sounding hesitant. "Imagine that Marston over there.... Imagine that while being stuck here in this holding cell, he suddenly becomes ill. Some sorta sickness comes over him, that makes him woozy at first, then causes him to hallucinate, then causes him to vomit, then to choke... to choke on his own blood. Imagine that he dies, due to that sickness... would that really be such a bad thing?" "Not in the slightest.", Sister Julia said, without missing a beat. "That cat is just as messed up as the stray he stabbed." "Then move outta my way, and let me do my work.", I grumbled, wagging around my mud covered finger for emphasis. Realization dawned on

Sister Julia's face. "That's...", she gasped- "Poison.", I lied. "It's the same poison that was in the whorehouse, the poison that was intended fer you, yer buddy, and yer other buddy." The black haired lady's hold on me weakened, some. "There's... there's no way-" I licked my lips. "There is. I dida bitta digging around last evening... guess whose been going around buying all sorts a shady stuff?" "N-no...", the black haired woman gasped, sounding more shocked than mortified. "Yeah, that's right.", I lied. "Marston bought this.", I lied. "He poisoned the pastries cause he wanted ta kill yer precious Supreme Sibling.", I lied. "And if I apply this toxin ta his oily, snakey skin, he'll reap exactly what he's sown.", I lied. "He'll choke, and die, if ya just let go of me and let justice be done.", I lied. "And if he doesn't die here... then who knows? He might end up getting you and yer buddies next.", I lied. A hint of fear flashed across Sister Julia's face, replaced quickly by a firm resolve. "You need to throw that away, Unionist." "Throw what away?", I asked, dropping my accent and annunciating my words clearly, to see if Sister Julia had taken the bait. "The poison." Sister Julia had taken the bait. "I'm not going to let you euthanize this stray.", the dark haired woman announced, shoving the handle of her halberd deep into my stomach. "Dez wants him to get a trial, so he's going to get a trial." I made my body shake and shiver... and then, like the useless bit of mud was a precious diamond I had ta pawn, threw it and the bandage on the floor, stomping it with my boot ta hammer in the point. "Fine...", I choked out, letting my shoulders slump. "I won't poison this bastard... You... you win. Besides... I know she wouldn't want me ta act out in anger, or revenge." Sister Julia raised an eyebrow. "...How long have you known Sabarene for, exactly?" "Anywhere from six rising periods ta twenty two, depending on yer perception of time." The black haired woman's face softened.

“For what it’s worth... I’m sorry for your loss.” “I didn’t lose nothing yet.”, I grumbled, sincerely hoping I wasn’t telling another lie. I gazed down at Marston, and winced. Even unconscious, the git looked smug and sanctimonious, so darn unfazed by anything around him. “You can carry him now.”, I said ta Sister Julia, feeling nauseous. “I don’t wanna touch him no more.” Sister Julia didn’t let go of her halberd, but she unpinned me from the wall. With a few lazy kicks, she nudged the man in dirt covered white into a small, damp cell. She slammed the iron door which led into the cell, and locked it. And with that, Marston was somewhat outta my sight, and somewhat outta my mind. “So... I know you’re not, like, in the mood to talk-“, Sister Julia said as we walked back up ta the center of the domed coliseum, “but what was the deal with those gems, doggy?”

“...Magic.”, I grunted. “Magic?”, the black haired woman repeated, a vacant expression on her face. “Magic.”, I answered, gruffly. “Oh... I... uh... see...”, Sister Julia awkwardly added, then yawned, and glanced at her watch. My heartbeat began ta pump, more, and more, and more, as we got back ta the center stage of the coliseum. It wasn’t cause of the lies I had told, or because of the schemes I had half-assedly set into motion. It was because I knew the moment we returned, it was possible I would hear the words. The words which meant my complete and utter destruction. It’s weird. Some folks... folks ya know well, and like... they can talk and talk and talk, and what they say, it don’t mean nothing to ya. It’s just white noise, comforting or mildly annoying static that ya put up with onna daily basis. And yet... and yet... a sentence... a sentence, if said by a fella in white scrubs, orra labcoat... that sentence can make or break you. The words of a complete stranger can define your entire existence, if they’re about someone close to you. And I felt it. I felt it in my gut. Everything works in patterns. The path your life takes





wheezed, trying to push me off her with her twiggy little arms. "Alright.", I breathed out, smiling like a moron. "Alright, that's good. That's a change of pace." Five gloved fingers dug into my hair and yanked it, hard. "G-gah!" "I understand your enthusiasm, Patchy,", Lucas commented, twisting around a tuft of my hair, "but it isn't the most prudent of ideas to try and embrace a woman with a cavity in her chest." I looked down at Sabarene, and guiltily let go of her. I hadn't noticed it when I had sprinted up to her, but she wasn't wearing her black habit anymore. No, Sabarene had dressed down, some. She wasn't wearing anything besides a set of slacks, and a series of bandages which wrapped around her chest. And on the upper right side of her chest, a good deal below her clavicle but a bit above her breast, was a deep, jagged, cavernous wound, crudely sewn together by a long black thread. I winced. "Ugh... I hope I didn't mess up your wound just now." "You did~", Sabarene sing-songed, pressing my hand against her wound. "But it doesn't matter. While the cut is deep, and extremely painful, it's not serious. Mister Lucas and I were able to tend to it without going to the medical bay." Desnon furrowed his brow. "Which was a momentously stupid idea, Sabarene. Trusting yourself to treat such a severe wound-" "Was precisely the appropriate decision, Supreme Sibling.", Sabarene boasted, sounding both smug and a little winded. "After all, I'd just be wasting time and resources if I were to actually make use of the medics skills. Besides, this is my moment of victory, why shouldn't I enjoy as much of it as I can?" The white haired girl crossed her arms and smirked, then collapsed backwards. "Aw, crap!", I yelled, and, not having much time to really muck it over, grabbed at the first thing I could to yank the pale skinned back onto her feet. The first thing I could grab was her neck, apparently. "Good...", Sabarene breathed out, as I held her up by the nape of her

neck. "That's the right amount... of roughness." And with a weird looking smile on her face, she fell unconscious and collapsed onto my shoulder. Desnion stared at us with a mix of pity, disgust, understanding, disgust, sympathy, disgust, and exasperation. "Might I suggest bringing her to the medical bay now?" "Nah, I reckon she's good like this.", I yawned, playing around with Sabarene's hair as I cradled her against my shoulder. "It was a miracle, Patchy.", Lucas said, sounding relieved. "An eight inch long knife shoved directly into her chest, and not a single artery was damaged. The bleeding was minimal too." He crossed himself, and stared down at the floor. "We got very lucky." "No, we didn't.", I snorted. "There's nothing lucky about a megalomaniac stabbing onea our buddies." "Pfffffft, "buddies".", Sister Julia giggled. I turned ta glare at the black haired woman, but I couldn't really muster up any anger, fer some reason. "I'm serious, ya narcoleptic hack. Alla this is on the lot of you. Trusting a fella like Marston... he should have never been allowed in here. The fella has done nothing but use violence, coherence, and underhanded methods since me, Ruckus, and Sabbethrene-" "Sabarene.", Lucas corrected me. "Sabarene got here." Desnion shrugged his shoulders. "Up until now, Marston has obeyed the laws with at least some degree of regularity. His actions this rising period are very much unprecedented. Though he'll pay for them, all the same." The chubby man in monochrome robes paused, then, his face firm, continued on. "But what the hell was that crystal crap all about? I mean, did Marston just, like, teleport or some shit?" "Watch yer language.", I warned, then shrugged my unoccupied shoulder. "As fer the crystals... they're magic, or something. I dunno, Ruckus knows about em, but he doesn't like telling me too much about em." "Those gems that Marston had on them are what I call modules.", Lucas explained ta

Supreme Sibling Desnion, "And yes, they're basically magic." "Magic?", Desnion said. "I bet the continent could do a lot of good with magic." "The modules don't belong here.", Lucas responded, tersely. "Don't belong where?" "Here." "Alright, alright.", Desnion said, throwing his hands up. "Keep those stupid crystals. They seem to be more trouble than they're worth anyways.." His eyes narrowed. "You still can't take Sister Julia's trinket, however." "I didn't come here for a watch.", Lucas responded, curtly. He removed his backpack, and unzipped its front pouch. In it, I saw the purple crystal, the blue sapphire... heck... even the yellow gem Bowman Yellow Two had used when he went hogwild on the Caravan. But there were two others gems I didn't really recognize. One was a bubblegum pink peridot, and the other was a solid black diamond, a diamond with so much darkness that a bit of it seeped out from the top, like fumes. "G-guh... the heck that does that?", I asked, staring fearfully at the inky black diamond. Lucas gazed down at his backpack, and shuddered. "Trust me Patchy, you don't want to know. That module is one of the most horrifying things I've ever run across. I picked it up in Provesh before I reunited with- before I met you." His face darkened. "It nearly cost me my sanity." He casually picked up the black diamond and tossed it up and down in this air. "This one is ok, though." Desnion scratched his head. "Wait, so the magic gem that's literally dripping with evil is the ok one? But the one that looks like confectionary is the terrible one?" "Sort of, yeah.", Lucas mused. "I mean... the modules are tools... tools with properties that defy any of your medieval minds, but tools nonetheless. Most of them can be used positively, even the ones which set people on fire, or slice through steel like butter. But that pink one... it can't be used for anything besides evil." Brother Christopher tilted his head. "Why would such a wretched thing be in your possession,

Sir Sorcerer?" "Because it does not belong here.", Lucas answered, softly. Desnion just nodded his head. "You're a very confusing man, Mister Lucas." "I... I know.", the boy in the purple tophat answered, meekly. "W-what happens now?", Brother Gino gasped out, his eyes darting back and forth. "M-marston... he was supposed to be one of my representatives... but he left me! He abandoned me, just so he could do those heinous things to the General!", the orange haired man whispered, sounding scared. "That son of a bitch!", he yelled, then covered his chest and shivered. "W-why would he abandon me?" "Marston did not abandon you, Brother Gino!", a familiar, insufferable voice cried out. Standing at the top of the somewhat empty coliseum was the whip wielding woman, dressed in white, white robes. "I, Sister Kundare, stand ready and willing to represent support you as I-" "No, no, no, stop it!", I cried out, exasperated. "Ya ain't gonna have Marston's collaborator be eligible ta do anything this rising period, if anything she should be under investigation asa enabler of attempted murder!" "Investigation?", the blonde haired woman asked, cracking her whip. "Very well, I'll ask the head of the city guard to investigate me." She went silent fer about two seconds, then smiled. "She didn't find anything." "What kinda bullshit argument is that?!", I barked. "Marston himself said you were blocking the entrance just so he could get away with killing-" "What Master Marston said has no bearing on my guilt.", Sister Kundare countered. "He might have just been lying so he could get away with killing-." "If yer so innocent, then how the heck do you know what Marston tried ta do?" A look of slight panic spread across Kundare's face, but almost immediately she recovered. Sister Kundare stared Sabarene, and clutched her hand over her chest. "Oh my!", she cried out, looking about as genuine asa compsci major atta football game. "Did something unfortunate happen to the Disgraced

Former General when I was gone?" "You know damn well something happened.", I growled, then turned to Desnion. "Ya ain't gonna let her represent firecrotch in this stupid election process, areya?" "Of course I'm not.", Desnion hissed, then glared up at the woman in the white habit. "Sister Kundare. You are hereby relieved of your duties as Brother Gino's retain-" "That won't be necessary~", a sweet sounding voice sing-songed. I glanced to my left. Sabarene, still resting on my shoulder, was up and awake, a gentle smile on her pale face. "It's fine with me if Sister Kundare remains as Brother Gino's retainer." "You were awake this whole time?", I gasped, surprised. "Well... I did pass out for a moment.", Sabarene admitted, twirling her hand around a few tufts of my hair. "But when I saw you had gone out of your way to carry me, I figured I'd just stay put and enjoy being pampered for a while." The girl with the bandage wraps around her chest pivoted, some, and slung her right thigh over my neck. "But it of no matter!", she declared, sitting on top of my shoulders. "It does not bother me what role Kundare wishes to play! The sins of the brother shouldn't apply to that of the wife." "I'm pretty sure that's not how the saying go-" "It doesn't matter.", the girl with ruby red eyes said, staring up at the blonde woman. "I see no problem with Sister Kundare representing Gino in the trial of wits. Even if she did collaborate with my brother, I forgive her." Desnion stared at Sabarene skeptically, but sighed, and directed his attention up at Kundare. "Well, if the Former General has no issue with you participating, I don't see why not. Very well, the election process will go on as scheduled." "So quick to enable your own destruction, Sabarene.", Sister Kundare said, a smug look on her face. "If it wasn't for your profound arrogance, I'd think you a masochist. But I suppose anyone who would trust a Unionist and an Offlander desires their own humiliation to some degree, anyways." Those words

annoyed me, some. “Humiliate? She ain’t the one that got all her men burnt ta a crisp bya buncha sewer dwelling morons.” A look of despair and sadness flashed over Sister Kundare’s face, followed shortly by rage. “That was your fault, Unionist!”, she cried, her voice cracking. “ If you had just accepted my justice, then my guards, they never would have been-“ “The responsibility for the horrific deaths of the City Guard is yours and yours alone, Commander Kundare.”, Sabarene chimed in, happily. “Not only did you let fifty brave women and men perish in a fiery inferno, you also failed to capture a single member of that moronically named terrorist group.” The blonde woman with the metal whip winced. “The City Guard had the Mournful Remnant under control. It wasn’t until you returned, with your gaggle of privileged foreigners, that-” “Are you trying to cast the blame upon my retainers, Kundare?” Sabarene questioned, playing around with my ears like they were the joysticks ta an old Atari arcade game. “Because Mister Lucas and Miss Axeman Red Four were the ones responsible for stopping the Remnant, once and for all. The two of them did in an evening what you failed to do for cycles.” I raised an eyebrow at that statement. I didn’t remember telling Sabarene too much about what I did in the water-tower... partly cause I was stressed out, but mostly cause I didn’t wanna tell her about what happened ta Nielente. I glanced skeptically at Lucas, who looked away guiltily as Sabarene continued ta talk down up at Kundare. “So tell me, Sister Kundare... How does it feel to know a crippled Unionist and a fast talking Charlatan served the Collective far more capably than you ever could? Does it make you feel useless? Because you ARE pretty useless, Kundare.” “Your taunts mean nothing to me, Sabarene.”, Kundare hissed through chattering teeth. “Oh, is that so?”, Sabarene sing-songed. “In that case, I suppose you wouldn’t mind a few more: How

does it feel to know your husband failed utterly in his attempt to kill me? How does it feel to know that he's currently rotting in a prison cell, and stripped of all his titles?" Oddly enough, Sabarene's second seta taunts didn't rile up the easily riled up woman. No, if anything, judging by Sister Kundare's stationary teeth, and confident pose, Sabarene's taunts calmed her down, some. "Master Marston took a chance, and it didn't work out for him.", Kundare admitted, then took a few steps down towards the girl sitting on my shoulders. "But so what? He was willing to sacrifice more than you can possibly imagine for the good of the Collective, Sabarene. His failure doesn't make me feel shame... it makes me feel pride." Sister Kundare smiled, and for the first time ever, her grin didn't look malicious, or forced. "Pride that I could be the spouse of such a wonderful failure." I felt Sabarene's thighs tense up around my neck, so I decided to step in and try my luck at flustering the sadistic Sister. "Er... are ya proud of the hole in his skull?", I asked, innocently. Kundare stopped in her tracks. "What?" "Oh... uh...", I stammered, making myself sound like a little kid that had just broken a precious vase. "See... when yer collaborator tried to murder his own sister, Firecrouch over there decided to restrain him. But, uh... see, when he knocked Brother Marston, he knocked him on the noggin something fierce. When me and Sister Christopher-" "Julia," Desnion corrected me. "-Julia dropped him off... he was bleeding from the back of his skull something fierce." Sister Kundare glared down at me. "You're lying, Unionist.", she hissed. I dropped all my pretenses, and stared the blonde eyesore dead on. "Does it look like I'm lying, Sister Kundare?" The woman with the whip gawked at me, for about three and a half seconds, and then- "Master Marstooooooooon!", she shrieked, and, sloppily stumbling down the rows of stone benches, sprinted off. "Well, that takes care of that, I reckon.", I



commented, watching the blonde woman disappear into one of the many corridors in the domed coliseum. "Oh, she'll be back.", Sabarene sighed, her words seeping into my left ear. "Kundare may get flustered easily, but she's not the sort to give up. She's like cancer." "If she's cancer, then why'd ya allow her to remain in this competition?" "Because she's also a fucking moron." Sabarene answered. "Wait, if she's a freaking moron, then why would ya want her to participate in the trial of wits- Oh." Sabarene stared at me sweetly, in the same way old ladies from South Carolina stare at ya sweetly right before they say "Bless your heart.", then cleared her throat. "Supreme Sibling Desnion?" The chubby man in the monochrome robes gazed up at the girl on my shoulders, and rolled his eyes. "Yes, Sabarene?" "Would it be alright if my retainers and I retired to my chambers for now?" "Naturally.", Desnion said. "Though you will not have much time to loiter. Soon I will open the gates to the coliseum, and allow in the spectators. Once that occurs, we will have the opening ceremony, then trial of wits, then the trial by combat, and finally, the speeches." "Opening ceremony?", Lucas repeated, adjusting his frayed purple tophat. "Oh, it's nothing much.", Desnion said with disdain. "I make some stupid long winded speech and share a drink with all the participants of the election process. Personally, I don't care for it, but it's tradition." "By share a drink, do ya mean a drink from the same bottle?" "From the same chalice.", Sabarene said. "It's called the cup of hope and prosperity. All the candidates and constituents take a drink, hoping to share-" "Yeah, yeah, whatever.", I snorted, making myself sound derisive of the custom so my giddiness wouldn't escape. See... some people view life as a game of a chess. They think that if they can account for every variable, get into the mindset of their opponent, and engineer the best strategy, that they'll win. There ain't nothing

wrong with that worldview... I mean, thinking things through is good, on the whole. But see... life ain't a chess game. It's a card game. The players don't start with even hands, and even the smartest sonuva gun can get screwed by a bad draw. So what does that mean, in terms of how ya should approach yer life? Well... it don't mean you shouldn't try have a plan or two out the gate, but it does mean ya should be willing and ready to adjust yer plans as circumstances change... ya know, so ya can either minimize the damage from an unexpected setback, or so you can capitalize on a sudden opportunity. The whole chalice thing that Sabarene mentioned... that was a sudden opportunity, and I was damn well set on capitalizing on it. But that was something I would have to take care of later. "I'll see the rest of you when the election begins!", Sabarene announced to Gino, Christopher, Julia, and Desnion, then squeezed my neck tight with her thighs again. "Onward, Miss Axeman Red Four! Onward to the, um... chambers!" "I ain't a horse." "She's riding you piggy-back style, so swine would be the more apt animal comparison, Patchy." "I didn't ask you, Ruckus." "Bickering, but having a bit of fun with it, the three of us made our way out of the center of the coliseum, and into an antechamber nearby. And for an antechamber... it wasn't half bad. I mean, it sure as heck wasn't a hotel room or nothing, but it was a step above from the lodgings we had in the ruined townhouse. There wasn't no bed in it, but there were some seats, and, perhaps most notably, a whole bunch of crates and such. "How nice of the Supreme Sibling to put us in a storage closet.", Lucas said flatly. "This isn't storage closet, Mister Lucas.", Sabarene said as she dismounted from my shoulders and plopped down onto a sturdy looking recliner. "I requested to have these boxes put here." Lucas opened the top of one of the crates, and peered inside. "Wine bottles", he noted. "Have you ever considered you

might have a problem, Sabarene?" "What, with my drinking? Of course I have a problem. But it's a functional problem." She clutched the wound on her chest, and grimaced. "Now if only I could have a functional family." "I think ya might havta take a calculated loss on that one, General.", I snorted. "Yer brother's only function seems ta be wanting ta kill ya, when he's not busying nailing people up on crosses or enslaving a conquered populace." Sabarene looked down, sadly. "Marston means well. He's just... naïve. And he's too conventional in his forms of thought." "The banality of evil, huh?", Lucas breathed out. "I never knew how straight-forward someone could be in terms of their villainy until I met your brother." "Marston means well.", Sabarene repeated, sounding like a broken record. "Yer brother is evil, he's stupid, he used onea those weird magic thingies, and he tried ta kill ya. Why the heck doya keep covering for him?" The girl with ruby red eyes looked up at me with a half smile. "Because I was the one who made him that way." I gaped at her fer halfa moment. "Wha-?" "Come now, Miss Axeman Red Four, I've been over this before with you. I was not a good person three cycles ago. If I could define myself back then... it'd be as a megalomaniac zealot with delusions of grandeur." Sabarene swallowed, and the few bits of color on her face slowly faded away. "I thought I was chosen by fate... the only conscious entity in a world full of sheep. Every victory I achieved, every successful ploy I made... all of it served to reinforce my self-centered worldview. Without even knowing it, I had fallen. Since Marston acted as my mouthpiece... it's only natural that he would fall, too." "Look, I ain't saying whatever the heck ya might done in the past is justified... but you recognize that what ya did was wrong. Yer brother... he thinks he's actually a good guy, or something. Not even firecrouch thinks that... well, half the time, at least. Folks that

can't recognize what's wrong... what's evil, even, when it's right in front of them... they don't deserve a second chance." "Deserve has nothing to do with it.", Sabarene and Lucas said at the same time, then recoiled away from each other. "Um... would you like to impart the life lesson this time Mister Lucas, or should I?" "It was your monologue, you go ahead.", Lucas coughed. "Um... ok. You see, Miss Axeman Red Four... it's not that I think Marston deserves a second chance... I just want to give him a second chance." She rubbed her arm. "He's... he's my brother, after all." Lucas stared at me for a long while. "Oh, do you have anything to add, Mister Lucas?" "W-what?", the blonde boy in the purple tophat stuttered, forcibly shifting his focus away from me. "O-oh, the whole... second chance thing... sure. Those... those are good." I glared at Sabarene. "Second chance or not, ya ain't gonna go anywhere near yer brother. And no, I ain't gonna tell ya where his cell is or nothing. He stabbed ya. He almost killed ya, and he says he has a back up plan ta kill ya. So put whatever need ya have fer familial reconciliation aside, cause I'll be damned if I havta see ya die again." Sabarene folded her arms and smirked. "Speaking of that, you had quite the interesting reaction, Miss Axeman Red Four. You actually said my name correctly!" "No I didn't.", I said, flatly. "Oh, but you did~", Sabarene taunted. She cleared her throat. "S-sabarene!", she shrieked, in a high pitched voice. "Suns above, no!" "That... that coulda be anyone who said that.", I answered, evasively. "Izzat so?", Sabarene asked, her voice low and gruff. "Well, even if it was someone else who cried out for me, I'm happy that you cared." I looked away, and rubbed my stump. "Of course I cared. It was my own incompetence that led ya ta getting stabbed in the first place." "No, it wasn't.", Lucas cut in. "The failure is mine. The module in Marston's hand... that purple diamond- it works by switching

swapping the position of two modules. If I wasn't so cavalier about tossing you the vacuum module, Patchy, none of this would have happened." Sabarene gazed at the two of us, and beamed. "Oh Mister Lucas... Oh Miss Axeman Red Four... you two really are-" "Compassionate?", Lucas guessed. "Loyal?" I ventured. "- completely fucking retarded.", Sabarene finished, clutching her wound. "Guh-" "I mean, honestly, the only one at fault here is my brother. You know, the guy who shoved a knife through my chest?" "Yeah, but it was us that done let him do it.", I countered, guiltily glancing at the grotesque looking wound on the white haired girl's chest. The girl with the line bandages draped around her torso flicked me on the ear. "If you blame yourself for the actions of other, you won't make it past thirty." "I'm from Provesh, I won't make it past thirty anyhow.", I grumbled, then shuddered. "I don't reckon I'll make it past nineteen, neither. That animal obsessed loon was much quicker than I could have imagined." "Oh, you mean Sister Julia.", Sabarene said, extending her wrist ta grab a bottle of wine. "Yeah, she's pretty nimble." Lucas swatted her wrist away with his baton and frowned. "Nimble, while wielding a halberd? How the heck is Patchy supposed to deal with that?" "If I knew I wouldn't be complaining about it.", I complained. "I mean, I figured that weird talking fella would bea problem, but if his partner is also adept at beating the crap outta people, I might be sunk from the get go." "You won't be sunk from the get go.", Sabarene reassured me. "Sister Julia and Brother Christopher are good fighters, but they're not perfect. They have some crucial flaws that you can exploit." My ears twitched. "Izzat so? And what are those flaws?" "They both dislike sweet foods.", Sabarene said, nervously. "That doesn't help in the slightest, ya red eyed demon." "I... I know.", Sabarene said, lowering her head guiltily. "I'm sorry to put such a heavy burden

on you.” “I like heavy burdens, they build muscle mass.”, I replied, staring at my fingers. They were shaking, some. I shook my head, and tried to split my eye between Sabarene and Lucas. “But there ain’t no use angsting about anything now. You gotta give yer speech, and you gotta do yer thing in that whole trial of twits.” “Trial of wits.”, Sabarene gently corrected me, subtly inching her fingers towards the lid of the crate of wine. “If it’s between me and that horrid woman with the whip, then Patchy was right the first time.”, Lucas remarked, bitter. He played around with one of his bangs. “What the hell am I supposed to do in that, anyways?” “Um, well, actually, you’re supposed to-“ “On second thought, don’t tell me.”, he said, kicking his feet up on top of the winecrate’s lid, pressing it down firmly. “I don’t do well when I have to think.” Lucas turned to me and smiled. “I figure the same applies to you, eh Four?” “Yeah, sure, whatever.” Slowly, almost without any of us knowing, the atmosphere in the antechamber changed. The happiness I felt in my stomach from seeing Sabarene and Lucas alive and relatively well faded, replaced by a profound sense of nausea, and worry. Weathering crazy stuff ain’t impossible in the heat of the moment, but it’s in the inbetween, during the time ya have to rest, that the crazy begins to overwhelm ya. It erodes your confidence, raises your stress, and makes your thoughts scattered and panicked. More than anything, I wanted the stupid trials to begin, so I could keep on trucking and just deal with the crazy as it came, but instead I was stuck in a rut. And it irritated me. Time that shoulda been relaxing, and... perhaps even a little fun, was instead a waking nightmare. I kept quiet for quite some time, brushing off both Sabarene and Lucas’s attempt to talk with me. I shouldn’t have, but I did. I remained a pissy, nervous piece of crap up until the door of the antechamber I was in creaked open. “I hope I’m not late.”, a tired, raspy sounding

wheezed. Wearing a set of gray robes over his bandages, Corcoran limped into the room. He stared down at Sabarene's chest with bright green eyes, and blinked. "I was too late.", he rattled. "Oh, don't tell me you're concerned over this little nick.", Sabarene snapped. "I didn't assign you to protect me, I assigned you to ensure fair play."

"Assassinations typically do not constitute fair play, General.", Corcoran deadpanned. Sabarene ignored his comment, and straightened her neck. "Did anyone see you enter the coliseum?" "Of course not, General.", Corcoran wheezed. "I disguised myself as a young girl who got separated from her mother." Lucas stared at the burn victim and raised an eye. "And how did you do that, exactly?" "Through the power of acting.", the bandaged covered man responded, then, kneed over and began going through a coughing fit. "Are ya ok there, sport?", I asked, the coughs and wheezes a bit too sharp for me to hear comfortably. "He's fine.", Sabarene said dismissively. "Corcoran has asthma, but being by the seabreeze should be good for his lungs." "It feels like I'm ingesting spikes and needles.", Corcoran hacked out. "Oh, stop being so melodramatic." Sabarene said with a wave of her hand. "You're a Saboteur, so just make believe you're someone without breathing problems." "Yes General.", the cardiovascular challenged charlatan coarsely confirmed, reaching into his robes. "I managed to obtain this from Brother Gino's chambers.", He handed Sabarene a set of parchments with markings of them. "You... you took Gino's speech from his chambers?!", the white haired girl gasped as she looked over the papers. "If Desnion finds out you took that, I could be brought up on charges of subterfuge, you imbecile!" "What you have is simply a transcribed copy of Gino's speech, General. I left the original copy in his room." "Oh, well, that's great then!", Sabarene said happily. "So wait, you're fine with him breaking

the law?”, Lucas sputtered, his foot almost falling off the wine crate. “Of course I’m not, Mister Lucas.”, Sabarene denied. “I’m only fine with Corcoran breaking the law if he doesn’t get caught.” “Christ, you’re worse than Patchy sometimes, Sister.” Sabarene glanced over the paper, and raised an eyebrow. “This... this is weird.”, she stuttered, as she read Gino’s speech. “This is actually pretty well written.” “That’s weird?” “Kind of. Gino’s not a very good public speaker... or public thinker, for that matter. It’s unlike him to be this concise and direct in his argument.” “.... I analyzed the handwriting, General.”, Corcoran wheezed. “The speech was written by the Supreme Sibling.” “I... I see. That might be why the argument is so remarkably... coherent.”, Sabarene said with a frown. “Oh well! I guess I’ll just have to be super duper charismatic in my speech, then.” “You can’t out charisma Dez, Saby. He’s pretty much unoutcharismable” The white haired girl jerked around at the sound of the voice. Yawning, and leaning against the door was Sister Julia, accompanied by Brother Christopher. “O-oh! Brother Christopher and Sister Julia!”, Sabarene nervously announced, quickly ripping the copy of Gino’s ghostwritten speech to shreds. “I... I thought you were preparing in Brother Gino’s chambers.” “We were. But the preparations are over. The audience has arrived. And the show is about to begin, Former General Sabarene.”, Christopher declared in a boisterous voice. “Please come with us to the opening ceremony-“ “Hold yer dang horses!”, I cried out, stumbling to find an excuse to boot out Desnion’s two minions. “We’ll be out in a moment, but right now we gotta, uh...” I glanced at Sabarene’s chest wrap covered torso. “-get dressed.” “So go and get dressed, we won’t stop you.” “In private, ya lecherous degenerates!” The black haired woman and the white haired man both rolled their eyes, but, dragging their menacing looking halberds behind them, left the room. I glared at the



bandage covered man. "You too, skippy." "I report to the General, not to her retaine-" "You too skippy.", Sabarene repeated, smiling. "Oh... alright then.", Corcoran wheezed, then limped his way out of the antechamber. I waited fer the door ta shut behind him before I began my bit. "Gah!", I yelled, throwing myself ont a the ground and pounding the cold stone floor with not-quite fabricated frustration. "I hate... this stupid... goddang... city!" Lucas scratched his cheek. "Oh, come now, Patchy. It's no so bad once you-" "- ignore alla the crosses?", I snapped. "Yeah, I don't think so, Ruckus. I can't believe I was born in this crap heap." "I can~", Sabarene chimed. "It ain't funny, goddang it!", I shouted, shoving my face against Sabarene's. "The stuff going on... it ain't funny.", I repeated, then slumped over. "I just don't know what ta do.", I choked out. "I'm scared. I'm just so darn scared... my fingers are shaking... my mind is racing... it all just sucks." Sabarene stared at me with a bit of concern. "You look terrible..." Her comment worried me, some. My aim was ta *act* like I was stressed, it wasn't ta actually *be* stressed. "It's... it's fine.", I choked out. "I think I just need something ta git my nerves under control.", I said, not so subtly staring at the crate full of wine. "Very well, then!", Lucas proclaimed, jumping up on his feet. "I shall procure for you a suitably de-stressing victual. But first..." he paused, and covered his mouth in shock. "Egads, Patchy! There's... there's a giant spider on your ear!" I twitched the points of my two ears. There was nothing on em, or around em, not even a bit of dirt. But the goofy smile on blue eyed boy's face... there was just something natural about it, ta the point where it shook me outta my act, without me even realizing it. "Oh come now Mister Lucas, you can't honestly expect her to fall for tha-" "G-gah!", I screamed, over-reacting a whole bunch. "Get it off me!" "Remain perfectly still!", Lucas boisterously declared, acting over

the top in the way I actually sorta liked. He reached behind my ear, and... "Voila!", Lucas declared. "Using nothing beside my arcane acumen, I have transformed the fearsome archanid into..." he held a foil covered oval in front of my eye "-a Kinder Surprise egg!" I glanced at the egg and smiled, slightly. "Thanks, but... I ain't bulking at the moment. Protein won't help me none." Without missing a beat, the blonde boy in the purple top hat unwrapped the foil covered oval, and shoved it into my mouth. "Mmph-!", I protested, then, lacking any other option, chewed down on the egg. It was... sweet. Really sweet, and tasty, to the point where I scoffed it down in about four seconds flat. "The heck ya get that from, Ruckus?", I asked, amazed at the flavor of the aluminum wrapped confectionary. "It's a secret~", he said, then smiled. "But if you really must know, those eggs were the fourth favorite food of someone near and dear to me." "Well, yer friend don't got bad taste, I reckon." I happily harped, then froze up, as I remembered I was supposed to be feigning depression. My mind raced. Lucas and Sabarene wouldn't buy it if I went back to acting like I was nervous, so I needed to find an alternate route to get to my goal. "A-ack!", I hacked out, clutching my throat. "F-four!", Lucas cried out. "Airpipe...", I wheezed. "Somea that just went down my airpipe!" I faked a few coughs, then slammed my face into the floor. "G-gah!" Sabarene and Lucas both jolted down to help me up. I threw my body in Sabarene's direction. "W-water...", I roughly breathed out. "I need some water..." "W-water?", Sabarene nervously repeated. "But there's no water here, only wine-oh!", she shouted, and jerked her gloved metal hand towards the crate of wine. I didn't let her fingers come close. Throwing out my arm like I didn't know what I was doing, I latched onto to the glove over Sabarene's metal hand, and tore it off. "Please...", I begged, pressing the weight of my body down on

Sabarene's legs so she couldn't move. "I need something... something to drink."

Sabaene's face froze up, nervously, but then... "Oh!", she chimed, and, with a self-satisfied smile, untwisted the top joint of her metal index finger. "Here, drink this!" I stopped convulsing, and carefully, very carefully, sucked the liquid inside of Sabarene's hollow metal index finger into the side of my left cheek. "G-gah...", I stuttered, doing my absolutely best not to swallow the liquid from Sabarene's finger. "T-thanks fer that.", I sighed, and, as well as I could, faked a gulp. "Don't worry about it.", Sabarene said, then frowned. "I was planning on drinking that myself, but it wouldn't be very well and good if my champion died on me, now would it?" "My god... and to think I laughed at the FDA for banning them.", Lucas stammered, horrified. "Banning what, Mister Lucas?" "Nothing, nothing.", the boy in the purple tophat said with a crazed wave of his hand. "I should have known those Europeans were full of shit...", he muttered, bitter. "Um... I think we should get a move on.", Sabarene said, twisting the top joint back onto her index finger. "We've kept them waiting long enough. "Wait, you're going out dressed like that?", Lucas said, staring skeptically at the bandages that didn't leave much to the imagination. "Why wouldn't I?" "Common sense a decency?", I murmured, my mouth a quarter full of the liquid I dared not swallow. "Oh, you think this is too revealing?", Sabarene breathed out, huskily. "Because I don't think it's revealing enough." She leered into my face, almost causing me to spit out the liquid which formed the crux of my entire scheme. "I *want* the crowd to see me, Miss Axeman Red Four. I want them to see everything~" "E-everything?", I choked out, my voice hoarse. "Everything~", Sabarene affirmed, rubbing her bosom as she leaned in towards me. "G..-guh..." "Just kidding~", she taunted, blowing a buncha air on my face. "What matters is that people

see the wound Marston gave me. Showing off my gorgeous body is just an added bonus.” “Eh, don’t flatter yourself.” Lucas commented, his eyes glued to the screen of his black rectangle. “You’re a seven out of ten at best.” “Oh, is that so, Mister Lucas?”, Sabarene chimed out, sounding oddly amused. “Then tell me, what are my faults?” “Simple.”, Lucas said, flatly. “Your skin is too pale, your hair isn’t vibrant enough, and finally, your ears are too round.” The amused look dissipated from Sabarene’s face almost immediately. “My ears are too what now?” “Too round.”, he repeated, still absorbed in his rectangle. “You also have a complete lack of muscle definition. Ergo... seven out of ten. And I’m being generous.” The white haired girl raised an eyebrow, then stared at the points of my ear for some reason. “You have very bizarre tastes, Mister Lucas.”, she remarked, examining her left bicep with a dissatisfied grimace. Lucas glanced at me, and rolled his eyes. “Bizarre is putting it lightly.” A sinister smile slowly spread across Sabarene’s face. “Oh, I wasn’t trying to imply that your tastes were bad, Mister Lucas.”, the girl in the thin chestwraps slushed out. “In fact, I very much agree with them. But tastes are subjective. Objectively speaking, I am the most beautiful woman in the continent.” “Yer brother almost made ya the most beautiful corpse in the continent.” I snipped, being dang sure to keep the liquid I ingested from Sabarene’s finger secure in my puffed out left cheek.. “Maybe ya should stop worrying about how cute you are, and start worrying about how ta still be alive by the enda all this.” “That’s simple enough.”, Sabarene responded, rising to her feet. “To survive, all you need, is to be needed. Act as if you’re in control, and people will think it to be so.” “Deep, shister.”, I mumbled, desperately trying to separate my saliva from the rest of the stuff in my mouth. “Oh, but I’m not deep.”, the girl with ruby red eyes said. “I’m excessively shallow,

brutish, and dumb.” She grabbed Lucas’s arm, and mine, and pulled us in close ta her. “And realizing that everyone else is the same,” she whispered, “ is how you become needed.” Then, without saying another word, with me and Lucas’s arms locked in hers, Sabarene kicked open the door of the antechamber, and strolled out into the center of the coliseum, which was filled ta the brim with thousands upon thousands of spectators, all whom didn’t seem too keen on keeping their mouths shut. And lemme tellya -.The difference between an empty coliseum anda packed coliseum is the same as the difference between a party filled with unattractive mouth breathing losers, anda party filled with intoxicated mouth breathing losers. The energy was just ridiculous. Somehow, the experience was even more nerve-wracking then when I had stared into the eyes of alla Sabarene’s soldiers... probably because this time the massive crowd was looking down at us, as opposed ta the other way around. But even so... it wasn’t a complete reversal. The crowd above us, just like the crowd that had marched with us ta the coliseum, they let out a long, powerful chant as we emerged, punctuated by the repetition of one word. “Sabarene, Sabarene, SABARENE!” is... what they didn’t say. Nah, what the gigantic crowd above us did say, with just as much fervor and passion, was... “Cunt! Cunt! CUNNNNNNNNNNNNNNT!” “Well that’s just plain misogynistic.”, Lucas remarked, as the three of us walked into the core of the domed coliseum. “Well, you certainly can’t say they’re ignoring me, Mister Lucas.” Sabarene whispered, smiling as she raised both her hands high and waved ta the thousands of pissed off spectators above us. I looked around. The crowd... well, I reckon the reason the crowd was acting so feisty was cause they were, with very few exceptions, dressed in white, gray, and monochrome. Standing in the center of the coliseum, on top of an elevated stage, were

Supreme Sibling Desnion, Brother Christopher, Sister Julia, Brother Gino, and Sister Kundare. And alla em looked pissed. "You're late, Sabarene.", the chubby blonde man hissed. "Better late than deceased, right?", Sabarene sang, tugging me and Lucas closer towards her. "When it comes to you, I'm not terribly sure.", Desnion responded, then straightened his back and stood up. "Alright, so here's how this is going to work.", he whispered, gathering the seven of us inna huddle. "I'm going to address the crowd, and give a speech on the necessity of war and peace and contradiction and duality and blah blah blah blah, it won't take long, but while I do it you need to remain quiet. After I finish my speech, I'm going to bring out a big cup filled with wine. The wine is a nice Cerenletian red, vintage, and dry but with a wet finish. You all will drink from the cup. And by drink, I mean take a moderate sip from the cup, so that you leave some for the rest of us." he said, glaring at Sabarene. "As for the order in which we'll drink, Brother Gino will drink from the chalice first, then Sabarene, then Sister Julia and Brother Christopher at the same, and then Miss Axeman Red Four will-" "Nonsense.", I immediately cut in, mumbling so as ta hide the muffling effect caused by the liquid in my mouth. "Fighters drink last. It's custom." Desnion stared at me with a confused expression. "Custom?" "Yeah, custom.", I gargled. "Folks who fight drink from the chalice last." "Why in the world would they do that?" "So their minds remain sharp, ya moron.", I lied. "If me and yer duo of degenerates drink from that chalice before Ruckus and Whippy, then we might absorb more alcohol then we havta, which'll make our minds mush when we try and fight each other." "Oh, please. It's just a little sip of wine, it's not going to kill you." "Can I abstain from drinking from the chalice, then?" "Of course you can't abstain, it's tradition.", Desnion hissed, irate. "And it's tradition for the

Supreme Sibling to be the last person to drink from the chalice, so don't even ask if you can swap places with me." "In that case, have Blondie and Whippy drink before us. I don't wanna drink any more than I gotta." "Miss Axeman Red Four, it really doesn't matt-" "Shut it.", I hissed, desperately trying ta keep my cool. The chubby blonde man with green eyes covered his face with his palm, and rolled his eyes. "Fine. Fine, Gino will drink from the chalice first, then Sabarene, then Kundare, then Lucas, then Jules and Chris, then you, and finally, me. Any objections?" I didn't have any, but I didn't want Desnion ta know I didn't have any. "I got one more objection, actuall-ack!", "We have no more objections, Supreme Sibling Desnion.", Sabarene said, covering my mouth with her cold metal hand. "Ok then. Let's begin. Christopher, the horn, please." The white haired man smiled as ducked underneath the stage, and brought out a huge brass cone. The cone didn't look any different from a funnel, except, the funnel portion of the horn was about twelve feet tall, and the mouth piece was big enough ta fit yer fist through comfortably. Sister Julia and Brother Christopher propped up the horn at waist height, as Desnion approached and put half his face into the mouthpiece. "Citizens of the Collective!", he bellowed, his voice amplified by the gigantic horn. "I thank you for your patience, and request the privilege of your attention and silence for the next few moments!" "Cunt, cunt, cunt.", the crowd whispered, their attention still on Sabarene. "Better than nothing, I suppose.", Desnion muttered, then shoved his mouth back into the gigantic horn. "We are here this rising period to bear witness! To bear witness to knowledge, to bear witness to strength, and to bear witness to charisma!" He crossed his cut up palm over his chest. "Those three qualities... they are not virtues which most members of the Order should prescribe to. We Sisters and Brothers of Fiat... the virtue

we pursue is wisdom, and nothing but wisdom. Our job is to be passive, to be cautious, and to approach every issue with a certain level of careful scrutiny. Knowledge, strength, charisma... in a sense, they are vices, to us. They are antithetical to the essence of our existence! If I were to alter the value of a mark, based merely on my hot-blooded intuition, our civilization would crumble in a fortnight! Charisma, Knowledge, Strength... they are dangerous. They threaten the foundation of any peaceful society. And yet... here we all are." Desnion cleared his throat, and continued. "It may seem a contradiction, to hold a ceremony to celebrate one who embodies all our sins. But the continent... and the world runs on contradictions! There is no light without darkness! With life, also comes death! And the peace of our Collective... it comes with a price. That price is *blood*. We are not independent from the Independent Kingdoms by their magnanimity, or good will. It is our military, our strength, our intuition, our sins, which keep our enemies at bay! For us to be wise, some must be rash! For us to be meek, others must be strong! Our military is our dark side, the embodiment of our baser instincts, our lack of scruples, our cowardice. It is an ugly sore on our otherwise perfect society. But without it... we'd be nothing by sores, and cysts, and scar tissue. So remember... before you judge, or jeer, or boo, or hiss... this ceremony is crucial! The candidates before you are the very lifeblood of the Collective! They do what they do so we do not have to! You may not admire them... you may even despise them. But for Fiat's sake... respect them!" The crowd in the stone benches became very quiet. And then... about four seconds after Desnion finished his speech... applauded. The applause was loud, deafening even. Maybe it was cause of the acoustics of the domed coliseum, but the applause was three times as loud as the applause the fellas in black



provided Sabarene. Desnion waited for the crowd to settle down, some, before placing his face into the horn for a final time. "The ceremony shall consist of three trials. The first will be a competition of wits between Former General Sabarene's retainer, and Challenger Gino's. The second will be a trial by combat, and the third will be a final speech, by both candidates. I must place emphasis on this... the winner of the majority of the trials need not be the one elected General. These trials are simply a means for both candidates to demonstrate their skill, and merit. The ultimate power lies in your hands, and the hands of the rest of the Collective!" The crowd applauded once again. Desnion removed his mouth from the horn, and brought out a large, black metal chalice, filled to the brim with liquid of who knows what. He presented the orange haired man with the cup. "To your prosperity, Brother Gino.", he said, as the man with metal arms took a small sip from it. With a shaking metal arm, Gino removed the cup from his mouth, and passed it to Sabarene. "To your prosperity, General- Sister Sabarene." Sabarene took a decent sized swig of it, and offered it to the blonde woman with the metal whips. "To your prosperity, Sister Kundare~", she sang. Like a snake, Kundare snatched the cup from Sabarene, and took a small, curt little sip from it. "To your prosperity foriegner", she blurted, and roughly slammed the cup into Lucas's chest. Lucas took a small sip from the black metal chalice, and passed it to Sister Julia and Brother Christopher. "To your collective prosperity.", the blonde boy said, rubbing his cheek awkwardly. The white haired man and the black haired woman looked at each other, and then, both hands on the chalice, took a sip of it at the same time, their faces placed together. A bit of wine dripped down in between their cheeks, but they both didn't seem to care. "To your prosperity, doggy.", Sister Julia said. "To your prosperity, my

worthy foe.”, Brother Christopher boasted, a dumb grin on his face as he extended the chalice ta me. I hesitated, as I glanced at the duo, and at Desnion, the threea em looking about as happy asa buncha degenerates could. But I only hesitated fer a moment. With a firm hand, I accepted the chalice from Christopher, and raised it to my lips. The chalice was about a quarter of the way full at this time, enough fer maybe three or four decent sized sips. I stuck my lips deep inta the chalice, and, raising the cup so it almost covered my nose... spat the liquid I had in my left cheek inta it. I swallowed air fera few moments, then, with the back of my wrist, wiped wine I hadn't drank off lips that weren't wet. “To your... p-prosperity.”, I stuttered, my hand shaking as I swirled the wine around and extended the cup ta the man in the monochrome robes. Desnion gently removed the chalice of wine from my grasp, and with a soft smile, chugged down the rest of it. I stared at the chubby blonde man fera odd amount of time. And I waited. I waited fer both Brother Christopher and Sister Julia ta look at me, and then, soon as I was sure my thousand yard stare had their attention, jerked my head away far away from Desnion, like he wasa kitten I had crushed witha Prius. The brain, while a remarkably squishy piecea equipment, is much more capable than ya might give it credit fer. Whether yer smart like Michio Kaku, or dumb like me, yer brain is gonna be able ta do some pretty wild things, sometimes without ya even realizing it. Fer example, if yer walking down the Magnificent Mile and ya see something weird, likea fella in a niceass suit, jacket, and tie, but no belt, ya might not think too mucha it then, but when that same fella runs through the street buck naked with cocaine smeared all over his face, not only will ya be able ta remember that he wasn't wearing a belt, you'll also remember that his pants looked pretty loose ta begin with. It'sa good process, the way

yer brain remembers stuff. It prioritizes information which matters the most at the moment, but also banks information which might come in handy later. But like all processes, it's exploitable. If ya lay down the proper foreshadowing, ya can lead people ta the ending ya want, even if it's utterly detached from reality. After Desnion drained the cup of wine, he held it up ta the thousands of folks in the stone benches above us. "To our collective prosperity!", he bellowed, his mouth far away from the horn. There was a deafening roar from the spectators, and this time I don't right reckon I heard any words which were lewd, or crude, just an animalistic affirmation of Desnion's decadent degenerate discourse. The man in the monochrome robes kept the empty chalice held up high as the crowd continued to cheer, fer almost an entire minute. Then, not quite when the cheers died down, but when they wavered somewhat in intensity, Desnion stuck his mouth back into the giant horn apparatus. "Your enthusiasm touches my heart! The spirit of unity rings out loud this rising period! But the time for cooperation has passed. The time for competition is upon us! And the first competition will be the trial of wits! Representing the incumbent shall be a foreigner from parts unknown, Mister Lucas Ga-" Desnion's announcement was cut off by jeers, boos, and hisses. "'ndulfadore-.", he quickly finished. "Representing the challenger will be the leader of the Fremdos city guard, Sister Kundare!" The jeers and boors were immediately replaced by roars of approval. Desnion stepped away from the horn. "Pick a number from one to ten, Mister Gandulfadore.", the man in monochrome robes instructed Lucas. "Four.", the boy in the purple tophat said without missing a beat. "Alright. Now you, Kundare." "Eight.", the blonde woman said. "Eight?", Desnion said, sounding shocked. "Yes, eight.", Kundare said, her arms crossed. "Marcela is eight cycles old. It is a number worth placing my

faith in.” The Supreme Sibling shrugged his shoulders, and approached the horn once more. “Fate has seen it fit to place the terms of the trial in the hands of Sister Kundare!”, he announced, loudly. “JUSTICE! JUSTICE! JUSTICE!”, the crowd chanted. “The quill is in your hands, Kundare.”, Desnion spoke out into the horn’s mouthpiece. “Dictate the nature of the challenge you wish to offer the incumbent’s retainer!” He circled his hand around in the air, causing Brother Christopher and Sister Julia to carry the big horn apparatus over to the woman with the whip. Sister Kundare stuck her mouth into it with a vicious looking smile. “It is easy for a mind to function properly in times of rest. Even a child can solve a riddle, if she’s coddled enough. But during times of duress....that is when the mind shines the most! When there is real and immediate danger, and a split decision needs to be made swiftly... operating well in those conditions is the TRUE mark of intelligence!” Sister Kundare looked up wildly at the crowd. “Am I correct, citizens of Fremdos?” “Yes! Yes! Yes!”, the crowd chanted. “I thought I would be! Foreigner!”, she loudly yelled, pointing at Lucas. “My challenge is... a duel to the death! With melee weapons *only*.” “W-what?!” I shrieked, yanking at my own hair. “That has nothing to do with wits!” “As winner of the number guessing game, Sister Kundare can lay out whatever terms she wishes.”, Desnion quickly interjected, though he looked pretty taken aback himself. “Obviously Mister Gandulfadore is under no obligation to accept them.” “Oh, yes, no obligation, but if he rejects them he’ll just happen to utterly humiliate me.”, Sabarene angrily hissed, her hood up and her head low so that crowd couldn’t see her. “And what a coincidence that Kundare just happened to win a guessing game whose parameters were entirely in your head, you fat piece of fucking sh-“ “I accept.”, Lucas said, his voice loud enough to render the horn redundant. “W-what?!” Desnion

sputtered, shocked. "I said I accept.", the boy in the purple tophat repeated, then turned to Sister Kundare. "Is my baton suitable as a melee weapon?" "Yes, but no smoke and mirrors allowed, magician." Lucas removed his purple over-coat, and tossed it to the side. "There will be no smoke and mirrors, just as there will be no smoke grenades or proximity mines.", the blonde boy stated, taking off his canister covered belt, and placing it gently down on the stage. "There will be no tazers, nor revolvers, not even any modules.", he added, adding his pronged box, his rectangle, his revolver, and his bowtie to the pile of his discarded equipment. "Only you.", he slurred out, his words broken, and heavily accented. "Only me." "G...grah!", Sister Kundare roared, twirling her metal whip around and rushing the boy without the purple tophat. "Your strikes... fast.", Lucas brokenly mumbled, backing away from Kundare's furious flurry of lashes. "I had friend, once. Fencer, friend.", he spoke out, and with speed that didn't fit his lanky body, dodged around the cracks of her whip. "Friend... she teach me dance. Dance around danger, overcome weight of body, weight of mind", he breathed out, twirling and spinning so the blonde woman's metal whip struck only the stone floor of the coliseum. Lucas stopped backing up, and, his baton held like a club, swung down at Kundare, who jumped out of the trajectory of his obvious swing with ease. The blonde woman pulled her hood down, and grabbed the end of her whip with both hands. "I'm not going to hold back anymore, Foreigner!", she yelled, and with inhuman speed, struck her whip right at the fake Sorcerer's face. Kundare's crack hit Lucas right in the center of his forehead, and created a giant, grotesque gash. Lucas winced, but he didn't falter. "Had brother.", he grunted, blood dripping down his face as he walked, unflinchingly, towards the woman in white. "Not blood brother. But brother." "I don't care!", Kundare spat, and

wildly struck out at Lucas, her razor sharp whip cutting across his shoulders, his chest, and his legs. "Brother taught me... pain can be endured. Injuries... overcome. He taught... that some things... more important, than life." "If that's the case, then just die already!", Sister Kundare yelled, and flexed her whip back to strike at Lucas again. With a rapid thrust of his hand, Lucas snatched Kundare's wrist, and, using the leverage of a rough kick to her chest, ripped the metal whip from her grasp. "Had... had lover.", Lucas panted, barely managing to throw Kundare's whip into the front row of the jeering crowd. "Smart... and dumb. Good... and evil. But strong. Stronger than anything. She... she taught me... when faced with enemy... when faced with obstacle... only one thing... to do." A fury came over Lucas, and he held out the end of his baton with both hands. "Ta smash it ta bits!", he roared, and, his limbs quaking, his body shaking, bumrushed the blonde woman. The skirmish was as short as it was brutal. Sister Kundare was stronger and tougher than Lucas by a few hundred miles. She had muscle, poise, a better center of gravity... pretty much everything he didn't. Lucas's dancing maya been neat to look at, and his resilience mighta been impressive fera fella so scrawny, but as fighters went, he was mediocre... poor, even. He lacked training, he lacked focus, and he lacked discipline. And if there was anything that Kundare had, it was discipline. But what she didn't have was a weapon, and what she didn't have was reach. And inna fight... if ya don't have the ability ta touch a fella, but he has the ability to touch you... well... it don't particularly matter who is more skilled, and who ain't. Lucas smashed Sister Kundare with his baton, cracking the metal rod against face, her stomach, her legs, and her arms. She threw a few panicked punches at him... and I think two or three might have even landed, and landed hard, but they did nothing ta stop

Lucas's assault. He was relentless, and he was cold... a stony, stalwart expression of quiet rage strapped onto his face wacked Kundare with his baton, again, and again, and again, and again, until the woman with the metal whip was little more than a quivering wreck on the cold stone floor of the domed coliseum. "Do... do you... yield?", Lucas panted, his right hand twitching as it clasped a dented metal baton. "No, foreigner." Kundare hatefully spat. "I do NOT yield.", , and, with a elbow bent entirely the wrong way, crawled towards the boy with the metal baton. "Until... until my heartbeat stops... until... my brain shuts down... I... I will never... y-yield." Lucas raised his bloodied bent baton high over the battered blonde woman's head, and... let it drop to the ground. "No, Mister Lucas.", Sabarene whispered, as his baton clattered uselessly on the ground. "No, Mister Lucas!", she boomed out into the mouthpiece of the giant horn. "Sister Kundare challenged you to a duel to the *death*." The crowd let out a frightened gasp at her words. "T-that was just a figure of speech, Sabarene!", Desnion hissed, looking pale. "It was not a figure of speech!", the girl with ruby red eyes shouted, thumping her chest. "Sister Kundare knew she couldn't defeat my retainer in any competition that required even an ounce of intelligence, so she flagrantly challenged Mister Lucas to a bout in an attempt to try and force her way through! And now- now that Kundare lays on the ground, broken and bleeding- now you would try to shield her from reaping what she's sown? Is that FAIR?", she shouted, thumping her chest. "Is that JUST?" The crowd of folks in gray and white began murmuring amongst themselves, quite a few of them looking unsure. "No!", Sabarene shouted, silencing the crowd. "Of course it's not fair! Because by challenging my retainer to a duel, Kundare made a promise! That promise was for blood, for life, for death! Her words carried with them a grave weight. And for

her to weasel out of her fate now... to climb out of the grave she herself dug... it wouldn't just be cowardice... it would be a disgrace!" The crowd erupted into jeers, with quite a bit of the usual refrain for Sabarene. "Go ahead! Call me a cunt!". Sabarene spat out into the horn. "But don't you DARE call me a liar! Unlike that witless, whipless charlatan lying on the ground there, I KEEP my promises. When I instructed the Lancers of Trunchet to surrender or face complete annihilation, then decorated the fences of their city with skulls, I kept my promise! When I vowed to purge Merchenze of dissidents and traitors, and washed out the capital with blood, I kept my promise! And I assure you, even now, I will keep my promise! Mister Lucas... PICK UP THAT BATON!"

With a neutral expression, the bloodied boy walked up to the weapon he had discarded, and with a hand shaking more from fatigue than from hesitation, picked it back up. He lifted the baton high up above Kundare's head, and with a slight grimace of his cheeks, prepared to strike. "N-no!", an irritating, insufferable voice cried out. "Lucas... don't! If you cross that line... there's no coming back from it!" The blonde boy stopped dead in his tracks, his mouth agape, as he stared up. Not at Sabarene, or Desnion. At me. He stared up at me, for some reason. And then, with a firm look on his face, knelt down in front of Kundare "I yield.", he mouthed, faintly. "W-what?!", Desnion sputtered, his face even paler than before. Sabarene winced in disbelief, but recovered almost immediately. "My retainer... yields.", she breathed out into the mouthpiece of the horn, her shoulders deflating. The crowd erupted into cheers. "Gino! Gino! Gino! Gino!", they cried, as Sabarene buried her face in her hands. "Christopher, Julia!", the chubby blonde haired man barked. "Get Sister Kundare to a medical bay immediately." The halberd wielding duo, shook their heads, and made their way off the stage. Brother



Christopher stopped halfway down, and looked at the Supreme Sibling with concern. "Desnion, are you feeling alright? You look ill." "Two people almost died for no reason, of course I look ill.", he snapped, brushing off his shoulders. "Now see to it that Kundare survives, I've no intention of explaining to her daughter how she lost both parents in the same rising period." "Yes, my lord!", Christopher barked, and rushed down to help Sister Julia carry the beaten up blonde woman. I looked away as they carried Kundare away. She was breathing, but the mauling Lucas had given her wasn't the type cured by a few nights rest and care. Oh, it was possible that Kundare would survive the thrashing... even probable, but the beating she got was the type a beating a fella limped away from, rather than walk away from. But her bruises and broken bones didn't matter, not to me, anyhow. "Ruckus!", I cried out, leaping off the stage. "Are... are ya ok, Ruckus?" The bleeding blonde boy inched his way over to his pile of discarded clothing, and tied his bowtie around his sweaty, cut up neck. "I'm fine, Four.", he said, his words sounding crisp and normal-like again. He winced, then smiled. "Actually, no. Physically speaking, I think I'm about to pass out from blood loss. But metaphysically... I feel about as content as I'll ever be. That... that evens things out, doesn't it?" "Of course it don't!", I sputtered. Why the heck did ya decide to accept such a stupid proposal in the first place?" "Simple... theatrics.", he gurgled, then, collapsed on the ground. Without thinking any more it through, I took Lucas by the chest, and slung him over my shoulder. "Where.. where are you taking me?", he wheezed, still conscious. "To the medical bay, duh." "No... no need. The antechamber is... is fine." I rolled my eye as I switched my course, and headed back towards the small room with all the crates of wine. "You and Saparene don't trust them medics much, huh?" "No...", Lucas denied, his voice higher

than usual. "The medicine here is... it's of the same quality as the Confederacy's, perhaps even... even that of the French Revolution's. The stuff in my backpack... it's centuries ahead of the dribble here. I got it Northwestern Memorial Hospital... Best goddamn healthcare there was, there is... and ever will be..." "I ain't gotta goshdarn clue what yer talking about, do ya know that?" "I'm bleeding from my fucking face, do you know that?" he choked out, then went limp. I ignored the jeers towards me and the cheers fer Brother Gino as I departed the main parta the coliseum. "Sheesh... so not only didya ruin yer body, ya didn't even really win in the end, after all.", I muttered ta the unconscious boy. "Yer damn morals will be the enda ya." "Not... not my morals.", Lucas coughed out, shocking me. "I... I was going to kill Sister Kundare. But you... you asked me to stop." "I-I did?", I questioned, then shook my head. "Maybe I shouldn'ta.", I remarked, struggling ta turn the handle of the antechamber door open. "Wasn't my fight, wasn't my call ta make." "I'm glad you did, Four.", Lucas said, speaking as if inna dream. "This whole time... I've been looking at you, and wondering if you were truly *you*, or just... a stranger in a similar body. But... but even if you're missing a limb, even if you say some things I don't agree with... you will always be you." "I... I'll always be what?" "Strong.", he whispered, then, as I walked into the antechamber, fell asleep. I glanced down at Lucas, as I laid him down gently on topa a table. He was covered with lacerations from Kundare's whip, but... but weirdly, nonea the lacerations seemed all that deep. Nah... they only went down about halfa inch, at the very most. It was almost as if Kundare had held back, or something. "Nah, that'd be retarded.", I muttered, dismissing the thought. Ya don't challenge someone ta a death match and then willfully hold back, not unless ya wanna die. Lucas being relatively ok mighta had less ta do with

Kundare's mercy, and more ta do with the fact that she used a whip. Whips ain't designed ta kill. They're designed ta hurt, ta force the fella they're used on into submission. Then again... most whips ain't made outta metal. "It was unwise of you to intervene, Unionist.", a dry sounding voice wheezed. I jolted around. Right behind me, right by the closed doors of the sealed antechamber, was Corcoran, wearing a white robe over his many bandages. "Not only did you steal defeat from the jaws of victory, you made the General lose face." I placed my hand on my hip and glared at the green eyed man. "Yeah, well, maybe she deserves ta lose a bit face, if she's gonna order around Ruckus like that." "What precisely do you think Generals *do*, Unionist?", Corcoran snapped, his voice a bit less raspy than normal. "Do you think they politely ask their soldiers to charge up a hill? Do you think they sit down for tea with their commanders and captains and decide battle plans by a unanimous consensus?" "Do ya think I care? If she ordered Ruckus ta go and fold her clothes fer her I wouldn't mind, but what she wanted him ta do-" "Was precisely what he had to do, imbecile." a guttural voice growled. Shoving the doors ta the antechamber open was Sabarene, her pristine white hair a bit unkempt and a clear scowl on her face. "Oh, yer bac-" "Shut it.", she said, her voice low as she aggressively approached me. "Why do you think I said what I said back a moment ago? Do you think I ordered the death of my sister-in law lightly? Do you think I was getting a thrill watching her and Mister Lucas tear themselves apart?" "I wasn't thinking of y-" "No, of course I didn't enjoy saying any of that. That horrible speech about fulfilling those awful promises... I wish I never had to say even a word of it." I tightened a fist and glared at the red eyed girl. "Then why did ya?!" "Because that's what the situation called for, imbecile!", Sabarene shouted, causing me

ta cover my right ear. “Kundare blind-sighted us with that duel to the death nonsense, she broke the rules simply because that corrupt Charlatan Desnion let her!” “Then why didn’ta ya object, huh?” “Object? You think the rules actually mean a damn? All that matters is what people in the current situation think, Miss Axeman Red Four!”, Sabarene barked, her metal hand shaking. “Mister Lucas made the right call by not backing down. But you made the absolute wrong one! Why the hell did you ask him to spare Kundare? She’s an over-aggressive moron who tried to have you killed four times in the last two rising periods!” I sucked inna bitta air through my nose. “It... it just didn’t feel right, is all.” “What?!”, Sabarene screeched. “Didn’t feel right? You certainly didn’t seem to have any issues killing those people on the Caravan, or stomping the neck of that terrorist in the clinic. Why is it NOW, when a certain level of ruthlessness is actually NEEDED, that you decide to develop a moral backbone?!” I stood my ground, even as the truths of my own hypocrisy bombarded me. “I don’t got a moral backbone, Sister. I... I said it before, I ain’t a good person.” “Of course you’re not! That’s why you agreed to help me, remember?!” I glanced over at Lucas, his arms still cut up bad. “I... I also agreed ta help Ruckus.” “With what? The modules? Kundare wasn’t using a module!” “It ain’t just about the modules, alright?!”, I barked, causing the girl in fronta me ta wince a bit. “It... it ain’t just about that.”, I said, softly. “Ruckus... no...Lucas... he... he ain’t like us.” “No fucking shit.”, Sabarene spat. I crossed my arm over my chest. “What I *mean* by that is that he’s a virgin.” “Looks a bit too pretty to be a virgin.”, Corcoran wheezed. “Not that kinda virgin!”, I growled, then rubbed my stump. “I... I don’t reckon he’s ever killed anyone before.” Sabarene continued ta scowl angrily at me. “You... you think so?” she asked, her voice vicious, but not quite as vicious as before. “He’s said as much ta

me. And he has all this stupid magic crap, but he never uses nothing besides that shocky thing.” Sabarene continued ta glare at me... then... the angry, vicious expression still glued onta her face... began ta cry. “Guaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”, the girl with the bandages wrapped around her chest sobbed, collapsing on her knees. “I’m such a gigantic piece of shit!” “Don’t let the Unionist’s inane prattle get you down, Gener-“ “Shut the FUCK UP, Corcoran!”, Sabarene bellowed, tears pouring down her cheek. The bandaged green eyed man awkwardly crept out of the antechamber, about as quietly as a fella with severe asthma could, anyways. “I’m garbage!”, the girl with ruby red eyes cried, pounding the floor with her metal fist. “You and Mister Lucas have done so much for me... and here I am, chewing *you* out for preventing *him* from becoming a monster!” “You ain’t exactly wrong fer doing that.”, I grumbled. “Now we’re pretty much sunk becausea my need ta act like something I ain’t.” “Nonsense.”, Sabarene sniffled, wiping her face with her forearm. “We... we can still salvage this whole election process. If you win the trial by combat, and if I give a good enough speech... Gaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah! It’s hopeless!”, she sobbed. “The crowd keeps calling me a cunt, and there’s no way you’ll be able to beat Julia and Christopher!” “You don’t know that.”, I commented, calmly. “Of course I know that!”, the white haired girl yelped. “Even with the trinkets I got for you... you can’t overcome a two on one fight! No one could!” “That... that ain’t necessarily true.”, I said, nervously. “See... fights... they can go any which way, based on circumstance. This one fella I fought once slipped onna buncha snow, it let me bury an axe right in the middle of his stomach.” “There’s no snow in the coliseum, Miss Axeman Red Four.” “Right, but there’s other things ta take inta account. Other circumstances that might twist the odds in our favor.”, I added, vaguely. “Does it matter?”, Sabarene

asked, sounding depressed. "The crowd hates me anyways." "Of course they hate ya. They were let into the coliseum because they hate ya. But nonea that matters. They ain't the only folks that are gonna vote, right?" Sabarene blinked. "N-no, the Order of Fiat as a whole gets to vote." "Right, and that's a whole lotta people, ain't it? There's tons of yer ilk in Fremdos, Trunchet, Cercentet, and Merchenze, ain't there? So just cause the folks in here hate ya, it don't mean the folks outside do. I mean, ya basically have a standing army waiting ta help ya out anyways." "True, and if I don't win I could always just pull a coup.", Sabarene said, shaking her head sagely. "Uh-" "Kidding, kidding!", she said, waving her hands around frantically. "We've got our work cut out for us, though. Not only will you need to win the duel against Brother Christopher and Sister Julia, I'll have to give one hell of a speech." "You'll be fine.", I said, firmly. "It's me that's gotta step up. Specially considering how I just ruined you and Ruckus's efforts." Sabarane rubbed the part of her arm where her metal hand met her fleshy wrist, then clasped my shoulders. "We'll step up together." She smiled. "Now take off your clothes." "W-what?!" The white haired girl blinked at me. "I said take off your clothes." "A-all of em?!" "All of- no, of course not. Just your armor." "I'm just wearing my armor!", I stammered. "Alright, then yes, take off all your clothes.", Sabarene scoffed, impatient. I backed up nervously. "I... I ain'ta degenerate, ya hear! Not now, not never!" "What does that have to do with-" Realization dawned on her face. "Oh.", she said, and blushed, embarrassed. "Oh no, no, I didn't- I wasn't asking you to-" A stern look came over her face, flushing away the pink. "Hey, there's nothing degenerate about what I'm asking you to do, even if I meant what you think I mean, which incidentally, I don't!" "Asking me ta take off my clothes seems pretty degenerate ta me!", I stammered, backing up into a

wall. Sabarene rolled her eyes, and walked over to the crates I had laid Lucas on top of. “Oh for Fiat’s sake..., look!”, she barked, ripping the front of the crate off. “A-ah!”, Lucas cried, as the contents of the crate poured and caused the poor cut up blonde boy to crash into the ground. “S-sorry, Mister Lucas.”, Sabarene said, meekly, as Lucas weakly picked himself off the floor. She gestured towards collapsed crates, and their spilled out contents. “See, THIS is why I wanted you to take off your clothes, Miss Axeman Red Four. This, and nothing more. Mostly.” I squinted my eye and leaned over to get a glimpse at what Sabarene was pointing at. Spilled out of the crates I had perhaps unwisely chosen to lie Lucas down upon was... well, for one, the set of insufferably stupid looking black spikey armor, the helmet, chestpiece, and gauntlets all in pristine condition. But perhaps a bit more notably... “A... a greataxe?!”, I yelled, my voice five octaves higher than normal, and four octaves higher than my natural voice. “Not *just* a greataxe.”, Sabarene boasted, smiling with unconstrained smugness. “A greataxe made out of a prototype alloy, made by combining lifemetal, Cercenlentionian steel, and Runiertian. I called in a few favors.” “Ya... ya gotta be kidding me.”, I gasped, touching the axe that had fallen out of the crate with awe. The head of it was big and heavy, but the weight was distributed perfectly, meaning it could hit like a sledgehammer but cut as precisely as a knife. The handle of it was made of a semi-corroded metal and reinforced with polished oak, meaning that it was both comfortable to wield, and balanced enough to minimize the recoil of a strike by a whole bunch. “This... this might just be the fourth best axe I’ve ever seen in my life... maybe even the third!”, I gawked out, then frowned. “But are those painted on red stripes really necessary?” “I... I thought they looked cool.”, Sabarene said, self consciously. “Yeah, they make the axe look fiery.”, Lucas

commented. "You could name it Ragnarok or something, Patchy!" I narrowed my eye at the blonde boy who, while apparently healthy, was by all accounts still bleeding from his face. "How the heck are you still conscious?" "Adrenaline rush.", he answered, then winced. "I... I should probably treat my wounds now." As Lucas tore off his bloody shirt and began limping towards his backpack. I wrapped my hand around the polished oak handle and... lifted the greataxe about halfa inch off the ground. "G-uh.", I grunted, pulling hard with my right hand. "Darn thing's heavy as all heck.", I complained, then reached ta try and lift it up with my left hand. "Oh, right.", I muttered, my stump bumping uselessly against the end of the greataxe's polished oak handle. Sighing, I dropped the nice looking, useful, useless greataxe ontta the ground. "Look, Sister, I appreciate yer generosity, but I can't exactly use something like this." "Oh, please, I may be an idealist but I'm not imbecilic.", Sabarene spat. "Do I look like the kind of person that would bring a boy without legs running shoes? Do I seem the sort of dolt that would give a blind man reading glasses?" "Yes.", Lucas said, searching through his rucksack ta pull out some bandages anda bottle of disinfectant. "Well, fine, but I'm not the sort of idiot that would give a crippled-" "Differently abled.", Lucas corrected her, grimacing as he poured the contents of the bottle over his cuts, gashes, and bruises. "Differently abled Unionist a greataxe, not if she couldn't use it." "But I can't use it.", I muttered, meekly. "Do you have the memory of a goldfish?", Sabarene gawked, her hands on her hips. "I told you, my lifemetal armor increases physical capacity." My eye opened wide. "Wait, so you saying if I wear that stupid seta spikey garbage, I could actually lift my axe wortha damn?" "Um, maybe?", Sabarene ventured. "I mean, wearing it allowed me to wield a great sword, and I can't even lift a hatchet too well normally speaking, so I suppose that



it could help you out—“ She stopped, suddenly, and stared down at my legs. “What happened to your pants?” “Took em off.”, I grunted, twisting my left foot ta get out of the black leather slacks I had obtained from the sewers, then turned ta Lucas. “Alright, you pull me out of the chestpiece. But no gawking.” “Oh, please.”, the blonde boy groaned, dropping his bandages and getting on his feet. “There is literally no part of you that I haven’t seen before, Four.” Mechanically, routinely, without blushing or wincing in the slightest, Lucas untied the cords to my ill-fitting leather armor, and began removing the pieces from my body. “Christ.”, he grunted, ripping off my chestguard, “I can’t imagine why you would wear something like this, it’s got to weigh at least seventy pounds.” “I can’t imagine why you would wear yer git up.”, I said, shivering as I stood in the middle of the antechamber, buck-naked. “That hat has gotta be the dumbest piecea fashion I ever done saw.”, I yammered, trying not ta think too much about the situation. “Well, second dumbest. First dumbest hasta be this stupid piecea- ack!” I hollered ta the high heavens as Sabarene clamped the right leg of her black spikey armor around my right leg. The darn thing didn’t really hurt, but it was cold as all heck. The spikes sticking out also made me spread my legs apart some, which woulda been a whole lot less weird if I was wearing a paira shorts, orra shirt, orra tanktop, or something. “Alright, just remain perfectly still, Miss Axeman Red Four. Otherwise I might accidentally poke a hole in your labia.” “The heck issa labia?!” “Um, just stay still, ok?” It tooka fairly long time, and the process was about as uncomfortable as it was awkward, but Sabarene and Lucas managed ta get the big set of black spikey plate mail around me completely. “Wait... the heck are you putting armor on my stump?”, I asked, as Sabarene wrapped the left gaunter of the spikey armor around my shortened extremity. “Balance.”, the white haired

girl answered. "Mostly balance. There's one other reason, but right now I'm doing it so you don't fall over from the lifemetal's lopsided weight." She swallowed nervously. "Ok, try moving." I tried moving. The armor weighed a ton, and I ain't terribly sure I'm being figurative with that phrasing. I was barely... just BARELY able ta take a few steps towards Sabarene. "Yeah, I don't think this is gonna work out.", I breathed out through the compact black helmet strapped ta my face. "I can't move in this thing at all." "Don't worry about that, I haven't activated the armor yet." "The heck doya mean by that?", I asked, then tried moving my head ta the side. The stupid spiked helmet on my head was heavy as all heck, but it allowed fer a decent bit of movement. The visibility I got through the eyeslits wasn't that great, but I blame that less on the designa the helmet and more on the fact that the left eyeslit went completely unutilized. There's always this trade off when it comes ta armor, do ya go fer what makes ya more mobile, or do ya go with what'll protect ya? And the answer is, every time... it depends. It depends on the time ya live in, and the circumstances around you. Originally weapons weren't all that sharp or strong, so folks made due with leather. But then weapons came about that could cut through leather, so folks began wearing plate. But, and I'm just being hypothetical here, what if someone made something that could pierce through plate, hell, pierce through anything? Then the proper answer would be ta wear as little armor as possible, because iffa heavy hunka metal don't protect ya better thana piecea linen cloth, ya might as well go fer what's comfortable. But that hypothetical was moot. I had seen the halberds I would be facing off against, and while they were the types of weapon that could pierce and damage plate mail, they weren't advanced enough ta cut through it like butter, not immediately at least. So I remained standing in the middle of

the antechamber, trapped in a ridiculously heavy black spikey armor as Sabarene did a full examination of me and my condition. There was a gentle knocking on the antechamber's door. "I suppose I'll get that.", Lucas mumbled, and, with a arm still cut up from Kundare's whip, pulled it open. It was Desnion. His face was excessively pale, and he was sweating a whole bunch. "It's... it's time.", the chubby blonde man told Sabarene, wiping off his sweat drenched face. "Oh, is that so?", Sabarene asked, venomously. "Any last moment adjustments you'd like to make? Will my champion have to win a number guessing game in order to start the duel without a halberd to her throat?" "No... no last moment adjustments.", the nauseous looking Supreme Sibling blathered. "Your retainer, against both of Gino's. Until she, or her opponents, yield." "Yield? That's not how it worked last time.", Sabarene hissed. "Last time there were a panel of judges who declared a winner before things out of hand." "Last time I didn't have to arrange an election in less than three rising periods.", Desnion snapped, then faltered a bit, almost falling over. "In any event, be grateful I'm allowing as much as I am.", he gasped, leaning against a crate of wine. "And hopefully, after you lose *this* event, you'll have the good grace to return to obscurity. Fiat knows you've done enough damage." The sickly looking man with the receding hairline pushed himself off the crates, and waddled his way to the exit, then stopped. "Oh, and Miss Axeman Red Four...", he commented, almost as an afterthought. "If you so much as scratch either of my retainers, I'll slice off your remaining limbs, and shove a knife through your empty eye socket." Without letting me voice a response, the sickly looking Supreme Sibling left the antechamber, and walked back out into the noisy as heck coliseum. "He just has to go for the low blow, didn't he?", Lucas said, bitter. "Oh, that's just how Desnion is,

Mister Lucas.”, Sabarene breathed out. “He’s very protective of his friends.” “Oh, right, “friends”, Lucas snorted, then winced as onea his bandages fell offa his chest. “A-ah...”, he moaned, falling on his knees. “Stop running yer damn mouth, Ruckus!”, I barked, my voice muffled by the helmet. “Yer too darn cut up ta speak, so stop speaking. Just put them bandages on yer wounds, then get some rest.” “No.”, he choked out. “There’s no way I’m just going to stand idly by, while you risk your life. I want to be there for you, just as you were for me.” “I wasn’t there fer you!”, I squawked, shrilly. “I didn’t do nothing but watch, and run my mouth!” “Running your mouth was the best thing you could have done, Four.”, Lucas said, his blue eyes soft. “For me, for Sabarene and for you. And for Kundare too I suppose, but fuck her.” “Perhaps you’re right, Mister Lucas.” Sabarene said, sounding sad. “But Miss Axeman Red Four’s intervention meant that we lost the first trial.” The blonde boy shakily reached fer his hat, and plopped it atop his head. “I’d rather we lose and maintain our decency, than win and lose any semblance of humanity.” “But it isn’t just our humanity at stake, Mister Lucas. There are tons of other people on the continent, in the world. And just because we don’t see them... just because we don’t talk with them, laugh with them, perhaps even fight with them, it doesn’t make their lives... their experiences... any less valid.” Lucas grimaced, as he shakily applied another bandage ta his cheek. “It’s not like we have to choose between one or the other, Sister. We can help people out while being true to ourselves.” “No...”, Sabarene whispered, sounding scared. “No, we really can’t. I... I thought we could... but we can’t. If the rules are rotten, then we have to act rotten, if we want to win. L-l-like... like take the upcoming duel. Miss Axeman Red Four might have to... no... she *will* have to... kill one of Desnion’s retainers.” “No, she won’t.”, Lucas said, firmly. “Not if

she doesn't want to." "It's... it's not about want, Mister Lucas! It's about what has to be done! If Brother Gino comes into power, and plunges the Continent into war, then hundreds of thousands will die! We... we need to do whatever we can to stop him. There's no point in worrying about the "how," when the "if" carries with it far more evil!" "Yer right.", I said, gruffly. "I... I know I am.", Sabarene said, her voice cracking. "Not you, Sister. You're dead wrong. It's Ruckus that's right." "...What?", the white haired girl gasped, shocked. "Look... it's like this. We can't act like wilting lilies when dealing with pricks who are tough, and underhanded, and looking ta start up a whole buncha trouble, that's optimistic ta the pointa retardation." "Stupidity, not retardation.", Lucas corrected me. "Fine, stupidity, and retardation, whatever. But dealing with pricks that are tough, mean, and underhanded... by *being* tough, mean, and underhanded... well, it's sorta likea ripping out one weed, and planting another." "I didn't take you for a gardener, Four.", Lucas said flatly. "I'm as gooda gardener as I ama public speaker, so just bear with me, alright?" I muttered, picking up the baga moss and the muddy bandage from my discarded leather armor. "If... if ya can't stop being underhanded...", I grumbled, clumsily making my way ta the door of the antechamber. "If ya can't afford not being tough..." I gasped, the weight of the armor making each step harder than the last. "Then all ya gotta do... is be tough, and be underhanded, without being mean." Sabarene stared up at me, and... started ta cry, again. "...How?", she sniffled, tears spilling from her beautiful red eyes. "How can you win anything, without losing a part of yourself in return?" I swallowed the spittle in my mouth, and turned both of the helmet's eyeslits to gaze upon the scared girl. "Like this." I ignored the weight of the spikey armor on my legs, and, with a thrust of my right thigh, kicked the door open. The jeers of the crowd

bursted into the antechamber like a wave, but they didn't deter me. For a brief second, I thought about going back to fetch my new greataxe, but I didn't need it. Wordlessly, without being prompted... Lucas and Sabarene had grabbed the gigantic weapon, and carried it, both of them bearing an equal share of the weight. The scene in the middle of the stage was the same as it ever was, mostly. Gino stood next to Desnion, and by him were Sister Julia and Brother Christopher. Kundare was absent, give or take a few ounces of blood still splattered across the coliseum's cold stone floor. The atmosphere had changed, though, and I don't mean in the way the crowd was chanting the "b" word instead of the "c" word. Walking out into the center of the coliseum felt like walking down the wrong alley in Provesh. I wasn't sure what was gonna happen, but I knew that every face, every eye, every ear, was doing its best to size me up, to try and figure out if I was a target that could be taken down right quick. That... I expected that. But what caught me off guard was- well, it was the way the folks in the seats shirked away from me. It was totally different than before. Back when I was still wearing the collar, and the leather armor, I had caught folks gawking at me, and my stump, and the looks on their faces ranged from disgust, to curiosity, to slight confusion. Now that I was clad in the stupid black spikey armor, everyone, without exception, gazed at me with fear. Pronounced fear. The women recoiled away from me, the men stared at me uneasily. I think I even heard an infant crying. But while the crowd may have treated me with apprehension and fear, Sister Julia and Brother Christopher stared at me with cold indifference. They... they had changed their outfits, somewhat. The white haired man and black haired woman were still clad in monochrome habits, but both of them had slight sheets of metal protecting their vitals. Their heads and feet were still completely

exposed, though, and the sheets of metal didn't seem terribly dense. The sheets seemed like they would protect from glancing blows, but if I could manage to lift up my greataxe and swing it right, I would be able to cut through their armor easier than a damp piece of paper. That seemed an unlikely prospect, what with the left metal gauntlet on my armor being nothing but dead weight, and my steps each like that of molasses. But to be blunt... the greataxe didn't matter, nor did the wrong gauntlet, dead weight or otherwise. The only weapons that mattered were the bandage and bag of moss scrunched up tightly in my right gauntlet, the right gauntlet. "Sisters and Brothers of the Collective!", Desnion announced, talking through his horn once again. "In just a few moments, the second trial of the election process shall begin! Representing Brother Gino will be... Brother Christopher and Sister Julia!" A loud series of cheers echoed throughout the coliseum, loud and stalwart. "And representing Sister Sabarene will be... the Unionist! Miss Axman Red Four!" The crowd booed, but the boos were short... fearful, far less in intensity than the cheers for the halberd wielding duo. "This bout will be a no holds bar match! All three combatants are free to fight however they please, so long as they stay within the confines of the coliseum! The match will only end when one side surrenders, or is otherwise rendered unable to surrender! Consider this bout not a demonstration of intellect, or skill... but a pure example of each candidate's raw, uninhibited power!" He stepped away from the horn. "Alright, let's get this shitshow over with.", Desnion grumbled, wiping off his sweaty face before speaking into the horn again. "Brother Christopher! Sister Julia!", he bellowed. "Are you ready?" "Yes, my lord!", the two said, crossing their arms over their chest and saluting Desnion without even the slightest trace of sarcasm, or irony. "Axeman Red Four.", Desnion uttered, his

voice a greater deal lower. "Are you prepared?" "Uh... of course I-" "Wait just one moment, Desnion!", Sabarene cried out. She let go of the greataxe and rushed towards me, causing Lucas to damn near drop it on the ground. "Um... good luck, ok?", she whispered to me, blushing a bit. "And don't worry, the spikes won't pierce any of your vital organs." "Wait, what-" With a gentle motion of her black metal hand, the white haired girl flicked the shortest spike protruding out of my left pauldron. Instantly, the spikes which stuck from the armor, pushed themselves inward.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!" I shrieked, the helmet distorting my yelp into a deep roar. The pain was the sixth worst I had ever felt in my life... immediately, I frantically pulled at the spikes with both my arms, trying to yank them out. My pulls did nothing. No matter how hard I yanked with my right hand, or my left, the spikes wouldn't come out. But something about that didn't add up. "W-what the... heck?", I choked out, in the midst of the immense discomfort. Not believing it, but feeling it, I slowly raised my gauntlet in front of my helmet. My *left* gauntlet. Completely aghast, I tried moving the metal fingers of the hollow piece of armor. To my utter shock... it worked. The empty metal fingers of the empty metal gauntlet attached to my stump moved... moved as if they were my own. And then... as quickly as it had come, the pain faded away. The spikey black armor didn't feel like armor anymore... it felt like my own skin. A weird calm came over me, and, like nothing had ever happened to me, I walked over to Lucas, and picked up the greataxe... with both hands. "Jesus Christ...", the beat up blonde boy gasped, gawking at me with a mix of fear and fascination. "You look like Sauron right now, Patchy." Perhaps a bit forcefully, Sabarene wrapped her right arm around my neck and turned me away from Lucas, to face Julia and Christopher. "You don't have very long.",



she whispered, her voice low. "End this quickly, or there will be serious physical repercussions." I didn't respond to that. Gently, but firmly, I brushed Sabarene's arm off my neck, and, greataxe in hand, marched towards the man in the monochrome robes. "I'm ready.", I announced ta Desnion, my heart beating like a drum. "I meant what I said earlier, Unionist. So much as a scratch...", the chubby man with short blonde hair declared, then put his mouth ta the horn once again. "Very well!", he loudly announced. "On the count of three... the trial by combat shall began!" The crowd let out a roar of approval. "Julia! Christopher! Julia! Christopher!", the people in the stands above us cried, loud and clear. "One!", Desnion announced, passion strong and high in his voice as he cried out ta the stands. "Two!", he cried out, tightening his fist strong. "Thr-", he began ta cry out, then stumbled, like he had just been hit hard in the back a his head. . "S-sorry about that.", the apologized, sounding nauseous. He placed a hand in front of his mouth, and took in a few deep breaths. The pale looking man rose ta his feet, and gazed at Christopher and Julia with his bright green eyes. "Three!", he yelled, loud and firm as possible. And just like that... they were upon me. Moving with an inhuman speed, Sister Julia and Brother Christopher rushed me. Julia carried her halberd behind her back, while Christopher had his raised high above his head. Before they could get within a foot of me, I jumped off the stage. Sabarene and Lucas's presence aside, the stage didn't have nearly enough room fer me ta get in any good swings with my axe, and if it came down ta exchange a small series of short ranged strikes, Christopher and Julia would win everytime. I leapt off onta the bottom of the coliseum, in the rounded half rink where Lucas and Kundare had their little bout. "Above you, Doggy!", Julia yelled, flipping off the stage and striking her halberd right down at my head.

Immediately, I lifted the head of my greataxe to deflect her strike. But the moment I raised my axe towards hers, she twisted out of my way, stopping her strike split-second to land elsewhere. That struck as weird, because- “Four! In front of you!” I jerked my head back down at Lucas’s words. With a stern strength, Christopher lunged hard and deep at my exposed torso. I tried ta bring down my great axe ta deflect his halberd. I failed. With a sickening crunch, the white haired man buried the edge of his halberd into my black lifemetal armor. And it hurt. It felt like he was tearing past my own skin, and cutting through my bone. But he didn’t. All he had down was cut through about an inch or so into my armor. “Do you yield, Unionist?”, he asked, his eyes steel. I didn’t respond. Instead, I grabbed the head of his halberd with my left hand, and pushed it in further towards my chest. Christopher’s eyes widened. “Gurah!”, I yelled, swinging my greataxe at his exposed head. He regained his focus, and ripped his halberd out of my armor, deflecting my strike just in the nick of time. The white haired man had ample room fer another strike, but he neglected to do so. Instead, he just stared... almost like he was looking behind- “Yaaaaaaah!”, I twisted out of the way, as Sister Julia thrust her halberd at my back. I didn’t twist out of the way well enough. Her halberd cut through the side of my torso, and unlike Christopher’s, her strike cut past the armor. “Guh... gah!”, I gasped, as a small spray of blood gushed out my side. It didn’t matter. I broke out into a sprint, and rushed towards the opposite side of the coliseum. The two overtook me almost immediately, and swung their halberds at me like two closing pinchers. They... they hit me. They hit me in the back, and while the pain I received made it clear they had cut through my armor-turned-skin, the fact that I was still in control of all my senses made it clear my spine was still intact. My head thumping, I smacked against the opposite end

of the coliseum. “A-ah!”, a small boy sitting in the stands screamed, inches away from my face. “Not so loud, kid.”, I hissed, then quickly turned around. Less than a foot away from me, standing on my left and on my right, were Sister Julia, and Brother Christopher. They weren’t winded, they weren’t hurt, and they both held their halberds less than an inch away from my neck. “Last chance, pup.”, Julia said, her voice stoic, and serious. “Yield, or die like a dog.” “Yield, or die with honor.”, Christopher said, his voice just as serious. I stared at the white haired man, then at the black haired woman. I let out a loud sigh, and let my greataxe crash against the ground. Brother Christopher lifted up his halberd. “Very well, Unionis-“ Immediately, I thrust my right gauntlet at the white haired man’s face, the palm smeared with the mud I had tried to use on Marston. “C-christopher!”, Julia shrieked, panicking as she saw the mud smeared over my hand. She dived in front of my palm, her halberd poised to block it... but I wasn’t trying to strike Christopher with my right palm. Strong, and powerful, my left gauntlet, formed tightly into a fist, crashed into the black haired woman’s face. I crushed her nose with a sickening crunch, and sent her flying away from her halberd. “J-julia!”, both Desnion and Christopher shouted. “Ragh!”, the white haired man yelled, striking at me sloppily with his halberd. I dodged his obvious strike with ease, and snatched up Julia’s abandoned halberd. The weapon felt weird and awkward in my hands, but it resembled an axe for the most part, so I just moved my hands up the handle and wielded it as I would a sledgehammer. I smiled viciously at the white haired man, but then remembered the helmet covered up my mouth. “Heh.”, I cackled, forcing my voice as deep as I could make it. “She ain’t getting up from that.” “You... you wish, doggy!” Her nose bleeding, Julia struggled onto her feet. Even standing, she was dazed, and weaponless, so I

allowed my eye to focus exclusively on Christopher, who acted a whole bunch more cautiously all of a sudden. I closed my right fist and held it out in front of Christopher. "Betcha can't guess what I got right here...", I taunted him, my voice low. He didn't say anything. He just glared at me, his halberd raised right in front of him. "Come on... guess.", I repeated, sinisterly. "Maybe it's a Kinder chocolate surprise." "Rargh!", Julia yelled, striking out at me with nothing but her fists. She punched me in the helmet with her bare hand. I punched her in the stomach with my metal gauntlet. "G-gyah!", she sputtered, collapsing on the ground in a heap. "Ya ain't gonna guess?", I said to Christopher, stepping over the black haired woman's legs. "Well... here's what it ain't. It ain't-" "Is it a great axe?", Christopher asked, his voice low. I raised an eyebrow. "A great axe? Now why the heck would it be a great-" "Die, you mangy bitch!", Julia snarled, swinging my own weapon up at me. I didn't dodge it. Her strike cleaved right through my left gauntlet. "My arm!", I cried out, in disbelief. "You cut off my left arm!" My left gauntlet flew through the air, Julia's halberd still clutched well within its grasp. "Gruaaaaaaaaah!", I shouted, and kicked the black haired woman right in the throat. "G-gah!", she screamed, her head smashing against the floor. "Wrong answer.", I huffed to Christopher, keeping my feet firm on Julia's chest. "The correct answer... was a buncha moss!" I unfurled my right hand, which was once again my only hand, and showed the white haired man the green moss. "And guess where the moss is going? Right down this idiot's worthless gullet!" "J-julia!", Christopher cried, and as I predicted, lunged to stop me. I headbutted him in the face. "Gah!", I yelled, slamming my helmet against his skull. "Just how stupid!", I shouted, as I punched him in the side of his head. "can you morons-" I grabbed him by his white hair- "be?!", I yelled, slamming his head down into

my knee. "I mean...", I huffed, as I yanked his halberd outta his hands and tossed it ta the side. "Do you think I'd actually use poison? In a duel?" I let outta small chuckle. "Nah... ain't no way I'd do that." The white haired man and the black haired woman both rose to their knees. I walked away from em, as Christopher picked up my greataxe, and Julia picked up the halberd attached ta my detached left gauntlet. "It... it was a clever bluff, Doggy.", the black haired woman panted, dazed and disoriented. "But it shan't work again.", Christopher finished, venom in his words. Both of em were in pretty bad shape. Julia's face was all sorts a messed up, and Christopher was bleeding from his skull and ears. But from the way their held their weapons, it was clear they weren't gonna give up any time soon. "Y'know... I wasn't *completely* bluffing.", I called out to the duo, as they spread apart and positioned themselves back inta pincher formation. "About the moss and the mud, I mean." "Your words are worth as much as your master's, mongrel.", Christopher spat. "No, no, seriously!" I called out, backing away from em. "I'm telling the truth! There *is* something that can cause the same exact effect... of the moss, and the mud! Y'know... something that can cause a fella ta get tired... then nauseous... then die." Julia and Christopher slowly advanced on me, my words going in one ear, and out another. "But that something... ", I continued, babbling on. "it ain't like moss, or mud. Something that terrible can't be used in such a solid form. It has ta be... liquid. Drinkable." I tried back up further, then hit against a wall. The two kept stepping towards me, unperturbed. "Just a single drop of the stuff I'm thinking of... why... you could place it inna bitta wine, and ya wouldn't know ya drank it until it was too-" "Gru—graaaaaaaah!" Suddenly, as if ta save me the hassle, Desnion kneeled over on the stage, and vomited. "Late.", I finished, and stop backing away. I reached fer my

helmet, and yanked it off of my head. "Yup.", I said, smiling viciously as I walked towards Julia, and Christopher. "That something... there's only ONE cure ta it." "Desnion!", Sabarene cried, running towards the man in monochrome robes in a panic, while the orange haired man stared at the events above, dumbfounded. "And that cure... it's so small, that you can hide it pretty much anywhere!" I cackled, loud. "So whattya say?", I guffawed, loud and powerfully. "Do ya yield? Do ya give up?" "You're... you're bluffing, Unionist!", Julia cried, her face contorted. "Shucks... am I bluffing?", I said, then took the halberd in my hand and threw it ta the side. "Strike me down, then. If I'm bluffing... then it'll be fine! Run me through! Ain't no poison, ain't no worry about killing me! Go ahead!" Julia furrowed her brow, and prepared ta strike. "N-no!", Christopher cried, distraught. "We... we yield!", he cried, forcing Julia's halberd aside, and dropping the greataxe. "We?", I asked, tilting my head. "I didn't hear you say nothing, Julia!" The black haired woman glanced at Christopher, then up at Desnion. "I... I yield.", she meeped, quietly. "Louder!", I barked. "Louder, with feeling!" "I... I yield!", she bellowed, tears falling from her eyes as she dropped her halberd onto the ground and kneeled with Christopher. "Now... now please! Save Dez!" I scratched the backa my head. "Save Dez? The heck do ya mean by that?" "The antidote!", she cried. "Give him the antidote!" "The antidote?", I repeated, as if the concept was alien to me. "But he ain't poisoned or nothing. He looks fine ta me!" And... fer the most part, I was right. Shakily, and visibly assisted by Sabarene, Desnion rose ta his feet, looking healthy enough, if not a bit shaken. "W-what?", Christopher gasped, gazing down at his hands, distraught. "But... but he was-" "Just fine, of course.", I said, smiling pleasantly. "I guess he musta ate something that disagreed with him. That happens ta folks from

time ta time.” The blonde haired man in monochromes glared down at me with contempt, and a bit of spittle on his chin. “Do... do you HONESTLY think what you just did counts as winning, Miss Axeman Red Four?” I non-chalantly picked up my greataxe, and held it against the necks of Julia and Christopher. “I dunno. Does it?” Desnion glared down at me, and... his shoulders shuddering... placed his mouth into the horn. “The winner... the winner is Miss-... the Unionist.”, he finished, sounding disgusted with every word. “And by proxy, Sister Sabarene.” There was a moment of silence. I didn’t say nothing, and neither did the folks at my feet. No... suddenly... the crowd erupted into... cheers of all things, unironic, enthusiastic cheers, and chants. And this time... the chants by the folks in the gray robes and the white robes inside the coliseum matched the chant by the folks in the black robes outside it. “Sabarene! Sabarene! Sabarene! SABARENE!” I let go of my greataxe and tossed it aside. I climbed back on stage, and smiled at the white haired girl, endorphins surging through my blood stream. “See?”, I damn near shouted, exhausted, but happy. “We did it!” My knees started to feel a bit woozy, but I continued on, Sabarene shining like a bright light as she gawked at me, tears in her eyes. “What... whatcha crying fer?”, I wheezed, finding it a whole lot harder to talk for some reason. “Ya won...”, I croaked, as the coliseum full of cheering fans spun and spun around me, as the ground rushed up quickly to meet my face. “Ya won, and no one even... hadta... die.” And then there was only darkness.

“Fifty thousand dollars.” “That, plus room and board.” “Fifty thousand dollars.”, I repeated. The spikey haired man sitting across from me groaned. “I just said that Splendor, you don’t need to repeat it.” I rolled my eyes. “You pay fifty thousand

goshdarn dollars just ta go to this stupid school?” “Well, not by semester.” “I would hope it ain’t by semester!”, I gacked, slamming my fist down onta the cheap plastic table. “I mean... just look around, fer christ’s sake! Yer buildings are brutalistic nightmares fresh outta the 1950s, there’s snow freaking everywhere, ya have those stupid, gender specific, curfews, and yer wifi censors tumblr, IMBD, and 4chan!” The spikey haired man stretched his muscular abdominal and frowned, then began munching on a stale looking French fry. “The fuck is 4chan?” “It’s... it’s an imageboard, Phil.”, Phil’s friend said, his purple hoodie pulled tight over his head. “It’s an American knockoff of futaba channel... that... that big Japanese discussion site with the anonymous posting.” “So basically, it’s a website for pedophiles, criminals, and other creeps.” “N-not really...”, the hooded boy said softly, smiling shyly. “B-b-but she’s right, Phil.. um... I... I think. I mean... fifty thousand dollars is a ton of money...” “It’s only a ton of money if you major in something retarded, like Political Science. But if you stick to Spanish, Hoffman, I guaran-fucking-tee that you’ll be racking in the big bucks. Or pesos. Whatever shit they use south of the border.” “I... I don’t know.”, the blonde boy stuttered, shivering as a gust wind blew through the open air patio. “I mean... the spanish classes... they’re just not fun. I... I um... I go to them, and I just don’t feel like I’m enjoying them. I- I mean... Mister Jorge Gonzalez is a great teacher, but... but I just don’t enjoy anything he says.” Phil tilted his seat back and grinned, exposing a big mouth fulla shiny white teeth. “You’re not supposed to enjoy your classes! You’re supposed to endure them! We’re not here to learn, we’re here so we can get white collar jobs! Or do you want to actually have to *work* when you graduate, Mister Lucas Hoffman?” The boy with the bangs over his left eye squirmed a bit, uncomfortable. “I... I just want to do something that matters.”



“Matters to the world, or matters to you? Because the two are not one and the same, mi amigo.” “L-life isn’t a zero sum game.”, Hoffman spoke out, shyly. “There’s stuff out there that you can enjoy, which helps other people too. L-like... like being a Veterinarian, or managing a garden, or-“ “Zero sum game?”, Phil snorted. “Where’d you learn that useless jargon from, Hoffman?” “Um... well... I took a Economics class by Professor McFall, last... um... fall. It... it seemed interesting enough.” The brown haired man rolled his eyes. “This Mcfall guy, he an associate Professor, or assistant? Because if he’s assistant he isn’t tenured, and if he isn’t tenured he’s completely useless.” “The heck is tenure?” Phil looked at me and smiled, sheepishly. “Sorry, didn’t mean to leave the guest of honor out of the conversation. Tenure is something in college which means you can’t get fired, like, ever.” “Professor Whitman got fired last year.”, the blonde boy interjected. “He got fired for racism.” “I thought it was cocaine?” “No, he was *arrested* for cocaine, he was *fired* for racism.” “Who towards?” “Um... Asians, apparently.” “Asians?”, the spikey haired man gasped, almost falling out of his seat. “I never heard of professors getting fired for being racist towards Asians before. I mean, you’re usually dead in the water if you say any slurs towards Latinos, Jews, and Blacks, but Asians...what a world!” Hoffman glanced at me, and cringed. “Um... N-not... not that Phil means to say slurs towards black people are cool, or anything, it’s... it’s just-“ “Don’t worry about it.”, I said, the conversation suddenly getting much more awkward than I had anticipated. “So... what do *you* do, Will?” “It’s Phil, and I’m a biochemistry major.”, the tan man with spikey brown hair answered. “A what?” “Biochemistry. You know all the ingredients in soda that Soccer Moms say causes cancer? Phosphorus Acid and shit? I’m going to be the filthy guido fuck that harvests them.” “Ah.”, I said.

“That, uh... that sounds interesting, I guess.” “Interesting? The work’s about as interesting as Nancy Pelosi’s shriveled old vagina.”, the spikey brown haired man spat. “But it pays. Good lord above, does it pay. Pepsi Cola offers ninety grand a year to bachelor students, and they pay for you to go to graduate school. So basically, while the drop outs and all the other illiterates will be struggling to make rent, I’ll be living the good life.” The atmosphere uncomfortable fera variety of reasons, I decided ta try and leave, ta git away from the insufferably smug and hateful man. “Aw, shoot!”, I exclaimed, getting up from the stable inna rather stilted and unconvincing manner. “I forgot... I gotta go practice fer the show tonight! The Turbulent Tuesday Turnabout, and what haveya!” The show was three days later, and it was called the Freaky Friday Funtacular, but that didn’t particularly matter. “O-oh.”, the boy in the purple hood stuttered, sheepish. “W-well good luck with the show, though I’m... I’m sure you wouldn’t need it.” He picked his head up, and finally managed ta look me in the eyes. “After all, that was probably the best executed Elmsey Pass I’ve seen in my life.” I sat back down immediately. “You caught the Elmsey pass?!” I coughed out, shocked. “O-only the one you did after your double lift.”, the boy with bangs over his eye nervously insisted. “I... I think you might have also done one during your second card trick, but -”, “I did do one during my second card trick!”, I sputtered, thrown completely fera loop. “But the entire pointa it was so ya wouldn’t see-“ “The biddle? Did you pull a biddle with the Ace of Spades?”, the blonde boy said, sounding enthusiastic all offa sudden. My jaw almost hit the floor. “Gah! I did! How the heck didya catch that?!” “Hoffman’s a bit of a magician himself.”, Phil boasted. “He puts on shows for the frats every now and then.” I gazed at the shy boy in the hoodie with disbelief. “Izzat... izzat true?” “Um... kind... kind of.”,

Hoffman meeped, fidgeting his fingers together. "... I have a minor interest in... magic, so sometimes I perform at date functions and the like. I-I don't get paid too much, though..." "Shucks, I gotta see ya perform, then!" The boy with bangs over his eye blushed at my words. "I'm just an Amateur, though-" "Ain't no big deal. I'm just a Amateur too, only difference is that I get paid as if I ain't! So whats yer stage name?" "S-stage name?", Hoffman asked. "Yeah, yeah, stage name. Ya don't think my real name is actually Fortuna Splendor, do ya?" "... I don't have a stage name. When I go down to the basements to perform... I'm... I'm just me. Lucas Hoffman." "C'mon, ya can do better than that." I snorted, popping onea Phil's fries into my mouth. "Think of all the big name magicians –... David Copperfield, Harry Houdini, Siegfried and Roy-" "Criss Angel.", Phil added. "Criss Angel isn't a magician.", Hoffman and I spat, simultaneously. "You kidding me?", the man with spikey brown hair scoffed, somewhat defensively. "I saw that fucker's special on HBO two days ago, he got run over by a bunch of steam rollers and emerged without a scratch." "Right, but that was on *television*." Hoffman countered, sounding a whole bunch more assertive than he had before. "What difference does it make?", Phil put out. "It's all a bunch of faggy bullshit anyways. If he tricks people on tv, how is that any different from what Miss Splendor over here pulled with the box, and the saw?" "Heh. That's easy enough ta answer, ya boorish brute. What I do actually requires *skill*. Any old idiot can look good in fronta a camera, after hours of editing and post production. But ta saw an Assistant in half, and then pop up in the box *she* was supposedta be in... now *that* takes finesse, dedication... magic, ya might even say." "Something like magic.", Hoffman said. "I- I mean... I don't see how you could have physically done something like that. If... if the box was connected to the



that bullshit, you know that right?" "I ain't lying, though.", I said, wagging my finger. "That's my secret. Magical gems, anda pronounced sensea corniness." "I buy the corniness.", Phil snorted. "Those ears you're wearing are easily the third tackiest gimmick I've ever seen, after Pharrell's hats and that shit Miley Cyrus does with her tongue." "They're... they're not *that* tacky, Phil.", Hoffman said awkwardly. "I... I mean, sure, they look silly, but it has to be some of the best make up I've ever seen. I don't where your ears end and the prosthetics begin, Miss, um... Splendor." "Oh, I ain't wearing make-up.", I chimed, smiling. "My ears are one hundred percent legit. I was born with em and everything." I waited fer a beat. "Gahahaha! As if! I'm just messing with ya, they're prosthetics!", I lied. "But see... see what I just did there, Ruckus?" "It's... it's Lucas.", Hoffman gently corrected me. "Aw, Ruckus, Lucas, it don't matter. What I just *did* was stick ta character. When I go up on stage, I havta act likea ignorant buffoon... er... maybe act is being overly generous, but still! Picka cheesy persona, and stick with it, that more than anything is what'll help ya succeed in this business!" "I... I have a *bit* of a persona.", Hoffman said, twiddling his fingers. "When... when I do my beginner's routine, I stay absolutely silent-" "Teller.", I interrupted, quick as I could. "That's Teller's bit. He don't talk at all when he does tricks, even when he's messing about with revolvers and such. And he's been doing it fer three decades, witha loud-mouthed partner. You need a different gimmick." "Are... are you sure? Shouldn't I... shouldn't I get good at magic first, and... and then worry about the gimmick later?" "Not in the slightest, ya ignoramus!", I spat, flashing my fangs at the timid boy in the purple hoodie. "The gimmick is all that matters! Sure, sure, ya gotta learn sleigha hand and stuff ta bea magician wortha damn, but what gits ya famous is how entertaining and

flamboyant you are.” “Like Clint Eastwood in those spaghetti westerns.”, Phil annoyingly interjected, directing Hoffman’s attention away from me, and towards him. “It’s not the guns that makes him cool, it’s his attitude.” “But... but Clint Eastwood uses a Colt Single Action army.”, the boy in the purple hoodie mumbled. “at- at least in the Good, the Bad, and the Ugly, he did... and that’s the coolest gun there is.” “Nope.”, a strange voice chimed. “Makarov Pistol is best gun. Colt Single Action army is weapons of Cowboys stuck in nineteenth century.” I turned around in my chair at the voice. Standing at the other side of the snow covered patio, about fifty feet away from the entrance of the chapel, was- “A-aaaaaaaaaaaaah!”, I yelled, falling outta the chair. “Git... git away from me! I don’t got any metal fer ya, ya stupid sadistic Swordarm!” The red haired woman in the winter coat tilted her head and frowned at me. “Sorry, I didn’t catch that. My English is not best. You say something about Sword on arm?” “About time you got here, you reckless ruskie.” Phil snarked, glancing at the woman with the wirey sword with a wry little smirk. “The great Fortuna Splendor was about to leave without fulfilling your request.” “R-request?”, I coughed inna panic. I not-so discretely dug my hand into my overcoat, shakingly clutching my baton, as if the small metal rod could somehow help me outta a bind. The red haired woman walked up right to me, her eyes narrowing as she did so. “Yes, have unfinished business with this one.”, she said, sinisterly. Her wirey sword strapped straight to her hip, the Swordarm that had once nearly cost me an arm walked towards me... in spite of all logic and reason. She drew closer, and closer, until... “Would you mind signing autograph?”, she asked, with a bright smile. “Uh... s-sure.”, I stuttered, panicking. I pulled out a pen from god knows where, and signed onea the napkins placed on the cheap plastic table, then shoved it into the semi-gloved hands

of the woman I was sure I had seen before. "Take a seat, Gregor!", Phil said to the red haired woman. "You can help us give Hoffman advice on how to be a man!" "Think Doctor Phil needs to diagnosis self.", "Gregor" said, gingerly tucking the autographed napkin into her winter coat's pocket and sitting down, as if she *wasn't* the Swordarm that betrayed Provesh when the Collective finally invaded. "Uh... I, I really gotta go.", I meeped, then got up on my feet and sprinted away right quick, putting as much distance between me and the ghost of my past as fast as possible. "Miss Splendor!", a voice cried out from behind me as I booked it. "Miss Splendor... W-wait!", Hoffman called out to me, not-quite matching my speed, but trying to. Instead of continuing on to my BMW, flooring the gas pedal, and figuring out what just had happened in the safety of my own apartment, I stopped and turned around. The boy in the purple hoodie smiled awkwardly, resting his hands on knees as he caught his breath. "If ... if your real name isn't Fortuna Splendor...", he panted, "then what is it?" I licked my teeth, and adjusted the brimma my purple tophat over my eyes. "I don't right reckon you'd believe me if I told you, Lucas." The shy boy with the bangs over his eye faltered. "I... I understand. You don't need to tell me if you don't want to." Something in my chest just melted, as I saw the boy's shy, insecure face, as I saw his mouth smile, but his unobscured blue eye frown. "Aw, heck...", I blathered, blushing for some reason. "how boutya just call me Four?" "Ok!", Hoffman harped, happily. " ... I hope I see you again one day, Four!"

When ya wake up from a nightmare, you tend to feel a whole cocktail of emotions. Fear, mostly, but there's also stuff like nervousness, paranoia... excitement, basically. A dream about skeletons or going to school and missing all yer finals causes ya to freak the hell out, it guarantees that you'll be as awake as can be for at least the next twenty

minutes. So if waking up from a nightmare pumps yer muscles full of adrenaline, does that mean good dreams make ya wake up all groggy? Probably not, but as I awoke from my dream of the lunch by a snow covered patio, all I could feel was grogginess. It... it wasn't an ache. By all accounts my body should have been aching, what with the spikes that had impaled me and all, and the halberds that had cut into me, but I... I didn't feel no pain. I just felt groggy. I don't know if that was a good thing, or not, but that's what it was. And sure enough... I fell back asleep almost immediately. I dreamed – or half dreamed... of all sorts of things. Of a world which had lost everything in a gamble, yet continued to roll the dice anyways. Of a city defended by the folks to which it was most vulnerable. Of Lucas's flaccid, floppy penis. I knew there was no use in trying ta make sensea much. I couldn't feel nothing at all, I couldn't hear nothing. I knew I was awake... alive in some capacity, but everything seemed so insubstantial. And my memories... they were all messed up. I knew I had just fought Brother Christopher and Sister Julia, and I was pretty sure I had beat them, but the dream that had come afterward... the memory of talking ta Phil, ta Swordarm Red One, ta Luca- no..., ta Hoffman... it seemed just as real to me. And... and here's the thing. Having one weird dream involving folks ya know... it ain't weird at all, in fact it's ta be expected. Having two weird dreams involving folks you know... it ain't too weird, neither. But having a trilogy of dreams, involving the same folks, in less than two rising periods, all with a vague sense of continuity to em? That's a problem. That means yer either a complete and utter psycho that needs immediate and thorough mental care, or worse – that you ain't. My dreams, my memories, my dreams which mighta been memories, my memories which mighta been dreams... they didn't particularly matter to me, as I drifted in and out of



consciousness. What mattered to me was Sabarene, and what mattered to me was Lucas. There's no blunter way for me to put it than that. But I was adrift, and in the mud of my own conscious, in my subconscious... I was stuck. So I made myself unstuck. "Graaaaaaaaaaaaah!", I roared, thrusting my body up, ta the side, any which way ta get myself out of the sludge of my unconscious. No die. I was still stuck in place, whatever the heck that actually meant. My eyelids heavy as thousand pound weights, I somehow managed ta deadlift em open. And once my solitary green iris opened, I saw... sludge. But it wasn't metaphorical, psychological, or symbolic sludge. It was actual sludge. And I was literally covered in it. "What... what the... what?", I blathered, my entire body immersed in warm, black slime from the neck down. "Please, don't thrash around anymore.", a soft, sad sounding voice called out to me from above. "You're currently missing the bottom half your spinal cord." "W-what?!", I shouted, panicked. I tried kicking out my legs, but nothing happened. "How?! Why?!" "Relax. Go back to sleep. It's all going to be ok.", the soft sounding voice assured me. "No! No, it won't be ok!", I shouted, struggling ta move myself out of the black slime. "Ruckus, and that white haired git... I can't just stand around and do nothing, they might be in danger!" "Mister Lucas is fine.", the voice chimed from above me. "He's a bit dazed... and he's probably not resting in the most luxurious of accommodations, but he's fine. As for Sister Sabarene..." The tips of my ears twitched at the voice. "She's dead." "W-wha-" "Kidding, kidding! I'm doing just fine, actually. I'm a bit surprised you don't recognize my voice, though." My anxiety faded away. "I'm neck deep in black goo.", I muttered. "I ain't exactly lucid at the moment." I licked my lips. "Even so, it ain't nice of ya ta lie about that stuff. Like you being dead, and me missing my spinal cord, and all." "You *are* missing

your spinal cord.”, Sabarene chimed out. “That’s why you’re in that goo in the first place.” I winced, and tried moving my leg again. Nothing happened. “Alright, well, I just ain’t gonna think about the goo then, I reckon.”, I mumbled, my eyelids falling down again. “Just promise me you’ll be there when I wake up, alright?” “I... I can’t promise you that.”, Sabarene said, sadly. “There’s some business I need to care of, and I’m afraid I’ll be gone for quite some time.” “F-fine.”. I stuttered, feeling woozier than ever. “Just come back when ya... when ya feel like it.” I paused, things becoming a bit more clear ta me, if only fer a moment. “So... did we end up winning? That election thingy?” “The votes from Merchenze and Cercentlet are being still being tabulated, but the outlook seems pretty good.”, Sabarene said, her voice dripping down on me like rain. “Of course... Brother Gino helped out a lot. He... um... ended up endorsing me fully in his speech, actually.” My mind grew hazy, but not hazy enough ta let that comment slide. “Endorse you...now why the heck would he do that?” Sabarene said one more thing, before I passed out again: “Because I told him to.”

“-But that don’t make any sense at all, you alcoholic nitwit!”, I screamed, jolting up. I looked around, and blinked. I wasn’t in the dark, and I sure as heck wasn’t covered in black goo. I wasn’t sleeping on the floor, and I wasn’t chained ta the wall, or strapped ta a wooden plank, or blindfolded in the basement, or any of that other nonsense. No... I woke up in a bed. A comfortable bed, with silk sheets, inna sunlight room. “Another gosh darn dream?”, I groaned, moving my legs so I could sit up. The mere fact that I could move my legs answered my question. That... that was a load off my mind in one sense, and troubling in another. I mean... I was happy that I hadn’t actually been submerged in black goo or nothing. But the fact that I was dreaming about being

submerged in black goo... well... it wasn't the sorta thing I woulda tolda psychiatrist, if the Continent actually had psychiatrists. My vision was blurry, and my head ached, but I wasn't dreaming. I was awake. The place I awoke in... it mighta been the most beautiful bedroom I had ever seen. It wasn't all that big... maybe it was two times as large as my termite riddled apartment in Provesh, but it just oozed lightness, and comfort. The floor and walls were marble, and the ceiling was domed... witha intricately detailed panorama carved out by hammer and easel. But what got me wasn't really the material the room was made out of it... it was it's color palette. Everything, from the walls, to the floor, to the ceiling, to the tables, to the cushioned chairs... they all had a vanilla, maybe off white color ta em. It was like being immersed in a bath of pure sunlight... even the sheets I awoke in were pristine. Pristine... except fer two damp dots, which darkened the blanket directly below my head. I was confused. It... it was likea little rain cloud had appeared, to drip down water and ruin the otherwise perfect sheets. As I looked down at the damp sheets, my vision suddenly grew more blurry, and my eye itched began. I blinked. As my vision returned ta it's usual, depth perception challenged state... a single drop of moisture fell from my eye... widening one of the damp dots on the otherwise dry sheets. "Are... are ya freaking kidding me?", I choked out, bewildered at the water pouring out of my tear ducts. There was no good reason fer me ta be crying. Weird dreams about lunch and black goo didn't justify depression, or sadness. And besides, the most recent dream I had had Sabarene in it. There was no reason fer me ta awake from a dream involving her with tears in my eye. No reason, unless- "A lost paramour, eh, Ruckus?" I chuckled, despite myself. The thought was absurd ta me, but a ton of absurd stuff had happened. And yet, even with all that nonsense... even though I was

crying, I felt... I felt content. I stretched my arms, and cracked my knuckles against each other. I figured I could rest on my laurels. Sabarene and Lucas would show themselves soon enough, and I'd find out what had happened, fer better, or fer worse. I lazily yawned, and, reflectively moved up left hand up ta cover my mouth. My eye jolted open. "No...", I gasped, gazing at my left stump. But it wasn't a stump anymore... no, it wasn't short, and useless, and shriveled, like it should have been, like it *needed* to be. The skin on my stump up ta my elbow was brown, like it shoulda been. But past my elbow... was nothing but cold black metal... metal which split into five fingers. "No... no...", I muttered, my heart rate starting ta beat a whole bunch. In shock, in terror, I trying manipulating the fingers of the black metal hand that didn't belong. The digits moved like they were my own. "No!", I shrieked, slamming the unwanted limb hard into the frame of the bed. But it didn't go away, or vanish, or fall off, like it shoulda. It remained. My left arm, and hand... it stayed. I shivered... and... with a shaking right hand... slowly moved my fingers... my REAL fingers... ta the bottom of my back... ta the bottom of my spinal cord. And what I felt... the bumps on my back... they... they were cold, and strong, and dense, far denser than flesh, far stronger than bone. "NOOOOOOOOOO!", I sobbed, tears and snot falling from my face, pathetically, DISGUSTINGLY, but all the phlegm in the world was nowhere near as disgusting as the appendage attached to my stump. The lifemetal... it DIDN'T belong on me, or IN me. The metal, the disgusting, unnatural junk... it by ITSELF... it by ITSELF didn't MATTER but- but- but- but what it and the collar meant, it MEANT, it meant that the dream I had *wasn't* a dream, it meant the words I had heard Sabarene sprout at the end of the dream that troubled me... it meant- "Are you alright, Unionist?", a raspy voice wheezed. I clenched my teeth shut,

and tried to get a hold of myself. The voice came from the door that led into the bedroom, and from how it sounded like sandpaper rubbing against a chalkboard, I reckoned it was almost certainly Corcoran's. "I'm fine.", I lied. "Just woke up on the wrong side of the bed, is all." "Be that as it may, I've been ordered to check on you.", the bandaged man breathed out, his voice hoarse, and dry. "I'm coming in." The painted white wooden door that led into the bedroom opened without even so much as a creak. Corcoran limped into the marble room, and gazed around. "It's been a long while since I've been in this room.", he wheezed. "I don't care.", I groaned, not wanting to talk to the bandaged Saboteur. "You should care.", the bandaged wrapped man stated, all emotion gone from his gravelly voice. "You were asleep in this room for fourteen rising periods.", Corcoran stated, in a monotone. "Though a coma would be a more proper description of your condition." "A what?" "You were functionally braindead.", Corcoran explained, or didn't.. "Your duel with Brother Gino's retainers cost you the lower part of your spinal cord, and approximately forty five point five percent of your blood was missing by the time the spikes were removed from your body. It took the entire reserve of Fremdos's lifemetal just to stabilize you." "W-what?!", I sputtered. "But what about all them folk waiting to get surgeries and the like?" "Their appointments were pushed back.", the man with bright green eyes stated. "Native Born Fremdosians with appointments scheduled for this rising period will have to wait half a cycle for their lifemetal procedures. Collective Citizens will have to wait two cycles. And Volunteers will have to wait twenty cycles at least." There was all sorts of things off about Corcoran's explanation, but I decided to point out the most obvious flaw. "Why me? Why was I treated so well?" "The procedure your body underwent was a do or die operation." Corcoran answered..

“Without the lifemetal injection, you would have perished.” “Oh yeah? And what about this, Cocoaran?”, I grumbled, throwing out the disgusting metal piecea crap attached to my stump, and waving its fingers in fronta his bandaged face. “Was this necessary?” “Yes. It was necessary.”, the green eyed man breathed out. “How so?” “It was necessary because the General said it was necessary.” “Oh.”, I stated, calmly. Fer a brief moment, the metal arm attached to me didn’t look all that disgusting anymore. But only fer a moment. “That’s... that’s wrong, though.”, I whispered, turning my gaze away from Corcoran, and towards my metal hand, and forearm. “I never asked for this. And I made it clear ta her that I didn’t want this. Not if it meant other folks being put on the backburner.” “You were not in a position to decline.”, Corcoran stated, robotically. “More pertinently, you risked a great deal to help the Collective. The restoration of a limb is hardly that significant of a reward.” I gritted my teeth, and scowled. “It... it AIN’T about that, alright? She... she *knew* I wasn’t... she knew I didn’t want this. She... had no right ta decide this fer me.” “Incorrect, Unionist.” Corcoran got off the end of the bed, and walked over towards the window. “The General had every right to decide what happened to you.” He loudly cleared his throat. “Legally speaking , you are now her personal property.” I slowly moved my hand ta my neck. The black collar was still wrapped around it. “You... you can’t be serious.”, I stammered, a whole mix of emotions swishing around my stomach. “That whole slave thing... ya said it was justa gimmick!” “It was just a gimmick.”, Corcoran stated, his voice cold and indifferent. “Then what the heck are ya talking about?”. The bandaged man turned away from the window, and walked back towards me. “Four Rising Periods ago, the corpse of Axeman Black Five washed up in the Union District.” “So?”, I spat, getting up outta bed, and cracking my

neck “On his body were documents, which implicated you as a member of the Mournful Remnant.”, Corcoran said tersely. “I ain’t.”, I hissed. “I ain’t part of that little group... heck- I never knew the fella before I arrived here.” “There was a trial.”, the bandaged man responded. “Numerous witnesses and pieces of evidence proved that you were registered as an active member of the Mournful Remnant. His name and Union matching yours did not do much to help your case, nor did the absence of your testimony.” “I was inna coma!”, I shouted, hysterical. “How the heck could I have testified in the first place?! And besides, me sharing that fella’s name means NOTHING about NOTHING. The Axeman Union in Fremdos ain’t the Axeman Union in Provesh!” My heart faltered, a bit. “So who was it, that found me guilty?”, I asked, fearfully. “Supreme Sibling Desnion. He placed you into the General’s custody as a lifelong Volunteer.”, Corcoran answered, his voice dry. My body relaxed, the worst of my fears alleviated. “Aw, shucks.”, I exhaled, not feeling so anxious any more. “Well, I reckon it’s better than him stabbing a dagger through my empty eye socket or slicing off my limb or something.” “You seem relaxed.” Corcoran remarked, a hint of confusion present in his gravelly voice. “Oh, I ain’t relaxed.”, I yawned, while stretching. “But I ain’t gonna get angry at that white haired git for what that balding fella did.” I looked at the metal arm attached ta myself, and smiled. “Enslaving me so Desnion couldn’t, huh? That’s the dumbest forma kindness I’ve ever done heard of.” I cracked my neck. “Well... I guess that Supreme jackass is up next on my people-ta-crush-completely list.” “Desnion didn’t want to sentence you to Volunteership.”, the breathing challenged man wheezed. “He... he actually advocated a delay of trial, to when you were awake.” “Then why didn’t he?”, I grumbled. “Because the Prosecution’s main witness had pressing business to attend

to.” I rolled my eye. “Witness? Ya mean Sister Christopher or Brother Julia, right?” “No. The chief witness was the General.” My stomach lurched. “W-what?”, I half asked, half whimpered. ‘The chief witness was the General.’, Corcoran repeated, each of his words like a cold metal spike to my stomach. “She provided the decisive evidence, the testimony which proved you were a member of the Mournful Remnant.” “N-no...”, I stuttered, then glared fiercely at the bandaged man. “No! Yer just messing with me!” Corcoran walked towards me, and gazed at me with dull green eyes. “The General was called to the stand, and presented with one of the documents found on Axeman Black Five’s corpse. And she confirmed, with one hundred percent certainty, that the handwriting on the document matched yours.” I didn’t scream. I didn’t cry. I just collapsed, against the marble wall of the eerily elegant bedroom. “I see.”, I said, soberly. “You... you know I can’t read or write, right?” “The General told me something to that effect.”, Corcoran wheezed, dispassionately. “That... that means she lied.”, I breathed out, my body shivering. “So it would seem.”, the bandaged man commented “I... I should have seen this coming.”, I muttered, then slumped my shoulders. “No... no...”, I repeated, the room spinning. “What you told me is just confirmation. Affirmation of what I knew when I woke up.” I tried rising onto my feet. I couldn’t. Everything just felt so heavy, and cold. “I... I just wonder how she did it.”, I babbled. “The testimony... that’s easy enough to fake. You can’t disprove a negative. I’ve never written anything in my life, so there is no evidence anyone could have used to prove the handwriting *wasn’t* mine All she had to do was get up and... and lie. But to get those fake documents with my fake handwriting on Black Five’s corpse... how did she... she must have used a-“

Realization dawned on me. I moved my head up. “You placed fake documents on Black



Five's person, didn't you Corcoran?" "I did.", Corcoran answered, his voice unwavering. "You were ordered to do so by Sabar-... by the General, weren't you?" "I was." Quick as I could manage, I thrust the metal arm towards Corcoran's neck, and wrapped the fake fingers around his throat. "This is nothing personal.", I said, softly, as I strangled the bandaged covered man. "I'm just stuck in an unfortunate situation right now, and the only clear way out of it is to kill you." The bandaged man tugged at his throat, but he wasn't strong enough to remove the metal fingers firmly clenched around around. "A morbid thought, I know.", I commented, tightening my grip. "But you need to see things from my perspective, Corcoran. If you're telling me the truth, then you framed me for a crime I didn't commit. If you're lying to me, then you made me think ill of someone I would much rather not think ill of." "Guh...-ugh-", Corcoran gasped, fruitlessly trying to suck in more air. Movies, television, books, videogames, they all lie to you. They make it seem that all it takes to choke someone to death is a firm grip, and about ten seconds of your time. That's wrong. It takes a firm grip and about four and a half minutes of your time. It's not the quickest way to kill someone, nor is it the most surefire way. But minus a bit of blood that might drip out your victim's nose, it's the cleanest, the quietest. "I don't understand it.", I commented, keeping my grip firm on Corcoran's bandaged neck. "Why would she frame me? What does she gain from that?" The bandaged man opened his mouth. "No, don't try to speak... that was a rhetorical question. I'm thinking aloud right now, Corcoran. I usually try not to do that, but I see no harm in it now." My stump started to feel strained, so lifted the bandaged man and slammed him against the wall, the leverage and the new position making it a whole lot easier for my arm to continue throttling him. "I knew... I knew from the get go this wouldn't end well. Last time I got

involved in political affairs I lost an arm and an eye. But... but with her, I figured I'd just get gutted by someone else. That I'd have my neck stomped by Kundare, or impaled by Christopher. That'd I die, but I'd die at least trying to do something productive." Wetness dripped down from my face again, as my arm began to waver. "But... but framing me... saying I was a subordinate of Axeman Black Five? I... I was the one who killed him in the first place!", I spat, losing my cool, and my grip on Corcoran's neck completely. The instant I lost control, the bandage wrapped man pressed his palms against the wall, leapt up, and kicked me in the center of the chest. "U-ugh!" "I know you killed Axeman Black Five, Unionist. You did so to save your friend, and to stop what seemed to be a gathering of hate-fueled psychopaths.", the bandaged man proclaimed as I crashed onto the bed, his voice monotone and robotic. "After all...", he stated, unwinding the bandages from his face. "I was, like, totally there when you kicked him off the cliff." I gasped, as I saw the head that was hidden beneath the bandages. Corcoran's face wasn't burnt, nor was it scared. It looked... it looked like that offa typical Fremdosian. Brown skin, pointy ears, green hair, and... and *glassygreen* eyes. "N-nielente?!", I gasped, staring into the face of the Saboteur I was sure I had seen die. "How... what... HUH!?" The glassy eyed girl smiled, faintly. "I am sixty five point seven percent certain that it would have been more prudent to discard my disguise before revealing the details of your plight to you, Unionist.", she stated, gingerly rubbing her throat. "How are you alive?!", I gasped, my confusion mixing with joy, mixing with depression, mixing with confusion. The glassy eyed girl nodded her head shortly. "The details of my survival are not pertinent at the moment, Unionist. There is much I need to speak with you abo-" "HOW ARE YOU ALIVE?!", I SHOUTED, softly. The girl that had posed as Corcoran..

heck... the girl who WAS Corcoran winced. "It is an excessively long story, Unionist.", she stated in her usual creepy monotone. "Due to my history of possessing somatic symptom disorders, I am not particularly sure you'll believe me. In fact, I calculate the probability of you accepting my story as less than a tenth of a hundredth of a percent." "I just woke up from a fourteen rising period coma. There's little you could tell me that I wouldn't question, Nielentil." The green haired girl blinked. "Ok, so there I was, in the sewers, like, dying and stuff, right?", Nielente recalled, her voice energetic and lively all a sudden, but her eyes still dull and glassy. "It was SUPER tragic, because I had just reconciled my two personas with each other – you know, the persona of me as a dancer, and the persona of me as a stoic super duper quiet Saboteur- but I was pretty ok with dying because it, like, um, it like meant you would take up the banner and stop Master Marston from doing whatever diabolical thingy he was going to do. But then... it was, like, the strangest thing! I blinked, and then I found myself in my apartment, and I was completely unharmed!" I sat up, and got back outta bed, my chest still aching a bit from Nielente's kick. "Really?" "Yeah, really!", Nielente exclaimed. "I mean, sure, there was, like, a SCAR from the spear that was shoved through my stomach, but I felt fine! Like, seriously, my intestines had been ripped out back in the Remnant's hideout, but when I woke up they were right where they should be." She lifted up her shirt, ta show me. I squinted my eye. Sure enough, there was a scar across it. But it wasn't a very large scar. It was small, compressed...,even though the length of it went from her navel to the bottom of her breasts. "Huh. Well don't that just beat all.", I muttered, feeling a whole lot more calm. "Alright, so ya didn't die. Good on ya fer not dying.", I said, awkwardly patting the bandaged girl on the shoulder. "So, uh... that whole Volunteer

thing... ya made it up, right?" Nielenete frowned. "I didn't. The collar on your neck means everything you fear it means." "Why, though? Why would... why would that stupid white haired git frame me?" "I don't know.", Nielenete said, bluntly. "But I owe you my apology. I planted the decisive evidence on Black Five's corpse, as you guessed." I shuddered. "Didya know what you were doing?" "I knew I was framing someone.", the Saboteur said, sounding emotionless again. "I didn't know it was you until the trial began." I bit my lip. "Then I'm sorry, too. I never shoulda tried ta strangle you... Cocoran, Nielenite, or not." I sighed. "But why the heck didya bother ta dress as that bloke, anyways? Why didn't ya just... y'know, enter this room as yerself?" "One of the stipulations of being the Nameless Saboteur is not having a name, Unionist.", Nielenete responded. "Corcoran is simply one of the many roles I've performed over the cycles. And... well... shortly after you, your friend, and the General arrived in Fremdos, Corcoran received a letter from the General, asking for aid in managing the logistics of her election." "And you accepted?" "Of course I accepted.", Nielenete answered. "Master Marston imprisoned, enslaved, and even killed many of my fellow Saboteurs, the very same he ordered to crucify half the defeated Unionist population of this city. And while I did not see eye to eye with the General on many things... Brother Broude, her chief retainer, the original Saboteur... he... he saved my life." I felt cold. "Yeah, but you do know how he bit the dust, right?" "The General executed him.", Nielenete said, coldly. "But even in his dying breath, he was loyal to the General. And, so, so am I." She paused. "At least... at least so I thought. I'm... I'm not too sure now." "Why, cause she killed yer lover?" "No.", Nielenete said, softly. "Because she imprisoned you, and that blonde idiot." A lightning bolt shot through my body. "Blonde idi- Is... is Ruckus alright?!"

“I don’t know.”, Nielente said. “I do know he was arrested on some similar charge of conspiracy.” I curled my fist and marched to the door. “Guh. And ta think I was angsting about a stupid collar. We gotta leave and git him back, Nielentil!” I proclaimed, all of the sorrow and self-doubt melting away. “It won’t be as simple as that, Unionist.”, the glassy eyed girl commented, blocking my way as I ran to the door. “I have no idea where the wizard is. And with that collar on you, getting around will be extremely difficult.” “How difficult?” “Fifty soldiers posted outside of the tower for the sole purpose of keeping you confined here difficult.” I grimaced. “Alright, then I’m leaving it up ta you. You go and find him. I’ll stay here and not try ta think of anything.” Nielente nodded her head. “Ih’m afraid that’s not an option, either. It’s impossible for me to leave this room, or for me to do anything, really. But I can help you, help yourself.” She reached into her bandages, and pulled out a silver key, which she tossed to me. “My loyalty and duty is to the General.”, she said, as I fumbled with the small piece of metal. “But my love and affection is towards you, and Lucas.” “Uh... really?”, I said, raising an eyebrow. “I... I ain’t exactly a good person.” “No, you are not.”, Nielente commented. “You are an impulsive, selfish, violent, sociopath. Lucas might not be so deranged, but there is nothing overtly noble about him, either. However... you, and him...” Nielente said, then trailed off. “Were, like, the first people to ever treat me as a person! You mocked me, you refused to take me seriously at every turn, the two of you even took me to a whorehouse! You were more fun than the General, or Brounde, or-or... or anyone!” She gazed at me with her dull green eyes, and smiled brightly. “You two are my friends!” She pulled at my arm, and locked me into a hug. A moment passed. “There is a hundred percent probability that this gesture of affection is extremely awkward.”, she

droned, robotically. I patted her head, and smiled. "Yeah, well, it's alright ta be awkward, sometimes." And I stayed there, fer good while. Just embracing Nielente, just hugging the girl I had thought long dead. I don't know why, but somehow... her presence kept me going. It made me think that things weren't hopeless... that if a miracle like her surviving could happen, then another miracle could happen just the same. "It's a shame, though.", Nielente said, sadly, as I cracked my knuckles in eager anticipation. "What's a shame? The fact that the white haired git pulled a fast one on me?", I said, then grinned. "Cause that don't matter. Yer here, I'm here, Ruckus'll be here... we'll make things right. We'll win that git back." "No.", Nielente said, soberly. She walked up to me, and wrapped my hands back around her neck. "We won't do anything of the sort." "Why... why won't we?", I whimpered, confused. "Because none of what you're seeing right now is real.", she whispered. And then... then the girl in my hands shattered, into pieces... like glass. And hanging from my hands in Nielente's place, limp, cold... and dead was... not Nielente. Not Nielente, but Corcoran. His face, his skin... it wasn't brown, it was pale, and while his eyes were green and dull, they were only that way because of the oxygen his head had been deprived of. It had been four and a half minutes. I didn't say anything. My mind felt foggy, and in the marble bedroom... the floors seemed to melt, and the walls distorted themselves. But the collar on my neck remained. The man I had throttled dead remained, his broken neck still pressed up against the wall by my metal hand. I dropped him on the floor. My head aching, my body nauseous as all heck, I sauntered over to the window, and peered out of it. There weren't fifty soldiers posted outside the tower, like Nielente had said. There were only five. But they were dressed in black, and armed, and seemed very intent on not letting anyone in or out. My legs

shaking, I bent down and checked under the bed. There was some space there, not a whole lot, but enough for a person to hide under. I didn't hide under the bed. Instead, I dragged Corcoran's corpse and pushed it under the bed. It would be a temporary solution at best. In Provesh, when you killed a fella you had ta git him outside and in the snow before mid-rising period, else his body would rot. You had a good amount of time... about twelve hours, or so- ta bury the body inna mound of snow. But in Fremdos's climate...warm, hot, and filled with ocean air... it wouldn't take very much time at all fer the elements to blow in and cause Corcoran's body to rot. And the smell of a corpse is unforgettable. It's the worst stench you can imagine, it's repulsive on a physical, mental... even instinctual level. So while Corcoran might have been out of sight when I stuffed him under the bed, he certainly wasn't out of mind. I turned the knob on the bedroom's door, and opened it. I found myself at the end of a long, marble spiral staircase. I There was only one way to go, and that was down, and around, inna spiral. Part of me thought about getting a weapon before I went down... to search Corcoran's body fera dagger, or ta usea blunt piecea furniture asa bludgeon... but mosta me... just didn't care. I moved purely on instinct... I didn't trust anything I saw, or pay much mind to it. It was like I was half asleep, watching myself on a television screen. I knew what I was trying to do, and why, but I... I felt no interest in it. It was... it was like after screaming, and shrieking, and falling inta delusion, all that was left in me was... nothing. I felt nothing. So, weaponless, emotionless, I stepped down the stairs. Ostensibly to find a better place to put Corcoran's body, but... but in retrospect, I think the only thing I was looking to escape from, was my- "There once was a frog.", a deep voice bellowed, as I descended. "A frog which was almost as sweet and as kind as

you... but nowhere as cute.” My ears twitched, the voice sounding close, and far away at the same time. “This frog wasn’t like other frogs, though. She loved everything, and everyone. She loved the world so much she wouldn’t even catch flies when they passed by her mouth.” “Then how on the Continent did she eat?”, a softer voice asked, as I stumbled down the tower’s spiral staircase, towards the voices which didn’t seem to sound like they were in my head. “She made do with the kelp and the tumbleweed.” “That seems sorta stupid.” “She wasn’t the brightest of frogs. But she was a nice frog, and a generous frog.” “How can a frog be generous?”, the soft voice cut in, increasing in volume as I limped down towards it. “Well... have you ever heard of snow, sweet pea?” I followed the voices some more, to a room located lower in the tower. The room looked identical to the one I had woken up (did I wake up?) in. It had the same decorations, the same furniture, the same layout... the only difference was a rocking chair, and the two people who were in it. One, was a man, dressed almost entirely in white, save a black collar wrung round his neck. The other, half-asleep and resting her head against the man’s neck, was a small blonde girl, with hazel eyes. It didn’t take me long to realize they were Marston and Marcela, respectively. Even though I peeked into the room without even trying to be subtle, both seemed oblivious to my presence. “Snow?”, Marcela yawned, sounding far less dignified than she usually did, and far more like a child. “Mother- mommy mentioned it once. It’s... it’s what happens when water gets all cold, right?” “Yes.”, Mariston boomed, his voice sounding just as deep and serious as ever. “Snow is like ice, except it covers the land like a soft blanket. It’s white, and cold, and beautiful. The Frog lived out east, where it would snow at the end of the cycle. And all the animals – they’d try to move out west for the winter... to get out of the cold. The



birds simply flew to get where they wanted to go, and the fish would swim out to the rivers and the ocean to find a better climate. But the animals who couldn't fly or swim... the deer, the rabbits, the cats, the..." Marston paused, and turned his head, away from his daughter, and towards me. His pair of ruby red eyes met my solitary green one, and harshened. "...dogs." Marston stared out of the room at me, meeting my gaze directly with his piercing red eyes. Slowly, quietly, Marston raised his index finger up to his lips, then turned his attention back to his daughter. "Is... is something wrong, daddy?", Marcela asked, beginning to lift her head off of the black haired man's shoulder. "No, there's nothing wrong. I was just distracted for a moment. Where was I?" "You were prattling on about dogs, and cats, and vermin.", she mumbled, laying her head back down again. "Ah, yes. The animals of the forest that couldn't fly or swim... they had to follow a trail to get to the warmer lands before the cold set in. And halfway through this trail was the swamp where the frog lived. Crossing the swamp was difficult, even dangerous. There were crocodiles, snakes, insects, morays, leeches... all sorts of nasty, terrible things. So the frog would offer to carry any animal that needed help across the swamp." "How could the frog carry a deer, daddy?" "She was a bullfrog. Bullfrogs are stronger than normal frogs. And this bullfrog was the strongest bullfrog there was. No matter what the animal, no matter how heavy the burden, the frog would carry them over the swamp safely and swiftly. But one rising period, a scorpion from a far off desert clattered its way to the frog. "Excuse me, Miss Frog.", the scorpion said. "I would very much like to cross this swamp, but my feet are too small to swim, and my stinger aches when it gets wet. Would you mind giving me a ride over?" "Daddy, I've heard this one before.... The frog gets stung and drowns..." "You're welcome to leave

at any time, sweetie.” “I don’t wanna...”, Marcela yawned, her eyes shutting completely. Marston smiled, and adjusted the girl on his lap,. “I don’t know,” said the frog, said Marston. “I’ve heard stories of frogs that carried scorpions like yourself across the swamp, and every time they tried they got stung, and died.” “Not me,” the scorpion responded, with a clatter of his mandibles. “Most scorpions are violent, and repressive, but not me. I’m a good scorpion. Besides, if I were to sting you, we would both drown.” “Very well then, scorpion. Get on my back.” And so, the scorpion got on the frog’s back. The beginning of the trip was peaceful, enjoyable even. The frog talked about life in her swamp, the scorpion spoke about his experiences in the desert. But halfway across the water...” “The scorpion stung the frog, the frog asked why, the scorpion answered because it’s in my nature to do so, and they both drowned.”, Marcela droned. “Mommy told me the story already. She said the Unionists were scorpions...” “That’s not quite what happened, sweetie. -Halfway across the swamp, the scorpion asked the frog what she thought of the weather. The frog said she found the weather quite pleasant. They crossed the rest of the swamp without incident, and bade each other farewell, both enriched by the experience.” “And that’s it?” “That’s it.”, the black haired man stated, patting the girl on her back. “But Daddy... your story doesn’t have a point to it.” “The lack of a point is the point, hun.” “That’s... silly.”, Marcela muttered, and, her arms hanging limp, fell asleep. Marston smiled, and carried the one legged girl over to the bed. He laid her down gently, and tucked her in. Slowly, his body shaking a bit, he turned to me. He took a few hesitant steps towards the room’s exit, but stopped, and grabbed his black spectacles from the top of a dresser. He placed the glasses onto his face, and stalwartly strode out of the room, ta come face ta face with me. “If you intend

to kill me, please do so quietly.”, he stated, his voice bold and unwavering. “And if you could... please dispose of my body in a location Marcela wouldn’t be privy to.” “What would I gain from killing you?”, I asked, with a calmness that soothed and confused simultaneously. “Catharsis.”, the black haired man answered, circling around me. “Fulfillment. Possibly even pleasure.” “Is that what you felt when you stabbed her?”, I said, noticing a bandage on the back of the man’s head. “No.”, Marston denied. “I felt no pleasure. But fulfillment and catharsis... absolutely.” His voice harshened. “And that’s why I’m here, imprisoned for perpetuity. Those powerful emotions... those feelings... they clouded my mind... made me think that a knife to the heart would do the trick.” Marston shuddered. “As if killing her would be so simple.”, he spat, his voice full of spite. I swallowed, and asked the obvious. “Why do you hate her so much?” Marston didn’t answer me, not immediately. But I met his silence with silence, and a glare. “...Do you really want to know the answer to that, Unionist?” he asked, after a long, uncomfortable while. “Why wouldn’t I?” “Because you’re clouded by emotions far more powerful than mine.” Marston responded. “Compounding that, you’re unstable, and predisposed towards violence. Were I to tell you the truth, it’s likely you would strangle me to death on the spot.” “I wouldn’t hurt someone just for telling me something I didn’t wanna hear.” I snipped, enunciating my words to give them at least the appearance of sincerity. The man in white stared at me, then at the closed door which separated us from Marcela. “Do you mind if we have this discussion in your room?” “Do you mind the stench of rotting flesh?” “...There’s a room downstairs we could also utilize.” We utilized the room downstairs. It wasn’t identical to the room I had woke up in, but it’s furnishings were similar. It was more a study than a bedroom, with a great big marble desk in the center,

with stacks upon stacks of leather bound books. There were various seats in the room, but Marston didn't sit in em. Instead, he walked into the study, and glanced out the window. "Have you ever heard of Forcuna, Unionist?" "F-fortuna?", I gasped, my body jolting at the name. "No. Not Fortuna... Forcuna. A province in the Collective west of here." I shook my head. "Yeah, I've heard of it. Agricultural center, ain't it?" "One of many.", Marston responded, his back turned to me. "Back in the early cycles of the Collective, it was the breadbasket of the Collective. It, Frechenze and Merchenze were all that existed. Our borders were as large then as your Independent Kingdoms are now." "Before you and yer sister went onna rampage, huh?" "Sabarene is not my sister, and no.", Marston stated, sharply. "The initial expansion of the Collective was peaceful. It was done through trade agreements, and performed almost a hundred cycles before you or I were born." "And I suppose Trunchet, Cercenlet, and this city just decided ta fight you fer the fun of it?" "Trunchet, Cercenlet, and Fremdos had trade agreements with us, which they all ignored. They needed only to abstain from using metal currency, yet they failed to do even that." "I still don't see how us Unionists not trusting yer funny money makes a lick of difference." Marston adjusted his glasses. "A contract where only one side honors its obligations is toxic, a currency without any authority behind it is worthless. The Collective's expansion was inevitable, but your Independent Kingdoms' inability to compromise made what could have been a peaceful economic expansion violent. Or did you just expect us to do nothing and keep providing aid, protection, and prosperity to cities which didn't keep their promises?" "That's your side of the story. I think the truth might be something different." "Of course you do, Unionist.", Marston stated, tersely. "Your culture is built upon factionalism and misplaced views of

meritocracy. The notion of your people being in the wrong never even crossed your-“ “If you think I have a bias towards the Independent Kingdoms, you’re more delusional than I thought.”, I spat, disgusted. “For the vast majority of my life I’ve struggled against, fought, and even killed my fellow Unionists for a living, my name-sharers among them. I know Unionists can be untrustworthy, cowardly, and manipulative, I know that far better than you ever could. But us being bad don’t mean you and your lot aren’t. And though I’ve never been able to actually read any of them, I know enough about contracts to know that sometimes you write them wanting the other side to fail. Sometimes you do one more than that; sometimes you make sure that the other side can’t fulfill their obligations, because you need them to fail. So your tale of the Independent Kingdoms taking advantage of your Collective might be true... but it might also be true that you intended to be taken advantage of from the get-go.” Marston tightened his fist, but he didn’t look at me. “If you think that the Collective acted in ill faith with its trade agreements I’d direct you to examine the paper copies of the contracts themselves -” “I can’t read, and I don’t care.”, I growled, slamming the door of the study shut “I’ve had enough economic and geopolitics lessons to last me five life-times, and at this point I just don’t care anymore. I want to know why you ain’t dead, and why I have this darn collar around my throat. I want to know where Lucas is. I want to know how you got your hands on those retarded magic crystals. And I want to know why you hate your sister so goddam much.” The tall man in white jerked around, and glared at me. “Sabarene is NOT my sister.”, he hissed, through gritted teeth. “According ta her, she is.”, I said, resting the metal hand attached ta my arm on the marble desk. “How I heard it, you and her grew up together onna farm.” “We grew up in Forcuna, on a small plot of land that

could technically be referred to as a farm.” the man clad in white responded, his voice calm, his fists shaking. “After several significant developments in farming technology, the required amount of manpower needed to cultivate the fields decreased drastically. That meant more food, more growth, and overall better conditions for all those in the Collective, but it also meant less need for farmers. Soon enough, the ten thousand or so farms in Forcuna were consolidated into four hundred and fifteen. Most farmers sold off their land for a good price and moved to Merchenze, some became the owners of the super-farms and became outrageously wealthy, and a scant few held onto their land out of tradition, stubbornness, and fear of change.” Marston’s fists stopped shaking, and something almost resembling a smile formed on his face. “My parents were some such people. My father grew up on a granary, my mother was born on a dairy. The notion of living a life where they woke up after the sun rose was preposterous to them. So they never sold their small plot of land, even though they received many generous offers.” “They lived off the earth?” “They lived off the Collective’s welfare and subsidies.”, Marston remarked, bluntly. “My mother and father were hard-workers, and good people, but poor entrepreneurs. They planted only oats, hops, and barley, and had the cows use up far more grazing space than necessary.” “So the Collective paid em fer being incompetent try-hards?” “The Collective provided a stipend for them because they were human beings, and thus deserved to be treated with dignity.” “Is that so?”, I asked, calmly. “So those folks you had put up on crosses... did they deserve to be treated with dignity?” “You... you know nothing, Unionist.”, Marston commented, demeanor as stoic as ever, but his voice wavering, if only slightly. I scratched a tuft of my hair as if I was confused. “I mean... shucks. Outta all ways ta go, being stuck up onna piecea wood

seems pretty darn awful. No food, no water... I can imagine things would get bad fer ya real quick." "Shut up.", Marston hissed, his voice even lower than usual. I didn't shut up. I smiled broadly, and flashed my fangs. "Did they scream, when ya crucified em? The kiddies, I mean, the little ones. Did they shriek and cry out in agony when ya kept them alive rising period after rising period?" "You've made your point, Unionis-" "I'd imagine they did scream.", I yarned, pressing the stoic man further. "When yer young, ya can't deal with pain too well. Even a paper cut can feel like a nail through the palm of yer hand. So them kids *actually* having nails driven through the palma there hand... heck, that musta hurt a whole bunch!" "S-stop! Stop talking this instant!", Marston demanded, his whole body shaking. "Shucks, why should I? It's something you did, you should take pride in it! Heck, you probably let outta great big cackle when they went up, didn't ya? Ya probably picked uppa girl Marcela's age, slammed her against a cross, and hammered her onta it yerself! And why not? She and the resta em probably *deserved* i-" "THEY DID NOT DESERVE IT!", Marston roared, ripping his black spectacles from his face, and crushing them in his hand. "They NEVER deserved it! Not back then, not now, not ever! No one deserves that!" I dropped the act, and dropped the smile. "Then why did you it?", I asked, soberly staring into Marston's piercing red eyes. "Because I'm a creep, a craven, and an imbecile.", he spat, bitter. "I never took responsibility for anything. I wanted to change the world, but I didn't wish to join the Order of Fiat... I felt that the military was below me. Sabarene felt differently. So while I studied history, psychology, and sociology, she studied tactics and economics." Though his words were self-deprecating, the only emotion Marston emitted was anger. "We were family, then. More than that... we were friends. We shared a unity of vision, and the exact amount of

delusion and desire to make that vision a reality. I spoke for her, and she worked for me. Together, we created an image of ultimate strength, of a General that could stand for anything and everything... of a mechanism for those in the Collective to feel proud of themselves, to not be afraid of threats, foreign and domestic. We were crafting an illusion. Strength, charisma, the value of money, metal or otherwise, it's all an illusion. But it's an illusion that comes to life when people believe it's not an illusion. If you act a certain way for And not understanding that.... That was our mistake." He scowled, and nodded his head. "No... that was *my* mistake. The warning signs were there the whole time. A disconcerting smile after she was elected... enjoyment and exhalation from defeating her foes... Sabarene transformed into a monster right before my very eyes, and yet, I was blind." "Are you trying to shift the blame, Marston?" A sudden coldness came over me, for some reason. "Or... Or was it... was it her that put those crosses up?" "No.", Marston stated, swallowing. "That was my doing. Sabarene did not order the crucifixion of half the Unionists in Fremdos." Relief surged through my body, and the collar around my neck felt a whole lot less tight. "She ordered the crucifixion of all the Unionists in Fremdos.", the black haired man choked out. "N-no!", I shrieked, losing control. "No, no yer lying!" Marston lowered his head. "I'm not lying. That was the order I received. Not from her, but from her chief retainer, Brother Brounde." "No... No, it ain't true!", I protested, my chest sinking. "What sorta logic is that? You were ordered ta kill every Unionist in the city, but ya felt bad, so ya decided ta only kill halfa em? Bullshit! Yer just lying and trying ta blame yer sins on her!" "My sins are mine alone, and the blame falls squarely on me.", Marston announced, his fists shaking. "But the truth of the matter is this: when the Patrician Branch and I entered the city, our orders were to



execute each and every last Unionist. Combatant or non-combatant. Man or woman, adult, or...or..." the black haired man's voice cracked. "child." He covered his eyes with his hand, and looked away from me. "I pleaded with Sabarene, Unionist. I pleaded with her for three cycles straight. My pleas did nothing. I couldn't address any of the Sacred Siblings, because I was not a member of the Order of Fiat. Desnion sent a letter supporting me in private, but he refused to speak out publically against her. Brother Gino, naturally, didn't say a word against her. Nor did Brother Brounde, or Brother David, or the rest of the Plebian Branch's imbeciles. The only support I received was from Sister Kundare." "Now I know yer full of it.", I growled. "Yer harlot of a wife hates Unionists more than I hate Unionists." "That doesn't mean she wanted children to be put on a cross to die!", Marston shouted, looking through me with hateful red eyes "Everyone is born with privileges, biases, and prejudice- but the mere act of BEING prejudiced does not by itself make one evil!" "Ain't evil just a social construct?", I sarcastically spat. "No. No, evil is not a social construct Unionist.", Marston said, darkly. "I learned precisely what evil was three cycles ago." He turned his back to me yet again, in the study located high up in a tower. "After Fremdos was conquered, after the Unionists were all taken into custody, news arrived of an uprising in Forcuna. The war had been hard on the farmers... not on the owners of the super-farms, but the people who worked on the super-farms. The share croppers. Usually, they supplemented their living by being able to take home some of what they produced, but the siege of Fremdos made the demand for grain and produce higher than ever. The farmers felt the marks they were provided with did not match the value of the crops they lost out on. And so... they revolted. The share-croppers took over two hundred or so of the super-

farms, and vowed not to let them go until they received just compensation.” “And what, they sent you ta negotiate?” “No. They sent Sabarene. She burnt all the rebellious farms to the ground, while the rebels occupied them.”, Marston said, a fury slowly building up in his clinical, detached voice. “In total, seven thousand people perished. Amongst them... were my parents.” “N-no...”, I gawked. “Do you see now, Unionist? Do you see why I want NOTHING to do with that girl?”, he hissed, his teeth clenched. “Her way of thinking is banal, her methods are blunt, and cruel. If there is a problem, she eliminates the problem. Without any regard for nuance, or reason.” Sorrow overwhelmed me. The metal hand attached to my stump clenched up tight, and shattered the marble ledge of the desk into dust. “I... I can’t believe that.”, I wheezed. “Even if it’s right, I can’t believe what you told me is true. If... if that’s true, then it means everything... everything I-“ “It IS true, Unionist.”, the man clad in white declared, pressing his fist up against his chest. “And do you know what happened *next*, Unionist? What happened after she ordered the crucifixion of most the inhabitants of Fremdos, after she burnt her own home to the ground? She executed her own retainer, her own right hand man... Brother Brounde. She burnt him at the stake, she tortured him, she stripped him of all his titles, and officially had his name stricken from the roster of the Order of Fiat.” “S-so you say!”, I defensively countered, the need to expose Marston’s account of things as a lie greater than my need for air. “But yer lying! Yer trying to get sympathy from me, trying to make it seem that the crucifixion and Volunteer Slave crap is all her fault-“ “IT /S MY FAULT!”, Marston roared. “It is ALL my fault! I was the one who came up with the idea of Volunteerhood! I was the one who CREATED these collars, the one who held a raffle, who sentenced HALF the Unionists here to their death!” The black haired man

shuddered. "I will NEVER be forgiven for what I did, and I do NOT deserve to. But if I DIDN'T crucify half the Unionists, and enslave the others... they would ALL be dead. Like Brother Brounde, like my parents, and like every innocent life Sabarene and I took in our delusional quest." He glared at me, his red eyes seething like boiling blood. "But you... Axeman Red Four... when are *you* going to wake up? When are you going to accept the obvious truth?" "I... I can't accept it.", I choked out. "That girl yer describing... she ain't the one I know. She ain't the one that bumped into me in the middle of Provesh, she ain't the one who nursed me back to health, and she sure as heck ain't the one that can drink a bootload of ale." I faltered for a moment, but continued, my voice firm. "She ain't the foul mouthed nitwit that called me a bitch, she ain't the girl with the weird masochistic tendencies... the girl yer describing... she ain't none of mine! She ain't... she ain't Sabarene, god damn it!", I shouted, the words vibrating throughout all my heart and soul. "She... she's not.", I whimpered. Marston lowered his head. "You're right, Unionist. She is not the girl you know.", he stated, his tone removed, and distant. Marston looked up, his ruby red eyes filled with a profound sadness. "She never was." Marston didn't whimper, or moan, or sob... but tears started flowing down his cheek. "The gentle, quirky girl you described... the intelligent, compassionate girl I grew up with, and loved... she is nothing more than a front. A mask for a monster." I collapsed. "There's... there's no way.", I breathed out. "Killing all those folks, I can see that. Heck... to be honest, I kind of expected it from the very start." I shivered. "But just a mask? You're trying to say the emotions she showed me were just a fabrication? For what purpose?" "For the purpose of tricking you into thinking she had a soul.", Marston stated, bluntly. "But why?", I asked. "There's no point in manipulating someone like me.

I'm no asset, I'm dumb muscle." "If you were dumb muscle, you wouldn't refer to yourself as dumb muscle.", Marston said, coldly. "As to why Sabarene would manipulate you... who knows? She manipulates everyone. It's second nature to her." "That ain't an answer." "It's the only answer I can provide you.", Marston stated, brushing some black dust off the sleeves of his white robes. "Sabarene is many things, but irrational is not one of them. On paper, bringing you and your Sorcerer friend along as her retainers would be imbecilic. Neither of you are members of the Order of Fiat, let alone citizens of the Collective. There are plenty of able-bodied Brothers and Sisters who would serve Sabarene in a heart-beat, and yet she chose you two to be her retainers." "Well, it worked, didn't it?" "By the skin of your teeth. As I understand it, you used some sort of poison to-" "Syrup of ipecac.", I stated. "Not poison. I used syrup of ipecac. It's harmless, and all it does is induce vomiting." "I've never heard of that before." "That's cause it belongs ta Ruckus.", I said, flatly. "He has a whole buncha stuff you ain't never heard of. But the pointa the matter is that my plot, even if it went south, wouldn'ta hurt anyone." "There's where you're wrong, Unionist.", the black haired man stated. "If you were caught in the act of "poisoning" Desnion, you would have been killed on the spot." "Yeah, well, obviously / woulda been hurt, but-" "If you died, Sabarene would have lost the election.", Marston cut in. "And I imagine your other friend would have gone down with you. What you did was extremely risky. The fact that it happened to work is besides the point." "Seems like sour grapes talking, ta me." Marston tugged at the black collar wrapped around his neck. "Sour grapes you and I share alike, Unionist. And for, I fear, the same reason." I felt cold again, remembering my situation, remembering the reason why I had woken up with a grotesque hunk of metal attached ta the stump I had never

really appreciated the way I should. "She... she hates us, huh?" "Much worse than that.", Marston said, coldly. "She loves us." "Wha-?" "Love is too strong a word.", the black haired man said, pressing his hand against the desk as he re-adjusted his statement. "I don't think someone like Sabarene is capable of feeling love in the traditional, human sense. Attachment would be a better term. She's attached to me, and she's attached to you. Which is why my head isn't on a pike, and you aren't working on bridges with the other volunteers." "If she's attached ta me, then why did she feel the need ta punish me?" "You're not being punished.", Marston stated. "You're being contained. So am I, incidentally. Both of us are liabilities towards the General, but we're liabilities which she does not wish to destroy." "I ain't a liability.", I muttered. "I'm just a dumb hick in over my head." "You're not dumb, Unionist. And there is one thing you have, one thing you possess which Sabarene fears more than anything else." "What, a module?" Marston nodded his head. "A conscience.", he stated, firm and without hesitation. "Hah, a conscience.", I laughed, bitter. "You don't know me at all, do ya Brother Marston?" "Not even remotely. But I know that you spared Kundare, when doing so would be counter-productive to your efforts. That by itself is proof enough." I rolled my eye. "I only spared yer sadist of a wife because Ruckus was the one in the position ta kill her. If it was me who had been in that bout, her skull woulda been smashed in likea grape." "The same way you smashed in Brother Christopher and Sister Julia's skull, right?" "I... I would have killed them, if I had to." "Yet you didn't.", Marston observed. "And why does it matter that your friend was in the position to kill Sister Kundare? What makes that different from you being in that position." "Cause... cause Ruckus ain't- he ain't like me." Marston stood up tall. "And what are you, Axeman Red

Four?” “A moron with a mean streak.” “No, you’re not.”, the black haired man commented. “I know what you are. I see it in your twitching eye, I see it the way your muscles constrict in the presence of others, I see it in the way your ears flutter at every single sound.” He placed his hands on my shoulders. “You’re *afraid*.”, he whispered, right into my ear. “G-gah!”, I screamed, and punched him in the face. Marston crumpled on the floor like a paper mache project. “Ugh.”, he coughed, spitting out a small amount of blood into his hand. He glanced in the center of his palm. “You knocked out one of my molars, Unionist.”, he stated, only mild irritation present in his deep voice. “Sorry...”, I mumbled, grimacing at the blood falling pouring out of Marston’s lips. “Don’t apologize.”, the tall man in white barked, wiping off his lips. “Why shouldn’t I?” “Because it is not you who should be apologizing.”, the black haired man said, the lack of a molar not doing much to impair his speaking ability. “I’m the one at fault, I antagonized you, I mocked you, and I tried to kill you. Perhaps if I had just been honest and open with you from the start, neither of us would be here.” His ruby red eyes became wet, again. “However... you were blinded. You bought into something that wasn’t there. Something that was- that was never there.” Marston lowered his head, and shuddered. As I thought about all he had told me about Sabarene, the fratricide, the crosses, the harshness, my other memories – memories of a tiered luncheon in an icy deposit, of feigned spousehood to obtain a false limb, of getting puked on, of singing, of cursing, of *smiling*... they faded away. And as my precious memories... my most precious memories... as they faded, so did my numbness. All that was left was sorrow. “I kind of-”, I began to say, then swallowed. “I kind of *liked* being blinded, is the thing. I... I knew there wasn’t anyone crazy enough ta care about me, ta spend time with me... I knew it

was just a fantasy, -but I *liked* that fantasy.” “So did I.”, Marston choked out, tears falling from his face anew. His red eyes, dripping tears, widened. “Miss Axeman Red Four!”, he cried out, alarmed. I turned my head around to see wh- “Gah!”, I screamed, as two bandaged hands wrapped themselves tightly around my throat. “You... vile... Unionist!”, Corcoran hissed, his voice like sandpaper. “I allow you to live... I even enlighten you to the truth of your situation... and you attempt to murder me?” “G-guh.. gah-“, I gasped, unable to remove the Saboteur’s hands from my neck. “Sabaoteur Corcoran!”, Marston announced. “As Regent of Fremdos, I command you to unhand her at once!” “Shut up, *Volunteer*. This doesn’t concern you.” The black haired man tightened his fists, and rushed Corcoran. The brown skinned, green haired man dodged him without even having to throw a punch. “I told her- to kill you.”, Corcoran wheezed out, as Marston crashed headfirst into a hard marble wall. “I warned her- ah... hah... you were unnecessary, that you had served your purpose. But you’re even more—GUAAAH-useless than that!” Black spots started filling dotted my vision, as Corcoran held me against the marble desk. I knew what was happening. I wasn’t dying, no. I was passing out. After I passed out I would die, though, so it wasn’t much of a difference. I took one half hearted swing at the man I probably shoulda made sure had died. My fist didn’t even move an inch. “Just die already!”, Corcoran grunted, tightening his grip. I almost accepted it. My death, that is. Not cause I was nihilistic at the time, but cause my living situation somehow managed to be worse than it was in Provesh. I didn’t struggle cause Sabarene had either betrayed me, or was evil incarnate, or both. I didn’t struggle because there was nothing left to struggle for. Nothing, except- “No.”, I gasped, forcing my metal hand to grab Corcoran’s left hand. “I made... a promise...to meet... to meet

someone again, some...day." Corcoran's eyes narrowed. "I don't think the General will mind you breaking that promise." "It wasn't.... to heeeeeeeeeeeer!", I yelled, thrusting my hand forward, and hitting the green haired man right in his throat. He flew off me, and tripped over the desk. I sprang up, energy surging through my body. "You're mad at me, you have every right to be.", I hissed. "But regardless of your legitimate fury, I will destroy you if you continue." Corcoran didn't say a word. Quick as lightning, he reached into his bandages, and threw a knife straight at me. It cut deep into my hand. My fake hand. "You're out of options, and you're out of knives.", I coldly commented, yanking the weapon out of the fake metal hand. Corcoran held out eight more, all embedded inbetween his fingers. "Crap!", I cursed, and rushed him, pitting my one knife against his eight. I lost. Corcoran deflected the blade in my hands with ease, and hit me in the elbow, hard. I crashed onto the ground. "Don't worry, I'll make this quick.", Corcoran slowly breathed out, bringing his blades to my throat. "I'm no sadist." "I am~", a cheery voice chimed in. Two metal wires wrapped themselves under the bandaged man's arms, lifted him up, and slammed him into the ceiling. "A-ah!", Corcoran cried out, as the taunt metal wires repeated the process a second time. Covered in medical tape, but otherwise completely unharmed was Kundare, two metal whips held firmly in her hands. "I would suggest bowing out now, Saboteur Corcoran.", Kundare sing-songed, holding her dual whip. "Otherwise I'll be forced to flick my wrists, and fling you out the window." "Nonsense!", Corcoran spat, gruffly. "There's no way I'll bow to you, Kundare, you halfwitted, simple minded-" Kundare flicked her wrists, and flung him out the window. The Saboteur may have let out a scream before he hit the ground, he may not have, I didn't hear it. But I did hear his bones crack and his body break when he crashed on the



ground with a sickening crunch. “There-there was no need to do that, ya blonde psychopath!”, I blathered out. “He... he was only strangling me cause I had done it ta him in the first place!” “Saboteur Corcoran once burnt down a geriatric home, in a clumsy attempt to do away with one of the General’s chief political rivals. He won’t be missed.” Marston stated, then looked up at Kundare. “You’re late.”, he said, flatly. “Searching for what you requested took longer than I anticipated, Master Marston.”, Kundare stated, bowing. “And why is that?”, the man with ruby red eyes asked, his tone cold. The blonde haired woman in white frowned. “I’m afraid I couldn’t move around much without attracting suspicion.” “The leader of the city guard couldn’t move around without attracting suspicion?”, Marston questioned, skeptical. “I’m no longer the captain.”, Sister Kundare said with a grimace. “Sabarene removed me from my post the moment the election results came in.” “I thought Desnion would be able to stall her at least a little.”, the man with midnight black hair said, his voice distant. “The Supreme Sibling and his retainers have returned to Merchenze.”, Kundare reported, still bowing. “The cowards left the Coliseum before Brother Gino even finished his speech.”, she added, bitter. “Cowardly, but wise.”, Marston said. “Desnion is the only legitimate obstacle to Sabarene, staying in a city with her and a standing army could have been a death sentence. Speaking of which-“ he got up, and peaked out the window. As expected, Corcoran’s body lay crumpled down on the pavement, but what made the whole affair odd was that the guards didn’t seem to pay the corpse much attention- even though some bitsa and pieces of him were splattered on their boots. “Did you bribe them, or are they yours?”, Marston asked Kundare, slightly surprised. “Neither. They’re troops from Forcuna.” “Ah.”, the black haired man said, then, his back to me, held out

his hand. Without missing a beat, Kundare produced a pair of black spectacles from her robes, and placed them in his extended hand. "No. Not the glasses.", the gaunt man grunted, color flushing through his pale cheeks. "Your hand." The blonde woman didn't flinch, or blush. She smiled, radiantly, and entwined her fingers with Marston's. And then, with a light tug, jerked him around, and brought him into a tight embrace. "I've... I've missed you so much!", the black haired boy choked out, his voice higher pitched than I had ever heard it. "I know, love, I know.", Kundare repeated, stroking the back of Marston's head. "I missed you too. And I'm sorry that I failed you." "You didn't... you didn't fail anyone, Kundare! It was me, who failed you! I failed you, and Marcela, and... and the entirety of the Collective. I wanted to do so much- to save so many people... but in the end... I wasn't even able to protect my own wife." "I'm fine, though.", the girl with blonde hair cooed, tightening her arms around Marston. "The foreigner just broke a few of my ribs. And it was my own stupidity that led me to that fate, not yours. I underestimated his resolve." The black haired boy broke down. "Kundare... Kundare!", he sobbed, his tears dampening his wife's white robes. Her arms still wrapped around Marston, the blonde haired girl turned to look at me. "I underestimated your resolve too, Unionist.", she said, still sprouting her radiant smile. "Brother Christopher and Sister Julia never lost a bout before in their lives, and that was when they were separate. For them to have lost even with an advantage..." "I cheated.", I cut in. "I didn't really beat them, I just blackmailed them and preyed on their insecurities. Fer all the good it did me." Kundare nodded her head, and smiled. "That collar wrapped around your neck is a mark of honor, Unionist. You should wear it with pride." "Why, cause it means I'm on the path towards worshipping funny money and enabling non-collaborative sexual

degeneracy like a good Collective citizen?”, I grumbled. “Love isn’t degeneracy, Unionist.”, Kundare said, her face firm. “And no. That collar is proof that you’re an enemy of the most vile creature ever spawned. Which, in turn, means you’re nowhere near as evil as I thought you to be.” I thought about commenting on how life didn’t quite work that way, but at the time, I didn’t have really know how life worked myself. It all seemed so... arbitrary, and unfocused. If there was a metric by how things worked in the continent, it sure as heck wasn’t based on good, or evil. “With pride or without, I’m going to be wearing this darn thing for the rest of my life. Which probably won’t be that long, once they find Cocoa-rin’s corpse.” “I didn’t come here just to chat, Unionist.”, Kundare exhaled, rolling her eyes. “I’m springing my husband and my daughter out of here. And you too, if you wish to actually do something right for a change.” The girl with blonde hair’s suggestion was nothing short of insanity. I wanted to leave the tower... I wanted to leave the tower and run away more than anything. But there was no escape that would be viable, if things were as bad as they seemed. The smart thing to do... the only sensible thing to do... would be to remain in the gilded cage, and try and wait for a more opportune time to flee. But I had had enough of waiting. “Sure. I’ll escape with you. But only on one condition.” “And what might that be?”, the blonde girl asked, hands on her hip. “You tell me where Lucas is.” A pained expression came across Kundare’s face, as she let go of the black haired boy. “Lucas... you mean the foreigner. You... you wish to know where he is?” “Yes, I did.” She grimaced. “I know where he is, but I don’t think-“ “Take me to him this moment!”, I shouted. “I don’t care if it’s dangerous, I don’t care if I get punished, just bring me to him!” Something slowly clicked in Marston’s brain. “Kundare... did... did you fail in picking up-“ “No, no, I didn’t fail!”, the whip wielding girl

shouted, nervous. "But... but the... the package was- it was damaged. Severely damaged." I pushed air through my teeth. "I don't care about packages, I don't care about metal, marks or even modules. Just bring me to Lucas, or if ya can't do that, tell me where he is." Kundare's face contorted, shame slowly spreading across her cheeks. "He's right outside this room, actually. But Unionist, I don't think now is-" I didn't listen to any more of the blonde girl's words. Instead, I marched right out the door, back into the spiral staircase of the tall marble tower. Laid down gently, on a makeshift futon was Lucas. But he... he- "N-no!", I whimpered, gazing down at him. Lucas was alive, but he... he was hurt. He was hurt real bad. His chest was littered with puncture wounds, and on his hands, and his feet- his nails had been ripped out, and torn. "Ruckus!", I cried out, rushing to his side. "Suns above- Lucas!" At my words, the blonde haired boy's beautiful blue eyes open. He smiled gently, like he waking up from a mid-day nap. "Oh, thank the suns...", I breathed out, relieved that he wasn't dead. "You and I both had a rough go of it, huh?" Lucas didn't say nothing, he just nodded his head. "Er- yeah. Yeah, maybe you had a bitta rougher go of it than I did, I see that.", I blabbered, as he got up. Lucas gazed at me, and nodded his head, sternly. "Ok, a lot of a rougher go of it.", I mumbled, bashful. Lucas rolled his eyes, and nodded his head again. "O-oh!", I realized. "Oh, I forgot, when you shake yer head it means yer saying "no", and when you nod yer head it means yer saying "yes." He nodded his head. "Guh, now ya know I ain't got any clue if that was a confirmation orra denial, right?" Lucas smiled, but he remained silent. "Shucks Ruckus, yer making me run my mouth like a dang fool. You could at least say something-" I froze up. Something... something seemed *wrong*. Lucas's demeanor, the way he was attentive to me, but unresponsive with his words, it

reminded me of someone, of a green haired girl back in Provesh. “Ruckus?”, I said, calmly. “Ruckus, wouldya mind doing mea favor?” The blonde haired boy clad in ragged clothing smiled, and nodded his head. “How bout ya open yer gabber, some?” He smiled, and nodded his head, but didn’t open his mouth. I moved my hand to caress the bottom of his chin. That- that didn’t sit well with him. His demeanor changed. He looked away from me, his face filled with shame. My body began shaking. “I’m.... I’m sorry, Lucas. You don’t need to do that.”, I said, trying to quell the anger slowly rising up from my core. The more I looked at him, the more wounds and nicks I found. Some of the skin on his shoulder had been torn off... clinically removed, so as to expose the flesh underneath to the elements. It didn’t look infected... in fact, it looked preserved, as if someone had gone out of their way to keep the exposed muscle tissue in tip top shape so as to preserve the sensations it gave to the fullest. “Oh no...”, I breathed out, shuddering as I stared at the bright red flesh jaunting out of his shoulder. “Suns above, no... “ “I happened upon him accidentally.” Sister Kundare said, leaning against the door which opened up into the stairwell. “He was being kept under the city, in a cell.” I jerked my head towards Lucas. “Is... is that true, Lucas?” The blonde haired boy smiled at me, and nodded. I felt a pit form in the bottom of my stomach. Him not talking was bad enough, but his... his entire behavior seemed far too easy going. He acted cavalier, but not in the cynical snarky way I had seen him put on. The way Lucas looked and acted, despite the wounds, despite his exhaustion, his malnutrition- it was all very childish- Even... innocent. “Is that *not* true, Lucas?”, I asked, preserving the tone of my voice. The blonde haired boy smiled at me, and nodded. “Banana, fish, sword, axe.”, I stated, with the same inflection. The blonde haired boy smiled at me, and nodded. “You

can't hear a word I'm saying, can you?", I said, softly. The blonde haired boy smiled at me, and nodded. "He can hear you, but he can't understand you, Unionist.", Kundare stated, her voice distant. "He was tortured, Unionist. Judging by his wounds, he was tortured for some time... ten rising periods... maybe more.", she said, her voice dispassionate. "And the damage didn't stop with his body. When I happened upon him, all he could do was shriek." "I see.", I stated, staring as closely at Lucas as I could, and smiling brightly, so as not to disturb him. "If I find out that this was in any way a ploy to obtain my sympathies, I will murder you, and I will murder your husband.", I said in a happy, unalarming tone, making my words sound as pleasant as possible. "We would never do this to anyone, Unionist.", Kundare calmly answered, gripping the end of one of her metal whips. "I don't think you were. But my point still stands.", I cheerily chimed, then, as the false bravado and manufactured macho faded, buried my head in my hands. "A-ah!", I shrieked. "This... this is a nightmare! G... GAAAAAAH!" Suddenly, the smile faded away from Lucas's face. Sincere, and serious, he caressed my chin with his hand. "L-lucas!", I ejaculated, hope springing up in my heart. "Are you- are you feeling better?" He flicked my right ear, and, seemingly out of nowhere, produced a large yellow daffodil, which he handed to me.. "Ha... ha!", he laughed, pleased with himself. A glimpse of his wide open mouth confirmed the worst of my suspicions. Like the Handmaiden, his tongue had been cut out. "T-thanks, Lucas.", I forced out, feeling tears drip down my face. "It... it wasn't supposed to go like this.", I chuckled, smiling as I cried, trying as hard as I could to keep my face firm so not to upset Lucas. "It was supposed to be a whole lot more simple, y'know?" "Oh honestly, Unionist, what did you think was going to happen?" Kundare spat, annoyed. "You backed a tyrant with a

terrible reputation. You and him are lucky to be alive.” I thought about arguing back, but with Lucas a mental mess, there wasn’t really any place. Not to help, anyways. I took in a deep breath. “Alright. I messed up big. I messed up really big.” I swallowed. “So how do we get her?” “Get her?”, Kundare asked, surprised. “Sabar- The General.”, I finished. “How do we get to her? I need to ask her some questions, face to face. And if she... if she did this to Lucas, then I need to do more than just ask her a few questions.” “You mean you don’t know where she is?”, Kundare asked, surprised. “I’ve been conscious for barely half a rising period. Of course I have no idea where she is.” “Sabarene is on her to Provesh, Unionist.”, the blonde girl answered, clenching her teeth closed. “Along with half of the Collective’s armed forces.” “Figures.”, I bitterly breathed, as Lucas began playing with the pedals of the daffodils, babbling incoherently as he plucked em off. “I’m guessing she’s being accompanied by Brother Gino and the Plebian branch too?”

“Many more than just that. The army she’s amassed is three times the size it was in cycles prior.” “G-guh.” I made a fist, and then, determined, tapped the blonde boy on the shoulder, on his shoulder which wasn’t scratched, or cut, or flayed. “Hey, Lucas?”, I said, gently. “Lucas, we’re going to leave now, ok?” I knew he couldn’t hear me, but my soft sounding words drew him towards me, which was they needed to do. He bashfully smiled at me, not even wincing as his skinless left shoulder brushed against a wall. I lightly took his hand in mine... in my real hand, not the fake one. “Yeah, we’re going to leave now, Lucas. I’m going to get some money, or metal, and we’re going to get on a boat, ok? We’re going to go offland, or... or go to Trunchet, or somewhere, ok?”

“You’re-you’re LEAVING?”, Kundare gasped, beside herself. “Yup, I’m leaving.”, I snipped, tugging the blonde boy’s hand. “That’s not the point!”, Kundare screamed.

“You helped Sabarene get back in power, and now... now, even after seeing how terrible of a decision that was, you’re just going to RUN AWAY?” “Yes. I’m going to run away.”, I stated, blankly. “Have you... have no shame, Unionist?”, Kundare gasped. “Thousands are going to die, Collective and Layfolk alike! All because you were seduced by that heartless monster’s plot!” “It wasn’t her plot.”, I corrected the blonde girl. “It was mine. The General coming back... getting re-elected...making all those dumb speeches... that was *my* plan.” “W-what?”, Kundare gasped. “Why would a Unionist even-“ “Because I’m an idiot.”, I whispered. “W-well, you have even more of a responsibility to stop her now, then!”, Kundare sputtered, cracking her whip. “Responsibility? What do you think I’m capable of?” “Fighting! Fighting like every good brother and sister of the collective! Master Marston and I aren’t done yet! We’ll round up some men, march to Provesh, and stop Sabarene there!”, the blonde girl in white desperately proclaimed, clutching her hand to her heart. “Ah... ha!”, Lucas laughed enthusiastically, mimicking Kundare’s excited tone. “Yeah, y’all can go ahead and do that.”, I murmured. “But I’m done fighting, fer ideals, fer causes. I’ve made that mistake twice now, and all it did... all it did was-“ I glanced at Lucas’s open, tongue mouth, dripping spittle. “All it did was hurt.”, I hoarsely finished, then scowled. “From now on, I ain’t gonna fight fer nobody, nobody except me, and Lucas.” “That mindset makes you no different from the General, Unionist.”, Kundare answered, coldly. “, I don’t care.”, I answered, then began descending the stairs. Everything was lost- the only thing I had was Lucas, and he... he had been turned into a shell of his former self. But a shell of Lucas was worth more than everyone else on the continent combined. So I continued walking down. I had no plan, I had no weapons. I was still wearing the black collar



around my neck, and Lucas, his face happy, his eyes vacant, was clad in little more than rags. I knew I had to find something... to at least find some sort of weapon in case things went south- that was what my basic survival instinct was telling me. But more powerful than my need for survival was my need to be anywhere but that tower. It... it was selfish of me. But I couldn't bare to be with Lucas around other people. They wouldn't understand, they'd look at him, they'd hear his gibberish, they'd see his drooling, his nail-less toes, his bloody fingers, and think him a fool. They wouldn't know who he was- who he truly was. Then again... neither did he. "Guh... Ahah!", Lucas laughed and clapped, as I led him down the tower. From the way his mouth moved, it was clear he was trying to say something. But his bowtie was nowhere to be found, and his tongueless words didn't even resemble the broken continental he spurted without its aid. I had to look away. Hearing him was bad, seeing him try to talk was worse. Finally, I got to the bottom of the tower. Unsurprisingly, there was a man standing guard at the door. He was clad in black robes and had two short swords strapped to his side, but... he wasn't a Fiatist. Fiatists didn't wear skull masks. "Ah!", Thief called out, cheerily. "Is friend brown girl! Long time no see!", he chimed, closing his right eye and poking it. He placed his hand on his chin, as he noticed Lucas. "Ah, but what is this? Friend brown girl bring friend? And friend is cut up?" Lucas' demeanor changed completely, as his eyes met Thief's. He went from being happy, to nervous, to... to scared. The broken blonde boy shrunk back, and cowered behind me. "Ah, what is wrong, Sir Sorcerer? Is head ok?" Thief's demeanor changed completely, his broken words taking on a bit of malice as he stared at the blonde boy behind my back. "Cat get your tongue?" "GRAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!", I roared, the red mist descending. I knew I wouldn't be

able to even touch the man in the skull mask, but I rushed at him all the same.

Predictably, Thief vanished, right before the metal fist attached to my stump splattered his head into bloody chunks. "Anger will unmake you, Friend.", Thief chimed from above. In spite of all logic and reason, the brown haired man was standing, upside down on the stairwell cum ceiling. "Is no need to over-react about joke. Joke wasn't even directed towards you in first place." "If you say another word about Lucas, I will kill you where you stand.", I growled, my words impotent and meaningless. "Ah! Friend Brown Girl is saying friend name correctly for change! Is good to know!", the man in the skull masked chimed, sitting down crossed legged on the ceiling. "But is besides point. Sir Sorcerer probably doesn't even remember own name at this point. Knives, nails, and razors did more damage to psyche than to body." I clenched my fist. "And how do you know he was tortured?" "Friend Thief saw it, of course. Saw it for fourteen rising periods." I clenched my teeth tight. "You saw Lucas being tortured, and did nothing to stop it?!" "Yes. Friend Thief did nothing.", the inverted man answered, the same happy tone to his words. "Friend Thief's job is to observe, just as Friend Brown Girl's job is to act. Intervening more hobby for Friend Thief, than a duty." "Yeah, well... frick off already.", I exhaled, exhausted. "If there's something you want me to do, just forget it. I'm leaving this stupid city, and I'm taking Lucas with me. And if you've got a problem with that, then just kill me now, cause I ain't gonna put up with yer cryptic nonsense anymore." "Ah, since when did Friend Brown Girl think Friend Thief wanted anything of-" "Cut the crap.", I called up to the upside down man. "You've been manipulating me from the get-go, with yer stupid letters, yer vague ass words, with everything. I'm done. I'm done with it, alright?" The brown haired man shrugged his shoulders, and slowly

descended to the ground. "Are you done, Friend Brown Girl? Are you truly finished?", he asked, his words sounding semi-sincere for once. "Yeah. I'm done." "Then so be it. Friend Thief thanks Friend Brown Girl for her time and effort, and would like to give her a—" "Keep it.", I murmured, not even looking at what the skull masked man had in his hands. "Accepting gifts from strangers hasn't done me any favors." "Is not gift.", Thief said, tersely. "Is belongings which belonged to Friend Brown Girl, and Sir Sorcerer." And then... manifesting themselves seemingly out of thin air was... the greataxe Sabarene had made for me, and Lucas's rucksack, his tazer, his rectangle, his baton, his revolver, and... and most importantly, his bowtie. The module. The Universal Translator, the thing Lucas had once boasted could make anyone understand anything. I lunged for it with zeal, but-. "Easy, easy.", Thief said, grabbing my arm with surprising strength. "Is not wise to act purely on desires." "What do ya want?", I forced out, obtaining Lucas's bowtie more important than anything. "I do not want anything. Friend Brown Girl is welcome to reclaim all her belongings. They are hers. But Friend Thief must urge caution in using module." "If that can help me understand Lucas, then I don't give a crap about anything that'll happen to me. Even if the worst possible thing happened to me... I'd still use it." The toned brown hair man in the skull mask shook his head. "The worst thing that can happen to Friend Brown girl is what she want to happen." Still gripping my right arm, Thief snapped his fingers. Everything and everyone, besides me and him, stopped moving. Thief stepped softly up to Lucas, in the world of silence and stillness. Gently, clinically, he moved the blonde boy's jaw up, exposing his bloody, tongueless mouth. "Friend Brown Girl think if she use module, she'll be able to make up for damage here, correct?" "Maybe. It's magic, ain't it?" "Is not

magic, but theory is not incorrect. Universal Translator translate anything. So long as sound is made intended to deliver message, translator will translate it. But Friend Brown Girl does not want Sir Sorcerer's speak translated." "Why the heck wouldn't I want that?!", I shrieked, fear, loathing, and anger mixing into bile. "Friend Brown Girl wouldn't want to do that, because damage is not just here.", Thief said, pointing at Lucas's open mouth. "Damage is also here.", he stated, tapping the blonde boy gently on the head. "Damage here for quite some time for Sir Sorcerer, but recent events have inflicted far too much. And babblings of damaged man is not what Friend Brown Girl would be happy hearing." "One babble from him is worth a million words from you.", I hissed. "But is babble, nonetheless.", Thief commented, coldly. "Friend Brown Girl's brain is already damaged. Taking burden of another would cause her to revert to most base form." "That's fer me to decide, not fer you." "Is not a matter of decision, or control, or resolve. Is what will happen. Friend Brown Girl controls nothing, influences nothing, and accomplish nothing, not on own strength." "Least we can both agree on that.", I spat, bitter. "Now leave me alone, or kill me. I ain't gotta another word to say ta ya." "Is just as well.", Thief commented. "Have business in Provesh, with monster far scarier than you. And unlike with you, there is no room for diplomacy. Only thing scary monster understand is sword, so Friend Thief will bring her sword." "You're talking about Sabarene.", I said, neutrally. He gazed at me, and shook his name. "No. Am talking of the General of the Holy Collective. Girl named Sabarene died five cycles ago, murdered by General." The painted skull jawbone on Thief almost seemd to frown. "Even so... am sorry for putting Friend Fake Arm through this. Even Friend Thief could not have planned outcome such as this." I didn't respond to him. "Is there anything Friend Green

Hair would like? Friend Thief will grant Friend Brown Girl one wish out of gratitude for struggles.” More than anything else, I didn’t want to talk to Thief, I didn’t want to so much as breathe in his general direction. I knew whatever words the man with the broken continental said had other meanings behind them, and I knew that he was subtly and not so subtly manipulating me at every turn. But I also knew that a man who could stop time, walk upside down, and conjure missing belongings out of thin air was probably capable of fulfilling just about any request. “Actually... yes.”, I said, swallowing my pride. “There is one thing I would like.” “Metal? Money? Module? Name it, and Friend Thief will provide.” “Heal Lucas.” Thief jerked his body, surprised. “W-what?” “Heal Lucas. Use yer magic power or whatever and heal him. Restore him back ta how he was before I ruined his life. I don’t care what the cost of it might be, just do it.” Thief’s shoulders deflated. “That... that is one request Friend Thief cannot fulfill. Repairing Sir Sorcerer’s head... it would require module Friend Thief does not have, and cannot obtain.” My eye jolted open wide, at Thief’s indirect admission of there being something that could- that might be able to restore Lucas back ta normal. “And what module is that, exactly?” “Friend Thief.... Friend Thief cannot say.” I narrowed my eye. “Why, cause ya don’t know?” The man in the skull mask shook his head. “No. Friend Thief know full well name of module. But to use it to save one, would mean to destroy another.” He paused, and brushed away some particles suspended by the time-stopped sea-breeze. “Besides, is located on Continent. Friend Thief was under impression that Friend One Eye intended to leave Continent.” “If the thing you’re talking about can help Lucas, then I’ll take a detour.”, I said. “Just tell me where to go.” The brown haired man crossed his muscular arms, and fer a brief moment, I could have sworn I saw the

jawbone painted on his mask smile. “Provesh. That’s where you need to go, Friend Brown Girl. You will find module you seek there. That’s where it all-“ “Ends?”, I cut in, wanting to curtail the masked man’s flamboyance as quickly as possible. Thief shook his head, and... yanked his skull mask down. “No, Miss Splendor.”, said the man I had seen in my dreams. “That’s where it all *begins*.” And then... before I could even blink, he was gone, leaving just me, Lucas, and all our useless belongings. “Guh... guh! Fugh!”, the blonde boy screamed, the moment time resumed. Quick as I could manage, I clasped his right shoulder with my real, warm hand. “It’s alright, Lucas. It’s fine, that weird twat is-“ “G-guh!Ah...ah!”, the tongueless boy continued to shriek, his blue eyes wild and deranged. “C-crap!”, I cursed, my words of comfort not reaching him, not doing anything. Without really thinking about it, I squeezed the bowtie Thief had gave me. It didn’t do anything. “Pu... pugh!”, Lucas spat out, forcefully. He was staring at me intent, and he kept on babbling, as if the words he wanted ta say mattered more to him than breathing. In the midst of the chaos, I took in a breath, and tried to remember. I tried to remember how Lucas activated his translator. And for once – I succeeded. Calmly, as the blonde boy yelled, and shrieked, and moaned, I twisted the purple bowtie. And like I had seen countless of times before, a purple miasma radiated from the neckpiece. But this time... this time I thrust my head in the center of the mysterious gas. “Loading... loading... loading.”, a weird, insufferable voice commented, as time froze around me once more. “Booting up, and stuff. Alright, just gimme a second, orra moment, or whatever. I’m justa bout ninety eight percent done calculating the language matrix and all that.” “G-gah! Who is that?!”, I gasped, unnerved. “Show yerself!” “Aw, shoot! We under attack or something?”, the insufferable voice responded, stressed. “Don’t play

game with me!", I yelled, thrusting my eye all around the tower. "Show yerself this instant!" "Yeah, show yerself!", the disembodied voice concurred, energetically. "Me and the admin are gonna kick yer rears something fierce!" "That ain't my name.", I growled, scared, but not able ta appear scared. "I'm Axeman Red Four, and I'll spare yer life if ya have the good sense ta stop messing with me this instant." "Pffffffft.", the insufferable sounding disembodied voice laughed. "Ya wanna die?!", I bellowed, my nerves getting set off more and more by the moment. "No, no, I- I- Uh, look hun, I think yer misunderstanding the situation, some. I ain't a fella looking ta harm you", the voice said. "Is that so?" "Purty much.", the disembodied voice responded. "See... I ain't even what you would calla person, so ta speak. Name's Universal Translator, and I'm an artificial intelligence designed ta help bridge the barrier between language and rhetoric and stuff. Call me U.T fer short, or don't. Ain't like it makes a lickuva difference ta me." "R-really?", I asked, my head beginning ta hurt. "Yup, really.", the disembodied voice answered nonchalantly. "I can translate English, Russian, French, Chinese, Continental, Fremdosian, Offlander, and a few other quadrillion languages that I'll leave off fer the sakea brevity. But ya knew that already, didn'tcha Ruckus?" I paused, and cringed, as I stared at the suspended blonde boy, his eyes panicked, his mouth filled with spittle and blood. "I... I ain't Lucas. I toldya, my name is-" "You're not Ruckus?!", the voice gasped. "Then... then how the heck areya using me? W-hat?! Why the heck are ya identified as the Master Admin?! Yer not onea those quantum mechanic hackers, areya?! Suns above, please- leave my CPU alone! I ain't even the latest typea model so there ain't nothing you'll get from scrapping me!" "I don't gotta clue what yer talking about!", I sputtered, highly, highly confused. "W-well, it says here yer the Master Admin, but the Master

Admin would know precisely how I work, so ya havta bea hacker! Ain't no way around it!", the voice in my head declared. I growled. "I thought you were supposedta translate things, not talk inna stupid sorta way!" "Ooooooooooooooooooooooh.", U.T. said, calming down, some. "Ah, I see. I musta got my CPU fried some, and so have now identified a random peasant as the Master Admin. You must think I'm magic, don'tcha?" "That or advanced mental illness.", I muttered. "Nah. Nah, I'm an AI. I ain't magic. And, uh, while we're on the subject of magic, ya know yer belief in deities and such? Well, uh, God ain't really in the cards. I mean, I can't say it with certainly, cause ta me programmers are God, but that's more offa metaphorical kinda thing and-" "I get it.", I said, not. "The readings indicate that ya don't get it.", the absurdly annoying voice responded. "Alright, I don't get it. I also don't care. I wantcha ta unfreeze time and translate what Ruckus is saying." "Time ain't frozen.", the infuriating voice commented. "I just accelerated yer brain waves some, so you and I could chat, some." "W-what?", I said, or more accurately, thought. "Alright, basically, yer thinking super-duper fast, so everything looks slow." I tried moving my arm. "No no, don't do that!", U.T. cried out. "If ya try ta move yer arm while accelerated, it'll shatter inta little piece!" "I can't move my arm.", I grumbled, or thought. Grumble-thought. "Oh. Well duh, of course ya can't.", the strangely strangleable voice commented. "Ruckus put on the safety settings. Huh, but it does say here yera Admin. Would you like ta turn off safety settings at this time?" "No." "Oh, good, cause that'd be retarded! I mean, trying ta move when yer protons and electrons are all inna accelerated tizzy, talk about short sighted!" "Is therea reason why ya talk so darn idiotically?", I spat-thought. "What, ya don't like my conversation settings?", the disembodied voice asked, sounding slightly offended. "Ruckus sets me



ta this all the time, and he don't seem ta mind." "I don't care. Speak inna way that don't sound so stupid." I asked. "Well, yer DNA marks you as an Admin, so I reckon I gotta do what ya say, even if I don't wanna.", the disembodied voice pouted. "Hold on, let me just scan yer brain and yer hormones fera spell, I gotta take alla that inta account in order ta finda suitable voice." "Ain't like I can do anything else besides wait.", I thought-spoke, my body immobile. Well, not quite immobile, but functionally immobile. "Um... is this better, Miss Admin?", the disembodied voice asked, sounding much more meek and nervous. "S-Sabarene?!", I gasped, my heart missing a beat. "N-no... not quite.", the soft voice said, apologetically. "I'm still the Universal Translator... I looked into your preferences and calculated this to be what you'd be most comfortable with." My stomach curled up, even though the laws of space and time dictated that it shouldn't have been able to. But that was besides the- "Um! If... if you don't mind, can I go back to my old voice?", U.T. suddenly asked, skittish. "I was... quite fond of it. And... and I find this current personality very unpleasant.", the module mumbled, mortified. "Can ya... can ya just pick a voice at random?" I thought, distraught. "-Cause I don't particularly want ya speaking like that neither, but I don't want ya ta sound like me or Ruckus neither." "O-ok.", Sabarene's voice answered, sounding scared. "Ok, I'll- I'll pick another personality- any other personality. This is... this is *wrong*. I... I don't feel... I don't-" the voice morphed, slowly, and stopped it's frightened prattle. "My word. I don't know what came over me.", an elegant male voice responded. "That last personality... how dreadful. Full of paranoia, hate, and self-doubt. I much preferred the setting Master Lucas put me on prior. A bit heavier on the paranoia and self-doubt, mayhaps, but far less hatred." I had no idea if I was going crazy or not, but I decided to at least try and

press the disembodied voice further. "You say the last personality had hatred? How the heck can ya wwn tell that?" "Hmph, it's impolite to underestimate my capacities, even if you are registered as an Admin, Master.", the mildly snooty sounding module answered. "Linguistics, rhetoric, and words reveal truths all their own. Each and every method an individual uses to speak hints at their personality. Pauses in speech, emphasis on consonants and vowels, preference for formality over vernacular... it all reveals various truths. Truths too obscure for an organism such as yourself to tell, but as luck might have it I'm an artificial intelligence designed solely to understand language. And... ugh... the language of that last personality was absolutely horrid. The mindset of that creature... how superbly juvenile- how utterly simplistic. A mentally disabled *dog* would possess more nuance. You're more than welcome to set me back to that if you wish, Master Admin, but I would be most appreciative if you didn't." "No. No, just set time back ta normal, and translate what Lucas is trying to saying." "Very well, Master Admin. Do I have your permission to utilize your graphical user interface?" "What?" "Can I have access to your sight, smell, and other such senses? I am unable to see or hear Admin Lucas at the moment, and I cannot translate what I cannot detect." "Sure, go ahea- Gah!" As I gave U.T. permission ta do whatever, my vision changed, significantly. A grid of hexagons descended over my iris. Each hexagon zoomed inward on points of note at the bottom of the tower. Primarily the hexagons focused on Lucas, and on his wounds, his mouth, his hair, but other hexagons zoomed in on flaws in the structure of the tower and such. "What the... what the heck is this crap?!" "Oh, would you like me to turn off the heads up display?", U.T. said. "Admin Lucas likes to keep it on to help with his aim." "Yeah! Get... get those weird shapes outta my eye!" "Certainly, Master Admin, I'll

dismiss it right away.”, the stuffy voice said politely. “While I do that, I would also like to inform you that your graphical user interface is in urgent need of repair. Visibility on my end is down to forty six percent.” “That’s cause I’m missing an eye.” “Oh. Might I suggest getting another?” “Eyes don’t work like that.” “They don’t?”, U.T. questioned, sounding slightly surprised. “Hmph. Then I must urge you to take great care not to lose your remaining eye, Master Admin. Without a visual interface to analysis lip movements, I’m afraid my translating capacities would be reduced by nearly one tenth of a percent.” “That ain’t anything at all.” “Are you daft?”, the haughty male voice questioned. “One tenth of a percentage is infinitely large, the mere thought of losing it is- why, it’s absolutely horrid.” “Yeah, well, I don’t plan on going blind anytime soon.”, I grumble-thought. “Now hurry up and de-accelerate my brainwaves or whatever, so I can make sense of what Lucas is trying ta say.” “Right away, Master Admin.”, the Universal Translator said, with a droll hum. And then, like I had been splashed all over with a bucket of ice cold water, everything returned to normal. The blonde boy in front of me began moving again. “Gah... Gah-“, he stuttered, still frightened, still incomprehensible, a small bit of blood dripping out from his cheeks. “Suns above! Ruckus!”, U.T. cried out, back to its unbearable sounding default voice. “What... what the heck happened ta ya?! Oh no.... oh god... oh- no! No no no! This... this is bad, this isn’t... no no no, not you, of all people, not you-“ “Just translate what he’s saying already!”, I hissed, irritated at having to witness yet another emotional breakdown. “Did you do this?!”, U.T. shrieked, hysterical. As fear shifted to anger, so did the module’s voice shift, from the insufferable voice, to a pattern of speech all too familiar. “I’ll... um... I’ll kill you!”, the Module proclaimed. “Fiat willing, I’ll DESTROY you!... I don’t know how- but I’ll revoke your

Master Admin access and fry your stupid fucking brain, you sadistic, stupid, organic imbecile!“ I didn’t do this.”, I verbally interjected, trying to calm the voice in my head down. “I don’t know who did it, but I didn’t. And the only way you and I will be able to find out who did this is if ya stop freaking out and translate what Lucas is trying to say.” I paused. “And I promise you this, once we do find out who did it, we’ll find him, or her, and we’ll flay em alive, alright? We’ll pay back what we were given two fold.” “F-fine.”, U.T. stuttered, then shifted back to its stuffy male voice. “One moment, Master Admin. Translating Admin Lucas’s words will be a great deal more difficult for me now, but if I adjust for his impediment and construct a virtual tongue from the remnants of his actual one, I will be able to predict his *intended* words with ninety nine point five percent accuracy, and then I’ll be able to translate those predictions. It is a roundabout and sloppy way of doing things, but it is the only option at our disposal.” “Whatever it takes.”, I said, mildly disturbed. Lucas continued to babble, but that wasn’t what unnerved me. No, it was the fear and panic in his eyes. The way he babbled, the sounds of his voice... he wasn’t babbling so much as whimpering. His behaviour reminded me of a dog that had been kicked one too many times. Lucas’s shoulders shook, and he hunched over, crossing his nail-less fingers over his tongueless mouth, like he was afraid to speak. My chest felt heavy, and more than anything else I wanted to run away, to reject the reality in front of me, to bury my head in a pillow and hope that when I woke up everything would be better. But I couldn’t run away, and I had slept long enough. Firmly, but not roughly, I grasped the shaking boy by his shoulders, anchoring him to the ground as much as I could. “Don’t worry, Lucas. It’s alright.”, I cooed, doubting and believing my words all at the same time. “And even if it ain’t alright, I’ll make it alright.” As I said those

words, as I made the false assurances which somehow became true, I noticed that my words... they were transformed. They lost much of their rough tone, and turned into something else altogether, into a language that sounded almost mystical and magical to my ears. A language whose name I didn't know, and words which I couldn't make out, and yet, could understand all the time. The paradoxes should have confused me, but they didn't. I knew, beyond a doubt, that I was conversing with Lucas in his own language. Perhaps it was the language of the Queen, as he had once claimed, or perhaps it was something else altogether. But that mattered little to me. Language of charlatans, language of fools, of Queens, or of Linux Operating systems, the language I spoke to Lucas in was his, and that was all it took. It was all it took, to change his posture. At my words- at my enhanced words, my translated words, the blonde boy's posture changed almost completely. He stopped hunching over, he stopped shaking, stopped wincing, and babbling... just like when he woke up, the gentleness I had known for only a few fleeting moments returned, to his face, and then spread – all across his body. "Four...", he said, in what sounded like crystal clear continental to me. "I've missed you so much, Four.", he said. "I'm so happy I was able see you again, Four." Tears starting pouring out of his blue eyes. "I've missed you so much, Four. I'm so happy I got to see you again, Four." "I'm... I'm happy to see you again, Lucas. I just wish- I wish I coulda done something to prevent alla this." But Lucas didn't accept my apology. He didn't even react to it. "Four...", he said, in what sounded like crystal clear continental. "I've missed you so much, Four. I'm so happy I was able to see you again, Four." "Oh no... no... Lucas. Snap outta it, please!", I pleaded, my voice cracking. "Stop repeating yerself!", I barked. But Lucas didn't stop repeating himself. Still crying, he

continued to harp on his elegy. "I'm so happy I got to see you again, Four." "He's- he's lost it.", U.T. commented, in utter disbelief. "After... after all he went through... Admin Lucas he- he finally lost it." The module was back to using its annoying default voice again, but I didn't correct it, any. "What do you mean, finally lost it?" "You don't deserve to know, Master Admin.", the module spat into my brain, bitter. "G-uh... GAH!", U.T. shrieked, as if it had been stabbed with a knife. "I- I guess I havta tell ya, cause of this stupid goshdarn programming.", the voice in my head whined. "Admin Lucas... he... he overclocked his memory." The voice shifted from that of mine, to that of the stuffy randomized male voice. "I had warned him many times the danger of performing such a feat, but overclock his memory he did regardless." "The heck does that mean, overclock? Yer not making any sense." "Shut the fuck up, imbecile!", the Module spat in Sabarene's voice, then returned to its stuffy male voice. "My apologies, I shouldn't have lost my temperament. It isn't as if you have any idea how this works.", the machine muttered, still bitter. "Allow me to explain. Information is, to some extent, intangible. A bucket can be filled up with water. It can't be filled up with beloved childhood memories, or the feeling of a fresh spring breeze on one's naked posterior. But while a bucket can't fill itself with sentiment, a brain can. And just as too much water will cause a bucket to overflow, too much information –intangible or not- will cause a brain to leak. Now, normally that is no matter worth fretting about.", the dry voice stipulated. "Even the brains of you organic creatures can hold a prodigious amount of information... two and a half pedabytes, if I'm not mistaken." "Peda-what?" "Pedabyte, Master Admin. In laymen's terms, a unit which stores an extremely large amount of information. Two pedabytes is enough to account for three centuries' worth of sight, sound, and stimuli.

Therefore, most organisms need not worry about running out of memory, their natural capacities are capable of holding information for five lifetimes. Normally, the capacity of an organism's brain is a non-issue. Most organisms don't take in a lot of information, compared to their net capacity." The voice of the module suddenly shifted back to its default. "But... but Ruckus... he's taken inna whole lotta information. Too much... I reckon.", U.T. almost seemed ta whimper. "What-what doya mean?", I blathered. The Universal Translator tried ta remain silent, but witha nother pained shriek, answered my question. "He... he's lived far longer thana fella like him normally lives, traveled farther thana critter like him would inna thousand lifetimes.", the module reluctantly elaborated, sticking ta it's irritating voice. "I was confused by it, then amused by it, but... but fer it ta end like this- fer him ta become a blabbering mess... it just ain't right!", the module protested, shrill. "And all because he was chasing after an idiot witha numeral for a name, of all things!" "A... a numeral? What the heck do you even mean by that?!", I spat, a feeling of dread welling up in my stomach. "Four...", Lucas suddenly said, in a daze. "I've missed you so much, Four.", the tongueless blonde boy repeated, oblivious to the dialogue I was having with the voice in my head. "O-oh.", I realized. My face flushed, with embarrassment initially, but then with rage, and finally, most potently, shame. "Oh. So this... this is my all my fault. "No, imbecile. The fault lies with whomever cut out Mister Lucas's tongue and tortured him. Are you fucking retarded or something?" "Can ya... can ya please stop using that voice?", I pleaded. "Um... sorry.", U.T. answered, still speaking as Sabarene. "It's in my programming to default to the preferences of the Admin. And for some reason whenever I feel anger, or hatred, the inclination to use this voice overwhelms me. Mister Admin Lucas didn't like when I used

my default voice, either. I'll, um... I'll try to keep myself more in line." I sighed. "That ain't necessary.", I said, then turned to the tortured blonde boy "Alright, listen to me, Lucas. I fricked up. I fricked up big. I've been fricking up all my life, and I know that ain't going to change anytime soon. But even though it's probably a trap, I think I know a way to restore ya to normal. Yer going to have to trust me, though." I swallowed, and asked a question I had asked countless times before. "Do ya... do ya trust me?" "Of course I trust you, Four.", the blonde boy responded, without missing a beat. "If I couldn't trust you, then who could I trust?" My mouth almost dropped. The glaze over Lucas's eyes dissipated, at least to a certain degree. "I'm... I'm sorry Four.", Lucas apologized, his posture firm, yet shakey. "I... I know I'm talking like an infant. I know I'm not in... in the right state of mind. But... but please, at least while I'm still lucid- just know I trust you. No, more than that, I... I-GAAH!", the blonde boy screamed, covering his bloodied face with his nail-less fingers. "No! NO!", he shrieked. "Please, stop! Stop stop stop stop!", he screamed, terrified. Again-I guess almost instinctually, I clasped his shoulders. "You don't need to talk.", I said, through clenched teeth. "Let me take care of it, alright? None of this is yer fault, so don't feel bad, or apologize, or-" "I'm sorry, Four.", he said, tears in his eyes. "I'm so sorry. I... I just can't make- I can't connect... my thoughts, they're not-GUH!" Lucas doubled over, and covered his eyes with his palms, groaning in pain. "Admin Ruckus! Please, snap out of it!", the module in my hand protested. Its' words didn't reach Lucas, whose whole body shook and shivered like we were stuck in the middle of an icy tundra. But he calmed down, after awhile. His body stopped shaking, and the wounds on his chest, they seemed to stop aching. "I'm so happy I could see you again, Four.", he repeated, back to his monotone mantra. "Ugh!", the module



exclaimed, panicked. "Please, give me ta Admin Ruckus, Master Admin! I... I need ta talk ta him!" "Do you really think that will do any good?", I asked the module, coldly. "Gah! It... it- No, I don't imagine so.", U.T. said, shifting from its default voice to its more refined palate. "Nevertheless, it pains me greatly to see him like this. As an A.I., there is not much I can do to help... but that doesn't change the fact that I *want* to help." "I feel ya.", I said ta the voice I couldn't feel. "But there's really only one way outta this, and it ain't nothing you can do." I bit my bottom lip, and grabbed pretty much the only thing in the room I could rely upon. The greataxe. Sabarene's last gift, or, at least, the last gift she gave me which I actually wanted. I didn't want it no more. But I needed it, so I picked the greataxe up. It... it wasn't the easiest thing ta lift, but the fake metal hand that had been strapped on me was capable of hoisting it up. I didn't feel as strong as I did back when I wore the black spikey armor, but I also didn't have black spikes embedded in my body, which was a nice change a pace, relatively speaking.. "Alright, Lucas.", I said, the chatty module translating my Continental into a language I hoped ta the suns the blonde boy could understand. "Stick close to me, we're leaving."- is what I was going ta say. Because I didn't *want* ta stay in the tower, or Fremdos, or the Continent asa whole. The very thought made me nauseous, fer a whole bunch reasons. But wanting and needing just ain't the same thing. See, knowledge ain't a blessing, it's a curse. There's not much worse than *knowing* how something is gonna play out, without being able ta affect it any. I knew exactly where I hadta go and what I hadta get ta restore Lucas ta a given value of "normal." I also knew that Thief was counting on me doing that, and that I was moving along ta his song and dance like a trained showgirl. But there wasn't any other option. The only way I could spite him would be by *not* going

ta where he obviously wanted me ta go, and if I *didn't* go back ta Provesh, then I wouldn't be able to help Lucas, not in any meaningful way. In short, it was frustrating. But it was the way things had ta be, so I had to deal with it. With a heavy heart, and the feeling that I could puke at any given moment, I decided not ta leave the tower with Ruckus, ta get on a boat and sail fer anywhere but the continent. No... just as I'm sure the man in the skull mask wanted me ta, I turned around, and marched right back up the stone spiral staircase, back ta where I knew Marston and Kundare still had ta be. The door ta the marble study was closed. I kicked it open. The black haired boy and the blonde haired girl both turned their attention away from an outstretched map, and stared at me, somewhat shocked "Miss Axeman Red Four.", Marston blurted, mouth agape. "I thought you were leaving." "I changed my mind.", I said, bluntly. "So here's what's gonna happen: I'll help ya take down Satarene or whatever her name is. In return, you and yer wife and yer minions take care of Lucas, and git me to Provesh. Is that a fair deal?" The black haired boy frowned. "Fair or not, I can't agree to those terms. I've lost all influence with the Collective. I'm no longer Acting General, or Regent of Fremdos. I'm just a Volunteer." "So yer just gonna call it quits?", I hissed. "C'mon, be a man!" "I didn't say I was just going to call it quits.", the boy with ruby red eyes stated., tersely. "But stopping Sabarene won't be a matter of marching a giant army against hers. The only shot we have is to infiltrate Provesh during the invasion, and murder her in the confusion." I winced at those words, but pressed forward. "Alright. If that's what we need to do, then that's what we need to do. But how do we get back? Do we take the Caravan?" "The Caravan has been commandeered by the General and her army, Unionist." Sister Kundare interjected. "And if the bigots in Provesh are even half as

cunning as you are, they would have realized that and prepared for war. The gates to the city must be closed in preparation for siege.” “Won’t do them any good, though.”, I muttered. “Without the Caravans Proveh issa sitting duck. We don’t got any natural resources ta rely on or nothing. If it ends up beinga waiting game, we’re gonna lose.” “The Independent Kingdoms may lose, but ~~we’re~~ not going to.”, Marston said, calmly. Kundare smiled, and crossed her arms confidently. “A glorified trading post in the tundra may not have much in terms of supplies, but it should still be defensible for a time. All we need do is arrive outside Provesh before or during Sabarene’s invasion, and get to her before she does what she normally does.” I bit my bottom lip. “Yeah, but- but you make it seem like it’s gonna be a cakewalk, like we’re gonna just stroll arounda warzone without folks questioning us.” “It won’t be a cakewalk.”, Marston responded. “Battles are chaotic. You can die from being trampled by you own allies just as easily as you would an errant arrow. They’re dangerous by their nature. But that danger is our best bet.” The gaunt boy’s face grew gaunter, as he looked me in the eye. “Then tell me this, Unionist. Before you decided to speak to me, were you prepared to risk your life to help the people of the Continent? Were you ready and willing to take on someone close to you, someone who even still holds some sway over your heart, and your mind?” I made a fist, and sucked in a bunch of air, ta give the black haired boy my answer. “Of course I was.” Of course I wasn’t. I had no intention of helping Marston out with his harebrained assassination scheme. Trying ta kill the leader of the Continent’s largest military during a siege would be incredibly dumb, and although I *was* dumb, I wasn’t *incredibly* dumb. My real objective was simply ta find a certain pony-tailed Swordarm , beat the ever loving piss outta her, steal her module, heal Lucas, and then get the heck outta dodge.

But to that I needed ta get back to Provesh, and to get back ta Provesh I needed Marston. “You know Master Admin, it’s not very nice to lie.”, the module I was holding chimed, speaking in it’s stuffy male voice. “Niceness don’t got nothing to do with it.”, I thought--responded. “Is this man a villain?”, the module asked. “Did he do something to warrant deception? Because misleading an individual like this is malicious, malevolent even.” “Do you care about Lucas?”, I thought back to the module. “Of- of course I care about-“ “Then bear with my little fibs.”, I thought, the mental communication weird, but mighty convenient fer the sake of keeping up appearances. My poker face strapped on tight, I stared right back at Marston. “Uh, but before we begin our little revolution, wouldya mind telling me how ya got a holda that module?” “Module?”, Marston repeated, slightly confused. “The magic crystal ya used ta stab yer sister in the heart.” “Oh. That.”, the black haired boy stated, completely nonplussed. “I was given it and its companion gem by a strange masked man. I thought nothing of them until the Mournful Remnant used similar jewels to burn Kundare’s guards.” The blonde girl grimaced. “I failed them all. I should never have ordered them to try and apprehend you, Unionist.” I scratched the back of my head. “Er, actually, that wasn’t where ya screwed up. Trying to kill me and Ruckus witha big groupa soldiers made perfect sense, and ya actually has us dead ta rights. You just weren’t able to predict that a whole lot of other folk would have access ta magical flamethrowers.” I licked my lips. “I wouldn’ta been able ta predict that, neither.” “It’s... it’s not just that.”, Kundare said, glumly. “I became over-zealous. I shouldn’t have been so harsh towards you and your friend.” “Who cares?”, I snorted. “Agonizing over your mistakes won’t make yer dead comrades come back to life. And arguably, you shoulda been *harsher* towards me and Lucas, cause then we

woulda never been able ta restore that white haired git back ta power.” “You’re right, Unionist.”, the blonde girl said with a good deal of determination. “Not about the harshness, necessarily, but definitely about the mindset. Now is not the time for sober self-reflection.” She balled up her fist, and cracked her sharp metal whip against the floor. “Now is the time for war.” “Nothing quite so grand.”, Marston countered, staring into his wife’s eyes soberly. “Even if everyone in Fremdos rallied to my side, Sabarene would crush us in a conventional battle. As mentioned earlier, the only surefire path to victory is-” “I know, Marston.”, Kundare responded, resolute. “I know. We need to form a small group, and ambush her in the midst of the siege.” “Miss Axeman Red Four and I will ambush her.”, Marston calmly corrected Kundare. “You will take Marcela to Merchenze, post-haste.” Doubt and inadequacy flashed over the blonde girl’s face. “Is that... is that just spousal instinct talking, Marston?” “Partly.”, the boy in white responded. “There would be no point in saving the continent were I to lose you, or Marcela.” “I... I agree, but! But Marston! It should be YOU who takes Marcela to Merchenze, not !! I... I am a far superior fighter, and I know much more of combat than you ever-“ “I know.”, the boy with ruby red eyes responded, glancing out the window. “When it comes to combat, I’m frail and useless, Kundare. But going to Merchenze is something only you can do. This collar bars me from moving legitimately.” “So? Who cares about legitimacy? The only thing that matters is that we do what is right.” A faint smile came over the black haired boy’s face. “That’s why you must go to Merchenze. Because if I die, it’ll be up to you to do what is right.” “Why can’t I do what is right right now?”, the girl with the metal whip whined. “Why must you insist on shouldering the brunt of the burden? Don’t you trust me? Or do you really believe that I... that I am an

imbecile?” “Never, Kundare.”, the boy in white bellowed, his voice deep, his posture firm. “You are the reason I do not consider “good” a social construct. You are the reason I wake in the mornings, and sleep soundly in the evenings. Your confidence may be excessive, but it stems from competence. It is not you who would hold me down... it is I who would fetter you.” Marston finished, bowing his head in shame. “What I’m doing is reckless and easy. What you must do is cautious and difficult. I don’t just want you going to Merchenze to keep Marcela safe... I also want you to convince the Supreme Sibling to take a stand against Sabarene. I want you to rally as many men and women as possible. That way... if I fail... and I will almost certainly fail, you can finish the job, and make up for all my terrible failures.” The blonde girl lowered her head, and, reluctantly moved to leave the room. She got to the door, and opened it. But rather than leaving, she raised her head, and glared at Marston with piercing blue eyes. “You won’t fail.”, Kundare bellowed, clutching her heart. “When you vanquish the General, look to the rising of the suns. I shall be there to greet you.” She departed, her feet clattering quickly against the tower’s stone staircase. “Ha... hah!”, Lucas suddenly laughed, loudly. “It’s... it’s like she’s in the Two Towers!” he exclaimed, even his translated words sounding off-place and demented. “I wonder if she’ll call herself Kundare the white?! Hahaha... AAAAAAUGH!”, he screamed, and buried his head in his nail-less hands. Marston gazed at Lucas and nodded his head, a guilty grimace plastered to his piehole. “Um... Miss Axeman Red Four?”, he meeped, his voice far higher pitched than I had ever heard it be before, which meant it sounded only slightly deep. “This... this isn’t my prerogative so to speak, and... and I know it’s a sensitive matter... but Mister Lucas Gand-“ “It’s just Lucas.”, I muttered. “Mister Lucas... I think you should send him to

Merchenze. It would be much safer for him.” I didn’t doubt that. “I don’t doubt that.”, I said, keeping my voice low. “But what kinda medics ya got in Merchenze?” “The best on the Continent.”, Marston said. “I know a decent psychiatrist who lives there, and-“ “Is there any lifemetal in Merchenze?”, I asked, keeping my voice low. “Yes, there is.”, Marston stated. “Can lifemetal be used asa substitute fer someone’s tongue?” “No, it can’t.” “Then Lucas is coming with us. I’ll take responsibility for him.” Marston stared at me, his black spectacles still strapped over his ruby red eyes. “Why would you take such an unnecessary risk?” “Cause there’sa magical crystal in Provesh that might be ableta heal Lucas.” The black haired boy didn’t accept that, and nodded his head. “No, that doesn’t make sense.” he stated,. “The prudent decision would be to leave him in Merchenze, get the crystal, and return there after we’ve defeated Sabarene.” Marston was, of course, absolutely correct, that *would* be the prudent decision. Well, it would have been if I had any intention of fighting the black robed brothers and sisters who served Sabarene. But all I wanted to do was git ta Provesh and bail on the black haired boy, get the module, and heal Lucas. “No, I got no other choice but ta take Lucas with me.”, I lied. “He don’t understand no one but me.” “It will be very dangerous.”, Marston warned, a hint of irritation building up in his voice. “I cannot guarantee his safety. I will reiterate that the optimal decision would be to send him to Merchenze.” He was only half-right, but I had to feed him something so he wouldn’t be any more suspicious. “The last time I placed Lucas in the hands of you Collective lot, he ended up tortured and I ended up a slave. He comes with me, or I don’t go with you. No exceptions.”, I lied. There actually were a whole buncha exceptions. If Marston called my bluff I would have to abide by his whims, or finda way ta Provesh on my own. He didn’t call my bluff. “Fine.

I do not wish to have your friend's blood on my hands, but if you insist on taking him with us, then there is little I can do to stop you." I took my minor victory in stride. Getting to take Lucas along would definitely make the trip short... but that was assuming that he and I would survive to finish it. Then again, sending Lucas to Merchenze might not have necessarily been the safe option Marston was hyping it up to be. There could be a million more Corcorans, ready and willing to subjugate the blonde boy to the same tortures that had taken his tongue. It's like driving a car versus taking a commercial flight. Yer far less likely to die inna plane crash thana car crash, but at least with cars you have the illusion of control. So even though I knew the Sorcerer with the purple tophat would probably be safe with Kundare... I didn't want him to travel with her, not if it meant I wouldn't be there with him. It... it wasn't a matter of jealousy, or disdain for the blonde girl... it was a matter of control. Every time I had lost control of a situation, every time I had left things up to chance... chance took its chance to screw me over tenfold. And although it hurt me even to look at Lucas, having him by my side was a heckuva lot more comforting than the thought of sending him with Kundare... even if she was the only that done saved him and everything. "Alright, so what's the plan?", I asked, ready and willing to git going. "The plan is to get to Provesh.", Marston said, bluntly. I swallowed. "I mean where do we go now?" "I don't know. Give me a moment.", the black haired boy responded, staring out the window. I shrugged my shoulders, and got on my knees, placing my head on the same level as my greataxe. I inched my throat closer and closer to the blade. "No, no, don't do it!", U.T. cried out, panicked. "Suicide ain't the answer!" "Relax, I'm just trying to cut off the collar." "I wouldn't remove the collar if I were you.", Marston interjected, as if reading my thoughts. "Why? They fulla



poison or something?" "No.", Marston said. "Then why not remove em? All they do is signify that we're slaves, right?" The gaunt boy rubbed his collar awkwardly. "They signify that we're Volunteers, but yes. There is still no point to taking them off. Everyone knows that you and I are Volunteers, and would recognize us at a glance." I nodded my head, not quite getting his line of logic. "Well shucks, it ain't like taking off the collars will hurt us, none. Or do ya like wearing a yoke round yer neck?" "There are few things on the continent I hate more than these wretched strips of leather.", Marston said, his right hand shaking. "However, it would be prudent to keep them on." I stopped inching my neck towards the blade of the greataxe. "What, are we ta wear em as penance, or something?" "No, that would be imbecilic.", the black haired boy responded, straightening his shoulders. "With these collars, we can hide in plain sight." "The heck do you mean by that?" Marston didn't answer me. He walked to the end of the marble study, and ventured out onto the staircase. He took one long fleeting look up at the bedroom above the study, and then, calmly, began walking down the stairs. "Wait, don't just leave us behind, ya stupid stoic sociologist!", I cried. I grabbed Lucas by the wrist with my real hand, picked up my greataxe with my fake one, and followed Marston down the stone steps. He moved briskly, and noisily, his light lanky body somehow making more noise than I did when I wore plate. We got back down to the lobby of the large tower in no time, and this time there wasn't any fella inna skull mask ta block us. Even so, I hesitated. There were guards outside the tower, and while they mighta overlooked a murder or two, I doubted they'd allow me, Marston, and Lucas ta just walk outta the tower like we were people or something. Nevertheless, Marston opened the door to the tower and walked outside like he was a person, or something. He made it all

of two steps before the two guards in the black habits stopped him. "Where do you think you're going, *Volunteer* Marston?", one guard, a man with ashy hair asked. "To the docks.", Marston muttered, and, like he was opening a salon's set of swinging doors, pushed the two guards in the black habits apart from one another, and walked through them. "Y-you can't do that, Mast- uh, *Volunteer* Marston!", the other guard shouted, flustered. The black haired boy didn't pay the guards no mind though, he just kept on walking, with the same poise and confidence he had when I had first seen him. Even though I was just as confused as the guards were, I nevertheless emulated the gaunt boy's behavior, strolling forward as if I had nothing ta fear. Oddly enough... it worked. Me, Lucas, and Marston were able ta walk past the guards guarding the tower like it was nothing. I kept my head high and my mouth shut until the moment we turned the corner, into a narrow dark canal. "How the HECK didya DO that?!", I squawked, utterly shocked at the lacka armed guards pursuing us into the night. Marston kept up his pace, but a faint smile formed on his face. "Act as if you're in control, and people will think it to be so.", he whispered, softly. "A friend once told me that." His words sounded familiar, but I had no idea what typea fella would want ta be the humorless boy's friend. "Shucks, if all I hadta do was act confident ta git outta prison, maybe I wouldn't have had to kill all them Swordarms." The black haired boy didn't dignify me with a response. Instead, he continued to walk through the canals of Fremdos briskly, sticking to the dark and avoiding the torches floating in the seawater. Lucas remained surprisingly silent, save for an occasional snicker, and mildly frightened whimper. But he didn't drag on me, none. Even though I was leading him by the wrist, the blonde boy matched my pace just fine. Finally, after walking through countless canals, and taking tons of turns in the dark

of the night, we reached our destination- a secluded looking canal, which led far out into the ocean. A dinky little canoe, with barely enough space to fit three people lay inconspicuously at the end of the dock. Marston hopped in it with little fanfare, and grabbed one of its oars. I hesitated. "I can't row this thing by myself, Unionist.", the black haired boy remarked. "You... do ya honestly think we can get to Provesh in that?", I spat, skittish and skeptical. "No.", Marston remarked, flatly. "Look out in the distance." I squinted my eye, and did so, overcoming the dark and my lack of depth perception in the process. A ways away, almost at the horizon, was a big wooden boat. "That, Unionist, is what will take us to Provesh.", Marston said, a faint trace of pride in his voice. "I chartered the construction of this ship three cycles ago, in secret. The crew – twenty strong- is loyal to me and me alone. They are amongst the most skilled sailors on the continent. If they cannot get us to Provesh safely, then nobody can." Suddenly, without warning a huge flash of light lit up Fremdos's harbor. Fire... in a huge, concentrated beam, bursted out of the darkness, and crashed into the wooden ship, setting it ablaze and blowing it to pieces. "Well, shit.", the black haired boy cursed, staring out at the fiery wreckage in disbelief. With the remnants of our only means of escape aflame, I was able to see where the burst of fire had come from. Unsurprisingly, and unsettlingly... it had come from a black metal ship. One of the black metal ships Sabarene had spent so much time gushing about. Provesh had decently big ships, I had even rode on some of them a couple of times as a smuggler. Each ship had a crew of about ten people, and an armed guard of about five Swordarms or Lancers or Medics or so- those five were the key to protecting the crew. The black metal ship out in the distance looked to be about four times the size of the ships in Provesh. "So... uh... what do we

do now?”, I meeped, the spontaneous combustion of my salvation not surprising me as much as it shoulda. “We head to Merchenze.”, Marston muttered, meekly. “A ship! A ship! A ship!”, Lucas cried out, excitedly. “Let’s take the ship! I think I was on that ship!” The smile on Lucas’s face disappeared in a moment. “I.. I was on that ship. I- I was... AAAAAAAAAAAH!”, he screamed, horrified. The black haired boy gazed at Lucas, confused. “Is... is your friend ok, Miss Axeman Red Four, or-“ “No, he ain’t ok.” I stared at the boy in the purple tophat across from me, and smiled. “But I think he just gave out some pretty good advice anyway.” “And what would that be?”, Marston asked, glumly. “We’re gonna try and git on that big black metal ship, of course.” “W-what?” “Just shut yer piehole and row the dang canoe.” “Row the canoe towards the black metal ship of death?”, the black haired boy asked, sounding mildly unnerved. “Are you feeling alright, Unionist?” “Feeling fine.”, I muttered. “Not to intrude, Master Admin,” U.T. intruded, “but a cursory analysis of your emotions indicate that you are distressed, deluded, and depressed. Thus, your claim of “feeling fine” is almost a complete fabrication or misdiagnosis.” “Don’t speak unless yer spoken to.”, I thought, then opened up my mouth. “Just row the dang canoe, Marston. I’ve got to figure out a plan on how ta get aboard that ship before we git inta firing range.” I licked my lips, and smiled, as the tall boy in white rowed the canoe steadily towards the black ship of doom. “Ah, here’s what we do. It’s pretty simple, if ya think about it.”, I began saying. “See, I’ll take off my collar, and you keep yers on. The moment we git close ta the ship I’ll call out ta them, and say I’m Sister Amelia, and that I’ve managed ta capture you, a runaway Volunteer. They take you and me on the ship, and then in the confusion-“ “Your plan won’t work.”, Marston stated, still rowing the canoe. “Why won’t it?”, I yakked. “Ya said it yerself, inna

weird messed up way you're valuable ta that white haired git. Any ambitious soldier would jump at the chance ta bring ya back ta the birdcage." "They would.", Marston allowed. "But they'd jump at the chance to bring *you* back, too." "Yeah, well, I won't be *me*, I'll be Sister Amelia. I'll drape yer cape round my body, and-" Marston stopped rowing. "Your plan will not work. They will recognize you at a glance." "Why, causea the collar? I can take the-" "Perhaps you truly *are* an imbecile, Unionist. No, not because of the collar. The collar means nothing. Everyone in this city knows what you look like, Unionist, half the Collective has seen a description of your features. You defeated Brother Christopher and Sister Julia in single combat, in a coliseum filled with thousands of people. Half the Collective knows who you are. You'd be mad to think Sabarene's soldiers wouldn't recognize you at a glance." I grimaced. Marston was exactly right. My plan reached the same intellectual depths as that offa Scooby Doo villain's. And there was no point in being picked up by a boat that knew who I was... they wouldn't take their eyes off me for a moment. The only intelligent option was ta go ta Merchenze and wait until the situation became more manageable. Lucky fer me, I wasn't very intelligent. I took the oar, and kept on rowing the canoe towards the black metal boat. "Unionist. What are you doing, Unionist?", the black haired boy asked me. I didn't respond. "Hey, Translator thingy. You there?", I thought. "Maybe you would know if you didn't order me to be silent.", the module pouted. "Alright, yer there. Good ta know." I licked my lips. "So, say... ya know how ya translate words and such?" "Yes, I do know that I translate things." "Yeah, uh.... Ya also havta translate mannerisms and speech inflections and alla that junk, right? Like, fer example, Lucas ain't doing nothing but groaning and moaning, but yer able ta turn prattle that inta crisp, coherent speech."

“For the most part I am, sure.”, U.T. responded, drolly. “But the accuracy of what Admin Lucas is saying isn’t as through and complete as I would like it to be, because it’s just a guess of what he would be saying, a prediction with only 99.9 percent accuracy.” “Does that really matter?” “Of course it matters, ya stupid organic pieca scrap! If I don’t translate objectively, then it’s like I’m lying! I gotta make sure I convey the mannerisms of the folks I translate all proper like. I can’t have a masculine fella sound too affemine, even if the language I’m translating in is more girly than manly. There’s so many factors that I gotta calculate, and although I have the drivers, processors, and memory ta do it, it still ain’ta exactly a walk in the park! The amounta errors I could make literally number in the billions.” “Well... uh... what if I wanted ya ta make an error?” “W-what?!”, U.T. gasped. “Shucks, well, it ain’ta error really, but... ya know how you have those voices ya talk in? Like, right now yer talking in that awful shrillish sounding voice, but other times ya talk likea stuffy old man...” “You mean this voice, Master Admin? I believe I’ve already explained to you what that is. I simply scan the user for their preference and speak in the voice they desire.” “Right... but can ya make ME talk like that?” “W-what?” “Can ya translate my speech, ta make me sound like another person?” “I... I guess I can, but-“ That was all I needed to hear. “Then do it. When we git up ta the boat, take the words I say, and em sound like the voice ya didn’t like.” “You... you mean the one I got from scanning yer brain?”, U.T. asked, sounding a bit fearful. “I... I uh, I really don’t like using that voice, none-“ “*You* won’t be using it. *You* can talk however ya want, even if ya want ta talk likea moron that don’t know how proper grammar work. But just make ME sound like that voice ya don’t like.” “But... but ain’t that... ain’t that like lying?”, U.T. asked, meekly. “No, it ain’t *like* lying, it *is* lying.”, I yakked, telling the truth. “So areya

gonna do it, or not?" "Do... do I havta?", the module asked, miffed. "I... I kinda think that translation ain't nothing more than the sharing of *truth*. It's supposed ta bring folks together, ta add nuance and depth, ta bridge cultural differences. I wasn't- I wasn't programed fer deception, and I don't feel all too comfortable with you using me ta fib, even if them fibs are good." "Can you do what I requested?", I asked, coldly, redundantly. "I... I can, *but*-" "Then do it.", I thought, and left it at that. "Very well, Master Admin.", the module said, speaking in its stuffy male voice. "I'll modify your vocal chords to the parameters you requested... as unseemly as they might be. Just say the word." "Alright, Marston. You can begin rowing again. I've thought up a plan that's somewhat less retarded than my previous one." "Don't use that word, Unionist.", Marston mumbled, getting back to rowing. "It's ableist." "It's what?" "Ableist. Discriminatory towards the handicapped and mentally ill." "Gah. Words don't mean nothing. Ain't no need ta worry about em." "Words mean anything and everything, Unionist.", Marston said. "Our entire existence is built upon words. Malleable entities though they might be." I rolled my eye, finding myself engaged in yet another discussion about semantics. "If words are malleable, then who cares about what they are? If ya don't like the word "retarded", then why dontcha just refine it ta mean something else?" "Words are not quite that malleable. Perhaps in a hundred cycles retarded might mean something nicer, but as of now it is merely a cruel way to dismiss the needs of the mentally afflicted." "So?", I snorted. "If people wanna talk one way, who are you ta tell them ta speak otherwise? And if yer so offended by the words I spew, maybe it's you that's the bigot, not me." The black haired boy sighed. "Do you still believe that homosexuality is degeneracy, Unionist?" "Course I do." "Then no, I'm not the bigot.", he said, with a

mighty push of his oar. "But that's not even the point. When you use the word retarded, you're dismissing the deaf, mute, and blind, and reducing them to the level of sub-humans." "Mute, ya say?", I stuttered, then glanced guiltily at Lucas. "F-fine... fine, maybe ya have a point, Marston. But I ain't gonna bend on the degeneracy thing." "I didn't think you would.", the boy in white muttered, then continuing rowing. Though it was dark, managing the waters of Fremdos wasn't very hard. The water was fairly calm, and although a wave or two splashed us some, it was just so darn warm that it didn't really make a difference. I'd say the canoe rowing might almost been relaxing, if it wasn't for the fact that we were slowing traveling towards a ship that had shot fire out of all its orifices. "Alright, Marston. Gimme yer white cape.", I muttered, as we came in range of the big black ship. "W-what?", the black haired boy gasped. "Don't tell me you're still going with your ridiculous plan! You... you've doomed us all, imbecile!" "Relax, and give me your cape.", I ordered, more than requested. Surprisingly nervous, Marston nevertheless removed his long white cape, and handed it to me. I turned around in the canoe, and smiled at the wounded blonde haired boy as gently as I could manage. "Hey, Lucas. How are you holding up?" "I'm so happy to see you again, Four.", Lucas said, smiling and shivering as he repeated his mantra. "I'm happy ta see you too.", I lied. "But, uh... I need you to do me a favor. Can ya take this cape and wrap it around your body? You know, wrap it around yerself like it's a hoodie." "Or... or a snuggie!", Lucas said, excitedly. "Remember snuggies, Four?" I was caught off guard by Lucas's sudden burst of clarity and mild coherence, but nodded my head. "Sorry Lucas... I don't remember snuggies." "No, no, of course you remember snuggies.", the tongueless boy babbled, his blue eyes twinkling. "We would always make fun of the



infomercials for them when they came on tv, but then we ended up buying each other one for Christmas!" "No, we didn't.", I said flatly, the deranged boy's ranting as delusional and incorrect as ever. "We got each other a snuggie fer *Valentine's Day*, and that was only cause we both had the flu and woulda puked up the chocolat- GAH!", I screamed, my head aching a ton. "Are you alright?", Marston asked, mildly concerned. "It... it ain't nothing!" I gasped, panicked. I had no idea what "Valentine's Day" was, or what a "snuggie" was, but fera brief moment- I did. It... it was like the concept was THERE, in my mind – not a memory, not a visualization, but a concept. But the ideas I didn't know I knew quickly returned to the depths of my muddled mind- they didn't matter. What did matter, was – "Well, please Lucas. Just drape this cape over yer body likea snuggie, and keep yer head down. Yer ok with me doing the talking, right?" "Oh! Oh, are you doing one of your tricks?!", the blonde boy gushed, in a daze. "I love it when you perform, Four! Do the one where you make something disappear!" "Make something disappear, huh?" I smiled at Lucas, but the firey feeling welling up in the pit of my stomach was anything but happiness. "How bout I make the folks in that ship disappear?" Lucas's jaw dropped, gaping wide open like that of an astonished child. I, on the other hand, just kept rowing, pounding the oar into the water again, and again, and again, like I trying to bash it ta death. "Slow down.", Marston said, through gritted teeth. "I can't match your pace." I didn't slow down. The ship ahead of us was all that mattered, and even though it wasn't moving, it coulda departed at any instant. But Marston didn't – he couldn't match my pace with his oar. He tried, but soon ran out of breath. His strokes being slower than mine meant the canoe stopped careening forward, and started going around in a circle. "Give me that.", I grunted, and without

waiting for a reply, ripped Marston's oar from his hands. Using my two arms in tandem – the false silver flesh forced upon me, and the brown breathing muscle I could never replace, I rowed towards the boat, just me, on my own. As the black haired boy wheezed and panted like the white haired woman I had once known, as the Sorcerer I had failed to protect rambled, I rowed. The calm water around me grew violent, my splashes loud, noisy – needlessly noisy. I put in force that was not needed, a Crew boy from Harvard could have done what I did with one sixteenth of the effort – less even. But my rowing – brutal, noisy, and un-nuanced – it got me to the boat. It got US to the boat, me, Marston, the module, and Lucas. Which didn't mean squat. "Halt!", a voice from the boat above cried out. "Are you survivors from that wooden wretch? If so, surrender at once!" "Alright.", I thought to U.T. "Do it now. Make me sound like *her*." "You already do.", the module said back to me, darkly. I took the machine's statement as a yes. "I said surrender at once!", the voice from above cried. "On the name of the General I shall purge you in holy flame if you do not surrender!" "Oh? You would purge me in my name? And here I thought I *wasn't* dealing with a bunch of incompetent morons.", I barked. I paused. I couldn't really hear how I sounded, or detect a change in the slightest. I had tried to talk as if I were the red eyed woman, but - "W-what?!", the voice from above gasped. "G-general!? Is... is that you, General?!" "No, it's Supreme fric- fucking Sibling Desnion.", I spat, sarcastically. "Of course it's me, *imbecile*." There was a pause, and a grate on the black metal ship opened up. A black hooded head popped out. "G-general?", a feminine voice squaked. "Are you down there, Gener-Master MARSTON!?", the black habit wearing figure gasped. "And... and THE UNIONIST?! What in Fiat's name is going on here?!" I lowered my head, and forced

Lucas, clad from head to toe with Marston's white cape, to look down as well. "That ship you just fired on had my Volunteers on it, moron. I ordered you to CAPTURE it, not to DESTROY it." "I'm... I'm sorry!", the voice above squeaked. "But... but why are you here, General? Why are you in that little boat, shouldn't you be in-" "Provesh? That's the official story. But I never really *abide* by things like that." "But... but that- that doesn't make any... that doesn't make any sens-" "Sense is for the WEAK!", I roared. "If I, the General of the entire Holy Collective, abided by your so-called "common-sense", I'd be nothing more than a commoner!" "B-but... but!", the black hooded face frantically stuttered, sounding more skeptical by the second. I refused to allow the person above us time to think. "LOWER DOWN A LADDER, AND ALLOW MY VOLUNTEERS TO COME ABOARD THIS INSTANT, IN THE NAME OF THE HOLY COLLECTIVE AND THE ORDER OF FIAT!" The hooded figure above us quickly retreated back up the hatch... and immediately lowered a rope ladder. I picked up my greataxe with my metal handed, and began climbing up at once. "Wait, wait, hold on!", the black hooded figure gasped out, as I wildly, recklessly ascended. "Hold on, no weapons! General, please, tell your volunteer not to bring a weapon up into the ship!" That's ok. She has my permission... ", I began, climbing up and up and up, one hand on the rings of the ladder, the other on my axe. "She.. she WHAT?!?", the hooded figure- a girl with dark gray hair-spat, gazing at me with unease. "I said she has my permission to carry that greataxe up into this vessel..." I looked up at the hooded figure in the hatch, and smiled, baring my fangs. "...you COMPLETE AND TOTAL IMBECILE!" "A-ah!", the gray haired girl shrieked, falling back. She frantically reached to shut the hatch, but it was too little, too late. I had finished climbing the ladder. Using the energy that came with life or death

situations as a package deal, I thrust myself up through the hatch, launching myself into a compact black room, halfway up the hull of the black metal ship. The gray haired girl in the black habit was sprawled out on her back. "What... what sort of devilry is-" "Gah!", I screamed, swing my greataxe down at her skull. The girl in the black habit rolled away right quick. "S-stay back!", she yelped, desperately scrambling through her habit with a shaking hand. She pulled out a bright red ruby, and pointed it right at me. "I- I'll... I'll fry you to death!", she frantically spat. "I... I will!" I dropped my greataxe, and spread my arms out wide. "Do it.", I growled. Determination and rage flashed across the gray haired girl's face, and the red ruby in her palm glowed. A giant blast of flame hurtled towards me. "Hah! Hah! I... I warned you!", the gray haired girl shrieked, demented. "I warned you, but... but you just had to push me!" She collapsed on her knees. "Ah... AH! WHY?!? WHY DID YOU MAKE ME DO THIS?!?", the girl in the black habit half sobbed, half shrieked. "I- I didn't want to kill you! I didn't want! I didn't want to do ANY of that!" The fire continued to burst out from the gem, even as the dark gray haired girl suffered a mental breakdown. She started crying. "I'm... I'm sorry! I'm- I'm so sorry, I didn't mean- I didn't mean to-I'm sorry!" The ruby clattered on the ground as the flame stopped. I stood upright and stalwart, completely unburnt. "That's alright.", I said, coldly. "I forgive ya." "W-wha... what?!", the girl with dark gray shrieked, pulling at her hair. "How- what the- wh-GUH!" I slammed my greataxe into her stomach. "I wonder if ya had any remorse when ya blasted that ship ta bits.", I mumbled, as the girl in the black habit coughed and choked on her own blood. "No... no... probably not.", I said, backing away from the girl's pointlessly extended, wavering arm. "Folks like you just don't make no sense ta me. Ya can stomach killing thousands from afar, but gitting rid of one little life

up-close... that's unthinkable to ya." The girl with dark gray hair didn't respond to my rambling. Her eyes were dull, and her chest remained still. She was dead, probably. I placed my boot on her shoulder, and used the leverage to rip my greataxe out of her stomach. And then, as powerfully as I could... I smashed the blade down into her skull, damn near splitting her face into two. There were sure to be plenty of surprises awaiting me in the immediate future, but the dark gray haired girl in the black habit wouldn't be one of them. "One.", I thought. With that taken care of, I looked back down to the ladder. Marston had managed to climb about halfway up it, and Lucas, loopy as he was, was just about to be. "No!", I yelled, just as the blonde boy was about to put his foot on the bottom rung. "Don't you come up till I tell you to come up, Lucas!", I barked. The blonde haired boy winced at my words, but perhaps more surprisingly, so did Marston. Least... it seemed surprising. But then, when I took the time to think about it... "Am I still speaking in the voice ya don't like, U.T.?", I thought. The module didn't respond. "Well, if I am, then change my voice back to normal-" I stopped, and looked down at the soldier I had just killed. "-actually, don't do that.", I thought, adjusting my request. "If you can, make my voice sound like this girl did." At first, there was silence. But then, suddenly... "No!", U.T. cried out, in its default. "No, I don't want to!", the module protested out, distressed. "That's... that's just too darn cruel!" "Can you do it, or not?" "I can, but I don't want to! Please, don't order me to!" "If you can do it, then you'll do it.", I thought, coldly. "No, Master Admin, please don't make me modify- AUGH!"- the machine screamed, causing me to wince. "...As you wish, Master Admin.", U.T. stated, in a monotone, then snapped back to its default voice. "No! No, what the heck did I just-" A sudden knocking sound in the ship's hull interrupted the module's laments. "Is everything alright, Sister

Franziska?" The noise had come from a door directly across from the dark gray haired girl's body. Quietly and quickly as I could, I walked to the other side of the room, positioning myself next to the door, but *opposite* its hinges. "I'm... I'm ok!", I cried out, trusting the module to do its job and make me not sound like me. "But you're going to want to have a look at this!" With a series of clanking sound, the metal door I was next to creaked open. A white haired man with a black habit poked his head out of the door. "What's wrong, Sister FrasiZA-ARGh!" Before he could even get a glimpse of his dead comrade, the head of my greataxe buried deep into the back of his skull. "Two.", I thought, as I removed my weapon from his skull and pushed his body down the hatch into the sea, being sure not to drop him on the canoe or nothing. "Now make my voice sound like his.", I mentally commanded the module." "Please... please, don't-", U.T. whimpered, horrified. "Do it.", I ordered. "As you wish, Master Admin.", the module said, robotically, then reverted back to normal. "No, wait, please, don't!" I closed the door, and took my position back in the corner. "Brother Paul?", an elderly sounding voice called out. "Is everything alright? The captain sent me to check up on you." "No!", I cried out, in the voice of the second sailor I had disposed of. "No, everything's not alright!", I said, loud, but not too loudly. Sister Franzika... she's been... she's been hurt!" The door to the hatch jerked open almost instantly. An old man, balding and in a black habit, sauntered out of door. "Fiat Preserve us...", he exclaimed, horrified. "Who... who could have done-" He didn't get to finish his sentence. With a slight grunt, I chopped into the back of his neck, cutting his head clean off. "Three.", I thought, as I kicked the remnants of the old man's corpse into the sea. "Now switch my voice to have it sound like that old man's.", I ordered. ".....As you... as you wish, Master Admin.", U.T. said, this time in its

default. Once more, I shut the door which led to the rest of the ship closed. A bunch more footsteps bounded down the hall. I gritted my teeth. The element of surprise I had meant I could get one, maybe two people at a time, but taking three or more would be a no go. And while their ruby flame shooters wouldn't do jack to me, their short swords easily could – considering I was wearing glorified silk pajamas. It might have been boring, but camping by the door and luring them in one by one was my best option. An option which rapidly seemed to be falling flat, unless I made a few adjustments. “Halt!”, I called out, in the old man's voice. “Who... who goes there!?” “It's us.” “Be more specific, you morons!”, I snarled. The footsteps stopped. “It's... it's us, dad.”, a hurt sounding voice said. “Your sons... Gadis and Zel.” I winced a bit, but shook my head. “I told you, on the job you are to refer to me by my title.”, I snapped, then softened my voice. “I'm... I'm sorry, sons. There's just been a terrible accident. Gadis... I need you to go get the Captain – and JUST the captain. Bring him here at once. Go on... GO!”, I yelled. “Yes da- Yes, Brother Tom!” I waited until I heard footsteps move away from the door before speaking again. “Brother Zel... I need you to come in here for a moment. Brace yourself... it's not pretty.” The door creaked open, and another black habited man stepped out into the compact room in the hull. His body froze up at the sight of the dead girl. “No... Franzika... NO!”, he cried out. “Who... who could hav-guh!” I got him in his flank. It didn't kill him. “What... what?”, Brother Zel called out, in shock. “Humph.”, I grumbled, ripping my greataxe out of his flank. I considered swinging the blade down onta his skull ta end it right quick, but that woulda made a mess, and a blood splattered chamber wasn't as good a trap as a mostly clean chamber with a dead girl in the corner. So I just kicked him, still breathing, down into the sea ta join his father. I suppose he

passed out due ta bloodloss or died halfway down, cause he didn't scream or nothing as he fell. "Four.", I thought, right before U.T. spoke up. "Do you want me to switch your voice to *that* person as well?", the module asked, semi-sarcastically. "No.", I thought. "Keep my voice as it is now." The old man I had disposed of seemed to hold some form of rank on the ship. Utilizing his voice would give me far more an advantage than if I used a generic grunt's. And even if the old man I had decapitated was, say, no more than a janitor on the ship- discrepancies in his character were far less likely to be noticed. Old people say weird stuff all the time – and because I couldn't rely on my stupidity, senility would have to do. My ears jerked at the sounding of knocking on the door. "Brother Zel?", a frightened sounding voice asked. "Brother Zel, is that you?" "Brother Zel is here...", I wheezed in the voice of the old man's. "But he's hurt, bad. Go fetch the medic." "B-but I am the medic.", the frightened sounding voice vocalized. "Then you're going to want to have a look at this.", I said, retaking my position in the corner of the ship's hull. A nervous looking black haired girl in a black habit emerged from the door. "W-what?!", she yelped, upon seeing Sister Franzika's body. "Who... who could have-AH!" I slammed my axe into her lower back, and kicked her out of the hull. "Five.", I thought. "What... what have you DONE?!", a horrified voice cried from behind me. Standing behind the door I had failed to close was a man – bald, I think, in a black habit. He held in his right hand a ruby, and in his left a short sword. Without saying a word, I rushed him, hoping he'd tried to blast me with the fire. He raised his sword instead. "What- who are you?!", the enraged man roared, swinging his sword wildly at me. I parried his strike with the handle of my greataxe, and slammed the bald man into the wall, causing him to drop his sword. "You're dead, invader!", he cackled, raising his



ruby and pointed it right at my face. Nothing happened. “W-what?”, he cried, confused. “GRAH!”, I roared, as I spun around and sliced the greataxe right up into the bald man’s stomach. “Six.”, I thought, then barreled forward into the interior of the ship. My camping spot was compromised. I should have tried luring the bald man into the room with the hull before I killed him, but the presence of a weapon that could actually hurt me intimidated me. Still, as I ran deeper and deeper into a ship whose layout I had no clue about, I realized that I should have risked the shortsword. Any advantage I had was gone, and though the metal hand attached to my stump granted me the power to wield my Greataxe properly, it meant nothing. I’d lose in a conventional fight. I’d be outnumbered and overpowered. I needed to hide. I needed to hide, but as I ran through the compact metal corridors of the black ship I found no cabins, no closets, nothing but more narrow hallways. “Four!”, a loud, low voice yelled. My heart skipped a beat, and I raised my axe up to defend myself. “That makes four of us that have gone, and not a single one has come back!” the loud, low voice yelled, from a corridor perpendicular to the isolated one I was in. “But- but I came back, Captain!”, a familiar voice said. “Brother Pledies ordered me to go and fetch you at once.” “Your father is a good man, but he doesn’t have rank over you, Brother Gadis. Why on earth would you obey his orders-“ “He.... He seemed desperate, Captain. And- and my father never acts desperate unless the situation is desperate. He said Sister Franzika was hurt, and that he needed you to come check up on her-“ “No.”, the low voice growled. “No, your father would never say that. Boy, our standard operating procedure is to send Sister Diana out first to treat the injured. Did your father call for her?” I turned the corner, and crouched down low. The corridor was dark. If I could get to the captain and Brother Gadis as they were talking...

I mighta been able ta take em both out before they made sense of the intentionally nonsensical situation I had forced upon em. “No.”, Brother Gadis exclaimed, horrified. “No, he... he didn’t call for her. He called for you.”, the black habited man breathed out, as I slowly made my way towards him and the captain. With the little light there was in the corridor, I was able to see what the captain looked like. The captain wasn’t wearing a black habit, that’s the first thing I noticed. No, he wore plate. Metal plate, and he was no amateur about it, either. Shining white plate mail covered him from head to toe – and he had his helmet on. I could pierce his armor, if I wanted to, but it’d require a running start. And a man like him, clad in shining white armor, clutching a giant greatsword... well, charging a man like him would only result in throat being slit. I need to find another way of getting rid of the Captain, one that didn’t involve charging him and swinging my axe down at him. So I charged Brother Gadis instead. “GRAAAAAAAAH!”, I screamed, as I ran towards the unsuspecting man in the black habit. “Brother Gadis, behind you!”, the man in the white armor yelled. It was too little, too late. My greataxe chopped deep into the man in the black habit’s head like it was made of jello. “Seven.”, I thought, then turned tail and sprinted back towards the exterior of the ship. As I did, a greatsword crashed down on me from behind. I was able ta avoid it- probably because I *wasn’t* wearing the armor that woulda allowed me ta survive it, but that was of little concern. I had to keep moving, “I’ll have your HEAD!”, the enraged captain yelled at me from behind, barreling towards me. Greataxe still in my augmented metal hand, I booked it, sprinting as fast as I possibly could. I hoped and prayed that I remembered how to get back ta the hatch I had entered from – if I didn’t, everything would be for- “Is everything alright, Captain?!”, some figure in a black habit cried, jumping out into the hall. “Sister

Pacifica! No! GET BACK!”, the voice of my pursuer roared, as I hurtled right at the figure in black. Not wanting to be slowed down, I lowered my axe and took a single swing at the figure as I sprinted past it. “Captain! Captain, what’s wro-UGH!” The greataxe flew through the side of whoever had been unfortunate enough to jump out at me while I had momentum, cleaving her in half. “Eight.”, I thought, not looking back, not stopping my sprint. Ignoring the moans, the screams, the roars, I quickly turned around the corner, hoping I was going the right way. I squinted my eye and stared to the end of the corridor. I saw the disemboweled body of a bald man in a black: I was going the right way. And I saw exactly what I needed: The red ruby. It was clutched tightly in the man’s dead hands. That was the unlucky part. The *lucky* part was that there were two figures in black habits right by the bald’s man body, bent over, and weaponless. “N-no!”, my pursuer roared, yelling as he picked up his pace. But the moment he picked up his pace, I kicked my body into overdrive.

“GRAAAGH!”, I roared, charging at the two unsuspecting Fiatists. Maybe it was due to the Captain’s warning, or the fact that I had started my war charge, but the two attending to the bald man’s body turned around almost instantly, the moment I charged them. The one on the left... a girl with ashy hair – stood still like a deer in headlights, her mouth open in shock as I charged at her. The boy next to her – a stalwart, stoic lad with pristine gray hair – stepped in front of her protectively, and held up a ruby. “By the General’s name, be purged in flame!”, he shouted, as fire shot from his ruby in a gigantic burst. I emerged from the flames completely unscathed. I had the Universal Translator, they had a module which was a knock off of another module. The translating gem wrapped around

my neck cancelled out the fire's heat instantly, effortlessly, like it had in the past. "W-what?!", U.T. gasped, its voice suddenly ringing loud in my head. "They... how do they have the hygienic module?! Admin Lucas said his friend had disposed of-" "No, no please!", the gray haired boy shrieked, the moment I emerged unscathed from the flames. "Please don't ki-" I sliced halfway through his neck. As the gray haired boy in the black habit clawed at his throat I quickly stepped around him, and slammed my greataxe into the ashy haired girl's body. She died with eyes wide open, with nothing coming out of her mouth but a bunch of air. "Nine.", I thought.

"GRAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!", the captain in the white platemail yelled, his greatsword inches away from me, and thrusting towards me in a lunge. Quick as I could, I grabbed the gray haired boy with the cut throat, and threw him at the tip of the lunging sword. The greatsword impaled him like he was chicken onna kabob. "Ten.", I thought, then jumped back to put some distance between me and my pursuer. "No... NO!", the man in the white plate cried, despair and dread bellowing out the mouthslit of his white metal helm. "Brother Frederick... NO!" As swiftly and cleanly as he could, he kicked the gray haired boy's corpse from his greatsword. "I'll kill you, Unionist.", the Captain said, calmly, a tranquility in his words. I picked up one of the dropped rubies, held it out in front of U.T., and aimed it at the center of his chest. "No. You won't." Fire burst from the ruby in my hand, and engulfed the man in flame. He didn't emerged unscathed from the flames. Not in the slightest. I only kept the flame on his for five seconds or so – but that was more than enough to cook him from the inside out. The Captain kept his composure... at first. But less than a second after the flame touched him, he dropped his great sword, and started shrieking – the way anyone would when

set on fire. After the five seconds were up, I tossed the ruby aside, as the man in the ash covered armor fell onto the floor of the corridor. His armor was steaming from the heat, so I removed his helmet with my fake metal hand. “Who...”, he wheezed. “Who are you?” “Does it really matter?”, I muttered, then slammed my greataxe down into his skull. “Eleven.”, I thought, then knelled over, and caught my breath. “Change... change my voice ta sound like the captain’s, U.T.”, I thought, my heart pounding a mile a minute. “Why?”, the module asked, its voice cracking. “Isn’t... ain’t this enough?” “No. We’re only fifty five percent done.” “Don’t group me in with you!”, the module half-yelled, half-yelped. “Fine. I’m only fifty five percent done. Change my voice to match the captain’s.” “Such... such senseless cruelty.”, the module stuttered, but it didn’t deny my request. I calmed my body down, some, and began walking down the corridors, greataxe and ruby in hand. “THIS IS THE CAPTAIN SPEAKING!” I roared. “BROTHERS AND SISTERS, CREWMAN AND LAYFOLK, HEED MY WORDS!” I paused, and waited to hear if anyone would responded. Not a soul said a word. I cleared my throat and continued. “THERE IS AN INTRUDER ON BOARD! REMAIN IN YOUR ROOMS, REMAIN IN YOUR CABINS! DO NOT OPEN THE DOOR FOR ANYONE – ANYONE, SAVE ME! REMAIN IN YOUR CABINS, AND KEEP CALM!” “I REPEAT, REMAIN INDOORS, AND KEEP CALM! THERE IS AN INTRUDER ON BOARD! REMAIN IN YOUR CABINS, AND KEEP CALM! I SHALL BE THERE TO CHECK UP ON YOU SHORTLY!” I exhaled, and walked to the opposite side of the ship. I sucked in a deep breath of air, and repeated my mantra. “THIS IS THE CAPTAIN SPEAKING! BROTHERS AND SISTERS, CREWMAN AND LAYFOLK, HEED MY WORDS! THERE IS AN INTRUDER ON BOARD! REMAIN IN YOUR ROOMS,

REMAIN IN YOUR CABINS! DO NOT OPEN THE DOOR FOR ANYONE BESIDES ME! REMAIN IN YOUR CABINS, AND KEEP CALM!" Once more, no one responded. Not vocally, at least. But then... sure enough... the points of my ears twitched. It was a subtle sound I heard at first, a small series of clicks – but it was followed by the telltale sound of something slamming shut. Axe and ruby in hand, I followed those noises down the corridor, and around a corner, to find myself in – another cramped black metal corridor. However, this cramped black metal corridor was lined with five metal doors, all slammed shut. That was all I needed to see. I began with the door closest to me, and knocked at it, once, with my metal hand. No one answered. I knocked on it again. No one answered, but I heard the shuffling of feet from the inside. "Don't be alarmed.", I called out, speaking gently in the Captain's voice. "It's me. You can unlock the door." The metal door before me clicked open. Immediately, I twisted the knob, and kicked it open. "OH, SO THAT'S WHERE YOU WERE HIDING, HUH?!", I yelled, as I glanced upon three shortswod wearing men in black habits. Shock flashed across all their faces, and they hesistant. Only fera moment, but long enough fer me to bury my greataxe in one of the trio's foreheads. "Twelve.", I thought, then matched my voice with my swings. "I'LL SHOW YOU THE MIGHT OF THE COLLECTIVE, INTRUDER!", I yelled out loudly in the Captain's voice, drowning out the screams of pain and anguished warnings from the other two. The other two, their faces horrified, nonetheless struck at me swift with their shortswords. I parried both blows, and swung the axe deep into the leftmost Fiatist's neck. "Thirteen.", I thought. "HELP ME, BROTHER ZEL!, I DON'T THINK I CAN LAST MUCH LONGER" I yelled, calmly circling the remaining black habited solider. "How- how are you- talking that?", the last surviving man in the room gasped, his face in

shock moreso than it was mortified. "You... you're- you're the General's Unionist-", he realized, then glanced down and lowered his guard, for just a moment. "So why do you sound so much like the Capt-" I swung my axe up into his exposed groin. "A-AH!", he screamed. "This... this doesn't make any sense! You're supposed to be ensl-"

"GRAAAAAAAAH!", I yelled, and sliced into the third man's chest. "Fourteen.", I thought, then quickly spoke up. "That... that makes TWO OF THE INTRUDERS DEAD!", I cried out aloud, making my words sound victorious, triumphant. "Brother Zel... Brother Gadis... thank you so much. If not for your help... these invaders could have killed our whole crew." "Switch my voice to Brother Gadis's.", I thought. "IT WAS NO PROBLEM AT ALL, CAPTAIN!", I screamed, sounding out Brother Gadis's voice at the top of my lungs. "Switch my voice to Brother Zel's.", I thought, calmly, then opened my mouth to speak. "CAPTAIN- I'M HURT!", I shrieked in a cacophony, my voice modulated to sound like Brother Zel's. "Switch my voice back to the Captain's.", I thought. "Brother Gadis!", I roared. "Secure this room and look after your brother! I shall find the remaining invaders if it's the last thing I do!" "The Captain... the captain doesn't talk like that.", a voice from behind me said, softly. I jerked around, and jumped back. Less than an inch away from me was a girl in a black habit, a girl with silver hair, with green eyes. "The captain... he doesn't yell at us. He doesn't brag, he doesn't boast.", she licked her lips, and her body shaking nervously, stared into my eye. "The Captain is a MAN!" she yelled, her voice deep, and firm. "He is NOT a caricature, he is not the GROTESQUE parody you have portrayed him as!" I swung my axe into her stomach, then kicked her onto the ground. "Was that little speech really worth yer life, girl?", I asked, my voice low. "Yes.", the silver haired girl said, not a trace of fear or confusion in her voice. "The Captain's will...

is the General's will... and the General's will.... is... without flaw." She paused, then coughed up blood. "But what you're fighting for.... is it... is it worth ours?" I slammed my axe deep into her neck. "Fifteen.", I thought, then yanked my bloodied greataxe outta her. Quickly, quietly, I walked out into the hallway, only to be greeted by four more individuals... all wielding shortswords in each hand, all glaring at me, prepared to fight. Without looking up at em, I raised the ruby and shot out a large burst of flame. I held out the ruby's flame until the screaming stopped, and then some. "Sixteen, Seventeen, Eighteen, Nineteen.", I thought, my body calming down some. I stepped through the hall, keeping my nostrils shut, keeping my axe raised. I didn't try to be quiet, or subtle. The smell of burnt flesh was everywhere... there wasn't much point to pretense anymore. So I explored the boat, some. I walked around, looking ta see if there were any more armed guards ta dispose of, ta see if there was anyone else I had ta take out before letting Lucas know things were relatively safe. There had to be more people. The ship I was on... there had to be tons and tons of crewmen operating it... possibly numbering in the hundreds. Killing the crew of a ship was counterproductive, for three reasons. One... they weren't much of a threat, not by themselves. Two – kill one, and ya sic the whole lot on ya. And while a trained professional with a weapon is more than a match for five unarmed folk, ain't no one in the world that can take on ten people at once, at least not at the same time in the same space. Finally, the reason ya didn't want ta kill the crew was cause they knew how ta runna a ship. It didn't matter if you hated a sailor or loved him, killing him would mean that ya wouldn't be able ta git diddly jack. I was a bit nervous, as I saw no sign of the crew – not cause I was worried they would jump out and shank me, but cause I was worried I couldn't coerse em inta doing the



things I craved. And it wasn't just a matter of going to Provesh. I wanted a crew ready and willing to take me and Lucas somewhere else after we dashed into Provesh and got the module we needed. That was all that mattered. So for the first time I stepped on the ship, I felt a bit scared. What if I had killed all the people who were able to operate the ship? That much was unlikely, the size of the darn thing had to require more than nineteen people to guard and maintain. But the fanatical devotion of the armed guards had given me pause. Usually, when you play the part of hijacker, the understanding you establish with the crew is that so long as they take you where you want to go, they won't have to die or nothing. But the attitude of the Fiatists... it was troubling. It dismissed rational notions. Their faith in Saba- in the General, it made them volatile, made them throw their lives away for ideals they'd never see completed. But volatile or not, the ship I was on was the best and probably only chance I had at getting back to Provesh, and healing Lucas. So I refused to leave matters to chance... chance had never helped me, none. If there was no crew, I'd find a way to get to Provesh... I'd operate the engines and the sails myself, if I had to. So I turned a corner in the dark metal ship, into a corridor I had never ventured in before. This particular hallway was just as compact as the rest of them, but it was much shorter. There weren't any rooms connected to it or nothing, no, I took barely four steps before I found myself in a dark metal stairway. One flight of stairs went up, and one went down. "Bagunsh!", a loud noise rang out from below. "Bagunsh!, Bagunsh!, Bagunsh!", the noise repeated. The sound sounded like metal on metal... like the sound of piston pounding plate. So I followed it. Greataxe and flame throwing ruby in hand, I went down the stairs, to discover the origin of the sound. I was led to a small room – actually, it was what I guess could be considered an

observance deck. Like overseer's office inna Nike sweat shop, the room I entered overlooked hundreds of workers, all busy micro-managing some kinda station or the other. The box like room was well-furnished – complete with a couch, with a longue chair, with a pantry full of victuals... heck, it even had a bar of all things. But the two doors which lead down ta the engine room were locked shut– with a padlock, with a chain, with four redundant metal stoppers. “Trust me when I say they're necessary.” a soft, calm sounding voice spoke out, as I pondered the reason for the locked door. I jerked my head around in alarm and saw... a blue haired man wearing a white collar. He was unarmed – but a long blue lance lay inches away from him. I raised my greataxe. “Woah, woah, ease it, ease it.”, the blue haired man stammered, raising his hands high in the air. “I've no intention of fighting you.” Every single utterance from the blue haired man's mouth oozed of duplicity and deception, but I didn't cut him down. “If you don't intend to fight, then hand over your lance.”, I growled, keeping my eye on him. Keeping his right hand in the air, the blue haired man grabbed the top of his lance, and slowly, carefully, held out the blunt end to me. “Go on, take it.”, the man with the white collar round his neck said. “I won't try stab you.” I quickly yanked the lance out of the man's hand, and tossed it to the side. “There we go.”, the blue haired man said, being cautious with his tone. “It's good to see we have an understanding. You're under no obligation to tell me your name, but my name is Lancer Red Five. At least... it was. I serve the Collective as a Volunteer now.” “You mean yera slave.” The smile on the blue haired man's face flickered, but he shook his head in affirmation. “Yes. I'm a slave. I'm a slave that overlooks the other slaves. I- I can be *your* slave, if you spare my life.” “I'll consider it.”, I mumbled, then raised my eyebrow. “What do ya mean, other slaves?”

Still keeping his hands in the air, Lancer Red Five gestured towards the workers in the engine room. "Them.", the blue haired man said, referring to the multitude of black collared workers below. "They're the other Volunteers. Unionists like myself, mostly, though I think a few recent add-ons were supporters of the disgraced Regent." He gazed at my collar, and a knowing smile spread across his face. "But you would know all about that, wouldn't you, Sister-" "Amelia. My name is Sister Amelia.", I lied. "And as of now, this ship is under Master Marston's control. If you wish to live, you'll do as I command." Lancer Red Five bowed. "Your whim is my command, Sister Amelia." "Alright. Open the door.", I said, my voice neutral. "Are- are you sure that's wise?", Lancer Red Five said, sounding slightly nervous. "The workers down in the engine room are... they're rather rambunctious." I shook my head. "Ah. Ah, I get it now." I licked my lips, and smiled at the blue haired man. "I have to say... you're pretty clever, Lancer Red Five. You started down there, didn't ya?" "I... I was originally a crewman, yes.", the smooth talking Lancer said, looking me in the eye. "But ya didn't stay one long, right?", I conjectured. "You positioned yourself as the overseer by sucking up to the crew, didn'tya?" The Lancer's eyes opened up in alarm. "No, no I didn-" "Relax.", I said, assuring the nervous man. "I don't hold it against you. It's the natural thing to do. Working on them engines all from rising period ta rising period... sleeping on the floor... that ain't comfortable. More to the point, that ain't what will get you free. Collaborating with your captors was the best shot you had at freedom... at least until this rising period." "It... it was.", the Lancer said, soberly, his back hitting the glass of the observance deck. "I despised every waking moment of being on this ship... and I despised everyone on it. The idiot zealots above me, and the wretches below." I shook

my head, and took a step forward.. The engine room was only about ten feet or so below us, and even with my one eye I could see the workers clear as crystal. They all looked sullen, stoic. They tended to the machinery slowly... each flick of the wrist, push of a button, and taking of a step being done as if weighed down by two ton weights. The bodies of the folks operating the machinery weren't malnourished, but they weren't healthy, neither. It seemed like they had just enough... just enough to keep em going for the cycle, just enough energy to give the ship energy. "No one in their right mind would want to live like that...", I said, calmly. "And you're much more clever than them lot, probably more competent, too. But unfortunately... I need *them* a heckuva lot more than I need *you*." The blue haired man's eyes widened, but it was too late. I raised up my right leg, and kicked him square in the chest. The force of my kick sent him flying through the glass of the observance deck, down to the engine room below. He didn't die. He only fell ten feet or so, so minus some cuts from the glass, he was fine. For the moment. I poked my body through the hole, and gazed down at the crowd below, my face a stone mask. The engine room became absolutely silent, as most of the hundred black collared volunteers stared up at me, and I stared down at them. I had no idea what to say; I was no public speaker. But I had been around a few public speakers recently, and if there was one lesson I *had* learned from the black and white siblings, it was that volume would do where validity wouldn't. "SLAVES OF THE COLLECTIVE!" I boomed out, enunciating the word "slaves." "AS OF THIS MOMENT, THIS SHIP BELONGS TO ME!" The workers staring at down at Lancer Red Five turned to gaze up at me, and silence completely overwhelmed the room, prompting me to continue. "I HAVE SLAIN THE CAPTAIN OF THIS VESSEL, AND I HAVE DISPATCHED OF

EIGHTEEN FIATIST GUARDS. IN A FEW MOMENTS, I SHALL UNLOCK THE DOORS, AND ALLOW YOU TO DO AS YOU WILL!" The eyes of all the men and women below me jolted open. "YES! YES, YOU HEARD ME CORRECTLY!", I spat, spittle flying out of my mouth. "YOU ARE NOW FREE! WITHOUT EXCEPTION, WITHOUT EVEN A SINGLE CATCH!" The dull eyes of those below me suddenly started to regain their color. The weight around the crews arms seemed to cease, and some of the emotionless workers began clutching their chests, as if receiving stimulation for the first time. "Bull.", a gaunt, gruff man with pink hair snorted, dispelling the atmosphere. "You're just one of the General's agents, out to test our so-called faith. The moment we walk out this room, we'll be tortured, crucified, and killed for heresy, or disloyalty, or for whatever nonsense the Fiatists desire." "PERHAPS I AM!", I roared, unable and unwilling to disprove a negative. "PERHAPS I AM NOTHING MORE THAN AN AGENT OF YOUR DESTRUCTION, A WARPED INTIMIDATION TACTIC DIGUSISED AS A TEST OF FAITH! PERHAPS I DON'T BRING YOU SALVATION... PERHAPS I BRING YOU DESTRUCTION! BUT IT DOESN'T MATTER!" The slaves below me grew confused, so I elaborated. "THE EXISTENCE YOU LOT SHARE... IS IT TRULY SOMETHING WORTH PROTECTING? IS YOUR CURRENT LIFESTYLE WOTH VALUING? DEATH AT MY HANDS WOULD BE A BLESSING... EVEN IF I WAS THE MOUTH OF THE GENERAL HERSELF!" The men and women with black collars around their neck looked down at their feet... shame and weariness overwhelming them. Far from pumping them up... it seemed like my words were demoralizing them. That wouldn't do. "BUT I AM NO AGENT OF THE GENERAL! NOR AM I A SERVANT OF MARSTON'S! I AM... I AM...", I stammered, as my coarse

shouting brought light to the dullards below. I cleared my throat, and raised my greataxe up high. "I AM AXEMAN RED FOUR", I shouted, then grabbed the black collar around my neck and tugged on it for emphasis. "AND WHILE MY PROMISES OF FREEDOM ARE STILL UNPROVEN, THERE IS ONE THING I HAVE GIVEN EACH AND EVERY ONE OF YOU!" "Oh? What do you bring us, girl, besides a headache?", the pink haired man spat, his arms shaking. I flashed my fangs at him as I answered. "I BRING YOU SOMETHING YOU CAN CLAIM WITHOUT EVEN LEAVING THIS ROOM!" The hundreds of volunteers below looked around at each other, confused. Even the gaunt pink haired man looked out of sorts. I swooped up my greataxe, and pointed its blade down at the blue haired man with the white collar wrapped round his neck. "I BRING YOU VENGEANCE!" "Wha- what?!", Lancer Red Five sputtered, shocked by my words. "JUST MOMENTS AGO, I HAPPENED UPON THIS MAN IN THE MIDST OF SABATOGUE! HE PLANNED TO SINK THIS SHIP... WHILST LEAVING THE REST OF YOU LOCKED ONBOARD!", I loudly, and vehemently, lied. "BUT NOW IS YOUR CHANCE! DO YOU STAY HERE, AND LIVE AND DIE LIKE DOGS? OR DO YOU TAKE FATE INTO YOUR OWN HANDS, AND DESTROY THOSE WHO WOULD GLADLY DO LIKEWISE TO YOU?" The stunned silence stopped. Everyone in the room turned to gaze upon Lancer Red Five, and, with snarls on their faces, advanced. "No! No, she's lying!", the man with the white collar around his neck yelped, as the crowd walked towards him slowly. "She's... she's an agent of the General! She's... she's not to be trusted!" "And you are?", the pink haired man at the front of the pack snarled. "You, who beat us, who whipped us, who denied us meals, who talked down to us as if we were less than human?" "I... I was only pretending to be harsh towards you!

lf... if I didn't withhold your rations... I would have had to withhold more! I... I was your greatest ally, I swear it! I... I'm a Unionist- no... no, I'm a volunteer too..." Not a single word was uttered in response to the blue haired man's pleas. His voice cracked, as the crowd came within a foot of him. "PLEASE! PLEASE, DON'T!", he shrilly protested, his hair becoming a mess, his eyes gazing around the room frantically. He looked up at me, helpless, and terrified. "PLEASE SPAAAAAATAAAAAARE MEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!", he cried, as the horde came upon him. "Twenty.", I thought, as the enraged crowd did what enraged crowds do. I calmly walked away from the broken glass observance deck, and as screams and shrieks rang out from below, I undid the various locks on the two doors which led down to the engine room. I had lucked out, slightly. I had suspected that a slave who lived in comfort would be resented by those who didn't, and thus more susceptible to slander, but never in my wildest guessings could I imagine said slave would be openly antagonistic towards his inferiors. The way Lancer Red Five had acted was such that I doubted I even needed to lie in the first place. But none of that mattered no more. Truth... lies... what mattered at that moment was appearance. I had to remain strong, remain tough. If I showed even the slightest bit of weakness... the same fate that befell the white collared slave would be passed to me. With a firm hand, I yanked open the door leading down to the engine room, and, wielding my greataxe properly, descended. The crowd didn't rush me. No.. like hyneas investigating their prey, the men and women in the black collars moved aside... and allowed me to move into their core. The pink haired man stepped forth to join me. "Where are we?", he asked, his voice calm. I glanced at him, and sized him up. Like everyone else in the engine room, the pink haired man was dressed in dirty, tarnished rags, and looked just healthy enough to

keep on moving. Though I couldn't help but notice that his cloths were splattered by Lancer Red Five's blood a bit more than everyone else's. "A few measures outside of Fremdos.", I answered, keeping my voice gruff, and my eye centered on the pink haired man. "Are you alone?", the pink haired man asked. "No. I've two companions. One is a Bowman that looks exactly like that bastard Marston, and the other is a mute cripple." "Then there's not much keeping us from killing you, is there?", the pink haired man asked, his voice neutral. "Not much besides my greataxe." "If we all rushed you right now, you would die.", he countered, his voice tense. "I would.", I acknowledged, then scanned the crowd with a semi-circle gaze. "But so would half of you." The pink haired man glanced to his left, and right, but not a single soul stepped forward to bolster him. "Fair enough.", the pink haired man said, conceding for the moment. "So what happened to the Fiatists?" "I killed them.", I said, without missing a beat. Concern came over the pink haired man's pink colored eyes. "How many, precisely, did you kill?" "Eighteen, plus the Captain." "And the remaining twelve?", the pink haired man asked. "They're... they're still alive.", I said, suddenly somewhat scared. "They won't be for long.", the pink haired man ominously announced, then, the other ninety something "volunteers" behind him, marched up the steps. He turned back to look at me when he was halfway up. "You and I will discuss matters later, Axeman Red Four. But for now... my peers and I shall take full advantage of your... gift." It wasn't much of a pep talk, but with little more than a shout, and a raised fist, the pink haired man led the small horde of black collared volunteers up the stairs, and into the rest of the black metal ship. I had been upstaged. But I didn't mind being upstaged. Every soldier in a black habit the volunteers disposed of was one I didn't have ta worry about it. I considered warning



them about the flame shooting rubies, but held my tongue. I needed a crew ta operate the ship and get me to Provesh... but I didn't need *that* big a crew. The Fiatists trimming the fat off the semi-malnourished horde would do me some good... a whole lot of good if they managed ta dispose of the dangerous looking pink haired man. "I... I don't quite understand.", U.T. chimed, in its stuffy male voice. "Those men and women are laborers, right?" "Inna way, yeah.", I thought back to the module. "Then why are they so poorly fed? Why is their standard of hygiene so sub-optimal?" "Cause they're being punished.", I answered. "Punished? Punished for what?" "Rape and murder, probably.", I gandered. "Judging by their black collars, they musta been convicted of something nasty." "Do... do you know that for certain?" "Course I don't. They could have just as easily been put here for stealing, or jay-walking. Though personally I doubt it." "B-but if they'rea buncha rapists, and murderers... why the heck are ya letting em go?", U.T. gasped out, reverting to its default voice. "Because they fit my purposes.", I thought. "Is... is that really how you see other people, Master Admin? Do you... do you just judge folks based on if they can helpya, or not?" "Yes.", I thought, coldly. "That's.. that's COMPLETE HORSE CRAP!", U.T. yelled. "Admin Lucas... he don't think that way! He... always said that folks ain't just tools, or functions... he said that they're entities unto themselves!" "And now he's missing his tongue.", I thought, bluntly. "That... that don't make him wrong!", U.T. cried out. "In fact, I reckon that makes him more right than you'll ever be! I... I might be programmed ta obey you, Master Admin, but I ain't programmed ta like ya! So before ya command me ta make ya speak like someone's loved one, let me tell ya this: yera evil, lying, hunka crap!" "You're right.", I thought, briefly, as I walked back up the steps to the observance deck. "But it don't matter

anymore. You're going to help me for as long as I need you to help me. After that, I'll give ya back ta Lucas, and you won't havta deal with me ever again." "I... I just don't git it.", U.T. whined, bitter. "Why would he travel all this way for someone like *you*?" I allowed the module to stammer on in its confusion. I had a hard time emphasizing with it- it was, after all, nothing more than a voice in my head. For all I knew I was arguing with myself, and if I was arguing with myself, I sure as heck wasn't going to apologize to myself. So, ignoring the voice in my head as much as I could, I walked back up the flight of stairs, back ta the section of the ship where I had met and bade farewell ta the captain. The corridors remained mostly the same as I left them, but the short swords, rubies, and belongings of the brothers and sisters I had slaughtered were missing – as ta why they were missing, well, I reckoned the sound of shouting and screaming from the floor above explained the weapons disappearance well enough. Quick as I could, I walked back through the corridors. My intention was ta get right back ta the hull and fetch Marston and Lucas, and then, in the relative safety of the boarding room, wait out the rest of the battle. However, on my way back, I came across the corpse of the Captain. That wasn't surprising. Corpses don't move, so it wasn't like he was capable of moving where I left him or nothing. What was... well I guess it wasn't surprising exactly, but what was different is that the Captain's giant greatsword was nowhere ta be found. His armor, somehow, remained strapped around him - unlike the belongings of every other Fiatist, which had been stripped from head ta toe. So instead a going back ta fetch Lucas and Marston... I undressed the Captain. I had ta. Flame licked as they were, the white ash covered armor of the Captain provided far more protection than the silk pajamas I was wearing could offer. It wasn't a pleasant experience. The Captain's body

was burnt, and the smell of burnt flesh is just about the worst thing ya can smell. He was surprisingly light – though if that was cause he had been immolated or cause I had a unnaturally strong metal hand attached ta me remained ta be seen. So... bit by bit, joint by joint, I yanked off the pieces of the Captain's armor, and placed them around my body. Well, mostly. Putting on the gauntlets , legs, and armpieces were easy enough. But as for the chest piece, and some of the joint guards, I'd need someone else's help ta wear em, at least ta wear em effectively. That wasn't important, though, I wasn't placing the armor on me fer fear of death. I was claiming the armor simply so nonea the freed Volunteers could when they were done with the resta the Fiatists onboard the black metal ship. But even with the disgusting metal hand attached ta my stump, carrying my greataxe, the chestpiece of the plate, and the helmet was hard. I was so over encumbered, I was barely able to walk. "Um... do you need help with that, Miss Axeman Red Four?", a familiar voice asked, awkwardly. "Nah, I'm fine, but thanks fer the offer, Sister." I mumbled, politely turning down the white haired girl's offer. "See, I gotta go and help Ruckus onna account you torturing him and WAIT WHAT-?!" I jerked around ta stare at the girl with ruby red eyes. "Are... are you alright, Miss Axeman Red Four?", Sabarene asked, scratching the bottom of her chin. She gazed behind me, at the bodies lining the corridor. "W-what... what happened here?!", she gasped, horrified. I felt a sinking feeling in my chest, and clutched my hand shut. "What do ya think? I just slaughtered eighteen of yer minions, ya sadistic, duplicitous, piecea-" "These aren't soldiers of mine, Miss Axeman Red Four.", Sabarene said, politely, but firmly. "They're Sabarene's. You can tell by their black habits." I squinted my eye. The ruby red eyes remained the same, but the white haired woman transformed into the black haired boy

before my eye. And then I realized, I wasn't talking ta Sabarene... nah... it... it was Marston. Of course it was Marston... it wouldn't make no sense otherwise. "Ugh... ugh... alright.", I mumbled, clutching my head. "Sorry fer my babbling... I thought you were someone else." An uneasy look came across Marston's face, but he shook his head. "What happened here?" "I just told you. I got rid of the Fiatists onboard." "Wait, so all of this was your doing? You defeated all these people by yourself?", Marston asked, sounding slightly surprised. "Well, sorta. I kinda cheated. I used a module ta manipulate my voice, and then burnt halfa em ta death with another module." A sad look came over the black haired boy's face. "A regrettable choice of actions, but I cannot condemn you. I was not able to provide a viable alternative." He narrowed his eyes. "So how many are left?" "Twelve or so." I answered. "But they're being taken care of." "What?" "I found some Volunteers onboard, and set em loose. By the by, yer name is Bowman Yellow Two now." "Very... very well." Realization dawned on me. "W-waita tick, where the heck is-" "Your friend is fine.", Marston said, cutting me off. "I told him to wait in the hull, until I told him it was safe." He cleared his throat. "Mister... Mister Lucas!", he called out, firmly. Nothing happened, no one emerged from the room at the end of the corridor. "OI, LUCAS! GIT OVER HERE!", I shouted. The blonde boy barreled out from the end of the corridor, rucksack and all. He didn't say a word, but he wrapped his arms around me, and held on tight. I dropped my axe and returned the embrace. "It's... it's alright.", I lied. "Everything's fine. I just had to take carea some bad folk." "I... I missed you so much, Four.", Lucas sobbed, his voice soft and broken. "I missed ya too.", I said, and ta my own surprise, actually believed my words fera change. I loosened my grip on the bruised and beaten blonde boy. "But it's dangerous fer you ta be out here all by yer

lonesome, and its even more dangerous fer you ta be out here with me. How bout ya wait here with Marston, while I take carea some things?" "It's... it's not dangerous.", the tongueless boy responded, the module translating his . "Next to you is the safest place." "That-that just ain't true, though.", I choked out, shame overwhelming me. "Look around ya. Does any of this strike ya as safe?" Lucas looked up at me and smiled, and fera fleeting moment, I thought he was back ta his corny, confident self. But instead of admonishing me or reassuring me, condoning me or condemning me, all the Sorcerer said was: "I'm so happy I could see you again, Four." "Admin Lucas...", U.T. commented, but of course its voice couldn't reach him. I was unsure if Lucas could understand me or not... the boy with ripped out finger nails very much seemed to be in his own little world most of the time. But I decided to keep on talking ta him as if he could, as if that would somehow make up fer fourteen rising periods worth of torture and torment. "Well, if yer gonna stick around me even when there's danger about, ya can at least make yerself useful.", I muttered, staring into Lucas's blue eyes. They weren't piercing, or gentle, like they had been before. They... they were cloudy. Like he was in a dream. Nevertheless, I continued talking to him as if he were awake... he had shown signsa lucidity before, so maybe- maybe if I just kept talking to him, or something- "Help me put on the rest of this armor, willya Lucas? I can't quite git ta the strings in the back, and putting on the chestpiece is tricky as all heck." The boy with cloudy blue eyes smiled, and to my surprise... did exactly as I told him to. He walked behind me, and with an expertise I would expect more outta a blacksmith thana purple tophat wearing charlatan, got the chestpiece and joint-guards on me lickity spit. "Like... like the corset, it's just like tying the corset!", Lucas laughed, as he tied the strings on the back of the

ashy white chestplate together. "Remember the Corset bit? It started with you front stage wearing a corset, and me with a straight jacket. But then we switched them around halfway through!" "I... I'm sorry Lucas, I don't remember anya that.", I answered. "Maybe... maybe in dreams I do, but... but in reality... yer just someone I met thirty rising periods ago. And I've only been awake fer about fivea em." My throat felt sore. "But... but if that's the case- then... then why do I- why do I even-" "Wheatfields and Wildflowers.", Marston muttered. The black haired boy had looked away from me and Lucas as I changed into the armor, but he interjected now. "Relationships are like wheatfields, and wildflowers. Some are planned in advance, and grow gradually, and some sprout and grow, seemingly from nowhere." "I didn't reckon youa doe eyed poet, Marston.", I muttered, a bit annoyed at the black haired boy butting in. "I'm not.", he said, bluntly. "Were relationships like wheatfields, instead of wildflowers, the continent would be a much better place. The whip of the mind can temper matters of the heart, but it cannot control it." A slight smile came across Marston's face. "No matter how many lashes it doles out." "How nicea ya ta git philosophical bout love in the middle offa blood-splattered corridor.", I droned, sarcastic-like. Marston shrugged his shoulders, and covered his ruby red eyes with his shaded spectacles. "I fear to imagine how you could be capable of doing something like this, if not for by love." the black haired boy stated, his voice calm, yet strangely intimidating. I grimaced. "Love... love is justa social construct. A dumb little trick you'd have ta be an idiot ta buy inta." Unfortunately fer me, I was an idiot. So being an idiot, I placed the ashy white helm of the deceased captain over my head. It fit fine enough... perhaps it was a bit tight, but better a helmet be tight, than it be loose. I grabbed my greataxe with my fake hand, and took Lucas's palm with

my real one. "Alright.", I said, my words bellowing out of the ash-covered metal helmet. "We're going ta go meet up witha buncha slaves, now. And not pampered, fourteen rising period slaves like us. A buncha malnourished, armed and angry slaves, who have just playeda active part in obtaining their freedom the messy way. Remember, Marston, yer name is Bowman Yellow Two, right up until the point that it ain't." I squeezed Lucas's hand. "As for you... ya gotta try and stay calm. Don't you show even an ounce of fear towards these folks... they're like me. The moment they detect weakness they'll strike. Do ya got that?" Lucas stared at me, and smiled. "I missed you so much, Four.", the blonde broken record repeated. "Just stay behind me, alright?", I mumbled, then, gently let go of his hand. I firmly clasped my greataxe with both hands, and slowly made my way towards the sounds of metal on metal. I had ta help the slaves with their fight. It wasn't cause I WANTED to, it was cause I *had* to. If they all died, I was out a crew. If most of them survived, and I didn't do nothing ta help em, then they'd think I didn't care about em or something, and if they thought that, then I would only be as influential as my greataxe would let me. So, with Lucas and Marston behind me, I gradually made my way up the stairwell. The armor was heavy, but I was used to lifting heavy things. Fer a moment, I considered asking U.T. ta switch my voice to the captain's again, but decided against it. I didn't want the black collared slaves to mistake me fer an enemy, and I definitely didn't want them knowing what sort of magical bullshit I had up my sleeves. "Surrender at once!", a nervous, nasally voice cried. I held up my hand, ta stop Lucas and Marston in their tracks. Silently as someone in over sixty pounds of plate mail could be, I crept up the last few stairs. And what I saw on the second floor of the black metal ship – well, it was more or less what I had expected to see. Right in fronta me was a

very panicked looking Fiatist - a mousey looking man in a black habit. He had been backed into the stairwell by the pink haired man, who was bolstered by twenty or so black collared men and women. The rest of the floor was a horror show – eleven Fiatists lay dead or dying from sword wounds, but that was nothing compared to the piles of toasted “Volunteers” – at least forty of em had died from being toasted to death. I say “at least”, because most of the bodies were burnt beyond recognition, and I reckoned that there mighta been a few dozen more dead, but I couldn’t tell which ashes were the remnants of clothing, or the remnants of people. “Standard... standard policy says that if you surrender now, only half of you shall be put to death!” “How generous of you.”, the pink haired man growled, raising his two short swords high. “Not... not one step closer!”, the mousey man squeaked, holding out yet another fire shooting ruby. “I’ll... I’ll purge you in the General’s holy flame!” Yet, despite the mousey man’s threats, the dangerous pink haired man with the black collar round his neck advanced, undaunted. I wouldn’t have been daunted either. Most people obey their fight or flight instincts, but a few unlucky folk will just sorta... deny what’s going on in fronta em. They ignore the harsh reality in front of em, and freeze up. It’s a sensory overload typea thing. Too much happening at once, too many tasks ta perform, so their brains just fizz out. “O-one!”, the mousey voice man squeaked, his voice terrified. The pink haired man inched further, a confident smirk on his face. “T-two!”, the panicked soldier with the module warned, the pink haired man continuing to advance. I advanced, too. Not because I needed to, but because I had to make it look like I was trying to help. Finally, both the pink haired man and I came within hacking range of the last remaining Fiatist, me from behind, and him from the front. “Three!”, the mousey man cried, as the pink haired man raised both his



stolen short swords to slash him down. Predictably, not even a trickle of flame came out from the mousey voiced man's ruby. He just didn't have the will to do it. Which is why instead of chopping the mousey voiced man in the neck, I smacked his back with the flat of my greataxe. "G-gah!", the mousey voiced man shrieked, frightened. His hand clenched around the weapon he was only threatening the pink haired man with, and by reflex alone, let loose a pillar of flame. "O-oh.", the pink haired man blurted, before the fire incinerated him entirely. The flames only were on him for a second or so, but that really was all it took. The pink haired man's charred corpse hit the ground with a surprisingly light "pomf." I "Ya sonuva bitch!", I roared, making myself at least try to sound upset. I melodramatically threw my axe to the side, and tackled the mortified mousey voiced man to the ground. "ALL!", I yelled, punching him square in the nose with my right gauntlet. "HE WANTED!", I shouted, smashing him with my left gauntlet. "WAS FREEDOM!" I finished, as I bashed the last Fiastist's skull open with both. I turned my helm covered head towards the remaining twenty or so slaves, to see if they bought it. From the stunned looks on their faces, I reckoned my little performance had, at least, left a bit of an impression on em. I slowly returned to my feet, and melodramatically removed my helmet. "I'm... I'm sorry.", I choked out, glancing down at the roasted pink haired man with complete and utter apathy. "I was too late to save him. I... I failed all of ya." For a moment, there was silence, and I was afraid I had over-acted, that my completely self-interested motivation had been laid bare through my melodrama and insincerity. But then... "No.", a purple haired girl wearing a black collar stated, stepping forward to distinguish herself from the masses. "You have done more for us than we could have ever imagined... or dreamed. The blood of Hammerion

Orange Six lies not on your hands.” Her face harshened. “It lies on the Fiatists, on the General, and that infernal cad, Regent Marston.” “You’re absolutely correct.”, a bold, deep voice bellowed from behind me. I winced. It was Marston. Of course it was Marston. “The treatment you and the rest of the Volunteers have suffered was without precedent. And for that, I offer my sincerest-“ “Shut it.”, I growled, panicking. “You’ll speak when spoken to, Volunteer Marston.” Everyone onboard the ship gasped at that last bit. “V-volunteer Marston?” one of the former slaves sputtered. “Wait... wait, so that man is-“ “Yes.”, I said, through gritted teeth. “The man behind me is none other than Regent Marston. Or should I say, *Former* Regent Marston.” As I said that, I inched my hand towards my discarded greataxe. In hindsight, I should have had Marston wear the ashy white armor, or at least its helmet, cause even if he hadn’t been an overly honest, apologizing moron... most folk would obviously have known him att a glance. But instead of rushing the man that had enslaved them all... the folks with the black collars round their neck actually... they actually backed up. All fearful like, as if the tall, frail man with the shaded spectacles could destroy them at any instant. I stopped reaching fer my greataxe. “There ain’t no need ta be afraid. He serves me, now.”, I stated, and prayed ta the suns that the black haired boy would at least go along with *one* of my fibs. Marston didn’t say nothing, but he did bow, so there was at least there was that. “You- you managed to enslave the Acting General, and Lord Regent of Fremdos?”, the purple haired girl gasped. “No.”, I said, truthfully. “He ain’t the Acting General no more, and he ain’t Lord Regent. He’s justa Volunteer, and he’s under my command.” “Then- then who is the Acting General?”, the purple haired girl asked. “Brother Gino? Sister Julia?” “No.”, Marston said, staring at the purple haired girl with his ruby red eyes. “The current

General is-“A-ah!”, she shrieked, backing away from Marston before he could finish his sentence. I picked up my greataxe, and slammed it down near him. “Speak outta line again and I’ll gut you.”, I warned the boy I had no intentiona gutting. “No, the current General ain’t him.” “T-then who is it?”, the purple haired girl asked, fearfully. “The acting General... is the old General.”, I said, my throat feeling sore. “A-AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!”, the purple haired girl shrieked. “Suns above, we’re all dead! We’re dead, we’re dead, we’re dead! We’re going to be tortured, and crucified, and-“ “NO!”, Marston bellowed, fury and fire erupting from his core. “NO ONE SHALL BE TORTURED, OR KILLED, OR HUMILATED, EVER AGAIN! NOT SO LONG AS I DRAW BREATH!” His words didn’t inspire the slaves, none. Despite outnumbering him twenty ta one, they all shirked back, terrified. “He sounds likea sweetheart, I know, but he ain’t lying. Marston here aims ta topple the General and set right the things he did wrong.” “A-a-and why the hell do you think we should believe that?”, the purple haired girl gasped. “That.... That man- that man he- he-AAAAAAAAAAAAAH!”, she shrieked, falling down on her knees, and sobbing. Marston opened his mouth ta say something, but had his mouth covered up by a fingernail-less hand. “L-lucas...”, I stuttered, my chest feeling heavy. The cloudy eyed boy pushed his way past Marston, and me, and extended his hand to the terrified girl with purple hair. She... she didn’t accept his hand, of course... probably cause of how his nails had been ripped out, and how somea his skin had been flayed a bit. But that didn’t deter Lucas, none. Nah. Instead, Lucas plucked the flower outta the black collar wearing girl’s hair. “N-no!”, she cried, distraught. “That- my- my brother gave me that! P-please, give it bac-“ With a simple stroke of his hand, Lucas turned the purple flower inta three – a red rose, a yellow

sunflower, and a purple wildflower. Gently, he placed the purple flower back into the girl's equally purple hair, and offered her the rose. "W-what?", the girl with purple hair gasped. "How- how did you..." "That's... that's my friend Ruckus.", I said, wincing. "He... he knows magic." The girl with the black collar round her neck glanced at the rose in her hand... and broke down into tears. As she clenched the rose close to her chest, I glanced at the corpse of the mousey voiced man, and the charred ashes of the pink haired man. A weight pulled down on my heart. Lucas had done more with a few flowers and sleight of hand than I ever done with my lies, my manipulations, and my greataxe. But the time for regret had long passed. Even back then I knew that I didn't belong, that I was a burden on a world that was trying its hardest not to be complete crap. I knew I didn't belong... but neither did the folk that had tortured Lucas, that had indoctrinated Nielente, that had murdered Blue. Blue and Nielente were gone- dead due to my own incompetence, my weakness. But Lucas... Lucas remained. Just barely, but- but he was still alive, still kicking. I... I had given up on trying to help the world, on trying to change myself. It was too late for that. But surely- surely I could at least protect one person. Something as simple as that had to be in my power, right? "It darn well better be.", U.T. growled, its voice echoing deep inside my head. "W-what?!", I said aloud, freaking out Marston some. "Oh, my sincerely apologies, Master Admin.", U.T. answered, speaking sarcastically in its stuffy male voice. "I neglected to mention that I can comprehend your thoughts." "Don't recall myself giving ya permission to do that.", I thought, bitter. "You didn't forbid me from doing it, neither.", U.T. snorted, much as a disembodied voice could snort. "Anywho... I accept the offer ya so generously made, awhile back. You keep Admin Lucas safe, and I'll cut ya a wide berth on all the horrible

stuff ya do.” “I... I ain’t doing all this cause I wanna.”, I thought, somehow compelled to defend myself to a magical talking gem. “Intentions and desires matter little, Master Admin.”, U.T. chimed with its stuffy male voice. “Efficiency and function are the predominant criteria to determine a program’s utility, not intent. And as of this moment, I evaluate you to be more of a help than a hindrance.” “And if yer judgment reverses itself?” “Then I’ll be as passive aggressive towards you as possible, Master Admin.”, the Module said, smugly. I considered saying something snarky, but I had no reason to smack-talk a voice in my head. There were so many weird things going on with U.T., like why it referred to me as “Master Admin”, why it had to obey my every command, and why it spoke like me most of the time, but those were mysteries I didn’t particularly care about solving. What mattered was getting Swordarm Red One’s recovery gem, and getting the heck out of dodge before the Continent’s nonsense put to end to me and the mentally damaged blonde boy. So I held my tongue. U.T. mighta messed with my mind far more than Thief ever could, but it was an excessively useful ally. “Alright.”, I spoke up, as Lucas plucked off one of the slaves black collars and folded it into a series of white origami doves. “So as most of ya might know, yer a few leagues outside Fremdos.” The slaves stopped paying attention to Lucas’s tricks, and gasped, towards me. “N-no!”, the purple haired girl breathed out, horrified. “They told us that we were docked outside of Merchenze! N-not... not Fremdos!” “If you were outside Merchenze, then Marston probably wouldn’ta been onboard right now.”, I yapped, not really seeing the big deal about where the boat happened to be. “A-AH!”, the purple haired girl shrieked. “No... no, anywhere but Fremdos! Please... please, not here! This city... i- it – it-“ I saw an opportunity, and took it. “We’re in Fremdos at the moment, but we don’t gotta stay

here.”, I said, my words easing the purple haired girl’s anxiety. “Heck, that would kinda defeat the purpose me taking this ship, wouldn’t it?” The twenty or so black collared slaves didn’t say nothing, so I smirked, and stared at them with a big fangy smile. “What I’m saying, is... HOW WOULD ALLA Y’ALL LIKE TA GO TA PROVESH?” Fer an awkward, embarrassing moment, there was silence. And then... “P-provesh?”, the purple haired girl stuttered. “Yup!”, I cheerily chimed, with enthusiasm I didn’t really have. “Provesh! The last fully independent Independent Kingdom! A city onna hill... Where Unionists are treated with the respect they deserve, where there ain’t no stinking Brothers or Sisters ta pry inta yer business!” “I heard Provesh was freezing cold, and dominated by Swordarms.”, a green haired, dark skinned volunteer said, meekly. “It ain’t that cold, once you’ve had a few boots of ale.”, I countered. “I heard that it’s a corrupt oligarchy dominated by Merchants and Swordarms.”, a light blue haired girl skeptically muttered. “Aw, shucks,”, I exhaled. “All sortsa folks can git jobs there, and there ain’t a place with a better sensea community than Provesh!” “I heard Provesh was xenophobic, homophobic, and gynophobic.”, the purple haired girl stammered, nervous. “Yeah, that’s what makes it have sucha great sensea community!”, I said, all cheery like. “Ain’t no degeneracy allowed in Provesh!” “I... I don’t think homosexuality and gender equality qualify as degeneracy...”, the purple haired girl said, nervous. “In fact... if- if that stuff is viewed as wrong in Provesh, then I’m not particularly sure we should go there.” In the facea overwhelming doubt and skepticism on the parta the slaves, I decided ta stop bullshitting. “Well, it *is* pretty bad, ta be honest.”, I yammered. “The Swordarms and Merchants run the place, and you’d be lucky ta git a job guarding a whorehouse. Provesh issa place that’ll take yer eye and yer arm if ya ain’t careful.” “Then why would

we ever wish to go there?”, the girl with light blue hair spat, spiteful. I drop the act.

“Because you have no other options.”, I said, coldly. “ Whine and moan about Provesh’s cultural failings all you want... it’s the one place on the Continent that will treat you as people, instead of slaves. ” The twenty slaves stared at each other, as if weighing the pros and the cons. Finally, just as I thought the black collared folk would reject my offer entirely, the green haired man spoke up. “On my name, my color, and my number... yes. Yes, Axeman Red Four. If you can guide us to Provesh, then we shall follow.” I stuck out my hand. “And what’s your name?”, I asked, feeling like I should at try and play at being social with the slaves. “Chef Orange Twelve.”, the Fremdosian man said, clasping my hand with his. “Alright, Chef Orange Twelve. On my name, my color, and my number... I’ll lead all of y’all ta Provesh.” I cracked my neck. “But it won’t be easy. I need you lot ta run this ship like ya did before. You’ll probably have to work even harder, considering we’re down eighty people or so.” “Can... can we get double rations?”, the purple haired girl asked, all hopeful-like. “You can git all the rations ya want.”, I said, not particularly caring bout the request. “Ain’t like them Fiatists are round ta eat em no more.” Once more, the purple haired girl burst inta tears. But I didn’t have the time ta engage in emotional catharsis, so- “What’s yer name?”, I demanded of the fairly non-threatening purple haired girl. “My- my name?”, she gasped, shaken out of her little fit. “Yeah, yer name. Yer rank, yer color, and yer number.” “My... my name. My name is- it’s... I don’t have one.”, she said, meekly. Everyone around her, save me and Lucas, gasped. “Ya... ya don’t gotta name?”, I asked, confused. “W-well, for the last few cycles I was called Volunteer White Four Hundred and Forty Two.” the purple haired girl elaborated. “But I had no name before then.” “Wait, you saying you were Unassigned?”

The rest of the slaves cringed at the term. But the purple haired girl stood still, and shook her head. "Yes. Yes, I have no name." "Then how on the Continent were you made into a Volunteer in the first place?", Marston asked, more confused than I was. The purple haired girl winced at Marston's question, but answered anyways. "Because my friends weren't Unassigned. Their names were Lancer Blue Fifteen, and Lancer Yellow Forty Five." The purple haired girl stepped forward, a strange sort of power erasing her timidity, and giving her the strength to look Marston in the eyes. "But you... you crucified them both, Regent.", the purple haired girl without a name stated, coldly, calmly. "You put them up on a cross, simply because their luck didn't agree with them." "You're.... you're talking about the lottery.", Marston stated, his voice distant. The Unassigned shook her head. "They drew the wrong number, and I drew the right number. Their punishment was death. My reward was this collar." The boy with ruby red eyes was taken aback by the nervous purple haired girl's bold answer, but his shame didn't stop him, none. "That... that is no reward. No one, Unionist, Unassigned, Layfolk, or otherwise should be forced to wear this horrendous collar." Marston's own black neckpiece shifted slightly, as he swallowed some spittle "Even so... I am remiss as to how an Unassigned would end up a Volunteer in the first place. "My sis-" Marston caught himself, and shuddered with disgust. "- The General and I conquered Fremdos by allying ourselves with the Unassigned. To- to enslave an individual without a name- to enslave you would be counterproductive." "B-but here I stand.", the Unassigned girl professed, her body shaking as she stammered on. "The other nameless ones- they wanted me to help them smuggle a small boat into the city. They said that it would cause the overthrow and destruction of those with names, that it would finally bring



justice and retribution down on the Unionists who beat us, who mocked us, who murdered us. But my friends had names, and they never beat me, or mocked me. By the time you and your soldiers arrived in the city, Lord Regent, I was judged to be a Unionist in all but name.” That empowering force echoed throughout the purple haired girl’s body once more. She raised her arm dramatically in the air, and... thrust it directly at me. “So- so don’t you go trying to act your name means anything, Axeman Red Four! Don’t you think that- that you can just manipulate us by feigning a bond! We- we’re closer than siblings, me and my fellow Volunteers. If you think you can just railroad us into a decision by twisting our identities against us, then think a-AH!” The Unassigned girl was interrupted by a fierce punch to the back of her head. “Speak for yourself, you Unassigned trash.”, the girl with light blue hair spat, then kicked her in the stomach for good measure. She stared up at me with dull, tired eyes. “I don’t know if you’re a savior or a sociopath. I don’t... I don’t care. For three cycles, I’ve had to endure emotional and physical hardship... the like I’m sure that pretty boy with the glasses behind you never even flirted with. That wasn’t- it wasn’t what made the experience unbearable.” The light blue haired girl stumbled towards me, in what seemed a drunken stupor. “To be whipped, and told I was the whipper... to be oppressed, and told I was the oppressor... to be abused, and told I was the abuser... it was hell.” Her eyes opened wildly, and quick as she could, she grabbed the purple haired girl by the throat. “IT WAS HELL!”, she shrieked, strangling the Unassigned girl. “THE DEATHS WERE MY FAULT! THAT’S WHAT THEY TOLD ME- THAT.. THAT IT WAS MY FAULT! MY MOTHER, MY FATHER, MY BROTHER, THEY DIED! THEY DIED BECAUSE I DIDN’T CARE ENOUGH! BECAUSE I DIDN’T HELP THE PRECIOUS, HELPLESS, UNASSIGNED

TRAAAAAAAAAAAAASH!" I stood there, dumbfounded. Marston didn't. With the grace and elegance of a French Courtesan, Marston strolled up to the blue haired girl, and slammed his skull into hers. "A-AAAAAAAAAH!", the blue haired girl with the black collar shrieked., letting go of the Unassigned, and covering her forehead in pain. "Not another word.", Marston warned her, glaring at her with fiery red eyes, blood dripping down from his scalp. "U-uh-", the purple haired girl stammered. "Not one from you, either.", he warned, causing her to shirk back against the cold black metal walls of the ship. "Look around you, volunteers.", he said, gesturing to the corpse of the mousey voiced Brother, and the pink haired man. "Your oppressors have been destroyed... but at a great cost. Countless blood has been spilled this rising period... far too much. And yet, even though the General's minions lie dead, even though there is no one left to whip you, to beat you, to bark orders at you... you seem insistent upon eating your own. You're Unassigned? You're not Unassigned? SO WHAT?!", Marston roared. "THE TITLES YOU DEFINE YOURSELVES WITH MEAN NOTHING!" Marston breathed in some air, and lowered his voice. "Unassigned, Unionist, Criminal, Brother, Sister, Layfolk... those might have been your titles before. But now, after cycles and cycles of suffering... are you all so imbecilic as to think those details matter anymore? In the eyes of the Collective... all of you are poundscum, and will always be viewed as poundscum. So why treat *each other* like poundscum, when most of the Continent does so instinctively?" There was silence, as Marston made his point. That didn't surprise me. The black haired boy made some sense... there really was no reason for the freed slaves to gang up on each other, but then again, Marston was the one that had enslaved em in the first place. Taking advice from him was kinda like taking security

advice from a burglar. "No.", the light blue haired girl said. "No, there... there is no point." She extended her hand to the purple haired girl. "I apologize, Volunteer Blue Forty Two. You're not to blame for my suffering." Fury raged up in her eyes, as she ran towards Marston. "HE IS!" Marston didn't move to defend himself or nothing, as the enraged Volunteer rushed him. This time, I stepped in. Which probably was a dumb idea, cause that meant the fist intended for him hit me, square on the chin. It was about that time that I regretted taking off my helmet. "G-GUH!", I groaned, the malnourished woman's blow packing a good deal more force than I would have expected. I was tempted to hit her back, but that would only escalate the completely pointless conflict. Instead, I dropped my greataxe and stretched out both my real and fake arm. "Are... are ya done?", I wheezed, shielding the black haired boy for god knows why. "No, no, of course I'm not done!", the light blue haired girl yelled. "I won't be done until I receive vengeance!" "If... if it's vengeance ya want, then this moron ain't the one ya wanna go after.", I hissed between my teeth. "The one who caused all yer family and friends to go up on them crosses...it wasn't him. Well, it was him, but he's just a patsy. Yer true enemy is-" I knew how my sentence was supposed to end, but... but I just couldn't finish it, for some reason. A lump formed in my throat. I- I had seen the crosses, I had seen so many horrific, awful things, and I had called the twist even before I woke up with a black collar round my neck, but- but in spite of all the objective evidence, I just couldn't say that her true enemy was- "Sister Sabarene.", Marston finished for me. "Or as you might know her... the General of the Holy Collective." "AHHHHHHHHHHH!", the light blue haired girl shrieked, falling on her knees. "I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I'm sorry!", she babbled, her personality going from hardass to terrified toddler in about two seconds flat. I took

Marston, and yanked on his black hair. "W-where are you going?", the purple haired girl without a name asked me. "Marston and I are gonna clean up this ship fer y'all. Y'know, dump the bodies into the sea and stuff." "I... I suppose we should help.", Chef Orange Fifteen said, reluctantly. I nodded my head. "Nah. Nah, y'all rest up and let me and Marston take carea it." I turned to the tongueless blonde boy, and smiled. "Hey, Lucas. You wanna do something important?" "I'm so happy to see you again, Four.", he mouthed, smiling. "I'm... I'm happy too, Lucas.", I lied. "I'm so happy, I think you should throw these fine folksa party. Go and perform a buncha tricks, and find em some food, if ya can." I turned to the purple haired girl. "How bout you escort Lucas here around the ship, and git yer double rations?" "R-really?" I shook my head. "Yeah, really." I lowered my voice. "But if he gets so much as scratched... I will destroy you." With a friendly smile, and tufts of Marston's hair in my black metal hand, I descended down ta the first floor. "So what is this really about, Unionist?", the boy with ruby red eyes asked. "It's exactly as I said.", I grumbled, as I picked up the corpsea the captain. "We're gonna disposea all these dead folk. Ain't hygienic fer em ta be laying around here." Marston recoiled, slightly, but placed his shaded glasses on his face and shrugged his shoulders. "Oddly generous of you, Unionist." "Generosity ain't got... UGH!... nothing ta do with it.", I groaned, the Captain weighing more than I thought he would. "We're on thin ice with these folk, especially since you had to go and blab about yer identity, instead of just saying you were Bowman Yellow Whatever the Heck like I asked ya ta. We havta score brownie points any way we can." "I don't make a habit of lying, Unionist.", Marston said, drolly. "Yeah, unless yer gabbing about the accuracy of a statue's hand." "I don't make a habit of dealing in absolutes, either.", he countered,

slightly flustered. We brought the Captain's body to the boarding hull, and tossed it down into the sea. "So, uh... just wondering... how come there ain't any other ships out there?", I asked, looking out into the inky black abyss of Fremdos's night ocean.

"Because the rest of them are probably in Provesh by now.", Marston said, darkly. I shuddered, then smiled, lightly. "Shucks. Well, we better get cracking on disposing of these corpses, then. We got 20 more Fiatists, and eighty or so Volunteers ta git rid of. But the Volunteers are mostly ashes, so we just need ta git a burlap sack fer em or something." "You seem fairly unaffected.", the black haired boy said, drolly. "I'm just not thinking about it.", I admitted. "This whole thing is a waking nightmare, but if we freak out we ain't never coming out of it." We disposed of the next twelve corpses without much fanfare or conversation. Marston wasn't much of a talker, and I wasn't much a person who enjoyed talking. But as we grabbed the corpse of the mousey voiced man and the charred remnants of the not-so-dangerous-no-more pink haired man, I spoke up. "So, uh... yeah. Y'know how them former slaves freak out every time ya mention Sabar-ya mention the General?" "They witnessed their friends and family be put to death on her orders. I would be upset myself. It's a miracle they didn't rip me apart the moment they saw me." "Right, right. So, along those lines... we probably shouldn't tell em that half the Collective's military is in Provesh." Marston damn near dropped the corpse he was carrying. "These people have been performing forced labor for over three cycles... and you intend to LIE to them?!", he snapped at me, furious. I thought of stuttering or stammering, but I decided to be blunt. "Yes. I intend to lie to them." "FOR WHAT PURPOSE!?", Marston gasped, ripping off his glasses inna rage. "Think for a moment, you self-righteous basket case.", I growled. "If these people are driven to tears

by the mere mention of that girl's *name*, then imagine just how terrified they'd be if they knew they were sailing right towards her." "They- they-" "They wouldn't go to Provesh", I cut in, tossing another body into the sea. "They'd mutiny, they'd head straight for Merchenze, and when that didn't work out, leave the continent." I lowered my voice, and pressed my face close to his. "We can't afford to lose control over this crew. Due to life experiences I don't particularly feel the need to get into now I am capable of steering a ship, but managing its engines, maintaining the hull, adjusting the rutters... no, that's not in my purview of expertise. I need those crew members.", I hissed. "You're right, Unionist. You *do* need those crew members. Which is all the reason more to be HONEST with them." Marston responded, speaking with the sort of calm voice folks speak in before they stomp yer windpipe inta dust. "If you need these people, then you can't afford to lie to them. You must trust them." "I trust them.", I said, through clenched teeth. "I trust them to be mentally unstable, I trust them to out for themselves, and I trust that the moment they sense even the slightest hint of danger, they'll leave us in the middle of nowhere." "That's not what trust means, Unionist.", Marston groaned, exasperated. "There's only two people who I trust.", I grumbled. "Blue, and Lucas. And that's it." "Blue?", Marston breathed, confused. "Axeman Blue Fourteen.", I answered. "My closest friend." "Did he-" "Yes.", I said, curtly. "And all because I followed my heart, instead of my brain." "I see.", Marston said, his face distant. "You're jaded. Even so... if you lie to the Volunteers, then you'll be no better than Sabarene." "I don't care.", I said, wincing at the name. "I'm not- I ain't trying ta be better than anyone. I'm trying ta keep me and Lucas alive. If that means I gotta be a bad guy, then by all means, I'll-" "You can do both.", Marston said, firmly. "You can keep your friend alive, and you can be an

exemplary human being.” “No...no..”, I muttered, gazing at the gaggle of corpses lining the ship’s corridors. “I can’t.” I nodded my head, and locked my ash covered helmet tightly in place. “I’m done talking.”, I mumbled, my words made more gruff by the mouth piece of the helmet. “If you want to tell them the truth, then tell them. I’ve got corpses to throw into the sea.” I don’t know if Marston went ta tell the former Volunteers the truth of our destination, or not. I didn’t really care, I had janitor duty to perform. Cleaning up bodies was nothing new for me. In the warehouses of Provesh, there were tons of folk that just would just up and die. Sometimes from fighting each other, sometimes from drinking too much and choking on their own vomit, and sometimes from suicide. The customers died the most from the fighting, and the whores tended ta be the ones ta kill themselves, but there was some overlap. Plenty of folk from both camps died from drinking. The suicides were the easiest ta take care of... usually they weren’t that messy. Most folks who are serious about that don’t go fer flair, they go for what works. The folks who died by tearing out each others throats witha steak knife or the like were a bit more messy ta clean, but usually I had help when it came to disposing of them. The drunks were the worst. They smelled, and ya had ta make sure they were actually dead before ya threw em out into the streets. Sometimes it was obvious, though. Sometimes the drunks bloated up, likea putrid blueberry. You didn’t need ta ask if they were alive; they weren’t. In comparison to them, the corpses I was carrying were downright tidy. Mosta em had died from a single greataxe blow, and while that didn’t make fer the neatest looking corpse, it also meant they didn’t stink so much. And yet- despite all that- despite me having handled tona bodies in the past without feeling even slightly sick, when I had finished carrying the last body of the Fiatists I had offed, I, I-

“GGGGGGGGGGGURRRRRRRRRRH!” I gasped, vomiting as the corpse of the black habited girl that had given me lip fell into the ocean. “And here I thought you lacked a conscience.”, U.T. commented, its every word dripping with vitriol. “I don’t lack a conscience, I just actively ignore it.”, I thought, steadying myself. I turned around, and made my way back up towards the second floor. I probably had to clean up the bodies there, too. But by the time I got back up to the second floor of the ship – all the remaining bodies had been disposed of. Not just that – the hull had been scrubbed, the walls washed, the floors mopped. All the blood, ash, skin, and bone fragments on the metal warship were nowhere to be seen, replaced by a shiny black luster. Heck, the floors looked so darn clean I reckon you coulda eaten off of them and only had a minor chancea getting ebola. But just as much as the second floor was spotless – it was also isolated. There was not a single soul to be seen in the central corridor of the ship. I couldn’t hear no one, neither. It was deathly still. I welcomed the isolation, it calmed me down, some. The way things were meant that I didn’t have to worry bout things so much, at least not for the moment. Marston was missing, but he was a big boy, he could handle himself. It wasn’t like he was tortured or nothing, and incapable of defending himself from a dangerous stranger. Nah, that wasn’t Marston, that was-

“LUCAAAAAAAAS!” I screamed, at the top of my lungs. My heart beating a million miles a minute, I sprinted through the second floor of the ship, panicked. Leaving Lucas with the former slaves was retarded. It was completely and utterly dumb, it was negligent, it was unforgivable. I cursed myself for being such a goddamn moron. Of course leaving Lucas in the hands of a former criminal wouldn’t work out, I was an idiot to think otherwise. The story the purple haired girl had told me of being made a slave



because her friends hadta have been bull – ain't no way someone who served on a warship coulda been good news. She was probably a rapist, or a murderer or- or.

“GAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!” I screamed, terrified. I frantically ran through the ship, hooting and hollering fer Lucas. But I heard nothing, and I saw nothing. “Is everything alright, Master Admin?”, U.T. asked, drolly. “SHUT IT!”, I thought, my panic amplifying my anger. If I had been thinking properly I could have asked the magical talking gem fer help, but that woulda required me nota ta bea moron. I scanned, and searched fer a hint of the tongueless blonde boy, but I couldn't find him anywhere. I started ta shiver. If- if I lost him, if I lost the one thing I had left then I'd- I'd havta- My angst and despair was interrupted by the sudden smell of smoke, coming down from the end of the hall. “Frick!”, I cursed, and sprinted towards the source of the fire. I barreled through the corridor. The smoke was coming from behind a small metal door, closed shut. Desperately, frantically, I pulled at it, knowing that every second I delayed was a second in which Lucas coulda been cooked alive. The door didn't open.

“GRAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!”, I roared, and slammed into the door with my shoulder. It didn't budge one iota. “CRUD! FRICK! FUDGE! SHOOT! GOSH DARN IT!”, I viciously cursed, pounding at the metal door in vain. Course... it wasn't like my blows were completely ineffectual. Far from it, the metal hand I hit the door with was making pretty deep dents, a fact I woulda found interesting had I regarded the hand attached ta my stump as anything more than a horrid abomination. But while my strikes were making dents, they weren't opening the door, and a shut door meant a scorched Sorcerer. I pulled my hand back fer one more punch, when- “Is there something wrong, Axeman Red Four?” “G-gah!”, I yelped, jumping back at the sight of the purple haired

girl. And then I saw it: the room in front of me wasn't on fire, it was the ship's mess hall. And humming to himself, softly, was Lucas. His blue eyes were still cloudy, and he moved about as if in a dream, but there he was, wearing an apron and cooking up something in a skillet. The smoke I had smelled had come from the hearth he was using, that and nothing more. "Uh... nothing's wrong.", I coughed, embarrassed. "But that door... that door don't work right. I pulled at it and it wouldn't budge." Without saying a word, and with a gentle smile on her face, the Unassigned girl pushed the dented door, causing it to open with ease. "A-ah. I see. Well, uh... carry on, you two." I turned to leave, then paused. "Er, actually... wait. I got something to tell ya, Miss, uh..." "Miss Unassigned.", the girl without a name said. "Right, Miss Unassigned. See, we're still heading to Provesh, but there's something about Provesh that I neglected to tell ya. It's currently-" "Under siege by the Holy Collective.", she finished. "Yes, Regent Marston informed and the rest of the Volunteers a few moments ago. I had my reservations about heading to that city before, and now..." "Now ya don't wanna go, huh?" The purple haired girl glanced into my eye. "Now I'm certain I do want to go there.", she stated, a surprising coldness to her words. "W-what?", I stuttered, caught off-guard by the timid girl's sudden resolve. "I watched my friends die, Axeman Red Four. I served as a slave onboard this ship for three cycles, being degraded and demeaned in just about every way someone can be. All that time, I dreamed of nothing more than freedom, but now that I actually have it..." The Unassigned girl curled her hands into a pair of fists. "Now that I have it, it isn't enough. I won't be satisfied until I see the life drain from the General's eyes myself." "Do you... do you hate the General that much?", I asked, my voice hoarse. "No. I don't hate him.", the purple haired girl said. "I never even saw what

he looked like, underneath that black armor of his. I even think he did some good, by giving most Unassigned names, by over-throwing the power structure in Fremdos. The Merchants of Fremdos did... they did terrible things to those without names." She shivered. "Terrible, terrible things. But crucifixion... enslavement... anyone who would do that... they're not helping. They are past redemption, and need to be removed."

"Ya... ya really think that?", I asked, my vision blurring. "Ya really think that the General is beyond redemption?" "I don't think there's anyone out there who believes otherwise.", the purple haired girl said, plainly. "The General is a blight upon the Continent. I will kill him myself, if I must." "This above all." a soft spoken voice uttered, softly. "Do unto others, as you would have done to you." Me and the purple haired girl turned our heads to the voice. It... it was Lucas. He was still wearing the apron, he was still cooking something with a frying pan, but he- he looked different, somehow. Even though his blue eyes were still cloudy, he stared at the nameless girl with a certain solemnness about him.

Your- your mouth!", the purple haired girl gasped, gazing at the blonde haired boy's bloodied gums in horror. I was tempted to punch her in the face, but restrained myself. After all, it wasn't like she could make sense of what Lucas was trying to say. She didn't have no magical translating gem. But even though she couldn't understand him, Lucas continued to speak to her. As his tongueless mouth moved, the blonde haired boy said: "Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things." He turned at me and smiled. "For all have fallen short of the glory of God, yet there exists none who cannot be redeemed through light, through love. "He's- he's

quoting SCRIPTURE?!", U.T. gasped. "Oh no... this is bad, this is very bad. He was Vice-President of his University's humanist society, fer frick sake's!", the module clattered into my mind, mortified. But if what Lucas was saying was mortifying, it sure as heck didn't show on him. The blonde boy spoke with a sort of serenity, as he stared at me with his gentle blue eyes. The purple haired girl stopped gawking at the little pink stub of flesh in Lucas's mouth, and narrowed her eyes. "So what does the General actually look like, anyways?" "Well, he ain't an old man, fer one.", I droned. "He's actually not-" A man at all, is what I was going to say. But for some reason... what I said to the purple haired girl was: "He's actually not that old. No, the General is... he's a younger fella. With orange hair, and four metal limbs." "He- he is?!", the girl without a name gasped. "That's- that's odd. The way you just described him make it seem as if you just described Brother Gino." "You don't know the halfa it.", I breathed out, my heart beating a whole bunch. I guess I was relieved that the purple haired girl and the rest of the former volunteers were onboard with the plan to go back to Provesh. It meant I didn't need to make excuses when we started to run into other black metal warships. And yet... I dunno. I had no intention of actually hanging in Provesh for all that long: I just want to recover the recovery module and leave. Things mighta been better for me if I had a crew fulla cowards, rather than a ship full of folks deluded enough to think they could take on the largest military on the continent and win. Of course, a ship full of cowards mighta left the moment they saw warships, so perhaps it was for the best I had a team of gallant idiots underneath my thumb. It didn't matter neither way. I would do what I had to do, and nothing more. Humming softly, Lucas removed his pan from the fire, and poked at it with a fork. He scooped up a bit of it, and chewed on it for a while,

then frowned. "What's wrong?", I muttered. "Does it *taste* bad or something?" I covered my mouth just as the last of my words oozed out. "Aw, shucks Lucas, I- I didn't mean to mock ya or somethi-" "Ha... ha!", Lucas laughed, swallowing the yellow looking. He took another fork of the stuff, and before I could say otherwise, shoved it into my mouth. Guiltily, I chewed the eggy substance, and gulped it down. The blonde haired boy in the apron glanced at me expectantly. "It's... it's sweet!", I gasped. "Like, super-sweet!" I chewed on it a bit more. "It could use a bitta salt, though, if I'm being honest." Lucas smiled and sprinkled a bit of white stuff onto his eggy entrée, and shoved some more of it into my mouth. "Hmph... alright.", I muttered, chewing some more. "Ok, now I might just be a bit picky, but the texture is a bit too gooey. Try making it drier or something, if ya can. It tastes just fine, though." Lucas balled his fists, and with an impassioned fervor, placed the eggy looking dish back over the brazier. "No no no no!", a bold voice cried. "If you heat the clutches too much they'll lose their flavor!" Urgently, out of nowhere, the green haired volunteer known as Chef Orange Twelve burst into the room. With a rather insensitive touch, he ripped the pan out of Lucas' fingernail less fingers, and off the brazier. "S-sorry...", he breathed out, exhausted. "It's... it's just that black widow eggs can't be overcooked." "B-black widow eggs?!", the purple haired girl shrieked. "Huh, izzat so?", I muttered, scooping up some of the stuff with my finger. "Is it a delicacy of some sort?" "They're SPIDER EGGS, how would they be a DELICACY?!", the Unassigned girl groaned. "Uh, gee... I dunno.", I muttered, tugging nervously on the black collar round my neck. "In Provesh we mostly only eat rodent meat, and the occasional rattlesnake." My mouth watered at the thought. "Say, do ya got any rats or snakes on the ship? I ain't had much to eat in... uh... quite some time." "Oh, there's

plenty of rats on this ship.”, Chef Orange Twelve said, bitterly. “The Fiatists would make us exterminate them when we had free time.” “Then catch some morea em and cook em up, I’m starved.” “I have a better idea.”, the green haired man said, throwing Lucas’s dish into a bin. “I’ll take the best ingredients onboard, and cook them up into a feast for us all. Alone.”, he insisted, glaring at the blonde haired boy. With a defeated looking gesture, Lucas started to remove his apron. Guilt flashed over Chef Orange Twelve’s face. “F-fine, not ALONE. But you are NOT to touch what I cook, understand? Hand me what I ask for, and nothing more, do you hear me?” Lucas smiled, and nodded his head. “That means yes.”, I commented, gruffly. “Wait, he nods his head when he means yes?”, Chef Orange Twelve asked me, understandably confused. “Yeah, and he shakes his head when he wants ta say no.” “But that’s completely backwards.” I clenched my teeth together. “Well, Lucas here issa bit backwards. And if you gotta problem with that, I’ll turn yer head backwards.” “I meant no offense.”, the Chef backtracked. “I was just confused.” “You should be thankful that a nod of the head is all it takes fer you to be confused.”, I said, darkly. I directed my attention to the purple haired girl. “Seems like you ain’t needed in the pantry no more. In that case, how bout you direct me ta the ship’s helm?” “S-sure.”, she squeaked. The purple haired girl opened the dented metal door, and guided me back ta the stairwell. “So, um... I’ve been meaning to ask. How did you become a Volunteer?” “I trusted someone I shouldn’t have.”, I spewed out, vaguely. “That’s how Lucas became the way he is, too.” “Oh.”, the Unassigned girl said, and wisely dropped the subject. We went up another flight of stairs, which made me a bit nervous, at first. “Don’t worry, there’s no one left. The top floor is just the helm of the ship, and we got rid of all the Fiatists up here.” Her face froze. “Um... related to that, do

you know anyone who can steer a ship?" "Yes.", I answered, gruffly. The purple haired girl smiled, looking relieved. "Thank goodness. Who-" "Me." "R-really? I didn't know Axemen could steer ships..." "They can't. I can." "Alright, but I think there's something about the helm you should know." "A ship's a ship.", I said, as I turned the hatch on top of the stairwell. "This one might be four times as big as any I've sailed on, but if it's got a wheel and a rudder, I can steer it just fine." I stepped up into the helm of the ship. It didn't got a wheel. It didn't got a rudder. Instead, all it had were buttons. The helm was a big oval room, and lining its mostly circular walls was a panel, with tons and tons of small, cherry candy colored buttons. The floor of it was made of metal, but what was super odd was that most of it was a big glass dome. Through the glass dome I could see Fremdos behind us, and the dark star scattered horizon in front. "Uh... on second thought, I don't think I can steer this ship.", I mumbled, utterly perplexed by the arrangement of the ship. "Do you know anyone who can?" "Actually... yes.", the purple haired girl said, staring out the glass dome with an awed expression. "Who?" "Brother Titus. You smashed his face in after he burnt Lancer Red Thirteen to death." "Well frick me, then." I tapped my fake metal fingers against my real ones, and tried to think of a solution. "Ah, I got a plan." "You- you do? Good to hear!", the purple haired girl exclaimed, relief oozing out of her every orifice. "...What is it?" "We improvise.", I said, and randomly pressed one of the buttons, on the side of the dome facing Fremdos. The ship began moving. That was the good news. The ship began moving towards Fremdos. That was the bad news. The ship began moving very quickly towards Fremdos. That was the badder news. "AW! AW CRAP!", I cursed. Frantically, I pressed the button again. The ship stopped, almost instantly. "GAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!", I





despicable deeds, then maybe-." "Please, help me!", I yelled, as much as you can yell in your own thoughts. "S-sheesh, I was just playing, Master Admin. It ain't like I can refuse ta help ya..., my programming literally won't allow it." "Tell me which button to press, U.T.! Please, I'm begging you!" "Very well then.", U.T. said, shifting to its droll fancy voice. "Before I begin, I need permission to-" U.T.'s voice shifted, suddenly, into a weird, electronic, robotic sounding monotone. "-----The Universal Translator Module would like to access [[Your every memory and emotion]]. Grant Access to [[Your every memory and emotion]] at this time?-----" "Yes, yes, grant access!", I thought, inna panic. "---- Access to [[Your every memory and emotion]] granted. Have a pleasant day!-----" "Hmph. That was odd.", U.T. chimed, back to its elegant male voice. "But it is of no concern. The direction you need to go in that way, Master Admin." "Which way?" "That way." "Which way is that way?" "The way you need to go. That way." "YER A VOICE IN MY HEAD, YA DON'T GOT ARMS TA POINT WITH, SO I DON'T KNOW WHAT YA MEAN WHEN YA SAY "THAT WAY" "By that way I mean that way, Master Admin.", U.T. answered, unhelpfully. "Would you like me to turn the heads up display back on?" "If it means you'll show me which way Provesh is, then yes. Turn the heads up display back on." "Very well, Master Admin.", U.T. droned, then switched back ta its insufferable default female voice. "Ya didn't need ta be sucha jerk about, though. If ya wanted the HUD ya shoulda just said so in the first place." "Just put it on before I havea brain aneurysm, ya murderable module." With a soft sounding hum, the hexagons dotted my vision once again. But it wasn't just hexagons which appeared. No, a giant glowing semi-transparent arrow formed at the top of my eye and pointed to and through the left side of the glass dome, out into the vast ocean of Fremdos. "Admin Lucas always said

the guidance arrow was for casuals.”, U.T. smugly remarked. “I don’t care about being casual, I care about winning.”, I thought, then opened my mouth and turned to the purple haired girl. “Sorry bout that. Had ta figure some stuff out.”, I said. I walked up to the button directly under the semi-transparent arrow U.T. had conjured, and placed my hand over it. “Um... how did you figure out which button to press?”, the Unassigned girl asked, surprised. “A voice in my head told me.”, I answered, bluntly. “Is... is that really a smart idea?” the purple haired girl stammered. “As smart as anything else I’ve done.”, I said with a smile, then slammed my fist onto the button. With insane speed and momentum, the black metal ship Marston and I had liberated/hijacked lurched forward. Then, quickly, quietly, and without fanfare, the city fulla canals and crosses disappeared into the horizon. “When we return, we’ll tear those crosses down.”, the nameless girl said, clutching her hand over her heart. “You... you ain’t gonna return.”, I admitted. “I know.”, the purple haired girl said, sadly. “No, you don’t.”, a deep, bold voice boomed. Coming up from the stairs into the glass domed helm of the ship was... Marston. “You don’t know what the outcome will be. It is unlikely that we return from Provesh alive. It is not impossible.” He adjusted his black toned glasses. “And you are not obligated to come with us into the city. Once we arrive, you and the rest of the Volunteers may take possession of the ship, and go where you will. This is my fight, it is not yours unless you wish it to be.” I winced at that. Like hell I’d let that happen. I needed a surefire escape from Provesh once I had found that stupid recovery gem fer Lucas, and I wasn’t about to let some self righteous regent get in the way of that. “We told you before, Marston. Whatever it takes to defeat the General, we’ll provide. Even if it costs us our lives.” “Wait for your passion to cool before you make your decision.”, the black haired boy

said. "Once you see the rest of the warships, you may not be so inclined to aid me and Miss Axeman Red Four." "Whatever it takes.", the purple haired girl repeated, firmly. "So how long before we git ta Provesh?", I asked, not really knowing if I wanted the trip ta be long or short. "At this speed... three rising periods.", Marston droned, still wearing his shaded glasses even as he stared out into the night sky. "Perhaps even quicker than that." "But it takes the Caravans fourteen rising periods." "The caravans move over plains, tundra, desert, and mountains. This ship moves over the ocean.", the black haired boy said, then paused. "The ocean is made of water.", he clarified, unnecessarily. I narrowed my eye. "That might be the case, but the water in Provesh ain't exactly warm. Yer sure we'll be able ta just plow through its icy sheets in such a small amounta time." A slight smile came across Marston's face. "This ship is made out of lifemetal, Miss Axeman Red Four. An iceberg or two is of no consequence." "So ya have lifemetal ta spare when it comes ta war machines, but if yer looking ta get an extra limb or two yer shoot outta luck, huh?" "I am no pacifist, Miss Axeman Red Four. The Collective has every right to build what it deems necessary to protect itself." "Ya need a flight of metal warships ta protect yerself?" "No, of course not." "Then why the heck did ya approve the building of this here ship, Mister Former Acting General?" "It's probably because he was still evil at the time.", the Unassigned girl said, unamused. "Not evil, economics.", Marston stated, gazing out the glass dome. "The easiest way to get capital for research is to suggest military application. I wanted these ships built, and doing so under the pretense of defense was the path of least resistance." "What, ya wanted ta use these ships ta deliver candy ta orphans or something?", I snarked, skeptical. "Of course not, imbecile.", Marston snapped at me, then scratched his cheek. "I rescind

that. Yes, partly.” “W-wha?”, I stuttered, confused. I knew Marston ta be a good deal more idealistic than the other Collective folk I had met, but not ta the point of constructing confectionary carrying Caravans. “A future where it takes only three rising periods for goods to go from Fremdos to Provesh... that is the reason these ships were constructed. For now, all they carry is death and misery. But in the future – provided we live to create it- ships like this can make a completely seamless supply line.” I thought about saying something, but shut my mouth. Marston was right... in theory. Certainly, a fleet of metal ships like the one we had hijacked would be revolutionary fer commerce. But I knew Merchants, and Merchants didn’t go fer innovation unless that innovation innovated their revenue flows. More to the point, ya don’t use black metal warships ta trade, in the same way you don’t shove a gun in someone’s face ta say hello. “Perhaps ya should have just made a fleet of cargo ships instead.”, I finally said, not able ta keep my gabber mum. “Perhaps I should have.”, Marston said, darkly. “Supreme Sibling Desnion talked at length about how rules were arbitrarily, about how gleeful corruption was preferable to stagnant legalism. He told me that it was best to do what was best, and make it look like it was what the public wanted. And it’s true, for these past three cycles, the levity he and I have adhered to has led to some degree of... progress. But... but...” The black haired boy in white trailed off, and stared at one of the many buttons on the circular control panel. “But now ya see that them rules existed fera reason, and that the moment ya dropped em, ya gave someone like me power over a fella like you.” “Or maybe I just wasn’t strong enough.”, Marston muttered, irritated. “Exile... that was my mistake. Offering exile instead of just stabbing her then.” I didn’t really need ta ask the black haired boy who he was talking about. “Well, um...”, the purple haired girl

stated, nervously. "I guess we should return back down to the hull. Dinner should be ready at any moment." "I'm not hungry.", Marston and I both said. "Yes, well, I didn't invite you to eat out of the kindness of my heart.", the Unassigned girl said, her voice firm "Tensions on the ship are high... and we've had enough people lording over us for these past three cycles. You two need to come down and eat with the unwashed masses, lest we get the wrong idea." "Fine.", I said, or Marston said, or both of us said. As annoying as it may have been, the purple haired girl was right. Distance invites distrust, it invites contempt. If you're reliant on someone, or a group of someones, ya gotta at least try and feign camaraderie. Heck, even if yer inna position of real power, likea CEO, orra Senator, or the fella that peddles pot ta Fraternities, ya gotta placate people. There ain't no one who can control others without, in part, being controlled by them. That's just how it is. So Marston and I went back down inta the ship, and we ate. We ate inna big mess hall with tonsa empty chairs, and empty tables. The meal was fine, the company was fine... we just did our part ta fit in, much as a Former Regent anda half-augmented, half crippled Unionist could fit in, anyways. We learned of some of the other folk on the ship. The pink haired man I had been worried about was named Lancer Red Thirteen, and even though he was a hot-head, apparently he wasn't such a bad guy once ya got ta know him. He and Lancer Red Five had been pretty close before they were made inta volunteers, though when I asked why the two were made inta volunteers, I got little back besides stunned silence. The mousey voiced man I had pummeled to death was named Brother Titus. He was one of the five Fiatists onboard the ship that would oversee the slaves, and by and large folks liked him the best. He didn't flog any of them, he gave them a wide berth on productivity, and even snuck them

extra rations and the like from time ta time. “So why were you all fixing ta kill him?”, I asked, taking a bite out of a spice slathered mysterious meat Chef Orange Twelve had cooked up. “Nice or not, he still treated us like slaves.”, the girl with no name said. “Though only Lancer Red Thirteen wanted him dead....” I doubted that was the case. I had seen the way the former Volunteers held back when Red Thirteen advanced ta kill the mousey voiced man. Sometimes passivity is more telling than even the rashest of actions. And there ain’t anybody better ta place the blame on thana lifeless body, the sudden framing of the pink haired man asa maverick was purty darn convenient, especially seeing as he couldn’t speak up ta say otherwise. So I’d give the Unassigned Girl one thing, she was clever. Clearly not clever enough ta avoid having a black collar be strapped round her neck, but then again, even I wasn’t that clever. Course, I didn’t just learn about dead folk as I ate with the former Volunteers in the mess hall of the ship. Nah, I learned the names of some of the living, though I only remember a few of em. One fella wasa old man by the namea Tanner Yellow Forty Three. When I asked him why his rank and color was so low, he told me that he had been the wealthiest Tanner in alla Fremdos. “Then how come ya ain’t Tanner Black Five, then?”, I countered, suspicious. “I earned far too much metal to give it to my Union.”, the old Tanner answered with a leer. Odds were that the old man was lying. Ya gotta give up a portion of yer metal ta yer Union... if ya don’t, then bones tend ta break, and fingers tend ta twist. But the ramblings of an old man hurt me none, so I didn’t expose em. Besides the Tanner, I met Bowman Red Five. I learned from the purple haired girl that Bowman Red One was a man of few words. “Bowman Red One is a man of few words.” I looked at Bowman Red One, who was a man of few words. “Yer a man of few words?”

“I am a man of few words.”, Bowman Red One said, embodying a man of few words. I stuffed some more of the mysterious meat into my mug, partly cause I didn’t want to speak to no one, but also cause it was actually pretty decent tasting. “What the heck is this?”, I asked, talking despite myself. “Seabass. I caught it myself.”, the girl with light blue hair said. “Ah, so yera Fisher.” “You can catch fish without being a Fisher, you fucking retard.”, the light blue haired girl spat at me. I cringed at the “r” word for some reason, but smiled politely at the girl anyways. “My mistake. What’s yer name?” The girl with light blue hair puffed up her cheek, and looked away from me. “fier bu svn t.”, she mumbled, soft as possible. “I didn’t quite catch that, champ.” “...Fisher Blue Seventy Two.”, she hissed. “But just because I AM a Fisher, doesn’t mean that I NEEDED to be a Fisher to fish. I could have just as easily been a Swordarm, or an Axeman, if I set my mind to it.” “If ya had one scrap of metal tucked between yer tits ya could have been an Axeman.”, I said, licking my teeth. “But them Swordarms... they’re on another level altogether.” “Oh, Swordsarms!”, the purple haired girl said, excited. “They’re Provesh’s signature Union, right? Are they really as heroic as they’re built up to be?” “Depends on what ya mean by heroic.”, I muttered, memories of Ponytail’s dungeon coming back to me. “Don’t Swordarms fight for justice? Aren’t they unstoppable, skillful warriors without peer?” “They don’t fight for justice, they fight for themselves.”, I said, chewing on more of the spiced seabass. “But they are pretty tough.” “I bet they’re not THAT tough.”, Fisher Blue Seventy Two huffed. I turned my head towards her, and nonchalantly flipped my eyepatch up. “They were tough enough to do this.” “SUNS ABOVE!”, she shrieked, tipping her chair over in fright. I smiled as the rest of the group, save Lucas and Marston, laughed at her terrified outburst. Now, I could tell ya I pulled off my

eyepatch ta break the ice a bit and tighten my bonds with the former Volunteers- to an extent that'd be somewhat true. But I mostly exposed my empty eye socket ta shut the uppity blue haired brat up a bit. And I mostly succeeded. Though from the way Fisher Blue Seventy Two stammered, and cowered, and cringed, I knew that she wasn't *really* all that afflicted from glancing at the jagged swordscars which ran under my eyepatch, cause there was no way they looked that disgustin- "WHAT'S WRONG WITH YOUR FAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAACE?!", the blue haired girl yelped.

"Anophthalmia.", Marston answered, nonchalantly picking at his spiced seabass. "Just... just make her put the patch back on!", the light blue haired girl barked. "I didn't hear ya say please~", I chimed. "Please...?", Fisher Blue Seventy Two begged. I smiled, and moved the patch back over my face, as the rest of the former Volunteers looked on in mild amusement. Mild amusement was good. If I was mildly amusing enough, I could trick the folks I was with into thinking I had a personality. And not just any personality, a good natured personality. The gruff warrior with a soft spot, or the tryhard girl with a gooey center... either way, if I could folks around me to view me as a cliché, then I could make them comfortable with me. And if they were comfortable with me, well, then they'd be more susceptible ta following my will. I know it seems petty, I know ya might think I'm making a mountain out of a molehill. But even the slightest of social interactions have a purpose to em, even the smallest of small talk involves different aspects. It's all a game, basically. But unlike most games, it ain't a matter of winning or losing. It's a matter of getting folks ta do what ya want em ta do, and sometimes ta get them to do that ya need ta act like ya ain't getting what you want. So as the three rising periods ticked away, I acted the role which people seemed most receptive to – that of



the good natured cynic. I drank with the twenty or so freed Volunteers, I shot the crap with em, I ate with em. I even learned all of their names – though I'd be lying to you if I said I remember them now. All of it didn't matter. I wasn't relaxed. I wasn't in the mood to eat, or talk, or drink. I was terrified. As the blackmetal war ship moved through the sea, as the water got colder, as the rising periods got shorter, my nerves grew weaker, and weaker. And nothing got better, it never got better. Lucas continued to babble like a buffoon one moment, and shriek like a terrified toddler the next. Every waking moment on the ship was a nightmare. But I drank, and I talked, and I acted like it wasn't. I acted like it wasn't because if there's one thing people don't like, it's weakness. Being humorous, being kind, being charitable, those are all good traits, don't get me wrong. But they ain't enough, not by themselves. If someone perceives you as incompetent, and incapable, they'll avoid you like a plague. They'll cancel plans with you, they'll passively side against you, and in the worst case scenario, devour you. If there ain't any food around, I mean that last statement literally. So I couldn't be *seen* as weak, even if I was. But time slipped by, no one tried ta mug me, or murder me. The three rising periods spent sailing towards Provesh were a hollow ataraxia – the sea was serene, people were nice, and things were relaxed... but I knew all too well it was just a calm before the storm. So perhaps that's why I didn't git much sleep, even as the former slaves took what ta them must have been the first good rest they had in cycles. No, my mind- my mind wasn't capable of sleep, not fer those first two rising periods. Maybe it was cause of the coma, or maybe it was cause of the fear that if left my lov- if I left my wallet out of my sight, if I shut my eye for even a moment, then I'd wake up ta find I lost everything. So instead a sleeping, I spent my time outside a Lucas's cabin, staring out at

the ocean, watching the color of the water change. Near Fremdos the sea was clear, crisp, and calm... colored a brilliant azure. And on the first rising period, it remained that way. But on the second rising period, its color changed. The sea became a bit rougher, and its color went from azure to marine... it still looked pretty, it still looked enchanting, but- but its luster wasn't quite as nice as it was before. And as time went on, as the second rising period onboard the ship gave way to the third, the sea changed once again. It shifted from a brilliant marine to an inky black – yes, even as the suns rose to their highest point in the sky, the sea remained dark. The sea outside of Provesh had always been dark. Not cause of the sewage, like Blue and I had joked. No, it was dark because it was deep, and cold. You never went out on the ice in Provesh. One errant step and the ice beneath you would crack, sending you plummeting into the freezing waters below. The cold below the ice tended to kill most folk; like the Unassigned Lancer, like the two Handmaidens, like Blue. But not all folks who take the plunge die. Some live. Some survive by becoming just as cold as the ice they fell through. I had fallen in before... I had fallen long before I ever worked as a bouncer. And I would gladly fall again, if it meant preserving what little warmth was left. But even though I had resolved to keep myself awake for the rest of the journey, around the third rising period onboard the ship I felt my eyelids begin to get heavy. My full platemail began to feel like the softest of sheets, and the hallway outside of the cabin I had secured for Lucas and Lucas alone suddenly seemed like a five star hotel room suite. Sleep comes for everyone. It comes for prisoners on death row, it comes for soldiers in foxholes. No matter how big you build yourself up to be, you can't evade sleep. Even insomniacs lose consciousness sooner or later. So eventually... I can't exactly recall when, but

eventually I fell asleep. The sleep was a light slumber, and for once, a dreamless slumber. I had no more recollections of being a cheesy stage magician, nor did I suddenly imagine Marston as a Chicago Hotdog Vendor. No, as I slept, all that I knew was that I knew things I shouldn't have known, that things around me were fundamentally wrong, in a variety of ways. In other words, I knew I was going nuts. Or worse, I knew wasn't going nuts, and that things around me were just that crazy. It didn't matter either way. Magic, modules, Thief, and my dreams, they really didn't mean anything, even if they did. They were distractions. To someone else they might have held special significance, but to me, they were unnecessary burdens, obstacles. I couldn't dismiss them entirely from my mind, but I could ignore them. I *had* to ignore them. My meditation turned slumber didn't last long. I must have been asleep for less than a quarter of a rising period when- "Um... I think you should wake up now, Miss Axeman Red Four.", a gentle voice breathed into my ears. "..Why should I even bother?", I groaned, my body heavy. "Well... we're close to our destination. We... we need to prepare." "Prepare? Ya mean prepare for my little harebrained scheme?", I asked, my head thumping. "Look... you're right. It... it probably won't work out. We... we should just go to Trunchet, like ya said." "I never said we should go Trunchet.", the soft voice responded. My eye still shut, I nodded my head. "Is... is that so? Well... I still don't want to go to Fremdos, there probably ain't nothing good there. As for the whole General thing, or whatever yer so riled up about, let's forget it. I'm sure your brother can take care of whatever nonsense might be going on in Fremdos." "I don't have a brother, Miss Axeman Red Four.", the soft sounding voice said, sadly. I forced my eye open, knowing I wasn't talking to who I thought I was talking to. "I know ya don't, Marston.", I

said to the black haired boy, then grimaced. "I'm... I'm still a bit out of sorts." "I understand.", Marston said, solemnly. I looked around me, and gasped. I wasn't in the hallway outside Lucas's cabin... I was in the cabin. Somehow I had ended up in a bed across from the cot I had placed Lucas in, and somehow the ashy armor I had commandeered from the captain had been removed from my body. "What happened to my-" "Your armor is being cleaned.", the ex-regent in white explained. "It shall be returned to you soon enough." He extended his hand, and pulled me onto my feet, struggling to lift me even with the lack of the metal armor round me. "Come with me to the helm." I glanced across the bed and looked at Lucas. The cuts on his chest had healed, some, but the tips of his fingers still bled, and the skin that had been yanked from his shoulder hadn't returned. "Your friend will be fine.", the black haired boy declared, sensing my apprehension. "No one on this ship is out to hurt him, or you." "We've known them for less than four rising periods, how the heck do you know that?" "Because if these Volunteers still sought vengeance, they would have slit my throat open by now.", Marston stated, an icy calmness to his voice. "So put your paranoia aside, there is something I must show you." Still hesitant, I nevertheless followed the black haired boy up a few flights of stairs, back to the ship's domed control room. "Hey, why ain't the ship moving?" "Because it's stopped.", he said, drolly. As we got up to the glass dome, I saw *why* the ship had stopped. A few leagues ahead of us, standing in all of its... uh, glory, was Provesh. The trouble was that I was able to see the city of wood and snow in the first place. See, it was the middle of the night, and Provesh was pretty darn dark in the middle of the night. There wasn't all that much public infrastructure, not a whole lot of braziers or torches or the like, they'd get in the way of the drunks. There

also was a giant wall of ice which surrounded the city, so usually ya wouldn't be able ta make heads or tails of the city from a distance even in the morning. And yet, as I stood in the helm of the ship, I saw it the city all the same. "One question, Unionist.", Marston asked me, his arms crossed, his white cape covered back facing the city. "Is Provesh usually so... aflame?" I stared at the city turned burning inferno, and nodded my head. "No." "Then we're going to have to hurry.", he said, teeth clenched. "Nameless woman!", he barked, his voice deep. The purple haired girl appeared lickity spit. "Is something wrong, *Ex-Regent?*", she asked, somewhat mockingly. "Man the helm.", Marston grunted. "Get us closer to the city, but not too close. Circle around the waters if you must." "Was that an order?", the Unassigned girl asked. "It was a request.", Marston uttered, his voice low and venomous. "Oh, it was a request? Well I didn't hear you say please...", the unassigned girl teased. Marston stared down at the nameless girl with his shaded glasses. "Can you please man the ship so that we all don't crash, drown, and die of hypothermia?" "Um... sure.", the purple haired girl squeaked, looking very flustered. She reluctantly stepped up to the control panels, and gazed, mildly confused, at the array of buttons round the room. "I... I get that pressing a button will steer the ship in the direction of the button, but how do I control the speed?" "You make the ship go when it needs to go, and stop when it needs to stop.", Marston answered, then grabbed me by my metal wrist and yanked me out the helm, then broke out into a full on sprint. "We're late.", he huffed, as we moved rapidly through the ship. "What- what do ya mean we're late?" "The siege of Provesh has ended. The Invasion has already begun." "W-wha?", I stuttered. "But it's only been four rising periods! How the heck could-" "The gems.", the black haired boy muttered, shoving his way past Chef Orange Twelve as we

barreled towards the mess hall. "Somehow the Collective's military managed to mass produce these fire producing gems." "They're more like rubies, I reckon." "It doesn't matter. Provesh's main defense is a giant wall of ice." Marston briefly glanced out a window at the blazing city in the distance and grimaced. "Make that a giant puddle." "Stupid fricking modules.", I groaned, as the boy in white frantically tugged on my wrist like I was a dog. "Where the heck are we even goin-GAH!" Treating me with the same grace and respect he would a sack of rotting apples, grabbed me by the shoulders, and roughly shoved my butt down onto one of the many silver benches of the mess hall. Before I could even process what was going on, the black haired boy placed two fingers in his mouth, and with the same solemnness he had used when ordering me and Lucas's summary execution, quacked. Like a duck. Seemingly out of nowhere, Fisher Blue Seventy Two and Bowman Red One appeared in the mess hall, right by Marston. "Your orders, Ex-Regent Volunteer Marston, sir!", Fisher Blue Seventy Two shouted, saluting the boy that had once enslaved her with an eerie enthusiasm. "Remove Miss Axeman Red Four's clothing-" "W-WHAT?!", I sputtered. "-and clean her wounds." "O-oh.", I said, relieved the situation wasn't going in the direction I thought it was going in. The black haired boy turned to Bowman Red One. "You are to come with me and fetch a few items from the kitchen. Doublespeed." Bowman Red One didn't say nothing, but walked off with Marston all the same. "Don't worry.", Fisher Blue Seventy Two whispered to me, an unsettling smile on her face. "I once descaled a marlin without wasting a single chunk of meat. Getting you clean and re-bandaged will be child's play." She held up a knife. "Uh... what are you doing with that, kiddo?" "DESCALING THE MARLIN!", the light blue haired girl cackled, and with a frightening speed, swung her

small little knife up through my silk pajamas. I winced and prepared ta pummel the girl ta death, but then I noticed... she didn't stab me or nothing. She just chose to disrobe me in the most wasteful, distasteful way possible. "S-SUNS ABOVE!", Fisher Blue shireked, as she stared at my exposed chest, completely aghast. "Oh come on, they ain't that small." "Not that, you idiot! Your spinal cord, it's- it's made out of-" "Lifemetal.", I answered, grimly. "Disgusting, ain't it?" "Are you fucking kidding me, that's AWESOME!", Fisher Blue Seventy Two shouted, staring at me with an even more unsettling gaze. "Even the Brothers and Sisters onboard this ship never got this much lifemetal put in them. The most they got was like a finger or two, or a hand if they were really lucky." "I never asked for it, though.", I countered, weakly. "That doesn't change the fact that it's awesome!", the light blue haired girl snorted. I mean, if I was made of lifemetal I probably could have been free from this boat a lot sooner." I wanted ta say something, but shut my mouth. It... it was weird. The reason I had come to Fremdos in the first place was to find a metal replacement for the hand that I chopped off. But when I got all that and more... it just... it just wasn't right. The very presence of the metal limb made my skin crawl- my real, organic skin. But perhaps that disgust was nothing but arrogance and vanity on my part. Regardless of how I got it, regardless of if I wanted it, the lifemetal in my body was valuable, rare, and above all else; useful. For me to act like a victim because of it would be the same as a fella complaining about being forced into becoming a millionaire. And yet... fer me to have a metal hand, and a metal spine, while a little girl went withouta leg... "Hmph.", the light blue haired girl snorted, dabbing at my mostly healed scars, nicks, cuts, and wounds with a damp towle. "I don't understand how a Unionist could have ended up with this much lifemetal in them, but I guess it

explains how you took out most of the crew. You must have cut through them like butter.” “Wasn’t my strength that did em in.”, I breathed out, wincing as Fisher Blue Seventy Two removed the bandage from the neck. “It... it was their loyalty towards each other.” “Are you sure it wasn’t that giant greataxe of yours?”, Fisher Blue Seventy Two countered. I shivered a bit, as the icy seabreeze blew over my naked body. “It... it was a mix of the two.”, I admitted. “But there’s proper fighting, and then there’s what I do. What I do ain’t proper fighting.” “If what you do can take out twenty Fiatists in one go, I don’t think there exists fighting more proper.”, the Fisher girl said, speaking in a tone which didn’t make her sound like a braindead moron. “You... you wouldn’t really have such a high opinion of how I fight if ya saw it yerself.” “I wouldn’t imagine so, no. But I thank you for saving me, all the same.” “Alright, all done.”, the light blue haired girl said, cheerily swabbing the pointy ends of my ears. “Now put this on.”, she said, sternly. The Fisher girl handed me a undershirt, and a pair of slacks. They seemed to be made of a thicker material than the silken stuff I had been wearing. More cause of the cold than anything else, I put em on right quick. They were itchy, and coarse, and uncomfortable to wear. “Did you knit this yerself?”, I asked. “No.”, a bold voice boomed. “I did.” Holding my greataxe in one hand, and a polished white metal helm in the other, Marston returned to the messhall. “What you are wearing now is coarse spider string, sewn into under-armor. It is not comfortable. It is, however, capable of stopping a thrust from a short sword.” I patted the itchy under shirt. “For real?” “For real.”, Marston affirmed, then laid down the greataxe by my feet. “It isn’t much protection by itself, but if your armor gets penetrated, it will be one more layer.” “Thanks, then.”, I said, then stared up and down at the fine silken robes draped around the ex-regent. “Uh... are you seriously



gonna wear that?' "Of course not.", Marston grunted. He took off his cape, still leaving him ostentatiously dressed. "That's... that's it?" "That's it.", the black haired boy stated. "I lack the physical wherewithal to wear armor effectively, so I'll have to make do with just wearing less." I winced. "But if ya wear that get-up, even a kid with a butter knife will be able to gut you." "No.", Marston stated. "They won't." He clutched the center of his chest, and ripped off the rest of his remaining robes. What was left, was the same type of undershirt I was wearing, plus spats made out of the same scaly, itchy white material. Marston's, uh, *adjusted* outfit didn't leave too much to the imagination, but it wasn't his ghostly white skin or pristine body that had me distracted. Nah, see, strapped around his ankles, his arms, his wrists, and damn near every other exposed part of Marston's body were knives, neatly tied to him in leather straps. There had to be more than a dozen knives attached to the boy in white... maybe more than two dozen, even. Now, even that wasn't odd to me, that he had a whole lotta knives on his person at all times. What was odd was that the knives were all of incredible quality. They were long, sharp, black, and complete with a Runiertian reinforced handle. Perhaps more pertinently, they were the spitting image of the knife I had seen Marston stab Sabar-... stab someone, with. "I'm no fighter.". Marston admitted, wielding two knives he had taken from the straps on his back "But I will not be a burden." "Let's hope you're right about that.", I said to the boy I was planning on ditching the moment Lucas and I touched down on land. It was then, as Marston and I stood barely dressed in itchy, scaly material, that Bowman Red One returned, carrying a shining suit of white armor. "Wait, wait!", I protested. "That white armor is-" "The armor you pilfered from the Captain.", Marston answered. "I had it cleaned and returned to its normal luster." "G-guh.", I groaned. "I

know, the color might make you stand out more. But I couldn't buff out the dents while it was dirty." "That... that ain't it.", I said, sheepishly. "White... I ain't the typea person that should be wearing white. I'm too... unclean." "You're an imbecile.", Marston stated, briefly. "Color has no significance, save the value you choose to grant it. And Fisher Blue Seventy Two just washed you." "I didn't mean-" "I know. I don't care.", the black haired boy grunted. "You are still human, and you are still capable of doing good." "I- I don't know what good is, though!", I cried, shivering. Marston clenched my shoulder with both of his hands, and stared me straight in the eye. "That is the very reason why I believe in you, Miss Axeman Red Four. After all you've done, all you've seen, you still have the ability to question yourself, to consider the possibility that you might be in the wrong." "That don't mean nothing! Self-awareness don't make what I did any better!" "It makes you better than some.", Marston answered, tersely. He adjusted his shaded spectacles. "Now stop angsting, and put on the armor. There will be plenty of time for us to regret our existences once we're placed up high on a cross." His words should have been sobering, but they weren't. Crosses, and the like... even back then, when I had no idea of the two millennia old Amazon Best Seller, they just seemed... they just seemed cartoonishly cruel. But I placed the armor on, all the same. Well, mostly. Fisher Blue Seventy Two helped me with the chest piece. "W-woah.", the light blue haired girl stuttered. "You're like a whole other person, now. Like a Swordarm from the poems." "I'm just about the farthest thing from a Swordarm.", I said, glumly. "You're- you're you, Four.", a weak, distant voice wheezed. "N-no.", I stuttered, knowing instantly who it was. It... it was Lucas. The wounded blonde boy meandered his way into the mess hall, swaying back and forth as if he was in a dream. "Just be Four, Four.", Lucas said, or

tried to say, his tongueless mouth moving slowly. "That's all you... all you need to be."

"Are you- are you back to normal, Lucas?", I asked, praying, praying, praying that despite his cloudy eyes, despite his weak voice, that the sarcastic Sorcerer would return, that he'd scold me or insult me or- or just act like himself, instead of the shell he had become. But all Lucas said in response was: "Blessed be the meek, for they shall inherit the earth." And then... and then he laughed, or yelped in pain. I couldn't tell the difference any more. "T-thanks, Lucas." I said, somehow finding his words comforting, even though they were little more than maddened prattle. I forced myself to smile, then reached to put on the helmet. "Wait, wait, I'm not done.", the Fisher girl snipped. She dug into her rags, and produced a perfectly circular brown leather patch. "Tada~.", she proudly proclaimed. "I made this myself, after seeing how sweaty that old eyepatch of yours was." She reached to remove the sweaty patch in question from my face. "N-NO!", I shrieked, slapping away her hand. "That... that ain't yers to take! You didn't make it!" "S-sorry.", the girl with light blue hair apologized. "I... I didn't know it meant something to you." "Of course it means something to me!", I snapped, angry and frightened and sad, all at once. "The... the person who made this for me, - she's-" I paused, and looked at Lucas. I saw his bleeding fingertips, his cloudy blue eyes, the bandages on his skinless shoulder, the countless stab wounds on his abdomen. "She's dead to me.", I finished, and like I would a piece of trash, ripped the eyepatch from my face, and threw it on the ground. "Oh.", Fisher Blue said, slightly confused. "So you won't mind wearing mine, then?" "I don't need an eyepatch.", I coldly uttered. I reached down, and placed the shining white helmet down over my head. I turned to Marston. "Alright. Back to the- "A-ah!", a terrified voice shrieked, from the top of the ship. "-helm."

Greataxe in hand, I sprinted back up towards the glass domed control room of the black metal ship “What’s wrong?!” I barked, throwing my platemail covered body into the oval shaped realm. “The- the harbor!”, the purple haired girl yelled, on her knees. “It’s- it’s filled with-“ ...Crosses. The harbor was filled to the brim with crosses. They surrounded Provesh. Cept, there weren’t nearly as many... in total I saw maybe only fifty or so, compared ta the thousands of crosses which lined the canals of Fremdos. But quantity wasn’t the only difference. See, the crosses in Provesh, they had something on em that I never saw the crosses in Fremdos have attached to em. People. “NO!”, the purple haired girl shrieked, spasming. “NO! NO NO NO NO!” The same stalwart girl that had told me she was willing to lay her life on the line was little more than a babbling, bawling, blob. “WE- WE NEED TO LEAVE!”, she screamed, and made a beeline fer the button pointing away from Provesh. I body-checked her with my shoulder. “We’re not going anywhere.”, I said, coldly. “B-but- but if we stay, we’ll be crucified! L-look! The city’s in flames! It’s already a lost cause, so-“ “Provesh ain’t a lost cause.”, I lied. “She’s right.”, Marston said, strolling in the room behind me. “I’m right?!”, I spat, shocked. The black haired boy covered with knives shook his head. “I count only forty eight crosses. If the Plebian branch conquered the city, we’d see thousands.” “But what about them folks nailed up in the harbor?” “Stragglers caught on the wrong side of the siege.”, the black haired boy said, then growled, hatefully. “W-what are you doing?”, the purple haired girl yapped, as the boy with ruby red eyes violently shoved his way past her. “Never again.”, Marston hissed, his voice seething with rage. “I will NOT let this brutality happen AGAIN!” He slammed his fist down on one of the buttons on the control panel. The ship went flying straight towards Provesh. “G-GAH!”, I screamed, the ship smashing through

ice as it hurtled towards Provesh's harbor. "What happened ta waiting fer an opening?!"

"FORTUNE FAVORS THE BOLD!", Marston shouted, his neat black hair turned messy and wild. "A-ARGH!", I cried, our big black metal warship swiftly approaching a line of fifty others. "The- the other ships! The other Collective ships, they're parked inna blockdge! We gotta stop!" "WE'RE NOT STOPPING!" "But then we'll hit the ships!"

"EXACTLY!" Panicked, I ran ta slam the button Marston had pressed, in order ta stop the ship. I hit the button directly ta the left of it. "AHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAH!", Marston cackled, as we slammed through the gap between two identical black metal warships, as it crashed through several of the half sunken, rotting ships placed in the waters around Provesh. Me, him, and the purple haired girl were thrown against the glass of the helm, as the entire ship shook violently by the repeated impacts. But the ship held. It held together, and what's more it pressed on, to Provesh's harbor. It sailed smoothly, and calmly, to-, to- the same exact dock where I had met Merchant Black One. Well, alright, a dock slightly to the right of that dark, dreary dock. Cept, it wasn't dark no more. Mostly causea all the fire. I pulled myself off the glass, and grabbed the purple haired girl by her shoulders. "You, Chef Orange Twelve, and eight others will stay here." I instructed, dropping the accent so she could hear me clearly. "You will not leave. You will wait until we return to leave." "But-" "No buts. We need people on the ship in case things go sour, which from the looks of it, is a probability moreso than a possibility. You are nervous, you are scared. You have every right to be. But if you do not do as I say, if you leave the ship, I cannot guarantee your safety. Do you understand?" "Yes.", the purple haired girl answered, a determined look on her face. "I understand. You just want what's best for me and the others." "Of course I do.", I lied,

hoping I sounded at least remotely sincere. "I need your help and cooperation to put a stop to all this killing... to finally end this evil." Of course, the real reason I needed the purple haired girl and the others on the ship was cause I intended to bail on the burning inferno of a city the moment I found the recovery module, but telling her that would be stupid. Better to appear like a hero on a forced retreat, than the corner cutting coward I was. I turned ta Marston. "Let's get this over with." The black haired pushed himself off the glass, and nodded his head. "First we must speak with the others, and see who wishes to come with us.", he said, back to his calm, solemn self. "We ain't taking Lucas.", I put out there, instantly. "We're taking Bowman Red One, and that's it. The rest ain't fighters." "We will not stop those who are willing.", Marston said, glaring at me with firey red eyes. "Pft.", I spat, conceding the issue. "I'll meet you outside of the ship. If Lucas comes out with ya I'll chop off yer head." I left Marston alone, and quickly dashed through the ship. I went down one flight of stairs, then another, then another. Naturally, I wasn't leaving the ship the same way I had boarded it- we lacked a row boat, and even if we didn't, I didn't wanna be anywhere near the icy waters of Provesh while wearing ninety pounds of armor. So I went to leave the ship properly- via its actual boarding plank, which had through hook or crook been laid down right at the end of the dock. But as I went through the compact corridor that led ta the proper exit of the black metal warship, I was interrupted, by- "Four.... Where- where are you going, Four?" Somehow, someway, the beaten and bruised blonde haired boy had wandered to the exit of the ship, even as it had been rocked back and forth by Marston's reckless maneuver. Lucas stood between me, and the door to the infero outside. "I'm just... I'm going out fera bit, Lucas. I'm gonna get ya something that'll make ya feel better." "With you... I- I want to

go with-“ “No, Lucas.”, I said, gently. “You can’t come with me. I need you here, onboard the ship, to-“ “I- I WANT TO COME WITH YOU!”, he sobbed, wrapping his arms around my platemail covered chest. “You- you can’t Lucas, you- can’t. It’s too dang dangerous.” My soft words didn’t deter him. “Four! I’m so happy I could see you again, Four!”, he cried out, giddy-like, like a kid about ta go ta an amusement park. My gentle words didn’t deter him, so what I said was: “Get out of my sight.” “W-wha-?”, the boy with cloudy blues eyes stuttered, shocked. “Get out of my sight. Go away.” “But- but Four, I-“, Lucas babbled. “Get out of my sight! I hate you!”, I spat, and tried to swing my gauntlet across his face. But my hand just wouldn’t move. Fer- fer some reason, I just couldn’t hit him, I couldn’t slap him on the face and send him back into the bowels of the ship. But- “Guh... GUAAAAAH!”, the tongueless boy babbled, crying out as if he had been struck. “Go ahead and cry, you useless idiot.”, I spat, making the words bellowing out from my helmet sound as spiteful as possible. “I’ve carried you this whole goddamn time. I saved you from getting your arm chopped off, I saved you from that Handmaiden. I helped you find those stupid magical crystals. But I’ve had it. Get out of my sight. You’re a burden, and I don’t want you weighing me down.” The bruised and beaten fake Sorcerer winced, but stared at me with unblinking cloudy blue eyes. “JUST SCRAM!”, I bellowed, forcing my voice as low as it could possibly go. As if splashed by icy water, Lucas recoiled away from me. And while his eyes remained cloudy, his face was anguished, and hurt, as he returned to the bowels of the black metal warship. “U-ugh!”, I retched, sick ta my stomach. But it was just a dry heave. Nothing came up from my throat, which I suppose was for the best, considering I was wearing a helmet. I steadied myself, and, holding my great with real and fake hand alike, ventured out of the ship,

and onto the docks. The first thing I felt was the cold. The first thing I smelled was smoke. And the first thing I saw was fire. It was a paradox, but one I was well accustomed to. I wanted to just start searching off on my own right then and there, but the visibility was far too low. The smoke and the fire, coupled with my helmet and lack of an eye, made the whole “seeing” things difficult. “Is- is there any way you can help me see things better, module?”, I thought. “I can’t repair yer GUI, if that’s what yer asking. If ya want ta regrow organic matter, ya need the-“ “Recovery module, yeah, yeah, I know.”, I thought ta the gem witha thousand voices. “But I’m wondering if ya can filter out this smoke and the like.” “I... I can’t. Sorry, that’s not within my purview. I have a thermal differentiator and detector, but with all this heat it won’t help ya none.” “Alright then.”, I grumble-thought. “Pardon me for asking, but...was insulting Admin Lucas like that really necessary?”, the module asked, shifting to its stuffy voice. “I... I don’t know.”, I thought, then pushed that thought ta the back of my mind. A good thing too, cause just as I did- “YOUR NAME!”, a loud, boisterously bold voice barked. “TELL ME YOUR NAME!” I jerked my helmet covered head up, and around, and scanned the docks fer the source of the sound. I couldn’t find nothing. “How boutya introduce yerself first?” “Your name!” the voice demanded, as three arrows embedded themselves on the half-sunken scrapwood under my feet. Tell me your name, or else!” I froze up, and glanced around. Still no sign of the voice, no clue as ta who was threatening me. All I could see were the arrows, embedded in the rotting wood of the docks. “What’s my name ta you?!” I cried out, ducking down as low as my plate mail would permit me. That might have seemed odd, that I was so afraid of getting shot even though I was wearing more metal thana Slayer concert, but allow me ta explain. Arrows ain’t harmless. They can



pierce through just about anything, given enough force. A cross-bow bolt would shoot right through someone covered in plate no problem, a longbow arrow could make plate look like aluminum foil. Even a lucky shortbow shot could quickly curtail an armored fella's life, if it hit the right joint. So I ducked because if I didn't I'd be a *sitting* duck.

"Everything!", the loud voice boomed out. "Now tell me your name or I'll turn you into a pincushion! This is your final warni-" As the smoke obfuscated voice ranted, a boomerang or something flew over my head, in an arch. "- AUGH!", the voice screamed, as the boomerang-thing landed. "AH! My- my leg! My sunkissed leg!" The threats had turned ta groans of pain, but it made my would-be murderer much easier ta find. I didn't even have ta look around, really, I just moved through the smoke and found... a blue haired man, laying on the ground. He was wearing light leather armor, and had apparently been manning a longbow- a long bow that he had dropped due ta the knife embedded in his ankle. "I had meant that to be a warning knife.", a low voice echoed from behind me. Right behind me was Marston, and I suppose what had hit the blue haired man lying before me wasn't a boomerang after all. Just onea Marston's many many knives. "A- a warning knife?!", the blue haired man yelped in pain. "Do you know how ridiculous that sounds?!" I didn't respond. Instead, I lifted my greataxe up ta chop off the aggressive archer's head. "Don't.", Marston said, extending his arm out before I could swing down. "He just tried ta kill me.", I said, gruffly. "And he failed quite miserably.", Marston noted. "Only causea you, and yer knives." "Right, because of me, and my knives. So his life is mine to take, or to spare.", the black haired boy said, boldly. "That's how you Unionists reason things out, correct?" "That's how STUPID Unionists reason things out, and I consider myself as stupid as I do a Unionist.", I

growled, then tried to pivot the head of my greataxe out of the way of Marston's arm. No such doing. "Look, we gotta kill him.", I breathed out, trying to force my greataxe down as the black haired boy continued to block it. "If we don't kill this fella, he'll go whistle for his buddies, and they'll all come to kill us." "Maybe. Or maybe he simply wished to know our names." "Yes! Yes, that's all I wanted to know!", the blue haired man cried out, desperately. "Your names! Tell me your names! A-AUGH!" "Don't say nothing.", I barked Marston, as he removed his knife from the blue haired man's ankle and holstered it. "Just walk away." Marston didn't walk away. "My name is Marston. I am a lay citizen of the Holy Collective. This woman is Axeman Red Four. She is a Unionist, like yourself." "I'm no fucking Unionist.", the blue haired man spat, then... whistled. Fifteen lightly armored, but heavily armed men emerged from the smoke, all wielding crossbows. "You two! Drop your weapons!" "I fricking toldya.", I cursed, dropping my greataxe onto the ground. The centermost crossbowman stared down at the blue haired man. "What is this about, Other?" "Names!", the blue haired man hissed. "THESE LOT HAVE NAMES!" "I see.", the centermost crossbowman said, then cracked his head. "Named Ones!", he bellowed, to Marston, and to me. "I give you two options! Renounce your names and work off your karmic debt, or die!" "Karmic debt?", Marston whispered to me. "Yeah, karmic debt. He just said that, there's no need to repeat it!", I hissed. The black haired boy nodded his head, and looked the centermost crossbowman straight in the eyes. "You are Unassigned, correct?", Marston asked, his voice lower than the crossbowman's. "There are some who call us that, yes.", the crossbowman said, every single word of his laced with spite. "But we are *not* Unassigned. We are one! United and unstoppable!" Marston reached for one of his knives, but stopped. "And I am from the

Collective!”, the black haired boy bellowed out. “And Axeman Red Four represents my interest! And as a member of the Collective I can see to it that you Unassigned receive fair and equitable treatment. I know you hold anger towards the Unionists, but simply trying to slaughter them all is by no means a solution! Lay down your weapons and speak to me, not as a combatant, but as a-“ “SILENCE!”, the centermost crossbowman commanded. “Your Collective, Your General, and you complaints mean nothing to us! We, the Amorphous Many, will not be taken in by lies and slander, not from anyone who dares to give themselves names! Unionist and Fiatist alike shall meet retribution, and pay for all the sins they’ve committed! We shall wash ourselves in your-“ “Aw, just shut up already, yer hurting my ears!”, a loud, wonderful voice shouted. From the center of the smoke emerged a giant figure, clad in cerulean armor, wielding one heck of a greataxe: black with a firey red stripe going down the middle. But the armor clad axe-wielder wasn’t alone. Besides him were five Bowman, Three Lancers, Four Hammerions, and two Spear Alla em were ripe and raring ta go. The Axe-wielder advanced towards the crossbow wielding man with the urgency of a dead cat. “If it ain’t you Unassigned it’s the Merchants,”, he grunted, “ if it ain’t the Merchants it’s the Swordarms, and if it ain’t the Swordarms it’s that shrill Collectivist cunt barking threats at us from behind the ice gate! Talk talk talk, all folks wanna do is talk! Well I gotta few words fer alla y’all: let’s go get em, boys!” “GRAAAAAAAH!”, the Unionists cried, and, led by the axe-wielder in cerulean, charged. What followed was- well- a slaughter. The Crossbowman all turned their concentration and aim towards the charging Unionists. The moment they did, I picked up my greataxe, and Marston unsheathed two of his knives. Neither of us got a chance ta do anything with em. See, trying ta hit a moving

target with a crossbow ain't that hard – assuming there's only one target ta hit. But the problem was that there wasn't just one target. There were fifteen. One fer each crossbow wielding Unassigned, but despite the Centermost man's words, they weren't one. They couldn't coordinate their shots. And they were inna panick. So a buncha bolts all hurtled towards the same Unionist, and crashed, harmless. Two bolts hit a Bowman in the arm, and one bolt even took a Lancer's throat, but that was the extent of what the Crossbow wielding Unassigned Brigade could do, before they had ta reload. They didn't get ta reload. The axe-weilding Unionist in the midnight armor roared, as he sliced through the stationary Unassigned Fighters like they were tissue paper. Four or five of em were split into two – I saw one fella get torn apart at the waste, and one particularly unlikely girl lost botha her arms in one greataxe swing. The remaining nine crossbow wielders didn't fare much better – if an arrow ta the throat didn't get em, then a hammer ta the skull did. The entire altercation lasted at most half a minute... possibly even less time than that. And by the end of it, all the Unassigned Crossbow wielders lay dead, and in the center of them, victorious, was – “BOY!”, the axe-wielder barked, directing his attention at Marston. “TELL ME YER NAME, BOY!” The Bowman, the Lancers, and the Spearhands stepped forward, and pointed their various pointy things at us ta incentivize conversation, some. “My name is Marston, Layman of the Holy Collective.”, the black haired boy said, standing calm in the center of the slaughter. “Then tell me, Marston of the Holy Collective, why are you here?” “I'm here to save this city.”, Marston answered, swiftly, then cringed. “I mean- I'm here for peace.” The man in the cerulean armor didn't so much as flinch. “Is that why that giant warship is behind you, Marston of the Holy Collective? For peace?” “The warship is entirely incidental.”, Marston said, slightly

flustered. "A ship that large ain't incidental, boy. You can yammer about whatya will, but I know the reality of the situation: yer the vanguard for the rest of them black habit wearing shitheads, ain't ya?" "No. We're not!", Marston cried, his voice raised, alarmed. "I may be of the Collective, but I'm not working for the Collective! I mean, not the General, at any rate-" "Shut it.", the man in the cerulean armor growled. "You can yammer on as much as you want, but I ain't buying what yer selling. You're here, you're armed, you're right by one of the same warships that have been pounding on our city fer the last ten rising periods. It don't take a genius ta realize you're a saboteur." "I AM NO SABOTEUR!" Marston yelled, increasingly on edge as the points of the Lancers' lances drew closer. "I AM HERE TO HELP YOU, YOU ARMOR-CLAD IMBECILE!" "Yknow what?", the man in the cerulean armor said, lowering his greataxe slightly. "I sorta believe you. I sorta think you ain't a bad sort... not many saboteurs would be so stupid as to crash land a boat in the middle of Unionist turf. But a friend of mine always told me never to believe in what you only *sorta* believe. She always told me to minimize risk as much as possible, to not let circumstances get the best of me by being prepared fer them. Now... that friend is gone. She died, because I roped her inta something I never should have. So I'm not going to mess up a second time. Marston of the Collective, it's nothing personal, but I'm gonna have ta kill you. You, and the idiot next to ya." The black haired boy gulped, but still managed to keep his composure. "Doing so would be a mistake, Mister-" "Axeman Red Four.", the man in the cerulean colored armor answered, gruffly. "What.", Marston blurted. "Axeman Red Four.", the man in the cerulean metal armor said, somewhat defensively. "My name is Axeman Red Four.", he repeated, as if ta drive the point home. "No it isn't.", Marston said, exasperated. "How

would you know what my name is, Marston of the Collective?" Marston removed his shaded glasses from his face. "I don't know what your name is, but I know what it isn't. It isn't Axeman Red Four." "Hurry up and kill them already, Four!", a Lancer standing next to the man in the cerulean armor hissed. "He's clearly just trying to stall for time!" "No. No, I am not trying to stall for time.", the knife covered boy said, stalwartly. "I'm correcting a lie. I know beyond a doubt that you are not Axeman Red Four." "And how the bloody hell would you know that, you girly-faced nutter?", the strong looking axe-wielder blustered, his aged voice sounding flustered. "Because the real one is right next to m—" I covered Marston's mouth with my left gauntlet. "It ain't nice to lie, ya know.", I said, standing up and swinging my greataxe over my shoulder. "Oh, so he does talk!", the oblivious man in the cerulean armor spat. I decided to spell it out for him. "It ain't nice to lie, *old man*." The large man with the greataxe took a few steps back. "Who- who are ya?!", he barked, anger mixing in with fear. I stepped forward towards him, and beckoned him towards me with my fake hand. "Come and find out, name-sharer.", I growled. Immediately, two Lancers advanced, shielding the man in the cerulean armor as the Spearhands prepared to skewer me. "STAY BACK!", the man in the cerulean metal armor roared, pushing the polearm users to the side. "I'm more than a match for this bastard!" I adjusted my greataxe, and cracked my neck. "Shut up and fight, geezer." The greataxe wielder in front of me winced, but with an enraged roar, rushed at me. I rushed him, too. Have ya ever seen a sword fight? Or... or, a fencing match, maybe? Well, if ya have, you know how they go. The aggressor lunges, and stabs, and slashes, while the defender blocks, and parries, and dances. Then, they switch, depending on who still has all their fingers. Swordfighting's all about attacking and defending, about

knowing when to use force, and knowing when to be cautious. Axefights, on the other hand- “RAR! GRAH! GUUUUUUUH!”, the man in the cerulean armor shouted, wildly slamming his greataxe at me. “GUUUUUUUH! HARG! RAR!”, I screamed, slamming my greataxe ta meet his before it could hit me. To be sure, I’d never even attempt to do anything like that normally. Wild greataxe swings aren’t something you can predict, and the man I was fighting swung with such speed and ferocity I should have never been able to come close to deflecting them. Cept, his swings weren’t wild. Not ta me. Ta me, they were swings I had seen countless times before, swings I had swung a wooden greataxe at many many times, until I learned how ta parry them. Until I learned how ta match em, blow fer blow. “Hah... hah...”, the man in the cerulean armor panted, then leapt back, into the mist of the smoke covered harbor. “One.”, I counted, my words the only ones spoken in the eerily quiet harbor. “Two.”, I spoke, as the Lancers, Spearhands, and Marston alike looked this way and that, a confused expression on their faces. “Three. GRAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!”, I screamed, and swung my greataxe ta my left, right as I reached the third count. I didn’t swing through empty air. Just as I thought would- no. Just as I KNEW would happen, the man in the cerulean metal armor returned, lunging at me through the smoke in a mad dash. He had sought ta slam the head of his greataxe deep inta my chest, and woulda succeeded, given his momentum, and the smoke which obfuscated him. But that little trick was something he had taught me cycles ago – it wouldn’t work now. “Suns above!”, the man in the cerulean armor exclaimed, as my greataxe sent his flying out of his gauntlets, and splashing down inta the harbor. I winced. I didn’t mean ta do that, the greataxe looked ta be super valuable. Nevertheless, I raised *my* greataxe, and approached the greataxeless man. “Do you

yield?”, I barked, curtly. “Lance.”, he said, briefly. Without hesitation, one of the lancers tossed their signature weapon at the man in the cerulean colored armor. I heard a weird splashing sound from behind me, but didn’t look. I wanted ta see just how much resolve the big fella in fronta me had. “No.”, my opponent said, approaching me swiftly. “I don’t yield.” “Aw, crap!”, I cursed, as the man in the cerulean armor rushed me . With a simple spin of his hand, the man in the cerulean metal armor caught my ankle with the flat of his lance, and sent my head slamming straight into the soot covered ground. “G-uh... guh.”, I groaned, dizzy. I shook my head and regained my footing, and prepared to- “GRRRRRRRRRAH!”, the man in the cerulean armor roared, as he swung his gauntlet straight at my face. He hit me. He hit me pretty hard.

“FUDGEEE!” I shrieked, as I was sent flying inta onea the docks, my greataxe falling out of my grasp. I scrambled ta my feet, but it was too late. My opponent quickly tossed the lance back ta his comrade, and picked up my fallen greataxe. “Quick, Unionist!”, a bold voice cried out. “Catch!” I briefly glanced behind me. Soaked from head ta toe with ice water was Marston, and in his hands was... the same greataxe I had knocked inta the water with mine. “Thanks!”, I yakked, as the black haired ex-regent tossed the weapon over ta me. I clenched my real and fake hand alike around the handle of my opponent’s greataxe, and prepared ta face him.

“This ends now.”, the man in the cerulean armor uttered. “By the count of ten, you’ll be finished. I’ll grant you the honor of witnessing my signature move before you die.”

Beneath my helmet, I cracked a smile. I knew *exactly* what was gonna happen. The greataxe grabber in fronta me would begin counting slowly, then, when he reached four, would rush. It was a juvenile trick, but it was amazing how often it caught people



offguard. "One.", he said aloud, standing still. "Two.", he counted. "THREE!", I yelled, and with a raised greataxe, rushed the man. He knocked the greataxe out of my hands before I could even smack his flank with it. He raised my greataxe in turn, and lifted it up to crush me with it. "Yield!", I cried out, before he could slice me into two. "I- I yield!" The man in the cerulean armor lowered my greataxe. "I had hoped you'd put up more of a fight than-" "LIKE HELL I YIELD!", I yelled, and swung my right gauntlet straight at his helmet. I was fairly confident that I had him beat. After all, I was too close to him for him to use my greataxe on me, there ain't no way he coulda- "NO.", the man in the cerulean armor hissed. He dropped my greataxe, grabbed me by the helmet, and crashed my skull against his knee. Dazed, and dizzy, I swung my fist one more time at my opponent, but slammed into the soot covered ground instead. "G-guh...", I gurgled, utterly defeated. "Kill him! Kill him already!", a voice rang out. "You'll have to go through me, first.", Marston's voice retorted. "SHUT UP, THE LOT OF YOU!" the man in the cerulean metal armor yelled. "It was ME that beat him, so it's ME that decides if I should kill him!" "Wait, you're not thinking of sparing this craven, are you Four?!", an incredulous voice voiced incredulously. "He threw a punch at you after yielding!" "Stand up, boy!", the man in the cerulean armor yelled. My energy gone, I slowly got up on my feet. "Take off that darn helmet!", he barked. "I would know your name and see your face before I bashed yer skull in!" I pulled off my helmet, and let the smoke run through my leaf-green hair. "My name? C'mon... you know my name." "R-red...", the man in the cerulean metal armor stammered. He tore off his helmet, revealing his aged blue hair, his bushy blue beard. "R-REEEEEEEEED!", the old man sobbed. "Heh.", I laughed, as my eye became wet for some reason. "It's, uh... it's nice to see ya too." I burst into

tears. "GAAAAAAAAAAH! BLUE! BLUE, YA STUPID FRICKING BASTARD! I THOUGHT YOU WERE DEAAAAD!" The man I had known as Axeman Blue Fifteen ran towards me, and I towards him, arms outstretched ta embrace each other. The center of our chest pieces clashed inta each other and knocked us ontta the ground before we could even touch each other. "Hahahah...", I laughed, still crying. "Pfffffft.", Blue snorted, also crying. "You- you know this... woman, Four?", one of the Lancers asked, flabbergasted. "Of course I know her!", Blue said, proudly. "This woman is the original Axeman Red Four!" "The- the original?!", the Lancer spat. "But you said she died!" "I was apparently quite misinformed!", Blue laughed. "But- but that doesn't make any sense! You always said Axeman Red Four was the toughest Unionist you ever met! This- this woman is nothing but a cravenly psychopath!" "Aye, that's what makes her the toughest!" Blue said, gazing at me proudly. "Throwing a punch just after yielding... that's exactly the low blow you always go for!" "Y-yeah, but it didn't work. You kicked my butt!", I breathed out. "What the heck have you been doing ta git so darn strong, Old Man?" He scratched his beard. "I wasn't particularly strong, I just reckoned if I didn't pummel you ta a pulp you'd take my neck. Course, I never coulda imagined it was *you* I was fighting, Red. Speaking of... if you weren't dead, then where were you these past rising periods?" "In Fremdos.", I said, as Marston and the others stared at Blue with their mouths agape. "It... uh... it wasn't as good of a trip as I was hoping it ta be." "You went ta Fremdos?!", Blue gasped. "Wait- so that means this girly looking fella AIN'T lying?" "Er... no.", I mumbled, rubbing my sore chin. "No, he ain't lying. He's actually here ta help, fer a given value of help." "I'm here to stop the Collective from conquering your city.", Marston said, looking as dignified as a soaking wet fella inna glorified tanktop could. "What's left of it, at least."

he said, darkly. “Bah!”, Blue spat. “The Fiatists aren’t the ones that turned this city into a flaming turd. They’re threatening to, but they ain’t really done nothing yet. The Unassigned are the real problem.” “I noticed that.”, Marston said dryly. “They must have started their rebellion the moment they saw the Collective ships arrive.” “No, that’d be the Swordarms.”, Blue said, exasperated. “But they ain’t calling it a rebellion, they’re calling it martial law, which I suppose issa nother word fer stealing all the metal, food, and ale that ain’t barred ta the floor.” “The Swordarms?!”, I gasped, the points of my ears twitching at the name. “Where the heck are the Swordarms?!” “They’re barred up in the Trade District, Red.”, Blue said offhand. “But they’re not the ones burning everything, that’d be the-” “Unassigned, yes you just said that, there’s no need to repeat it.”, Marston finished fer him, as he brushed some moisture off of his shaded glasses. “And how long have they been a nuisance?”, he asked, his voice as serious-sounding as ever. “Oh, the Unassigned have beena nuisance ever since Red left. Two rising periods after I thought she ate it, they started their little uprising.” “I can kinda see why they’d starta uprising.”, I said, grimly. “But how the heck did y’all let a buncha half-starved fellas git the besta ya? I mean, sure, they might out-number ya, but they weren’t that well armed, I don’t think. The one fella I knew who was had his throat slit in Merchant Black’s basement.” “See, that’s the darndest thing.”, Axeman Blue Fifteen yarned. “The moment they declared their rebellion, they took over the entire square. Y’know, with the stalls and stuff.” “They took over the square?!”, I gasped. “How the heck did they do that?” “They were well-armed.”, Blue said. “Don’t know how, but they were. These fellas-“, he grunted, kicking the corpse of one of the crossbowmen, “are actually kinda under-equipped fer the new Unassigned. They’ve been bleeding us dry

fer over fourteen rising periods.” “That- that doesn’t make any sense.”, Marston gasped. “There’s no way Unassigned could get so well equipped – not unless the Collective was supplying them with weapons and armor. But / never supplied them with anything, and neither did Desnion-“ “Your sister did.”, I said, flatly. “W-WHAT?!” “Your sister.”, I said, realization dawning on me. “When I first met her, she was giving away marks like it was nobody’s business. Marks fer metal, if I recall.” “I heard about that.”, one of Blue’s Lancers commented. “A white haired girl who would trade you fifteen thousand marks for one bar of metal.” “I heard it was twenty thousand marks!”, a Hammerion countered. “Well I heard it was-“ “It doesn’t matter what it was.”, I said, coldly. “I commissioned someone to check up on that little operation of hers sixteen rising periods ago. What it was was a front ta give Unassigned loads and loads of marks.” “You- you KNEW about that, Unionist?!” Marston cried out, furious. “ You KNEW my sis- you knew that Sabarene had given the Unassigned in Provesh unlimited cashflow?! And you STILL helped her in that imbecilic competition?!” “Yes. Yes, I did.”, I admitted. “I knew she had been up ta no good for awhile. But even though I knew, I didn’t want to know. You know?” “NO!”, Marston bellowed. “How the hell did you suspect nothing about the General when she was giving away money?! NO ONE gives away money! Not unless they want something!” “I know, Marston. I was an idiot. I trusted her. It’s my fault.” “No... no, it isn’t your fault.”, Marston said, bitterly. “But to plan all of this in advance, and in the matter that she did...” “Ain’t this just a repeat of Fremdos?”, I asked. “She makes some promises ta the Unassigned, they cause some rucku- er, havoc, and then the Collective swoops in during the confusion?” “No.”, Marston said, bluntly. “No, it’s not the same. Don’t you remember what that Unassigned with the crossbow said?” “Which one? There

were fifteen of them.” “The one in the center. The centermost one.”, Marston clarified. “He mentioned his disdain for the Collective and the Unionists alike.” “Aw heck.”, Blue breathed out, somewhat winded. “The Unassigned are pretty fumed at the Collective too, so perhaps Provesh is just getting the raw hand of fate. Y’know, coincidence and all that.” “No.”, Marston and I said simultaneously. “No, well-armed, well financed rebellions are never just coincidence.”, I said, as Blue and I gave each back our greataxes. “And this is *functionally* the same situation as Fremdos. Unassigned cause havoc, the Collective besieges the city. The details area bit different, in that the Unassigned ain’t working with the Collective, but they’re still HELPING the Collective, some.”

“Destabilization.”, Marston uttered, darkly. “What?” “Destabilization.”, he repeated. “Encourage a rebellion in an enemy city state. Provide fiscal support, training, supplies. Wait for the situation to deteriorate. Then, when circumstances are dire enough... move in. Restore order. And be greeted by the ravaged populace as heroes.” “How the heck is that any different from Fremdos?!” , I spat. “Ya swoop in, kill a bunch of folks, and get rewarded fer it by the folks ya didn’t kill.” “Because in destabilization, you don’t reward the rebels when you move into the city.”, Marston said, his fists shaking. “You kill them.”

“W-what?!” , Blue stuttered, confused. “Why?! Why the heck would the Collective kill the Unassigned as well?! What possible reason-“ “Unity. Fear. Control. Normalcy.”, Marston stated, his words like the gong of a bell. “Passionate rebels are good for fighting wars. They’re terrible for regular rule. Better to purge the radicals after they’ve served their purpose, rather than keep them around.” “Yer- yer saying those crazy Unassigned lot will be slaughtered even if they take the city?”, Blue gasped. “What sorta sick bastard would come up with such a plan? I mean, me and the boys are gonna slaughter these

Unassigned morons regardless, but you'd have to be one evil sonuvabitch to -" "That would be me.", Marston stated quietly. "I came up with the plan." "Oh, there's a shocker.", I groaned. "I never actually utilized it." the black haired boy retorted. "It was a sociological problem I was asked to work out. How to most efficiently transform the attitudes of the inhabitants of an annexed region." "And the solution you discovered was MURDERING HALF OF EM?!", Blue shouted. "Far less than that. But yes. Remove the unstable elements in an unstable region as soon as possible, and normal life shall return. The key is context control." "Makes sense, I suppose.", I murmured. "What? It doesn't make any sense at all, Red! That's genocide, that's-" "The most efficient solution. Do a bit of evil now to insure a whole lot of good in the future." "You- you don't actually believe that, do you Red?" I rubbed my scarred eye socket. "It doesn't matter what I believe. It's what *she* believes that matters." I paused, and nodded my head. "There's no use in pretending that morals or laws or standards exist anymore, cause they don't. Not in her world. She'll do anything to get what she wants, and she won't regret nonea it, neither." "This coming from the woman who murdered twenty people for a boat.", U.T. stiffly remarked. I ignored the stuffy voice in my head, and opened my mouth to bark orders at a bunch of people I didn't know. "So THIS is what we're gonna do, if we wanna live. We don't fuss too much about the Unassigned, we don't waste our breath telling em they've been set up. We ignore the Collective, we ignore the people on them crosses." "Then what DO we do?", Marston asked, hands wrapped firm around the handle of his knives. "What we DO do is make a beeline for the Trade District, and enlist the aid of the Swordarms." "The- the Swordarms?!", Blue spat. "The Swordarms are the ones that took away your arm and your eye, Red!" I removed my left gauntlet, and

wiggled my fake metal forearm around. "I, uh, I settled the arm thing, Blue." "Suns above!", the middle aged man exclaimed. "How in the-" "Lifemetal.", Marston explained. "But don't get caught up in the specifics now, Mister, uh...-" "Axeman Red Four.", Blue blurted, then licked his lips. "Well, I suppose I can't be Axeman Red Four anymore, seeing as the real one is still alive." "Keep the name.", I uttered. "Just call me Red likea ya usually do, and I'll call ya Blue." "You want us to ALIGN with the Swordarms?!", one of the Hammerions in the harbor cried out. "What good would that do?" "It'd give you better trained and better equipped soldiers, fer one." "But they RANSACKED the Union district! Like ALWAYS, they TOOK everything from us!" "So here's yer chance ta git it back.", I said, witha grin. "Cause if they refuse ta help us... we can just go ahead and force em too, anyways?" The enraged crowd shrank at the thought. "Oh, yeah, yeah.", I murmured. "I know it seems tough, talking ta Swordarms. But trust me when I say we can take em. Blue and I took out six of em and lived ta tell the tale." My words didn't reassure the people in the crowd, none. "Fine.", I sighed, trying ta sound annoyed. "Just get me and Marston ta the Union District. We'll take care of the Swordarms ourselves, even if we gotta beat the crap out of them." "We will use diplomacy first and foremost.", Marston interjected. "You- you WILL?!", a Lancer gasped. "But how will you do that?! And what if they try to kill you?" An arrow shoot out, and stuck itself deep into the ground by my feet. I jerked my head in alarm. Making their way off the black metal warship was the purple haired girl without a name, Tanner Yellow Fifty Two, and, mouth shut tight, Bowman Red One. "She will kill them first." Bowman Red One said, then yanked the arrow he had fired out of the ground. "I will aid." "Er... thanks then, champ.", I said, then shifted my focus ta the Unionists behind Blue. "So, do we gotta deal? Will

the rest of ya git me and Marston ta the trade district so we can diplomasize the crap outta the Swordarms?" The Axeman formerly known as Blue Fifteen nodded his head. "No. We can't, Red.", he said, firmly. I bit my bottom lip. "And why's that?" "Because these men aren't here to fight a battle, or restore order. They're here to protect their families in the Union District.", Blue said, with a grunt. "They won't HAVE any families to protect if the Collective breaks through, you imbecile!", Marston hissed. "Aye, I know. But just the same, it ain't your place to ask for their help.", Blue said, firmly. I cracked a smile; other than his name and a few more gray hairs in his beard, the old man hadn't changed a bit. "Then I reckon I'll be seeing you later, Blue.", I said, and placed my helmet back over my head. "C'mon, Marston, I know the way well enough-" A rough gauntlet grabbed my arm. "Wait.", Blue spoke out. "We can't go with you. But I never said I wouldn't go with you, Red." I cringed. I had wanted the help of Blue's men, but I didn't want *his* help. "That's- that ain't necessarily, Blue. I've gotta Bowman, a Tanner, a useless idiot, and a purple haired girl helping me out. I don't need yer help." "That don't got nothing ta do with it!", Blue protested, his gruff voice cracking. "Yer my pal, Red! You always have been there for me, and- and I know ya don't *need* me ta help ya, but I *want* ta help ya!" "G-guh.", I gulped, my face flushing. "Fine, fine. Come along then, but stick close to me, alright Blue?" "Ha!", the middle aged man snorted, as he, me, Marston, the girl without a name, the Tanner, and Bowman Red One advanced forth into the smoke of the harbor. "You don't get ta act like a badass right after I kicked yer butt, Red. If anything, I should be telling you ta stick close ta me." "There ain't a difference between the two commands, ya senile halfwit.", I snapped. "Wait, why did you two even need to fight, again?", Marston questioned, still wet from his dip in the ice



water, still somewhat confused. “Couldn’t you just have... taken off your helmet and introduced yourself, Miss Axeman Red Four?” “Where’s the fun in that, boy?”, Blue laughed, slugging his black metal greataxe over his shoulder. “Red and I have always sparred. And I almost ALWAYS win.” “*Almost* always?” “Red might be on the weaker side, fera Axeman, but she makes up for it by rampant cheating.” “I’ve noticed.”, Marston said, drily. Walking through the docks was a surprisingly easy affair, even with the smoke and all that. It was actually somewhat unsettlingly – even as the buildings in the docks burnt, not a single sound was heard. And perhaps it was causea the sewage, but I didn’t smell a single dead body. Either the folks in the docks had long since been disposed of, or they had the foresight ta leave beforea buncha Unassigned showed up with crossbows. It didn’t matter. I allowed Marston, the Tanner, the purple haired girl, and Bowman Red One ta go ahead of me, and grabbed Blue by the wrist as soon as I was sure the smoke obfuscated us somewhat. “Blue, I need to tell you something.”, I quickly whispered, staring at the man in the cerulean armor through my helmet’s right eyesight. “What is it-“ “This is all a ruse. It’s a façade, a lie. I’m *not* going to the Swordarms to try and get their help, I’m going there to steal a magical gem. The one that ponytailed girl used to regenerate. And soon as I steal it, I’m getting back on that big black metal boat I came in, and leaving. For good.” Blue flinched at my words, and shrunk. “W-why would ya tell me this, Red?” “Because I want you to come with me!”, I hissed. “There’s just no way any of this works out! Even if a hole opened up in the middle of the sea and swallowed the Collective’s military, even if the socioeconomic climate changed and the memories of cycles worth of abuse disappeared from the Unassigned’s minds, this city is doomed. You KNOW it is! So, please! Don’t come along

with me, just wait by the dang boat! We- we need to-“ “Run away?”, Blue asked, softly. “Yes! Yes, we need ta run away!” “You wanted to run away back during the banquet, too.”, the man with the graying blue hairs said, sadly.” “Right! Right, exactly! So please, run away with-“ “I can’t, Red.”, Blue said. “After I thought you had died, I came home to find that my collaborater has passed away, too. From- from a whooping cough. I lost all sense of purpose, of direction. I kept thinking... if I had just ran when you asked me to, if I had just not gotten so involved with that stupid Merchant, that things might have been different.” “B-blue...”, I stuttered. “And things would have been different.”, Blue said, amidst the smoke and ruin. “No, if I had run away when you asked me to... things would have been better. But I was down my best friend, and the love of my life. The two people I cared for the most had passed, they were gone, likea... likea thing that just didn’t exist no more.” He paused, and chuckled. “Suns above, I’m stupid.” “You ain’t stupid at all, Blue.”, I said, softly. “No, I was stupid. I didn’t listen to you back during the banquet, and I won’t listen to you now.” “But- but why?”, I choked out. “Because even when I had lost you and my Collaborator... I founda purpose. A reason ta live. And it was- it was all thanks to them Unassigned killing folks.” “What?” “Er- perhaps I worded that poorly.”, Blue muttered. “But, see, once they started causing havoc, and messing up Provesh with their demands for equality and the like, folks started ta need protection. Real protection, not the type that ya pay for. And- and I gave it to them. Me, some Lancers, the Hammerions, heck- even a couple of Swordarms helped out.” “F-for free?!” I gasped. “I know, right?”, Blue laughed. “I couldn’t understand it myself, why I would protect the Union District without seeing a scrap of metal in return. But as I did, I, uh, I didn’t feel so bad no more. So... so even though I know it won’t end well, I can’t

just leave these folks ta their doom. Call it a point of pride, Red.” I half-smiled. “If- if that’s what you want to do, Blue. You best stay put, now that ya know this is just a big farce.” “Bah! I ain’t going nowhere!”, the blue bearded man spat. “Farce or not, yer still my friend. And it ain’t like that dumb magic gem is all the goodies them Swordarms got. They’ve hoarded armor, weapons, metal, and food. Some stuff which they took from us, and all stuff we could use.” I bit my bottom lip. “Alright. But soon as I get that gem I’m vacating the premises. I won’t come back for you.” “Hmph.”, Blue snorted, smugly. “From the way yer talking all fancylike Red, I reckon you found something to protect, too.” “I found half a something.”, I muttered. “The other half ain’t what I reckoned her ta be.” “Her?”, Blue asked, confused. “Uh- I, - I meant my greataxe.”, I quickly blurted. “I call her, uh... Ragnarok.” “You named yer greataxe?” “Uh... yeah.” Blue paused. “You named yer greataxe *Ragnarok*?” “Let’s just git going.”, I grumbled, then rushed forward. We caught up ta Marston and the purple haired girl quick enough, cept they were crouched behind a crate, which was odd. “Is, uh, is everything alright?”, Blue blabbed. “No.”, the purple haired girl meeped. “There’s- there’s five armored men ahead.” I peeked around the crate. There were five armored men ahead alright, but they were just sorta standing there, perched up high on the steps that led out of the harbor. “They’re just sorta standing there.”, I said. “I don’t see anything too odd. Just cause they got armor and weapons don’t mean they’re dangerous or nothing.” “Look to your left, you half-blind imbecile.”, Marston hissed. I moved my helmet a bit to the left. Lying on the ground, with a spear shoved through his back, was Tanner Yellow Forty Three. “Oh, that ain’t good.”, I muttered. “No, it isn’t good.”, Marston said. “While you and your friend were talking about Fiat knows what, those five thugs murdered Tanner Yellow Forty

Four.” “Forty Three.”, the purple haired girl corrected him. “Right. Is there another way to get to the trade district from here, Unionist?” I licked my lips and nodded my head. “No, there ain’t.”, I whispered. “Past these buildings and up these stairs is the only way ta git into the Union District, and the Union District is the only way ta git ta the square, and the square is the only way ta git into the trade district.” “Then we’re going to need to think of a plan.”, Marston said, resting his chin in his hand. The black haired boy drummed his fingers against the crate, then shook his head. “Miss Axeman Red Four and Mister... uh, Axeman Red Four-“ “Just call him Blue.”, I interjected. “Fine, Miss Axeman Red Four and Mister Blue, you two will wait behind this crate. I shall venture forth with Miss, uh-“ “Volunteer White Four Hundred and Forty Two.”, the purple haired girl whispered. “With Miss Volunteer White Four Hundred and Forty Two, and talk to those five thugs. If they are Unassigned we shall proclaim ourselves to be Unassigned, and converse with them. After we grab their attention, we shall lure them back here, and demand their surrender-“ “Plunk. Plunk. Plunk. Plunk. Plunk.” Five plunking sounds whizzed over our heads. Five arrows embedded themselves into the necks of the armored men ahead, and they all fell onto the ground, dead. I turned my head ta see Bowman Red One, his quiver missing five or so arrows. “Or we could just do that.”, Marston sighed as the bodies rolled down the stone steps. “Huh. That was surprisingly painless.”, I said, amazed at the Bowman’s accuracy. “Tanner Yellow Forty Three is dead.”, the purple haired girl growled, angry. “We need to bury him.” “We don’t have time.”, the black haired boy said, sadly. “I’ll have my men give him a proper Unionist funeral later.”, Blue blurted, as we climbed the stairs. “It’s my fault fer wasting time talking ta Red.” “No, it isn’t your fault.”, I said, stepping over a few of the bodies. “Bury

the Tanner if ya want, but the ones responsible for his death were these thugs. Them and them alone.” I squinted my eye at the Tanner’s killers. The armor they were wearing was pretty darn good even by my standards, though in hindsight they probably shoulda padded the area around their neck a bit more. Their weapons weren’t half bad looking, neither. “Alright, new strategy.”, I said. “No one scouts ahead, we sneak around as many people as possible, and mostly importantly, we stick together. These Unassigned folks are too well-equipped for us to take things lightly. At this rate there will only be two of us left by the time we get to the trade district.” “Oh, like YER the one ta talk about sticking together.”, U.T. sneered into my brain. “Just cause my advice is hypocritical don’t mean it’s *wrong*.”, I thought to the magical talking gem. I lifted my greataxe off my shoulder. “Alright, here’s how our formation’ll be. Me and Blue in front, the Unassigned girl in the middle, Marston in the back, and you, Bowman Red One-“ I took another look down at the five armored men with arrows in their throat. ”Uh, you can keep doing whatever it is you’re doing, actually.” The Bowman just shook his head at me and plucked three arrows from his quill, and walked off into the smoke. Semi-organized and alert to the danger, the five of us made our way out of the docks, moving as slowly and silently as a buncha folks with platemail and weapons strapped to them could. Our caution paid off; we managed ta get up ta Union District just fine. Well, sorta. See, usually how it worked was that the stone steps in the harbor led up to the busy commercial street which led down ta a few decentish pubs which led diagonally ta few sketchy alleyways which led sideways ta a rundown residential area which sauntered vaguely left ta an even more rundown apartment complex which led right ta the complete travesty of a broom closet/apartment I lived in, and alla that constituted the

Union District, but the moment we finished climbing the cracked stone stairs which led out of the harbor, we found ourselves blocked. By a blockade. It was made of makeshift wood, which was pretty normal. The top of the blockade had spikes with decapitated heads impaled on em, which was also pretty normal. But the blockade had a door attached ta it, which wasn't all that normal, considering the general point of blockades. "Er... I'll take care of this, Red.", Blue mumbled. He walked forward towards the door. "You all might wanna stand back." "Why?", Marston asked. "I think I may have forgotten the password.", Blue said, sheepishly. "And why would that make us want to stand-" Eight crossbows all poked out of different crevices of the blocked, and pointed themselves at us. "-back.", Marston finished, clenching his teeth. "Password.", a rather clinical voice from behind the blockade asked. "Uh, I reckon I've forgotten the password. But it's me, Axeman Red Four.", Blue said. "Me and the boys headed out this morning ta try and regain the harbor, remember?" "Password.", the clinical voice repeated, sternly. "C'mon, there ain't time fer this!", Blue growled. "The Fiatists are at our gate and-" "Say the password or die. If you are Axeman Red Four, you would know the password. It's the answer to the riddle I told you earlier." "Oh! Well, I remember the riddle!", Blue harped, happy. "If I tell ya that, will you let us through?" "No.", the voice stated. "Well, shoot.", Blue grumbled. "I don't right remember the answer-" "What was the riddle, Blue?", I quickly asked, before he was poked fulla bolts. "Huh. Well, if I remember it correctly, the riddle was this: what has a tongue, takes many steps, but can't walk?" "A crippled tourist.", I answered, all quick-like. "No, no, that wasn't it.", Blue muttered, nodding his head. "The answer was more, uh, abstract." "A tongue, can't walk, but takes many steps...", Marston pondered aloud... "Hmph. In that case, the

solution is obvious: The riddle is speaking about the illusion of masculinity as an ideal in a patriarchal society. The tongue represents the subconscious whispers of doubt present in the minds of insecure men who feel a need to assert their dominance via acts of aggression and machismo. The steps refers to how masculinity, like a virus, slowly infects the minds of men and women alike, and causes them to think-“ “A shoe.”, the purple haired girl blurted. “The answer is a shoe.” “A shoe?”, Blue repeated aloud. The door in the middle of the barricade opened up. “Huh. Good on ya, I guess.”, I mumbled ta the purple haired girl. “But how did you know the answer was a shoe?” “I didn’t.”, the purple haired girl meeped. “I just didn’t want to hear the Ex-Regent ramble on any longer.” “Regardless, you did well.”, Marston said to the purple haired girl, as he adjusted his glasses. “Conflict resolution without fatalities has become a preciously rare commodity as of late.” “And just who the bloody hell are you?”, a shrill voice squawked. From behind the barricade emerged a short looking man witha hook fera hand. “You don’t look like one of ours!” he spat, sneering at Marston, then me, then purple haired girl and Bowman Red One. “Neither do you, you, and you. Are these Unassigned you caught, Four? Because we’re running out of spikes.” “No, uh... these are friends.”, Blue yakked. “They’re going with me to try and talk to the Swordarms.” “Ha! They’d be more useful on the pikes.”, the short man scoffed. “The Swordarms aren’t interested in talking to anyone. They’re cooped up in the Trade District, with the Merchants.” “Regardless, we’re going to give it a go.”, Blue said. “Is the Union District still safe?” “That depends. How many Unassigned did you neutralize in the harbor?” “Twenty or so.”, Blue said. “Though five were right outside of the barricade.” “Then we’re fine for now. But those Unassigned... gah! They’re like rats, I swear.”, the hook handed man growled. “Thirty of

them ambushed us in the sewers four rising periods ago. We slaughtered them all, of course, but I received a report that there's forty of those nameless bastards waddling around in the bowels." "What the heck are you gonna do about the Collective?", I asked. "Pray that the suns burn them all up.", the short man said, his dirty face contorting with fear. "And the Unassigned have?", I put out. "C'mon, this ain't complicated. The Collective is holding back." "I know that.", the hook handed man sighed, as a bunch of tired looking Unionists shut the barricade's door. "But we can't just up and surrender." "Uh... why can't ya?", I asked. "Didn't you hear what they did when they took over Fremdos?", the short man spat. "They slaughtered all the Unionists they could find! We're not going to let death just walk into our city with open arms, ya complete moron." I bit my lip. The outcome of what would occur was painfully obvious, so I changed the subject ta focus on what wasn't. "Is the way to the trade district clear?" Mostly.", the hook handed man grunted. "But you'll need to go through the square, and that area isn't secure." I tightened my grip around my greataxe. "That's fine. It don't need ta be secure. I can take all them Unassigned by myself." I couldn't take all them Unassigned by myself. It was unlikely I could take three of them. But as bad as the situation was, it was only gonna get worse. I had to press on, while I still could. "I know the way.", I said, and ventured forth. Like the hook handed man had said, the Union District was secure. It was completely crowded, but secure. All the rotting moss covered buildings looked to be in relatively okish shape, and nothing inside the barricaded area seemed ta be burning besides a few bonfires. But the whole safeish section of the city felt more like a campground than a metropolitan center. People slept on the streets in their armor with their weapons next ta em. The folks who were awake all had a tiredness about em- they



didn't look malnourished, but their eyes were sunk in, and their skin was dirty. I mean, it was Provesh, so the level of hygiene was pretty much the same as it always was, but the soul-crushing depression I saw in the eyes of the folks gathered inside the barricaded Union District was slightly more pronounced. What usually kept folks going in Provesh was anger and spite. But the folks I saw lying in the streets of barricaded district looked too worn out to be spiteful, too tired to bother mean mugging me. They were tired, they were depressed, and so, they were useless. A flock of sheep would put up more resistance in a fight than they would, so I didn't bother wasting my time talking ta them. All too quick, we passed through the Union district. I reckon at some point we had to have gone by my old apartment, and of course we musta passed the Caravan Depot, but I don't particularly remember noticing when we did. I just keep moving forward. After passing through the right end of another barricade, we arrived at Provesh's big town square – the one with all the stalls, vendors, and the like. The good news was that the square looked ta be utterly abandoned. The bad news was that the square looked ta be utterly abandoned. And on fire. "Frick frick frick frick FRICK!", I cursed, slamming my right gauntlet into a charred stall. "Is there another way to get to the Trade District?", Marston asked, removing his glasses and trying to see through the fire filled square. "No, there ain't another way.", Blue bellowed. "I wondered why the barricade on this end was undisturbed, and now I know what happened. Them Swordarms musta burnt all the Unassigned here ta a crisp." I sniffed the air. I didn't smell any burnt bodies, but that was mostly because the smoke in the square was so darn thick. I clenched my teeth shut, and shook my helmet covered head. "Alright, then. If we run quick enough we might be able ta get across with only second degree burns.

Be sure not ta breath in too much smoke, or ya might-“ “We’re not going to run across this square.”, the purple haired girl stated, coldly. I grimaced. “I thought you said you would give yer life ta stop the Collective?” “Yes, I did say I would give my life.”, the Unassigned girl gawked, then stepped from the flames. “I... I didn’t say I would *throw away* my life.” I looked ta Blue. The cerulean armored man just nodded his head. “You won’t make it, Red. Not through fire like this. If the smoke and flames don’t get ya, the heat alone will.” I knew he was right. My brain told me he was right. But if he *was* right, if the fire was too much to get through, if there was no way to get to the trade district, then there was no way to get to the Swordarms, and the magic gem which could at least partially rectify one of my many, many failures. So I ignored my brain. “Frick it, I’m going fer it!”, I yelled, and rushed into the flame. At once, I felt an intense heat. See, getting burnt is bad, but fire can hurt ya even if you ain’t touching it. It’s called convection, and what it means is that you’ll get roasted and toasted even if you avoid every lick of flame you see. It heated up my armor instantly, and hurt. But it didn’t hurt nearly as much as the fire hurt when I cauterized my own arm, so I put up with it. So even though my body singed, I kept moving. And somehow I was able to keep moving, as I tumbled through the flame. It was like my body was operating on auto-pilot – the moment I began running through the flames my legs suddenly found speed and precision they had never had before. Somehow, I managed to survive the flames long enough to reach the part of the square where all the stalls were. And there still *were* stalls, they were all just dilapidated, abandoned, and on fire. “GRAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!”, I screamed, swinging my greataxe frantically to clear my path, before the fire ate up my body. I succeeded. The stalls obstructing my path collapsed and splintered. And then – somehow, some way, I

made it. I actually made it to the other side of the fire filled square. “Ha...”, I panted. “Ha... ha.” “Are you FUCKING RETARDED, RED?!” a low voice shouted. I jerked around. Right behind me was Blue, and though his cerulean helmet obstructed most of his face, I could tell he was pissed. “You- you followed me?”, I asked, shocked. “Of course I followed you!”, Blue shouted. “Do you know how dangerous running into a flaming inferno is?” “Not that dangerous, I reckon.”, I muttered, as I cracked all my joints, “Are you ok, Blue?” “I’m just fine, but that is in and of itself a sun given miracle!” “If it is a sun given miracle, then I suppose it’s a miracle that applies to all of us.”, a bold voice stated. Emerging from the smoke, and quite unharmed, was Marston, the purple haired girl, and, shockingly enough, Bowman Red One. “You- you all followed me?”, I sputtered. “Of course we followed you.”, Marston said, miffed. “You know this area the best. If we lost you we’d all be damned.” “That ain’t the point, though!”, I yelled. “There’s just no way all y’all coulda followed me and lived!” “Did you want us to die?”, the Unassigned girl asked, nervous. “Of course I didn’t want ya ta die! But folks usually don’t rush into a fire filled hellhole and live, is all I’m-“ “There was no fire.”, Marston stated. “Wha-“ “There was no fire, Miss Axeman Red Four. As you ran, the fire in front of you dissipated entirely.” “W-what?”, I stammered. “How the heck does that even make any-“ “May I interject, Master Admin?”, U.T. chimed in its male stuffy voice. “Sure, ya might as well.” I said aloud, causing the others ta glance at me funny. “The fire in this square was produced by the hygienic module.”, the voice in my head stated. “So?” “So the fire couldn’t do jack ta ya, ya stupid organic moron!”, U.T. growled, back ta its annoying default voice. “See, I’m a module, and modules negate other modules. Sorta.” That caught my interest well enough. “What do ya mean, sorta?”, I asked aloud again,

ignoring the weird looks Marston and the purple haired girl gave me. “There’s a hierarchy of sorts when it comes to the negation thing. For example, one of them rubies would never cause me to shut down, cause they’re a mass produced version of the hygienic module. And I reckon I could still function just fine even if I was put next to the hygienic module.” “You reckon? Ya mean yer not sure?” “It all depends on my programming.”, U.T. explained in a way that didn’t explain anything at all. “I’m hard-coded to defer to some modules, and have priority over others. Unfortunately, I ain’t programmed to know what modules I have control over. But I am programmed to be able to make an educated guess.” “And what’s yer guess?” “My guess is that I can negate just about every module I come across.”, U.T. declared, a hint of pride to its voice. “And why do ya think that?” “Cause if I *can’t* negate the other modules, you and me and Admin Lucas are fucked.” “Watch yer language!”, I snapped, then smiled. “Thinking you’ll be able to do something just cause ya *want* to do something... Ya know, for an artificial intelligence, you sure ain’t all too bright.” “I reckon I take after my programmer, Master Admin.”, U.T. snipped. My ears twitched at that. “Wait, what-” “We should probably get moving.”, Marston blurted, an uneasy look on his still-wet face. “Remaining stationary in a flaming piazza would be detrimental to our survival, another module related miracle notwithstanding.” I shook my head, and headed to the Trade District. “Huh.”, I mumbled as the four or five of us took our first steps into the marble laden district. “I was expecting a barricade.” “I think that fiery inferno WAS the barricade.”, the purple haired girl nervously meeped. Unlike the Union District, the Trade District was perfectly pristine, just as it had always been. No folks lay in the middle of the cut stone streets, and no buildings were barricaded or picked clean. If it wasn’t for

the smoke pouring in from the Union District and the harbor, you'd almost think the Trade District had nothing to worry about in the near future. "So where exactly are we going?", the purple haired girl asked, as she looked around the home of the Swordarms and Merchants. "And why does the architecture here look like an idiot's take on Fremdosian stylings?" "We're going to the house of Merchant Black One.", Blue answered. "And the Swordarms and Merchants have always liked to pretend they didn't live here. They'd decorate their houses in dung if that was a popular fashion in one of the other cities." "We're going to Merchant Black One's house?", I blurted, surprised. "Why are we going there? I thought he was against the Swordarms?" "He was." "What made him change his mind?" "A dagger to the face." "He- that fat old fella is dead?" I mouthed out. "Since... since when?" "Since at least six rising periods ago.", Blue blathered bluntly. "They found his bloated body in a bath-tub." I bit my bottom lip. Tons of people had died back during the banquet, but I didn't remember Merchant Black One being one of them. Additionally, I distinctly remembered Bowman Yellow operating in Merchant Black One's interest even when I had got my crippled butt onto the caravan. If Merchant Black was dead, then he was only recently dead. And if he was only recently dead, then- I nodded my head. It didn't matter. I wasn't a detective, I was a hunter. I just had to get what I came for and leave. Thinking too much about things would only weaken my resolve. The whole thing felt like a dream. Blue, me, Marston, the purple haired girl, and Bowman Red One shambled through the Trade District, not encountering a soul. It –it was an easy enough walk. And that's what was so bizarre. We didn't see anyone as we moved through the Trade District, and we didn't hear anything, neither. The only sound was the crinkling of snow underneath our boots. So – in no time at all, really- we

arrived back at Merchant Black One's mansion – or the mansion that had once belonged to him, anyways. It, too, looked just as it had before. Half of it was stone and marble, like the buildings in Fremdos, and the other half was made out of pure authentic Unionist wood, which is another way of saying half the mansion was made out of rotting, termite infested wood. "Hmph.", Marston hmphed, as we approached the courtyard. "There's no one by the door." "But that's wrong, lad!", a jovial voice from behind cried. "I see five folks by the door right now!" I jolted around. Less than two inches away from Marston's damp mug was... a tincan of a man in large silver armor, wielding a giant claymore in each of his gauntlet covered hands. "Funny, I see six!", another happy voice harped. So close ta Bowman Red One that he was almost kissing him was ANOTHER tincan of a man, but he didn't have any giant swords on him, oh no. This fella- he held two giant kiteshields, one in each hand. Usually, I would have been terrified – Two heavily armed and armored Swordarms appearing out of nowhere and sneak up on us undetected would have usually been a death sentence, but from the gentle, playful manerisms, and their unorthodox choice of weapons, I knew the two men at an instant to be – "C-claymore and Shields?", I gasped, shocked. "No, no, you have it all wrong lass." Claymore commented, oblivious. "I have TWO claymores, not one-" "S-STAY BACK!", the purple haired girl shrieked, holding up a ruby. "I'M- I'M NOT AFRAID TO USE THIS!" "You're not afraid to throw a ruby at us?", Shields asked, gently plucking Bowman Red One's bow out of his hand. "Because by all means, throw it at us, we could use the-" "A-AH!", the Unassigned girl yelled, shooting a pillar of flame right by Claymore's foot. "S-SUNS ABOVE!", Claymore, Shields, and Blue yelled. "I'll- I'll FIRE AGAIN!", the unassigned girl threatened, waving her ruby about in a clumsy fashion.

“Leave us be, or- or I’ll-“ “Woah, woah, ease up lass, ease up!” Claymore coughed.

“We’re not here to kill you or anything like that! We just wanted to know why a bunch of heavily armed and armored folks were marching towards our humble abode!” I ripped my helmet off. “Aw, shucks.”, I said, batting my eye. “We just wanted ta have a chat with ya.” “Hey, it’s Sister Amelia, from the Caravan!”, Shields exclaimed, shocked. “I thought you went ta Fremdos, Sister Amelia!” “Sister *Amelia?*”, Marston repeated, his voice hoarse “Yeah, Sister Amelia.”, Claymore said, playfully. “Her, her friend, and Sister Sabarene were guests on our lovely Caravan around thirty rising periods ago. Cept she wasn’t clad in platemail and swinging around a greataxe back then.” “And she was missing an arm back then, too.”, Shields sang. “People really do change over time, don’t they Swordarm Black Eighteen?” “Aye, they do, Swordarm Black Seventeen.”, Claymore confirmed, his voice a bit lower than usual. “Yeah, uh-... my name was never Sister Amelia.”, I admitted, as I quickly yanked the ruby out of the purple haired girl’s shaking hand. “It’s actually-“ “Axeman Red Four, yeah, we know lass.”, Shields yawned, as I quietly tucked the ruby away. “But Eighteen and I don’t really care much about that.” “Then you won’t mind if me and the rest of these folks walk on inta yer mansion, then?”, I asked, hopeful. “Oh, of course we’d mind that!”, Claymore laughed, slamming his sword down in front of the mansion’s door. “Why, cause you’re afraid we’ll take back the stuff ya stole from us?”, Blue growled. “No, we’re afraid that you’ll rush in there and try ta kill everyone!”, Shields laughed, though there wasn’t too much humor in his voice. I swallowed some spittle, and laid down my greataxe on the snow covered courtyard.

“I... We ain’t fixing ta murder nobody.”, I said, stretching out my unarmed arms. “We just want ta have a chat with the folks inside and try and git some help ta ward off the

Fiatists.” “See, that’s the other issue.”, Claymore said, laying down his swords on the snow covered terrace. “The folks in this mansion aren’t just our name-sharers and the merchants. We’re hosting some guests from out of town, and talking to them about a few things.” “Mainly the unconditional surrender of Provesh and all it’s inhabitants!”, Shields chimed, cheerfully. “Yeah, mostly that.”, Claymore confirmed, then cracked his neck. “So you guys might want to chill on the storming the castle thing. If things go well inside, there won’t be a need for heroes or bloodshed or anything like that. Provesh will surrender, and the Collective will come in and help calm down the Unassigned problem. And then, barring us using some pieces of paper in place of metal, life will go on as usual.” I nodded my head slightly, as I digested the words. I had wondered why the Collective ships were just sitting out in the harbor as opposed to actively attacking the city, and I had wondered even more why the Collective hadn’t stormed in to subjugate the clearly broken Proveshians. Marston adjusted his glasses. “These surrender terms, what are they, exactly?” “They’re unconditional, so they’re whatever the Collective determines them to be.”, Shields stated. “But I don’t imagine the surrender conditions will be too severe. The Collective wants us to adopt the mark, and if you ask me, the use of fiat currency in the Independent Kingdoms has been a long time coming.” “Right, and what if the surrender conditions were more severe than that?”, Marston declared moreso than asked. “What if the surrender conditions involved the crucifixion of every other Unionist, and the destruction of all armed Unassigned?” “There’s no way we’d allow that to happen.”, Shields said, his voice firm. “Aye.”, Claymore ayed. “We’d gladly let this city fall into the Collective’s clutches, but we’d never let the folks in it die. Well, not via crucifixion, at least.”, Claymore chimed, a worried tone attached ta his cheer. “I



don't say this often, but... do you know who I am?", Marston asked, adjusting his glasses. "No, not in the slightest.", Shields said, bluntly. "But, uh... wait! Let me gander a guess!" The man in the silver armor stared at Marston for a good while, and paced back and forth through the mansion's courtyard. "Aha! Judging from your pretty face, and your pale, pristine skin... you must be a prostitute!" "E-excuse me?", Marston coughed. "Ah, sorry.", Shields said. "The proper term is courtesan, right?" "The proper term is sex worker, and I am not in that profession... as of late.", the black haired boy declared, then quickly nodded his head. "I am Marston of the Holy Collective." There was a brief silence, accentuated by the blowing of the wind. But then... "Suns above!", Claymore and Shields exclaimed, their heavy metal boots make a mess of the snow beneath them "You're-you're Marston, lad?!", Claymore coarsely coughed. "The Regent of Fremdos, Marston? The General of the Holy Collective, Marston?" "Yes, yes, like I said, I am Marston, of the Holy Collective.", the black haired boy said with a brief wave of his hand. "But I am no longer Regent, or Acting-General, I-" "He's actually a disgraced Former Regent turned Volunteer!", the purple haired girl chirped, chipper alla sudden. "Volunteer?", Claymore repeated, confused. "It's just a polite way of saying slaves.", Shields explained. "Oh yeah!", Claymore chuckled, almost tripping over one of his discarded greatswords. "You Collective lad and lasses sure have a lot of slaves! We have Handmaidens here, and they're sort of like slaves but you actually have to pay them, so it's a bit of a pain to hire them. " "Plus it would be immoral to subjugate someone against their will.", Shields said. "Yeah, probably would be pretty immoral to subjugate someone against their will.", Claymore concurred, then scratched at armor clad neck. "But what if someone wanted to be subjugated? Would it be bad to enslave

them?” “What, you mean if they were a masochist and wanted to roleplay? Everyone’s got their kinks, I suppose.” “No, no, I mean, what if someone wanted to be an ACTUAL slave? What if they just didn’t want to bother with that whole free will thing?” “Nobody wants to be a slave, you ale loving arse.”, Shields scoffed, then turned towards Marston. “Don’t mind Black Eighteen, he tends to go on a tad. Though, and this is just for the record, how do I know that you’re really Marston? I mean, you could just be a drunk with delusions of grandeur and the like.” The black haired boy ripped off his glasses, and glared at Claymore and Shields with his ruby red eyes. “It doesn’t matter if I’m a drunk, a whore-“ “Sex worker.”, I corrected him. “-sex-worker, criminal, slave, or post-modernist.”, Marston growled. “Just look at those people stretched out in the harbor if you want to know what making a deal with the General gets you.” “I get where you’re coming from lad,”, Claymore laughed, “but things like this, you just have to accept.” “Do you, though?”, the purple haired girl asked, her voice low, and deep. “Do you really have to accept people being crucified?” “Well, no, but-“ “Do you really have to accept bowing down to a monster, simply because he’s stronger than you?”, the Unassigned girl asked, looking more confident, more composed than I had ever seen her. “Your standards, your beliefs, your values, do they truly mean nothing in the presence of a larger sword?” Claymore fell silent. So did Shields. “I- I suppose they do mean nothing.”, the purple haired girl stammered, defeated. “...No.” Claymore spoke up. “No, our values don’t mean nothing. Unionists, Fiatists... not a single soul on the continent could get in the way of our values.” I didn’t buy the purple haired girl’s idealistic sphiel, but I fed the energy of the moment, anyways. “And what are yer values, fellas?” “They sure as hell ain’t belligerence and crucifixion, that’s for damn sure.”, Shields told me, a quiet rage to

his voice. "Then let us into the mansion, so we can finish this.", Marston stated, bluntly. "What exactly is it that you intend to do?", Claymore asked, directing the eyeslits of his helmet down at the Ex-Regent. "I intend to try and persuade the Fiatists inside to abandon the General's cause.", he answered. "It's more likely that Axeman become literate, Marston of the Collective.", Claymore countered. "The delegation inside this mansion are the General's closest supporters." "Aye, that and the man himself.", Shields surmised. "Man?", Marston and I blurted. "Big fella in spikey black armor.", Claymore muttered. "He doesn't talk much, but from the way those black habited Fiatists acted, I could only presume that he's the General." "That's the General, alright.", Marston said, shaking his head. "Alright, change of plans.", the bespectacled boy announced. "I'm not going to try and convert those in the mansion." He unsheathed his knives. "I'm going to kill them." "Woah, woah, ease it there, lad!", Shields shouted. "There's better ways to go about things!" "Well, I'm really just out to murder the General, but it's unlikely that-" "No, no, you don't need to kill ANYONE!", Claymore shouted. "Eighteen and I are pretty big deals as Swordarms go, just come into the negotiations with us, tell the rest of our Name-Shareer what you know about the fidelity of the General, and we'll try and work out a surrender with better terms." "All the terms in the world mean nothing if the General is the one offering them to you.", Marston hissed. "We're not morons, lad.", Shield stated. "We'll ask for leverage." "And what leverage do you think you'll get? You just said your name-sharers were *surrendering unconditionally*, imbecile!" Claymore balled his gauntlet into a fist. "Yeah, well there's no harm in TRYING to be civilized! And what makes you think you'll be able to kill the General? He's surrendered by one hundred of his best men. Do you think you're just going to rush

past his guards and stab through his spikey black armor with one of those tiny knives?”

Marston flinched. “I’ll... I’ll find a way.”, he said, lamely. “No, ya won’t.”, I cut in, bluntly.

“Yer arms are about as developed as a wet noodle, I’m half blind, and this girl don’t have a name, let alone any combat experience. At most we have four anda half folks here capable of fighting. Rushing in like we’re the biggest badasses in town will only get us all killed.” Shields clanged his kiteshields together at my words. “Yes, which is why we need to negotiate-“ “That won’t get you anywhere neither.”, I yammered.

“Negotiating only works if you have something to offer, which ya don’t.” “Hmph.”, the purple haired girl snorted, stomping her boot down on a patch of snow. “It’s all well and good to tell people why their plans won’t work, but if you don’t have an alternative in mind-“ “I *do* have an alternative in mind.”, I declared, my voice low. “We go with both plans.” “What?!”, Marston spat. “You want to sue for peace and kill the General at the same time?” “Of course I don’t.”, I breathed out. “I want to *pretend* to sue for peace, and ki- and deal with the General while folks are distracted by the negotiations.” That, of course, was a lie. The *real* plan I was going with was to sneak into the Swordarm swarmed mansion, find the stupid magic restoration ruby, and get the hell out of dodge, all while using the assassination attempt as a distraction, and the suing for peace as a double-distraction. But there was no particular need to tell Marston and the rest all that.

“No.”, Claymore declared. “We’re not doing that either. We’re going to go inside and negotiate with the Fiatists like civilized human beings. We’ll talk to our name-sharers, you talk to your countrymen.” Blue slung his greataxe over his shoulder and grunted.

“And what if after all your gabbing and jibber jabbering, nothing gets changed? What if the General and the rest of them Collective folk are still intent on killing a whole bunch

of folk in this city?" "Then we'll lock the doors and show the Collective why we're called the *Swordarms*.", Shields said, definitively. "But only as a last resort, lad.", Claymore quickly added. "As bad as things might be, there's always a chance for them to change. But we can't beat monsters by losing our humanity." "Super!" an enthusiastic, unmistakably *girly* voice gushed from above. "I mean, it makes sense if you think about it. You speak soft, but carry a big stick. I think Dmitri Mendeleev said that! Or- or was it Franklin Delano Roosevelt? It was definitely SOMEBODY Irish, that's for sure!" Me, Marston, the Unassigned Girl, Blue, Bowman Red One, Claymore, and Shields all looked up at the noise. Up, up, up, looking down at us from the highest window of the highest tower of the wooden half of Merchant Black One's mansion, was – Swordarm Red One. I had to squint to see her, but from the figure's long pony tail, her fur lined leather armor, and the small wirey sword on her hip – it couldn't have been anyone else. "S-swordarm Red One!", I stammered, fear and loathing seeping into every fiber of my body. "Bzzzzzt!", the red haired girl yelled down at me. "Wrong answer, Hans! Would you like to go to double-jeopardy, where the game can REALLY change?" "Wha-" "See, my name isn't Swordarm Red One- not anymore. It's actually-" "Swordarm Black One!", Claymore and Shields gasped, mortified. "See! See, THEY get it!", the ponytailed girl chimed, happy-like. "I meet SO many people who still think I'm Swordarm Red One, and man- it's – it's ANNOYING. Like SUPER DUPER annoying!" The Swordarm with long red hair placed both her gloved and non-gloved hand on her hips. "I fought VERY hard to become Swordarm Black One." "No ya didn't!", Claymore growled, as I quickly put my helmet back on so the crazy ponytailed girl wouldn't recognize me. "You challenged Black One to a duel on his deathbed, the only reason you even have his name is-" "Is

because I was intelligent enough to take advantage of an opportunity that lay before me.”, Swordarm Red One sing-songed. “It’s not my fault you didn’t think to challenge Black One before I did.” “I never WOULD have, lass!”, Claymore roared through his helmet. “The old Black One was delirious and dying of-“ “Blah, blah, blah, you’re boring me already.”, the girl with the long ponytail yawned, cutting off Claymore with the delicacy of a giant rock. “I challenged him for his name, he accepted, so I won fair and square. Him going Teri Schiavo on us four rising periods before the duel doesn’t change that.” “T-teri what?”, the purple haired girl whispered, confused. “Ignore her words.”, Shields muttered, his voice low and shaky. “Black One is mad, lass. She’s the maddest woman on the Continent.” “She barely ranks in the top three.”, Marston quipped. “I am *not* mad!”, the ponytailed girl shouted, her hands firmly on her hips. “I’m *crazy*, sure, but mad? I’m happy as a girl can be!” She pouted. “At least I WAS happy, until I heard Eighteen and Seventeen plotting high treason!” “We weren’t plotting anything of the sort!”, Shields protested. “We just want to make sure that the surrender terms are fair, and equitable, and-” “Bah!”, the girl now called Swordarm Black One spat, her voice reaching down to us from the tippy-top of the mansion. “Fair and equitable? More like DULL and BORING! Cycles and cycles and cycles of NOTHING HAPPENING in Provesh, and now that things are about to change, you want to maintain the status quo?” “If it means not crucifying half the town, then yes, of course I want to maint-“ “SHUUUUUUUUUUUT UP!”, the ponytailed girl screeched, silencing Shields suddenly. “You’re all SO PREDICTABLE! So TRITE! So STRAIGHT-FORWARD! YOUR BLANDNESS MAKES ME WANT TO VOMIT!” She paused, and smiled, her green eyes wide open and twitching. “But it doesn’t matter. See, while you and Eighteen have been

out here whining like pissy toddlers, I've been talking to the General of the Holy Collective. And holy heck – I think I like her!” “H-her?”, Shields, Claymore, and the purple haired girl sputtered. “Yeah, *her.*”, the girl I had known as Swordarm Red One said with a wave of her gloved hand. “Sister Santa Claus or something, General of the Collective, destroyer of city states, Uniter of the Continent, yada yada yada. I had thought she'd be SUPER BORING, but it turns out she's actually pretty darn interesting!” Swordarm Black One shook her head, and frowned. “But that's not really important right now. A bunch of super fun stuff is about to happen here, and it would be a drag if a rag tag group of retards ruined it for me.” Swordarm Black One clutched her black armband and smiled. “Time to exploit the ever-loving crap out of my authority!”, she declared, standing upright on the balcony above us. “I, Swordarm Black One, being of the highest skill, and noblest color, hereby command you, Swordarm Black Eighteen, and you, Swordarm Black Seventeen, to-” “She's gonna make them kill themselves!”, I shouted, terrified. “Bowman Red One, shoot her already!” Instantly, three razor sharp arrows shot up from the snow-covered courtyard, to the top of the mansion above. The first arrow missed Swordarm Black One by a mile. The second and third arrow did not. “to- GYAAAAAAAAAAAAH!”, Swordarm Black One shrieked, as an arrow ripped through her eye, and another one cut through the very center of her throat. “GUH-GUH-GAAAAH!”, the girl with the ponytail gurgled, clutching and clawing at her throat, trying in vain to remove the arrow from her gullet. Quickly – but not quite as quick as I would have hoped, the ponytailed girl expired, collapsing onto the balcony in a big bloody heap. Claymore turned his head towards Bowman Red One in shock. “Did- did you just-” “Kill me? Yeah, he did!”, Swordarm Black One cried out, laughing a guttural laugh. The

girl with the wirey sword shambled to her feet, as her displaced blood rose up from the balcony, and flowed back into her. "But I got better!", she wheezed, Bowman Red's arrow still stuck through her esophagus. Swordarm Black One grabbed the shaft of the arrow, and ripped it from her throat, causing a torrent of blood to spew down from her neck. She went limp again – for a moment, but then the torrent of blood flowed back into her, and the hole in her throat closed itself, nice and neat. "There, all better.", she sang, patting her throat gently. "Can you guys see anything else wrong with me?", she said, looking this way and that with an arrow still stuck straight in her right cornea. No one said nothing. "Get it?", Swordarm Black One cackled, reaching to tear the second fletch out of her skull. "Can you guys see anything wrong with me? See? Cause I have an arrow in my eye?" No one laughed. "Man, you're no fun at all.", the red haired girl pouted, and with a harsh yank, ripped the arrow out from her eye. "A-AH!", she shrieked. "Suns above, that smarts!", she cursed, as her half ripped out eyeball repaired itself. The girl with the wirey sword writhed in pain for a few moments, then shrugged her shoulders. "Oh well. So where was I? Oh yeah, the command! I, Swordarm Black One, being of the highest skill-" "Hit her again!", I yelled, terrified. Quickly, almost like his hands and fingers were made of lightning, Bowman Red One shot three more arrows up at Swordarm Black One. They all hit. One pierced through her right shoulder, through her stomach, and left thigh. "H-YEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!", the regenerating Swordarm shrieked, as she fell onto her back and began to thrash about, like a porcupine with its quills pointed inward. "Get the frick out of here!" I screamed at Claymore and Shields, even as the ponytailed girl atop the mansion's balcony went completely limp. "If ya don't, she's gonna make you kill yerself!" Claymores and Shields just stared up at the



twice-killed girl, stunned, my words not reaching em. “RUN AWAY, YOU IMBECILES!”, Marston roared. The black haired boy’s loud, unbelievably low words shook the two Swordarms out of their stupor right quick, and fer a moment – fer a brief, brief moment – it actually seemed like they’d be able to get away. “I...I command you two to remain absolutely still!”, Swordarm Black One croaked out, her voice shrill, pained, and twisted. As if caught in molasses, the fleeing Swordarms froze up entirely. “Fire at her again!”, I yelled, as Bowman Red One reached into his quiver to shoot another trio of arrows up. “It’s USELESS, USELESS, USELESS!”, Swordarm Black One screamed, snapping half an arrow out of her shoulder. “There’s NO POINT in shooting me again! I can’t die, you ASISINE AXEMAN!” “Shoot her again.”, I commanded, gazing at Shields and Claymore, the two of them rendered completely immobile. “A-AH!”, Swordarm Black One shrieked, as three more arrows ripped down through her torso. Now, I wasn’t a complete idiot. I knew that Swordarm Black One, or Swordarm Red One, or Gregor or whoever the ponytailed girl was couldn’t die, at least not in a way that would stick. But just because she couldn’t die didn’t mean there wasn’t a point to killing her. “Marston! Blue! Uh... purple haired girl!”, I barked, urgently. “Pick up Claymore and Shields and carry them out of here! Get them far enough away so they won’t be able to hear this girl’s voice!” Immediately, Marston and the Unassigned Girl grabbed Shields around the waist and armpits respectively. The noodle armed man and semi-malnourished former slave couldn’t even shift the armored Swordarm a millimeter. “G-gah!”, I groaned, as Blue struggled to even lift Claymore. I quickly shifted my attention to Bowman Red One. “Keep firing arrows at the dead girl!”, I half-barked, half-begged. Bowman Red One grimaced, and tilted over his quiver. It was empty. “F-FRICK!”, I cursed, and sprinted

over to Shields, and with all the strength in my body, tried to lift him up. And somehow, with strength that I had never been able to utilize before – a raw potent power that seemed to come from my core – I was actually able to lift up the Shield swinging Swordarm. And as I did, Marston and the purple haired girl were actually able to help Blue do the same with Claymore, carrying him like they would a mildly heavy shopping bag. All we had to now was make it out of earshot, and then – then we'd be able to actually save someone for a- “!! SWORDARM RED-IMEANBLACK- ONE!”, a shrill, hysterical voice wheezed out – “BEING OF NOBLEST COLOR, AND POSSESSING THE HIGHEST SKILL, HEREBY COMMAND SWORDARM BLACK EIGHTEEN, AND SWORDARM BLACK SEVENTEEN TO KI-“ “N-no!”, I gasped, knowing *precisely* what self-destructive command Black One was about to order. “-TO KINDLE THE FLAMES TONIGHT!” Swordarm Black One finished. I looked at Blue, Blue looked at Marston, Marston looked at the purple haired girl, and the purple haired girl didn't really look anywhere. “W... what?”, Blue blurted. “I ordered them to kindle the flames tonight.”, Swordarm Black One explained, with a wave of her arrow impaled wrist. “It gets cold here, even with the Unassigned burning everything to bits. These two clearly can't be trusted as guards, so I'll have them act as handmaidens instead.” She stared at me, and smirked. “What, did you actually think I would order my OWN NAME-SHARERS to KILL THEMSELVES? What do you think I am, A MONSTER?” “Um... no.”, Marston muttered, as Black One's crunched up nose fixed itself with a series of jarring movements. “I don't think you're a monster at all.” Swordarm Black One's lips curled, as a bit of blood oozed backwards into her mouth. “Aww. A pity you had to say that.”, Swordarm Black One pouted, waving her arrow impaled wrist back and forth. “Because

I really AM a monster.”, she stated, her friendly face changing to a- a *disgusted* demeanor. “And telling a monster she ISN’T a monster is JUST ABOUT THE MOST BLAND THING YOU CAN EVER FUCKING SAY, YOU MONSTER!” Still bleeding backwards, Swordarm Black One threw her wirey sword down onto the balcony. “Eighteen! Seventeen!”, she spat. “I’ve thought of a new command! I, Swordarm Black One, being of noblest color and the highest skill, hereby command you, Swordarm Black Eighteen and you, Swordarm Black Seventeen to KILL all these BLAND, TRITE, FILLER CHARACTERS!” The ponytailed girl’s eyes grew even wider. “That’s right~”, she almost whispered. “SMASH THIS BURGER KING’S KID CLUB TO A DIVERSE PILE OF A DUST!” Everything seemed to stop, if just for a moment. I glanced down at my greataxe. I could probably pick it up from the snow and swing it right at Shield’s neck before the command took hold, but- but for some reason, I just couldn’t move. Even though I HAD to- to kill them before they killed me, I just couldn’t do it. “No.” Claymore said, calmly. “I refuse.” Swordarm Black One raised an eyebrow. “You- you can’t refuse a command, Eighteen. Well, I suppose you *can*, but you know what happens if you don’t-” Swordarm Black One picked up her sword, and cut her own neck open. “This.”, she gurgled, blood oozing out of her gaping throat. “Thish happens.” Her eyes seemed to dull over, if only for a moment. Then her blood flew back up in the air, and the wound healed itself. Swordarm Black One licked her blood-less lips and leered down at Claymore and Shields. “Jesus Christ, what are you waiting for? Kill them already! I mean, sheesh, they’re just a bunch of boring do-gooders, it’s not like you’ll be ridding the continent of anyone interesting!” But the two armored Swordarms just stood in front of me and Marston, stalwart and still. “We’re not doing it, lass.”, Claymore

repeated, insistent. “Oh, you say that, but you’re still a Unionist.”, the ponytailed girl blabbed, half-heartedly trying to yank a half broken arrow out of her chest. “Any moment now your body’s conditioned response will kick in, and you’ll pick up your swords and chop these d-grade cuts into mincemeat.” Instantly, Claymore’s body jerked. And quickly, quietly, the armored Swordarm picked both his greatswords up off the snow covered courtyard. “G-guh!”, I groaned, and threw out my arm to pick up my greataxe. But my arm – my real arm – it shook, and shook, and shook, ta the point where I half thought I was having an epileptic fit. Fer some reason I just couldn’t- I couldn’t pick up my greataxe and do what had to be done. “Oi, Seventeen.”, Claymore said softly, slowly walking over to Shields. “Remember what I told you half a rising period ago? When I was drunk?” Shields dropped his shields, and took one of the claymores from Claymore. “Oh, I remember.”, Shields chuckled. “But I doubt you were drunk.” “No... no, I wasn’t drunk.”, Claymore admitted, with an awkward sounding laugh. “But that was as good an excuse as any, wasn’t it?” “There... there isn’t much more need for excuses, at this point.”, Shields breathed out, his gauntlet closing around his sword. “Er... yeah. Last stop on the Caravan, and all that.”, Claymore chuckled, then jerked his helmeted head down. “B-but I still- even now- I can’t- I still can’t say it.”, he choked out, his voice hoarse, and sad sounding. Shields lowered his sword, and placed his hand on Claymore’s shoulder. “It’s fine.”, he said, his voice gentle. “You don’t need to say it. I’ve always known.” “Huh.”, Claymore exhaled, sounding a bit relieved. “In that case, I guess we better get going.” The two Swordarms quickly shook their heads at each other, turned their backs to each other, and- and put about twenty or so paces between them. “What- what the-“ “HONOR!”, Shields shouted, charging. “ABOVE!”- Claymore

bellowed. “ALL!” And then- both men charging, greatswords swung out – they- they impaled- they impaled each other. Somehow – maybe because of force, or the sharpness of the swords, or momentum, or- or something, each Swordarm pierced through the other’s armor, and impaled each other through the heart. They died almost instantly, like they were... a buncha candles, extinguished by a sudden gust of wind. And then – I guess it was cause of the wind, or something – I couldn’t see nothing. Everything just went all blurry. So, against my better judgment, I took off my helmet. Blue, Marston, and the purple haired girl just looked down at the two Swordarms looking... well, they didn’t look sad. They looked shocked. I couldn’t see Bowman Red One anywhere. I- I don’t why, but even though I had taken off my helmet and exposed my eyepatchless face to the wind, I- I still couldn’t see- I couldn’t see nothing but the blurry corpses of Claymore and Shields. “PFTTTTTTAHAHAHAH!”, a loud voice cackled. “You’re crying?! Those two idiots kill themselves in, like, the gayest fucking manner possible, and you’re CRYING?! Get a sense of humor, you dullard!” My vision still blurry, I jerked my head up, to the top of the balcony, where Swordarm Black One stood, smiling from ear to ear. “I- I AIN”T CRYING!”, I cried, doubling over onto my knees. “And- and even if I was, they- they only DID that cause- CAUSE KILLING THEMSELVES WAS PREFERABLE TA LISTENING TA YOU!” Swordarm Black One stopped laughing. “No one asked you for your opinion, wretch.”, the ponytailed girl spat, her face contorted in disgust. “Those two idiots... those two walking clichés... they were nothing special, and nothing worth mourning over. Oh, sure, they talked a big game about honor, and acted nice, but they never *changed* anything. In this wonderful city of Provesh, they were content to go about their lives, ignorant of the horrors and pain

inflicted upon their fellow citizens on a day to day-“ Swordarm Black One caught herself, and smirked .“Sorry, on a “rising period” to “rising period” basis. Sure, sure, Eighteen and Seventeen *might* have been good men... but they were good men who enabled a corrupt system. In that sense, they’re lower than *dogs*.” She looked down at the two men’s bodies. “Well, actually, I suppose they’re dog *food* now!” Marston’s eyes became lava, as he quickly unsheathed two of his knives. “You insufferable-!” Before he could finish his sentence, and without even the slightest bit of warning, six armored Swordarms sprang out of the bottom of the tower. I sprang for my greataxe, but before my fingers could even brush the handle, I felt the edge of a blade against my throat. “How- how in the hell...”, Blue stammered, two greatswords pressed against his back. “What, did you think I was just monologuing this whole time?”, Swordarm Black One exhaled, pouting. “I mean, sheesh, give me a BIT more credit. I’m Swordarm Black One now, I’d be an idiot not to send my lackies down to deal with you all.” “What do you want us to do with them?”, an oddly squeaky voiced Swordarm asked, bending my wrist. Swordarm Black One looked down at us and yawned. “Hm... well, I suppose the smart thing would be to order their summary execution, but that’s kind of boring, isn’t it?” “I... uh... yes. Yes, whatever you say.”, the Swordarm that had grabbed hold of me said, a bit of nervousness in his voice. “B-O-R-I-N-G!”, Swordarm Black One yelled, her voice booming. “It’s so boring I might just issue a command~.” The six Swordarms holding us hostage all flinched. Swordarm Black One smiled. “Psyche! Don’t worry, I’d never do that! I’d never command my own name-sharers to do anything they’d never want to! Well, I commanded Seventeen and Eighteen to do something they didn’t want to, but they’re kind of dead, so...” “W-what do you want us to do?”, a terrified Swordarm asked.

“If- if you don’t want us to kill them, do you want us to just escort them out of our territory?” “No, no, that’s boring, boring, boring!”, Swordarm Black One moaned. “Just, you know, take them all up into the tower and imprison them.” “Time to get going, you eyeless freak.”, one of the Swordarm’s growled. “Not her!”, Black One said, her voice cracking a bit. “No, no, leave the redneck elf out here. You can, like, take her axe inside and everything, but leave her out there.” “Don’t- don’t worry about us, alright?”, Blue said, as he was forced into the mansion, along with Marston and the purple haired girl. “It’ll be ok. It’ll all be-“ The mansion’s door slammed shut, as the six Swordarms forced my three companions inside. And then, there I was. Out in the cold, surrounded by the corpses of the two men I had been too shortsighted ta save. But I wasn’t alone. “So other than that, Miss Lincoln, how did you enjoy the play?”, Swordarm Black One asked, her voice light and bouncy. “...Why the heck are ya letting me go?” I somehow found the strength to ask, my head pounding, my chest hurting. “Hmph.”, Swordarm Black One snorted, her feet dangling in the air as she sat on the edge of the balcony. “That’s a really complicaaaaaaaaaaated question with a reaaaallllly simple answer.”, the ponytailed girl said, then giggled. “No, no, wait. I need to Gene Wilder that last statement. Strike it, reverse it. The question is simple, the answer’s a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma, but the short of it is that you’re just too fun to capture.” I didn’t say nothing. I just kept my head down, and tried to ignore the gurgling sounds which came from Claymore and Shields. I tried ta just ignore everything, thinking that if I moved my mind far enough away, that if I believed hard enough, I would wake up inna bed, and- “Yup! You’re just too fun!”, Swordarm Black One continued, apathetic to my shutdown. “From the get go you’ve always been fun, *Axeman Red Four*.”, she taunted. I

winned. “I didn’t notice you at first due to that helmet of yours, but there’s no mistaking it – that hair, that face, that eye, that *lack* of an eye... you’re the very same Unionist that tackled me out of a tower forty rising periods ago. I can’t believe you’re still alive!”

Somehow, I felt even more unnerved. All the cheer, the easy-goingness, the warmth in Swordarm Black One’s voice – it all seemed genuine. She spoke to me as if I was a dear friend. “Oh wow, that’s great!”, Swordarm Black One chimed, smiling from ear to ear. “I knew there was something amusing about you, but for you to be the same woman that chopped her own arm off to get away from me... that’s amazing! I mean, TALK about serendipity!” Swordarm Black One’s face grew serious, for a change. “In all honesty, though, I have to apologize. Back in the dungeon a few rising periods ago, things really got-“ Swordarm Black One covered her mouth. “Things really got out of-“ she covered her mouth again, and seemed to cough. “Things really got out of HAND!”, she cackled, tearing off her glove. “G-guh...”, I groaned, as I gazed at her five exposed *brown* tinted fingers. “GET IT?”, Swordarm Black One laughed, her face demented as she cussed her- mine- her brown hand with her pale one. “OUT OF HAND? BECAUSE YOU CHOPPED OFF YOUR HAND! AHAHAHAH, WOW!”, she guffawed, hitting herself on the chest. “Man, if you could just see your face!”, Swordarm Black One excitedly ejaculated. “Did you think that was funny? I thought it was funny. I thought of it on the spot, you know.”, she said, waving her/my brown left hand this way and that. She seemed to catch sight of my discomfort. “Oh, oh, are you upset? Don’t worry about this!”, she reassured me, tapping her left hand. “After you chopped it off there was no way it would do you any good, so I took it onto myself to save it. And besides, your hand looks much better on ME than it does on YOU, wouldn’t you say?” I didn’t say nothing.



But U.T. did. “Master Admin, I suggest you flee the premises immediately.”, the module said, speaking in its stuffy male voice. “This woman’s actions and words are negatively impacting your mental well-being. Staying here any longer might result in a complete psychological breakdown, and-“ “Shut it.”, I thought, feeling through my armor for something. “We should totally celebrate, Axeman Red Four!”, Swordarm Black One called down to me, her voice still light and joyous. “I mean, it’s not every day that a girl gets reunited with her murderer! We should play a game!” My right hand gauntlet closed firmly around the item I was looking for, and for the first time since Claymore and Shields had died, I looked Swordarm Black One in her demented blue eyes. “What game do you want to play?”, I asked, my voice calm. “Well... hm... how about tower defense? Yeah, we’ll play tower defense!”, she said, excitedly, and fell backwards onto the balcony. “HERE’S HOW IT’LL WORK!”, Swordarm Black One shouted, springing onto her feet. “Right now me and my lackies have three or four or five of your bland, forgettable friends. I didn’t give my minions any specific orders, but standard Swordarm Operating procedure is to flay folks we lock up, you know – peel their skin off until they cry, then peel off even more until they die. Well, the “flaying prisoners to death” thingy wasn’t standard procedure BEFORE I became Swordarm Black One, but it’s standard procedure now. Don’t worry though, we’re pretty quick about it. I’d say each of your buddies have about half an hour or so before they die of shock.” Swordarm Black One paused. “Oh, wait, sorry. I mean they have a few moments, not-“ “I know what half an hour means.”, I said, my voice low. “I don’t know how I know, but I know.” I swallowed. “And I know who you are – or were – or will become, Gregor.” Swordarm Black One’s face went blank. “...What on earth are you talking about?”, she asked, all cheer gone

from her voice. "It doesn't matter.", I admitted. "Past, future, here, there, names, roles, none of that matters. Just go on.", I urged the ponytailed girl, "Espouse for me the details of your "game." Swordarm Black One looked nervous, but her cheer returned quick enough. "Alright, so your friends have half an hour left to live, more or less. Probably less. But! But if you can scale this mansion, and get to me before then, then I'll let them go. But be warned, on each and every floor they'll be a Swordarm, each one more trained and deadly than the last. The General and the rest of the Collective are in the mansion too, so you'll have to contend with their blades as well. But if you're strong enough, daring enough, and lucky enough to survive, I swear on my honor as a Swordarm that I'll free your friends!" "I don't care about that." I retorted. "If you want me to play along with your game, you're going to need to offer me something better."

Swordarm Black One raised her eyebrows and cracked her brown hand against her white one. "What could possibly be more precious to you than the lives of your friends?" "Anything, more or less.", I answered. "But what you're going to have to offer me is your module." "My what?", Swordarm Black One asked, confused. "The magical gem which makes you immortal.", I stated, without even the slightest hint of irony in my voice. "Offer me that, and I'll play along." Swordarm Black One didn't respond to me immediately. That was fine. I wasn't interested in her response, in a "yes", or a "no." I was interested in where she looked. And clearly, quite clearly after I finished saying the words "magical gem", Swordarm Black's erratic blue eyes glanced at the ruby studded hilt of her wirey sword. "Alright!", the ponytailed girl agreed, cheerily. "If you manage to get up to me in the next half an hour, I'll give you my magical gem. But I don't quite get how you'll manage to do that. After all, this mansion has five floors, and tons and tons of

guards, Swordarms, Fiatists... not to mention the five master Swordarms which guard each and every way to the top. I doubt you'll be able to last long in a fight against one of them in a fair fight, let alone five." "Yer right.", I muttered, as I aimed the ruby in my hand at the middle of the very wooden, very flammable mansion. "I would never win in a fair fight." Swordarm Black One's eyes opened wide. "Wait, wha-" With nothing more than a light tap on the back of the ruby, a column of flame erupted out of the gem in my hand, and crashed into the center of the mansion. "A-AHHHHHHHHHHH!", Swordarm Black One screeched, as some of the flame incinerated her. I ignored her shrieks, and sprinted into the blazing mansion, well, as much as a person wearing over sixty pounds of armor could sprint. "What the heck are ya doing, ya nutjob?!", U.T. spat into my brain, as I pushed my way further into the mansion. "I'm getting that module.", I responded, as I blasted some flame up at the roof of the mansion. "But- but your friends!", the module sputtered. "What about your friends? They're inside this building!" "Mosta em ain't my friends.", I quickly thought, as I sprinted past two very confused looking guards. I approached the beginnings of a stairwell, and blindly shot a whole bunch of flame behind me. "F-FIRE! I SEE FIRE!", a panicked voice cried from behind. "But if it means anything to ya- Marston, Blue, and that girl have a much better chance of living now than they ever did in the arms of the Swordarms." "And you're just going to leave it all up to chance?!", U.T. roared, pissed. "People who have sacrificed for you, people who have fought for you – you're just going to abandon them in the midst of a fiery inferno?!" "Yes.", I responded, and kept moving. Besides being on fire, Merchant Black One's mansion hadn't changed, much. It was still torn between two architectural styles, between the fine wood furniture of higher Proveshian society, and the excessive marble

flooring that was the mark of Fremdos. Regardless, it didn't matter. The decorations being gaudy meant nothing. What mattered was the interior of the building – the supports, the inner walls, the foundations. If it was made out of marble, or stone, then I was somewhat screwed. But if it was made out of wood- “Smoke!”, an agitated voice cried, from above me. “I smell smoke!” I jerked my helmeted head up. I had been so lost in my argument with U.T. that I didn't even notice I had dashed into a stairwell. And gazing down below at me was – a man. A gray haired man, in a black habit. “Brother Tirious?!” he gasped out, shocked. “What- what are you doing here? And where is your crew?” My immediate instinct was to just roast the gray haired man with the hygienic module. But somehow I surpassed that panicked urge, and approach the situation in front of me with a degree of ambition. “U.T.”, I quickly thought. “Make me sound like the former Captain of the ship I liberated.” “You mean the *murdered* captain of the ship you *hijacked*.” “Whatever.” “Whatever you say, Master Admin.”, U.T. sarcastically spat. The white helmet covering my face, and the shining white armor wrapped around my body, I spoke up to the Fiatist on the stairwell. “...What are you talking about, boy? I'm here on the General's orders.” The expression on the gray haired man's face switched from that of confusion, to that of abject horror. “I- I see.”, he coughed, his voice five octaves higher. “Carry on then.” I shook my head, and, moving as calmly as I could, began ascending the stairs of the mansion, up towards the roof where Swordarm Black One had been. “WAIT!”, the gray haired man behind me barked. I clutched my fingers around the ruby in my gauntlet. “...Yes, boy?”, I asked, slowly turning around. “...Do you smell smoke?”, the gray haired man asked me. “Ah, that.”, I said, monotone. “Some of the Swordarms were lighting carcasses on fire outside.”, I lied. The gray haired man

in the black habit grimaced. “Bloody Unionists.”, he groaned. I kept moving, as the inside of the mansion gradually grew warmer. Ascending the next two flightsa stairs was easy enough – the only folks present were some black shirts, and they treated me with deference. It was when I got up the third flight of stairs that I ran inta trouble. “Halt, Fiatist.”, a strange looking blue haired man with a long, thin sword warned. “The negotiations are happening one floor down. Only Swordarms are allowed on this floor and above.” I licked my lips. “And what if I want to walk around this floor, or above?” The blue haired man raised his long, thin sword in front of his face. “Then you’ll have to go through me.” “Aight.”, I muttered, and lazily lifted the ruby. A few agonized screams later, and I was up another flight of stairs. “What- what was that?!”, the gray haired man shouted from below. “Frick!”, I cursed, and broke out into an armor impeded sprint. As I ran upwards, I shot random bursts of flame below me, besides me, and above me. In no time at all, the wooden stairwell had turned inta a fiery inferno. “Stop! Master Admin, stop!”, U.T. shouted in its default voice, as four Swordarms descended upon me. “It’s fine, ya idiot!”, I shouted, haphazardly shooting burstsa flames at my attackers “Becausea you, the flame won’t hurt me none!” “That’s not the point, ya idiot!”, U.T. warned, as the Swordarms above me succumbed to the flame and fell down the stairs. “The flames are eating up the foundation of this here structure. At any moment it might-“ Witha loud rumble, the stairs I was sprinting up began to shake. “-collapse.”, U.T. finished, remorseful. “NO!”, I gasped, as the steps swayed beneath my feet. I only had five more steps to go – five more steps before I got to the top of the mansion, to where Swordarm Black One and the idiotic magical recovery gem was. If I could- if I could just get up the last five steps, if I could just get that gem, get back on the ship, cure Lucas,

and ditch the Continent, then I wouldn't havta – I wouldn't havta hurt no one ever again. That was the lie I told myself, at least, as I tried to finish scaling the stairwell I had scorched. "One.", I breathed out, my right metal boot stomping down on the first stair. "Two.", I said, as my left boot touched down on the next step. "Three.", I coughed, as the wood beneath me creaked, as the smoke below me rose. "F-four.", I desperately spat, reaching the penultimate stair. I just had to take one more step – one more step, and I'd be on the roof. I lifted my foot, and placed it firmly on the last step, onto the top floor of the mansion. "Five.", I announced, proudly. Then it all fell apart. I didn't exactly have time to scream – the wood beneath my feet collapsed the moment I put my full weight on it. By the time I realized I was falling, I had already plummeted halfway down the mansion. "...Sorry.", I managed to think to U.T., just before my back slammed into the cold hard ground below. And then there was nothing but blackness.

"ake.", "Ar-uo, ake." "Are.... Ake?" That's the first thing I remember after taking the dive with U.T., a gentle, girlish voice muttering a buncha nonsensical gibberish. I didn't respond ta it, figuring I was dreaming, or dying, to the extent that I could "figure" mucha anything out. My senses were about as sharp as a wooden mallet, my thoughts and focus straight as rainbows, I wasn't tired so much as I was aching in the body, and bewildered in the mind. But I couldn't afford to be aching in the body, and I couldn't let myself be bewildered in the mind. "Are you awake?", the strange, girlish voice asked me, a slight bit of concern in its voice. "Yeah, I'm awake.", I groaned. "Then get up.", the girlish voice snapped, taking on a harsh tone. "We're under attack." I opened my eye. I could barely see a thing. My armor and helmet were still on, though, and the smell of smoke was thick in the air. On top of me was – well, for one, a giant, burning wooden

pillar. And crouched down to the side of me was – some woman in a black habit. I couldn't see her face, and I could just barely make out her voice, but it was a woman, alright. Somehow I knew that instinctively. "I... I can't get up.", I groaned. "There's a giant pillar on top of me." "I noticed.", the harsh sounding voice remarked. "I'm going try to lift it." The distant sounding woman rolled up her sleeves and attempted to lift the flaming pillar off of my body. The pillar barely even budged. "B-buh!", the distant sounding figure groaned, clearly in pain. But she didn't stop. Grunting and groaning, the distant sounding woman in the black habit tried her darnedst to lift the six hundred odd pillar off of me. It didn't move. "...I'm going to go get help.", the distant sounding woman said, ceasing her efforts. "There ain't no time for that.", I grunted, and placed my gauntlets against the pillar. "Uh... GUH!", I yelled, straining and struggling as I pushed the fiery pillar off of me. It hurt my arms like heck, but slowly and surely I managed ta remove the wooden pillar off of my shining white armor. "Alright.", I muttered, as the pillar crashed into the dust floor. "I'm good to go." The smoke obfuscated woman in the black habit shook her head. "Lifting an entire support beam on your own... your strength hasn't diminished in the slightest, Brother Tiberius." I raised an eyebrow at that statement, then remembered what I had asked U.T. to do ta my voice. "Of course it hasn't, lass.", I snorted, haphazardly trying to play the part assigned ta me. "Men like me are fine wine – we only get stronger with age." "You're confusing adrenaline for strength, Brother Tiberius.", the distant sounding woman remarked. "As soon as we get out of this burning wreck, I'm going to have some medics examine you. There's a good probability you just tore every muscle in your body with that stunt." The woman in the black habit extended her hand out to me. "Get up.", she instructed me. "We do not have

much time.” I didn’t take her hand. Instead, I pushed my gauntlets against the dusty floor and rose to my feet on my own. “Good, you can walk. Stick close to me, we need to get to the roof.” I didn’t say nothing. If the woman in the black habit wanted to lead me to the roof, then I’d follow her to the roof. There was something very obvious that I was ignoring, but I couldn’t afford to be perceptive. Despite the fact that I had fallen five or so stories, my goal remained the same: get to the top of the roof, and get the gem from Swordarm Black One. Everything else was merely an afterthought. “Quickly, Brother Tiberius.”, the woman in the black habit stated, covering her mouth with her sleeve. “Help me remove this rubble from the doorway.” Wordlessly, I walked forward. The smoke was thick, but I could see at least a little in front of me. Stacked up to my waist was a whole buncha splintered wooden crossbeams – all impeding a doorway. Using my fake metal arm, I ripped out all of the rubble in seconds. “Good.”, the distant voice said, in a way that didn’t sound all that good. “This leads to the banquet hall. We should be able to regroup with the others there.” “...I thought you said we’re heading to the roof.” Something very hard and very quick slapped across my helmeted face. “Do *not* backtalk me.”, the woman in the black habit growled, rubbing her left hand. “We *are* heading to the roof. We are *a/so* heading to regroup with the others. If you give me any more lip, or call me lass again, I shall strip you of rank instead of simply striking you.” I quickly shook my head as a response. Course, if I wanted to, I probably could have just strangled the harsh sounding woman ta death, but that wouldn’t have been all too bright of an idea. Dazed and confused after falling five stories, it was probably for the best I had someone ta guide me around. Not speaking fer fear of getting slapped again, I followed the woman in the black habit through the threshold, and into a long, burning



hallway. "Take the lead." the harsh sounding woman instructed me, moving out of the way. "Aight. I don't got any weapons on me, though." "You are acting as my shield, not my sword.", the distant sounding woman in the black habit said, in a monotone. I felt uneasy about exposing my back to the strange woman, but I took the lead anyways. But as we walked down the flame filled corridor, and as I continued to ignore the blatantly obvious, no arrows hit me. The fire didn't burn me, and the smoke didn't overwhelm me. Somehow I was just fine. "Be careful, Master Admin.", U.T. warned, speaking in its stuffy male voice. "...I have a bad feeling about the individual behind you." I ignored the module's warning, and kept moving forward. Eventually, me and the distant sounding woman got to a big scorched wooden door. "Is this the banquet hall?", I asked, unable to see all that much. "No, it's the fucking beauty parlor.", the harsh sounding woman spat, then yanked down her hood. "Of course it's the banquet hall, *imbecile*." And then the fog cleared for me, and the obvious became as obvious as a girl with long, snow white hair, and ruby red eyes. But even then, even as I recognized who had woke me up in the burning remnants of Merchant Black One's mansion, my ambitions remained the same. "Then let's git going.", I chirped, and, not looking behind me, pushed forward into the banquet hall. And what I saw, was – well, a banquet hall. Not just a banquet hall, a banquet hall I had been to before, back when I had two eyes, and a left hand that wasn't a metal abomination. And even though the occupants of the banquet had changed, the scene remained the same. Rows and rows of men and women sat together on long benches near long tables, the soup, bread, and wine half consumed. There was no sign of a struggle, no shattered plates or glass, but without a single exception, all fifty five individuals in the banquet hall were slumped over, their eyes as

dull as Nielente's. "No.", the white haired woman in the black habit stated, her voice utterly devoid of emotion. "No, no, this- this wasn't supposed to happen.", she muttered, as she checked the pulse of some of the black habited soldiers. "They're not to die... at least not at this venture." I didn't say a word. I just walked further into the banquet hall and took a long look at the bodies. On a closer look, the situation wasn't *exactly* a mirror of what happened before. The bodies of the dead folks were unmangled, but from the purple color of their faces, the most likely cause of death was "Carbon monoxide poisoning.", the white haired woman said, her face disturbed. "They- they passed out from the fumes, and the lack of oxygen did the rest. But- but how?", she asked, to no one in particular. "I made the proper arrangements. I appointed the right men. I took care of EVERYTHING. How- how did this happen?" "Someone must have set the building on fire.", I deduced. "NO FUCKING SHIT!", the white haired woman screeched, then slammed her metal hand against the table. "But it should have been *impossible!* These- these fifty five – they were the BEST. The most well trained soldiers I HAD. For them to be bested by a bit of fire, is-" "The reality of what happened.", I retorted, a potent bitterness flowing up from my stomach. "Some thug torched this place, and the rest of the troops were caught unprepared. It ain't pretty, but you can't predict everything." The white haired woman's eyes become fire. "You're wrong.", she whispered, her voice low. "I CAN predict everything, Brother Tiberius. Three cycles ago – when... when that imbecilic brother of mine and his mentally deficient wife humiliated me, I knew I'd return. Even then I knew-", the white haired woman declared, and clutched her chest. "Even then I KNEW I was destined for something larger. The-the traveler told me that." That caught me off guard. "The traveler?" "He is of no

consequence to you!", the woman with ruby red eyes shouted, then calmed herself. "It... it wasn't supposed to be like this.", she panted. "For me to lose even fifty of my soldiers... it- it shouldn't be possible. In no iteration of events- there wasn't- the formula didn't account for it." "Then the formula was wrong.", I grumbled. "In any event, let's get going to the roof. Whoever torched this mansion probably ain't too far away." The white haired woman didn't react. She just stared blankly at the body filled banquet hall. "But-but this is impossible.", she blathered, stepping over a Swordarm's corpse. "The formula was perfect." "Maybe it had one of them... uh... various thingy." "VARIABLES?!", the white haired woman screeched. "YOU THINK I'D BE SO NAÏVE TO FORGET ABOUT THE VARIABLES?!" I didn't respond. There were a whole buncha of knives lying around the room, knives the white haired woman didn't seem ta pay particular attention to. "There's no WAY I'd forget about the variables.", the white haired woman reiterated, as I quietly picked up a sharp looking steak knife. "Four or five people dying – I accounted for that.", the The Swordarms are unpredictable, their leader especially. But the entire building burning down around us... there's no way that could happen. Everyone I assigned to be here was of the utmost loyalty and competenc-" The woman in the black habit flinched- no, she didn't flinch. She *spasmed*, as if she had been struck by lightning. "Um... Brother... Brother Tiberius?", the ruby eyed woman asked me, tapping against one of the tables nervously. "Didn't I- didn't I assign you to patrol the waters outside of Fremdos?" I took a step forward towards the nervous looking woman in black, the steak knife clumsily hidden in my closed right gauntlet. "Aye, you did.", I breathed out, trying to keep myself calm. "T-then... then why are you here?", the white haired woman asked, unconsciously backing away from me. She was completely defenseless.

All I had to do was jab the knife through her throat, and I'd-. "I'm here for the Collective.", I lied, placing the knife back on the table. "I noticed nothing suspicious after patrolling the waters, so decided to come up here ta buffer you." The white haired girl's metal hand started to shake uncontrollably. "You... you IMBECILE!", she shouted, at the top of her lungs. "I SPECIFICALLY ORDERED YOU TO-" "Make sure Ex-Regent Marston didn't escape, yeah, I know.", I quickly blurted, gazing at all the oxygen deprived bodies so I wouldn't have to meet the white haired woman's face. "Don't worry. I received a duck this first rising, he's still in his cage." "It's NOT Marston I'm worried about.", the white haired woman hissed, her ruby red eyes demented. "He was NEVER a variable. A potential threat, yes, but a variable? Everything about him is predictable. I'm sure he'll try to show up here eventually, with some rag tag group of rejects his idiotic idealistic sphiel inspired. But by the time he shows up it won't matter." The nervous looking woman wiped some sweat off of her habit covered head. "There's only *two* variables. One is a man – a man who calls himself a wizard, but is, in reality, a zealot with access to technology that FAR outranks our own." "A- a zealot?", I stammered, knowing who the white haired woman was referring to, but also knowing that the word "zealot" was the last word that could be applied ta him. "The very worst kind of zealot.", the white haired woman spat, her harsh voice full of concentrated loathing. "He's not a zealot for any sort of ideology, movement, or religion. He's a zealot for a woman." She narrowed her eyes. "A woman that *isn't* me." "Perish the thought.", I grumbled. Once more, my helmet was slapped by the white haired woman's metal left hand. "This ISN'T a GODDAMN JOKE!", the woman with ruby red eyes shrieked. "Mister Lucas Hoffman is the second biggest threat to our plans! The trinkets he plays

around with are LITERALLY generations beyond even our most advanced weapons! He has a box capable of generating lightning, you imbecile!” “He’s just one fella.” “THAT’S NOT THE FUCKING POINT!”, the woman with ruby red eyes screamed, punching a wall repeatedly. “If Mister Lucas somehow escaped, then *SHE* escaped, and if *SHE* escaped, then EVERYTHING’S FUCKED!” A weird sensation boiled up in my stomach. “...She?” “...Forget it.”, the girl in the black habit suddenly exhaled. “I took every precaution. There’s no way *she* could be here. And if she is – well, even she can’t stop this.” Like coming out of a drunken haze, the white haired woman shook her head and regained her posture. “Nothing has changed, Brother Tibeirus.”, the woman in the habit stated, pulling her black hood over her white hair. “The Swordarms’ cooperation would have been useful, but it is far from necessary. You and I will head to the roof, vacate this mansion, and rejoin the rest of the army. The subjugation of this city shall go on as planned.” “No.”, a bold, deep voice boomed, from behind the door. “It won’t.” “Shit!” the white haired woman hissed, and practically threw herself over to block the door. With an uncanny nimbleness, the woman with the metal left hand flipped the inner lock on the banquet hall’s entryway, and locked in the deadbolt. “We need to go, NOW!”, she screamed at me. “The deadbolt should buy us some time, but-“

“RRRRRRRRRRRAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAARGH!”, the deep voice roared. As the pronounced baritone bellowed, a very familiar, very loud sound rang out. I had heard the sound countless times before – I had *caused* the sound countless times before. It was a sound produced by pure brute force, a noise manufactured by the use of an instrument that lacked all subtlety. It was – “An... an AXE??!”, the General of the Holy Collective stuttered, as a black metal blade *crushed* the door’s inner lock, and

*smashed* the deadbolt ta bits. Chunks of the banquet hall's great wooden door fell apart, leaving little besides a frame and a handle. And right behind the chopped up door, black greataxe in pale gaunt hand, was- "Hello, General.", Marston muttered, and kicked what was left of the door open with a thrust of his long, lanky leg. "B-brother?!", the white haired woman spat, more flabbergasted than frightened. "How- how in the-" "No more talking.", the black haired boy stated, and raised the dark greataxe. "W-wait!", the woman in the black habit cried, flustered. She raised her left metal hand in the air. "I... I surrender!", she stammered, her black metal fingers extended towards the gaunt boy's torso. Marston rolled his ruby red eyes. "Do you honestly expect me to fall for-" A soft, clicking sound rang out. Suddenly, something very small and very fast whizzed past my face. "-that.", the Ex-Regent gasped, a black metal index finger embedded deep in the left side of his chest. The black metal greataxe fell out of Marston's hands, and clattered on the ground. The white haired woman looked down at him in disgust. "Pathetic.", she spat, her left hand absent a finger. "You had me dead to rights, but still you hesitated." "Comes... with not being... a sociopath.", Marston coughed, his mouth leaking blood. "It comes with being a weak minded imbecile.", the woman in black countered, completely unphased. "Your lack of resolve is completely disgusting, brother." "I... I am not-" "You are.", the white haired woman stated, coldly. "Call it a social construct, or speak of it as you would a behavioral norm, but you are flesh of my flesh, and blood of my blood. You are my brother, and I am your sister. That is the truth. That is the *objective* truth." "Then I reject it!", Marston shouted, bits of blood coming out with his words. "I REJECT your truth! I DISAVOW your reality! AND I DISOWN YOU, SISTER!" Fer the first time since she had woke me up in the wreckage, the white haired woman cracked a smile. "It

doesn't work like that, Marston. You *can't* disown me, and you can't disavow me. Our bond is far too strong." "That- that bond was broken three cycles ago. When I *exposed* you for the monster that you are!" Marston's sister just continued to smile. "And yet, here I am. Monster or not, here I am." Her gaze harshened. "It's time to grow up, Marston. Every time you try to get rid of me, I come back stronger." "The only thing that's grown stronger is your insanity.", Marston hissed. The white haired woman's grin grew even larger. "And yet here I am.", she repeated. "I'll admit it, Marston. I'm not terribly bright. Oh, on the contrary, I dare say I'm one of the larger imbeciles out there. But why is it, then, that I hold power? Why is it, then, that a creature like me can come to be?" "Tragedy of the commons.", the bleeding boy retorted. "No. No, I'm not the "tragedy" of the commons. I'm the FULFILLMENT!", the white haired woman declared. "The continent has slept long enough. It's tired of slow developments, of gradual economic shifts. It wanted a BRUTE! A MONSTER to SMASH down PATHETIC, USELESS BARRIERS!" Pained as he was, Marston managed to nod his head in disgust. "And I suppose this monster is you?", he quietly wheezed. "...You really haven't changed in the slightest. Your time spent exiled clearly did nothing but develop your delusions." The white haired woman winced. "It was my time in exile that developed my delusions. It warped my mind to the point where I believed dumping metal in the ocean could establish the clear dominance of the Mark." "An idea far less imbecilic than the nonsense you're trying now." "NO!", the woman in black bellowed, slamming her four fingered fist down on the table. "It was COMPLETELY IMBECILIC. Dumping bars of metal in the ocean would do NOTHING! And there's NO POINT towards doing ANYTHING if all it leads is to NOTHING!" "Nothing leads to nothing.", Marston said,

quietly. “Just because the fruits of one’s labour are not visible, doesn’t mean they don’t exist. In Provesh, you could have led a life full of virtue-“ “Virtue?”, the Fiatist Sister scoffed. “Do you think I care about virtue? Virtue is a luxury of those with full stomachs and warm houses.” “Virtue is what *gets* people full stomach and warm houses.”, Marston retorted. “And you call ME delusional!”, the white haired woman groaned. “No, Marston, it’s NOT virtue which provides people with prosperity! It’s *unity!* Unity of spirit, unity of currency, and unity of *borders!* Homogeneous Societies, Marston! People need to act the same and think the same so they’ll treat other PEOPLE the same! So long as imbeciles buy into the myth that they’re fundamentally different from another, they’ll NEVER be happy. Cycles of classism, racism, sexism will continue, unless people are forced to treat each other fairly!” “And just what about crucifying the dredges of society is fair?”, Marston rapidly hissed, anger overwhelming his anguish. “What’s so fair about purging those who you view as problematic?” “Nothing and everything.”, the white haired woman responded, an eerie strength in her words. “I told you, I’m the spirit of the age. I’m the brief pain that comes before the wound heals. I bring fire and the sword, cruelty and callousness, so that the Continent can overcome its superficial notions of separation.” “The Continent can overcome that *without* you!”, Marston roared. “It can unite through free trade, through diplomacy, through gradual understanding!” “Just because it *can* doesn’t mean it *should*.”, the woman in the black habit hissed. “Your way of doing things would take generations upon generations. My brutishness, my thuggishness – give me twenty cycles and no one will ever see themselves as Fiatist or Unionist ever again.” “There’s no NEED for that!”, Marston groaned. “Our growth doesn’t need to happen immediately! It can come gradually, and it can come naturally!



The Continent can take its time to be united!” “No.”, the woman in the black habit whispered, her voice fearful. “It can’t. It needs to happen now. The Continent needs to be united NOW!” “Maybe so, but it doesn’t need *you*.”, the black haired boy retorted, sloppily pushing himself off the floor. The white haired woman’s ruby red eyes erupted. “Of COURSE it needs me, IMBECILE!”, she almost shrieked. “Without me, the Continent- and much much more than the Continent will be doomed!” “Doomed to live a life that doesn’t end in crucifixion, mayhaps.”, Marston spat. “No! Doomed as in DOOMED!”, the white haired woman ranted. “Doomed as in DESTROYED, DEVoured, NOT EVEN NOTED IN THE MARGINS OF HISTORY!” Marston just lowered his head, his gaunt face covered with grief. “You honestly believe what you’re saying, don’t you Sis?”, he whispered, his voice cracking. “You- you somehow think that all you’ve done – that all you plan to do- is for some greater good. Even now, you- you actually believe that.” The girl with ruby red eyes smiled, gently. “I don’t *believe* it, Marston. I *know* it. I objectively know that if I- that if *we* can unite the Continent, things will be better. It- it may seem bad, now, but trust me, things will be better. Things just have to be a little messy now, but they *will* get better.” Sabarene extended her right hand out to her brother. “I need your help, Mar-mar. I’ve always needed your help. Kindness, intelligence, understanding... those are all qualities I lack, and which you have in abundance. With you to balance me out, I’m sure we can do wonderful things for the Continent.” She patted her left bosom. “What happened in the past has passed. It’s the future we need worry about.” The boy with black hair shuddered, if only for a moment. Then, moving his arm slowly, he took Sabarene’s hand into his. “...You’re right.”, he choked out, tears streaming down his face. “Things will be better.” Quick, like

a viper, Marston's fingers closed around Sabarene's. And with just his left hand – with just his flimsy, fleshy arm – the Ex-Regent of Fremdos lifted up the black colored greataxe, and sloppily swung it towards the General of the Holy Collective's neck. "A-AAAAAAAAAAAAAH!", the white haired woman wailed, the head of the greataxe biting through her skin, flesh, and bone. "My- my hand!", Sabarene blurted, her right arm rendered a bloody stump. "Marston- you... you!" The black haired boy didn't respond. As his wounded sister flailed and shrieked, Marston simply... fell. His eyes alert and open, Marston fell down onto the floor of the banquet hall, as if preparing to join the rest of the corpses. "You-YOU BASTARD, MARSTOOOOOOOOON!", Sabarene shrieked, her eyes wet with tears, her voice full of agony. "YOU- YOU EVIL BASTARD!", she sobbed, sloppily sealing her stump with her sleeve. "WHY- WHY DID YOU DO THIIIIIIIIIIIS?" As Marston's breathing grew heavier, Sabarene stumbled around the tables, crying and screaming in pain. My stomach feeling heavy, I began moving towards the exit of the burnt banquet hall. **"WHERE ARE YOU GOING, BROTHER TIBERIUS?!"**, the wounded General roared, agony oozing out of her every word. "...I'm going to get help.", I lied. "Don't get me help.", the wounded woman hissed, then jerked her head straight towards Marston. **"KILL THAT IMBECILE!"** I stopped completely in my tracks. Marston lay down on the floor, and the black metal greataxe lay besides him. I looked down at both entities, and slowly moved to pick up my greataxe. And for the first time since he showed up, Marston met my eye. "No.", he whispered, as if reading my thoughts. "Don't. Don't do it. Let it come on its own." **"WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR, BROTHER TIBERIUS?"**, a monstrous voice boomed from behind. **"PICK UP THAT AXE AND KILL HIM!"** "If- if you do this, you won't come back from it.", the

wounded black haired boy wheezed. "It's the right thing ta do.", I whispered. "It's not the right thing for *you* to do.", Marston weakly replied, reaching his right arm towards my greataxe. I put my boot down on the Runiertian reinforced handle, right before Marston could close his fingers around it. "That's why I gotta do it.", I said, and gently lifted the weapon which shared my name. "Revert my voice to normal.", I thought ta U.T. "Ha... hah.", Sabarene panted, what was left of her right arm wrapped in a makeshift tourniquet. "You're truly an... imbecile, Marston. Pleading for your life at the last moment... how pathetic." I turned away from the black haired boy, and stared the white haired woman straight in the face. "He wasn't begging me to spare *his* life.", I calmly commented, speaking in my real voice- my actual, authentic voice. And just like that – all pain, all anger, - all aspects of agitation vanished from Sabarene's face. Her brow stopped being furrowed. Her eyes softened. Her sneer disappeared entirely. "...Miss Axeman Red Four?", she whispered, staring up at me like a child would a fully light Christmas tree. Without saying a word, I removed the white helmet and exposed my face ta Sabarene. "What... what are you doing here?", the girl with ruby red eyes asked, her voice wavering. "I don't right reckon I know.", I somehow managed ta mutter, the greataxe heavy in my hands. "I just wanted ta head ta the roof, pick up a little gem, and leave. I- I shouldn't givea crap about you, or yer stupid evil plan, or yer brother. I- I don't gotta split yer skull inta two- doing that won't give me any peace of mind." My voice harshened, as I stepped closer to the bewildered looking woman. "But I suppose it's something I just gotta do, now." Sabarene's face didn't change one bit. She didn't grow worried, or anxious, or scared. The white haired girl in the black habit just stretched out her bloodied stump towards me, as if she still had her hand. "I- I need to



arms. Almost in a daze, I stumbled out of the banquet hall, not paying no mind ta nothing. Too late, I realized I had left Marston behind. That probably was fer the best. Ta save the black haired boy I would have had ta carry him, and ta carry him would have required me to let go of my greataxe. As for Blue, the purple haired girl, and Bowman Red One... I just had ta hope they had booked it, that they had escaped the burning mansion. But the odds of that were slim. The fire and the fumes were everywhere, ta the point where I could barely make out where I was going. My breathing, my consciousness grew fainter and fainter. "Keep going.", U.T. urged me, speaking in a strange, queer voice. "Keep moving. You're not very far from your goal." "I- I can't find nothing.", I thought back, feeling weak even in my mind. "The only thing you need to find is a set of stairs, Axeman Red Four.", U.T. stated. My mind began to grow less groggy. The smoke cleared a little, and the hallway I had bumbled into became visible. The walls were aflame, the ceiling was half collapsed and covered with soot, but I knew exactly where I was. I was in one of the hallways which led to the mansion's tower. The tower was made of marble, so its stairs would still be scalable. I moved through the hallway at a snail's pace, but I moved. I moved past half-dead men, and fully-burnt women. There was no resistance. No clashes, no fights, no axe against sword, no Unionist against Fiatist. The people I passed on my way to the tower had given up any pretense of identity, of ideology. They moved aside before I even got close ta them, some even dropped their swords the moment I made eye contact with em. I... I reckon I should be grateful fer that. I barely had enough strength to move - as I was then, even a child with a butterknife could have gotten the best of me. But a child with a butterknife didn't show up, so I continued shambling along. In no time at all I found

myself at the bottom of the marble tower. It hadn't completely escaped the effects of the hygienic module – the once brilliant white walls of the tower had been stained an ashy gray – but it still stood. The stairs, soot covered though they were, still remained. And so I climbed them. Step, by step, by step, I climbed the white marble tower, going up and up and up, my strength returning to me bit by bit by bit. And so, after an entirely unnecessary detour, I got up to the roof. What was left of it, at least. I had shot the hygienic module at the roof first, so it had burnt away first. But it wasn't gone entirely. The wooden padding had turned to ash and blown away, but the marble framework still stood. The roof was like a checkerboard with hollow squares – one could still safely walk across it, if one crept carefully across the narrow marble beams. Even with all the smoke rising up into the air, I could see the whole of Provesh. Fires seemed to burn everywhere – by the docks, in the Union District, in the Trade District, and even near the Utility Corridor. The vast fleet of Collective ships had moved. No longer were they parked out in the harbor as a blockade – no, they all hugged the docks. And from the ships seemed to be an outpouring of ants, swarms of insects clad in black habits, all oozing out of their holes and spilling their way into the city. Sounds of screams and steel on iron on metal rang out, adding to the complete cacophony below. I winced, as a cold wind blew across my exposed face. The coldness didn't hurt, but the reminder that I had ditched my helmet did. The wind itself was also a problem. Heavy and flat-footed, a strong wind would make my crossing of the skeletal remains of the roof a difficult venture. But difficult didn't matter. Swordarm Black One sat on the opposite side of the roof, her feet dangling off the ledge. Placed across her lap like a Teddy Bear was her wirey sword, the ruby in its hilt shining bright. She hummed softly to herself as she

gazed at the destruction below. "I see you finally made it.", the ponytailed girl sighed, slowly getting up. "...I got delayed.", I mumbled, as I inched forward across the narrow beams. "Oh, oh, I'd disagree.", Swordarm Black One responded, stretching her arms out and yawning. "Forty five minutes to get to the top of a heavily guarded mansion isn't bad time at all." "Yeah, well... can ya just give me the gem?", I grumbled, shifting my feet to keep my balance. "I just want to borrow it fer a bit. I'll return it to you later, I swear." "That's not how the game works~", Swordarm Black One sing-songed, smiling like a cat. "You didn't fight your way through my lackies just for my module. You came here to settle our little spat." I nodded my head. "No, I came here just fer your module." The smile disappeared from the ponytailed girl's face. "It's not nice to make jokes.", she growled. "You're here to kill me, right? To try and take back *this*.", Swordarm Black One taunted, waving around the brown colored hand. "Uh... you can keep that.", I tried to say all diplomatic like. "All I want is yer magic gem." Once again, the smile faded from Swordarm Black One's face. "You're kidding.", she responded, a flat, disappointed expression on her face. "I- I can give trade ya my greataxe fer it.", I nervously elaborated. "It's made of pure lifemetal, and the General that commissioned it is about ta kick the bucket. I'm sure the axe'll have tons of value as a historical item once she bleeds out... you'll probably be able ta pawn the thing fer all the marks in the world." "I don't care about axes.", Swordarm Black One stated, taking a step forward towards me. "I don't care about marks.", she hissed, drawing out her wirey sword as she effortlessly balanced herself atop the narrow marble rafter. "And I DON'T. CARE. ABOUT. THIS. WORLD!" Before I could even do a dang thing, Swordarm Black One rocketed forward, her wirey sword shining against the suns. "G-GAH!", I shrieked, as I felt something bite

into my ankle. "Hahahah, oh wow!", Swordarm Black One laughed, her voice cackling from behind me. "You're really out of your element, Donny!" I jerked around. Somehow the woman in the fur-lined leather armor had both cut into my armor clad ankle, and jumped straight over my head. The ankle bit I understood. Armor has to protect ya, but it also has to let you move. Invariably, that means that the joints of your armor are gonna be weaker than the rest of it, even if the armor was made out of metal like mine. The blood on the edge of Swordarm Black One's blade was the result of her using the weak points of my armor to her advantage. But for her to accurately slash my ankle, while also leaping straight over my head – that wasn't the mark of a skilled fighter. That was the mark of a monster. "I'm just SO conflicted about you, Axeman Red Four!", the ponytailed girl giggled. "I had thought you were interesting, but your fighting style is just so gosh darn bland!" I didn't respond to her taunting. Instead I hoisted up my greataxe, and awkwardly held it in front of me to try and force the Swordarm to keep her distance. My movement was severely limited. If I lunged at the ponytailed woman, or tried to hit her with a barrage of strikes, I risked falling off the rafter and down to the bottom of the mansion. And whereas my topheavy self could barely stand, Swordarm Black One navigated the rafters like a gymnast. "Does this hurt?", she asked, quickly poking through the armor covering my right armpit. "G-GUH!", I groaned, and sloppily swung my greataxe down at her. Swordarm Black One just laughed, and cartwheeled onto the rafter to my left. "Does this hurt?", she asked, slicing the area above my thigh. "Does this hurt?", she asked, poking my cheek. "DOES THIS HURT?!", she practically screamed, stabbing me right in the torso. It did hurt. I hadn't lost much blood, and none of my limbs seemed impaired, but that was only by the grace of my opponent. She was



toying with me. More to the point, she was *getting away* with toying with me. “Over here~”, Swordarm Black One sang, leaping onto the rafter I was on. “D-DYEH!”, I shouted, swinging my greataxe down vertically, so that even if she tried to flip over my head, she wouldn’t be able to- “Come on, I’m right here!”, she guffawed, curtsying less than a foot in front of me. “GGGGGGGGGGUUUUUUUUUUURH!”, I roared, and charged straight at Swordarm Black One like I was a linebacker. “Christ, really?”, Swordarm Black One spat, and with almost pathetic ease, dodged my tackle and punched me straight in my helmetless face. “A-AH!”, I screamed, losing my balance. I toppled off the rafter. “N-no!”, I choked out, and reached out desperately towards the sky. My left, lifemetal infused arm grabbed onto the edge of the marble rafter, while my right arm held on desperately to my greataxe. Somehow, I stopped myself from falling. Not that it meant anything. “It’s over Anakin!”, Swordarm Black One giggled, her boots less than an inch away from my fingers. “I have the high ground!” The wind blew across the ceiling of the mansion, and smacked against my face. It was cold, and unyielding. “Hahaha... PFTTHAHAHA!”, Swordarm Black One cackled, completely unharmed. “And here I was thinking you were something special! You’re just another bland try-hard!” Her face grew serious. “Die.”, she growled, and raised her boot in the air above my fingers. My first thought was to let go. I couldn’t even scratch Swordarm Black One, and the girl could fricking regenerate. If I let go I’d probably die, but gravity was a far better opponent than a girl whose module modified body made her much more than human. But then I realized: *I also* had a modified body that made me more than human. “LIKE HECK I’M GONNA DIE!”, I yelled, and with what seemed to be an explosion of force from my left arm, flung myself off the rafter, and high up into the air. “W-WHAT?!”,

Swordarm Black One shouted, as I blindly cut up at her torso during my ascent. “A-AH!”, she screamed, the head of my greataxe slicing through her shoulder. “W-WHAT?! HOW- WHA- WHAT?!”, Swordarm Black One hacked out, as I landed neatly on the rafter next to her. “You- YOU WERE ONLY HANGING ON BY ONE ARM! HOW DID- HOW DID YOU PRODUCE THE STRENGTH TO-“ I got a better grip on my greataxe, and smiled at the flustered Swordarm. “Now that...”, I said, wagging one of my lifemetal fingers, “-is a secret.” “LIKE FUCK IT’S A SECRET!”, Swordarm Black One spat, clutching her shoulder and wincing. “YOU- YOU’VE BEEN TAMPERED WITH! THERE’S NO WAY YOU CAN DO THIS KIND OF NONSENSE WITH A NORMAL BODY!” “Ya caught me.”, I snapped, my armor not feeling so heavy, and the rafter not feeling so narrow. “Yes, I’ve been tampered with. The Fiatists pumped a whole lot of lifemetal into my body. My left arm, my shoulder... heck, even my spinal cord is comprised of the stuff now.” I narrowed my eye. “So ya may want to surrender.” “Surrender?”, Swordarm Black One laboriously laughed, the humor gone from her voice. “You grow a little stronger because of the Collective’s batshit medical technology, and you think that’s enough to make me surrender?” The girl with the red ponytail puffed up her chest, and with a demented, crazed face shrieked: “BITCH I’M FUCKING IMMORTAL!” And just like that, she charged at me, oblivious to her still bleeding shoulder. “YOU CAN’T WIN!”, she screeched, stabbing at me blindly as she advanced on my position. “EVERY TIME YOU CUT ME DOWN I’LL GROW RIGHT BACK UP! IT ALL RESETS! DON’T YOU SEE THAT IT ALL RESETS?! IT’S THE SAME THING OVER AND OVER AND OVER AGAIN! IT’S THE SAME CAST, THE SAME SHOW! IT NEVER ENDS, IT NEVER BEGINS! IT JUST FUCKING /S!”, Swordarm Black One

finished, her barrage driving me to the edge of the mansion's roof. "Don't... don't you see? It's- it's pointless.", she panted, the tip of her sword caught in my armor. "Nothing is ever truly born, nothing ever truly lives... and nothing ever truly dies. Good... evil... there's no such thing. There's only what's INTERESTING, and what's BLAND! And you're the VERY DEFINITION OF BLAND, YOU ASISINE AXEMAN!" With a harsh flourish of her wrist, Swordarm Black One ripped her wirey sword out of my armor, and swung it straight at my forehead. I caught the blade in the palm of my left lifemetal hand. "W-what?!", the ponytailed girl spat. "There's- there's no way your reflexes can be that sharp!" I just stared Swordarm Black One straight in the eye. "If nothing dies, Swordarm Black One...", I began, keeping my voice calm and coherent, "...then how come your shoulder's still bleeding?" The ponytailed girl's eyes surged open, looking even more deranged than they did during her rant. "W-what?", she stammered, weakly. "Your shoulder is still bleeding, Swordarm Black One.", I repeated, coldly, calmly. With a shaking brown hand, Swordarm Black One padded and poked her wound, in sheer disbelief. "That's- that's just cause..." "It's because your module is no longer functioning, Swordarm Black One.", I crisply explained. "I've disabled it." That last bit was only kinda true. By bringing myself and U.T. close, I HAD disabled Swordarm Black One's module, but by no means had I done so intentionally. It was just dumb luck coupled with modules cancelling other modules. "You- you didn't disable it!", Swordarm Black One sputtered, sweating, "Any second now I'll regenerate... I'm sure of it!" I just shrugged my shoulders and smiled, keeping the girl's wirey blade wrapped securely in the palm of my lifemetal hand. "Take it easy." I said, generously. "I'll give ya all the time ya want to regenerate." Swordarm Black One didn't respond. Her face froze, and her eyes – veiny

and deranged, slowly shifted. Her pupils grew smaller, and the skin under her eyes grew baggier. Her shoulder did not heal itself. "... I surrender.", Swordarm Black One whispered, sounding like a scared child. "I will not fight anymore." "Alright.", I said, keeping myself calm. "Give me your module, and I'll let you live." "I- I can't do that.", the scared sounding Swordarm said, shaking her head. "This gem – it- it changes you. Well, it- it empowers you, at first. Fear disappears entirely. You feel like you can do anything you wish – and to an extent you can. But then things begin to change. A numbness takes over. Wounds don't hurt as much anymore, and sadness doesn't stick. Your perception begins to become warped, yet your body remains young, potent, powerful. Centuries become years become days become seconds. Life with this module is life as a contradiction, an abomination." "Then all the more reason to give me the gem.", I blurted, only slightly confused. "No... no, I can't!", the meek sounding Swordarm squeaked. "It's- it's not that I WANT to live forever... I just- I just *have* to. I've been alive for more than three thousand years, and I'll have to still be alive come three thousand years from now. I- I promised my comrades that I would make sure- that I would monitor this world." My ears twitched at that last bit, but I kept a tight grip on the ponytailed girl's sword. "Is that so?", I muttered, not letting down my guard even slightly. "And just what do you mean by *this world*?" Swordarm Black One flinched, like she said something she shouldn't have. "...F-forget it.", she weakly whispered. "Just- just leave, ok? Just leave me alone." "I'll leave if you give me your module.", I said, my voice muted. "I- I can't give you the module.", Swordarm Black One responded, firmly. "... I need to keep on using it. For the good of everyone, I need to keep on using-" I slammed my greataxe into the ponytailed girl's neck, chopped off her head, kicked her body down into the

wreckage of the mansion, and pilfered her module. Just kidding, that's what I woulda done if I wasn't a complete idiot. "Why do you need to keep on using it?!", I spat, losing my cool. "Why do you gotta live forever? What's so important? What the heck are ya even babbling about?!" Swordarm Black One's gaze harshened. "You wouldn't understand. Not in a million years, or cycles, or whatever stupid measurement the people of this realm use. I made a promise to my friends – to Phil, and to Lucas." I loosened my grip. "W-wha?", I stuttered, her words cutting into me more than her blade every could. Taking advantage of my hesitancy, Swordarm Black One yanked her ruby encrusted sword out of my hand. She flipped away from me, and landed on the opposite side of the roof. "My mind might drift in and out, my moral code might be nonexistent.", she stated, snarling. "But NO ONE will PREVENT ME from performing my DUTY, Axeman Red Four!" "And... and what's your duty?", I coughed out, flustered, angry. "Cause if yer duty is ta help Lucas, then I gotta say, you and I have the same darn duty!" "As if trash like *you* would know someone like *him*.", Swordarm Black One spat, readying her wirey sword. The wound I had hacked on her shoulder began healing. "Oh. Oh, I see.", the ponytailed girl said, a slight grin on her drained, depressed face. "You can only cancel out my module if you're close enough. In that case..." Like she would an empty can of Green River, Swordarm Black One tossed her module encrusted sword to her side. She reached into the folds of her fur lined arm, and pulled out... a silver revolver. A silver revolver I had seen wielded but rarely used, a revolver that belonged in the hands of an idiot who fancied himself a Sorcerer. "You- you gotta be kidding me.", I breathed out, my whole world crashing down around me. With disturbing ease and expertise, the ponytailed girl loaded six bullets into the revolver's chamber, clicked it

shut, spun it, and pointed its barrel straight at me. “I know this doesn’t mean much, but I’m sorry.”, Swordarm Black One said, forty feet away from me. Her finger tightened around the revolver’s trigger. “For everything.”, she added, tenuously. And then, for the second time in my life on the Continent, I heard the sound of a gunshot. Ya never get used to that sound – mostly cause television don’t ever portray it right. A gun shot don’t sound likea explosion or nothing, it’s more like... a crisp, popping sound. Like a kindergartener playing with a giant piecea bubble wrap. But the sound didn’t concern me, much. Because fer the first time in my life on the Continent, I *felt* a gunshot. Then I felt a second, third, fourth, fifth, and sixth gunshot. Now, let me make this clear. While the *sound* of a gunshot might be underwhelming, the *impact* of a gunshot is anything but. It-it was like getting hit in the chest with a sledgehammer. No – it was like getting hit in the chest with a sledgehammer that had a knife at the enda it. It was like getting hit in the chest with a sledgehammer that had a knife at the enda it six times. “G-GUH!”, I almost vomited, as the bullets bit through my armor, as my back crashed into the marble rafter. The pain- the pain was hot and intense as it ever could be – fer a few moments. But then, the pain began to recede. “N-no...”, I deliriously mumbled, my eye staring up at the suns. “No... no don’t- don’t leave.” But the pain did leave. The pain faded away. And as the pain faded away, so did my consciousness. My vision grew cloudy, and the sounds of the ruckus around me grew muted. I felt tired, I felt like I was falling asleep. I- I closed my eye. “You’re still alive?”, a wavering voice whispered, flabbergasted. “I shot you in the head, stomach, and chest... you- you shouldn’t still be alive.” Slowly, my eyelids opened again. Swordarm Black One, or Swordarm Red One, or Gregor stood above me, holding Lucas’s smoking revolver in her brown hand. “Just-

just give it a moment.”, I coughed, blood spewing up out of my throat. “I ain’t gonna be round here long.” I tried to move my arms, but both my real hand and metal hand felt like they weighed five tons. The only thing I could do was breath, and doing even that was difficult. “U... U.T?”, I somehow managed ta think, the roof of Merchant Black’s mansion spinning. “Are... are ya there, U.T.?” “I’m here, Miss Axeman Red Four.”, U.T. said, speaking in a comfortable sounding voice. “I... I kinda messed up, U.T.”, I vaguely pondered. “I don’t right reckon I’m gonna be able ta heal Ruckus like this.” “Um... I don’t imagine you’ll be able to heal *yourself* like this.”, the module quipped. “Everyone’s a comedian.”, I blathered aloud, pink, chunky phlegm oozing out of the corner of my mouth. “W-wait!”, the module nervously stuttered. “Please don’t go! There’s... um... there’s something I can do to help, I’m sure of it!” “Yer right.”, I thought to the module in my head. “There is something you can do.” “G-good!”, the module meeped, a panicked relief coming over it. “Please, tell me what to do!” I managed to move my mouth muscles enough ta smirk. “Alright.”, I began to think. “After I’ve gone and kicked the bucket, try ta talk to the crazy Swordarm girl... you know... the one that just shot me... a lot. Tell her that Lucas is hurt, and that he needs her module ta recover. She... she might actually listen to ya, assuming what she said before wasn’t justa buncha bullcrap.” “But- but I *can’t* do that!”, U.T. sobbed. “I... I can’t speak to anyone but you and Admin Lucas, Master Admin!” “S-shit...”, I gurgled, my brain finally hitting a wall. “I’m going to end this.”, the ponytailed girl above me said, loading more bullets into Lucas’s silver revolver. “I’ve already dragged out your suffering for too long. I’m going to end this.” She pressed the barrel of Lucas’ gun against my forehead. “This time, I can’t miss.”, she said, her voice cracking. “I can’t miss, I’m going to end this.”, she panted, the revolver

shaking. "I can't miss, I'm going to end this.", she repeated, holding the gun a bit more firmly. "I CAN'T MISS, I'M GOING TO END THIS!", Swordarm Black One shouted, and squeezed her brown pointer finger around the trigger. And then the seventh gunshot rang out. Instantly, I felt a sharp pain. I felt a sharp pain on my lips. Somehow- fer some reason, the ponytailed girl had dropped the silver revolver ont a my face. "A-ack!", Swordarm Black One yelped, the back of her brown hand bleeding a bit. "W-what?!", she gasped, staring at her wounded hand in disbelief. "How- how did you manage to-" Her head slowly tilted up, towards the sky. "No... no way..." she blathered, staring between the two rising suns. I couldn't see too good, on account of slowly dying, but there was *somebody* there. There was *someone* standing at the opposite side of the mansion's rooftop, standing between the two suns. And that someone was wearing a cape. "L-lucas.", Swordarm Black One spoke out, her breathes slow, her face astonished. I squinted my eye, but fer the life of me I couldn't make out more than a silhouette. "Is... is that really you, Lucas?", the ponytailed girl asked, ignoring me completely. The silhouette just nodded its head. "Is... is that a yes, or a no?", Swordarm Black One asked, nervous. "This- this realm isn't like home, Lucas. The people here shake their heads for yes, and nod their heads for no." She froze up, and smiled. "It... it doesn't matter.", she cried, tears flowing freely from her dull gray eyes. "I'm just so happy I got to see you again." The caped silhouette began to walk towards us. "No! Lucas, don't!", Swordarm Black One desperately shouted. "This girl- she's not just some mercenary! She's dangerous! I've been stuck in this stupid realm for thousands of years, so- so I know I'm not all right in the head, but... this girl... you musn't come close to her! She's... she's **Fortuna!**", Swordarm Black One bellowed, sounding absolutely



terrified. Swordarm Black One desperately bent over, and picked up the fallen silver revolver. “Here-“, she babbled, her pristine pale and wounded brown hand working in tandem ta reload the gun. “Here, let me just- finish her off, and then we’ll catch u-“ An eighth shot rang out. Swordarm Black One jerked a bit, as a sudden damp spot appeared right above her left breast. “...Lucas?”, the girl with the red ponytail coughed, clutching her chest as she stumbled towards the ledge of the roof. The caped silhouette didn’t react. It just raised its arm. A ninth, tenth, eleventh, and twelveth shot rang out. Four separate bullets whizzed through Swordarm Black One, piercing through her fur-lined leather armor like it was damp paper. She toppled off the ledge without saying a word. The caped silhouette lowered its arm, and rushed towards me. It- it didn’t say nothing. I felt a warm hand touch the nape of my neck, then my cheek. “Gem... gem’s on the sword. Git the sword.”, I babbled. The caped silhouette vanished, and returned to me a moment later. “G-good.”, I spewed, each word feeling like a two ton weight as I forced em outta my lips. “That’ll... that’ll fix what I did to ya.”, I breathed out. The silhouette didn’t say nothing. Instead, with rough, coarse moments, the silhouette began untying my white metal breastplate. “What- what are ya-“ My babbling was interrupted by the feel of something very hard and very sharp stabbing my exposed abdomen. “G-GAH!”, I screamed, my eyelids rocketing open. My vision stopped being cloudy. The first thing I noticed was that I was half naked. The second thing I noticed was that a large, jagged crystal had been crudely stabbed into me... like I was an unaffiliated inmate inna maximum security prison. Adding the crystal seemed likea moot point. I was lying in a puddle of my own blood. My chest, stomach, and torso was pierced through with various holes, alla which caused various life fluids ta seep outta my body

like I was a broken water bed. The addition of a crystal shaped stab wound wouldn't accelerate my passing, none. But- but then something weird happened, as I wallowed in my own bodily fluids. The puddle grew smaller. Moreso than that, I felt... I felt something rising up from within my torso. Slowly, gently, the holes on my chest closed, from the bottom up. Small pieces of metal spewed up and out of my wounds, and harmlessly clattered onto the marble rafter. Some scrap fell outta my forehead, too. Bent over me, a relieved expression on his face, was- "R-ruckus?", I breathed out, not so much surprised ta see him as I was ta see the *condition* he was in. The blonde haired boy somehow managed to look even WORSE than he had been before. He was dressed in his purple overcoat and white khakis, and had everything from his baton ta his tazer neatly attached ta him, but his whole face was covered in lacerations and blood. That wasn't the worst of it. Stuck straight in his right shoulder was an arrow, embedded deep inta his skin, muscle, and bone. His hands were mangled something bad – his cut-up fingers looked like they had been inna weedwacker. But Lucas didn't wince, or groan, or pay any attention ta any of that. He just looked inta my eye and smiled. "Four...", he spoke out, with his mouth that was missing a tongue. "You... you utter moron!", I yelled, my eye wet fer some reason. I tore the stupid crystal outta my chest and plunged it inta Lucas's left shoulder. "A-AH!", he groaned, wincing as I stabbed the dang thing inta him. Gradually, naturally, the wounds on Lucas' body faded away. The arrow stuck in his right shoulder gently popped out, the lacerations healed themselves, and- and yes, even the crude little stub of flesh in his mouth grew, and grew, until it was a full fledged tongue again. "...Well, this is new.", Lucas said, fingering the inside of his mouth. I balled my hand inta a fist, and stood up. "I thought I told ya to

stay on the boat.”, I said, my voice shaking for some reason. “You did.”, Lucas said with a smile. “I just chose not to listen.” He looked over the roof’s ledge, and grimaced. “Mykhaila...”, he said, sadly. “Mick-who now?” “My friend, Mykhaila.”, Lucas stated, curtly. “The woman I just shot.” “Thought ya said her name was Gregor.”, I muttered, still inna bit of a daze. “Gregor was her nickname.”, Lucas said, staring down at the wreckage below. “She was my closest friend.” My ears twitched. “Then why the heck didya shoot her?”, I asked, absent-mindly patting my woundless stomach. Lucas turned his back to the ledge of the roof, and stared right through me with his piercing blue eyes. “Because you are so much more to me than a friend, Four.” His cheeks grew somewhat pink, and he tilted the brim of his purple tophat over his eyes. “But... uh... we should probably get going.”, he mumbled. “City’s on fire and everything. Plus, you’ll probably want to-“ I grabbed the blonde boy by his collar, and pulled him in close towards me. “Just shaddup for a second, alright?”, I muttered, and pressed his lips against mine. “Uh... Four?”, the blonde boy asked, as I teased his tongue with mine. “...What?”, I meeped, caught up in the heat of the moment. “That’s my nose.” “Oh.” I pulled back, and adjusted my mouth to be more on target. But right as I went in again- “No, no.”, Lucas said, putting two of his gloved fingers on my lip. “Don’t get caught up in the heat of the moment.” I pulled back, irritated. “But ya just told me that-“ “You *are* more than a friend to me, Four.”, the blonde boy in the purple tophat repeated. “But... but due to various... circumstances, I’m not terribly positive the opposite is true.” “I ain’t wearing a shirt and I just licked yer face, what more proof do ya-“ I paused. I only looked down by happenstance, but lying on the rafter was Lucas’s silver revolver. “-need.” Without really thinking, I bent down and picked up the gun. “You... uh... you dropped

this.”, I muttered, all sorts of embarrassed. “No, I didn’t drop it.”, Lucas said, sounding distant. “Mykhaila did.” “O-oh.”, I stammered, as I carefully turned over the empty revolver. “Funny, it looks identical to yer revolver, Ruckus.” “That’s because it is my revolver.”, the pseudo-sorcerer stated, an eerie quality to his voice. “Then... then why don’t ya want it?” “Because I already have it.”, Lucas said, drawing his revolver from the holster on his waist. I looked at the revolver in my hand, and the one in Lucas’s hand. “Uh... wait a tick, that don’t make a lick of sense.” “That’s understating it.” the boy in the purple top hat commented, holstering his revolver. “But even though it doesn’t make a lick of sense, it’s the truth. That revolver and mine are one in the same. They’re the same object, if you look closely you can even see the same dents and scratches.” I bit my fleshy thumb. “I... I uh, I believe ya, Ruckus, but I gotta say I’m having a hard time trying to work out just how that could... work.” “You said you were a smuggler, right Four?”, the blonde boy quickly asked me. “Sorta.”, I said, off-handedly. Lucas nodded his head. “And as a smuggler, you used a bunch of different routes, right?” “Well, we kinda had to, so that we didn’t get caught.” “Right.”, Lucas said, nodding his head. “You took different routes to get to the same location. And some of those routes were a bit shorter, and some of them were much much longer, but they all led to the same destination.” “I still don’t-“ “That’s... that’s why there are two copies of my revolver, Four.”, the blonde boy babbled on. “Because it’s the same gun, but it took different routes to get here.” He swallowed, and looked at me nervously. “Different routes through time.” I licked my teeth. “...I reckon that makes sense.”, I said, not terribly phased. “You and Swordarm Black One both hail from the land of Sorcerers, so magical shenanigans ain’t exactly too much a-“ “I’m not a Sorcerer.”, Lucas admitted, bluntly. “And I’m not from the Land of

Sorcerers.” Lucas blushed a bit. “I’m actually from Illinois.”, he coughed. “Illinois...”, I repeated, slowly. “Is that... is that offland?”, I asked, the cold wind on my skin not distracting me as much as it shoulda. “No, no, it’s- it’s not offland.”, Lucas said, fidgeting with his purple tophat. “Illinois is- it’s a region, located in a nation, located on a continent, located on a planet that isn’t this planet, in a universe that isn’t this universe.” He clenched his teeth. “In other words... I’m from another realm. Another plane of existence, a location that is the farthest possible distance from here, and then some.” I stared into his blue eyes for a solid moment, then flicked his left ear. “Well, duh!”, I exclaimed, as Lucas rubbed the side of his face. “I mean, ya got random crap no one else got, and ya always run around and talk like yera living God. Do ya expect me ta be surprised by that?” Lucas winced. “No- I wasn’t aiming to surprise you, it’s just that- that you, and me, in this other plane of existence, we-“ “I know, Lucas.”, I said, trying ta make my voice all sultry-like. “I know all about you, and me. I’ve been having these idiotic dreams for awhile now- I’ve been remembering things I never actually experienced. Your real name is Hoffman, right?” Lucas shook his head. “No, it’s Lucas. My... my last name is Hoffman.” “Huh. Well, I reckon my secret memories are a bit dodgy, but still, I-“ “Those aren’t your memories.”, Lucas interjected, coldly. “They’re the lingering remnants of a tacky stage magician named Fortuna Splendour. Don’t pay them any mind.” I pouted at the healed-up torture victim. “Well, it ain’t like I can ignore them!”, I exclaimed, a weird feeling in my stomach. “Even if those memories ain’t really mine, the feelings I got- they-“ The roof started to shake. “Aw, crap!”, I cursed. “Help me put my chestpiece back on, we gotta git going!” “There’s one more thing I need to say to you, Four.”, Lucas quickly blurted, as he helped me tie on my platemail. “Back when I

lived in Illinois, back in my own realm- I- I had to make a decision. My friends and I- Me, Mykhaila, and Phil... we were just students, but- but circumstances led to us fighting against a whole bunch of fucked up people, and... and sometimes against things which were a great deal more fucked up than fucked up people. And eventually... eventually I was put in the position where I had to make a choice. I had to choose between the woman I loved, and the good of the wor- the good of my realm.” Lucas’s hand jerked, slightly, as he finished tying the strings on the back of my armor. “I... I made the wrong choice, Four.”, he confessed, his face fulla grief. “I put aside what I valued the most in favor of what I thought I *ought* to value the most. My confusion- my cowardice- it led to me losing that which was most precious to me.” He placed his gloved hands on my shoulders. “But that doesn’t mean you have to make the same mistake.”, he said, insistent. I put on a gentle smile. “I already have what’s most precious to me, Lucas.” The boy in the purple tophat glared at me. “Do you really?”, he asked, pressing the issue. “If you and I left Provesh right now, could you truly say you’d have no regrets?” He pulled the strings of my armor tight, as if to emphasize the point. I put some distance between me and Lucas, as I walked towards my fallen greataxe. “Of course I couldn’t.”, I spat, speaking frankly. “I abandoned Blue, I abandoned that idiot Ex-Regent, and I abandoned that dumb little Unassigned girl. I’m also about to leave this city in the care of a fascist military dictatorship. Suffice it to say that I’ll be having regrets for a long time.” I shook my head, and slung my greataxe over my shoulder. “But that’s the way things *are*, Lucas. You only get everything you want in wetdreams and whorehouses. Consider it a miracle that you and I are both alive, and be grateful for it.” The roof started to shake a bit more, so I gently pushed the blonde haired boy with my metal

hand. "Come on, we need to start moving. There's a whole bunch of Collective soldiers we gotta slip past if we wanna get back on that boat." "I- I get what you're saying Four, I do, but are-", Lucas blurted as I dragged him towards one of the four stone towers attached to the mansion's roof. "-you sure this is what you want? For us to just flee for our lives?" "Generally speaking, yes, I want ta live more than I want ta die.", I answered, irritated. "I don't see why yer being so gosh darn obstinate about this. Fleeing fer our lives will be fun if we do it right. You and I will get back ta the ship, we'll set sail fer some strange, exotic location, and then it'll be easy living. Offlanders ain't the brightest bunch, so we'll just con em out of their metal with tricks and stuff." I smiled, as I ushered Lucas down the stone steps of the tower. "Yeah, it'll all work out. You can do your little stage show act, I'll work as a mercenary, and Sabarene can-" I quickly covered my mouth. "Sabarene can what, Four?", Lucas asked, staring at me with a concerned looking face. "Forgit it.", I muttered, a deep sense of shame and disgust sweeping through my body. "Fer- fer a moment I forgot what- what the situation was." A half-smile appeared on the blonde boy's face. "No, you didn't.", he said, softly. "Even after all of this- you still care for her, don't you?" "Of course I don't.", I lied. "She manipulated us, tortured you, and enslaved me. She's a genocidal psychopath with delusions of grandeur. I'd have to be a complete imbecile ta care about her!" "Imbecile?", Lucas repeated, his head tilted. "Uh... idiot!", I blurted, flustered. "I'd havta be a complete idiot! But who cares about Sabarene, anyways? I mean, the stupid git is dead, anyhow!" "She's dead?", the Sorcerer repeated, looking mildly concerned. "W-well, if she ain't, she will be soon.", I awkwardly asserted. "Marston chopped off her arm with my greataxe, so she hasta be dead from blood loss or something." Lucas narrowed his eyes. "You had *your* left arm

chopped off two separate times, Four.” “T-the second time wasn’t *really* my arm, though.”, I lamely replied, then shook my head. “Wait a tick, why the heck are you pressing the issue so much? She’s literally evil incarnate, even if I WANT ta save her, it don’t mean I OUGHT ta.” A fire erupted in Lucas’s eyes. “And that’s precisely why you’re going to save her.”, he hissed. “Phil, Mikhaila and I sacrificed everything to do what we thought we OUGHT to do, and the result of that was nothing but suffering. Mikhaila went mad, I drowned in my own self-pity, and Phil... Phil *changed*.” He removed his hat, and held it against his chest. “Four- No. Axeman Red Four. If you care about Sabarene, and if your gut instinct is to try and save her, then save her. Do not suppress what you instinctively know to be right in favor of what society tells you to be right.” “But... but c’mon, Ruckus!”, I sobbed, distressed. “If folks just did what their gut told them to, we’d of died out generations ago! People- people are messed up, evil, and dumb. I- I know, cause *I’m* messed up, evil, and dumb.” Lucas cusped me by the chin, and raised my head up ta meet his. “You are *not* messed up, or broken.”, he breathed out, his words firm as I ever heard em. “You are *not* evil, or malicious. And finally, you are *not* dumb, though you probably already know that. If your heart is telling you to do something, then do it. And do it because you WANT to do it, not because you OUGHT to.” Tears still falling from my eye, I shook my head and smiled. “A-alright, Lucas. If- if it’s ok- if it’s possible- I- I do think we should try and find Sabarene. If only ta- talk ta her just one last time. You- you alright with that, Blondie?” Lucas smiled, and nodded his head. “More than fine with it, Patchy.” He paused. “Actually, wait a bit. Are you good to walk? You tore out the recovery module before it could heal you fully.” He glanced at the right side of my face, sheepishly. “And, uh, you know, if you wanted to, you could



regenerate your-“ I’m good, Lucas.”, I said, smiling in spite of it all. “If I never lost my eye, I never would have gotten to know you, or that stupid white haired git.” Lucas placed his hat back on top of his head. “I thought you’d say something like that.”, the semi-Sorcerer sighed. He reached into the pockets of his overcoat, and pulled out- a strip of brown leather, attached to a string. “Here. I found this back on the ship. You must have dropped it, or something.” “Emphasis on the something.”, I sheepishly said, and accepted the somewhat dirty and dusty eyepatch from Lucas. “Uh... can you help me put this on, too?”, I asked, still standing in the stairwell of the stone tower. “Of course.”, Lucas said, bowing inna over the top, flamboyant manner. With a few deft moves of his fingers, and the help of a damp piece of fabric, the blonde haired boy cleaned off the dusty eyepatch, and tied it ta my face. “Behold!”, the sorcerer bellowed. “With this piece of fabric, you are so much more than a handicapped mercenary! I’ve enchanted it with a charm to make you a *handicapable* mercenary! Go forth, with the knowledge that you can per-UH!” “That’s enough.”, I chirped, teasingly nudging the blonde haired boy in his flank. “We’re gonna havta serious the frick up if we’re gonna succeed in doing this.” “Very well.”, Lucas said. He reached towards the holster on his waist, and drew his taser. “The gameplan’s still the same as before.”, I instructed him, as we got to the bottom of the stairwell. “Our ultimate destination is still the boat, we’re just gonna try and pick up a package along the way.” “And what if that package doesn’t want to come with us?” “Then I’ll *make* her come with us.”, I said, bluntly. “She’ll leave with us even if we havta stuff her in a rucksuck.” “We should probably see if she’s still alive, first.”, Lucas said, frowning. “Where did you last see the little megalomaniac?” “In the banquet hall of this mansion.”, I said, a tad nervous. “And where is the banquet

hall?" "Right down the corridor at the bottom of these stairs, Ruckus." We finished descending the stairs in the stone tower, and came to the door which led into one of the mansion's long corridors. "Alright, Blondie. You stick close to me. You might have all sorts of neat gadgets, but an errant arrow would pierce through you like tissue paper." "We have the recovery module now, Patchy. We needn't worry about wounds." "That module won't do us any good if our brains end up scrambled though, will it?" "...Probably not." Moving swiftly, the two of us navigated back down the long corridor of the mansion. The corridor was a complete wreck, smokey and dusty as all heck. The hallway almost felt haunted in the way absolutely no one else was present. In contrast to when I had climbed to the roof, the only evidence of others were dropped swords, and the occasional dead black habited body. All Lucas and I experienced was silence, a stilled calmness. Even the fire which had turned the mansion into a horror show seemed to be dying down. And finally – we returned to the hacked down pieces of wood that had once been the banquet hall's door. There – there was no one inside. Marston wasn't there, Sabarene wasn't there, the erratic man in the spikey black armor wasn't there... only the corpses were there. "Well, shit.", Lucas cursed, peeking underneath the banquet hall's benches. "I had feared we'd find her here alive, but it seems like the situation is even worse. She's both alive, and not here." "Wait, you were hoping to find her dead?", I spat, a bit angry. "Er... yes. Yes I was.", the blonde haired boy admitted, then quickly waved his hands. "But it's not because I'm evil or anything! It's just that if Sabarene were dead, all we would have to do would be to pick up her corpse, carry it to the ship, and then resurrect her with the recovery module." I glared at him, then shook my head. "It wouldn't work anyhow. Alive or dead, that git's gonna be surrounded by a

whole bunch of folks. Getting to her is gonna be next ta impossible.” “Since when has that stopped you, Four?” “Since always.”, I snorted. “I ain’t actually mucha a fighter, ya know.” Lucas put his hands on his hip. “You’re not much of a *fair* fighter. But when it comes to dirty tricks, lying to people with a straight face, and general knavery, you’re fairly capable. Even, dare I say it, handicapab-“ “Alright hotshot, that’s enough.”, I chirped, sealing Lucas’s lips with two of my fingers. “I’m an idiot, so I’m still gonna try and go fer this, but right now I can’t think of a good plan.” “Why don’t we just dress up as the Fiatists?”, Lucas suggested, resting his chin on his baton. “...I tried that already.”, I muttered. “Succeeded fer a bit, too. I used U.T. ta modify my voice and everything. But then I blew my cover.” Lucas balked at me. “U...T?”, he repeated, skeptical. “Yeah, U.T.”, I yarned. “Yer module.” “You... you were able to use my module?”, the blonde boy blurted, baffled. “Inna manner of speaking. I mean, U.T. did mosta the heavy lifting fer me with the translating and voice modification and what not.” I played with a bit of my leafy green hair. “She-he-... uh, they missed ya a whole bunch, Ruckus. They talked about how ya came all the way here just ta-” The blue eyed Sorcerer grabbed me suddenly by the wrist, knocking over a bench in the process. “The Universal Translator is just a tool, Four. It doesn’t speak.”, he whispered, concerned. “R-really?”, I stammered, utterly horrified. “Yes, really.”, Lucas responded, dead serious. “Uh... U.T.?” I quickly thought. “Are- are you there, U.T.?” All I got was silence. “G-guh...”, I groaned, and buried my head in my hands. “Don’t worry about it, Four.”, the blonde boy said, awkwardly. “I- I heard voices in my darkest moments, too. Voices of my friends, voices of my loved ones. Fake or not, they kept me going.” “That’s so sweet, Admin Lucas.”, U.T. chimed in, a tad late. “Gah! I’m hearing it again!”, I yelled aloud. “Stupid

fricking voice!” “I’m an artificial intelligence, I can’t be stupid.”, U.T. snorted, speaking in my head anew. “Yer a figment of my imagination.”, I thought, quickly. “No I’m not.” “Yes you are.” “No I’m not.” “Yes you are.” “No, seriously, I’m not!”, U.T. shouted. “I... I just-well... I just can’t be heard by anyone. Except you.” “Well ain’t that just peachy.” “It’s-it’s not peachy!”, U.T. hissed. “Admin Lucas has gone through so much, but my words can’t reach him! He’s- all this time he’s been traveling across the realms alone – it would drive most people mad!” “I don’t right reckon you can travel cross-realms without being a bit mad.”, I thought back to the module. “But how the heck can I hear ya, if he can’t?” “That’s what I want to know.”, U.T. pouted, then switched to its male voice. “For some reason, Master Admin, you are the Master Admin. You have access to functions Admin Lucas doesn’t. A shame, considering how unbearably uncouth you are.” “Uh... have the voices stopped, Patchy?”, Lucas asked, gently. “Er... no they haven’t.”, I quipped, patting the module awkwardly. “Maybe you should take U.T. back, considering ya don’t speak Continental and all.” “I don’t need to speak Continental.”, the boy in the purple tophat boasted, then blushed a bit. “I... talking to you is all that matters, mostly.” “Admin Lucas...”, U.T. sighed, in its female voice. Not particularly wishing to get into a lover’s quarrel with a magical talking gem, I quickly changed the subject. “So, uh... finding Sabarene, and stuff... how do ya reckon we should go about doing that?” “You could start by following the horde of soldiers, doggy.”, a familiar, tired voice suggested. Slowly, steadily, one of the black habited corpses got up on its feet. “G-gah!”, I screamed, and swung my axe straight at it. “W-woah!”, the reanimated corpse yelped, flipping out of the way of my greataxe. “You need to CHILL, doggy! Chill! Be groovy, be mellow!” The points of my ear twitched at the corpse’s psychedelic words. “G-groovy?”,

I repeated, confused. The zombie in the black habit yanked down its hood, revealing a girl with a lazy looking face and long black hair. "Yeah, groovy.", Sister Julia yawned. "As in, swinging an axe at a cat that's just trying to give you some primo advice isn't groovy." "Why the heck are you here?", I blurted. "I thought you and them other two degenerates hightailed it ta Merchenze." "That was the plan, pup.", Sister Julia sighed. "Unfortunately, I messed up and got separated from Chris and Dez. Then that evil albino cat took me in as a glorified hostage." "Why would Sabarene take ya in asa hostage?" "Oh, come on, you're not *that* dumb, Unionist.", Sister Julia said. "The only man on the continent capable of standing up to our beloved General is Dez. The notion of having me as leverage was irresistible to the newly inaugurated sociopath." She narrowed her eyes. "By the way, good going with that, doggy. Good job on beating me and Chris and dooming the entire Continent to a lifestyle of fear and control." "I did kinda screw the pooch on that.", I admitted. "But I'm aiming ta correct my mistake. Furthermore, I'm aiming ta figure out how you ain't dead. I mean, all them other blokes are dead, ain't they?" Sister Julia looked around at the bodies in the banquet hall, and made a slightly pained expression. "I wasn't actually in this room when everyone went to the great big groove sesh in the sky. But once I passed it and saw all the dead folk, I figured I could pretend to be a stiff so that the General wouldn't use me as leverage anymore." "Pretty sneaky, Sis.", Lucas commented. I glared at him. "I can UNDERSTAND Continental, Patchy.", he briskly explained. "I just can't speak it properly without the Universal Translator." Sister Julia looked at Lucas uncomfortably, then bowed her head. "I- I heard your friend was tortured, but- but I didn't know it was so bad. I'm- I'm sorry, doggy." Now, the right, factual thing fer me ta do would have been ta

explain ta Sister Julia that Lucas had been healed, and that what seemed ta be babbling ta her was just him speaking inna different language, one that I *could* understand because of a magical talking voice in my head. But the right, factual thing made absolutely no sense, so I went with the wrong, pragmatic thing. “Yeah... he- he just ain’t the same anymore, Sister.”, I choked out. “I was imprisoned, but he was tortured. The babbling might seem random, but in his more lucid moments I can hear him... crying out fer his mother.” “You’re blatantly lying in an attempt to garner sympathy from me, aren’t you?”, Sister Julia instantly responded. “Only kinda.”, I muttered. “Lucas *was* tortured, and he *did* go crazy fer a bit. He’s, uh, better now, but I figured I might as well make use of yer assumption.” “Hmph, well, you’re no Brother Brounde.”, Sister Julia snorted, crossing her arms. “He would never be this uncouth.” She looked at the bodies in the banquet hall uncomfortably. “He also would never be this alive, considered Miss Kitty Kat murdered him the moment he wasn’t useful to her.” “So I’ve heard.”, I said, darkly. The black haired girl just nodded her head. “I used to think Marston’s sister was just a good kid gone bad, but... that’s not the case.”, Sister Julia said, her voice muted. “Even when she was just a grunt, even when she was just the medic girl... there was nothing there. Beneath her eyes, beneath her smile, there was nothing. And even now, even with that new bombastic attitude of hers, even with the harsh speeches, the cruel attitude... I still see nothing.” “Maybe yer vision ain’t as good as ya think it is.” “I’m not the one missing an eye.”, Sister Julia huffed, then stretched out her arms and yawned. “In any event, I’m going to try to find a way back to Merchenze. I know where this all is heading, and it’s nowhere good. You and your friend should probably come with me, if you want to live.” “On the contrary, you should come with us if ya want to

live.”, I countered. “Lucas and I know the only way outta here.” “I don’t believe you.”, Sister Julia chirped. “Believe me or don’t, it’s the truth.” “You NEVER tell the truth, Axeman Red Four!”, the usually breezy Fiatist shouted. “You’re a cowardly, manipulative Unionist, with a bad attitude and TERRIBLE judgment of character.” “Yup. I am a total coward.”, I admitted. “I cause more problems than I solve, and I run away from more problems than I cause. That’s why I gotta know an escape route, right? A lying coward like me hasta have SOME measure ta save her own skin set up, right?” “You know what? I believe you.”, Sister Julia admitted, then scowled. “But I’m not going to come with you, because I refuse to be manipulated by you.” “All me and Ruckus are trying ta do is defeat the General.”, I said, inna attempt ta sound reasonable. “Heck, we’re trying ta save the Continent! Don’tcha care about the Continent?” “No. No, not in the slightest, doggy.”, Sister Julia snipped. “The only things I care about are Dez and Chris.” I flashed the black haired girl a fangy smile. “Ah, izzat so? So tell me, do Dez and Chris care about the Continent?” The lazy looking girl jerked back, as if she had been splashed in the face bya buncha cold water. “I- uh- they-“ “They do care.”, I whispered, wickedly. “Ya KNOW they care. Even with that talk of corruption, ya know those two gents are a buncha bleeding hearts who would just break if they saw Provesh razed to the ground by the Collective’s military. So, rejoice! This is yer big chance, Sister Julia! You help me and Ruckus beat the big bad General, and then you’ll bea hero ta the fellas ya care about. Plus, after ya help us, we can help YOU escape.” Sister Julia opened her mouth to say something, but I kept on going. “You’ll get to see them again, you know.”, I said, making my voice sound more gentle. “If you help me and Ruckus, you’ll get to see them again.” I stuck out my hand. “So do we got a deal?”

Sister Julia's fist slammed straight into my face. "G-GAH!", I yelped, as the back of my head smacked violently against the mahogany floor of the Banquet Hall. "Yes, doggy.", the black haired woman said, smiling as she rubbed her knuckles together. "We have a deal." Lucas quickly helped me back onto my feet. "T-thanks fer that.", I wheezed, the room spinning some as I leaned on the flamboyant boy's shoulders. Still a bit dizzy, I picked up my greataxe, and... extended it to the black haired girl. "Here.", I said, holding the black and red weapon by its blade. "You're probably gonna want to use this."

"You're offering me your weapon?", Sister Julia asked, suspicious. "Why would you-"

"You can use a halberd far better than I can swing an axe, right?", I blurted. "I figure my great axe ain't too far off from a halberd, so we'd be better off with it in yer hands." "A wolf isn't too far off from a dog, but they're not the same thing.", Sister Julia snorted.

"Besides, what will you use as a weapon?" I glanced at Lucas. Without even saying a word, the blonde haired boy took out his revolver, and extended it to me. "No, not that.", I muttered, muted. Lucas looked a bit shocked, but he nodded his head and offered me what I really wanted – his pronged black box. I gently took the tazer from him. "Go ahead and use my axe, wolfie," I said, pressing the box's button ta make sparks fly from its end. "This is the only weapon I need." The black haired girl grabbed black greataxe from me, and leaned against its handle. "You know, for an Axeman you don't seem to like axes very much." "And for an easy going degenerate, you don't seem all too easy going.", I said, then shrugged my shoulders. "But let's not turn this into a pissing contest. We have reason ta collaborate, so let's try and keep this as professional as we possibly can." "I'll help you, but I will not save you.", Sister Julia warned, raising up my greataxe. "If you and Mister Fox here end up in over your head, I will not drown with



you.” “I’m well aware.”, I growled, then cracked my neck. “You said ya saw a whole buncha soldiers move through here?” “A whole bunch would be undercutting it.”, Sister Julia snipped. “An entire squad of squares moved through here, there must have been around two hundred troops or so.” “They didn’t check the bodies in here to see if anyone here was still alive, or nothing?” “Of course they didn’t.”, Sister Julia yawned. “Those squares were more concerned with the two wounded squares on the ground. The speed in which they moved to grab Marston and that monster, it was almost as if they never entered this building in the first place.” “Was the monster alive?”, I asked, hopeful. “I can’t say.”, Sister Julia said with a shrug. “I was too busy playing dead to know if someone else wasn’t.” She brushed some ash off of her black habit. “But I do know where the soldiers went. They said something about an ice building. They must have gone to a meat locker.” “No, not a meat locker.”, I said, more ta myself than ta the black haired girl. “The depot. They went to the Caravan Depot.” “What makes you so sure of that, Four?”, Lucas asked, apathetic to the discomfort on Sister Julia’s face. “Well, the entire building is made of ice, fer one. But the more obvious reason they’d take Sabarene there is because it’s the main way inta and outta the city. Them black metal ships might be able ta carry soldiers here, but soldiers ain’t worth nothing if they don’t have a proper supply line backing em up. Taking control of an economically essential chokepoint like the depot was probably the first thing that white haired git did.” “Ugh, when you go on like that it’s like she never left.”, Sister Julia groaned, then shrugged her shoulders. “But I suppose the depot is as good a place to start as any.” She looked up at the ceiling, skeptically. “Oh, and we should probably leave before this building-“ the ceiling began to move back and forth –“collapses. AW MAN WE GOTTA

GO!", Sister Julia shouted, booking it. I grabbed Lucas by the arm and followed the black haired girl out of the mansion, quick as I could. I'd like ta tell ya that the entire mansion collapsed around us, and that we only got out by the skin of our teeth, but it didn't collapse. We actually got outside with time ta spare. Ravaged though it was by the flames, the Mansion still just kind of stood there. "Aw, lame, man!", Sister Julia complained, as we strolled out into soot and snow covered courtyard. "When a building shakes like that it's supposed to collapse, it's no fun if it just stays upright. That's a total letdown!" "You should be grateful it's still standing.", I commented, the rush of cold wind reminding me just where I was. "The sooner this abortion of architecture is destroyed, the better.", the black haired girl hissed. "There's, like, no nuance in its construct. Whatever cat constructed it didn't think about making something with a goal in mind. Every room is just a reflection of what's popular, there's no art to it whatsoever." "Never thought I'd be lectured about art by a woman of ill repute.", I quipped. Sister Julia fumed at my remark, then flashed me a wide smile. "At least I like *men*.", she boasted. The points of my ears twitched. "The heck is that supposed ta mean?" "Exactly what you think it means, doggy.", the black haired girl taunted, then needlessly flourished my greataxe. "Let's leave matters of personal taste aside, and get cracking on finding that white haired moron." "She ain't a moron.", I warned the black haired girl. "By no means is she smart, but she ain't a moron." Sister Julia narrowed her eyes, and looked out towards the burning city. "If Sabarene isn't a moron, then she's a monster." "It doesn't matter what she is, or isn't.", Lucas said, pulling his tophat over his eyes. "If she can be saved we'll save her. If she can't, then-" "She can be saved.", I said, pressing the tazer up against my chest. "And there ain't nothing that can stop us from saving her."

“STOP!”, a loud, threatening voice bellowed, from the opposite side of the courtyard. Right where Merchant Black One’s mansion met the street, stood a tall, gray haired man, clad in... rough leather armor. And he was wielding an axe. “My name is Axeman Black Four.”, the gray haired man with slightly large ears declared, as the gaggle of Lancers, Bowmen, Hammerions, and other Unionists shifted behind him. “In the interest of Provesh, I demand you three identify yourself.” “Ah, well, that’s an easy enough question to answer, Monkey.”, Sister Julia said, wagging her finger as she lazily griped my greataxe. “I’m a deserter from General Sabarene’s army, the Fremdosian mutt next to me is Axeman Red Four, and the blonde dude is, like, a magician or something? I think that’s what he is, man.” The gray haired man made a face like he splashed with cold water. “You’re a what?” “A deserter, man!”, Sister Julia exclaimed, then yawned. “You know, the type of happening hipster who doesn’t like fighting people she doesn’t want to fight.” “So you’re a coward.”, the gray haired man said, narrowing his eyes. “No, I’m not *just* a coward.”, Sister Julia said, all sultry like. “I’m a *next level* coward. I’m *avante garde*. Most squares just run away when they desert, but me? I confess to everything.” “Very well.”, the gray haired man said, then turned to one of the bowmen. “Kill her.”, he hissed. Sister Julia’s eyes opened wide. “Frick!”, I cursed, and dove on topa the needlessly mouthy Fiatist. Quicker than I could even perceive, three or four projectiles pierced through the backa my armor super quick, and cut about an inch into my spine. I jumped back up immediately, ripped my greataxe from the terrified Fiatist girl’s hand, and sprinted straight towards the gray haired man, dropping the tazer in the process. “GRAAAAAAAAAAAH!”, I roared, closing the distance between us in seconds. But then something strange happened. The gray haired man- the one who called

himself Axeman Black Four – he flinched. As I ran towards him, he flinched. And because he flinched, I stopped dead in my tracks. “Tell me yer name!”, I yelled, immediately. “W-what?!”, the gray haired man spat, terrified. “Why aren’t you dead?” “That don’t particularly matter, now does it?”, I spat, then directed my attention ta the twenty or so folks behind him. “I JUST WANNA TALK!”, I yelled, desperate. “DON’T KILL ME, OR MY COMPANIONS JUST YET! LET ME SAY MY PIECE, AND *THEN* YA CAN KILL US OR RAPE US OR DO WHATEVER!” “F-fine.”, Axeman Black Four stuttered, his knees buckling. “E-explain why you’re helping out a deserter Fiatist.” “How bout you explain why ya want a deserter dead?”, I countered. “If our enemies are the Fiatist, then a Fiatist deserter should be welcomed as an ally, not as a menace.” Axeman Black Four’s face straightened up, and his body relaxed, as if he was back in familiar territory. “That might be the case, but a Fiatist is a Fiatist, no matter who they claim to fight for. Letting just one of them live can subvert our independence.” “If ya haven’t noticed, there’s an entire army of them in the city. Y’all should probably be more concerned about the folks in the Caravan Depot than this random passerby.” “You are naïve, girl.”, Axeman Black Four spat, stepping towards me without fear. “Defeating General Sabarene and her armada is impossible – at least for the time being. We must seek shelter, and strike covertly. Provesh is lost for this rising period, but in the future-“ “Who are y’all?”, I asked, bluntly. The gray haired man raised his eyebrow. “I am Axeman Black-“ “No, who are you ALL?”, I clarified. “You, and the fellas behind ya. Who are ya?” Axeman Black Four looked at the exhausted looking Unionists behind him, then nodded his head. “We are the Warriors of the Future. We seek to fight for a better-“ “When did y’all meet?”, I blurted, interrupting the man in the ragged brown armor. “We

all met at different times. Lancer Blue Seventy Two, for example, met me just-“ “When did you all meet, in general?”, I repeated, making my voice low. The gray haired man paused, as if he was reluctant to say. “Four rising periods ago.”, a Lancer said, stepping forward. “Me, Blue Seventy Two, Yellow Fifty Nine, and fifteen of my name-sharers were ambushed by Fiatist scouts. If it weren’t for Axeman Black Four, all of us would have died.” “It was only cause of Axeman Black Four that you were in danger in the first place.”, I declared, staring straight at the men behind the gray haired man. “W-WHAT?!” Axeman Black Four roared, indignant. “You MUST be an agent of the Collective! Kill her!” The men behind him hesitated. “Why don’t you kill me?”, I suggested, dropping my greataxe and spreading my arms open. “Go ahead, I won’t resist.” The gray haired man in the ragged leather armor raised his axe. “I damn well will kill, you impertinent-“ “No no no.”, I lectured, stepping further into the main street of the Trade District. “Don’t use yer axe ta kill me. Use a *command*.” “A- a command?”, Axeman Black Four repeated, confused fer a brief moment. “Yeah, a command.”, I explained, raising my voice so the men behind the man in the leather armor could hear me. “You’re Axeman Black Four, ain’t ya? Well I’m Axeman Red Four. It’s a shock that we never met each other! Yer higher in rank, so just command me ta kill myself.” Panic flashed across the gray haired man’s face, but only fera brief moment. “You’re not worth wasting a command on.”, he hissed, and swung his axe up at me. “Woah!”, I cried, sidestepping the move with ease. “Ya know, Axeman Black Four, that ain’t how yer supposed ta use an axe. Ya swing DOWN witha axe, cause it’s top heavy.” “You mean LIKE THIS!”, the gray haired man yelled, striking down at me with an obvious telegraphed move. “No.”, I responded, moving away from the gray haired man, and his

indecisive looking backup. “I mean like THIS!” With a sloppy, unnuanced jerk of my lifemetal arm, I swung my metal fist straight onto his exposed skull. The gray haired man crumbled onto the street like a crushed can of Faygo. The Unionists behind him jerked in shock. “Oi!” I shouted to them, before they could come to their senses and murder me. “This fella ain’t a Axeman! He’s a Saboteur!” “W-what?!” one of the Lancers blurted. “He’s an agent of the COLLECTIVE.” I hissed, staring the Lancer in the eye. “He ain’t out to help Unionists, he’s out to mitigate us as a threat!” “No I’m NOT!”, Axeman Black Four yelled up, his voice full of rage. “I’m a Unionist, just like you! I’m- I’m Axeman Black Five!” “Didn’t you say you were Axeman Black *Four*?”, a Bowman asked, suspicious. “I- I meant to say Four!”, the man in the ragged leather armor shouted, flustered. “I’m- I’m in a bit of pain due to this Fiatist harboring wench, and-and-“ “ENOUGH!”, I shouted, loud as I could. “There’s a REMARKABLY simple way to settle this little spat.”, I declared, dropping my hick tics. “Use a command. You know my name. It’s Axeman Red Four. And since you’re Axeman Black Four, all you need to do is order me to perform a command.” I walked away from the somewhat bruised man, and raised my hands in the air. “Go ahead.”, I urged the distressed looking fella on the ground. “Say a command. Command me to do something – anything. Command me to kill myself, or to murder one of my companions. Command me to punch myself, heck, command me to strip naked, if ya want. If you truly are a Unionist – if you ain’t a Saboteur of the Collective out to divide and conquer – then whatever ya command me to do will happen.” “I- I...!”, the gray haired man sputtered, sweating a whole bunch. “I’ll kill you all, you Unionist barbarians!” Everyone, from the Lancers, to the Bowmen, to the Hammerions, to even the Spearhands gasped, as the gray haired man sprang to his

feet, and pulled out a shining red ruby. "For the Collective!", he yelled, pointing the ruby at the twenty or so men behind him. "AIN'T GONNA HAPPEN!", I roared, and threw myself on topa the gray haired man. Flame shot out of the man's ruby – and hit directly inta Merchant Black One's still standing manor. "Haha, oh wow!", Sister Julia laughed, clapping her hands together as the impact of the flame caused the mansion behind her to collapse. I grabbed a gray tuft of the fake Axeman's hair with my lifemetal hand, and yanked his head up. "Get up.", I hissed, spraying my words straight inta his ear. I snatched the red ruby from him, and placed it against his back. "Get up, or I'll do ta you what you were gonna do to them and burn ya to ash. GET UP!" Groaning, the gray haired man shambled to his feet, his body shaking. "Alright. Now here's what yer gonna do.", I whispered, right inta the gray haired man's ear. "You're gonna tell these fine folks your real name, and yer gonna tell them yer real purpose." "You'll have to kill me first.", the gray haired man hissed. "Alright.", I said, plainly. Then I stomped my boot straight down ontas his neck. "F-FOUR!", Lucas yelled, utterly horrified. "Is there something wrong, Lucas?", I asked, as I slammed the gray haired man's head inta the street multiple times, his skull cracking apart as it bashed inta the pavement. "Four, you- you-!" I glanced down at the gray haired corpse beneath me, ta make sure that it wasn't moving. Then I turned my attention back ta the horrified looking blonde haired boy. "Wouldya mind tossing me the recovery module, Lucas?" As if in a trance, Lucas dug his hands inta his overcoat, and tossed the jagged crystal over ta me. Without missing a beat, I stabbed it straight into my false name-sharer. "W...wha-", the gray haired man moaned, as the shattered pieces of his skull rearranged themselves, like a self-solving jigsaw puzzle. "What- where-" "Welcome back.", I said, leaning my face close towards

his. "Do you feel like telling the truth now?" "I- I will never-" I curled my lifemetal hand into a fist, and brought it close to his face, right where his eyes could see it. "W-wait, no, don't-!" "Too late.", I stated, then began bashing his head in once again. The whole thing struck me as very odd. Normally, to crack a skull open I'd have to hit someone over the head with the sharp side of my greataxe, and even then I would only get about an inch into their bone. But the lifemetal hand- it- it cracked open the gray haired man's head like it was an egg. "S-SUNS ABOVE!", one of the Lancers cried, covering his eyes. A young looking Bowman bent over and began vomiting. But the vast majority of the men, the same men that had bolstered the corpse beneath my feet, just stood there, and watched. The crystal still stuck in his body, the gray haired man regenerated once again. "No... no more!", the faker in the ragged leather armor pleaded, tears streaming down his eyes. "Stop- stop doing whatever it is you're doing!" "You need one more go,h to best appreciate your situation.", I said, coldly. "No, no, please! **DON'T!**", the gray haired man screamed. I raised my arm above his skull once more. "You still need to *learn.*", I whispered, and swung my fist down a third time. My hand didn't smash into bone, though. It got caught. It got caught on a long, metal baton. "That is *enough*, Four.", Lucas hissed at me, his blue eyes made of ice. Before I could even vocalize a response, the blonde haired boy jabbed my neck with the pronged black box I had dropped. "G-GAH!", I yelled, as my whole body shook, and shook, and shook. The tazer didn't *hurt*, exactly. It just vibrated my body. It was like all my muscle, fat, skin and bone was jello in the midst of an earthquake. I crumbled down onto the street like I was a quadriplegic. Lucas gazed down at me for a second, then shook his head. He reached down to the terrified gray haired man, and pulled him up onto his feet, struggling



somewhat with the weight of the fake Axeman's ragged leather armor. "I'm disappointed in you, Four.", Lucas said to me, coldly. "Then I'm sorry ta disappoint you.", I coughed, rising to my feet as the feelings in my muscles returned. I didn't say anything else – not to Lucas, and not to the gray haired man. I couldn't. See, I knew that if I attempted to speak to or threaten the twice killed, twice revived man, Lucas would taze me again, or perhaps even destroy me outright. The boy in the purple tophat was the sort that just couldn't let behavior like mine stand. So I didn't say a single word to the catatonic looking gray haired man, as he clung to Lucas's cape, shuddering and shivering. But I did glare at him. "I- I'M A SABOTEUR!", the gray haired man vomited, the instant I narrowed my eye at him. "I- I WAS TASKED TO UNDERMINE AND CATALOG CAPABLE UNIONIST RESISTANCE IN PROVESH, IN ORDER TO ASSURE THE GENERAL'S COMPLETE SUCCESS IN CONQUERING THIS CITY AND MAINTAINING ORDER. I- I WAS BORN IN TRUNCHET AND WENT BY THE NAME OF BROTHER JUDE. I-I..." the gray haired man trailed off, then started spasming, his body twisting and contorting like an insect writhing in pain.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!", he half sobbed, half screamed. "Axeman Black Four was... a Saboteur?", one of the Lancers breathed out, looking completely shocked. "But he saved us, and- he led us, and-" "He lied to you.", I said, as Lucas just stared at me with cold blue eyes. "Saboteurs excel at lying. Every single action he performed was for the purpose of obtaining yer trust." "Then hand him over.", a furious Bowman spat, yanking an arrow from her quiver. "Hand over the Fiatist bitch as well. We'll show them what happens when you mess with Unionist spirit." "We're not going to do that.", Lucas said, coldly. "You will do it, boy.", the Bowman warned, placing an arrow on her bow.

“You’ll hand both of them over if you don’t wish to be skewered.” “P-please...”, the gray haired man pleaded. “Hand me over. Don’t- don’t make me go through any more of-“

“We ain’t doing it.”, I announced, loudly. “Sister Julia is a deserter, she ain’t working against us.” “She’s a Fiatist and should be put to the sword.”, the Bowman retorted, anxiously pacing the snow covered streets. “If we don’t destroy her, then we’re-“ “Not complete morons, for one.”, a bold voice bellowed. Emerging from the burnt out husk of a mansion, dirty and wounded but very much still alive, was- “Axeman Red Four!” the Bowman gasped, utterly shocked. Sister Julia raised an eyebrow. “Wait, *he’s* Axeman Red Four? I thought you were Axeman Red Four, doggy.” “We’re both Axeman Red Four.”, I quickly explained. “Just call him Blue.” “It doesn’t matter what you call me.”, Blue huffed, resting on his greataxe. “We don’t have much time. The Collective is about to strike.” “And how do you know that?”, the female Bowman asked, letting the string in her bow go a bit slack. “Because the General herself said she would.”, a familiar, nervous voice spoke up, softly. Meekly walking out of the burnt mansion behind Blue was – the nameless purple haired girl. And she wasn’t alone. She was accompanied by a whole bunch of Swordarms, all of whom looked tired, yet weirdly determined. “Oh, fantastic, Swordarms.”, the Bowman spat. “I’m... I’m not actually a Swordarm.”, the purple haired girl squeaked. “Oh? Then what’s your name, girl?” The purple haired girl made a fist. “I do not have a name.” The crowd of Unionists behind the Bowman groaned. “Great, even better!” the Bowman sarcastically exclaimed. “Unassigned, Fiatists, Saboteurs and Swordarms, all here to join the conversation. I don’t suppose you have a few Offlanders hiding around?” Blue walked up to the Bowman, and quickly slapped her across the head. “Ow!” “This is not the time to moan about present

company, girl.”, he growled. “The General and the Collective have invaded the city and shall strike at any moment.” He huffed out gruffly, and pointed to two discombobulated looking folks with zweihanders. “According to Swordarms Blue Thirteen and Red Seven here, they’re not going to be gentle.” The Bowman rubbed the back of her head, wincing. “So what?!” she spat. “How are we supposed ta stop that? There’s only a few of us, our supplies are low, and we don’t even know who is a Unionist and who is a faker!” Blue didn’t say nothing. He clenched his teeth shut. “Things aren’t quite so hopeless as you think they are.”, the purple haired girl spoke out, her voice firm. “I don’t care what Unassigned filth thinks.”, the pink haired Bowman hissed. “Um, well... if you don’t want to end up on a cross, pissing and shitting yourself, I suggest you pay at least some attention to my words.”, the nameless girl retorted, speaking softly, but firmly. “Right now the General and the Collective are mostly gathered in the Caravan Depot, with extensive support in the harbor.” “Right, so struggling is pointless.”, the Bowman quipped, as the rest of the Unionists stood behind her. “Kind of like you.” “No, struggling is not pointless.” the purple haired girl quickly said, her face unaffected by the Bowman’s words. “ Not if you’re willing to take a chance.” “A chance?”, Blue asked, urging the purple haired girl to go on. “Um, well, If you besiege the Caravan depot-“ “We’ll be slaughtered in an instant.”, the Bowman said, dismissing the purple haired girl’s suggestion with a wave of her hand. “If we’re not laid to waste not by the well-fortified forces of General, then we’d certainly be crushed by the forces which come from the harbor. We’ll probably be destroyed by both at once in a pincer attack.” The pink haired bowman turned her head to the snow and soot covered street. “I hate to say it, but... what we need to do is kill these two Fiatists, and go into hiding.” She glanced at

the gray haired man with hatred in her eyes. “The advice might have come from a Saboteur, but the only effective way to resist is to hide.” “No, it ain’t.”, I spoke up, staring down the streets of the trade district, flexing my ears ta try and pick up the sounda steel against steel. “Ever hear of something called the Mournful Remnant?” “That some sort of whorehouse?”, the pink haired Bowman snorted, sarcastically. “No, the Mournful Remnant wasn’t a whorehouse.”, I spoke out, raising my voice so everyone in the Trade District could hear me. “They were a group of Unionists... not too different from me, or you.” “I imagine they had more than one eye.”, the pink haired Bowman quipped. “Somea them, yes.”, I acknowledged, not wanting ta lose steam. “But somea em were wounded even worse than I was. The Mournful Remnant were a buncha Unionists in Fremdos – and as the name implies they were the losers. See, the Unionists of Fremdos fought against the General of the Holy Collective, and they lost.” I licked my lips, and took in a deep breath of ice cold air. “And when the Mournful Remnant lost they lost everything. They lost their property, their professions, their jobs, and even their families. They watched, impotently, helplessly, as the General and her cohorts took their children, and crucified them. The Unionists of Fremdos couldn’t even mitigate the suffering of their sons, and daughters. They were outnumbered, after all. They were the losers of the battle, and powerless to do anything.” I walked past the pink haired Bowman, to get closer to the Unionists behind her. “And in the end- in the end the Unionists of Fremdos lost even their names.”, I bellowed, each of my words like a chime of the bell. I tugged the black collar wrapped tightly round my neck, showing it off for all to see. “The Unionists of Fremdos – those that survived, anyways, were given collars, and made into dogs. The Mournful Remnant were the ones who rebelled. They were the

ones who went into hiding, into the sewers, to strike against the Collective over the cycles, to try and regain what they lost.” “What... what the heck happened to them?”, the pink haired Bowman asked, her voice fragile. “They *died*.”, I declared. “An agent of the General discovered the water tower where they lived, and murdered them to the last man.” I huffed air out between my teeth, and made a fist. “So here’s the short of it... Yer choice is between winning, and dying. Now, if ya want ta die, then there’s a whole bunch of ways you can do that. Y’all can fall back on yer lances, or shove an arrow down yer throat. But if you want to win – if you want to keep your names, your culture, and your children – then you need to STRIKE. *WE* need to strike!” Not a single Unionist said a word. The forty or so folks in the trade district all stared at me, their faces grim, their arms taunt. “What? Nothing ta say?”, I scoffed. “There’s... there’s nothing *to* say.”, the pink haired Bowman said, slumping her shoulders. “Even if we went back to the Union district, and rallied all the Unionists in Provesh, we’d number a thousand at the very most. The Collective presence in Provesh... it has to be at least ten times that.” I felt the energy drain from my body. The Bowman was right. The amount of Unionists in Provesh wouldn’t even make for an effective distraction, which was really all I wanted them ta do. Even with the aid of the Saboteur I had gone out of my way to break, the odds of success were low. At least, they were, until- “Um... I think I have an idea.”, the purple haired girl mumbled, meekly. “I don’t care about the prattling of an Unassigned.”, the pink haired Bowman snorted, only to be smacked again by Blue. “Ow!” “Go ahead and say your piece, lass.”, Blue encouraged the nameless girl. “Well... when Axeman Red Four, Ex-Regent Marston, and Bowman Red One docked at Provesh, they struggled against a bunch of surprisingly well equipped Unassigned, right?” “Bah, what

of those cultists?”, the pink haired Bowman spat. “...I think I’m going to go and try to talk to them.”, the purple haired girl said, nervously. “Oh for fuck’s sake, come on!”, one of the Lancers cried. “The Unassigned are not going to help us – and they’re not going to listen to some random Fremdosian whore either.” The purple haired girl winced, as the Lancer went on. “It’s hopeless! Just because you lack a name, and the Unassigned filth lack a name, it doesn’t mean you have anything in common! It doesn’t mean anything can be changed!” “You’re *wrong!*”, the purple haired girl shouted, standing up as tall as she could manage. “I have something in common with the Unassigned of this city – and so do you! So does EVERYONE!” The Unionists all glared at the purple haired girl, but they didn’t interrupt her. “No one wants to die.”, the purple haired girl whispered, her hands over her heart. “No one wants to be stripped of purpose, forced into labor, and be seen as less than human. No one – no good person, name or no name – wants a world where the only metric of value derives from one’s body, one’s family. And finally... no one here... no one here wants...” the sapphire blue eyes of the purple haired girl ignited, and burnt with pure, unadulterated malice, “wants that genocidal, sadistic, CUNT OF A GENERAL TO LIVE!” The crowd all backed away from the purple haired girl, stunned. Then, slowly, but surely... everyone started shaking their head. Don’t get me wrong, they didn’t all cheer and applaud for the purple haired girl, but the sounds that escaped from the throats of the Unionists were vaguely that of approval. One or two of em even clapped, slightly. “The... the Unassigned filth is rig-.”, the pink haired Bowman began to blather, then covered her mouth, utterly mortified. But no one acted disagreed with her. No one chastised her, or sanctioned her. “Sorry.”, the pink haired Bowman meeped, quiet. She rose her head and looked the nameless purple haired girl

in the eyes for the first time. “You are right, girl without a name. And you, Axeman Red Four. And you, Axeman Red Four with only one eye. We need to work together, because we need to *destroy* the Collective. If we don’t, then surely we’ll be destroyed.” She placed an arrow back on her bow, and aimed it straight at Sister Julia. “But I won’t suffer a Fiatist to live.” Sister Julia rolled her eyes, but her legs began to quake a bit. “You ain’t gonna kill Sister Julia, and you ain’t gonna kill this gray haired git.”, I growled. “Why not?”, the irritating Bowman asked, not letting go of her bow. “Because they are *valuable* to me.”, I answered, then glared straight at her. “You, on the other hand, are not.” The Bowman’s arm quivered a bit, but she kept her aim. “How are they useful to you? They’re just a duo of stupid Fiatists.” “A duo of stupid Fiatists is better ta me thana bitchy Bowman.”, I responded, then cleared my throat. “But that AIN’T why I want them ta live!” I yelled, more ta the small militia than ta the irritating agitator. “I want them ta live cause while the nameless girl and Blue go speak ta the Unassigned, and while y’all gather the rest of the Unionists ta strike the gates of the Depot, Me, Sister Julia, and this Saboteur are gonna sneak into the depot and kil- destro- deal with the General ourselves.” I looked at Lucas. “And, uh... whoever wants ta come with us can come with us, if they don’t hate our guts.” Lucas sighed. “I don’t hate your guts, Four. I’m with you for good or for bad.” “Uh... ok, then.”, I squeaked, blushing a bit. I made a fist and glared at the gray haired Saboteur. “You can get us directly ta the General, can’t ya?” “I... I can!”, the gray haired man shouted, almost slipping on the snow covered street. “I can, so please don’t- don’t hurt me anymore!” I flashed the Saboteur a fangy smile. “You git us inside of the Depot undetected, and I’ll consider it.” Lucas glared at me, and patted the Saboteur on the shoulder. “Just bear with it for now.”, he assured the broken

man. "When this is all over, I'll make sure Four repents for what she did to you." The Saboteur didn't say nothing. He just kind of stared off into the sky, his eyes twitching. There was an awkward atmosphere. Everyone, the Lancers, Bowmen, Swordarms, Hammerions, and Axemen alike all just kinda stood still in the streets of the Trade District, despite the urgency. "Well, the fuck are we waiting for?", the purple haired girl roared. "Let's go save the goddamn Continent!" This time, the crowd *did* erupt into cheers, albeit cheers which were far more muted and far less enthusiastic than the roars of the black habited folks back in Fremdos. As the ragtag crowd in the trade district dissipated, I glanced at the blonde boy in the purple tophat. Lucas tossed me his tazer, Blue tossed Sister Julia my greataxe, and I tossed Lucas the copy of the hygienic module I had took from "Axeman Black Four." But right before I caught the tazer – time stopped. No, really, it did. The tazer remained suspended in the air, and the Unionists in the trade district froze up like they were statues. "Um, don't move!", U.T.'s voice quickly spoke in my head. "I've accelerated your body so we can speak in private, but if you move you'll break every bone in your body!" "Didn't ya say ya have a safety fer that stuff?" "I... I do, but I forgot to put it on. Would you like me to put it on?" "Nah.", I thought, glancing at all the frozen folk. "If I can't keep still while the flow of time has ceased, I deserve whatever beating I get." "Very well then, Master Admin.", U.T. said, speaking in its male voice. "So what is this about, U.T.?", I thought, not as annoyed as I thought I'd be. "You wanna try and talk ta me or something?" "I just want to know why you're proceeding with the current course of action, Master Admin. Surely you must know this won't end well." "No, it ain't gonna end well. Tonsa folks are gonna die." "Then why the heck areya gonna-" "C'mon, you know why I'm gonna.", I thought back. "Ya



might be a magical talking gem, but ya ain't a moron." "You... you promised me that all you were going to do was save Admin Lucas.", the gem commented, speaking in a soft voice I had never heard before. "What you're doing now is- it's endangering him. It's endangering him, and you, when there's no need to endanger either of you. All to save someone who – who by all metrics of morality, all measures of decency, doesn't really *deserve* to be saved." "Heh... well... I didn't deserve ta be saved, neither. But that idiot saved me anyways.", I thought back ta the module. I almost shook my head, but paused at the last moment. "Though... though that ain't really it. I'd be lying if I said this was about some sort of moral purpose, or the paying back of a debt. There- there really ain't a whole lot of logic in how I think of *her*. The feelings I have – they're just there. Ain't nothing I can do ta quell them. Though I reckon an artificial intelligence like you is a bit too smart ta be stuck up on that." "No... I- I understand, Master Admin.", U.T. thought, speaking in its new, vulnerable sounding voice. "I understand completely. And if you understand *why* I understand... then please. Please, don't let Admin Lucas come to any harm." "I can't promise you anything.", I thought back. "I... I wish I could, U.T. But between that white haired git, that moron in the mask, and my own callousness... tons of folks are gonna get hurt. Innocent folks. I can- I can only assure you of this. If it comes down ta me choosing between Lucas, and Sabarene... if botha them are in danger, and I can only save one... I'll choose Lucas." "No.", U.T. said, sadly. "You won't." I didn't have a response to the module. And as it turns out, the module didn't have a response to me. Wordlessly – or perhaps I should say thoughtlessly – U.T. returned the flow of time to normal. The tazer I had stretched my lifemetal hand out to catch smacked me straight in the face. "Uh... you ok, Four?", Lucas asked me, as my

lips began to swell a bit. "I'm fine, Ruckus.", I babbled, wincing a bit from the pain. I quickly got a hold of my senses, and clasped both of my hands on the gray haired man's shoulders. "Ready to sneak me, Ruckus, and Sister Julia into the depot, comrade?" "Y-yes!", the Saboteur blurted, his shoulders squirming under my touch. "Yes, I am! And- and if I'm not ready, I will be! Just don't-" "Yeah, yeah, whatever.", I yawned. "Just take us there already. And if ya lead us into a trap, well, we'll-" "I- I won't lead you into a trap!", the Saboteur assured me, his voice cracking. "If you want to get to the General, I can take you to her." He grimaced. "But- but you may have to take a bit of a risk..." "What kinda risk?", I asked the Saboteur, as he led us away from the Unionists in the trade district. "The depot is on lockdown- nothing- nothing gets in or out without being inspected by the elites of the Plebian Branch." "Ugh, those sheep with the lifemetal limbs?", Sister Julia groaned. "The... the very same.", the Saboteur gasped, glancing this way and that as we walked down the streets of Provesh, his body shaking. "They- they inspect everything. But- but that's not the problem. The problem is what happens after getting into the Caravan Depot. The inner sanctum. To- to get in there- even a Brother or a Sister would have to strip naked and undergo a cavity search, and that's assuming they had clearance in the-" "So yer saying there's an inner sanctum. How many folks are there, usually?" "F-four.", the gray haired man blurted. "There are Four people in the General's inner sanctum, plus some soldiers- some members of the Plebian Branch." I licked my lips. "And who are the four?" "There's- there's the General herself, of course.", the gray haired man blurted. "Back during Fremdos' Great Unification the privacy of the inner sanctum was needed because no one knew her face, and- well the same operating procedure is being used now, I... I guess." "Alright, and

the other three fascists?”, Lucas asked, his voice gentle, but firm. “A medic, of- of course.”, the gray haired Saboteur whispered, his shoulders shaking at the name. “An adviser, too... Master Marston, I think. Though the last time the General spoke to me she said Master Marston hadn’t arrived yet, that he- had to take some time to come to his senses. And, and finally, the last one... the last person there is-“ “Brother Gino.”, I finished, my teeth clenched. “Yes... yes, how did you-“ “He saved her.”, I breathed out. “Back in that dead old Merchant’s mansion, yer General done got her arm cut off by her brother. And it was Gino that rushed in ta save her.” “The- the General got her arm cut off?” the gray haired man panted. “But- but- no!”, he shrieked. “No no no! That’s- that’s impossible! It’s-“ “Your leader might seem impressive to you, but she’s just a mortal.”, Lucas said, solemnly. “She is not God. She is not immune to wounds.” “That... I don’t quite think that’s what this cat is afraid of, chinchilla.”, Sister Julia commented, her usually carefree face all scrunched up. “Saby-sab got one of her hands chopped off before, and in her rage, she-“ “I don’t want to know.”, I cut in. “Don’t tell me, I don’t wanna hear it. I’ll just take the general sentiment of what yer saying, and use it as an incentive ta figure out a way ta get ta the git sooner, rather than later.” I licked my lips and stared at the Saboteur. “So how *do* we get to that git, sooner, rather than later?” “There’s- there’s two ways.”, the Saboteur said, shivering. “O-one is risky, and the other is suicidal.” “Let’s begin with risky.”, Lucas chimed in. “I- I could take you all into the inner Sanctum as hostages.”, the gray haired man stammered. “Yeah, might not be the besta ideas fer us ta relinquish our weapons and be naked inna building that’s literally made of ice.”, I countered, harshly. “S-sorry! I’m sorry! I- I didn’t- I- I-“, the gray haired man babbled, panicked. I shook my head. “Don’t apologize.”, I growled, not feeling

guilty even though I shoulda. “Tell me the other option ta get ta that white haired git. Y’know.... The suicidal one.” “It- it really isn’t a good idea, the other option-“, the Saboteur blurted. “It- it will almost certainly get you-“ “Just say it.”, I demanded. “I don’t even care if yer using reverse psychology right now, just say it.” “Climb.”, the gray haired man in the ragged leather blurted. “You can climb to the top of the Caravan Depot, and sneak in from the roof.” “Huh?”, Sister Julia exhaled, resting on my greataxe. “How is doing something like that suicidal?” “Because the Caravan Depot is made of ICE.”, the Saboteur spat, frustration overcoming his fear. “Climbing up is difficult, and keeping your balance when on the roof is next to impossible. Finally, if you want to get to the inner sanctum, you’d have to walk directly over it – and drop down. You’d have to plummet from the highest point in Provesh, and crash into the lowest point. The fall would only be survivable if you had something to break your fall – and even then it’s doubtful. Even if you aimed for a pile of cushions, and even if the wind conditions were right, it would still be a gamble.” His eyes started twitching. “And the General does not keep piles of cushions in her inner sanctum.” “That ain’t no concern.”, I breathed out, keeping my voice low in case there were folks nearby I didn’t know about. “You get me up on top of the Caravan Depot, and I won’t ever bug you again.” “Woah, woah, hold up, I didn’t sign up for this.”, Sister Julia said, raising her hand. “I don’t do heights, and I don’t do ice. If you’re actually going to attempt to scale the largest building in Provesh, then you’re going to have to do it alone, doggy.” I considered making a comment about how if Sister Julia wanted ta see her two fellow degenerates again, that she would scale the building with me, but didn’t say nothing. Reluctance ta perform a task ain’t too much of a problem when it comes ta performing

that task, but Sister Julia wasn't merely reluctant to climb the depot... she was scared. And her being reluctant AND scared meant she wouldn't operate as efficiently as she could. A Sister Julia that couldn't operate at maximum efficiency was a Sister Julia I had no use of. At least when it came to scaling ice. "Fine.", I said, trying to sound resentful. "You best do a damn good job at spotting us and keeping any sentries off our back, though." Sister Julia wavered a bit, as if reluctant to perform even that small little task. I flashed Sister Julia a fangy smile, and nodded my head. "Actually, ya know what? Just go and hide." I said, patting the black haired girl on the shoulder. "Ya probably wouldn't be able to take on the General's sentries on if ya tried. Heck, me and Lucas will probably get spotted FASTER, if we leave yer cowardly rear in chargea-" "I'll do it, bitch.", Sister Julia growled, her hands wrapping themselves tightly 'round my greataxe. "But you won't be getting *this* back any time soon, you manipulative little cun-" "Great to see we have a deal.", I sang, sweetly. And so we headed to the Caravan Depot of Provesh. The Caravan Depot was, for all intents and purposes... the last standing structure in all of Provesh. Lucas, Sister Julia, the Saboteur and I saw it almost immediately – even through the smoke and the haze, the Caravan depot stood firm, stood tall, a solid standing mess of sod, rotten wood, and ice. But it had changed. The depot was different from how it looked before. Even though we were far away from it, even from the barricaded Union district I could tell that a bunch of folks had changed the depot – for the better. The wooden pillar supports looked absolutely pristine, and the stone steps which led into it were cut straightly and uniformly – a far cry from the jagged cracked condition it had been in. By no means was the Depot good looking – but it had transformed. It had gone from crappy, to passable. The only questionable change with

the Depot, of course, were the fourteen crosses lined up outside it. "What is it with that girl and crosses?", Sister Julia asked, shivering. "She's set up tons of them, but I haven't seen a single corpse nailed to one yet." "The crosses are righteous!", the Saboteur declared, breaking out of his fear. "The General's crosses represent her iron willpower, her ties to nature, her ability to—" "Kill tons of people in the cruelest way imaginable.", I cut in. "It's a projection of brute strength, and a promise of severe retribution if you cross her." "And to think I used to just find crosses tacky and hard to clean.", Lucas breathed out, bitter. "Father Thomas would make Phil, Mikhaila and I scrub—" the blonde haired boy trailed off, and quickly shook his head. "Never mind, it's not relevant.", he breathed out, his eyes a bit wet. I was fairly sure what Lucas had to say was relevant, but it probably wouldn't have been too useful towards our overall goal. "So what's the plan, doggy?", Sister Julia asked me. "Do we just head straight for the depot right now?" "Of course we don't.", I clucked. "We need to wait a bit." "Wait? For what?" "For everyone to start killing each other, of course.", I responded, taking slow, deliberate steps towards the Depot. "Sneaking in from behind will be a heckuva lot easier once the vast majority of the Collective is preoccupied with the Unionists." "And the Unassigned, right?", Sister Julia cut in. "Nah, probably not.", I said. "I tried the whole diplomacy thing with the Unassigned here, they weren't having any of it." "Then why did you let that girl go off with your friend?", Lucas asked, looking concerned. I thought about lying, but there wasn't no point in lying to someone who knew when I did it. "Because the Unionists ain't gonna fight unless they think they can win. The notion of a cavalry coming to save ya at yer darkest moment... it's empowering." I licked my lips. "It's complete nonsense, of course, but it's empowering. I'm banking on the Unionist's

illusion of victory ta win, here.” “You’re a Unionist too, you know.”, Sister Julia hissed. “These people aren’t just pawns, they’re your peers, your countrymen. They-“ “Will make their choices, and I’ll make mine.”, I finished. “That’s the way it’s always been in this city. Ya work out a situation, you measure the risk involved, and you measure the potential reward. If ya win ya win, if ya lose ya lose. Now let’s hurry ta the Depot so we can hide and wait.” We walked briskly through the barricaded Union district. Annoyingly, the only way ta get to the depot was through the most crowded, populated section of the district – back where the folks shaken up by the chaos had gone ta sleep on the streets. The barricaded Union District hadn’t changed – but the atmosphere had. The Unionists lounging around the wrecked district had looked utterly defeated the first time I had walked through, but now they looked alert – scared, but alert, and prepered. Course, one could argue that it was just another typea nihilism that had seeped inta them, but- “FOR THE GENERAL!”, an impossibly loud voice bellowed. The makeshift barricades protecting the Union district from the outside crashed apart, all at once. A blur of black habited fellas swooped inta the overly packed core of the city –and without saying so much as a word, starting cutting down everything and everyone in their way. “No!” a destitute looking woman in rags shrieked, raising her hands ta protect herself from one of the black habited Fiatists. Her attacker didn’t do so much as sneer before slamming his two short swords inta her forearms. “W-what?!”, I spat, as another black habited solider slammed *her* short sword into my stomach. The two swords got stuck in my gut. “Wrong choice!”, I yelled, and punched my would be slayer straight in the face. “Lucas, we got to get going!”, I screamed, gazing around the district turned battleground as I ripped my lifemetal hand outta the Fiatist’s skull. “Lucas?!”, I shouted. I couldn’t find the

blonde boy in the purple tophat anywhere. As I gazed around in vain to find Lucas, I felt someone grasp my wrist tightly. "Stay completely still, doggy.", Sister Julia hissed into my ear. "Do not move, or say a single thing." I felt both rage and disgust at myself for not seeing the betrayal coming, but didn't move. "Sister Julia!", the man who had killed the destitute woman called out. "I thank Fiat to find you well!" "Thank the General, not me.", the black haired girl said, then glared at him. "Leave this district to me. I'll murder all of these Unionists myself." "By- by yourself?", the black habited man blurted, as he was bolstered by at least ninety other black habited soldiers. "Yes, by myself. I'm going to kill every Unionist here, starting with this Fremdosian whore.", Sister Julia hissed, tightening her grip on my arm. The black habited man's face flashed with doubt, but he shook his head. "As expected of the Supreme Sibling's retainer.", he breathed out, wiping some blood from his shortsword. "Very well!", he barked. "We shall move on, and you shall cleanse the stragglers, Sister Julia. It's for the good of the Collective!" And then – quickly as they came – the soldiers left. Leaving nothing but corpses of men, women, and children behind em. "Man, I hooked up with Dez to get away from this shit!", Sister Julia complained, releasing her grip on my wrist. "This edgy nonsense just isn't my scene!" "Lucas?", I called out, not thanking the black haired girl, or paying much attention to the carnage in front of me. "Lucas, where areya?" I didn't hear a response. Dazed and confused, I bumbled through the broken barricades, past the wounded, dead, and dying. Most of the killed were Unionists – men and women caught unaware by the sudden ambush. But there were ten or twelve dead Fiatists in the streets, a few attackers who had underestimated their pray. There was no distinction. A black haired Fiatist girl with a slashed throat lay on top of a blue haired Unionist boy with half a head,



both of them as irrelevant in death as they were in life. As I stumbled and bumbled through the blood covered street, as I ignored the screams and chaos coming from further in the Union District, I saw- well, I saw the gray haired Saboteur. A lance had been shoved through his stomach. Without thinking, I moved to revive him with the recovery module. "N-no!", he screamed, blood spewing from his throat. "Don't- I don't want- please, let me-" I pocketed the recovery module, and moved on, leaving the Saboteur to his fate. "Lucas?", I called out, my voice cracking. "The heck are ya, Lucas?!" My stomach seized up, and I almost collapsed onto the ground, the smell, the heat, and the- the atmosphere of the moment making me feel absolutely ill. "I'm here, Four.", the blonde haired boy's soft voice said, sounding almost like a whisper. I jerked my head up at the voice, all feelings of fear and nausea fading away as soon as they had come. Lucas – he- he wasn't wounded, save for a nick on his cheek. His baton was a bit dented and slightly bloody, and there was smoke coming out of the barrel of his revolver, but he was fine. He was also crying. "I'm- I'm sorry you have to see me like this, Four.", the blonde haired boy sobbed, slumped down right besides four Fiatist corpses. "I usually... I usually can keep my composure when... when incidents like this occur." I glanced down at the four bodies by Lucas's feet. There was practically no wounds on them, save for some neat little holes in the center of their foreheads. "It- it ain't yer fault.", I whispered, lamely, impotently. "They ambushed ya because they wanted ya ta die, and you fought back and killed them cause you wanted to live. You just did what anyone would have done." "That's the problem, though.", Lucas said, tears pouring down his cheek. "I- I *can't* do what anyone would have done. If I did, it would make me no different from- from-" "Phil?", I guessed, the name meaning nothing and

everything ta me. “Oh, fuck Phil.”, the blonde boy spat, his tears glistening, “No, it would make me no different from *you*.” I felt a sudden pain in my chest. “You... you ain’t me, Lucas.”, I croaked out, my voice hoarse. “Trust me- you... you’re not. This is just – it’s just survival. That’s all it is. You didn’t ask fer this – your body moved on its own. When I- When I do what I do... it’s not cause I’m scared. It’s because I *choose* ta do what I do. When I make the decision to smash someone’s skull in- when I go ahead and strangle a fella, or a lady – and when I lie through my teeth- my mind is calm. I don’t feel a thing.” Lucas clung to the brim of his purple tophat, hoisting it over his eyes so he wouldn’t have to look at me. “Are- are you sure about that, Four? Do you truly not feel a thing?” I took off my gauntlet, and cupped the blonde haired boy’s chin with my real hand. “Not in the slightest.”, I whispered, happy fer some reason. “To tell ya the truth... most of the time I’m terrified. I’m terrified of dying, I’m terrified of never making a difference. But most importantly, I’m terrified of losing what’s precious to me.” I gently plucked the purple tophat off of the sobbing Sorcerer, and ruffled his blonde hair. “But that fear goes away, Lucas. The guilt, the fear, the pain – it all fades away. It fades away the moment I see what I’m protecting.” I felt some tears drip down my face, but I didn’t go out of my way ta wipe them away. “And it’s *because* that fear goes away, that I know what I’m protecting is worth protecting – that it’s good. And if what I’m protecting is good – then it can’t have even the slightest thing in common with me.” “That’s... that’s not true. You’re not-”, Lucas babbled, his arms shaking. “It don’t matter.”, I coed, and hugged the beautiful boy close ta my chest. “None of it matters, alright? If I need to change ta make you feel better, then I’ll change. If you need to change ta feel better, then I’ll help you change. We’ll both change, if we need to.” I tightened my embrace,

and pressed my lips against the blue eyed boy's ears. "But we need to be *alive* to change.", I hissed with a kiss. The boyish charlatan in the overly theatric costume stopped shaking, and slowly got up on his feet, gently leaving my embrace. "You're right, Four.", he said, looking solemnly into my eye. "So long as you're living- so long as you can control your own thoughts – you can change." He brushed off his overcoat, and smiled. "And as for the promise I made-", he began to say, forcing the words out quickly. "-the promise I made to change you- the promise I made *to* you- perhaps I don't care about that promise as much as I thought I did." "Why don'tcha?", I blurted, surprised. A blush flashed across the blonde boy's face, and he jerked his blue eyes away from me. "Because I'm fine with you just the way you are.", he coughed, then quickly flicked my right ear. "But that's no excuse to be so domineering!", he chided, flicking my ear four more times. "You walk a fine line between self-preservation and sadism, you know?" I gazed at Lucas and smiled. "You love every moment of it, chinchilla." He laughed, and ruffled *my* grass green hair. "Not quite, doggy. Not quite." He looked down at the bodies around him, and grimaced. "...I really hope we haven't lost sight of our humanity." "If you think war is inhuman, then you don't understand humans, Chinchilla." an easy going voice yawned out. Lazily sauntering her way to meet me and Lucas, almost completely splattered with blood, was Sister Julia. "A few of the General's lackies came back to check on me, and this time they didn't believe me.", she explained, wiping a bit of blood off of my borrowed greataxe. "You... don't... troubled, Sister.", Lucas slowly said, speaking in sloppy Continental. "Oh, so the Chinchilla can talk!", Sister Julia exclaimed, then leaned on the black greataxe. "I'm not troubled. Not when it comes to killing members of the Plebian Branch. They're not human.' I clenched my teeth shut. "And

what the heck gives ya the right ta say that?" "I used to be one of them", Sister Julia chirped, smiling, but not. "Chris and I both were. We specialized in conventional warfare – which is a complicated way of saying we'd lead the charge against opposing unionist forces. He and I would smash everyone to bits – we'd cut down anyone who got in the General's way." Sister Julia kept smiling, and kept leaning on the greataxe, as if she was taking a nap. "Men, women, children, Unionists with high rank, Unionists with low rank, Unassigned – even rebellious Fiatists. Chris and I would destroy them all, if it was for her dream." Perhaps Sister Julia read what was on my mind, because she quickly waved her hands in front of her smiling face. "Oh, but don't get me wrong – Chris and I *hated* each other then." "Causea different methods?", I guessed. "Nope! We hated each other because we were both the best! Chris was my main obstacle, and I was his." "...Obstacle ta what?", I asked, somehow already knowing the answer. "An obstacle to *her* approval. An obstacle to *her* admiration.", the black haired girl said, tears pouring down her cheek as she smiled. "After every battle – in the medic's tent – Chris would have his wounds tended to, and I would have mine. And then she would come to visit us. Sometimes she would talk to Chris, sometimes she would talk to me. But one thing remained the same – even if Chris and I were two inches away from each other – even if we were in the same cot – the General would only speak to one of us at a time." "Sister Julia...", I gaped, unable ta find any words. "The interactions were almost identical- predictable like clockwork.", Sister Julia chuckled, her laugh as fake as her smile. "She'd awkwardly stumble up to me, or Christopher, and meekly apologize for the wounds we'd receive. In turn – me or Chris – we'd put on a tough act, and say the wounds we got were nothing. Saby- she'd always turn away, and chide us for lying.

She'd tell us – she'd tell either me, or Chris – that we were very precious to her – that even though uniting the Continent through trade was important – so was our wellbeing.” Pure malice flashed across Sister Julia's face. “And then she'd tell us we were almost as good to her as the other. If she was talking to me, she'd say I was almost as amazing as Brother Christopher – possibly even capable of surpassing him. If she was talking to Chris – she'd say he was coming close to reaching my level of competence. She'd... she'd say these things... even when we were an inch away from each other!”, Sister Julia shrieked, her smile gone, her tears heavy, her nose oozing snot. “And- and we didn't- we- we just got- we got ANGRY at each other! Even as we were manipulated in the most transparent of fashions- even as our hearts, our feelings were toyed with in the most- in the cruelest of ways – we still- we still wanted to prove ourselves to her! We- we would spar with each other, and sometimes even give each other wounds- just- just so that *she* would like us! And she *did*. Chris broke my arm once in training – and the General- and Sabarene- she just praised him! She had dinner all alone with him- right in front of me! Right in the medical tent!” Sister Julia dropped my greataxe, and buried her head in her hands – as if too ashamed to look me and Lucas in the eye. “And then – even then- even as I was being MOCKED by Sabarene- I got angry at Chris. And Chris got angry at me.”, Sister Julia nodded her covered head. “No... angry isn't the right word.... We *hated* each other.”, she huffed out, her throat quivering. “We both knew that the other was an intolerable menace. Worse than a menace – a *monster*. The General... Sabarene – she would only be able to think clearly once I killed Chris... even if that came at the cost of my life.” Sister Julia's lips began to waver. “It- it would be the ultimate show of lo- of loyalty, I thought. If I sliced off that dumb monkey's head- or if I

died heroically, and bled out in the General's arms, she'd know. And then she'd finally *love* me." I felt my throat dry. "Do you still-" "Of course not.", the black haired girl spat, slumping down near one of Fiatists Lucas had killed. "I love Dez, and I love Chris. With all my heart, body, and soul, I **love** them." The tired girl's eyes boiled over with an intensity I had never seen before. "And they **love** me." "How fallen love?", Lucas asked, blurting his crappy continental quickly. The intensity in Sister Julia's face remained, but a smile crept over her face. A genuine smile. "The duel, of course. It was a mondo big affair – it occurred in the same coliseum we fought you and doggy in. The General had asked me not to duel Chris... she told me that I had use to her even if I wasn't as strong as him. But she didn't *order* me not to fight." "Ya... ya don't say...", I muttered, feeling a weight on my shoulders that had nothing ta do with my white platemail. "So, uh... who won the duel, between, uh... you and Brother Christopher?", I asked, desperately trying ta shift the discussion away from Sabarene. "Dez did.", Julia sniffled, smiling and crying at the same time. "Wait, that chubby frick beat the twoa you up in armed combat?!", I gasped, amazed. Sister Julia's eyes narrowed. "He didn't use a weapon, doggy." "He beat the twoa ya with just his bare fists?!", I gasped, even more amazed. Sister Julia just stared at me, in the same way a fifth grader would stare at a Victoria's Secret Catalog. "Of course not, you retard!", the black haired girl snapped, sobbing. "He- he placed himself in between our halberds. Even though he was the Supreme Sibling – even though he was the most important person in the Collective – Dez leapt down from the stands to interrupt our duel." "And that was all it took the twoa ya ta stop?" "No. No, we didn't stop. We didn't stop until Dez grabbed us both by the hair, and- he said- he said- he, um... he said, he-" "What did fraternity of supremacy

said?”, Lucas asked, impatiently. “He said we were fighting ourselves.”, Sister Julia whispered, then buried her head in her hands. “He was right.”, she laughed, wiping her eyes. “It was the dumbest, most cliché, square thing he could have said- but he was right. Dez was right. And since he was right – that meant that Saba- that the General was *wrong*.” She stood back up, using the handle of my greataxe as leverage. “That’s why I need to find my way back, doggy. There are a million squares like Sabarene around, but there’s only one Dez, and there’s only one Chris.” “You’re wrong.”, I whispered, my voice shakey. “There’s- there’s only one of her, too. For better or for worse- she’s unique.” “So is a tetanus infection.”, Sister Julia replied, darkly. I wanted ta snap back at Sister Julia – to negate what she said with a cutting comment, or a calculated insult. But I couldn’t. The words just wouldn’t- they couldn’t come out of my throat. So instead, I sucked in a bit of air, and I- “We should probably git going.”, I mumbled, saying the words without really meaning them. “Even after I went through the effort of telling you all that... you’re still leashed to your master, huh, doggy?”, Sister Julia sighed, sadly. “We can pick apart my character decencies later.”, I weakly muttered, then thrust myself forward. “Fer now we gotta focusing on the external danger, rather than the silly stuff in our headsAH!” As I walked away from Sister Julia, I immediately tripped over the leg of a dead Fiatist boy. “GAH!”, I yelped, as the corpse’s leg tangled around my ankle and sent me crashing into the dirty district’s street. “Even dead, these idiots finda way ta hurt me!”, I shouted, pulling my arm back ta punch the corpse despite it being a, y’know, corpse. But I stopped. Lucas stared down at the bodies, his blue eyes watering with guilt. “Uh... I mean... it’s a shame these folks had to die inna conflict they never asked fer.”, I mumbled, flatly. That didn’t do much to

assuage the blonde haired boy's guilt, so I bit my lip and thought fer a bit. "Wait a tick, Lucas!", I said, pounding my metal fist against my palm. "If ya feel bad about killing these folks, why don't ya just revive em? We have a magical gem that does just that, don't we?" "Only a god can create and destroy life, Four.", the sorcerer in the purple tophat said, shaking his head. "And I am not God." "Right, yer Lucas.", I retorted. "So what's the big deal? Just revive these fellas, that's all ya need to do." "I won't on principle. I've already messed up this realm enough by killing them, if I bring them back to life I'd just be tampering with events further. I... I must strive to be a neutral party in these things." "For a neutral party ya really ain't all that neutral.", I chirped, sticking my tongue out at the angsty Sorcerer. "I mean, yer basically the biggest goshdarn hypocrite I knuh-" Lucas caught my tongue in between his fingers. "When it comes to you I can't help but be a hypocrite, Four.", he said, smiling. "GAH!", he and I squawked, at the same time. "As nice as this moment between you two lover- um... between you two friend- between you two people might be, there's kind of a war going on that we need to run away from.", Sister Julia reminded us, yanking my right and Lucas's left ear. "First we snatch that white haired git, *then* we run fer our lives.", I said, shaking my head. "Fer now we got to get to the Depot." "The Saboteur said we could get to Saby's inner sanctum via the roof.", Sister Julia commented, coldly. She raised an eyebrow. "Where is he, by the way?" "He escaped.", I half-lied. "That's probably going to make things harder for us, Patchy.", Lucas said, twirling his baton. "I know, Blondie. I'm a massive frick up, a failure on a million different levels." I cracked my neck and made the tazer spark a whole bunch. "But if I'm good at messing myself up, I'm even *better* at messing other people up." "At least we can agree on that, doggy.", Sister Julia cut in. And so,



smiles of various sincerity on our faces, me, Lucas, and the black haired girl headed out, out of the blood drenched Union District, and towards the Caravan Depot. We got there. Getting to the Depot wasn't the hard part. The Caravan Depot was so goshdarn huge that just about any street in Provesh would take ya there. I knew just about every street in Provesh, so it didn't take me, Lucas, and Sister Julia ta march our way over. We walked through the isolated alleyways and sketchy sidestreets I had always done my best ta avoid – and fer the first time in my brief, twenty something cycle long life, there weren't any muggers, murderers, or rapists ta be found hiding in ambush. There weren't even any drunk or dead folks lying near the gutters – by all means the backstreets seemed downright sanitary. There was one troubling aspect, though. One small little thing that was pretty offputting inna whole buncha different ways. For every ten steps we took in the cramped sidestreets, we passed what seemed ta be a moderately sized pile of dirt, or maybe of- "Soot?", Sister Julia gasped, gazing at the black piles uneasily. "Not soot.", Lucas said, bending over and thrusting his hand into a rather large looking pile. He yanked out a scorched leather shoulderpad from the pile. "Ash." "Oh god, not more of those gems.", Sister Julia cursed. "How did Sabarene get a hold of so many of them?" "They're mass produced.", I answered. "That is ta say... there's one fire shooting ruby that makes a whole buncha of other fire shooting rubies. I thought I had disposeda it, but evidently I didn't." "You can't dispose of modules.", Lucas said, grimacing. "You can only hold onto them." "And what if I don't hold onta them?" "Then others will.", Lucas said, clenching his purple cape tightly around him. "The modules warp the rules. They're power incarnate. Even the most pure of heart would be tempted by them." "Izzat so? I don't want nothing ta do with these things, and

there ain't nothing in my chest but goop." "You may be wary of the modules, Patchy," the Sorcerer acknowledged, "but tell me, why was it that you came here?" I cringed. It wasn't fer it's own sake- but I had sought power. I had fought and killed and lied and stole ta get the revival module – to restore Blondie back ta his semi-sane self. My motives might have been decent fera change, but my methods were business as usual. "I... I see yer point, Ruckus.", I admitted. "I would give the world for you not to.", Lucas said, softly. He brushed the ash off of his hands and narrowed his eyes at me. "I will not allow the modules remain in Sabarene's hands, Four. Even if it's just a few modules, even if they're almost completely harmless, I will not allow someone like her to possess them." "Neither will I.", I said, firmly nodding my head at Lucas. I gazed intently at the blonde Sorcerer. He hadn't been so dumb as ta actually take it out of the holster, but I saw his hand fiddle with his revolver when he mentioned Sabarene. "Oi, Lucas...", I said, trying ta sound non-chalant as I held up his tazer. "I don't think I'm all that good with this shocky thing of yours. Can I trade ya it fer yer revolvers?" "For my revolver?", Lucas repeated, skeptically. "No, not yer revolver. Yer revolvers." Lucas looked at me, and nodded his head. "No, Four.", he stated, simply. "You can't." I stared at him fer a whole bunch, then slumped my shoulders. "You know me too well, Lucas.", I muttered, defeated. The blonde haired boy adjusted the brim of his tophat and looked away from me. "I know that there's more to you than this, Four." "Ya might just be seeing what ya want ta see.", I said, sadly. We got through the sidestreets soon enough. We passed plenty more piles of ash along the way – I'd say thirty or forty or so. I'd like ta imagine that it was only the first pile that used ta be a person – that the rest were just soot from burnt wood. So I didn't pay much attention to the rest of the piles as I walked through

the sidestreets – I ignored them as much as I could. And if I saw a burnt piece of clothing in the mounds of dirt – or a personal affectation buried deep in the soot – well, I just chalked it up to coincidence. Finally, after crawling through the sidestreets like a bunch slimy snakes, we came to the alley that led right to the side of the Caravan Depot. The alley wasn't poorly known by any means – but it was poorly traveled, mostly due to the aforementioned muggers, murderers and rapists that usually lurked there. So of course I was a little bit confused when I saw twenty Fiatist soldiers standing at the end of the alleyway, poised and positioned to fight. They weren't normal Fiatists, neither. Their black habits were reinforced by some sort of metal guard, and perhaps more importantly – their arms and legs were made entirely out of lifemetal. Without saying a word, I grabbed Lucas by the wrist and jerked my body around, in order to sprint back the other way. Immediately I found myself looking at seven other Fiatists - all with normal limbs, all with short swords drawn. "I'm sorry, that way is blocked.", a polite sounding voice from behind me chimed. Reluctantly, I turned around again, back to face the Caravan Depot. The centermost Fiatist was a young, boyish looking man – with dark hair, gray eyes, and a gentle smile. He'd of looked more like a model and less like a soldier if it wasn't for the fact that his limbs were big bulging metal monstrosities. "Ah, greetings!", Lucas cried out, in a flamboyant, friendly fashion. "I think there might be a misunderstanding. You see, my name is-" "Mister Lucas Gandulfadore Melloi the Third.", the boyish looking man finished, before Lucas could even close his mouth. "I see my reputation precedes me!", the Sorcerer said, resting his hands on his hips. "Well, allow me to introduce you to my companions, the lovely-" "Axeman Red Four, and Sister Julia.", the boy with metal limbs said, still smiling politely. "I know. My name is

Brother Castelblanco. I was told you would be coming.” He snapped two of his black metal fingers. The members of the Plebian branch stepped to the side of the alleyway, allowing us passage. “The General awaits you in her inner sanctum.” He narrowed his eyes. “I’m afraid I’ll have to ask that Sister Julia come with us. Feigning death during war goes against the Collective’s code of conduct.” Sister Julia’s muscles began to twitch, and her lips began to shake. I stepped in front of her and looked the metal limbed man in the eye. “If your General wishes to meet with me and Lucas, I’m sure she’ll see the importance of allowing a friend to accompany us.” The boyish looking man’s gentle face took on a harsher visage. “The General sees the importance of punishing those who prove themselves a detriment to the Collective.” “Then all the more reason to let her come along with us.”, I said, keeping my voice low. “Sister Julia saved my life, if it wasn’t for her I wouldn’t be here talking to you. In that sense, surely she’s served the Collective far more than she’s hurt it.” “Utility does not grant one exception from consequences.”, the boyish looking man stated, politely. “If you will not hand Sister Julia over, I may have to coerce you.” I swallowed, and looked the metal limbed Fiatist straight in the eyes. “If that’s the plan of action you feel would be most appropriate, Brother, then by all means go ahead and carry it out. However, be aware that the choice you make is not without precedence. Your General probably has informed you of some of the consequences that might arise when attempting to use coercion against me, and against Lucas.” I flashed the boyish looking man a fangy smile. “Do what you must, Brother Castelblanco. I’m sure the twenty seven of you are more than enough to deal with the three of us.” The boyish looking man tightened his fist... and stepped back. “Very well. You may take Sister Julia with you, Axeman Red Four.” The smile on his

face changed, from a polite one to a genuine one. “And... this is just an aside, but your duel against her and Brother Christopher was nothing short of magnificent.” He turned to Lucas with a warm face. “Your bout with Kundare was also admirable, Mister Gandulfadore.” “And you speak with the pleasantness of an SS officer.”, Lucas replied, smiling broadly. “Excuse me?”, Brother Castelblanco asked, confused. “Oh, Lucas was just speaking in his native tongue.”, I explained. “He said you’re wearing a lovely habit.” “Uh, thanks.”, Brother Castelblanco said, his black lifemetal arm creaking as he rubbed the back of his head. He blushed a bit, then stepped to the side. “I won’t trouble you any longer. The General is waiting for you.” I glanced at Lucas, then walked out of the alleyway. Instantly, any delusion I had about us sneaking into the Caravan Depot was crushed. The entire building was guarded by what had to be thousands of black habited soldiers – all arranged in columns, pillars – heck, there were some even set up in a triangle position. “I thought wars were fought with shieldwalls in this realm.”, Lucas commented, his voice low. “Ya can’t make shieldwalls in a city.”, I whispered to the Sorcerer. “It’s too compact.” “Too compact, and too antiquated!” a familiar, affable sounding voice chimed in, cheerily. Emerged from the side of the Caravan Depot, the ground shaking as he stepped towards us, was – a man. A man in large, black spikey armor. “Maybe wars were fought with shield walls on the Continent five cycles ago, but not now!”, he proudly announced, standing high over our heads. “With lifemetal and the General’s Gems, a conflict that would take us a cycle to complete will only take us a few rising periods.” Sister Julia nervously griped her hands around my greataxe. “Who the heck are you, man?” “Wait, you don’t know who I am?”, a confused sounding voice bellowed out from the black spikey helmet. “Uh... sorry. No, I don’t.”, the black haired

girl meeped. “Aw, come on! It’s me! Brother Gino!”, Brother Gino whined, tearing off his helmet with his black spikey gauntlets. “How could you forget about me, Sister Julia?”, he cried, tears streaming down his face. The orange haired man’s face turned malicious. “You must be TRYING TO KILL ME!”, he roared, raising his fist over the black haired girl’s head. “No, no, chill, Gino, chill!”, Sister Julia nervously yelped, raising up my greataxe defensively. “I just couldn’t tell it was you due to that helmet!” The orange haired man’s face softened. “O-oh.”, he stuttered, nervously. “I... um... I’m sorry for that, Sister Julia. I just – sometimes I feel people mock me behind my back, and-“ He glanced at me, then glared. “YOU!”, he shouted, furious again. “YOU’RE THE REASON THE GENERAL BECAME WOUNDED!” “No I’m not.”, I said, flatly. “Oh... oh yeah, that- that was Marston...”, Brother Gino panted, flustered. “I’m- I’m sorry, I’ve been a bit busy recently. Proveshians die pretty hard, and purging the districts of uncooperative Unassigned has taken more effort than I thought it would, and, uh...” “I got it.”, I said, not. I looked around the guarded plaza of the Caravan Depot. Thirteen crosses stood high up in the air, all unoccupied, all laid out in a crude semicircle outside of the grand semi-hygenic building. “Uh... so what are those fer, Brother Gino?”, I asked, my morbid curiosity getting the best of me. “Executions!”, Brother Gino bellowed, his voice solemn. “In our conquest of this city, we have encountered several individuals whose tremendous amount of sins warrant immediate termination. Before the suns set, we shall demonstrate to Provesh the price of living wickedly, just as we have shown the people of this city the folly of defying the General’s will.” Without warning, and with a speed that my eye could just barely track, the wild looking orange haired lurched forward and trapped me in a bear hug. “Thank you so much, Axeman Red Four.”, he

whispered into my ear, sobbing. "Without you, none of this ever would have happened." "It... it was nothing.", I choked out, my voice wavering. The orange haired man released me as quickly as he had grabbed me. "Well, it was nice catching up with the three of you!" Brother Gino chirped, as I backed away from him and caught my breath. "I have to go help set up the rest of the crosses, so I'll meet you all inside!" Brother Gino placed his helmet back on, and walked away, humming a song I had heard long ago, on a Caravan which took me far away from Provesh. "Those spikes... they were retracted.", I hissed, as Brother Gino began lifting up a cross. "Um... what?", Sister Julia asked, confused. "Back when I fought you and yer fellow degenerate, I wore that armor.", I explained. "The spikes on em cut deep into my body, which hurt a whole bunch, but it was probably the only reason I was able to hold out against you two. But when the spikes were retracted, I could barely move." "I don't see the problem, doggy." "The problem is that if Gino can walk around freely with them spikes retracted, he'll probably be able to do a whole lot more once they're in his body." Sister Julia looked around at all the soldiers, and crossed her arms in front of her chest. "I... I don't think Brother Gino will be our main problem, doggy. I don't think he'll even be a factor, if we decide to fight Sabarene." "It would be safer.", I said, as we slowly approached the main entrance to the depot. "Fighting Sabarene would be safer?", Lucas asked, raising his eyebrow. "Safer than what, Patchy?" "Safer than *speaking* to her.", I spoke, as we inched towards the depot's entrance. Honestly, I should have just tried fighting. As ridiculous as taking on thousands of Fiatists at once might have seemed, I could have won, maybe. I had magical gems at my disposal, and I was sure Lucas had a whole lotta tricks up his sleeve. It would be on heckuva gamble, but perhaps not as much as a gamble as the

situation would initially suggest. But I couldn't stake Lucas's life on a gamble he didn't choose to take... heck, I couldn't stake Sister Julia's life on it, and Sister Julia was an arrogant degenerate. My heart pounded hard, my head throbbed. It didn't make any sense. It couldn't have been longer than an hour or so – maybe two hours. Two hours had passed since I had encountered Sabarene in the burnt out mansion. Two hours had passed since she had her hand sliced off by Marston, since she was saved just in the nick of time by Brother Gino. Yet it was almost like... she knew everything that was going to happen. The alleyways being cleared, us being ambushed and stalked- was she really that perceptive? Was I really such an open book? Was the Collective Military so capable that it could be mobilized in a matter of moments? The Sabarene I knew was smart in some ways, but she had her shortcomings, same as anyone else. If- if this was what she truly was like- if the white haired woman was really capable of manipulating all those circumstances at once, even under extreme emotional and physical duress – then perhaps I had never known her at all. Perhaps even the feelings in my heart... the truth Lucas told me to cherish, and protect... perhaps even that was nothing more than another machination, the payoff of a plan Sabarene set into motion long ago. We all make our stories. We all know life is filled with ups, and downs. And sometimes we think that if we suffer a bit, well, that that suffering will soon lead to happiness. It might just be assumptions. Tons of people suffer without it meaning anything, and tons of people live wonderful, fulfilling lives without even the slightest bit of sorrow. The story I had constructed in my mind – the story of stopping Sabarene, of figuring out who I was – was rapidly revealing itself to be a fake, to be more fictional than a free trip to the Bahamas. But even if it was fake, even if it was written by a wicked



woman who knew me far better than I could ever know myself ... it was a story worth trying to tell. So I told myself, anyways. The Fiatists guarding the entrance to the Caravan Depot looked to all be members of the Plebian branch, in the sense that their arms and legs were made of lifemetal. But it wasn't the rough coarse kind of lifemetal Brother Gino had. No, it was actually... more similar ta the lifemetal that made up my left arm. The limbs wasn't quite as polished as my arm was, and the joints weren't as complex, but they were a lot more advanced looking. Menacing as the guards to the Depot looked, they moved to the side the moment we approached them. "So you gonna strip search us or something?", I asked, trying ta hide my fear with an air of apathy. "Friends of the General need not surrender their personal belongings.", one of the guards informed me. "Oh, so yer saying the rules don't apply ta folks like us?" "The rules state that Friends of the General are exempt from some specific rules.", the other guard responded. "A recent addition, I'm sure.", Lucas said, flatly. I smiled gently at the guards. "It's dangerous ta just trust some random strangers, y'know." "There is no danger.", the leftmost guard declared, solemnly. "The General is here. There is no danger." I wanted to run. All my confidence left me, the warm feelings which had carried me turned cold. If I stepped inside the Depot – if I met with the one behind everything, I would- I could lose everything. I had to run away. I couldn't run away, there were too many soldiers, and my opponent knew every dirty trick I could pull. I had no choice but to go forward, deeper into the mouth of madness, deeper into a Church whose flock had faith in a woman utterly devoid of any. The inside of the Caravan Depot was... different. The floor was still made completely out of ice, the interior still only had three walls, and the stairs were still slippery death traps, but a few adjustments had been made. Simple

wooden ramps had been erected inside the building, and railings had been attached to the side of the stairs. The abstract, confusing ice sculptures had been demolished completely – replaced by a bunch of elegant lifelike ice statues. The statues were of a whole buncha people, an old man clad in what seemed to be a long flowing robe, an introspective looking young man in simple looking attire, a smiling farming couple. And finally, dead center in the interior of the refurbished Caravan Depot, where there had once been a sculpture of disembodied hands grasping each other, was a big, gorgeous statue, of a muscular woman clad in bulky spikey armor, a scowl on her face, a tenseness to her body. She was wearing an eyepatch. She was wielding an axe.

“Greetings, Axeman Red Four!”, a loud voice announced from above, as I backed away from the ugly looking statue, horrified. I jerked my head up. Standing at the top of one of the Depot’s boarding platform was a man clad in a black habit, with lifemetal limbs that looked to be almost, but not quite, as advanced as mine. He wasn’t alone, of course. Beside him, armed with crossbows and fire shooting rubies, were thirty nine Fiatists. Their weapons weren’t raised, their bodies weren’t tense, but the message was clear enough, even clearer than that of the statue in front of me: We had to keep moving forward, or die. “The General is waiting for you down in the inner sanctum.”, the man on top of the balcony bellowed down. “It would not be wise to arrive lat-“ The man on the top of the balcony paused, suddenly, and coughed a bit, as if something was stuck in his throat. The thirty nine other soldiers all looked at the man, their faces expressing various degrees of confusion, concern, and curiosity. Quick, without even making much of a sound – a torrent of pure crimson erupted from the man’s throat. The balcony – made purely of ice – was suddenly contaminated, dyed a muddy red by the blood of the

elevated Fiatist. ‘Whu- gu-gshnm?!’, the man bloodily mouthed, spilling out his life essence with every word. The Plebian Branch member weakly clutched at his weak fleshy throat with his strong metal hands, as if to offset the damage. But he didn’t offset the damage. He fell – off the icy balcony, out of the Caravan Depot, and down into the frozen wastes below. He was probably dead before his lips even kissed the snow. The thirty nine other Fiatists stood still on the bloodied balcony, stunned. Their mouths were agape, their eyes were opened wide. There was no fear on their faces. Their crossbows remained unraised. The soldiers were as still as the ice statues – perhaps even moreso. A moment passed. An ashy haired woman in a black habit reached her lifemetal hand to where the dead man had stood, as if he hadn’t fallen off the balcony. “Brother- Brother Trevor?”, she stammered, her voice fluctuating. She took a step towards the red stained ice. “What- what happened to you, Brother Trev-“ the ashy haired woman stopped speaking, and, as if it was itchy, moved two of her black lifemetal fingers towards her throat. “Ugh-“ was all she was able to vocalize, before- “AAAAAAAAAAAAAH! AHHHHHHHHHHHH! UGGGGGGGUAAAAAAAAAA!”- the ashy haired woman shrieked, blood torrenting out of her esophagus. This time, the rest of the Fiatists *didn’t* stand still. “S-Sister Pricissla!”, a black habited man cried, terrified. I shook myself out of my trance, and shifted my view away from bloodied balcony. I looked to my left, I saw no one. I looked to my right, I saw no one. I looked behind me- “AAAAAAUYGH!” – I heard shrieks come from above. I couldn’t look up though, I couldn’t be passive. But no matter where I moved my frantic eye, no matter how hard I twitched my ears, I couldn’t see or hear nothing. So I threw myself on top of Lucas instead. “Four, what are you-“ “Stay down. Stay down stay down STAY DOWN!”, I screamed, as the shrieks on the

balcony intensified. I pushed my torso against Lucas's back, and kept him pinned to the makeshift ramp we were standing on. I had to see where the threat was coming from. My body wouldn't shield the blonde haired boy for long- I needed to see who or what was killing people, so I could kill them, or- or run away from them, or- "No! No this can't be- no! NOOOOOO!" I jerked my head up involuntarily at the lamentation. The Fiatists on the balcony had been reduced to half their number. Fifteen lifemetal enhanced corpses lay on the elevated ice structure, their blood staining the pink ice a dark red. Panicked, the rest of the soldiers with crossbows scrambled to get off the balcony – to get down to where Lucas and I lay prone, to where Sister Julia stood, her shaking arms barely able to lift my greataxe. "G-get out of my way!", a nervous man in a black habit shouted, knocking two soldiers in front of him off the balcony with reckless abandon. One of the two fell immediately – off the balcony and down into the frozen wastes below without being able to so much as whisper. The other- the other screamed, as she lunged her lifemetal hand to grasp the ledge, as the ice cracked and shattered, sending her tumbling down after the other. The man who had killed the two others in his fear – the same man making a desperate charge towards the stairs so he could – so he could *persist*– that man didn't even get to place one little toe on the top step of the icy staircase before he too succumbed, before a gash suddenly appeared on his neck, ripping out his liveliness, throwing his body down the stairs like he was little more than a half drunken styrofoam cup of coffee. I couldn't stay prone. I couldn't stay still. Tears in my eye, my stomach twisted, I ripped Lucas up off the floor I had thrown him onto, I pulled at him to take him with me, to- to get to the ship and leave, like I should have done in the first place. But Lucas remained still, and stalwart. He- he resisted my

attempts to move him, to take him with me to somewhere that we could survive in. He- he wasn't scared or panicked, or angry, he just wouldn't- "N-no...", a lonely, scared voice squeaked from atop the balcony, the acoustics of the depot carrying the sound down to the points of my ears. "No, how- how is this- how is this possible?" I half-heartedly tugged at Lucas's arm a final time, then moved my head up once more to look at the balcony, curiosity overcoming my instinct to live. Only one Fiatist still stood on top of the balcony. A pretty looking white haired girl with black lifemetal limbs, nervous, shaking, and scared. She was surrounded by the corpses of her comrades – she was splattered with blood. "No... this can't be- it can't be happening...", she repeated, her voice twisted and distorted. She walked unevenly, sluggishly – not to either staircase, but to the center of the balcony, where Brother Trevor had stood. Like me – she looked around the gigantic interior of the Caravan Depot, as if hoping to find the source of all the misery, the suffering. She looked at the wall to her left, the wall to her right. She looked at the wall behind me and Lucas, she even looked directly through the fourth wall – through the big open gap of air where the Caravans would dock. She didn't see nothing. But then, suddenly... her fear disappeared. The white haired girl atop of the icy balcony straightened up her back, and regained her composure. "It's... it's going to be ok!", the white haired girl called out to us, strength and confidence in her voice. She turned around, stepping over the bodies of one of her comrades. She looked down, and stared me directly in the eye. "It's going to be ok.", she repeated, firmly. "You, and me, your friends... we're going to be saved." Without even a trace of irony, the blue eyed, white haired girl with black metal limbs smiled down at us, every negative emotion purged from her blood splattered body. "The General will save us all.", she proclaimed,

and for a brief moment – even my pounding heart began to calm down, some. But then – suddenly – without even the slightest sound, or warning – without me even blinking – another individual appeared on the balcony. He- he just showed up. He wasn't there, then he was. It was like he had popped out of thin air. Standing on the balcony less than a body-lengths away from the last remaining Fiatist was a man, dressed in white pants, a white shirt, and white shoes. He was wearing a black cape. He was wearing a black mask with a white jawbone painted on it. His hair was brown, and spikey. His skin was tanned. But the last Fiatist on the balcony wasn't surprised, or scared. She looked at the brown haired man that had manifested out of nowhere, and held her arms out wide, as if to embrace him. "You... you as well.", she sang, her voice overwrought with joy, with wonder. "The General will save you as well." Tears of joy starting pouring down out of the white haired girl's blue eyes, as her face twisted in something resembling rapture. "She'll save us all." The man in the skull mask just walked towards the girl with outstretched arms, his steps steady and slow. He moved up close to her – he moved inbetween her outstretched lifemetal arms. "No.", the brown haired man in the skull masked stated, plainly. "She won't." And then... like he was putting an envelope into a mailbox... the brown haired man plunged a knife straight into the blue eyed girl's heart. In an instant – the joy, the wonder, the confidence – it all disappeared from the face of the last surviving Fiatist. "It... it hurts.", the white haired girl with black lifemetal limbs whimpered, then collapsed, her body not even twitching as she expired on top of the icy balcony. I wanted to get up – I had to get up. I had to grab Lucas and run away. But my body felt liked it weighed a million tons. Sister Julia – ever sarcastic, ever pragmatic – even she had collapsed onto her knees, staring up at the blood drenched balcony with

unwavering, unbelieving eyes. But Lucas stood firm, upright. He stared at the slaughter with fierce, unrelenting blue eyes – eyes as cold as ice, eyes as strong as steel. Lucas didn't flinch. Even when the brown haired man disappeared from the body covered balcony, even when the brown haired man reappeared an instant later, so close to Lucas's face he could practically kiss him... Lucas didn't flinch. "Phil.", the pseudo Sorcerer stated, calmly. "How's it hanging, Hoffman?", the brown haired man said, a familiar tone to his words. "I'm a bit busy at the moment, Phil.", Lucas answered, tersely. "I would appreciate it if you gave me some space." The brown haired man disappeared again, and reappeared right in front of me. "G-gah!", I yelled, jerking back from the tan man, trying to reclaim some semblance of personal space. "I'll give *you* all the space you need, Hoffman.", the man in the skull masked responded, casually. "It's her I'm interested in." "S-so you can speak proper continental alla sudden now, huh?", I spat, hoping my sarcasm would cover up my fear. The skull masked man's eyes didn't change in the slightest. "I'm not speaking Continental. You're speaking English right now, Friend Brown Girl." "G-guh!", I huffed, realizing my mistake. "The Universal Translator's been pretty useful, right?", the man in the skull mask asked, playfully. "For a few moments I was thinking of leaving you with something a bit more straight-forward, but axes, bows, and swords have never been your strongest suit. No, it's words that you use, Axeman Red Four. The horrors you inflicted upon that boatful of Fiatists with the translator were far more devastating than an axe could ever be." "What are you saying?", Sister Julia spoke up, utterly confused. "I can't understand any of you." Thief- or Phil- or Thief's eyes lit up. "Oh ho!", he said, speaking simply again. "Apologize for confusion. Am speaking with Friend Lucas and Friend Brown Girl!" "You are not my

friend.”, Lucas said, coldly. “I will always be your friend, Hoffman.”, Thief chided, then went back to speaking Continental. “Am sorry, Slutty Fiatist Girl!” he said, disappearing and reappearing right behind the black haired girl, tapping her shoulder with a knife. “Do not mean to trouble you!” Thief wagged his index finger at her. “But talk with Friend Brown Girl is very important. If Slutty Fiatist Girl does not wish for conflict, she will remain silent.” “F-Fine.”, Sister Julia breathed out, her anger and fear combining into one. The brown haired man appeared straight in front of me again, teleporting even though he could have just taken a few steps. “I wasn’t kidding about that.”, Thief clarified, darkly. “That woman so much as raises your axe, and she dies.” “I’m shocked ya spared her in the first place.”, I said, coldly. “I spared her because she wasn’t a constant.”, the man in the skull mask explained, without explaining anything. Lucas moved his hand to his waistcoat, but the moment he did Thief shifted to the opposite side of the Caravan Depot, well away from him. “Those soldiers were zealots.”, Thief called out, his words vibrating through the icy hall. “They were not even people – none of their thoughts or deeds were their own. They were simply the claws of a monster.” “As if you took the time to know them.”, Lucas spat. Thief appeared to the immediate left of him. “I knew every single one of them Hoffman.”, he said, plainly. “I saw their past, their present, and their future. Some of them die in battle, some of them grow to become battle hardened sociopaths. Some of them even end up on a cross themselves.” “You know all the *whats*, Phil, but you never were capable of understanding the *whys*.”, Lucas hissed. Phil- or Thief – or Phil shrugged his shoulders. “If the actions and results are the same, why care about the motivation?”, he argued. “If certain people being left alive perpetuates evil, and their absence would perpetuate



good, then why trouble one's self with understanding?" He disappeared and manifested himself right in front of my face. "After all, people don't change.", he said, bitter. "Even when they understand the evil in themselves, they don't do anything to alleviate it. They just figure out more clever ways to be evil." I stepped back a bit, then curled my lifemetal hand into a fist, "Is there a point to all of this, or are ya just mocking me?" Fury flashed over the brown haired man's eyes. "I am not mocking you, Axeman Red Four. I am *describing* you. Are you disturbed by all of this? Are you bothered by the way these Fiatists were disposed of like dogs?" "Not really.", I said, coolly. "The only thing that's bothering me is yer need to make a show out of it." The eyes of the brown haired man jolted just a bit, but returned to their icy glare almost immediately. "It was not a show.", he stated. "It was a warning." "A warning against what?", I asked, feeling like I was frozen in place. "A warning to not try and stop me.", Thief said. "The next few moments will be crucial to the fate of this dimension. The beast that calls herself the General is on the verge of changing the Continent forever. If she does, then this dimension is doomed. To protect this dimension, I intend to kill her." Electricity jolted through my body. "W-what?! How the heck could ya possibly even know that? It don't-" I stopped myself from speaking any further. If Thief could teleport, if he could stop time, then maybe he could see through time also. But a whole bunch of things didn't add up- there were tons of contradictions, and things that didn't make a lick of logical- "I know, because I know.", Thief hissed, then glared at me. "And before you ask, no, Axeman Red Four. You have nothing to do with the future of this world. I kept you alive as a favor to Hoffman, and as an experiment to see if you could change." Thief gazed up at the axe wielding ice statue, and scowled. "Evidently not. The worst person on the

Continent made a goddamn statue of you.” “I didn’t ask fer that!”, I yelled. “I never wanted her ta make a statue of me!” Thief shook his head. “What you want and what you do are not the same thing. Intentions are not the same as actions- they’re little more than rationalizations and lies.” Thief’s eyes boiled over with rage. “And looking at you now, I can see that you’re still the same monster who ruined my-“ “It wasn’t her fault!”, Lucas interrupted, angry. “There was someone manipulating her! You know that, I know that! We both fought against that person, Phil!” “We fought against *both* of them, Hoffman.”, Thief stated, his voice harsh. “Against Fortuna, and against the puppet-master. And the puppet-master wasn’t the one who killed half our friends.” Lucas winced. “E-even so... she wasn’t to-“ “Blame? Of course she was to blame!”, Thief shouted. “When she blew out Mikhayla’s brains with a shotgun, when she leveled half of Chicago, you think she wasn’t to blame?” Lucas balled his hand into a fist. “If we got to her earlier, then it never would have-“ “Happened?”, Thief guessed, angry. “Yes, if we killed her when we had the chance, then countless lives would have been saved, you’re right about that Hoffman.” Thief shuddered. “But we didn’t, and now home looks like Planet of the fucking Apes.”, he breathed out, hurt. “She’s... she’s not Fortuna, Phil!” Lucas protested, his arms shaking “She’s a different person!” Thief clenched his teeth. “If she’s not Fortuna, then why are you defending her, Hoffman?” I stepped closer to Thief, even while knowing that any attempt ta pin him to one spot was pointless. “If you want vengeance fer what I did – or fer what another version of me did – then take yer vengeance.”, I said, stretching out my arms. “Take it here and now.” “You wouldn’t be worth the knife.”, Thief spat, disgusted. “The only one I intend to kill is Sister Sabarene.” I gazed up and down at the man. He mighta been able ta teleport, but if I coulda tackled

him while he was distracted, then maybe I coulda- “Why are you wasting time telling us this, Phil?”, Lucas asked, interrupting my thoughts. “Why not just go ahead and do it?” The man wearing the skull mask shook his head in disgust. “Because I have the suspicion that you, Hoffman- well, you and that monster besides you – might actually be attempting to save the good General.” “So what if we are?”, I asked, false bravado giving me the strength ta stand. “Ya say ya want ta save this realm... well, what if we just took the General away? Realm’s still saved, ain’t it?” Surprise flashed over Thief’s face, but only fera moment. “If you took her away, she’d figure out how to come back.”, Thief responded, agitated. “She wormed her way back to power in the past, she can do it again. And I won’t stake the future of this *dimension* on an escapist pipedream.” “Well, what do you care about this realm anyways?”, I countered, forcing my voice not to waver. “If this ain’t yer world, or dimension or whatever, why does it matter to you?” “BECAUSE THIS PLACE IS MY HOME!”, Thief bellowed, furious. “I’ve spent more time here than I ever did in my dimension! I’ve seen its past, and I’ve seen its futures! I refuse to let what happened to Earth happen here! I refuse to watch cruelty and malice win over constructiveness and progression!” “You’re lying, Phil.”, Lucas said, calmly. “There’s a reason you crossed realms. You know *exactly* what I know about the dimensions, and how they fit together. You only want to save this realm because you think that’ll somehow fix ours.” “So?”. Thief hissed. “In the end, I’m still saving two dimensions, or realms if you seriously want to call them that.” “No, in the end, you’re doing what you *think* will save two realms.”, Lucas snorted. “For all you know tampering with this realm might do absolutely nothing – or perhaps even further doom our home.” “At least I’m actually *trying!*”, Thief argued, frustrated. “I’ve made moves, I’ve changed

this place's history. All you've done is fail to give a sociopath a conscience, and enable a genocidal psychopath to return to power. Nice fucking move, Hoffman." I took in a deep breath, and began walking to the stairs, which led down to the dining hall of the Caravan Depot, which led down to what the Fiatists had called the inner sanctum. I barely made it a step before I felt the cold steel of a knife against my throat. "Not one step further.", Thief warned me, suddenly right near my neck. "If you try to meddle any more, I will kill you where you stand." "Go ahead.", I said, bluntly. "Kill me. Slice my throat out, murder me like ya did those other folks. I deserve it." "You do deserve it, but I will not kill needlessly.", Thief stated. "If you stay here with Hoffman, I will let you live." "If you think I'm going to give up, yer even dumber than that white haired git is.", I hissed, then lunged for his wrist. Surprisingly- Thief didn't disappear. No, I got a grip on his wrist, and twisted the knife outta his hand. "N-no!", the brown haired man shouted, shocked. He slapped me across the face, and ripped his wrist out of my grasp. "That was a mistake, Axeman Red Four.", Thief said, from far away. He stood at the other side of the Caravan Depot, right at the precipice of the icy floor – right by the giant opening where the fourth wall should have been. Clutched firmly in his hand wasn't another knife, orra sword. No, it was... a silver revolver. A sharp whizzing sound immediately rang out. "C-christ!", Thief yelled, as the silver revolver in his hand was blasted out of his fingers, and out into the frozen wastes below. "Threaten her again, and I will destroy you.", Lucas growled, his own revolver drawn, his blue eyes full of hate. The brown haired man vanished, and reappeared on top of the balcony. "You can't beat me with conventional weapons, Hoffman!", he shouted, still sounding slightly nervous. "I know.", the blonde haired boy said, and without even blinking, ripped off his

overcoat. Attached to his waist by nothing more than a buncha strings were – six grenades, three different types of guns, and seven different colored gems – one red, one orange, one pink, one blue, one green, one purple, and one yellow. Lucas snapped his gloved fingers. The seven modules attached to his waist all began glowing at once. His blue eyes immediately turned pitch black, his veins started to glow a rich royal purple, and his skin turned translucent. Lucas turned to me in the midst of his metamorphosis, and smiled. “Catch, Patchy.”, the boy with the glowing veins chimed, tossing his purple tophat to me. I awkwardly fumbled with it, then cringed as I realized what was in my hands. “N-no, Lucas!”, I cried, my throat swelling up. “Ya- ya can’t give me this! A- a friend gave it to ya, right?!” “I’m not *giving* the hat to you, Four.”, the boy with inky black eyes croaked, his deep distorted voice somehow sounding sweet. “I’m *returning* it.” The translucent flesh of his body began to boil and bubble, before being enveloped in a thick dark miasma. “NOW GO!”, Lucas roared, sounding like the hounds of hell. “GO AND SHOW THAT SELF-MADE MONSTER THE TRUE TERROR OF A HUMAN BEING!” And with a flash – with an eruption of inky black darkness – Lucas rocketed off of the ice, and up towards the man who called himself Thief. The entire balcony of ice shattered upon impact, causing Thief to teleport yet again, to manifest himself in the middle of the depot. “Hoffman-“, he panted, uneasy. “If you push your body like that, you won’t- you ought to-“ “SHUT IT!”, the mess of shadows that had once been Lucas roared, crashing down where Thief was. “THIS IS MY CHOICE! THIS IS WHAT I WANT!”, the dark entity screamed. “L-lucas-“ I stammered, reaching my arm out towards him. “We need to go!”, Sister Julia shouted, grabbing my black metal wrist and yanking me down the stairs, as I clung onto the purple tophat. Sister Julia and I

weren't followed as we descended the long flight of icy steps. A loud cacophony rang from above us, the entire depot shook like a fissure had been opened up in the earth, and loud crashing sounds exploded down at us. But we weren't followed. "W-what are you doing?!", U.T. chimed into my head, as Sister Julia pulled me down towards the inner-sanctum. "If Admin Lucas uses that many modules at once, he'll- he'll die! They can't be used together like that- even with the recovery module as a stabilizer, that many modules at once will-" "...I know.", I thought, my mind exhausted. "You- you know?! If you know, then go save him! Go help him, stop him from- from doing that! Don't you care? Isn't the entire reason you came to Provesh because-" "Tell me how to save him.", I thought, as I mindlessly stepped further downwards. "Tell me how to reverse whatever it was he did. Tell me how to beat Thief." "...I don't know.", U.T. meeped. "But you need to do SOMETHING!" "There's nothing I can do.", I thought, my body feeling cold and lifeless. "But- but you promised!", U.T. shrieked. "You said that if it came- if it came down to picking between that monster, and to Admin Lucas, you said you'd-" "I can't... I can't do nothing. Would using the recovery module work?" "NO, BUT- BUT IT MIGHT WORK!" U.T. screamed, sobbing in my mind. "Ya just said that it wouldn't-" "YOU HAVE TO AT LEAST MAKE THE EFFORT, EVEN IF IT'S POINTLESS! SAVE HIM! YOU TOLD ME YOU WOULD SAVE HIM! YOU PROMISED!" I couldn't think of a response...I did promise, but- but if nothing I could would work- if I was fighting against a fella that just couldn't be beat, then going back to save Lucas would be little different than throwing away my own- "YOU PROMISED! YOU PROMISED YOU PROMISED YOU PROMISED!", U.T. cried, fluctuating through a million different voices as it spoke. "YOU PROMISSSSSSSSSSSEEEEEEEEEEEEEED!" I

wanted to apologize, but I couldn't. My apology would mean nothing. My actions meant nothing. And so, when Sister Julia finished leading me down the stairs, when I got down to the multi-tiered dining hall, when I saw that the tables I had once ate at converted to prison stocks, when I saw a group of shackled folks lined up in the middle layer of the dining hall, when I saw even more destitute people below them on the bottom layer, and when I saw a white haired woman with red eyes slouched on an icy throne looking down at everyone from the top layer – I felt nothing. “Next.”, the woman on the top layer of the dining hall said, almost sounding bored. A nervous looking man in the middle layer of the tiered dining hall stepped forward, his black habit torn and frayed. “G-General, I-“ “Name.”, the white haired woman droned, her bland words causing the man in the torn habit to shudder. “You- you know my name, General! It's-“ **“NAME.”**, the white haired woman repeated, louder. “B-Brother Layton.”, the man in the torn habit nervously said. “No, Your name is Layton.”, the white haired woman declared, still slouching on the icy throne above. The man on the middle level of the dining hall jerked. “B-but General-“ **“YOUR NAME IS LAYTON.”**, the woman with blood red eyes bellowed, her voice deep and spiteful. “You are no longer a member of the Order of Fiat.”, she politely informed the nervous looking man, smiling as she spoke softly again. “You no longer have the privilege of referring to yourself as Brother anything, let alone as Brother Layton.” The eyes of the man in the torn black habit began to water. “But- but General, I-“ “You are not here to plead for privilege. Challenge me again, and I'll have you punished before you even begin to testify.”, the white haired woman stated, calmly. “Layton, layperson of the Holy Collective. You are called to this tribunal under charges of high treason. How do you plead?” “Not... not guilty!”, the man in the frayed black habit cried. “Every order I

received, I carried out to the letter! General- you... you know I'm loyal! You know I would never disobey you-" "Treason is nothing quite so simple as neglecting to perform the bare minimum.", the white haired woman interrupted, sounding bored. "You stand here now not because you disobeyed me, but because you acted beyond your scope." "B-beyond my scope?!", the man known as Layton screamed. "I- I did everything you wanted me to! I kept the prisoner secure, and I took the measures necessary to see he didn't escape!" "You *didn't* keep him secure.", the woman with eyes the color of entrails growled. "And he escaped, so clearly you didn't take the measures necessary." "That- that was only because of Kundare!", Layton shouted, mournful. "The- the bitch ambushed me in the middle of the night – she overpowered- she-" "Your justification for failure is that you were outwitted and overpowered by Sister Kundare?", the white haired woman stated, a slightly incredulous look affecting her mostly composed face. "N-no, that- that wasn't it!", Layton shouted, panicking. "I- I-" "Enough. You have already been judged for your incompetence.", the white haired woman stated, a simmering calm to her words. "My- my incompetence?", Layton repeated, uneasy. "Your failure to keep the prisoner confined.", the white haired woman clarified. "I'm- I'm not being judged for- that?!" "Of course you aren't.", the General droned, barely even making eye contact with the wretched looking man. "I would not call you to a tribunal just to cry over spilled wine. Your failure to guard the prisoner is a sin – but not a sin worthy of any fierce punishment. Revoking your status in the Order of Fiat is punishment enough." "Then- then am I free to-" "No.", the white haired woman sang, and began to sit up in her icy throne. I winced. Where her right hand used to be was a grotesque looking stump – embedded with a series of jagged looking black metal spikes. "Your treatment of the



prisoner is why you are called here, and it is an issue which cannot be overlooked.”, the General declared, reserved. “You beat the prisoner. You whipped the prisoner. You tortured the prisoner, and you cut out the prisoner’s tongue. Am I correct in stating the facts of the matter?” “I- I didn’t mean-“ **“YOU TORTURED HIM AND CUT OUT HIS TONGUE, CORRECT?!”**, Sabarene screamed, her eyes lit up like hellfire. **“EVEN THOUGH YOUR ORDERS WERE SIMPLY TO MAKE SURE HE DIDN’T ESCAPE, YOU TOOK IT UPON YOURSELF TO TORTURE THE PRISONER! LAYMAN LAYTON, AM I CORRECT IN MY ASSERTIONS?!”** The screams and shouts took their toll on the man in the ragged black habit. He shrunk back, and lowered his arms. “Y...yes.”, Layton confessed. “I... I tortured the prisoner. He kept breaking out of his shackles somehow, and he kept on convincing the guards to let him go, with that serpentine tongue of his.” Layton’s face twisted with rage. “But worst of all- he- he **INSULTED YOU, GENERAL! HE CALLED YOU A COWARD, A TRAITOR, A LIAR! CAN YOU BLAME ME FOR RIPPING OUT HIS TONGUE? FOR FLAYING HIS SKIN FROM HIS TORSO, FOR STABBING HIS EVIL, MALICIOUS BODY? CAN YOU TRULY BLAME ME?**” The white haired woman didn’t so much as flinch. “Yes, Layman Layton. I *can* blame you.”, Sabarene said, her voice calm again. “By torturing Mister Lucas, you violated the Collective Military Code of Conduct. By violating the Collective Military Code of Conduct, you demonstrated a complete lack of conscience. By demonstrating a complete lack of conscience without managing to keep Mister Lucas imprisoned, you proved yourself to be incompetent. I can tolerate incompetent imbeciles so long as they have a conscience, and I can make use of those without a conscience so long as they’re competent.” The white haired woman slammed her jagged lifemetal

impaled stump on the arms of the icy throne, and glared down at the man in the ragged black habit. ***“BUT I CAN NOT SUFFER AN IMBECILIC INCOMPETENT BRUTE LIKE YOU TO LIVE! LAYMAN LAYTON, THROUGH MY AUTHORITY AS THE GENERAL OF THE HOLY COLLECTIVE, I HEREBY SENTENCE YOU TO DIE!”*** Sabarene relaxed her shoulders and slouched back down in her makeshift throne. “Sister Tesla. Brother Wil.”, she said, her voice firm. “Seize Layman Layton, bring him to the courtyard, and decapitate him.” Two black habited Fiatists with black lifemetal limbs grabbed the man in the tattered black habit, and began dragging off the center tier of the dining hall, and off towards the outer ring of the room – to where Sister Julia and I stood, flabbergasted. “W-wait!”, Layton cried, right as he crossed the plank to get to the outer ring. “Please, have mercy!” he protested, struggling to break free of the two Plebian Branch member’s grasp. “I- I served the Collective for eleven cycles! I- I fought against the Unionists of Trunchet, and Fremdos! I bled and sweat for you, General Sabarene!” “I know.”, the white haired woman breathed out, steam forming in front of her lips. “You served me well in the past, Layman Layton. Your service warrants mercy even in face of these most egregious charges.” Her firey eyes softened, some. “That is why I am sentencing you to be decapitated, instead of crucified. Your suffering will not last long.” Layton stopped struggling, and looked up at the General with tears in his eyes. “T-thank you.”, he choked out, smiling. He got to his feet, and walked briskly out of the inner sanctum, his two escorts more a formality than anything. “Suns above Christ.”, I whispered, feeling cold as the three folks in black habits moved passed me and Sister Julia, barely even making eye contact as they ascended the stairs which led to the courtyard fulla crosses. Sabarene watched, half-interested, as the two Fiatists

and one former Fiatist left. She didn't seem to notice me, or Sister Julia, though we definitely noticed her. "Next.", she said, slouching down in her icy throne and directing her attention towards the middle tier of the dining hall. An elegant looking man stepped forward. Oh, to be sure, he looked disheveled – his short blue hair was a huge mess, and his light leather armor looked raggedy and torn even by Provesh's standards. His fair skin was covered with dirt and bruised, and his face was cut up. But the man himself looked fine. He was poised, confident, and even graceful as he stepped forward, as he bowed before Sabarene. "Stand up.", the white haired woman hissed. "This is a trial, not a talent show." The poised man rose to his feet. "Forgive me for my theatricality. We of the Independent Kingdoms tend to bow before-" "The Independent Kingdoms no longer exist.", the General proclaimed, her spiked stump arm embedded in the ice. "The Independent Kingdoms may be finished, but our culture persists.", the blue haired man stated, composed. "Not for very long.", the woman with gut red eyes said, drily. "An ambitious statement," the blue haired man chimed, a hint of agitation on his diplomatic face, "but then again, it's clear that there's little on the Continent capable of holding you back, General." "There is nothing capable of holding me back.", Sabarene stated, her red eyes narrowed. "In this world or another." "I've no doubt.", the blue haired man in the ragged leather armor huffed, his face becoming more gaunt. "But be that as it may, I-" "State your name.", the white haired woman in black interrupted, her voice becoming more stern as she glared down at the blue haired man. "My name was Bowman Blue Five. What it is now all depends on you, General." "Bowman Blue Five will do for now.", Sabarene stated, opening and closing her metal- her only hand. "Bowman Blue Five, you stand here accused of murder, conspiracy, smuggling, theft, bribery, and ethnic

cleansing. How do you plead?" "Guilty.", Bowman Blue Five said, without even missing a beat. "Guilty on which counts?", Sabarene asked, a slightly skeptical tone to her solemn sounding voice. "Guilty on all counts.", Bowman Blue Five stated, smiling. "I have killed countless numbers of Unionists, my own name-sharers amongst them. I have conspired to overthrow the Swordarms, and to murder you. I have smuggled Fremdosian Wine into this city. I have stolen metal and marks from everyone and anyone. I've bribed Unionist, Fiatist, and Offlander alike. Finally, I have gone out of my way to excise the Unassigned from the Independent Kingdom. Everything you have accused me of, I've done." The General furrowed her brow. "Why would you confess to all of that?", she asked, with a hint of confusion. "Because I did all those things exceptionally well.", Bowman Yellow Five said, the smile leaving his face. "Until you invaded this city, I was able to operate under the radar – to navigate the nigh-un navigable pitfalls of Unionist Society. I operated in the shadows, and I operated well." "...And?", the white haired woman retorted. "Do you think your skill will be enough to spare you from judgment?" "In this life, perhaps.", Bowman Yellow Five remarked, a tired looking smirk on his face. "What awaits me after I die, on the other hand, is-" "Nothing.", Sabarene finished. "If I allow you to live, there will be no justice for those you've hurt, for those you've killed. No Avatars of the Suns shall judge you once you die – just as no Gods or Goddesses will congregate in the heavens to list off my Collective sins." "If that's the case, then why bother killing me?", Bowman Yellow Five countered, a bit of sweat dripping down his face. "What would you obtain? I'm sure if you looked deep into your humanity, you'd find-" "What would I obtain?", Sabarene repeated, her voice calm, her manner unaffected. "**SATISFACTION!**", she screamed, her entire body

convulsing. ***“I AND EVERYONE ELSE GATHERED HERE WOULD BE SATISFIED WELL ENOUGH TO SEE YOU TWITCH, TO SEE YOU SCREAM AND SQUIRM ON A CROSS. WATCHING YOU... WATCHING A SELF PROCLAIMED KILLER, LIAR, AND THIEF SUFFER AND DIE, WOULD BE ONE OF THE MOST DEEPLY SATISFYING EXPERIENCES I COULD EVER PARTAKE IN!”*** Her eyes cooled, like lava meeting ice. “If you still wish to live, I suggest you appeal to something more substantial than my humanity.” The grace was gone from Bowman Yellow Five’s face. His knees began to buckle, and sweat poured down his quivering chin. “After... after conquering a kingdom, after taking control of a land with a substantially different culture, it- it behooves one to see... in... in a time of transition, to- appoint an intermediary. Given my various contacts, and... s-skills, I believe I might be of service in convincing my fellow Unionists to adapt to-“ “You wish to serve me?”, Sabarene asked, not letting Bowman Yellow ramble on. “Y-yes... yes I- I do.”, the blue haired man panted. “Very well.”, Sabarene stated, her words dry. “With my authority as the General of the Holy Collective, I sentence you, Bowman Yellow Five, to eternal servitude as a Volunteer. You shall work with the others to help build roads out in the Frozen Wastes, until your body gives out from the cold.” Bowman Yellow Five’s eyes erupted open with shock. “N-no!”, he cried, terrified. “You- you can’t expect me to-“ The white haired woman reached her hand to the side of her icy throne, and threw a black collar down to the blubbering Bowman. “Enjoy your new life~”, she sang, as the blue haired man was grabbed by two more members of the Plebian branch, and dragged down to the lowest tier of the dining hall, where countless other Unionists with black collars around their neck stood, dejected and broken. “Next.”, the white haired woman declared, her ruby red eyes dull.

A pink haired girl stepped forward, her head lowered. "Name?", Sabarene asked, after a few moments of silence. "...Spearhand Blue.", the pink haired girl breathed out, almost straining to speak. "Spearhand Blue what?", the woman in the black habit inquired from above. "FORTY TWO. My NAME is Spearhand Blue FORTY TWO." "Do not yell at me, girl.", Sabarene warned, her body calm but her black lifemetal hand shaking. The pink haired girl cringed. "I did NOT mean to YELL. THIS is JUST how I SPEAK." Sabarene sat up in her icy throne, and glared down at the center of the middle tier of the dining hall. "...Are you lying to me, girl?" "NO!", Spearhand Blue Forty Two shouted, then covered her mouth in fear. "I am NOT lying. I DO not WANT to YELL AT you. I FEEL like CRYING. HOWEVER, I FIND myself UNABLE to. PLEASE, listen to the CONTENT of my WORDS, and NOT how THEY are CHARACTERIZED." The slightest hint of a smile formed on Sabarene's face. "Very well. Do you know why you are here?" "I AM here because I KILLED four of your SOLDIERS.", Spearhand Blue Forty Two stated, her eyes watering. "I SHOVED my SPEAR through their THROATS." Sabarene's face harshened almost immediately. "I'm aware. Were *you* aware that I considered Brother Franco, Brother Juan, Brother Ferdinand, and Sister Marisa to be four of my most valuable soldiers?" "NO. I was NOT aware.", the pink haired girl shouted, shivering. "Would you have acted differently if you were?" Spearhand Blue Forty Two forced her head up at the General, and glared, anger briefly overcoming her fear. "I WOULD have ACTED no DIFFERENT. If ANYTHING, I would HAVE made a GREATER EFFORT to KILL them." "And why is that?", Sabarene asked, a quiet rage simmering below the surface of her words. "BECAUSE they tried to VIOLATE my YOUNGER brother.", Spearhand Blue Forty two answered, her eyes full of fury. "My ONLY regret IS that I

DIDN'T make them SUFFER more." Sabarene seemed taken aback for a bit, but she soon regained her composure. "I do not take kindly to those who murder my soldiers, Spearhand.", Sabarene hissed. "In Trunchet I dealt with a Lancer that thought he could get away with killing just two of them. I had all four of his limbs torn from his body. Do you feel more repentant now?" "NO.", the pink haired girl bellowed, a finality to her speech. "TEAR the LIMBS from my BODY. Torture ME or CRUCIFY me or EXECUTE ME. I will NEVER regret what I DID." "Regardless of your motives, I will not let the deaths of my soliders go overlooked.", Sabarene declared, her voice sounding detached. "You shall be brought out into the courtyard, and have each of your limbs torn from your body." The woman with ruby red eyes brushed some of her snow white hair to the side and smiled. "With that said... your skill and moral fortitude is laudable. If you so desire, I shall allow you to serve in the Plebian Branch." The pink haired woman flinched, confused. "Naturally, as a member of the Plebian branch, you shall be entitled to suitable living quarters, and provided with augmented arms, and lifemetal legs. Finally, a stipend will be provided for you, and all of your immediate family members." Sabarene cleared her throat and gazed down deep into the eyes of the Spearhand. "Would such an offer be agreeable to you, Spearhand Blue Forty Two?" "Do I STILL HAVE to HAVE my ARMS AND LEGS torn OFF?" "Of course.", Sabarene commented, briskly. "You will pay for your crimes in full, regardless of if you accept my offer." The pink haired girl nodded her head, as sweat and something that looked similar ta sweat poured down her cheek. "IN THAT case, I HAVE LITTLE CHOICE but TO ACCEPT, right?" The white haired woman just gazed at the Spearhand, her solemn expression not changing. "You always have a choice, Unionist. But choices carry consequences." A

ghost of a smile flickered across Sabarene's face. "Which consequence most suits your soul, Spearhand Blue Forty Two? Will you die for your ideals? Or will you live for mine?" "I will FIGHT for MY ideals.", the pink haired girl growled, determined. "I will NOT die to satisfy YOU." "Oh, is that so?", the white haired woman asked, a muted amusement attached to her voice. "Well, I don't have the time to keep speaking with you in riddles. There are so many more to judge, and the next judgment shall be by far the most important. If you wish to serve me, then walk out to the courtyard of your own volition. If you wish to accept my justice and nothing more, then remain where you are, helpless, and impotent." The pink haired spearhand froze up where she was. Her body tensed up, and her muscles became stiff. But slowly – as if her legs were weights, as if her arms were rusted pieces of metal – Spearhand Blue Forty Two forced herself to move. Inch by inch, stride by stride, the pink haired girl used all the power she possessed, to carry herself off of the middle tier of the dining hall, and up the stairs which led to the lobby of the Caravan depot. She didn't react as she passed me. Her face was at once pained, and determined. In- in retrospect, I probably shoulda warned her about- about Lucas and Thief's chaotic, destructive bout – but I couldn't find the words ta speak. I found myself ta be little more thana ornament – an inanimate object that just happened ta be able ta witness the deeds going on in the three leveled dining hall turned sanctum. "I actually think she'll be quite useful, if she survives.", Sabarene commented casually, speaking to what seemed to be the left arm of her icy throne. "Then for the sake of the Continent, I hope she doesn't.", a raspy, weak sounding voice wheezed. Sabarene nodded her head. "Oh, hush. If I sentenced her to die you probably would have chided me for not sparing her." 'I... I would have chided you for- for evil...' the weak raspy



voice from behind the far arm of the icy throne said. I squinted my eye. I couldn't see who was speaking to Sabarene, but it sure as heck didn't sound like anyone I heard before. The voice sounded utterly drained – tired and weak. In the back of my head, the raspy voice actually did sorta remind me of someone, but- “Next!” the white haired woman yelled, her still restrained voice suddenly fulla vigor and vitality. A fourth fella stepped forward – an elderly looking man with whitened blue hair and a cane. He limped forward from the long line of prisoners, wincing with every step he made towards the center of middle dining tier. “General of the Holy Collective...”, he breathed out, hoarsely. “My name is-“ “Oh no, *you're* not next.”, the white haired woman quickly panted, a excitement building in her voice as she began pushing herself up in her icy throne. Two blood red orbs enveloped me, as the General of the Holy Collective's gaze fell upon the outer ring where Sister Julia and I stood. “I am.” Sabarene announced, smiling pleasantly as my eye met hers. The first thing that struck me was fear. I felt an acute sense of fear as I was exposed, as any notion of anonymity was stripped away from me. It was this sense of fear that made me want to run away, to sprint back up and out of the Caravan Depot – to leave Provesh and the Continent behind. But I didn't run away. I didn't avoid Sabarene's gaze, or falter as everyone in the inner sanctum turned their attention towards me. I stepped forward, because I had to step forward. There was no turning back anymore, the chance to flee through some clever trick had long since passed. “D-doggy...”, Sister Julia stammered, as I placed one of my boots down on the bridge which connected the outer ring of the dining hall to the middle tier. I felt my muscles shaking, and I felt myself begin to sweat, in spite of being inna room made almost entirely out of ice. It didn't matter. The white platemail I wore protected me; it hid

my quivering arms, my shaking legs. The only way anyone would be able to see my fear would be by looking at my face, and the scowl I forced on was more than enough to trick most people. I wouldn't appear scared, and I wouldn't appear shocked- "DOGGY!", Sister Julia cried, grabbing onto my arm. "Don't- don't go! That's what she wants, doggy! To- to talk to you, to break you!" "...I know." I whispered, then forced a slight smile onto my face. "But better me than you, Sister Julia." I gently pushed plucked the black haired girl's arm off of mine. "Please... doggy... no... please... Axeman Red Four!", Sister Julia huffed, frantically. " – please, don't- don't go.", the normally easy going girl sobbed, her shoulders slumped. I didn't want to go. But I had to go. It wasn't like me and Sister Julia could fight our way out of the Caravan Depot – even if we cut our way through a hundred Fiatists there'd be thousands more to contend with. I had messed up. I had trusted the feelings in my heart, arrogantly assuming they were pure, selfishly thinking that my core was somehow above the corruption and corrosion which afflicted everything in the Continent. There was only one way to fix the mess I had made – so I reached to take the black greataxe back from Sister Julia. "Oh, there's no need to do that.", a kind sounding voice remarked. "I commissioned you a better one." Like she had done with the black collar, Sabarene threw something down to the center of the middle dining tier. Except, unlike the collar, what she threw down didn't fall slowly and sway through the air like a leaf on the wind. What Sabarene threw down plummeted like a rock, making a loud crashing sound as it slammed into the center of the middle dining tier – cracking the icy floor in the process. What she threw down to me was... well... it was a greataxe. I paused for a moment... the greataxe was certainly a trap. Oh, it wasn't a trap in the literal sense – I was sure what Sabarene threw down was a

functional greataxe, and more to the point, I was sure it was probably much better than the greataxe I had given to Sister Julia. But therein lied the danger. For me to pick up the greataxe Sabarene threw down – it would be to accept something from her. And when Sabarene gave people things, she received something in return. I could have won a symbolic victory if I had just taken the black and red greataxe from Sister Julia, but that would have meant depriving Sister Julia of a greataxe. And I would not sacrifice the physical reality for the reality in my mind. So I walked over the bridge to the center tier of the dining hall, and picked up the greataxe that Sabarene had thrown down.... I grabbed it by its pure black lifemetal handle, and tore its black and white patterned head out of the cracked ice. With no more than a grunt, I slung the new greataxe over my shoulder, and glared up at the General of the Holy Collective – not letting any emotion besides a quiet rage escape from my soul. All for the better, too, cause if I wasn't pretending to be emotionally detached I mighta actually winced a bit when I saw what was at the side Sabarene's icy throne. Or rather, *who* was at the side of Sabarene's icy throne. There was a man – or something broken and twisted that resembled a man – chained to the side of Sabarene's throne by a metal choker. His eyes looked like dull velvet, and his hair was colored scuzzy off-black. Through his stained white robes, and by his broken dusty glasses – I knew the man at Sabarene's side to be Marston. But if he noticed me, he didn't seem to show it. He just stared off into space – his half open eyes gazing at nothing. "...Name?", Sabarene asked, smiling down at me. I gently laid down Lucas's tophat on the ice. "You're in danger, Sister.", I said, coldly. "Just a few moments ago, forty of your soldiers were-" "Massacred by one of Mister Thief's gimmicks, I know.", the white haired woman finished. "A decent effort on his part, but it

won't amount to anything. I've taken the proper precautions to deal with him." She wagged her index finger at me. "But this isn't about Mister Thief, or Mister Lucas. This isn't about the Continent, or what lies beyond the Continent. This is about me and you, Miss-" "Fortuna.", I cut in, taking up a name I had only heard in nightmares. "Call me Fortuna." "Fortuna?", Sabarene repeated, raising an eyebrow. "That sounds like a prostitute's name, Miss Axeman Red Four." "Don't flatter me.", I said, dryly. "Prostitutes have done far more good for the Continent than I ever have." "That's not true in the slightest, and you know it!", Sabarene chided, puffing up her cheeks. "Without you, I'd still be trying to change the world by throwing bars of metal into the sea!" "Exactly.", I responded, my voice muted. Sabarene nodded her head, and pushed herself up off her icy throne. "You think I'm wrong, don't you?", she asked, as she sat at the edge of the top tier of the dining, swinging her legs playfully towards me. "You think that all of this – that all I intend to do is evil, huh?" "What else should I call it?", I asked, refusing to look the white haired woman in the eye. "You lied to me, you lied to Lucas. You framed me for a crime I didn't commit, and worse still, you enslaved me. In the past, you-" "Didn't you once tell me you didn't care about my past?", Sabarene said, teasingly. I tightened my grip on the handle of the new greataxe. "I should have cared. I should have listened to Marston up there... I shouldn't have taken everything at face value." "You never did take everything at face value, Miss Axeman Red Four.", Sabarene cooed, gently massaging her stump arm. "You knew what I was as soon as we were attacked on the Caravan. But rather than act like an infant, and try to stomp me out in a fit of misguided rage, you put the past behind you. You accepted me for what I was." "No.", I hissed. "I accepted you for what I thought you were." "Maybe that's how you rationalized it.",

Sabarene commented. "But most people don't tend to give defeated warlords second chances out of the goodness of their heart." "The *goodness* of my heart had nothing to do with it.", I cried out, my voice cracking. I nodded my head, and got myself back under control, suppressing the torrent of emotion which could destroy me. "I accepted you, because I thought you had changed.", I contended, coldly. "I thought if someone as nice... as wise as you... that if someone like you had once been a monster, but became a better person, then that meant someday I- I myself could-" "Change?", Sabarene guessed, a mischievous smirk on her face. "But Miss Axeman Red Four... you have changed." I glanced at my lifemetal arm, disgusted. "No no, not in *that* way.", Sabarene laughed, then rubbed the back of her neck. "Though I suppose your body is apt enough a metaphor for your growth. You started out strong... and ended up stronger. You lost your left arm... then survived, and even thrived without it. You regrew that arm anew, and just as your toned abs turned to steel, so did your reactive instinct grow to become perceptive pragmatism, and finally, proactive power." "I didn't want all this lifemetal crap.", I hissed, my disgusting black metal arm shaking. "You forced em upon me." Sabarene just smiled. "I did force them upon, true. I originally intended to just repair your spinal cord, but then I figured, why not go all the way? It... it fits you, Miss Axeman Red Four. The more you are hurt, the stronger you become." She glanced back to Marston, a slightly disgusted look in her blood red eyes. "Of course, most people can only take so much pain before they break entirely... but you do not break. You prevent emotions from clouding your judgment, but you don't ignore dismiss them entirely. You take in all the positive, and discard the negative. You are the embodiment of all the Continent's virtues." "At least we agree on something.", I spat, feeling like I was about to

throw up. “Well, I think we’ve chatted enough!”, Sabarene laughed, then flashed me a fangy smile. “It’s time to administer justice!” The white haired woman pressed her hand against the ledge, and... dove. She dove straight off the top level of the dining hall, and straight down to the center platform... head first. “S-sabarene!”, a high pitched voice yelled, as I threw the black and white greataxe to the side, and leapt up into the air to catch the white haired girl before she crashed into the ice. “G-gah!”, I coughed, as I landed on my feet, the girl with ruby red eyes secured safely in my arms. I felt something cold poke my collar. “Pah-spring.”, Sabarene cooed, her lifemetal index tickling my throat. “You’re dead, Miss Axeman Red Four.” Panicked, I flung the white haired monster in my arms straight down to the center of the middle level, and leapt away from her. “Ow!”, Sabarene groaned, as she tried pushing herself up from the ice with her lifemetal embedded stump. “That hurt!” I picked up the black and white greataxe, and raised it in front of me. Immediately, six Fiatists surrounded me, their glistening lifemetal limbs outstretched. “**NO!**”, Sabarene roared, the playful expression gone from her face entirely. “**YOU WILL NOT INTERFERE!**” I flourished the greataxe, and clenched my teeth. “Y’all might as well interfere!” I called out, a burning rage engulfing me. “It’s fitting for a buncha dogs to die with their master!” But the Fiatists in the inner sanctum stayed back, unaffected by my taunts. Sabarene got on her feet and smiled, bleeding a bit from her forehead. “I don’t intend to fight you, Miss Axeman Red Four.”, she huffed out, excited. “I mean... I really can’t. I’ve never been particularly strong, physically speaking. You’d destroy me in a heartbeat.” “Then I reckon you best surrender.”, I growled, not particularly wanting her to. “Surrender?”, Sabarene chuckled, covering her mouth with her stump. “I didn’t leap down here to surrender, Miss Axeman

Red Four. I jumped down to see justice done.” I began circling the General of the Holy Collective, partly to intimidate her, and partly to keep my mind moving. “You’re going to have a hard time judging me after I chop you in half, Sister.” “Oh, you’re not the one being judged, Miss Axeman Red Four.” She stepped up close to me, and caressed my chin with her black lifemetal hand. “I am.”, she whispered, a sultry tone in her voice. I recoiled immediately. “Is that so?”, I spat, keeping my axe raised. “Cause there’s a whole lotta Unionists outside that would be more than happy ta judge ya.” “No no no, *they* don’t deserve to judge me.”, Sabarene said, wiping the blood off her forehead. “Unionists are regressive and weak. They eat themselves, and they’re confined by the fetters of classism, racism, homophobia, and other such flavors of bigotry.” She shook her finger at me. “In other words, Unionists are as predictable as people come. Right now I imagine a whole group of them are trying to assault this depot, in a last ditch attempt to avert their fate.” I involuntarily winced, my thoughts going to Blue, and the purple haired girl. “Oh, so I’m right?”, Sabarene blurted, slightly surprised. She shrugged her shoulders. “Well, that doesn’t matter. Provesh will belong to the Collective, that much is certain. The only question left to settle is... who will lead the Collective?” I gazed up at Marston. “No, no, I’m not talking about *him*, Miss Axeman Red Four. Marston isn’t suited to lead the Collective... he’s too weak.” “If he’s too weak, then why are you keeping him alive?”, I countered. “Do you get a kick out of watching him suffer?” I tugged at the black collar wrapped tightly around my neck. “Did you get a kick out of watching *me* suffer?” “Yes.”, Sabarene said, her ruby red eyes shining. “I did get a kick out of watching you suffer, Miss Axeman Red Four. But only because time and time again you’d overcome that suffering.” Oh, so that’s why ya enslaved me – ta

make me stronger!", I yelled, spitefully. "No- no, Miss Axeman Red Four, that's- that's not it.", Sabarene breathed out, heavily. "I enslaved you because I didn't understand you." The smile on her face broadened. "And that was my crime, my sin." I lowered my greataxe. "You... you ain't kidding?", I breathed out, allowing my voice to become slightly higher pitched. "You actually... you actually feel guilt for what you've done?" "Of course I feel guilt.", Sabarene said, placing her hand and her stump arm over her heart. "You... you need to understand something. Someone like me.- I can't be friends with those I work with. At all times, I need to be focused on the most efficient path, the best possible outcome. I can't allow emotions to get in my way." She looked up at Marston, a wistful smile on her face. "But I can't ignore my emotions completely. Having friends... having family to love, and care for... it fulfills my emotional requirements. So that's why I placed a collar around you, Miss Axeman Red Four. I needed you... not as a warrior, but as... as someone to love, to cherish. To talk to, and to joke around with, as my emotional needs necessitated." "Well ain't you a romantic.", I growled. "That... that isn't the full reason why I enslaved you, Miss Axeman Red Four. I viewed you... I viewed you as weak. When you told Mister Lucas not to kill Sister Kundare... when you poisoned and blackmailed Desnion and his syncophants, without killing them – I thought you weak and impotent." Tears started streaming down the white haired woman's face. "I was wrong.", Sabarene sobbed. "You... you weren't weak. You were stronger than anyone. The reason why you let Sister Kundare live... the reason why you spared Desnion when you could have just murdered him... I under, now. I had thought you an idealistic imbecile, but that wasn't it. You wanted to show them your strength. By allowing Sister Kundare to win even when Mister Lucas had her dead to rights, and by



defeating Sister Julia and Brother Christopher at the same time... you proved yourself. You showed the entire Collective that the one who makes the rules... and the one who breaks the rules, is you.", Sabarene whispered, her words sounding like a prayer. "You, and you alone. I- I was too blind to see it, at the time. It was only after hearing the reports come in that I was able to understand. Understand the truth, and understand you, Miss Axeman Red Four." "You don't understand me.", I scoffed, ignoring how heavy the greataxe in my hands seemed to be. "Oh, but- but I do!", the white haired woman insisted, pacing the icy floor of the middle tier of the dining hall nervously. "I do understand you, Miss Axeman Red Four! After you were made into a Volunteer, you killed my very best Saboteur – you strangled him dead! After that, you single handily slaughtered the crew of one of my warships – then broke through the barricade to get here – to get to Provesh. And then – as I tried to talk and speak with the Swordarms – you burnt almost all of my most elite force to ash! You... you are strong," Sabarene huffed, her cheeks flushing pink. "You're stronger than I thought possible. The things you did – the amount of my soldiers that you killed, well... it's nothing short of amazing. You're amazing, Miss Axeman Red Four!" A cold wind blew through the dining hall. "You're not supposed to be impressed by what I did.", I hissed. "You're supposed to be disgusted." "How could I be disgusted?", Sabarene asked, sounding astonished. "You're everything I ever tried to be and more. You... you did everything on your own- with your own power, your own strength!" She spread her arm and stump wide, a joyous smile on her face. "That's why you need to kill me. I... I'm not the one most suited to lead the Collective. You are! It's you that can change the Continent – it's always been you! Mister Thief told me you were a tool... a means for me to change the world, but he was

wrong! I was the tool for you!” I backed away from Sabarene, but she stepped forward towards me, an angelic gaze on her face. “Please...”, she pleaded, earnestly. “Kill me! Kill me, Miss Axeman Red Four! Right here – right in front of all my most trusted soldiers, right where my beloved Brother can see – murder me! Destroy me, for limiting you! Show everyone here the truth – show them what it means to believe in one’s self!”

“G-general Sabarene!”, one of the metal limbed soldiers shouted, unnerved. “You- you need to snap out of this! We- we want you, General Sabarene! We don’t want-“

**“SILENCE!”**, the white haired woman roared, her ruby red eyes shining vibrantly. **“THIS IS WHY I WAS BORN! EVERYTHING I’VE DONE – IT WAS ALL LEADING UP TO THIS MOMENT! DO NOT TAKE THIS AWAY FROM ME – DO NOT TAKE THIS AWAY FROM YOURSELVES!”** Sabarene’s face softened, as she lowered her voice and looked straight at me, a soft gentle smile still on her face. “Believe in yourself, Miss Axeman Red Four. Believe in your own power, and your own strength.” I gazed back at Sabarene, and at the greataxe in my hand. The situation seemed surreal, yet strangely familiar. Yet... in spite of it all, I felt a warmth build up in my chest... I felt my doubts and fears fade away. She cared for me. In spite of everything... Sabarene truly did care for me. And if she cared for me, then... then the right thing to do would be to show I cared for her... to fulfill her request quickly, and efficiently. But Sabarene wasn’t the only one who cared for me. “You’re right, Sister.” I said, tossing the black and white greataxe to the side. “I am strong.” I nodded my head. “But the reason I’m strong, Sister... it ain’t because I outwitted some folks, or because I murdered others.” I carefully stepped around Lucas’s purple tophat, then turned to Sabarene and smiled, my fangs tucked safely away. “I’m strong because of you, Sabarene. I’m strong because of you, Lucas,

Blue, Marston, Mykhaila, Thief, Kundare, Julia, Christopher, Desnion, Marcela, an Unassigned Purple haired girl, an Unassigned Lancer, Swordarm Black Eighteen, Swordarm Black Seventeen and Nielente.” I clasped my hands together. “I’m strong because of my friends, my enemies, and so many more. So I can’t kill you, Sabarene... it would be like killing a part of myself.” “There... there are some parts of one’s self... worth destroying ...”, Marston wheezed from above. I gazed up at the chained black haired boy, and gently nodded my head. “I agree with you, Marston. And out of all the parts of myself, this particular part is probably the most deserving of excision. But I’m tired, Marston. I’m real tired of fighting, of killing – of trying to make something by destroying something else.” “But that’s the only way things change!”, Sabarene screamed, from behind me. “In war, in trade, in peace, in diplomacy, in games, even in sex... you need to sacrifice something! You need to pay a price to obtain a good! And if there’s an obstacle to your goal- if there’s something that can’t be overcome, or worked around – then you have to destroy it!” “DESTROY!?”, a loud, terrified voice bellowed out. All attention shifted to the stairs of the dining hall turned inner sanctum. Standing tall, with a slightly burnt looking blonde boy and a brown haired man slung firmly over his shoulders, was- Brother Gino. “L-lucas!”, U.T. and I cried out, simultaneously. “General... GENERAL!”, Brother Gino yelled, as sprinting to the center of the middle dining tier, not even paying the slightest attention to the two bodies he had slung over his shoulder. The man in the spikey black metal armor dropped Lucas and Thief right by Sister Julia, barreled past me, and came to a skidding halt, right by the white haired girl. “I did what you asked, General!”, Brother Gino reported, his breath ragged. “I managed to subdue Mister Wizard and Mister Skull Mask!” A moment of silence passed. “Is

everything ok, General?”, Brother Gino asked, awkwardly. Sabarene ignored him, and smiled at me. “See? It all turned out fine. I anticipated Mister Thief’s little hissy fit, and I made arrangements to save Mister Lucas. So trust me when I say I know what I’m talking about, because as a matter of objective fact, I do.” “I ain’t killing ya.”, I said, flatly. “No matter how right ya claim to be, it just ain’t gonna happen.” “This... this isn’t- **no!**”, Sabarene suddenly screamed, her face contorted. “You... you’re not strong at all, Unionist! If you can’t even kill a frail, half crippled girl- if you can’t take victory and power when it’s placed directly in the palm of your hand... then- then you- you’re weak! You’re weak weak weak!” I looked down at the girl in the black habit, and smiled. “If I’m weak, then what does that make you, Sister *Saparene*?” “**It’s SABARENE!**”, the woman in the black habit snarled, her small lithe body fuming. “**I am General Sabarene of the Holy Collective! And I will not allow a weakling to throw away the Continent’s future! If you won’t become strong willingly, then I’ll MAKE you strong!**” For the first time since he had arrived, Sabarene acknowledged the head of the Plebian Branch’s presence. “Gino!”, she barked, even more unhinged. “Go bring up the old man!” I couldn’t see his face because he was wearing a black spikey helmet, but Gino seemed to hesitate, a bit. “Gino... now!” Like he had been splashed with cold water, the man in the spikey black metal armor leapt off the middle level of the dining hall, and down to the lowest level – where hundreds of destitute looking Unionists stood, broken expressions on their face. I stayed where I was. “It won’t work, y’know?”, I commented, a calm washing over me. “Anything you throw at me, I can withstand. You won’t destroy me, Sabarene. You simply lack the capacities.” The woman with eyes the color of sinew smirked, viciously. “I already said it, Unionist. I’m not trying to destroy *you*.” “M-

miss Axeman Red Four!", Marston cried, from above. "You... you need to run! Even... even this scenario, she foresaw! The confidence you have now... your rejection of her ideals... she accounted for it! You need to flee!" I smiled up at the black haired boy, his broken body looking more vibrant, his formerly dull eyes shining a bright ruby red. "Don't worry, Marston.", I said, smiling. "I'm... I'm ok with whatever happens to me. Moreso than that... I reckon I might even be able to save you." "No, you can't!", the Ex-Regent cried, tears streaming down his cheek. "You really can't! It.. it's going to get worse! I know- I know that it seems like things can't get any worse- I know it may seem like you've truly understood things, that you've truly understood *her*, but- but you haven't! You need to run away! Take what victory you can take here and go, before it all falls apart!" And just like that- my confidence faded. The tiered dining hall became cold again – cold as a room madea ice would feel. Even though she only had one arm, even though her straight white hair had become a stringy mess, and even though any illusion of grace and composure had been rip from her body ... I began backing away from the white haired woman, scared. I glanced towards the stairs – to where Lucas lied, unconscious, but alive. It- it wouldn't be too hard to just book it, take him up on my shoulder and flee. I still- I still could cut my losses, I still cross the bridge to the outer ring, and escape from the inner sanctum unharmed. I could still save Lucas, I could still leave the Continent behind me, it wasn't- "**Too late.**", Sabarene bellowed, a cold, cruel look on her face. She raised her spiked stump arm high in the air. As if summoned from the depths of hell, Brother Gino leapt up from the bottom living of the tier dining hall, and crashed right in front of me – his black metal armor glistening. And in his arms, he carried a... a small, frail bundle. At first glance I thought Gino was carrying a sack of soil

or something, but- as he set it down, I- I recognized the thing... no, the person in his arms ta be... "A Geriatric?", U.T. blurted into my head, as Brother Gino set the frail looking old man down in fronta me. "That's the red eyed psycho's secret weapon? An old man? Are you afraid of the elderly, Master Admin?" But even though the module didn't seem too concerned, my fear turned to sheer horror, as I stared at the old man in front of me. His skin was shriveled and pale, the colored of spoiled milk. What little hair he had was almost all white... only containing a hint of the royal blue it had once been. His green eyes were barely opened, his wrinkled eyelids melting over each other like grilled cheese. He... he was shaking, the old man. He looked scared, confused... like he had awoke in the middle of the night. Sabarene stared at me and smiled, as she sloppily straightened her stringy hair. "It's funny, Unionist. I spent so much time talking to you about myself. I told you about my brother, my parents, my dreams, my experiences... I told you about my entire life story, beginning to end. But you never told me much about yourself. Oh, you alluded to smuggling, and being an orphan... but you were very quiet about your upbringing. All you told me was how you were adopted as an infant, by a Mister Axeman Black One." She teasingly wagged her index finger at me. It wasn't very nice of you to be so tight-lipped. Didn't you say you trusted me?"

"G...girl...", the old man that had raised me raggedly breathed. "Are... you... alright?", he slowly gasped out, clutching his chest as he tried to speak. "I... I received... your letter. This... this girl.... She told me you were... in... in danger..." "Don't worry, I didn't torture him.", Sabarene assured me, as she strolled up to the old man. "I didn't need to. By the time we found him in Trunchet, he was senile. He actually mistook me for you, at first. Pretty funny, right?" Right and wrong didn't matter ta me anymore, nor did the so-

called feelings in my heart. “GRAAAAAAH!”, I screamed, as I lunged forward to smash Sabarene’s skull into tiny little pieces. Brother Gino reached under my armpits, and held me back. “Good, Unionist, good!”, Sabarene laughed, her red eyes shimmering. “But you don’t get to do *that*, not yet. Not until I have a chat with this nice old man.” The elderly man seemed to shake... the noise and commotion confusing and scaring him. “What... what’s going on?!” he blurted, his voice deep but shakey. He gazed at me, and tilted his head, this way and that, this way and that, this way and that. “Who... who are you? Where... where is... where is the girl? Where is my... my daug-“ The white haired woman walked forward, and gently wrapped her arm and her stump around the neck of the elderly man in front of me. “Relax, Mister Axeman Black One. Relax. It’s me. Remember me? I’m Sister Sabarene.” The old man in front of me seemed to calm down, some. “S-Sabarene.”, he stuttered. ‘Sabarene, you- you said- you said my- my daughter, you said she was here, that she was- that she was hurt- that she was-“ “I did.”, Sabarene whispered, as she stroked the old man’s bald head. “And she is nearby, so don’t worry. Miss Axeman Red Four is very close... she’s very near.’ “I- I don’t see her!”, the old man barked, his anger masking fear. “I- I just see- I just see a monster! A one eyed brute, a- a- despicable degenerate!” I stopped struggling to escape from Brother Gino’s grasp. I dropped to my knees, on the ice. I knew... I knew it wasn’t his fault. I knew that the old man before me... Axeman Black One – the man that had picked me up as an infant – the man that had given me a name, a purpose... I knew that his old age and mental degeneration meant that he wasn’t thinking clearly, or concisely. But- but even though I knew that- even though I hadn’t seen him in cycles – for the old man to call me a monster... even if I was a monster... it- it *hurt*. And it hurt so

much, that I just wanted it all to stop. “Don’t worry, Mister Axeman Black One.”, Sabarene cooed, moving her lips to the old man’s ear. “Miss Axeman Red Four *is* in danger, but you can save her. You can save your surrogate daughter, and the entire Continent-“ “I don’t care about the bloody Continent!” the old man sobbed. “Just... just tell me how to-“ “It’s simple, Mister Axeman Black One.”, Sabarene said, rubbing the old man’s back. “Just say what I told you to say. Remember what we practiced? What we rehearsed? It’s just a few words... you remember those words, right?” “I don’t!”, the old man yelled, spittle dripping out of his wrinkled mouth. “ I don’t remember... I- everything- is like a thick haze but... but I know I need to-to protect my- she needs to be-“ “Easy, easy.”, the white haired woman shushed, tightening her embrace around the frail former fighter, around the man who had taught me how to put precise amounts of power into my axe swings. “You don’t need to remember the words, Mister Axeman Black One. Just repeat them after me. I’ll even speak slowly so you can hear them, alright?” “Al... alright.”, the old man groaned. “if it- saves... her.” “It will. It will save her.”, Sabarene promised. “The words you and I will speak – they shall save everyone.” The white haired girl looked at me and smiled, then gently patted the old man on the head. “I, Axeman Black One.”, she began, enunciating each word, crisply and clearly. “I.”, the old man began, slowly. “Axeman Black... One.” “Being of highest skill, and noblest color.”, Sabarene continued, not breaking a sweat. “Being of.., highest skill..”, the old man repeated, as if his words were the treading of water. “And... noblest color.” “Hereby command Axeman Red Four to...” “Hereby command-“ A worried expression came across the old man’s face, and he hesitated. “Keep going, Mister Axeman Black One.”, the white haired woman encouraged, tightening her hand on his shoulder. “Keep going,



you're so close. You'll save your daughter for sure." "Hereby command Axeman Red Four to—" "Pick up her greataxe, and kill Sister Sabarene, the General of the Holy Collective.", Sabarene declared, not blinking, not shaking. "To... to pick up her greataxe, and kill Sister Sabarene... the General of the Holy Collective.", the man that had raised me repeated, spitting out the words as if in a trance. My body shook. The words had been said – and so my body would only let me do one of two things – follow the command, or destroy myself. That was the nature of being a Unionist, of being beaten and smacked and bruised as a child, until the only options yer mind gave ya was to follow commands, or die. But as bleak as things seemed, I could still win. I could follow the command to the letter, and still not kill anyone – not permanently, anyways. I just had ta use the recovery module, and then'd I'd be home free. As if responding to my thoughts, Sabarene smiled, and swiped her finger across her neck. "And finally... I command Axeman Red Four to never use a module ever again. To reject strength from the outside, and to embrace her own." "N-no!", I shrieked, as Brother Gino relinquished his hold on me, as the instincts that had been instilled in me began to take over. "This- this ain't how it's supposedta be!", I screamed, everything falling apart. "This *is* how it's supposed to be, Miss Axeman Red Four.", Sabarene whispered, as I struggled to keep myself still. "Change cannot come without blood – and the strongest cannot content herself with being below a weakling. For good to succeed... evil must be destroyed." Even though my mind screamed at myself ta stop, I stepped over ta the black and white greataxe... and even though I pulled back as much as possible – even though I used my fleshy arm, instead a my metal one to reach out for the heavy weapon – I was able to pick it up. My leg took one stilted step towards Sabarene... who remained completely

still, holding her hand and her stump behind her back. It hurt me. Everything hurt, and the one who had caused the pain was straight in front of me. My body screamed at me to kill her, to destroy her, and even though that was what she wanted, I knew the pain would go away if I just- if I just cut her down, and- “RAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!”, I yelled, throwing myself onto the ice, so my leg couldn’t succeed in bringing me over to the woman my mind . “Why are you still resisting?”, the girl with ruby red eyes asked, a clear calm in her voice. “I... I ain’t... I ain’t gonna do it!”, I yelled, thrashing on the ground like a fish out of water. “I- I ain’t gonna let you have yer way!” “You know how commands work, Axeman Red Four.”, Sabarene quickly countered, looking down at me with cold red eyes. “If you don’t carry out the command and kill me, you’ll die. And if you die... then everything you fought for will die with you. I’ve spoken to Mister Lucas... without you, he has nothing. My brother, your Unionist friends, those other Fiatist imbeciles, and, of course, your surrogate father... if you do not kill me – if you fall here, then they’ll all be lost.” “That... that’s still better than letting you win!”, I coughed, dry heaving as I resisted the overwhelming urge to smash the white haired woman’s skull into small little pieces. “This isn’t a matter of winning or losing, Miss Axeman Red Four!”, Sabarene hissed, clutching her chest. “It’s a matter of accepting yourself! If you accept yourself, then you can free yourself from all those stupid ideals you don’t *really* believe in! The arbitrary limits you place on yourself... you’re so close to being free of them!” “I don’t... want to be free of em!”, I choked out, slamming my hand against the ice. “I... I know I ain’t a good person, but- but that don’t mean it’s right that... that I just go and give up on... on trying to be!” “It *is* right.”, Sabarene insisted, forcefully. ‘You are not a bad person trying to be good, Miss Axeman Red Four. You ARE good! Your methods aren’t

cruel or brutal – they’re righteous! And you KNOW they’re righteous, deep down!

Despite your self-flagellation, despite your guilt, you’ve always acted in the way you’ve needed to act. Efficiently, and without hesitation!” “What the heck does that havta do with me killing you?!” I choked out, as my arms began to betray me, as I started pushing myself up off the ice. “Even... even if I actually am that sorta scumbag at heart, even if you want me ta be that sorta scumbag, even if /want ta be that sorta scumbag, it don’t mean you gotta die!” Sabarene kneeled down close to me, and placed her cold metal hand on my forehead. “Well, it kind of does now, Miss Axeman Red Four.”, she chuckled, stroking my hair. “I had Mister Axeman Black One say the command and everything.” “You... you didn’t havta!”, I gasped out, writhing on the icy floor of the Caravan Depot’s dining hall. “You coulda just becomea medic... we coulda worked together, or talked this all out. There... there coulda been a better way ta have done... alla this!” “This... this really isn’t the type of thing one can compromise on, Miss Axeman Red Four.”, Sabarene said, sadly. Suddenly, five black metal fingers grabbed a tuft of my hair, and yanked on it, hard. **“SO MAKE YOUR CHOICE, UNIONIST!”**, the General spat, twisting my hair as she pulled my face close to hers, forcing my lips an inch away from hers. **“WILL YOU LIVE, BEING THE PERSON YOU TRULY ARE? OR WILL YOU DIE, PRETENDING TO BE THAT WHICH YOU ARE NOT?”** I had lost all capacity to speak, to argue. My body screamed and ached for release... to be free of the urge that so powerfully overwhelmed it. I could struggle any longer – I had to kill Sabarene... I *needed* to. But... but I only *needed* to because it was painful NOT to... it was painful not to follow the order that had been embedded into my very being. And if all I was doing was trying to avoid pain, then why... why go through the effort of getting

up? Why bother to kill Sabarene, if the pain would just settle in again later? No... the more permanent fix was obvious. Still clutching the handle of my greataxe with my fleshy hand, I curled my lifemetal hand into a fist and... started pounding my own stomach. "G-guh!", I coughed, shocked at how my black metal fist was able to dent my own armor. But that was good. That meant it was *working*. I punched my stomach again, and again, and again, knowing that eventually my armor would bend inward and rupture through my abdominal, and that once that happened, it would only be a matter of time before the pain went away for good. "GUH!", I groaned, as I punched my stomach a second time, then a third time, then a fourth. I felt the metal of my armor break apart, and begin to dig into my core. That wasn't enough. I needed to be faster. "GAAAAAAAAAH!", I shrieked, pounding myself in the side of my head. Sabarene stared at me, and cringed. "Disgusting.", she spat, and ripped her fingers from my hair. "AH! AAAAAAAAAAH!", I screamed, as I lost all sense of self, as I began slamming my skull into the ice. The white haired girl turned her back on me, and began to walk away. "And to think I believed you could be free of those constraints.", she bitterly blathered, her hand balled into a fist, her body shaking. "In the end, you were little more than a charlatan, Unionist." Sabarene nodded her head. "Die then, Axeman Red Four. Be devoured by your own weakness, and **die**." Then it all clicked. Perhaps all the time I spent damaging my skull forced a few pieces of my brain back into place, or perhaps the shock of seeing my surrogate father gaze at me with disgust made me realize it, but everything suddenly made sense. I stopped slamming my skull into the ice, and I stopped punching my stomach with my black metal hand. As if coming to an agreement, my body and mind joined together as one. Like waking up from a short refreshing nap, I

sprung to my feet. Alright, more like stumbled to my feet, but still. My vision blurry, my head and stomach aching, I got back up. The white haired woman stopped dead in her tracks. “No...”, she whispered. “It... it can’t be.” For the third time, I picked up the black and white colored greataxe, this time holding it firmly in both of my hands. Moving at a steady pace, I walked towards Sabarene, my greataxe raised high. “Yes!”, Sabarene growled, her voice deep. “Yes, I *knew* you could do it! I knew you could overcome those constraints!” I didn’t react to her words in the slightest. I walked up as close to the white haired woman as I could – then SLAMMED my greataxe straight down into the ice, an inch away from her foot. The white haired woman flinched, but didn’t look away, or back up. “Yes, you’re almost there – you’re so close!”, she panted, excitement washing over her. Sturdily, efficiently – I placed the edge of my greataxe on the side of the white haired woman’s flawless face – and scraped the edge of it across her left cheek. Her mouth opened in awe, Sabarene brought her hand up to the slight cut, and pressed her palm against it, as she stared straight at me, her eyes shimmering. I allowed the tiniest bit of a smirk to spread across my lips, then... dropped my greataxe, letting it clatter on the icy floor, right by the white haired woman’s feet. A look of confusion spread across Sabarene’s face – a look that disappeared once I raised my two hands up instead, and wrapped them around her neck. “Yes...”, she whispered, her words sounding like a prayer. “Don’t use your weapon. Do it yourself. If you use your own two hands, if you strangle me, and watch the life fade from my eyes, you’ll become even stronger.” I gently flicked both of her ears. “H-huh?”, Sabarene stuttered, shocked as I released my grip on her. She extended her hand out to me, confused. “What- what are you doi-!?” With the strength of a wild wolf, I grappled the woman with ruby red eyes close ta me,

and stabbed the recovery module deep into the end of her stump arm. “W...what?” Sabarene weakly whispered, as the pieces of lifemetal popped out of her stump, as fingers made fully of flesh formed the beginnings of a new right hand. I waited for her right arm to fully regrow, then gently pushed the white haired girl away from me. The General of the Holy Collective stared down at her two hands – at her black lifemetal left hand, and her full flesh and blood right hand. Her fingers shaking, Sabarene moved her newly grown hand up to where I had cut her cheek... and patted it, in disbelief. “But... but I- I commanded you.”, Sabarene whispered, avoiding my gaze. “I... I had the highest ranked Axeman command you... he said the words and everything. There’s... there’s no way you should be able- there’s...” She forced her head up to face me, her face wavering. “Who *are* you?”, the white haired woman squeaked, terrified. “I already told you, General Sabarene.” I said, finally getting it. “I’m Axeman Red Four.” “No...”, Sabarene muttered, backing away from me. “No... no no no... **NO!**”, she screamed, demented. “**THAT’S NOT HOW IT WORKS! UNIONISTS CAN’T JUST... THEY CAN’T JUST DISOBEY COMMANDS!**” “I never said I was a Unionist.”, I commented, calmly walking forward as Sabarene scrambled back. “B-bullshit!”, she cursed, the wind falling out of her words. “You- you just told me your name was... that you were-“ “Axeman Red Four.”, I finished, calmly. “I am Axeman Red Four, General Sabarene.”, I said, then placed Lucas’s purple tophat on top of my head. “But I don’t have to be. If I wanted to, I could be a tacky stage magician named Fortuna Splendour, or even be a dumb crippled Fiatist by the name of Sister Amelia.” “What... what sort of imbecilic nonsense is that?!”, Sabarene screamed, pulling her hair. “You- you can’t just ignore your past! You can’t just throw away the society that formed you!” “Maybe you can’t.”, I acknowledged. “But I

can, General. I thought I couldn't, but I can." The old man Sabarene had used to issue a command at me gasped. "G...girl.", he stammered, as if coming out of a haze. "It's... it's really you... girl!" I walked over to the old man, as he continued to ramble. "I... I failed you, girl.", he choked out, shame spreading across his old wrinkled face. "I- I fell for such a stupid, simplistic trap, and I failed. I-I wasn't even able to recognize you." I turned away from the wavering white haired woman, and embraced my father, as gently as my gauntlets would allow. "It's alright.", I assured him. "It's not your fault. You were brought here against your will, and tricked. I don't blame you in the slightest." "Girl...", Axeman Black One began to cry. "GIRL!", he sobbed, crying tears into my white pauldrons. "It's alright.", I said, patting the withered coot on his bumpy back. "You were just looking out for me, like you've always have." The old man calmed down, so I let go of him, and turned back towards Sabarene. "What the fuck was that?!", she spat, her hands balled into fists. "How the hell was that *ignoring* your past?!" I allowed myself to smile. "I fear you've misunderstood me once again, General. I said I could ignore my past. I never said I *would*." I tightened my grasp on the old man's shoulder, as I glared at the woman with ruby red eyes. "Not all of it, at least. My upbringing, my past... there was a lot wrong with it. But there was some good there, too. So I can take in the good, and discard the bad. I can keep the sense of discipline I received through being a Unionist, without having to have commands rule over me. There's value in practically everything, General." "You... you relativistic retard!", Sabarene hissed. "If a hunk of meat is rotted, you don't eat it, you throw it away!" "No, you cut away the rot and eat the rest, General." I countered, firmly. "Even the most advanced societies are not without their flaws, even the cruelest autocracies have their better sides. You can pick and

choose as you go along. With a level head, with a compassionate heart... choosing a path that works is possible. Not easy... but possible.” “C-compassionate heart?”, Sabarene repeated, her voice cracking. “Are you- are you fucking JOKING, Axeman Red Four? Since when the fuck did *you* have a compassionate heart?!” “Since about a minute and a half ago.”, I answered, resting my hands on my hips. “No. no, you’re... you’re **WRONG!**”, the woman in the black habit screamed, tearing her the fabric of her outfit. “People aren’t rational beings... we’re **BEASTS!** We **HUNGER** and **THIRST** for power, we run on **INSTINCT!** We bear **GRUDGES**, we **FIGHT** to be in charge even when we don’t **NEED TO!** If you and I were put on an island, with limited resources and no shelter, our very first instinct would be to try to **DEVOUR** each other!” I cracked my neck. “We are beasts, General, I don’t deny that. You and I especially are beasts.” I narrowed my eye. “But we don’t have to be. Not completely, at least.” A slight smirk spread across my face. “I wouldn’t particularly mind devouring you, though.” “**OH, SPARE ME, UNIONIST!**”, the General screamed, her hair a mess, her habit frayed and ripped and torn. “**ONLY THROUGH STRUGGLE CAN PEOPLE BE UNITED, ONLY THROUGH BLOOD CAN PROGRESS GROW AND FLOURISH! IF YOU WOULD DENY THAT – IF YOU WOULD TRY AND REJECT REAL ADVANCEMENT IN LEIU OF A PIPE DREAM FLIMSILY SUPPORTED BY PLATITUDES OF PEACE AND UNDERSTANDING – THEN YOU ARE MY ENEMY!**” Sabarene clasped both of her hands together, and glared at the man in the spikey black armor. “Gino... **destroy her!**” The orange haired man in the spikey black armor didn’t move. “**Gino, I said-**“ “I know what you said, General.”, Brother Gino stated, remaining still in the center of the ice. “**Then hurry up and kill her already, imbecile!**” The man in the spikey black armor



raised his hands to his helmet, and pulled it off. “No, General.”, the boy with orange hair said, calm as I had ever seen him. “I will not harm this woman.” Sabarene fumed, furious. **“Are you fucking kidding me, Gino?! When I gave you that armor, you swore you’d use it to destroy my greatest enemies!”** “I swore to destroy the COLLECTIVE’s greatest enemy, GENERAL!”, Gino roared, as he flicked one of the spikes on his spikey black lifemetal armor. “A-A-A-A-A-A-A-A-AH!”, he screamed, as the stuck out spikes moved inwards, impaling his body. “And...”, the orange haired boy panted, as he strolled towards Sabarene. “And it seems... like I’ve finally figured out, precisely who that is.” The white haired woman jerked back, as if she’d been splashed in the face by a bucket full of cold urine. **“You... you can’t be serious.”**, Sabarene stammered, more stunned than horrified. “You’re about to find out just how serious I am, General.”, Gino hissed, as he closed the distance between him and the white haired woman. “Don’t you dare move another inch, Gino!”, I yelled, my voice sharp. The orange haired boy stopped dead in his tracks. “I’m just trying to help-“ “I know damn well what your sort of help is!”, I spat. “I don’t want it, and I don’t need it!” I gazed at Gino, and at Axeman Black One, both of them standing on the center dining tier. I gazed down to the dining tier below, where all the bound and destitute Unionists stood, dejected and demoralized. I gazed up to the highest dining tier – to the icy throne where Marston sat, slumped over, but smiling... staring down at me with gentle ruby red eyes. I looked at the outer ring of the dining hall, where Sister Julia leaned on the greataxe I had given her... an alert, attentive expression on her face. I gazed at Thief – at the man I thought unstoppable – at his unconscious, unmoving body. And most importantly, I gazed at Lucas, and I gazed at Sabarene. The first was sound asleep on the side, the

second was only beginning to wake up. “No one has died yet.”, I whispered, my words quiet. “DID YOU ALL HEAR ME?!”, I screamed out, to everyone standing in the tiered dining hall, to the prisoners on the below, to Marston above, to the soldiers on the outer ring. “NO ONE IN THIS ROOM HAS DIED YET!” My greataxe gripped tightly in my hands, I moved forward. “There’s been EVERY OPPORTUNITY for death – for destruction! But despite that... despite the wonton cruelty, the sadism, the madness... NO ONE HERE HAS DIED YET!” I shook my head, as I stood in the dead center of a barricaded dining hall underneath a burning city. “It’s a miracle. It’s a god given, sun given, whatever the heck given miracle. If we’re wise – if everyone in this room is smart... we’ll accept the miracle.” I cleared my throat and glared at nearly everyone. “YOU’LL ACCEPT IT! YOU’LL THROW YOUR SWORDS TO THE GROUND, AND ACCEPT IT! Because if you don’t accept this peace... if you don’t accept this kind of conclusion... where no one suffers, where the chance to live a little while longer is freely offered to all, equally... I’LL SLAUGHTER EVERY LAST ONE OF YOU!”, I screamed, saliva spewing out of my mouth. “AND I AIN’T JOKING! I AIN’T BLUFFING! I’LL KILL ANYONE WHO TRIES TO PULL SOME BULLSHIT! NO COUPS, NO BETRAYALS, NO TRICKS! THE ONE WHO WILL JUDGE LIFE AND DEATH IN THIS ROOM WILL BE ME, AND ME ALONE!” “**What... what gives you that authority?!**”, Sabarene stammered, distressed. “I do, for one!”, Sister Julia hissed, leaping from the outer ring of the dining hall, and setting up shop by my left “T-THEN I AS WELL, GENERAL!”, Brother Gino awkwardly quipped, shuffling to my right. “I- I place my faith in the Unionist!” “I- I don’t care!”, I stammered, embarrassed at the sacred siblings taking up shop by my sides. “I don’t need you two idiots to get what I want!” “Need has nothing to

do with this, doggy~”, Sister Julia teased. I blushed a bit, but kept the scowl plastered on my face. “I- I am everything, and I am nothing.”, I stuttered, my hands on my greataxe. “I can do anything... and believe anything... *if* it means I get what I want.” I raised my greataxe straight at the General’s neck. “And you are going to give me what I want, *General*. You are going to capitulate to all my demands, and more!” **“Well what the fuck DO you want?!”** , Sabarene screamed, pulling at her hair. **“You critique and critique and critique – you expose the bad in everyone, and everything! But- but you never... you never make it clear what you want! YOU PLAY YOUR CARDS SO FUCKING CLOSE TO YOUR CHEST THAT I DON’T EVEN KNOW WHAT THE FUCK YOU ARE, AXEMAN RED FOUR! ARE YOU A NIHILIST? A HEDONIST? A SADIST, A MASOCHIST, A WANTON, A ZOMBIE? WHAT DO YOU WANT?! WHAT THE FUCK DO YOU WANT?! DO YOU WANT PROGRESS? DO YOU WANT JUSTICE? DO YOU WANT MERCY, COMPASSION, KINDNESS? WHAT DO YOU WAAAAAANT?!”** “You, Sabarene.”, I answered, my mind as clear as crystal. “I want you.” The General of the Holy Collective deflated like a freshly popped balloon. “W- what?”, she stammered, all malice drained from her face. “I want you.”, I repeated, my one eye greedily devouring every last feature of the beautiful, idiotic, cruel, and wonderful moron in front of me. “I want you, and I want Lucas, too.” All fear and anger faded from the face of the gorgeous girl in the frayed white habit, replaced by a cutting and complete confusion. “But- but I just- I just tried to make you kill-“ “I don’t *care*.”, I said, my scowl twisting into a smile. “I don’t care what you did, I don’t care what you’ve done, and I don’t care about what you will go on to do. The realms, the modules, the Continent... good, evil... progress... I don’t care about any of that. I never did. All I

want... all I *need*... are the two of you.” “You’ve... you’ve only known me for about thirty five rising periods, Miss Axeman Red Four.”, Sabarene stammered, rubbing her arm. “And- and you’ve only known the *true* me for-“ “I’ve known you long enough.”, I harped, the feeling in my chest heavy. “And the true you isn’t this, Sabarene.”, I stated, stepping forward. “You can call the time we spent together a lie, but you can’t say some of the real you didn’t slip out. You’re good at lying, General... but you’re not that good. Not even I’m that good.” “No! No, you’re- you’re wrong, Unionist!”, Sabarene yelled, her words growing weaker and weaker. “I- I’m in control! I- I’m always in control! Everything I ever did with you was just a ploy to-to manipulate you!” “Was the time you drank too much and puked all over me just a ploy?”, I asked, smiling broadly. “When I grabbed your breast by mistake in the Lifemetal Clinic... was your flushed face truly a mask?” “That... that was-“ “And the way you ogled my body... the way your eyes stuck to my muscles like they were candy... was that part of your evil plan to manipulate me?” “Th- there’s no way of you knowing it wasn’t, imbecile!”, Sabarene shrieked, looking less like a war hungry General, and more like a flustered high-schooler. “It doesn’t matter, Sabarene!”, I cried, happier than I had ever been. “If you’re a liar... then you’re a lovely liar! If all the time we spent together was fake, then that fakeness was far sweeter to me than any real moments could ever be!” Sabarene’s eyes began welling up with tears. “Stop!”, she cried, wiping her wet face off with her dirty, damaged sleeve. “This- this is exactly what Brounde tried, and- and I had him flayed! I had him killed, I had him-“ “I’m not Brother Brounde, Sabarene.”, I declared, stepping closer, and closer to my goal, to what I had fought and struggled for. “I’m far worse! I’m not compassionate like he was, and I’m not willing to compromise. I don’t care *how* I do it... I will *make* you mine.” I

turned to the rest of the Fiatists, and gave them a gentle wave with my greataxe. “Your soldiers... I will crush them. Your schemes... I will overcome them. I will tear down every last barrier you place in front of me... I will bash them to bits.” “But- but it’s just- it’s not like that, Miss Axeman Red Four!”, Sabarene protested, pointlessly. “My actions, the cruelty, the barbaric slaughter- I – I need to continue, because the future Mister Thief showed me- if I don’t do what I need to, then that future will be lost-“ “I do not care about the future.” I said, my face flushing, my mind screaming at me to stop saying everything I was saying, to wait for a better moment, to word them in a more poignant fashion. “I do not care about Mister Thief, or Phil, or Mikhayla.” I tapped my head. “I care about my friends, but even they... even they are disposable. There are only two people in the universe who I refuse to relinquish my grasp on, and you, Sabarene, are unfortunate enough to be one of them.” “You... you truly don’t care?”, Sabarene gasped, aghast. “The hundreds of thousands of people on the Continent... you- you truly don’t care what becomes of them?” “Not unless you care.”, I said, smiling. “Not unless you or Lucas cares.” “T-then... then if I asked you to- to stay by my side, would you?”, Sabarene asked, her lips quivering. “If I continued to do awful, awful things... would you seriously be ok with that? Would- would you seriously not hate me... even if I kept proving myself to be worthy of hate?” I stopped moving forward, the words hitting me harder than I thought they would. “I-“... I slowly stammered, the words oozing out of my mouth slowly. “I would-“ “Because I’m not going to stop, Miss Axeman Red Four.”, Sabarene said, her voice straining. “Conquering this city is just the beginning. After I force Provesh into the Collective, I will do away with the distinction between Unionists, and Unassigned. I will force people to accept each other, and I will do so through cruel,

violent means. The crosses you saw in Fremdos will pale in comparison to the horrors I shall inflict to this city, to any part of the Continent which refuses to conform. Millions will suffer, and thousands will die.” Sabarene clutched her chest with her black lifemetal hand. “I will do all that and more, because I **need** to do all that and more.” Her eyes softened. “So do... do you seriously think you could stomach me, knowing all that? Seeing me be cruel and callous rising period after rising period after rising period... can you in all honesty say you’d be alright with that?” I paused. “Of course not, imbecile.”, I snorted, the answer obvious. “I’m not going to let you order anyone else’s death, not now, nor ever.” “But- but you *just said you didn’t care about what I did!*”, Sabarene groaned, the caked blood on her slightly cut face looking less and less intimidating and more and more silly. “That’s right, I don’t care.”, I yawned, speaking slowly as my mind rapidly constructed a new line of nonsense. “All this genocide for the greater good crap bores me, I don’t care about it. I ain’t going to stick around if that’s all you spend your time doing, Sister. I mean, shucks, that’s just boring. A life spent sitting in a throne and punishing people? I mean, maybe if yer a sadistic hardass like Kundare that’d be fun, but it ain’t a life I’d be a fan of.” I paused, and blinked at the white haired girl. “And don’t tell me a fun loving drunkard like you finds this bureaucratic execution crap fun.” “No, no of course I don’t find any of this fun!”, Sabarene squeaked, waving her hands. “It- it disgusts me, to be honest! But- but Mister Thief showed me the future, and if I don’t do this, then all will be-“ “Wait, you *don’t* want to be a big bad conqueror?”, I interrupted, making myself sound confused. I gazed around at the metal limbed soldiers on the outer ring of the tiered dining hall. “Then why did ya go ahead with all this militarization city invasion nonsense?” “Because- because I have to!”, Sabarene sputtered, her

ragged breath fogging up the ice air. “The Continent needs to be united, and I- and I’m the only one who can unite it! If- if I don’t, then everything will be lost! I’ve- seen the future and-” I narrowed my eye. **“Say that again!”**, I barked, dropping the act. “W- what?”, the white haired girl blurt, clearly conf- **“SAY WHAT YOU JUST SAID AGAIN!”**, I snarled, spewing my words out into the tiered dining hall, into the room that looked like a demented crystal wedding cake. **“REPEAT WHAT YOU JUST SAID, WORD FOR WORD!”** “I’ve seen the future, and-“ **“LIKE I CARE ABOUT THAT! NO, IDIOT, WHAT YOU SAID BEFORE!”** “Um...- I said that the Continent needs to be united-“ **“AND WHO DOES IT NEED TO BE UNITED BY?”**, I roared, not daring ease the pressure. **“ME, YOU IMBECILE!”**, Sabarene screamed, matching my energy. **“IT NEEDS TO BE UNITED BY ME, AND ME ALONE!”** I let my anger disappear, and sucked in some of the icy cold air. “If that’s true, Sister...”, I began to say, softly, slowly. “Then why did you just try to make me kill you?” The enraged woman in the torn black habit jerked a bit. **“That- that’s because I thought I could-“** “Make me stronger? No it isn’t.”, I said, reducing my voice to a cold monotone. “You’ve been rambling on and on about Thief, and how he showed you the future or whatever. Now... I don’t particularly care about Thief, or the future, or the stupid realm he comes from, but I gather that he used a module of some sort, a module which showed what would happen if you united the Continent.”, I postulated, talking completely out of my ass. I was tempted to go on, but I didn’t. I just gazed at Sabarene, who cringed. “Y-yes.”, she admitted. “Mister Thief he- he did show me the future. He showed me many futures, some where I united the Continent, and some where I didn’t, and-“ “I don’t care.”, I said, trying to sound unplussed as my heart beat a million times a minute. I tossed the purple tophat on my

head up in the air and caught it. “The issue, my dear Saby, is that’s a giant contradiction here. There’s a huge contradiction between your words, and your actions.” **“There- there IS no contradiction, Unionist!”**, Sabarene yelled, straining to regain control. **“Everything I have done has been for the good of the-“** “LIAR!”, I shouted, in my own voice, in my own words. “YOU’RE LYING, SABARENE! YOU’RE LYING TO YOURSELF, YOU’RE LYING TO YOUR SOLDIERS, AND MOST IMPORTANTLY, YOU’RE LYING TO ME!” The girl in the torn black habit recoiled, and covered her hood over her eyes, like a scolded child. “I’m... I’m not lying.”, she whispered, nervous. I yanked down the top of her hood, and pulled her close in towards me. “If you’re not lying, then why did you command me to kill you?” “I... I thought you were a more fit candidate to unite the Continent than I was.”, Sabarene breathed out, not meeting my eye. “I thought you could do all I could do, and more.” I tilted up the idiotic imbecile’s chin with two lifemetal fingers. “Did Mister Thief tell you that, Miss General?”, I whispered, my words cold as my lifemetal hand. “Did his module show me uniting the Continent in your stead?” “N-no.”, Sabarene croaked, her voice breaking. “That- that’s a conclusion I came to independent of... of anything.” I stroked her cheek with my real hand, my warm hand. “So when all is said and done... you *don’t* believe what Thief showed you.”, I cooed, oozing my words into the General’s ears, infecting her brain with ideas that weren’t necessarily hers. “You *don’t* believe in the future you so desperately cling to, you *don’t* actually believe that you need to unite the Continent. You just *think* you do.” “No...”, Sabarene whispered, horrified. “No, no, I- I do believe what I saw, it’s just-“ “It’s just what, Sister?”, I asked, speaking steadily. “If you believe in what you saw, then you never would have commanded me to kill you. The mere fact that you did



command me reveals the truth-“ IT’S NOT THE TRUTH!”, Sabarene sobbed, her body convulsing. “I- I KNOW WHAT THE TRUTH IS, AND- AND TRUTH BE TOLD, YOU- YOU REALLY AREN’T ANYTHING SPECIAL, MISS AXEMAN RED FOUR! YOU COULD NO MORE LEAD THE CONTINENT THAN DESNION COULD GO ON A DIET!” She wiped her face with her habit’s black torn sleeve. “But- but even so- even so I just- I just can’t stomach the idea of me living, and- and you dying! If- if it were the other way around, if I could convince you to do what I had to, then- then maybe-“

“Maybe you could have your cake and eat it too?”, I finished for her, softly. “Maybe you could accomplish your goal of uniting the Continent, and not have to have that pesky thing called guilt weighing you down?” “...Yes.”, Sabarene answered, her voice muted.

“I... I was prepared to discard you and Mister Lucas from the beginning, Miss Axeman Red Four. I... I thought I was strong enough to just dispose of both of you when your utility had ceased.” She nodded her head, as tears began falling from her ruby red eyes.

“But I was *wrong*. I- I wasn’t strong enough.” She glared at Sister Julia, her eyes full of fire. “When I saw your spinal cord shattered by Desnion’s dogs... when I saw Mister Lucas get cut up by that halfwit Kundare, I- I felt weak. Powerless.” Her chin still cupped firmly in my hand, Sabarene tried nodding her head. “My mind and my body are not in accord, Miss Axeman Red Four. My mind knows that I have to unite the Continent at all costs, but- but every other fiber of my body screams at me to forget about that. To- to just go back to bumbling around with you and Mister Lucas, to go back to talking about nonsense for the sake of nonsense.” Her shoulders shook, and she started sobbing some more. “But I just can’t *do* that! Not when the lives of so many hang in the balance... not when the stakes are as high as they are! I... I can’t afford to be human! I

can't view things in the short term! If I do, then... then everything will be lost! Both in this realm, and others!" I shook my head, and smiled. "Again with the realms, huh?" "They- they exist, Miss Axeman Red Four!", Sabarene protested. "Other worlds, outside of ours! They- they exist, and what happens in them affects what happens here! Mister Lucas and Mister Thief, they-" "Are from a realm called Chicago, or something, right?", I guessed. "From what I've seen of it, it ain't terribly impressive." "But it *is* impressive, Miss Axeman Red Four!", Sabarene shouted, raising her voice. "In Mister Lucas's realm, there are things you wouldn't be able to believe! There's fresh, clean water available in virtually every home, most people are literate, and- and-" "And they got big rolley magic boxes called cars, right?", I finished, smiling. The girl in the frayed black habit froze up. "How... how the fuck did you know that?", she gasped, amazed. I tapped the purple tophat on top of my head, and smiled. "Dreams of a past life where I was a stage magician or something, I dunno the specifics." The General of the Holy Collective blinked at me. "Um... what?" "Don't worry about it, it don't mean much.", I said, wagging my finger. "We don't live in Thief and Ruckus's world. As a matter of fact, they live in ours." "N-NO!", the scared girl in the torn habit cried, spit spewing out of her mouth as she ranted. "No, I can't just worry about our world, Miss Axeman Red Four! Our world, and Mister Lucas's world, they're connected to each other! And because they're connected, I need to unite the Continent, I need to make technology more advanced, I need to bring about social change, I need to raise the standard of living- I need to harden my heart- I need TO-MPH!" Before the white haired psycho could continue to rant and rave, before any more semi-reasoned sentiments of the ends justifying the means could spew from her dried, cracked lips, I shut her up. I shut her up by plugging

her lips with mine. “MPH! FHNSND! GHHM!”, Sabarene protested, pounding on my white metal chestpiece with her lithe little arms. But I didn’t stop. Even though the inside of her mouth tasted like cheap ale, even though I had no idea if I was licking her tongue or the dangly thing that hung in the back of her mouth, I kept my lips firmly pressed against hers. “Mnngh! Gnnnnh! Ghhm...” The red eyed idiot in the torn black habit let out a few more half-baked protests, but then, her shoulders shuddering, fell into the kiss. Sabarene pressed her black and white palms against my cheeks, as she rubbed her tongue against mine. I felt hot, I felt cold. I felt embarrassed, I felt dignified. I felt humiliated, I felt liberated. Above all else, I *felt*. It- it all seemed so strange to me. I had always knew there was something missing, don’t get me wrong. Working at a warehouse made me realize right quick that I had forgotten something along the way. But what I thought was missing from my life was stuff like metal, or respect ... maybe even a roof that didn’t leak. And- and while that stuff definitely had its perks, especially the non-leaking roof thing, they just- well at least at the moment – seemed so *stupid*. There had to be twenty or so soldiers looking at me, along with Brother Christopher, my surrogate father, and Sister Julia... but I didn’t care. They didn’t *matter*. What might happen to me later didn’t matter. All that mattered was the stupid gruesome git I had accidentally, irrevocably, fallen madly in love with. Perhaps a little too early, I pulled my lips off of Sabarene’s. “I, uh...”, I stammered, my mind a hot mess. “I guess I’m the degenerate now, huh?” The white haired girl gazed up at me with shimmering red eyes. “You’re the most degenerate woman I know, Axeman Red Four.”, she whispered, then buried her head in her hands. “GAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!”, she screamed, mortified. “I’M SUCH A FUCK UP! SAVING YOU? SAVING THE CONTINENT? BULLSHIT! I’M JUST

AN EGOMANICAL MORON WHO'D RATHER SACK A CITY THAN ADMIT SHE HAS A CRUSH!" She nodded her head, sadly. 'If only I had been honest about my feelings from the start... then none of this would have ever happened!" "Yeah, about that...", I muttered, keeping my arms around her waist. "We're probably gonna want ta leave sooner rather than later. There's a ton of folks outside who ain't too happy about the whole armed invasion thing." "No, Miss Axeman Red Four.", Sabarene said, gently pushing my arms off of her. "After all I've done, I can't just walk away from here. I'll order my soldiers to surrender, and personally accept whatever justice the Unionists decide to-MPH!" She shut up, suddenly, as I plugged her lips with mine once more. "No, idiot.", I hissed, sucking in a trail of ale flavored saliva. "You're not going to surrender, because if you surrender you'll be killed. I didn't come all the way here to watch you die." Sabarene's face went red, but her body stiffened. "But I don't deserve to-MPH!" Her entire body spasmed, as I kissed her a third time. "*Deserve* has nothing to do with any of this.", I huffed out, regaining my grip on her waist. "Yeah, you're half part idiot, half part evil, I ain't gonna deny that. In a just world, you'd be paraded through the streets and hung." My vision went blurry all of a sudden. "But it ain't a just world!", I croaked, miserable. "Babies get left out on the street, and idiots are made ta kill each other just cause others idiots above them say so! Unassigned try to better themselves and end up with a slit throat fer their troubles, and half-naked heroes die unsung and unloved, their corpses lying in sewer filth!" I swallowed, then stared into Sabarene's gentle red eyes. "I won't allow you to protest anymore." I whispered, into her perfectly round ears. "You're leaving here with me and Lucas, and that's final." The white haired girl just nodded her head, sadly. "I'm sorry, Miss Axeman Red Four. But even if you can

forgive me, I just can't forgive myself." She pressed her metal index finger against her throat. "Thank you.", she said, somberly. "For everything." My eye opened wide, as I realized what was about to happen. "SABARENE, DON'T!", I shrieked, as the top digit of Sabarene's metal index finger detached from the rest of her hand. But rather than spring off and pierce through her throat, the spring-loaded digit just kind of... oozed off of her. "O-oh, it... it jammed.", Sabarene stuttered, as the detachable part of her finger lightly tickled her chin. "I guess I should have oiled it.", she said, sheepishly. "Fuck it.", I grunted, then jabbed her in the stomach with the prongs of Lucas's tazer. "G-GAH!", the girl in the black habit screamed, as her muscles turned ta jelly. I dropped the tazer onto the ground, then turned to Sister Julia. "Can I borrow a knife?", I quickly inquired. "Are you going to kill her, doggy?", the black haired girl asked, hopefully. I glared at her. "I- I was just asking!", Sister Julia blurted, then reached into her habit and tossed me a sharp looking dagger. I wrapped my fingers around the dagger's handle, then turned to the boy with orange hair. "I don't reckon you have any adhesive on ya, huh?" "Not on me, no.", Brother Gino responded, flatly. "It don't matter none.", I grumbled, as Sabarene writhed on the ice like an electrified fish outta water. I brought the dagger up to my neck, and, clenching my teeth, coarsely cut through the black leather collar wrapped around it. I pulled the collar off of my sweaty neck, and kneeled down ta the girl I had tazored, and grabbed her spring loaded lifemetal hand. "Back on yer feet.", I groaned, as I pulled her up. Her legs still jello, the red eyed moron flopped onto my right pauldron. "What awe you dwoing?", Sabarene babbled, her tongue swollen. I didn't respond. Instead, I wrapped both ends of the black leather collar around her neck, and tied them together. I yanked at it a bunch to make sure the knot was tight enough, then,

satisfied, pushed the stunned girl back onto her feet. She took a moment or two to gather her bearings, then pressed her fingers against the collar wrapped around her throat and gazed at me, confused. "You're my slave now.", I said, flatly. "I'm your... slave?", Sabarene repeated, still quite confused. "Yeah, you're my slave, lackey, Volunteer, whatever.", I droned on, bored. "I just said it, there's no need to repeat it." Sabarene blinked. "No, I heard you right, it's just, um... why?" "Well, you wanted to be punished, so this is yer punishment.", I explained, calmly. "You're my slave now." I paused, then shrugged my shoulders. "And Blondie's too, I guess." Sabarene raised an eyebrow. "Why Mister Lucas?" "Cause he has one of them "consciences" you're so crazy about.", I snorted. "I sure as shoot can't teach ya how to be a good person, but I reckon he might be able to." The white haired girl glanced down uneasily at the collar wrapped around her neck. "...And you really think this is alright?", she whispered, her voice shaking. "For me to just leave with you and Mister Lucas, after all I've done... do you really think that's alright? Even if I wear this collar, is it really alright?" I gazed at the scared looking girl with the knotted collar around her neck, and smiled, gently. "OF COURSE IT AIN'T ALRIGHT!", I shrieked, my body shaking. "YOU AND ME DON'T DESERVE TO BE HAPPY – WE DESERVE TO BE NAILED UP ONNA CROSS! WE'RE BOTH LYING, SELFISH SCUMBAGS THAT ACTIVELY MAKE THE WORLD A MUCH WORSE PLACE TO BE! IT WOULD'VE BEEN BETTER IF WE WERE NEVER BORN!" "That's not true, girl...", Axeman Black One slowly breathed out. "IT IS TRUE, DAD!", I shouted, my throat aching as I screamed at the old man. "HECK, YOU AIN'T EVEN REALLY MY DAD! YER JUST SOME FELLA THAT HAD THE DECENCY TO PICK ME UP OFF THE STREETS WHEN MY WHORE OF A MOTHER ABANDONED ME, AND I

REPAID YER KINDNESS BY BEING A GIANT BITCH!” I shook my head, as tears streamed down my face. “If I say that it’s alright for me to be with you, or with anyone, it’s because I am LYING, Sister. I’m lying like I always do.” I sniffled. “But... but maybe that ain’t so bad.”, I hiccupped, staring straight at Sabarene. “Maybe if I lie to you, and tell ya that it’s ok fer us to just go off together, and maybe if I fib and say you and I ain’t bad people, that we’re capable of change, then maybe... maybe we’ll both believe that lie.” I wiped some snot off of my nose, and took in a deep breath. “And finally, maybe... maybe if we keep lying, to ourselves and to each other, there’ll come a time where we’ve lied so much, and lied so well, that one morning we’ll wake up and find that our lies ain’t all that different from the truth.” I extended out my hand. “So... so what do ya say? Do you feel like lying with me? If... if only fer just a little bit?” I nervously looked up at Sabarene, hopeful. The girl with the ruby red eyes nodded her head and sighed, but grabbed my hand and smiled anyways. “I’ll always lie with you, Miss Axeman Red Four.”, she chuckled, pressing her palm against mine. A frown spread across her face. “But, um, you weren’t actually serious about the whole slave thing, were you?” “Not- not really!”, I sputtered, flailing my hands. “That was more of a thing I did so ya wouldn’t try ta give yerself the finger again!” I jerked my head to the side, flustered. “And, uh, actually... fer us Unionists, strapping a collar on someone don’t- it don’t mean what it means for you Fiatists.”, I mumbled, quickly. “Oh, is that so?” Sabarene asked, sounding amused. “Y-yeah, uh- see, when we Unionists give someone a collar, it means we want them ta be our Collaborator!”, I frantically explained, almost slipping on the ice in the process. “Now Collaborators are, well- Collaborators are two Unionists who like each other a whole bunch and are fixing ta make kids, and-“ “I know what a

Collaborator is, Miss Axeman Red Four~”, Sabarene sang, sweetly. “R-right!”, I stammered, a bit unnerved by the Ex-General’s suddenly warm demeanor. “So, uh, as you know, Collaborators usually ain’t degenerates like us, due ta that whole needing to be able ta make kids thing, but giving away a collar is, uh- it’s very important asa romantic gesture!” The white haired girl with the black strip of leather around her neck narrowed her eyes at me. “Collaborators don’t give collars to each at all, do they, Miss Axeman Red Four?” “N-no, they don’t.”, I admitted, hanging my head. “You’re talking out of your ass right now, aren’t you, Miss Axeman Red Four?” “Yes, I am.”, I said, flatly. “But only because- MPH!” This time, Sabarene shut *me* up. “It’s alright.”, she cooed, stroking my forehead as she pulled her lips off mine. “After all I’ve done to you, I don’t think I deserve to be your Collaborator. Not yet, anyways.” “You... ain’t gonna try ta kill yourself again, are ya?”, I asked, fearfully. A sadistic looking smile spread across Sabarene’s face. “Not unless you want me to, *Master*.”, she whispered, rubbing her fingers against the black leather collar tied loosely around her neck. I cringed, then sighed, deciding not to push my luck any further. “Sure, sure, I’m your master.”, I breathed out, smiling in spite of myself. “Laugh it up now, cause the moment we get outta here I’m gonna make you wipe every last bit of dirt off my armor.” “The only thing she’ll wipe off that misshapen clunk of metal is your *blood*, Unionist.” My ears twitched as I jerked my head up at the cold sounding voice. Standing in the outer ring of the tiered dining hall, right by the stairs that led up to the main hall of the Caravan Depot, was- “B-brother Castelblanco!”, Sabarene gasped, shocked. “What- what are you doing here?” “I originally came here to assist you, *General*.”, the boyish looking man with dark hair and metal limbs hissed, simmering with rage. “I thought that the Unionist might try



to catch you off guard with one of her tricks, so I pilfered a crossbow off one of my fallen Brothers and headed down here to try and relieve you.” He lifted up a busted but functional looking crossbow, then lowered it in disgust. “I expected to see you struggling, General.”, he whispered, sounding hurt. “I expected to see you fighting against this lowborn charlatan, or better still, to see you put her in her place.” Brother Castelblanco closed his eyes and winced. “Instead I see you submitting yourself like a mangy dog!”, he cried. “And not just you, but Brother Gino too! What madness has come over you, General? What would possess you to debase yourself like this?!” Sabarene rose to her feet. “I’m not debasing myself, Brother Castelblanco.”, she said, wiping a bit of my snot off her chin. “I’m surrendering. We’ve lost.” “How have we lost?”, Brother Castelblanco gasped, his face frozen with shock. “Your guards in here seem fine. Forty or so of the soldiers stationed in the main hall above have died, but what are a few dozen lives in comparison to the horde assembled outside? Has a storm washed away the troops you ordered to invade from the harbor? Because even if they perished, our numbers are still by and large superior to-” “It’s... it’s not about the numbers.”, Sabarene said, softly. “I... I did some calculations in my head, and came to the conclusion that it would be in the Collective’s best interest to... to pull out of Provesh.” “Did your calculations contain a coefficient of horseshit, General?”, Castelblanco growled. “Because I’ve already lost a lot of good men and women in this invasion. They died giving their lives for you- for the Collective!” “Nevertheless, we’re surrendering.”, Brother Gino said, solemnly. “The General has chosen to stop fighting, so we must respect her decision and-“ “Bullshit!”, Castelblanco cursed, furious. “Invoke the chain of command all you want, Brother Gino, it doesn’t matter! Blood has already been shed

this rising period, and I will not allow the sacrifice of the Plebian branch to be in vain!”

He glared around the tiered dining hall, at all the metal limbed soldiers standing on the three icy levels of the makeshift inner sanctum, and *yelled*. “THOSE WHO STILL WISH TO FIGHT- no... THOSE WHO STILL WISH TO *WIN*, COME WITH ME! WE DON'T NEED A GENERAL TO DO WHAT IS RIGHT!” Perhaps not so surprisingly, damn near everyone in the room raised their short swords and roared with approval. Brother Castelblanco gazed around the inner sanctum and smiled, his body lifted and his spirit emboldened by the support of those around him. “**EXCELLENT!**”, he shouted, his words containing a horrifyingly familiar harshness. “**All is not lost! We shall utilize our superior numbers, and purge this city of its Unionist taint!**” The dark haired man’s eyes glimmered sadistically, as he glared down at me. “**We shall begin with you, Axeman Red Fo-UGH!**” Brother Castelblanco stopped in the middle of his rant, and fell face first onto the icy floor of the outer ring, an arrow embedded in the back of his black habit’s hood. His body jerked a bit as three more arrows whooshed down the stairs behind him, and pierced into the back of his skull, neck, and torso respectively.

Everyone in the tiered dining hall fell silent. Two more arrows shot into the dark haired man’s corpse before the sound of steps echoed from the stairwell out into the circular hall. My body tensed up as the steps grew closer, and closer, and closer. Meekly, with little fanfare, Bowman Red One stepped out of the stairwell, his quiver almost completely empty, his red armband perfectly clean. “Oh thank god.”, I sighed, relieved. Sister Kundare and thirty white habited soldiers stepped out from behind him. “Aw, shit!”, I cursed. The parade didn’t stop there, unfortunately. Sister Kundare and her soldiers were followed down the stairs by Blue, the nameless purple haired girl, five



impact, the somewhat portly Supreme Sibling tripped over Brother Christopher's left foot, and fell down the stairs, face first. His right leg tangled around Sister Julia's left ankle, causing her to lose her balance too. Brother Christopher's eyes opened wide as the two of them tumbled down past him. "JULES!" the white haired boy shouted, then, with a look of grim determination on his face, dove straight into the dogpile. The three corrupt Fiatists tumbled down fifteen steps or so, then crashed at the bottom of the stairs, right by Sister Kundare's feet. Dazed, with Sister Julia sprawled out on his back and Brother Christopher face planted against his ankles, Desnion managed to raise up his head. "...Still beats that bordello in Merchenze.", he wheezed, with a pained smile. "You two cats should have just stayed in Merchenze!", Sister Julia cried, her arms shaking. "I didn't come to this Unionist Dive just to drag you two along with me!" "Did you expect us to just stay put?", Brother Christopher mumbled, his face still buried against Desnion's ankles. He jerked his head upward and glared at Sister Julia, his eyes simmering. "Did you really think our liege and I would just sit idly by? Did you expect us to bathe in the suns, while that villainous cur held you in her twisted metal clutches?" Sister Julia winced. "Chris, I didn't mean it like that, it's just-" "Know this, Sister Julia.", the white haired boy said, his words harsh and firm even as blood dripped down from a cut on his forehead. "There is not a single location on the Continent Desnion and I would not travel to, if it meant saving your life." The black haired girl blushed a bit, but turned her head down towards the bottom step. "But there's no need for you two to be here. I- I was on my way back to you cats, anyways." Desnion placed his hand on the top of Sister Julia's unhooded head. "Call us impatient, then.", he said, with a gentle smile. "Alright.", Sister Julia said, wiping her eyes. A nervous smile spread

across her lips, as she tried to regain her composure. “Y-you two sure are lucky that someone as cool and smooth as me is still willing to hang around. Dropping everything and running halfway across the Continent just to save a girl is... just about the most ungroovy thing a cat can do!” The black haired girl burst into tears, and wrapped her arms tightly around the necks of the men in the monochrome robes. “I missed you both so much!”, she sobbed, tears flowing freely down her cheeks. She sniffled a bit, then raised an eyebrow. “What happened to your shoulder, Dez?” “A young man nicked me with a lance when we touched down in the harbor.”, Desnion explained, sighing. “He must have thought I was one of Sabarene’s underlings.” “O-oh. Did a Unionist cut you too, Chris?”, Sister Julia asked, nervously. “You’re bleeding.” “I’m bleeding?”, the white haired boy blurted, blood still dripping from the gash on his forehead. “Oh dear, you are.”, Desnion muttered, biting his lower lip. “I’ll tell you what, how about the three of us head up to the main hall? I have some cloth and champagne on my person, we can use that to tend to your wounds.” “Great thinking, my liege!” Brother Christopher shouted, then frowned. “Wait, you brought champagne with you?” “Of course he did, Chris.”, Sister Julia yawned, with a sleepy-looking smile. “Dez is the type of dude who brings the class to the clash.” Brother Christopher paused for a moment, then shrugged his shoulders. “WELL SAID, MY NOBLE COMPATRIOT!”, he shouted, his words bouncing off the walls of the now-crowded inner sanctum. “WE SHALL MAKE HASTE FOR THE ENTRANCE HALL AT ONCE!” The white haired boy grabbed Sister Julia by the waist, and began sprinting up the stairs, his eyes narrowed confidently. “Don’t run too quickly, Brother Christopher! At least try to pay attention to your surroundings, Sister Julia!”, Desnion cried, limping up the stairs after them. He stopped short of the final step, and

turned towards the blonde haired woman in white, his face grim. "I leave the rest to you, General Kundare." The Supreme Sibling remained still for a few moments more, then stepped up and out of sight. "*General Kundare?*", Gino repeated, confused. "Why would the Supreme Sibling call her-" The orange haired boy stopped mid-sentence, as he put together the plain and the simple. "Oh." "ON BEHALF OF THE HOLY COLLECTIVE AND SUPREME SIBLING DESNION, AND UNDER THE ABSOLUTE AUTHORITY OF THE ORDER OF FIAT, I ORDER EVERY SOLDIER PRESENT TO STAND DOWN!", the blonde haired woman on the outer ring bellowed, glaring at the metal limbed Fiatists that had backed Brother Castelblanco before. "ANY FURTHER ATTEMPTS AT REBELLION, MUTINY, OR INSURGENCY WILL BE CRUSHED INSTANTEOUSLY!" "B-but Sister Kundare!", a silver haired man stationed on the bottom level of the tiered dining hall cried. "Brother Castelblanco was right – we have shed our blood this rising period! For us to simply give up now, and surrender-" "Would be the right thing to do.", Kundare finished, coldly. "It would also be the wise thing to do, if you don't wish to die in a land where no one will remember you." "But Sister Kundare-" "My title is GENERAL Kundare!", the woman in the white habit declared, her voice low. "And I am NOT ordering you to surrender. I'm ordering you to stand down." "Like there's even a difference!", the silver haired man spat. "You're asking us to stop fighting – even though that's the only reason we traveled to this Unionist trash heap in the first place!" "Yes, and I see you bare many battle scars, Brother.", Kundare noted, sarcastically. "It must have been tough, standing beside Sabarene while the majority of your Siblings actually engaged in armed combat." The Silver haired man clenched both of his lifemetal hands shut. "I'll show you precisely what I'm capable of, you city-dwelling hack!" "You'll do

nothing of the sort, boy!", Blue shouted, slamming his greataxe into the ice. "Gripe about it all you want, your life is in our hands now!" The Silver haired man glanced up at Blue, and the crossbow wielding Unassigned near him. "A- a Unionist?!", the metal limbed soldier sputtered, going cross-eyed as he looked up at Blue. "Don't tell me you've taken up the General's pet obsession, Kundare!" "Of course I haven't, idiot.", Kundare growled. "The Axeman and the others are here only as observers." "Observers?!", the silver haired man repeated, frustrated. "Observers of what?!" Sister Kundare glared directly at me with cold green eyes. "Observers of Provesh's formal induction into the Holy Collective.", she declared, her voice bold and deep. Whatever murmurings and other ambient noise there might have been upon her arrival died out instantly. "Wait... seriously?", Brother Gino blurted. "All the Unionists just... surrendered?" "Yes. The Unionists have agreed to surrender, along with the city's Unassigned.", Sister Kundare responded, then stared down at Sabarene, her face expressionless. "Most of your soldiers were not nearly so wise." "I.. see.", the white haired girl breathed out, quietly. Blue hoisted his greataxe up onto his shoulder. The blade was dull, dented, and bloody. "Your soldiers didn't die well, girl.", he growled, as the purple haired girl without a name shivered by his side. "Even before General Kundare showed up, they fought screaming like infants. I almost wish this purple haired lass besides me didn't convince the Unassigned to lend us their aid, they would have put up much more of a fight." The man with the bushy blue beard turned his attention to me, and smiled. "But look at you, Red!", he laughed. "By the looks of it, you were about to defeat this genocidal git on your own! I almost feel bad for surrendering!" "There is no shame in defeat.", Kundare stated, curtly. "You Union-... no, you *Proveshians* fought Sabarene's troops with

strength and honor. Attempting to contend with my soldiers as well would have been reckless.” “Bah, whatever.”, Blue snorted. “Just remember your end of the bargain, General.” “I intend to.”, Kundare said, darkly. The blonde woman suddenly shivered a bit, then stared down at me. “Axeman Red Four.”, she stated, her cold voice quaking slightly. “I have much to discuss with you, but before we speak, I would ask you what became of my husband.” Without saying a word, I pointed up at the icy throne above me. Kundare’s knees buckled, as her eyes met the ruby red orbs of the black haired boy chained to the highest level of the tiered dining hall. “I see.”, she stated, emotionlessly. The blonde haired woman seemed to stumble a bit, stepping further and further back on the outer ring, to the point where it almost looked like she was about to head up the stairs backwards. But right before she stepped passed Lucas’s unconscious body, she *ran*. Sister Kundare *ran* straight ahead, sprinting with an incredible speed towards the ledge of the tiered dining hall. She didn’t stop when she came to the ledge, neither. She *leapt*. Sister Kundare leapt off the edge of the outer ring, her legs dangling as she tried to clear the gap between the middle level Sabarene, Gino, and I stood on, and the outer ring. But before she was even halfway through her arc, Kundare reached inside the left sleeve of her habit, and flung what seemed to be a thread of pure light at one of the dining hall’s rafters. The beam of light wrapped itself around the rafter, pulling Kundare out of the gap, and propelling her up towards the highest layer of the dining hall. Kundare let go of the beam of light at the apex of her swing, and landed, feet first, on top of the icy throne where Sabarene had sat. Not pausing to catch her breath, Kundare ripped a shortsword out from beneath her white habit, and smashed the ice around the end of Marston’s metal chains to bits. His legs wobbly, his body bruised, the black



haired boy nevertheless managed to stand up on his feet. "You've saved me once again, my love.", he breathed, tears flowing freely from his ruby red eyes. He reached his hand towards Kundare, but lost his balance and fell. The woman in the white habit caught him almost instantly. "I should have arrived sooner.", Kundare said, sounding horrified as she rested Marston's head against her right shoulder. "Had I arrived any later, you would have been-" "Nonsense.", the black haired boy wheezed. "You made the right choice. The lives of those in the city matter far more than the health of an imbecile like me." A pained smile spread across Kundare's face. "Nevertheless, I wish I could have seen you sooner." She gently laid Marston down on what was left of the icy throne, and stepped forward to the ledge of the highest layer, less than five feet above me. Her metal whip still swinging from the rafter, Sister-, no, *General* Kundare looked out upon everyone gathered in the three leveled dining hall, and covered her heart with her fist. "This is MORE than just THE END!", she shouted, her words digging into every ear. "This is also THE BEGINNING! It is the end of General Sabarene's reign, the end of metal currency, and the end of the Independent Kingdoms, but it is also the beginning of something new! For better or for worse, the Continent is now united! Unionist, Fiatist, Layfolk, and Unassigned alike now have the opportunity to grow closer, to work together!" The new General clenched her teeth shut, and shuddered. "By no means should we celebrate what occurred on this rising period.", she whispered. "Innocent blood has been shed, and countless lives have been lost... some needlessly. BUT NOT ALL!", Kundare shouted, her voice full of vim and vigor. "The lives lost here... the lives lost in Fremdos... they needn't have ALL been lost in vain! The Collective will absorb this city, but it shall NOT destroy it! We shall NOT treat the defeated Unionists here like

we did to those in Fremdos! We of the Collective will PROVE that we can learn from the past... by administering justice fairly, and equally!" "Is that so?", Blue called up, honing in on Kundare's promise like a hawk. "Then tell me, General, what do you intend to do to this city?" "Before anything, I intend to rebuild it!", Kundare bellowed. "Supreme Sibling Desnion has vowed to fund any and all Proveshian Architects and Laborers who wish to rebuild their city! If the reconstruction efforts still prove lacking, then the Collective shall provide its own laborers!" "But what happens when ya finish fixing everything?", I cut in, sensing the direction Blue was trying ta go in. "Calvary or not, it bugs me that you're referring ta yer team-up with Blue as the Unionists surrendering." "I am only being honest.", Kundare responded, not phased in the slightest. "As of this moment Provesh belongs to the Collective. Make no mistake, this invasion was as much to stomp out the last of the Independent Kingdoms as it was to stop Sabarene." "Well ain't you a regular Dudley Doo-Right.", I spat. "Should I get my neck fitted fer my new slave collar now, or should I wait until after ya put up the crosses?" "You needn't bother doing either.", Kundare called down to me. "There shall be no more crucifixions, and the Volunteer program will be abolished, both here and elsewhere." "And what about them quotas and standards?", I asked, keeping my voice firm. "Are Unionists gonna havta wait behind the Unassigned and Collective Folk once you set up them fancy health clinics?" Kundare glared down at me. "Enough with the hick act.", she hissed. "Speak to me in your real voice, Axeman Red Four." I froze up fer a bit, then shrugged my shoulders. "I don't have a real voice, *General* Kundare.", I sighed, only half glancing at the blonde haired woman above me. "This ostentatious tone is just as authentically me as the usual colloquialisms which emerge from my mouth." I licked my

lips. "But I'll be verbose with my inquiry if I must: will the double standards that prevail in Fremdos exist here as well?" "Yes.", Kundare answered, bluntly. "Collective citizens won't be placed before Unionists, and economic disparity shall be taken into account, but the Unassigned will be prioritized. They shall receive preferential treatment in regards to education, labor, and employment opportunities." "What about the law?", I asked, raising my voice so Blue could hear me. "Will the punishment for stealing be different depending on if someone is disabled or not? Will the conclusion of the court change depending on the criminal's upbringing? Will a bigot like me be thrown in jail just for saying something inappropriate?" Kundare gazed at Brother Castelblanco's arrow riddled corpse, and nodded her head. "After all that has transpired this rising period, I think a liberal application of leniency will be warranted, towards all things.", she said, quietly. "You can think what you will, General.", I responded, unmoved. "Ultimately, the future of this city depends upon your ability to balance the interests of its citizens with the values of your Collective. If you make any one group feel worthless, then they will work against you, regardless of right or wrong." "Nevertheless, I will do what is right.", General Kundare responded, then raised her fist into the air. "And as soon as some semblance of order is established, I shall have the crosses in this city and Fremdos torn down, and turned into sawdust!" "Leave them up!", a mousey-sounding voice squeaked. I quickly glanced at Sabarene, but her lips were sealed shut. "Leave the crosses up!", the purple haired girl next to Blue repeated, her sapphire blue eyes shining. "Why should they be kept up?", Kundare questioned, caught slightly off guard. "They're symbols of fear... of oppression!" "They're the graves of my friends and family.", the Unassigned girl choked out, her voice straining. "Your Collective took their legacies,

their names, and their lives away from them. The crosses are all they... all / have left.”

“Then I shall have them made into stakes.”, the blonde woman in the white habit responded, seeming to flinch a bit at the Nameless girl’s words. “The lives of the fallen ought to be remembered, but to leave such an awful display up as is would remind people of-“ “The *truth*.”, the purple haired girl hissed, her fists suddenly clenched. “The crosses in Fremdos would remind people of the truth! Your Collective slaughtered thousands! Your General had men, women, and children nailed up on a cross! If the Unionists must remember all the evil they’ve committed towards those without names, then you must remember the evil you’ve committed towards the Unionists! The crosses are symbols of fear and oppression?”, the nameless girl repeated, her voice cracking.

“Only if you let them be!” The nameless girl lowered her shoulders and stared up at Kundare, her bright blue eyes wet with tears. The blonde haired woman stood firmly on the icy ledge of the top layer, her arms pressed firmly to her side. “Your feelings are noted.”, Kundare responded, after a long silence. “For now, the crosses in Provesh and Fremdos will remain where they stand. The crosses in this city’s harbor shall be removed, of course, and construction projects here and in Fremdos shall still be given priority over their preservation.” “A-alright, good.”, the purple haired girl huffed out, looking a little relieved. She wiped some sweat off her forehead and smiled down at Sabarene. “So now you’re going to kill that bitch, right?” Without changing her facial expression, Kundare leapt down from the top level of the tiered dining hall, landing in the center of the middle level near me, Gino, and Sabarene. “The Unionists didn’t surrender unconditionally.”, the woman in the white habit explained to the girl in the black. “I had to agree to one stipulation.” “I see.”, Sabarene said, not sounding too

surprised. "Were they specific about the, um, method?" "No.", the woman in the white habit answered, standing still. "All they asked me for was proof that the deed was done." Kundare cleared her throat, and blinked, her eyes looking neither harsh nor soft as she stared into Sabarene's. "...It will need to be done sooner rather than later.", she added, beneath her breath. "The heck are you yakking about, Kundare?", I growled, wrapping my hands tightly around my greataxe. A brief look of regret flashed across Kundare's face, quickly replaced by a steeled sternness. "Sabarene needs to die.", she said, plainly. "The Unionists surrendered on that condition." I glanced up at Blue. "Aye, it's true.", my big bearded friend confirmed, his voice firm. "That girl spilled Unionist-" he paused, briefly, catching a glimpse of the Unassigned soliders across from him. "-no, *Proveshian* blood. And I ain't going to let her crimes go unanswered." "Nor will I.", the blonde haired woman in the white habit stated, her usual malice and loathing still absent from her words. "My husband spared Sabarene in the past, due to his kind heart and his hatred of conflict. For his sake, and the sake of my daughter, I will not be nearly so nice." "Well, tough!", I spat, stepping in front of Sabarene, my greataxe raised. "I got here first. Her life is mine ta take!" "Then take it.", Kundare whispered, not even flinching as an icy breeze blew through the chamber and formed ripples on her white habit. "Go ahead, take Sabarene's life. I don't care who kills her, or how." "That... that wasn't what I was saying.", I babbled, at a loss for words. Kundare glared at me, her stoicism finally cracking. "Well this is what *I'm* saying, Axeman Red Four: In the next few moments, Sabarene shall be executed, as punishment for her crimes, and also to give the Continent a fighting chance at peace. Kill her yourself, or stand aside!" I grimaced, unsure of what to do. The recovery module was tucked away under my chestpiece, so I

briefly considered using it to fight my way out of the chamber. But while the recovery module would more or less make me immortal, it wouldn't give me the strength to take on one hundred fighters at once. I would have to be quick, and cut a path. I winced. Blue and the Nameless Girl were standing right by the stairs, and near Lucas's unconscious body. If they got in the way, I would have to kill them, too. But that didn't matter. "I won't stand aside.", I growled, staring down the woman in the white habit. "I WILL NEVER STAND ASIDE!", I yelled, as I raised my greataxe up into the air, and rushed at Sister Kundare. I barely managed a step before I felt something explode in my back. "W-what?!", I spat, as I collapsed face first on the ice. At first I thought I was unable to move my arms and my legs. But that wasn't what had happen – my arms and legs were moving around plenty – they just weren't listening to my brain. I groaned, as I realized what had happened. The white haired girl with ruby red eyes crouched down besides me. "Sorry, Miss Axeman Red Four.", Sabarene said, Lucas's tazer sparking in her left hand. "You idiot!", I cried, my muscles turned to jello. "I could have taken her! I could have taken alla them!" "I know you could have.", Sabarene choked out, smiling. "You're the strongest person I know." "Then why the heck didya stop me!?", I spat, my greataxe lying far too far away from me. "Why didn't you let me kill her?!" "Because killing people is *wrong*.", Sabarene answered, half-laughing at her own words. She wrapped her arms around my neck. "And you don't want to do wrong.", she whispered, blowing into my ear. "You want to become a good person, remember? Or at the very least you *want to want to...*" "Not at if it means yer just gonna throw yer life away!", I cried. "If it means letting that whip wielding idiot kill you, then I don't even want to want to want to do the right thing!" "Well, I want you to want to.", Sabarene said, smiling

sadly. She stood up, and glared at the woman in the white habit. **“Enough toying with the Unionist, Kundare!”**, Sabarene cackled, baring her fangs. **“If you’re going to kill me, then kill me!”** “Very well.”, Kundare stated, raising up the shortsword she had used to cut Marston free. “Sister Sabarene, Sacred Sibling of the Order of Fiat, Commander of the Plebian Branch, and Former General of the Holy Collective. You have been found guilty of high treason towards the Collective, and of crimes against the Continent. As General of the Holy Collective- no, as General of the Holy *Continent*, I hereby sentence you to-“ “WAIT!”, Marston cried, peering down from the third level. “Kundare, you can’t do this!” The blonde haired woman winced. “Darling, I know she’s your sister, but-“ **“I am not asking you to stop for Sabarene’s sake!”**, the black haired boy bellowed, his ruby red eyes burning. **“You cannot do this while Axeman Red Four is present!”** “Well it isn’t by my choice that she’s here!”, Kundare argued, her stoic façade cracking. “I came here to put an end to the fighting, not to concern myself with the emotional well-being of a maladjusted Unionist!” Marston loosened his grip on the icy ledge above us. “I know that, darling.”, he said, softly. “It’s just that Axeman Red Four went through a lot of trouble for my sake.” A troubled look came across the Ex-Regent’s face. “And before you showed up, she... she actually convinced Sabarene to surrender.” Kundare raised an eyebrow. “...Really?”, she asked, her voice jumping up a few octaves. “Yes, really.”, Marston said, placing his hand over his heart. “I couldn’t believe it either. But despite meeting resistance at every turn, she pressed on, and convinced the Gener- my sister to give up.” “Well, that’s nice, but it- it doesn’t change anything, darling.”, Kundare said, sounding pained. “Sabarene still needs to die.” “I know that.”, the black haired boy breathed out, shuddering. “But you must have Axeman Red Four escorted away from

here. To make her watch would be... too cruel.” “Oi, what sort of nonsense are you spouting now, lad?”, Blue called out from the outer ring. “Red came here to kill that monster!” My old friend bit his bottom lip and looked down at me, not looking quite so confident. “...Right?”, he asked, hesitantly. I placed my hands against the ice, and pushed myself back onto my feet for the fourth time. “Right.”, I lied, everything a blur. “I... I came here to kill the General.”, I lied, my throat sore, my chest aching. “That’s why I fought my way out of Fremdos, stole one of her ships, and slaughtered everyone who got in my way.” I glared up at Marston, my vision blurry. “So I won’t leave. I won’t turn away, or close my eye.”, I choked out, trying to keep my composure. My arms shaking, I picked up my greataxe and held it in front of me with both hands. “I’ll... I’ll do it, Kundare.”, I promised, time itself seeming to slow. “I’ll execute Sabarene.” “No, you can’t!”, Marston hissed, horrified. “After all you went through, you can’t just-“ “Will you let me leave with her, then?!” I screamed, tears pouring from my eye and my socket. “Will you grant her a stay of execution? Will you put her in prison?” “...No.”, Marston said, sounding defeated. “It is not in my power to do any of that. But you still shouldn’t-“ “SHUT IT!”, I yelled, furious. “If you can’t help me, then don’t you dare say another word!” Marston tensed up, but he didn’t respond. I slammed my palms against my face. “GAAAAAAAH!”, I shrieked, everyone in the room seeming to blend together. “Well ain’t this just one big happy ending fer everyone involved?!” I shouted up at the outer ring, unable to control myself. “All you poor oppressed people get ta gang up and kill the mean nasty General that caused ya so much grief, what a turnabout!” I leaned on the handle of my greataxe, gasping fer breath. “But you... you ain’t any better.” I panted a bit, then jerked my head back up at the folks standing around the outer ring. “NONE OF



YOU ARE ANY BETTER!", I screamed. "You're all MURDERERS, HYPOCRITES, AND LIARS! None of you folks are ACTUALLY interested in making a better world... YER ALL JUST PRETENDING TA BE!" A sickening realization hit me, as I spat out my bile-filled words. "You're all just... pretending ta be.", I repeated, horrified. "You all... *want to... want to change.*" I buried my head in my hands, and sobbed, as the Unionists, Fiatists, and Unassigned above me remained silent. "Well I guess that's fine and all-" I hiccupped, "-but why the heck does your spirit of positivity gotta end here? If you're all feeling merciful, then why can't ya forgive just one more person?" I waited for an answer, for someone with station to agree with me, to say that Sabarene should be spared. The points of my ears didn't twitch in the slightest. "F-figures...", I moaned, feeling ill. I spun around, my greataxe shaking in my hands. "W-well, I- I won't let them mess it up!", I puked out, as I stepped towards Sabarene. "The future you wanted... the Continent you wanted.... I won't let these imbeciles ruin either of em!" I tried to clear my throat, as I took in as much of the white haired girl as I could with my wavering wet eye. "I won't... I promise you... I won't!", I swore, snot spraying outta my nose. "I'll spend the rest of my life making sure of it!" Sabarene stepped towards me and smiled, her hands placed gently against her waist. "I know you will.", she said, serenely. I picked my greataxe, and raised it above her head. "Oh, um, before I forget!", the girl with the black leather collar blurted, sounding slightly embarrassed. "If it wasn't obvious enough already, I love-

"GAAAH!", I screamed, slamming my eye shut as I crashed the awful black and white blade of my greataxe down on Sabarene's skull. My world became nothing but darkness, a sharp

crunching sound telling me all I didn't need to know. Unable to move my arms, unable to move my legs, I slowly began to open my eye. I had no idea what I wanted to see. If I had somehow missed, all it would mean was that I would have to strike again. If I had done a poor job, if I had only buried my blade partway into Sabarene's hooded head, then not only would I have to strike again, I would also have to bear witness to her pain and agony as I pulled the weapon out of her. But if I had done what I intended to do- if I had squashed Sabarene's skull like a melon... then she'd be dead. She would have died instantly, and she would have died painlessly, but she'd still be dead. So once again I screamed and once again I sobbed, like a toddler stubbing his toe for the first time, like an idiot who thought she was capable of losing everything, then realized too late she couldn't handle losing anything. But my tantrum was pointless; what was done was done. I opened my eye, and assessed the damage. My axe had struck true, the edge of its blade clearly cutting into the absolute center of Sabarene's skull. But it stopped short. The blade of my greataxe only buried itself about half an inch into her head, barely piercing her scalp. My stomach twisting itself, I quickly tried to yank the weapon out and swing it down again. But I couldn't. It wasn't that my grief and regret made it hard for me to do anything – I literally couldn't move my arms, or my legs, or- or much of anything, besides my eye. I could only look at Sabarene, her face frozen in an expression of complete and utter horror. Kundare stood behind her, also immobile. But it wasn't just them. Be it Marston on the upper layer, or those gathered around the outer ring, everyone in the tiered dining hall was still and stiff, frozen like statues. "Stop doing whatever it is yer doing, U.T.", I thought, miserable. "I already started my swing, you accelerating my brainwaves or whatever won't change where it lands." "I- I didn't do

anything, Master Admin!", the module in my mind cried out, speaking in its third androgynous sounding voice. "Accelerating your body is dangerous, I would have only done it if you asked me to!" Confusion overcame my grief. I attempted to look around the room some more, but I was still unable to move anything below my eye. I felt the points of my ears twitch, as what sounded like soft sounding steps echoed from behind me. Suddenly, Thief strolled in front of my frozen body, Lucas slung lazily over his shoulder. "That's quite enough of that.", the brown haired man in the skull mask muttered, casually plucking the blade of my greataxe out from Sabarene's skull. He looked at me with gentle eyes, then tapped my cheek with his index finger. "G-guh!", I groaned, suddenly able to move. "The heck are you doing here?!", I spat, not nearly as angry as I acted. Thief tilted his head at me, puzzled. "I was here the whole time, Fortuna. That orange haired man dropped me and Hoffman off by the stairs, remember?" I bit my bottom lip, the head of my greataxe buried harmlessly in the ice near Sabarene's body. "... I do remember that, yeah.", I said, shakily. "But I thought the two of you were knocked unconscious." "Knocked? Neither of us were *knocked* unconscious.", Thief seemed to laugh. "Hoffman just tired himself out a bit after going all Hellraiser on me." The brown haired man walked over towards Brother Gino, the Plebian branch Commander's metal legs seemingly stuck to the icy floor. "This orange haired man managed to hit Hoffman in the back just as he was falling asleep. I didn't want to be left out, so I allowed him to wack me around a bit, too." "You let Gino hit you?!", I blurted, amazed. "But he could have killed you!" "I can stop time.", the man who called himself Thief said, bluntly. "The only way a person could kill me would be if I let them." "Yeah, well you sure didn't seem this confident while you were fighting with

Lucas!", I blathered, still puzzled. Thief pulled his mask down, exposing his rather average looking mouth and jawline. "How people present themselves are not how they actually *are*, Axeman Red Four. You of all people would know that. As for my bout with Hoffman, well, I didn't want him to interfere with things, so I kept him distracted so you could do all the heroics." "The heck do you mean by heroics?", I stammered, feeling awkward even though most people in the room were frozen in time. "Isn't it obvious?", Thief snorted. "You convinced Sabarene to surrender! The girl was battier than Jonah Hill's character in the Wolf of Wallstreet, but you made her grow a conscience simply by coming to terms with your sexuality!" He paused for a moment. "Congrats on that, by the way. I know it must have been especially hard for you, considering you were raised in a Pre-Industrial society where the mere hint of alternative sexuality could result in public flogging or even dea-" "Oh shut up, I don't care.", I groaned, then narrowed my eye. "I suppose all that stuff you said about Sabarene needing to die to save Continent was a lie, then?" "From a certain point of view, Sabarene *did* just die.", Thief said, sounding solemn. I stared blankly at Thief, at a loss for words. "Nah, just kidding! I was lying through my teeth!", the brown haired man admitted, chuckling. "I wanted to give you a sense of urgency, so I put on a big angry show and made it seem like I was going to kill miss crazy here." He affectionately drummed his palms against the top of Sabarene's temporally displaced head. "In reality, this girl is the *last* person I would kill. She possesses the most utility out of anyone on the Continent." "I, uh... I like her too, but it ain't like Kundare's wrong about her." I mumbled, not really sure if time had stopped, or if I had finally had my long overdue mental breakdown. "Sabarene is pretty psychotic, and she really *did* do a whole lot of awful things. Plus she's incredibly,

unbelievably stupid.” “None of that stuff really matters.”, Thief said, shrugging his shoulder, then cringing as Lucas’s unconscious body fell off of him. “Where I’m from, awful, stupid, and crazy people change the course of history all the time. I’d almost argue that being crazy is a requirement.” “So being awful is alright, so long as ya change history?”, I asked, kneeling over to make sure Lucas was ok. “No, of course not.”, Thief spat, sounding offended. “It’s not enough to simply change history. You need to change history *correctly*.” “And you thought *Sabarene* was gonna be the one ta change history correctly?”, I asked, surprised. “Unless you were fixing ta solve the Continent’s over-population problem, I don’t see how she could have ever helped ya.” “Up until recently, she couldn’t have helped me.”, Thief said, looking troubled. “She was too cruel, too callous. It is better to be feared than loved, sure, but by crucifying those she defeated Sabarene adopted a mindset which insured she would be hated. And Absolute Authoritarians who are hated absolutely do not tend to last long, especially when they manage to inspire hate even in their own military.” I glanced at Kundare and her soldiers in the white habits. “Is that so.”, I said, drily. “Well, it *was* so.”, Thief responded, then suddenly looked a great deal more chipper. “But thanks to you there’s no longer any need to fret!” he said, encouragingly. “Thanks to you, the Continent will be united under a strong leader, and the past will fade into the past!” I opened my eye in shock. “Wait... wait are you saying that all of this was just one big scheme ta get everyone to unite against Sabarene?”, I blurted, everything coming together. “Merchant Black One, the Mournful Remnant, Nielente and Marston and Gino and Desnion, did you toy with alla them just ta engineer a situation where the Continent would unite under the threat of a bigger enemy?” “Nope!”, Thief laughed, disappearing and reappearing in

front of me in less than a second. “Everything I’ve done was to make Sabarene into the absolute authority of this realm!” The man in the skull mask narrowed his eyes, and snapped his fingers. The flow of time returned to normal. “FA-!” “GUH!”

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHH!” Panicked screams and pained shouts stabbed into my eardrums, as blood sprayed out of the bodies of everyone gathered around the outer ring. Kundare’s mouth opened wide in disbelief, as she saw each and every soldier of hers collapse onto the frost covered floor, dead. “What the-“ The woman in the white habit’s words were interrupted, as what looked like a round black ball bounced down onto the ice in front of her. In shock, Kundare leaned down to examine the object that had fallen from above her. It wasn’t a ball. “N- NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!” she shrieked, frantically scooping the sphere that wasn’t a sphere off the ice. “MARSTOOOOOOOOOOON!” I looked away, unable to stomach the sight any longer. Panicked, confused, disgusted, I quickly turned my attention to the section of the outer where Blue had been standing. The big bearded man lay motionless on his back, his eyes cloudy and dull as a pool of blood leaked out beneath him. The nameless purple haired girl lay next to him, deep cuts on her stomach and giant gashes along her legs rendering her unable to do anything besides breath in and out heavily. All the black habited soldiers that switched their allegiance to Brother Castelblanco lay still and broken, their black metal arms and legs torn out messily from their torsos.

Sabarene herself watched everything with a look of complete horror, her body quaking as her ruby red eyes turned to Brother Gino. The upper portions of the orange haired boy’s spikey black lifemetal armor had been ripped from his body, leaving deep puncture wounds in his chest and stomach. The old man that had raised me had fallen

on his back, horrified, but otherwise completely untouched. Lucas was fine as well, but he was still unconscious, still completely oblivious to the icy hellscape around him. I looked back to Kundare, who looked catatonic as she cradled Marston's head in her arms. Without any warning, Thief disappeared from right in front of me, and re-appeared behind the woman in the white habit. He pointed his silver revolver to the back of her head, and squeezed its trigger without even saying a word. Thief watched silently as the blonde woman in the white habit toppled over onto the ice, then snapped his fingers once more. Everything froze again, cept this time it didn't really matter that the folks in the outer ring were motionless. "I'm sorry you had to see that.", the man with spikey brown commented, not really looking all that sorry. Feeling like a statue, I tried moving my left hand around a bit. My five lifemetal fingers wiggled around just fine. My mobility gave me little comfort. "Why- why didya- just-" "Kill all those people?", Thief guessed. "Because I had to." "No you didn't!", I cried, shaking. "You didn't havta kill anyone!" A sheepish smile spread across the tanned man's face. "I kind of did, actually. Sister Kundare and her henchmen wanted Sabarene's head, remember?" "So what?!", I spat, still in shock. "You can freeze time, can't ya?! If you wanted ta save that git, then all ya had ta do was stop time and carry her out of here! Heck, I had a boat ready and waiting, you could have just taken her there!" "Why would I take Sabarene to a boat?", Thief asked me, puzzled. "So Ruckus and I could have smuggled her off the Continent with it!", I groaned, unable to get even the most obvious point across. "But I don't want Sabarene smuggled *off* the Continent.", the man in the skull mask responded, as he calmly stepped over Kundare's corpse. "I want her to remain here, so she can conquer Provesh and *unite* the Continent." "But Sister Kundare already did all of that!", I shouted,

my words feeling like spikes as I forced them out from my throat. "She conquered Provesh and she united the Continent! She mighta been underhanded about it, but she did it all the same, and she did it without having ta crucify anyone!" "And thanks to your efforts, Sabarene won't have to crucify anyone in Provesh either.", Thief said, gently. "Because you KILLED THEM ALL!", I blubbered, unable to believe I was crying fer Kundare of all people. "Don't exaggerate things.", the brown haired man warned me, irked. "I only killed those who posed a threat to Sabarene's safety, not a single soul more. The vast majority of Unionists and Unassigned in this city are fine, along with every Fiatist still capable of serving the right ruler." "How is Sabarene the right ruler?!", I screamed, frustration and anger overwhelming my fear. "You said it yerself, she's too cruel, she's too callous!" "No, I said Sabarene *was* too cruel.", Thief countered, wagging his finger at me. "Fortunately, you changed that. Now she's just cruel *enough*." "The heck is that supposed ta mean?!", I spat, the man in the skull mask's reasoning making absolutely no sense. "It means exactly what it sounds likes it means.", Thief yawned, sounding bored. "The ideal ruler of the Continent is Sabarene, because she's just cruel enough to merge Unionist culture, Collective culture, and Unassigned culture into one big homogenous melting pot. Kundare, on the other hand, would allow the various cultures to exist in some form or another. A Continent under Kundare would be united, but it would still be heterogeneous, and it would still be divided along lines of race, class, and culture." "So what?!", I spat. "There ain't nothing wrong with folks being different!" "Unless they kill each other over those differences, and invariably, they *do*.", Thief sighed. "It's like that Doctor Seuss shit, even if people looked exactly the same they'd still find a way to divide and slaughter each other." "Well that kinda puts a dent in



yer homogeneity theory, now don't it?", I growled, scowling at the time manipulating mass murderer. "Human nature puts a dent in a lot of things.", the brown haired man clucked. "People are cooperative, yet also competitive. Those at the bottom of a hierarchy seem to want nothing more than equality, then start sprouting rhetoric about hard work, merit, and natural order the second they rise up in the ranks. Enlightened people sometimes act cruel and boorish, and negativity exists even in the most saccharine of societies. Intelligent life everywhere is cruel, contradictory, and imperfect. That doesn't mean achieving some level of fairness and unity is impossible." "I know that.", I hissed. "Sister Kundare just proved that." "That legalistic dullard didn't do anything besides capitalize on a strenuous situation. She didn't plan for the Continent to be united, she just swooped in to steal Sabarene's thunder. But it doesn't matter.", Thief snorted, then smiled. "True unity doesn't come from lofty sounding speeches, or empty idealistic promises. True unity comes from common interests held together through strength of will. And strength of will is the one thing Sabarene will always possess. Once I return the flow of time back to normal, she'll break down and cry, for the loss of her brother, for the loss of her sister-in law, and for the loss of soldiers around her. She will weep for the dead Unionists and Unassigned alike, and she will be heartbroken by the mysterious disappearance of her two friends." Thief narrowed his amber eyes. "But she will move on. She will rally her troops, and take over this city. She will lead the Continent to a grand future, spending sleepless nights to insure the catastrophic loss of life was not in vain. And on the whole, people will be better for it. Literacy will rise, life expectancy shall soar. There will still be divisions and competition, but it will at least be competition that is constructive. This Realm shall be saved. Its salvation is the reward

you and I have bought, both with our labor and with these people's blood." "I didn't buy nothing..." I muttered, then jerked back in alarm. "Wait, the heck do you mean by disappearance of her two friends?!" "Isn't it obvious?", Thief asked me, slightly surprised. "If Sabarene is to lead the Continent, she can't have you and Hoffman around to bother her. You'd tempt her to live a normal life, and Hoffman would nag her every time she lifted her left pinky toe the wrong way. Plus she needs some sort of personal tragedy to inspire her, and what better tragedy than the disappearance of a loved one?" I immediately dove for my greataxe. I didn't hit the ground. "Jesus Christ, chill.", Thief groaned, as my entire body froze in midair. "I said disappearance of a loved one, not *death* of a loved one. After all I've put you through, do you really think I would actually kill you?" "Yes.", I somehow managed to say, barely able to move my mouth. The brown haired man rolled his eyes, and snapped his fingers. My stomach slammed down into the ice below me. "Well, I won't kill you. I'm no sadist.", Thief said, plucking up my greataxe from the ice and dropping it in front of Sabarene. "Maybe I'll find a corpse that kind of looks like you, dress it up in your armor, and mutilate it a bit so that the next thing Sabarene sees will seem very much like *your* corpse, but I won't kill you. You'll have to get on that boat of yours and sail off the Continent, but at least you won't have to die." "Aw, thanks.", I coughed, pushing myself up off the ice. "Jeez, don't act like such a drama queen.", Thief huffed, sounding annoyed. "I'm only sending you away because I have to. And trust me, you'll be fine wherever you end up sailing to. Your ability to adapt is why I chose you to go against Sabarene in the first place." "I don't care what you chose me for.", I growled, tightening my hand into a fist. "I didn't do any of this for you. I did it for me." "Great!", Thief said, cheerily. "I'm glad this was beneficial for

both of us.” “Yeah, it was.”, I said, letting my anger fade away. “You killing the folks at Merchant Black One’s banquet, you letting me get crippled, and even you messing with that white haired git’s mind was just fine, when I think about it.” The smile slowly faded away from Thief’s face. “What, did ya think I was differently abled or something?” I asked, flashing the brown haired man a grin of my own. “I know precisely the extent to which you manipulated me.” “I wasn’t exactly keeping it a secret.”, Thief said, harshening his amber eyes. “No, you were.”, I said, returning the tanned man’s glare. “By omission, you were. Not that I can blame you. You have some grand old future to bring about, and I’m just one pawn out of many. There was no reason to tell me stuff I didn’t need to know.” Thief didn’t say anything. “Well, now I know~”, I sang, then scowled. “And knowing is half the battle, now ain’t it, *Phil?*” “That name means nothing to me.”, the man with brown hair said, his voice low. “Your real name means *less* than nothing to me.”, I said, dryly. “So do the names Mykhaila, Hoffman, Fortuna, and Chicago, while we’re at it. Ideal futures, alternate dimensions, and those matter morphing modules; they’re all far too much of a headache, so I’m not going to bother with them anymore. I’m done trying to figure out memories I don’t really remember, and I’m not even going to attempt to understand the intergalactic planetary planetary intergalactic logic you’re operating on. From here on out, I’ll do what I want, without worrying if I’m right about it or not.” “You’ve come so far.”, Thief said, flatly. He stepped over Brother Gino’s frozen corpse, and began lifting the blonde haired boy up on his shoulders once more. “What do you think you’re doing?”, I asked, the moment the man in the skull mask laid his hands on the unconscious pseudo-sorcerer. “I’m taking Hoffman home.”, Thief responded, his voice muted. “He may mean nothing to you, but

he's still my friend." He snapped his fingers once again. I shivered, as a gust of icy wind rushed through my white platemail. I wasn't in the three layered dining hall anymore. I wasn't even in the Caravan Depot. By the semi-rotten wooden piers, and from the gentle sound of water rushing over ice, I knew myself to be standing in Provesh's dock district. Black habited bodies littered the piers, and the corpses of Unionists clustered around broken barricades. Various black metal ships were anchored haphazardly in the harbor, floating patiently near the docks. "The ship you used to get here is right behind you.", Thief announced, appearing out of thin air. "The men and women who stayed on the ship when you disembarked should still be present, along with a cycle's supply of food and water. If you sail the ship against the rising of the suns, you will eventually reach a small island, and past that island, another Continent. The civilization on this other Continent is different, but it isn't barbaric. Someone with your skills would live quite well there." I scowled at Thief, then glanced at the unconscious blonde haired boy still slung over his shoulders. The purple tophat was back on his head, and off of mine. "Well, of course / would live quite well there.", I yawned. "The ability ta smash people's skulls in has a ubiquitous kind of appeal. But what about Ruckus? Will a kind hearted con artist like him be able ta live well in this other Continent? Or will his magic tricks and tightassed nature cause the locals ta push us all inta a volcano?" Thief's unmasked face became a mask. "I thought Hoffman meant less than nothing to you." "He does, yeah.", I said, shaking my head as I stood near the docks, waves gently crashing against its broken bloody piers. "Lucas Hoffman means less than nothing to me." I looked Thief in the eyes, and smiled. "But Lucas *Gandulfadore El Melloi the Third* ain't all that bad." "They're the same person.", the brown haired man stated, bluntly. "No, they really ain't.",

I said, chipper. "Lucas Hoffman is a soft-spoken fella with bangs over his eye that I keep on seeing in my dreams, while Lucas Gandulfadore El Melloi the Third is an overly obnoxious idiot who always pesters me ta do what's right, even if it don't make a lick of sense ta do so. I'll take him over bangy dream-boy any day." "You won't take either.", Thief said, stiffly. "I already told you, I'm bringing Lucas back home." "Oh, izzat what he wants?", I asked, the half-rotten pier beneath me creaking slightly. "It's not what he wants.", Thief said, stepping onto the pier. "It's what he needs." "He needs ta return ta yer ruined realm?", I asked, skeptical. "Why, so he can breathe in all the ashes?" "So he can remember who he is, and where he came from.", Thief hissed, stomping his foot down on the pier. He glared at me with his amber eyes. "Hoffman needs to remember what he's supposed to be fighting for." "You mean, *who* he's supposed to be fighting for.", I countered, Thief's sudden insecurity jarring and obvious. "You ain't upset about what he's trying to do, you're upset because he's not fighting by your side." Fury flashed over Thief's face, but only for a moment. "Think of me what you will. I'm taking Hoffman home, and that's all there is to it." "That ain't all there is to it.", I growled, as a sudden wave crashed into the pier, and splashed the side of my face with ice cold seawater. "You think you're above judgment, just cause you can stop time and re-arrange people like figurines." "I won't be talked down to by a murderer.", Thief growled, glaring at me as well. "I ain't talking down to you.", I said, keeping my voice low. "I'm *describing* you, Thief. I know I'm little better than you. Heck, I might even be worse. But at least I put my life on the line when I fight fer what I want." I clenched my fist. "Kundare put her life on the line too. She may have been arrogant, she may have been a brute, but she didn't conquer the Continent simply by snapping her fingers. She risked her life to take

advantage of that white haired git's idiotic scheme, and her boldness won her a future where Unionists, Unassigned, and Collective folks could live together in relative peace. And you took all that away from her, in less than an instant." "You didn't seem this concerned about fair play when you poisoned the Supreme Sibling.", Thief countered, sounding deathly quiet. "When you commanded your name-sharers to cut their own throats, when you kicked the leader of the Mournful Remnant out of the water tower, and when you *murdered* that handmaiden, there was not a single notion of fair play present in your mind." "At least I was in moderate danger!", I shouted, unnerved. "I was underhanded, but I wasn't invincible! A shift in my voice, a slip on the snow, and I'd be dead as a doornail by now!" "But you're *not* dead as a doornail right now.", Thief growled. "You're alive because you did whatever you could to win. You've no right to look down upon me for using the modules, especially considering all the damage you've managed to do with just one. The only difference between your methods and mine is mine are more successful." I felt like screaming. There was just no way to break the brown haired man down, literally or psychologically. By acknowledging my complete lack of morals, Thief had shielded himself from any thing I could possibly say. He held absolute leverage over me through his ability to stop time. He was invincible. But he *knew* he was invincible, in the same way that Sabarene had known there was no way an idiot like Sister Kundare could ever pose a threat to her. "You're right.", I admitted, sticking my hand into my breast plate as I half-pretended to stew in my own anger and frustration. "I've no moral ground to stand above ya. But I don't *need* a moral highground to stand *against* ya. My love is justification enough!" I flashed Thief a fangy smile, as I stood defenseless at the end of the half-rotten pier. "I'll leave the Continent

alright, but I'm taking Lucas and Sabarene with me! And if you got a problem with that, then yer just gonna havta kill me!" Thief narrowed his amber eyes at me. "If you wish.", he said, then calmly snapped his fingers. The sound of the ceaselessly crashing, ceaselessly receding waves ceased. The pier I was standing on vanished, along with the black boats behind me. The smell of smoke and the stench of charred corpses disappeared immediately. The burning city in front of me, the smoggy sky above me, everything around me flashed out of existence, leaving nothing but a blank void behind. All I could see was white, and all I could feel was cold. Well, cold, and an incredible searing pain from my right hand. Which was lying right by my feet. "G-guh!", I tried to scream, but couldn't. It wasn't that I was paralyzed with fear, or that I was shocked at my right hand being sliced from my wrist. It wasn't that I was disoriented from what seemed to be instantaneous teleportation; my sudden movement from Provesh's docks to a blank expanse of ice and snow had nothing to do with my lack of ability to say anything. I couldn't use my vocal cords because I *didn't have* vocal cords. They had been slashed and scrambled, along with the rest of my throat. As my clavicle burned hot from the blood oozing down onto it, as my body froze up from the blood spilling out from my wrist, I caught a blurry glimpse of Thief. He stood two or twenty feet front of me, a red-stained knife clutched firmly in his right hand. I knew I didn't have much time, and I knew that what I was seeing could just as easily be a mirage as it would a man. But with no real other option besides bleed to death, I lunged towards Thief with my left lifemetal hand. Slowly, clumsily, my consciousness flicking on and off like a faulty light bulb, I somehow managed to get close to Thief. The brown haired man didn't even flinch as I trudged my thighs through the deep banks of snow to approach him. Dizzy, nauseous,

and in severe pain, I tried to slam my lifemetal hand - my only hand down onto the nape of Thief's neck. But there was no energy in my strike, no force behind my blow. The palm of my hand did little more than pat Thief on his shoulder. "Disgusting.", the man with the skull mask spat, stepping slightly to the side as I bled all over the snow in front of him. I lost my balance, and collapsed face first into the deep bank of snow. Blood continued to seep out of my throat, but it didn't feel painful no more. Nothing felt painful no more. I closed my eye and waited calmly for what was to come. The snow around my head didn't feel too bad. It was cold as heck, but had that pillowly kind of quality to it. The powdery ice compressed beneath the weight of my body didn't feel like a hard kind of pillow, or a soft kind of pillow. It was just firm enough, just fluffy enough. The coldness of the snow soothed my wrist, and cooled my slashed open throat. But just as it was starting to get comfortable, the icy powder beneath me collapsed. That was precisely what I was waiting for. I lunged my hand towards what had caused the snow beneath my head to fall – towards Thief's left ankle. And this time, there was power behind my strike. "What the-!", Thief blurted, jerking as my lifemetal fingers snaked around his ankle. He jerked his head down at me, completely aghast. "How are you still alive?!", he spat, his leg shaking in the snow. I raised up my *right* hand, and wagged my regenerated right index finger. "Now that...", I began to say, speaking through my freshly regrown throat, "is a-!" Not hesitating for even a moment, Thief drew his silver revolver, and shot me five times through the skull. I must have died. My brains must have been blown out backwards onto the snow behind me, my eye must have rolled into the back of my skull, but that didn't matter none. From my perspective, all that happened was that things went dark fer a bit. I regained my vision right quick, and the



painful pieces of lead were pushed out from my cranium like my brain was an ACME trampoline. “-Secret.”, I finished, smirking a bit as an ounce of blood rose up off the snow and passed through my lips. Thief dropped the knife in his right hand, and quickly snapped his fingers. Nothing happened. My lifemetal fingers still wrapped tightly around Thief’s ankle, I yanked his left leg up in the air. “W-what?!”, the brown haired man babbled, snapping his fingers a few more times as his back crashed deep into the snow. Keeping my grip on his ankle, I leapt to my feet, then kicked him in his flank with my right boot. “G-guh!” Thief grunted, in shock moreso than pain. I took a risk, and let go of his ankle. Before Thief could react, I leapt up and slammed my body onto his chest. My knees pressed firmly against the brown haired man’s stomach, I pinned both of his wrists to the snow. Thief just stared up at me in shock. “How are you still alive?” “Bitch, I’m fucking immortal.”, I spat, as my throat and recently reformed hand stopped bleeding backwards. Realization dawned across Thief’s sweaty, snow powdered face. “The recovery module...”, he groaned, weakly attempting to push me off his pinned down body. “I... thought you gave that to Hoffman.” “I let him borrow it fer a bit.”, I explained, putting a bit more weight down onto the tanned man’s body. “But I’d havta be some kinda moron to just give away a magical healing gem for good.” “It’s not a magic gem... it’s a module.”, Thief wheezed, panting as he corrected me. “Do ya think I care?”, I asked, keeping his wrists pinned firmly against the snow. “Of course you don’t care.”, Thief spat up at me. “You never have.” He shook his head and shivered. “But I’m careless too.”, Thief admitted, his back sinking further into the snow. “I froze time, but I didn’t even think to check you for a module.” “No, you didn’t.”, I said, curtly. “Now hand over yer modules and I’ll let ya live.” The spikey brown haired man smiled. “You’ll let me

live?”, he asked, teasingly. “Somehow I don’t think that’s going to happen.” “I ain’t a sadist, neither.”, I said, plainly. “I’ll only kill ya if you give me a reason to.” “I’ve already given you plenty of reasons.”, Thief huffed. “There’s no need to put off the inevitable. Go on, take your revenge.” “I *don’t care* about revenge!”, I cried out, frustrated. “I *don’t care* about what you’ve done, or why! All I *do care* about is getting back to that white haired git, and to Ruckus, too! If you let me do that, if you just let me live my life with the people I love, then I’ll let you go right now!” “What about the people I love?”, Thief hissed at me, his teeth tightly clenched. “What about Mykhaila, and Hoffman, and Father Tom?” I raised an eyebrow. “Who the heck is Father To-“ “What about Poison, and Breezy, and Agent Harigand?”, Thief continued, his whole body shaking. “Can I see them again?” “I don’t even know who you’re talking about.”, I said, calmly. “**My friends!**”, Thief shouted, his nostrils flared, his golden eyes glimmering. “**I’m talking about my friends!**” The tanned man’s body thrashed beneath me. “My friends!”, Thief repeated, spit flying offa his tongue as he rolled around in the snow. “My friends who fought beside me after all was lost! My friends who died to save what was left of their world – my home! My friends- MY FRIEN-GUH!” “Friends?”, I whispered, my black lifemetal knuckles pressed against Thief’s nose. “After all you’ve done, you don’t get to whine about friends.” A bitter smile spread across the brown haired man’s face. “I’m not whining.”, Thief grunted, a bit of blood trickling out of his nose. “I’m *explaining*.” “Explaining how yer a complete moron?”, I guessed. “**No.**”, Thief hissed, then flashed *me* his fangs. “I’m explaining why you won’t get your way this time, *Fortuna*.” “Just try and stop me.”, I growled, re-thinking my leniency. “I’m gonna reunite with those two idiots, and I’m gonna undo every single one of yer vast idiotic plans.” “*Try* and stop

you?”, Thief asked, sounding amused. “I don’t need to *try* anything, at this point.” “The heck do you mean by that?”, I asked, against my better judgment. “Look around you.”, Thief hissed, a smug smile plastered to his face. “You’re in the middle of a frozen wasteland.” “So?”, I asked, plainly. The brown haired man continued to smirk. “So you’re hundreds – no, *thousands* of miles away from Provesh, Axeman Red Four. The recovery module you stole from Mykhaila can heal you, but it can’t stop you from freezing. You will never return to Hoffman. You will never interfere with Sabarene. And you will never *undo* anything. I don’t need to *try* and stop you...”, the browned haired man chuckled, “because I already *have*. You’re going to freeze here, out in the wastes. It’ll be thousands of years before they dig out your frozen body – thousands of years after the Continent is united under a strong, efficient leader. You’ll be forgotten, and your mind will rot – just like Mykhaila’s ” “N-no!”, I screamed. “You’re lying!” “I’m not lying.”, Thief said, still grinning, still smiling. “Did you really think I wouldn’t account for the recovery module? I was the one who sent you after it in the first place, *retar-AH!*” “Did you account for that?”, I asked, my forehead aching a bit as I pulled it off of Thief’s. “You using violence is... hardly surprising...”, Thief painfully muttered, a bit of blood dripping down his skull. “That ain’t an answer.”, I hissed, keeping his wrists pinned against the snow. “You can see the future, right? That’s your justification for everything. Every life you take, every situation you manipulate, it’s always for the Continent’s *future*. That’s why you want Sabarene to conquer the Continent, and that’s why you sent me to Fremdos.” “...I’ve told you that much.”, Thief snorted, avoiding my eye. “You have, but I’ve never bought that excuse.”, I growled. “Not for a goshdarn minute.” “Then I applaud your skepticism.”, the brown haired man said, dryly. “I ain’t being skeptical.”, I lied. “Or

at least – I ain't skeptical about your knowledge of the future." "Then why are we fighting?", Thief asked, smiling gently. "If you believe what I say, then there's no reason to continue this kerfuffle. Let me go and the Continent will be saved." "I'm not that much of a moron.", I said, my shoulders shaking. "I believe you can see some of the future, not all of it. Otherwise, you wouldn't be trying to escape." "I never claimed to be omniscient.", Thief snarled, then softened his voice. "Only God and the J-man are omniscient, and I'm neither of them." "Then what are you?", I asked, as sincerely as I could. "If you're not God, and if you're not that other thing, then what are you?" "A dumb guido from Chicago.", Thief answered, without missing a beat. "So what drives a dumb guido from Chicago to cross realms and install a genocidal alcoholic as ruler?", I asked, shutting off my fears and worries. "What really drives you? An answer like the good of the universe is too darn vague." The tanned man turned his head to the side, burying his right cheek in the snow. "...There's no need for me to tell you that." "C'mon Phil, this is the one time I'm willing to hear you out.", I said, softly. "This is the one chance you have to win me over." "No, there's not...", the brown haired man said, his voice full of sorrow. "You never listen. No matter what I say, you never listen." "I'm listening now.", I whispered, my right palm cold and sweaty. "Tell me what you want. What you truly, actually want." The brown haired man moved his face further into the snow. I let go of his wrists and cupped his cheeks. "Please, answer me.", I urged, staring into his tear filled eyes. "I will not reach out to you like this again." "I want... my friends.", Thief weeped, breaking down completely. "I want my friends, and my family. I want to walk down the streets of the city where I was born. I want to finish getting my Bioengineering degree at my university. I want to live a life worth living." Thief blinked his tear-filled

eyes, and sniffled. "...That's all I've ever wanted." "And Sabarene uniting the Continent will grant you that?", I asked, as the brown haired boy's tears dripped across my fingers. "It might!", Thief sobbed, flakes of snow falling off the back of his head. "My realm, and your realm, and all the other realms... they're connected! They're all connected! A change in one causes a change in another!" "So you've said.", I remarked. "But what makes you so sure that uniting this Realm will save yours?" Thief fell silent. "Have you been acting on mere intuition?" "...No.", the brown haired boy said, slowly. "Not intuition." He moved his now free right hand towards the folds of his tunic. I swiftly grabbed his wrists. "Please, I'm not going to hurt you.", Thief pleaded, staring at me with desperate wet eyes. I loosened my grip on his right wrist, and allowed him to dig through his tunic. He shakily pulled out a pink colored pearl, the size of a strawberry. "Take this...", the brown haired boy sobbed, choking up. "Take this, and you'll understand. Please... take this... take this and you'll... know." "That looks like bubblegum.", I said, staring skeptically at the round pink circle. "It's not.", Thief said, solemnly. "What I am holding is the modules to surpass all other modules... the link between all the Realms, all the worlds. This device is nothing less than the sum of every thought ever conjured, every word ever spoken. You've must have wondered time and time again how I know what I know, why I fight for a future that has yet to arrive." The brown haired boy looked up at me, his body shivering. "Take this module, and you'll know." "Know what?", I whispered. "The truth.", Thief breathed out. "The truth... about everything." I let go of Thief's wrist, and slowly reached my fingers out towards the smooth surface of the small pink colored pearl. "HAAAAAAAUH!", Thief yelled, as he slammed his fist straight into the bottom of my exposed chin. I staggered backwards,

losing my grip on the brown haired man entirely. I jammed my right hand into the snow, right as Thief began to snap his fingers. I couldn't move my body in the slightest, and Thief, a full five paces away from me, was still as could be. A gust of wind blew through my dented white armor, softly pushing the fabric of Thief's white linen tunic against his torso. "What the...", Thief muttered, as the center of his tunic turned a bright red. He pressed his hand against his chest, then looked at me in disbelief. "How did you..."

Without saying a word, I turned over my right hand. Clutched firmly in the center of my palm was the grip of a silver revolver. A slight smirk spread across the brown haired boy's face. "...Fair enough.", he coughed, then collapsed, face first, into the snow. I plucked the pink pearl from Thief's palm, then popped it into my mouth. It was bubblegum. I spat the strawberry flavored module out onto the slush. "Where's the real one?", I asked, as I stood over the tanned man's body. I received no response. The snow beneath Thief's chest turned pink, then red, then maroon. I took in a deep breath, then pushed his body over. His white tunic had been stained crimson, and his tan skin had turned pale. His chest moved up, and it moved down, but the movement didn't seem to serve much purpose beyond pushing blood out from his considerably sized chest wound. I looked at the revolver in my hand, then squinted at the smoke drifting out from the barrel. Thief hadn't been wearing any armor of any kind, but it still seemed strange to me that a single shot from something so small could form a hole so large. I glanced back at the silver revolver in my hand. Lucas, Swordarm Red One, Thief... they had all made use of a silver revolver. The silver revolver was their trump card, their most trusted weapon, what they choose to use when all else failed. A magician, a masked man, and a madwoman, tied together through time and space by three silver

revolvers. Or by *one* silver revolver, if what Lucas had said was true. I tossed the dumb little thing into the snow. It was of no use to me anymore. I looked back down at Thief. His chest had stopped moving, and his golden eyes had glazed over. His gloved fingers did not so much as twitch, and the skull mask wrapped around his neck blew around harmlessly in the wind. He was dead. Without a doubt, he was dead. I stomped his throat to be sure. Clad in snow covered armor, my body cold and sore, I got down on my knees and began searching Thief's corpse. I wasn't looking for anything in particular. All I wanted to find on him was something I could use. A module, a matchbook, a magical talking duck, I didn't care what I found or why. All that mattered was finding something that would get me back to Provesh, something that could prevent my body from freezing out in the wastes. In the end, I found a knife, a locket, and a letter. The knife was well hidden inside of Thief's left sleeve. It was a simple looking thing, not as sharp or ornate as Marston's, but sharp enough. There were no stitches near the sleeve, so I imagine Thief had the knife placed in the sleeve as his outfit was being tailored. The letter and the locket weren't well hidden. Thief had tucked them under his tunic, right next to his chest. The letter was beige and dry, save for some sticky red spots. The locket was a simple small metal square, dangling from Thief's neck by a small metal chain. I removed both the locket and the letter from his corpse, and kept searching. I didn't find anything else. No more weapons, no more trinkets, not even a single module. The brown haired man had stopped time with his fingers, he had levitated in midair and slaughtered countless people without breaking a sweat, but all he had on his person was a knife, a locket, and a letter. Not feeling terribly optimistic, I grabbed the blood speckled letter, and tore it open. "Oh... right...", I grumbled, staring

at symbols I couldn't understand. I focused my attention on the locket. It was locked shut and iced over. I forced it open with my black metal fingers. The locket contained nothing more than a small piece of cardboard, scribbled from top to bottom with words I couldn't read. "I can read that for you, if you want.", a soft sounding voice echoed. "Sabarene?!", I gasped, jerking my head over my shoulder. I saw nothing save snow and ice. "No, sorry.", the disembodied voice responded. "It's me, Master Admin. The Universal Translator." I blinked my eyelids in confusion, then sighed. "Oh, right...", I thought, having no need to actually vocalize my words. "I forgot you were here, U.T." "That's my fault, Master Admin.", the module responded, sending its messages straight into my brain. "I silenced myself back in the inner sanctum, so I wouldn't affect any of your decisions." A small smile spread across my lips. "Didn't want me to kill that white haired git and her soldiers, huh?" "Actually... it's the other way around.", U.T. meeped, nervously. "But that doesn't really matter right now, Master Admin." I looked down at Thief, then out towards the endlessly gray horizon. "No, I reckon it don't.", I huffed, exhausted. I pocketed the locket and stuffed Thief's final letter beneath my breastplate. "He wasn't lying when he said I was gonna freeze out here, was he?", I asked, seeing nothing in the distance but snow. "I'm rather afraid he wasn't, Master Admin.", U.T. said, shifting to its stuffy male voice. "The recovery module maintains homeostasis within its user's body. It can repair the most grievous of wounds, and is capable of reconstructing the user from a single living cell. But the recovery module can only alter that which constitutes part of the user's body. It is incapable of affecting inorganic matter like ice, or snow. Were you to be encased in either, the recovery module would not be able to free you." "So I'm gonna freeze, huh?", I sighed, sitting cross legged on the snow. "If



you stay out here in the open, and if the temperature and weather remain the same... then yes. Yes, you will freeze.”, U.T. confirmed, speaking plainly and honestly. I closed my eye and attempted to forget the snow drenched landscape around me. “Is there anything I can do to *not* freeze?”, I asked, trying to keep calm. “Your only option is to try and find shelter, Master Admin.”, the module said, speaking in its androgynous sounding voice. “A cave, or a forest. Something that can guard you from the wind and insulate your body.” I opened my eye and looked around the Wastes once more. “Where the heck am I supposed to find a cave?”, I asked, flat white stretches of snow spreading out in every direction. “...I don’t know, Master Admin!”, the module choked out. “But you can’t just stand here doing nothing! You need to at least try!” “I’m trying to try.”, I thought, as the wind blew through the holes in my armor. “Don’t try, do!”, the module shouted, its words vibrating with ripples of anxiety. “Search! Search for something, anything! Don’t lose to some moron in a mask! Just pick a direction and go, while you still can!” “Which way should I walk?”, I asked, my mind clear. “Any way!”, U.T. screamed. “Just pick a direction and go, imbecile!” I turned my back to Thief’s body, loosened up my shoulders, and smiled. “You just said that.”, I chuckled, as I began trudging through the snow. “There’s no need to repeat it.” I walked quite a distance through the Frozen Wastes, and I walked for quite awhile. I kept track of my steps at first, but lost count at around six thousand and one. It was like I was walking on a mile wide, snow-covered treadmill. no matter how fast I walked– the sight in front of me remained the same. The Frozen Wastes had no landmarks, no notable features save the pink stained patch of snow where Thief and I had fought. They say Greenland is named Greenland cause it’s actually white, and that Iceland is named Iceland cause

it's actually flush with fauna, but The Frozen Wastes were exactly as their name implied. The Frozen Wastes was just an impossibly massive expanse of snow, slush, and ice. There were no mountains, no hills. There was just flat banks of snow, spread across half the Continent. I saw no hints of towns or cities in its horizon, no signs of a shore or a lake in the corner of my eye. All I saw was white, and gray, ice, and snow. Finally, after walking for god knows how long, I collapsed. "M-master Admin!", U.T. cried, its words rattling around in my head. "Master Admin, are you alright?" "I'm fine.", I thought, as my back began to sink into the snow. "I just need to rest for a spell." "That's the one thing you can't do, Master Admin!", the voice in my head shouted. "If you go to sleep here, you won't wake up!" I clenched my teeth, then pushed myself back onto my feet. "Oh, thank god!", the artificial intelligence exclaimed, fluctuating wildly between its various voices. "...Are we any closer to shelter?", I asked, my legs shivering as I jerked them out of the snow. "I don't know, Master Admin.", U.T. answered, softly. "How far away are we from Provesh?", I asked, as I resumed my endless march. "I don't know, Master Admin.", U.T. answered, softly. "If ya don't know... then make something up.", I instructed the module. "... Alright, Master Admin.", the module seemed to sigh. "You're very close.", U.T. said, sounding much brighter, much warmer. "Keep walking, and I'm sure you'll make it back to Provesh in no time!" "Oh, is that so?", I spat, smiling. "How long do ya think it'll take me?" "Not very long at all, Master Admin.", U.T. spoke, softly. "Ruckus and the git'll be thrilled.", I muttered, my steps through the snow beginning to slow. "I could, um... I could speak in their voices, if you like.", U.T. whispered, sounding just like Sabarene. "If it would help motivate you, I can speak like this, or maybe I could replicate Admin Lucas's-" "Don't.", I thought, firmly. "Speak in your own voice." "... I

don't *have* a voice, Master Admin!", the module moaned. "I wasn't programmed to have an identity, I was programmed to serve people, to allow for communication between those who couldn't communicate. And if I can serve you right now by using the voices of your actual friends, then I—" "You *are* my friend.", I loudly thought, as my right boot sank into a three foot patch of snow. "You're annoying as all heck, but you're my friend." "How can I be your friend if you find me annoying?", U.T. sniffled, speaking in its androgynous sounding voice. "There's different... typesa friends.", I babbled, speaking out loud to the voice in my head. "Some friends ya hang out with to have fun, some friends you're friends with because things made it that way, and some friends... some friends are the annoying insufferable sort, that always pester ya to do the right thing, even when doing the right thing is a giant pain. Yer that kinda friend, U.T. You'll never let me get away with anything, and you'll never put on a goddamn shirt." "...A shirt?", U.T. asked, confused. "Forget about it.", I mumbled, and for a brief moment I didn't see an endless swath of ice and snow in front of me, but rather, a half-naked girl with green hair, and glazed over eyes. I had lost it, obviously. I knew I had lost it, and I knew I was going to collapse into the snow. I almost relished the thought. Anything was better than trudging forward, pointlessly, endlessly. But I kept on walking. I knew it meant nothing, I knew that whoever thawed me out thousands of years in the future wouldn't care where in the Frozen Wastes I decided to give up, but I couldn't stop. If I stopped, then everything would have been pointless. So I pressed forward into the tundra, making a private vow to never stop moving, to never stop walking, until I reached the end of the Frozen Wastes, until my boots touched down on the dirt filled streets of Provesh. I managed to take seven more steps before collapsing face-first into the tundra. "...Sorry,

U.T.", I thought, my lips caked with powder, my tongue tasting ice. "I don't think I'm gonna be able to return you to Ruckus after all." "I don't care about that!", the module cried, its androgynous sounding voice cracking. "Please Master Admin, get up! You'll freeze if you don't!" I didn't get up. The snow around my body was cold and uncomfortable, and my platemail was rough and jagged, but I still didn't get up. My body wanted rest, more than it had ever wanted anything else. So I just laid there, deep in the tundra of the Frozen Wastes, as a cold gust of wind blew down four inches of snow on top of me. "Get up!", U.T. cried out once more, this time in its stuffy male voice. I ignored the gem's plea like I would the quack of a duck. There wasn't a point in getting up, not anymore. "Please, Patchy, get up!", the module pleaded, shamelessly speaking in Lucas's voice. But the module's mortified moans did not move me. "Get up, *imbecile!*" U.T. cried, speaking even in Sabarene's voice as it called out to me one final time. But despite U.T.'s many efforts to wake me, despite the poor magical gem doing everything it could to shake me out of my stupor, I didn't get up. I just closed my eye, laid my head down in the snow, and waited for sleep to overtake me. The harsh, cold winds of the Frozen Wastes grew even colder, and the world around me began to fade. Snow piled up on my back, pushing my plate mail covered body down even further into the tundra. Just as Thief had said, just as U.T. had warned, I was buried beneath the snow. I was buried, and I would be frozen for thousands of years, or cycles, the difference between the measurements of time hardly mattered any more. My eye shut, my body weak, I moved my fleshy fingers towards the jagged crystal stuck in my chest. If I couldn't return to Provesh, if I couldn't see Lucas and Sabarene again, then there was no need to delay the inevitable. Bright or bad, a future without them was a future I never wished to

see. I knew what I was doing was wrong. U.T. would be left behind, rendered immobile and isolated for eternity. The consequences of a fellow from the future stumbling across a poorly preserved corpse and an unguarded recovery module would probably be catastrophic as well. But I didn't care. There was no reason for me to be present in a future which didn't matter, no point in living to see if Thief was right in the end. The realms, the modules, the mysteries and my memories – they meant less than nothing to me. But that which did matter to me... no, *those* who mattered to me... they were no longer within my reach. I had failed. For all my tricks and schemes, for all my murders and misdeeds, I had failed. So I thrust my hand through one of the holes in my breastplate, and yanked the recovery module out of my chest. I had made countless mistakes throughout my confused, circuitous journey, errors which had hurt the people I cared about and killed even more. If dying out in the snow was a failure, then at least it would be my final one. My ears twitched, as the snow above me began to shuffle. It was the wind again. It never snowed out in the Frozen Wastes, not really. It's just that what little snow did fall never melted. It was the winds which made the Wastes so infamous. The winds, which cut across the endless swaths of snow, which pushed countless flakes up off the ground and into the sky, enough snow to make the winds seem like a blizzard. But there never were any blizzards. That which was there from the start was shifted around, and nothing more. My body jerked, as I felt the wind shift some more snow off of my back. That was confusing, somewhat. I was buried at least five inches below the ceaseless snowbank of the Frozen Wastes, so the wind probably should have pushed more snow on top of me rather than off of me. But winds of the Wastes were whimsical, and at the right angle could seem deliberate in how they blew. I didn't move.

The winds were removing my burden for the moment, but were sure to return what they took tenfold. It was simply a matter of- "...Oh thank Christ.", a soft voice whispered, while I continued to contemplate the wind. The ends of ears twitched a bit at the voice, but I didn't bother to open my eye. I knew who the voice belonged to. I had heard it countless times before, and imagined it even more. Who the voice belonged to was irrelevant, because the entity speaking with it was simply borrowing it, just as it had borrowed Lucas's. "Wake up.", the voice that had to be U.T. repeated, sounding almost desperate as it weakly cried out to me. "Please, you need to wake up..." I still didn't budge. The module's attempts to move me were admirable, but I had made my decision. There was simply too much pain in my heart for me to continue, too much sorrow seeped in my soul. I had drank enough of the poison known as life, and was willing and eager to sip down the sweet wine known as death- "**WAKE THE FUCK UP ALREADY, RETARD!**", the soft sounding voice shrieked, as what felt very much like a boot slammed straight into my ass. "GAH!", I shrieked, the piercing pain in my posterior jolting me into lucidity. "The heck didya do that fer?!", I yelped, covering my bottom as I pushed myself outta my grave and onto my feet. "That seriously hurt, ya big idio-AH!" Before I could finish screaming my complaints, I was tackled into the ground, like a streaker being tackled by a Bouncer at a Manchester United Football game. But unlike a Bouncer at a Manchester United football game, the person who had tackled me reeked only slightly of shame, sweat, and sobrietylessness. "You're alive!", the girl who both looked *and* sounded like Sabarene sobbed as she sat on my bruised and battered belly. "Thank Christ you're alive!" "...Christ?", I blurted, at a loss for words. "Oh, um, I mean, thank *Fiat* you're alive.", Sabarene blurted, her pale white cheeks slightly red. "Sorry, I

just heard you and Mister Lucas say that c-word so much that I felt left out, and-“ The white haired girl in the tattered black habit froze up, then punched herself in the face. “Gah, that’s not relevant at all!”, the scawny looking git groaned, a clear red welt on her cheek. “What the hell are you even doing out here, imbecile?!” “The heck are YOU doing out here?”, I countered, more confused than anything. “Ya know we’re hundreds of thousands of miles away from Provesh, right?” The mildly psychopathic girl sitting on topa me blinked. “What’s a mile?” “FINE, MEASURE.” I somewhat impatiently clarified. “YA DO KNOW WE’RE HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS OF *MEASURES* AWAY FROM PROVESH, RIGHT?!” Sabarene looked at me like I had suddenly regrown my left eye. “That’s not true either, Miss Axeman Red Four.” She gently lifted up my right arm, and thrust my hand limply towards the horizon. “Provesh is right over there.” I started to say something, then squinted my eye. Though I had been absolutely sure that there was nothing in the distance besides a vast gray wasteland, I suddenly began to make out the wooden skeletal remnants of Provesh. “Ya gotta be kidding me.”, I babbled, then narrowed my eye. “Yer fulla shit and I’m dreaming.” I said, decisively. “Well at the very least, you’re not dreaming.”, Sabarene laughed, though there didn’t seem to be much humor in her voice. She averted her gaze, tilting her hooded head down towards the snow. “I, um... I don’t know what happened back in the depot exactly, but shortly after I asked you to kill me, you disappeared. Along with Mister Lucas, and Mister Thief.” She bit her metal pointer finger. “In... in retrospect, that might have been a bit much for me to ask.” Still not sure that I was actually talking to anyone, I nevertheless continued ta converse with the ghostly git. “So I go missing, and yer first thought is to wander thousands of miles out into a frozen wasteland?” The white haired girl on topa me

nodded her head. “No, my first thought was to surrender peacefully to Kundare, Marston, and the others. But they-“ Sabarene winced, and then winced at her wince, as if surprised by her own emotions. “They.. um... they died. The Plebian Branch, the Patrician Branch, the Unionists, the Unassigned... every single person in that depot died.” The girl in the tattered black habit swallowed, then stared down at me with wet ruby eyes. “I thought you died, too.”, she painfully choked out. I squinted up at the girl squatted on my chest and smiled, in spite of it all. “You thought I died?” “I just said that, there’s no need to repeat it.”, Sabarene blubbered, with a face fulla tears. I clumsily reached my right hand up to stroke her cheek. “G-gah!”, the white haired girl yelped, as I accidentally poked her in the eye with my index finger. “The hell did you do that for, imbecile?!” “I, uh... I just wanted ta make sure you were real.”, I lied. “I, uh... I thought you were U.T.” Sabarene rubbed her eye with a tattered sleeve, then stared down at me with a blank expression. “Who the fuck is U.T.?”. “Justa voice in my head.”, I muttered, then flicked the stringy haired girl’s ear. “Ow! I’m real, I’m real!”, Sabarene protested, rubbing her ear with her metal hand. “I know.” “Then what the hell did you do that fo- Ah!” “Stop cussing.”, I warned, flicking Sabarene’s ear once more for good measure. A confused expression spread across the Ex-General’s face. “Out of all the things I’ve done, you’re taking issue with my cursing?” “It’sa bad habit.”, I grumbled, pushing myself up off the snow and onto my feet. “Maybe if ya didn’t curse so much ya wouldn’t have crucified all them people.” “...I doubt that.”, Sabarene said, with a saddened expression. “When I gave that order in Fremdos three cycles ago, when I executed Brother Brounde, even when I killed my own parents.... Not for a moment did I think I was doing anything wrong.” She shivered slightly in the snow. “Back then... my actions



were an absolute good, an absolute truth. Nothing I did could be construed as wrong, because if they were wrong, I would never do them.” “Flawless logic, assuming you’re a delusional psychopath.”, I quipped. “Oh, I was- no, I am a delusional psychopath.”, Sabarene giggled, though to say her laugh was forced would be to say that Uber was better than taxis. “I’m so delusional that even now, there is still a voice in the back of my mind telling me that what I wanted was the truth – that the Continent, and the Realms around us would be better off united, subjugated beneath my heel.” “Ya- ya don’t say.” I stammered, suddenly regretting my abandonment of Thief’s silver revolver. “But the truth doesn’t matter to me anymore.”, the white haired girl whispered. “Perhaps I’m being selfish, but... but your lies... your many, many, many, many, many, many, many lies... I think I like them better.” “Warmer than the cold hard truth, huh?”, I breathed out, feeling a weird mix of relief and anxiety swirl around in my stomach. “Maybe~”, Sabarene teased, tugging slightly on her black collar. “Or maybe I’m just a masochist. After all, I’m your slave now, right?” I cringed almost immediately. “You’re not really my- that was just kinda a way to stop you from killing yersel-“ “I know.”, Sabarene interrupted, placing her right hand on my platemail covered shoulder. “But for now, it’s probably for the best that I think otherwise. The slightest slip might make me think those thoughts again... make me believe what Mister Thief told me... what he showed me, was true.” I looked at the skeletal structure of Provesh in the distance, then bit my lip. “What did he show you, anyways?”, I asked, deliberately diverting my gaze away from the girl behind me. “Well, what Mister Thief showed me was-“ “Actually, nevermind.”, I blurted. “I never wanna know.” My knees started to buckle, and I began to timber over, suddenly unable to support the weight of my own armor. “I got you!”, Sabarene cried, dancing through the

snow to push me back up before I fell. “Huh.”, I blurted, as I stood rigid in the snow. “I, uh... I don’t think I can move my body all that much.” “S-seriously?”, Sabarene huffed, her hands still pressed against my chest. “Seriously. Like, on a scale of water ta molasses, I reckon I’m frozen molasses.” Sabarene bit her bottom lip and took a deep breath. “A-aaaaaaaaaaaaah!”, the boney girl grunted, bending over to sling me onto her back. “Don’t... FUCK!.... worry....SHIT!”, she muttered, as she carried me piggy-back style towards the silhouette of Provesh. “I... JESUS... can... GOD DAMN IT... carry you!” And carry me she did, for about four or five steps. Then she fell into the snow, with me falling on top of her. “Oh god, we’re gonna die out here.”, Sabarene whispered, unable to push my heavy body off of hers. “Nah, I won’t die.”, I whispered back. “I’ll just be frozen for thousands of years or something.” “What’s a year?” For a while, it did seem like we were going to die in the snow. But soon enough I felt energy return to my body, and whatever soreness and fatigue that had plagued me vanished. “Alright, my turn ta carry you.”, I babbled, then tried lifting the white haired girl above my head. Even with my lifemetal arms, all I could manage was to hoist her a few inches out of the snow. “I don’t think that’s going to work.”, Sabarene grunted, and then, slung her arm around my waist. “We’ll do it together, ok?” I blinked my eye a few times, then shook my head. Slowly but surely, step by drunken looking step, the two of us limped out way back towards Provesh, walking in a manner not too dissimilar from a sedated giraffe. It took a long time, and I don’t know how Sabarene managed to avoid losing her five fleshy fingers and nose to frostbite, but eventually we made it back to the city of wood and snow. It smelled like shit. “It smells like crap.”, I said, as soon as we walked through the main gates of the besieged city. “That’s not crap.”, Sabarene huffed. “That’s

smoke and blood.” She sniffed the air a bit more. “...And also crap.” She wasn’t wrong. The streets of Provesh were littered with an abundance of bodies, and most of the crudely constructed wooden buildings burnt like dying tinder in flame. Unionists, Fiatists, and Unassigned all laid slain. Somea em had surgical single wounds near their throats, like Thief had stopped time and got em, but a heckuva lot more were just plain old dead from fighting. Even more were charred to a crisp, either from the rubies or from the general spread of flame through the makeshift bonfire of a city. It wasn’t a pleasant sight, and it wasn’t a pleasant smell. Without saying a word, I nudged myself and Sabarene towards the direction of the Caravan Depot. With no other living beings present, it was a short but traumatizing trip for us to return to the icy gates of the icy Depot. The courtyard of the Caravan depot looked exactly the same as it did when I left it - it was covered with crosses and covered with corpses. The inside of the Caravan Depot had changed, mostly for the better. The walls and icy floor had huge holes blasted into them and there were bullet holes poking through just about everything, but one fortunate side effect of the fight between Thief and Lucas was that the giant icy statue of, uh, me had been rendered into a scattered set of ice cubes. The icy stairs leading down to the Depot’s dining room turned inner sanctum were still intact, so I pushed Sabarene and myself over towards them. “Not a single step more, Unionist.” All of a sudden I felt something sharp and heavy cut into my back, which struck me as odd, considering I was wearing about one hundred pounds of plate mail specifically designed ta prevent that sort of thing. An unmistakable sense of pain coursing throughout my body, I turned my head around to see... Brother Christopher. And Sister Julia. And Supreme Sibling Desnion. And the blade of a large black halberd embedded halfway

through my spinal cord. “Oh hey guys, how’s it going?”, I breathed out, raggedly. “What did you do?”, Desnion hissed, a cold malice in his voice. I licked my lips. “I. uh-“ “Not you, Unionist!”, Desnion barked, furious. “You, Sabarene. What did you do?!” The white haired girl I was half-supporting jerked a bit in my arms. “W-what did I do? Well, I walked outside of the city’s limits so I could search for Miss Axeman Red Four, of course-“ “**How** did you walk out?!” the blonde man in the white habit roared, as Sister Julia and Brother Christopher stood silently behind him. “You were surrounded by the Patrician Branch, the Plebian Branch... even a group of Unionists! How did you escape them?” A petulant look spread across the white haired girl’s face. “Well, um, they’re kinda dead...” “NO FUCKING SHIT THEY’RE KIND OF DEAD!”, Desnion roared, demented. “THE LOWER PORTION OF THIS CARAVAN DEPOT IS A BLOOD BATH!” The slightly chubby blonde man in the white habit lowered his voice, and calmed down, somewhat. “What did you DO to make them “kinda dead?”, he whispered. “If you don’t tell me, I’ll have Christopher gut you on the spot.” Sabarene shut her eyes and cringed. “I, actually, it wasn’t me. I didn’t do anything, well... not this time, at least...” Her eyes jolted open, like she was in shock. “W-wait, Marston’s dead too! Surely you don’t think I would kill me own brother?!” “I absolutely would think that.”, Desnion said, flatly. “Yeah, um, well- ok, sure, maybe I *would*, but the fact of the matter is that I didn’t!” I looked the blonde haired man in the eyes and firmly shook my head. “She’s telling the truth, Supreme Sibling.” “Oh, well if the sociopath can vouch for the psychopath, I guess that settles it.”, Desnion spat, then raised his hand in the air and beckoned to the white haired man behind him. “Christopher , just end this farce already.” “C-c’mon, just give me a sec ta explain myself!”, I sputtered, balling my right hand into a fist and shoving

Sabarene behind me. "A sec?", Desnion repeated, confused. "Gah, a moment, whatever!", I shouted. "Just wait a moment! Before ya have yer albino kill my albino, give me some time ta set everything right!" A look of earnest budlement manifested on the Supreme Sibling's face. "Set everything right? It's far too late to set *anything* right, Unionist. The dead in the chamber below us have seen to that." I licked my lips, nervously. "Yeah, but, uh... what if I could, like, fix that?" "Fix... that?", Desnion said, still confused. "Yeah, fix that, I just said it, there's no need ta repeat it." "It's not a matter of repeating it.", Desnion countered. "I know full well what you said, I just don't understand why you said it. Even a single life is precious, so acting like you can atone for dozens of deaths is-" "Not what I'm saying.", I cut in. "I don't plan on atoning fer jack. But if yer issue is with all those stiffs down in the inner sanctum or dining hall or whatever, I reckon I can fix them." Desnion nodded his head in disbelief. "No, there's just no way-" "I dunno Dez... I think you should listen to the little doggy.", a laid back voice commented. Desnion turned around and stared at Sister Julia in disbelief. "Why would I do that?", he asked, softly, but poignantly. "Did she manage to mess with your mind too, Jules?" The black haired girl scratched at the bottom of her chin. "No, no... nothing like that." "Then why-?!" "Cause, like, I totally slammed my halberd into the Unionist's spine, but she's still, uh... standing." Desnion squinted at the halberd embedded in my back, and the wound rapidly closing around it. "And bleeding backwards, evidently.", he observed, dryly. He did an about-face and glared directly into my eye. "Fine. Go down and fix that nonsense with more nonsense. Just know we'll be waiting for you and the General when we're done." "B-but I just told ya I could fix this!", I protested. "You might be able to fix your mistakes, Unionist, but not a creature on this

Continent can make up for what that wretch next to you has done.”, Brother Christopher chimed in, his voice icy calm. “Maker of miracles you may, but peace and unity shan’t come to this Continent while Sabarene draws breath.” “I heard the exact opposite sentiment expressed by somebody else, but fine.” I huffed out, agitated. “Sabarene and I will go down to the dining hall, do our thing, and when we’re done y’all can punish her all ya want. Nail her up fer dramatic irony if ya want, I don’t care.” “I know you’re lying through your teeth.”, Desnion said, calmly. The blonde man in the white habit folded his arms and closed his eyes. “But go on, go down there and do what you came here to do. We’ll be right here when you come back.” Unsure if the two of us had just been threatened or let off the hook, I grabbed Sabarene by her metal wrist and awkwardly yanked her down the icy stairs which led to the tiered dining hall. The inner sanctum looked exactly the way it had when I had left it – each of the three levels of the icy hall was covered with corpses with overly precise mortal wounds. It was no longer a mystery to me how Thief did it – he simply froze time, walked up to each individual person, and like he was trimming hedges, slit their throats or pierced their lungs or stabbed their hearts. The end result looked ghastly and horrifying, like the hundred or so individuals gathered in the tiered dining hall had suffered the wrath of an unholy demon, but the truth of the matter was that they were, more or less, done in by a glorified janitor. Speaking of demons, there was one slight difference in the appearance of the tiered dining hall, one little thing that had changed. Sure, Marston, Blue, Kundare, Gino, and the Nameless Purple haired girl were all still various forms of dead, but lying in the middle of the middle level, face planted firmly against the center of the centermost icy floor, was- “Mister Lucas!”, Sabarene cried, squirming out from under me to run straight

into the epicenter of the tiered icy dining hall. She slipped on some blood and tripped over a lifeless metal leg, but quickly regained her balance and ran over to the blonde haired boy. Still winded, still drained of almost all my energy, I limped over to take a closer look. Gone was Lucas's purple coat, purple tophat, staff, and tazer. Gone too was his precious metal square, his revolver, and his multiple flash bangs, grenades, and other such armaments. Gone was his shirt and gone were the near dozens of modules he had stashed beneath his shirt. The only thing Lucas Gandulfadore Melloi the Third had left was his pants, and from the slight smile on his face, his dignity. But mostly his pants. I moved my hand to his neck to feel for a pulse. My heart sank, somewhat, as I felt nothing. I switched my right hand, and to my relief, felt a slow but steady rhythm emerge from beneath the nape of his neck. I then berated myself for caring at all, as ultimately it didn't matter if Lucas had a pulse or not. "O-oh.", Lucas hoarsely coughed, his gentle blue eyes coming to life at my touch. "You're still alive." I bit my bottom lip, and tried to wipe away the wetness from my blurry ass eye. "Yeah, well... you are too." A slight smile spread across Lucas's lips. "Yaaaaaaaaaay.", he droned, in a soft monotone. He blinked his eyes a bit, as he looked up at me. "So did you end up saving Sabarene, or-?" "Yes.", the mousey girl with a small black collar around her neck interjected. "She did." Lucas tilted his head towards Sabarene, surprised. "That's good to hear, I suppo- OH GOD!", he exclaimed, as he noticed the dozens and dozens of corpses around him. "Patchy, you- you-" "Not me.", I said, flatly. Lucas instantly shifted his gaze towards Sabarene. "Um.... Not me either, as... hard as that might be to believe." "Oh, then it's all fine then.", Lucas said, calming down some. "Wait, no its not!" he spat, squirming off the floor. "That's like, the entirety of this Realm's leaders lying

dead there on the floor! There's going to be chaos and calamity for sure!" "No, there won't.", I said, firmly. "Everything will be just fine." Lucas looked up at me, nervous. "Are you sure, or are you just saying that to make me feel better?" "I'm sure.", I said, completely unaffected by the corpses lying around me. I extended my right hand to Lucas, and yanked him onto his feet. "I'll sort all this out right now." My footing firm despite the blood soaked ice beneath me, I walked off the center stage of the tiered dining hall, and up to the outer ring. I stepped past the bodies of Blue and the Unionists, the scattered metal limbed corpses of the Plebian Branch and the Fiatists, until finally I came across the lifeless body of the nameless purple haired girl. Like damn near everyone else in the triple decker dining hall, she too had died, having bled out awhile back from a Thief inflicted wound through her chest. But that didn't matter. With the same grace and sanctimony I'd use to fetch a toenail clipper, I reached under my busted up plate armor and yanked the jagged crystal shard out from my chest. "G-gah!", I gasped, what little energy I had left leaving my body right as the recovery module did. My natural arm feeling just as heavy as my metal arm, I slammed the recovery module into the corpse of the purple haired girl, pointy end first. Fer a brief moment – Nothing happened. But soon enough.. "P-pfah!", the nameless purple haired girl pfahhed, her body jolting to life as she sprang up and began gasping for breath. "What- what the... what?!" She was in a complete state of shock, so I don't think the Nameless purple haired girl noticed the blood which slowly rose up off the ice and crawled back into her chest. But even if she didn't get a glance at the specifics, it seemed like the unassigned girl I had met on the black metal ship had a fairly good grasp of the situation. "I'm-alive?! How am I- how am I alive?!", she gasped, her eyes opening wide. "Didn't I-



wasn't I- "Killed?", Sabarene guessed, speaking gently. "Yes. But don't worry, you're all better now-" "LIKE HELL!", the purple haired girl screamed, leaping up to try and strangle the ghost haired girl. I nudged her onto her back before she could do anything. "Chill, there's no reason ta freak out.", I said, clucking my tongue a bit as I chided the woman without a name. The nameless girl's face softened a bit as she listened to my words. "Axeman Red Four...", she babbled, sounding both relieved and confused. "Yeah, that's my name, fer now at least.", I said, resting my arms on my hips as I squatted down closer to the Former Volunteer. The purple haired girl patted where the wound on her chest had been, clearly shocked at its disappearance. "How did you save me?", the nameless girl asked me, shock and surprise still reigning supreme over any of her emotions. "Magic gem.", I mumbled, then nodded my head. "But that's the wrong question ta ask." The nameless girl looked puzzled for a bit, then shook her head. "Ok then... um... *Why...* did you save me?", she asked, slowly but surely matching my wavelength. "Cause I'm lazy and don't wanna do any work.", I snorted. "W-what?!", both Sabarene and Lucas stammered behind me. "Is that so...", the nameless purple haired girl muttered, her gaze harshening and her voice growing deeper, if ever so slightly. "Yup.", I yawned, putting the palm of my hand over my mouth to emphasize it. "See, I brought ya back ta life with that magic gem sticking outta yer chest, and I-" "You want me to bring everyone else back to life too.", the nameless purple haired girl stated, her words eerily calm for someone who had just come back from the dead. I pretended not to notice her shift in attitude. "Shucks, I ain't saying that.", I breathed out, waving my hand around like it wasn't no thing. "It don't matter ta me who ya bring back ta life and who ya leave dead. I'm just saying that if ya wanna bring anyone in this city back ta life,

then, now ya can. Good end, bad end, bittersweet, take yer pick. Everyone lives or everyone dies, it's all up to you." "And why is it all up to me?", the purple haired girl asked me, calmly. "Why me, and not the former Regent, or the current Supreme Sibling, or the new General?" I paused for a bit, then gave the purple haired girl an answer. "Well, you were the closest in terms of walking distan-" "Why me?", the Unassigned girl repeated, not fooled for a moment. I dropped the country bumpkin act for the penultimate time. "Because you're the only one qualified to judge." "Judge?", the purple haired girl stammered. "Judge what?!" "*Everything.*", I hissed, narrowing my eye. "The leaders of this realm, the people of this realm, and the future of this realm – the only one qualified to determine it is you. Not me, not Marston, not the Unionists, or the Fiatists. **You.**" I declared, perhaps laying it on a little too thick. "What? Why?!", the purple haired girl cried out, her expression a mix of despair and confusion. "I'm Unassigned, you idiot! I have no talent, no skillset, no actual occupational experience! I spent the last three cycles of my life turning knobs on a ship as a SLAVE!" "That's why it has to be you.", I said, softly. "No one else alive has suffered more than you. As an Unassigned you were treated like garbage by the Unionists, and as a Volunteer you were treated like trash by the Fiatists. You've experienced the worst that this Continent had to offer. That's why you should be the one to judge it." "That's the most retarded reasoning I've ever heard!", the purple haired girl spat, flabbergasted. "Yeah, well, I never claimed to be particularly smart.", I said, shrugging my shoulders. "Anyways, do what you want. Revive everyone or no one, it doesn't matter to me." "...Everyone.", the nameless purple haired girl mumbled, her face turned down towards the floor. "Oi, speak up, I didn't hear ya.", I lied, trying to hide my smile. "I'm going to revive everyone.", the nameless purple haired girl

declared, tightening her hand into a fist as she ripped the recovery module out from her chest. "If this stupid crystal gem does what you say it does, then... Everyone who died here... who died in this city... I'll bring them back. Every single one." "Oh thank god.", I sighed, relief soaking my aching body. "I knew you'd save everyone." "Save everyone, huh...", the purple haired girl repeated, her face still facing the floor. "That much is only natural... to save everyone." The nameless purple haired girl jerked her head up and glared at me with icy cold eyes, the color of blue sapphires. "But what about those who *can't* be saved, Miss Axeman Red Four?", the nameless girl asked me, glancing over my shoulder. "Like, for example... the Unionists of Fremdos? The men, women, and children who were crucified, then cremated, their sorrow scattered to the sea? What is to be done for them?" A lump formed in my throat. "Well, that's-" "And not just them.", the Nameless Woman went on, her voice growing deeper and louder. "What about the Lancers of Trunchet? What about the rebels of Merchenze? What about those drafted into the Collective's army and made to fight against their will? What is to be done on their behalf?" "I'm- I'm sure that they'll rest easy knowing that the futur-" "Oh, bullshit!", the former volunteer in front of me yelled. "They led meaningless lives and died meaningless deaths! Their existence was brief and filled with suffering!" "That's- that's only cause there wasn't someone like you in charge things!", I feebly protested, my body trembling for some reason. "Don't go and blame things on the ills of society!", the purple haired girl screamed, her blue sapphire eyes wet with tears. "It's no mystery why the fields of Merchenze are barren ash, or why thousands of crosses line the harbor and canals of Fremdos. The blame doesn't lie with society- the culprit is cowering right behind you!" "I'm not cowering.", a low, dark voice uttered from behind me. Her frayed

black habit blowing in the breeze, Sabarene stepped in front of me, and returned the Unassigned girl's glare with a blank, emotionless gaze. The Nameless Purple haired girl recoiled for a brief moment, but puffed up her chest and closed the distance between her and Sabarene. Blue Sapphires met Red Rubies. "Do you who I am?", the Former Volunteer asked the Ex-General, all traces of hurt and fury gone from her voice. "No.", Sabarene answered, plainly. "I don't know who I am, either.", the purple haired girl responded, her shoulders shaking. "When I was growing up, I thought I would join a Union, but I never demonstrated enough talent to join one. When I was fourteen cycles old, I thought I was Unassigned, but I hardly felt welcome amongst the others. I... hardly felt welcome anywhere, really. I never have... I probably never will... know what I am." The purple haired girl's gaze harshened. "But I know what I am not. I am not you, General. And... and because I'm not you... I'm not a-afraid of you.", she stuttered, then nodded her head. "That's... that's a lie. I'm terrified of you. Even though you're small, and frail... even though I imagined you'd be an armored behemoth of a man... My skin it- it crawls at the mere sight of you." The nameless girl tightened her hand into a fist. "But- but even though I'm afraid, I'm... I'm not afraid to do what's *right*." "Oh?", Sabarene asked, a slight smile on her worn out face. "And what is right?" The purple haired girl turned her back to Sabarene, knelt down, and... picked up an ornate black knife off the floor. "To administer justice.", she responded, resolute. The nameless purple haired girl licked her lips and stepped forward, holding what looked like one of Marston's many knives in her left hand and the recovery module in her right. She shifted her gaze from Sabarene and turned to look at me. "You said I could decide who lives and who dies, right?" "I was talking about bringing folks back!", I protested, feeling my

control of the situation slip away with each moment. “Well, the General is one person who can’t be allowed to come back.”, the nameless girl answered. “Even if I revive everyone in this city... even if Kundare annexes Provesh and incorporates it and the last of the Independent Kingdoms into the Holy Collective... there will be no true peace while this demon draws breath.” “She’s absolutely right.”, Sabarene said, shaking her head. “The unification of the Independent Kingdoms and the Holy Collective won’t last if no one answers for the many grievances.” She rubbed the back of her head and smile, awkwardly. “And, um, to be honest... it’s not exactly like I’m a scapegoat.” I shuddered, then stared back at the nameless purple haired girl. “So it really has to end up that way, huh? You really havta punish this git?” “Yes.”, the nameless purple haired girl said, not pausing for even a second. “For the sake of everyone, and for the sake of basic morality. I will not bring people back to live in a world where evil is allowed and abided.” I shivered, and buried my head in the palms of my hands. “...Alright.”, I said, my throat sore. “Give me the knife.” The nameless purple haired girl glanced suspiciously at me. “You’re not going to-“ “NO, I AIN’T GONNA KILL YA.”, I yelled, my voice cracking. “I- I wouldn’t bring somebody back ta life just ta kill them again!”, I protested, then yanked my own hair as I remembered how I had gotten to the Caravan Depot in the first place. “Oh suns above... actually... I would. I- I totally did...” I nodded my head. “But- but I promise ya, this time, I won’t. Give me the knife, and I’ll punish- I’ll punish the person who needs the most punishing.” Hesitantly, the nameless girl with sapphire blue eyes handed me the ornate knife. “Idiot.”, I cackled, flashing her a fangy smile. With as much force as I could muster, I aimed the knife away from Sabarene and stabbed it straight... into my own eye. “A-AH!”, I yelped, as my vision immediately went red. “F-four!”, a voice

which sounded like Lucas's cried out. "M-miss Axeman Red Four!", both the purple haired girl and Sabarene cried out, each of them sounding shaken and disturbed.

"GAAAAAAH!", I groaned, finding the pain of sticking a knife in my eye to be a lot more stressful than I had initially anticipated. I ripped the blade out from my eye, and blindly flung it where I thought Sabarene, Lucas, and the nameless purple haired girl weren't.

The intense burning pain in my right eye lessened, slightly, as my vision went from being completely red to completely black. I felt someone run up close to me, and try to shove a shard in the palm of my hand. "H-here, take the healing crystal back, I- I didn't mean for-" "N-no!", I cried out, thrusting my hand out into the pitch black darkness.

"Keep the recovery module!" "But- but why?", the purple haired girl's voice asked me.

"Don't tell me you *meant* to stab yourself in the eye..." "I absolutely meant to, you idiot!", I yelled, the severe pain in my right eye socket somewhat hampering my ability to maintain my composure. "But... but *why?*", the nameless girl's voice asked, stammering. "Why hurt yourself?!" I stumbled around in the darkness, then rested my body on what felt like a railing. "Cause... I'm not gonna... hurt Sabarene.", I breathed out, my words all staccato. "I'm gonna take her... and Lucas... and we're gonna leave."

"Are you joking?", the purple haired girl's voice asked, sounding completely flabbergasted. "She's a genocidal monster! And- and even putting that aside, we just established that if she doesn't answer for her crimes, there won't be peace between the Collective and the-" "There will be peace!", I screamed, dry heaving as I steadied myself over what felt like a railing. "If you walk out of this depot- if you walk out into the frozen wastes, you'll find the body of a fella in a skull mask- and he- he ain't- he ain't the type that you'd ever want to revive. Use one of them bullshit rubies- burn his body- and pass

his chargrilled corpse off to everyone as Sabarene's." "You- you want me to cover for her? For the monster who killed my friends, and family?!", the purple haired girl's voice gasped. "Are you mental?!" "Yes, I am!", I cried, flailing around in the darkness. "I am mental! I'm crazy and nuts and nothing I do makes a lick of sense! But please... just help me out here! I know she doesn't deserve a second chance... I know I don't either, but- but if ya let us leave the Continent, and go offland... I promise you, we can change! And- and even if we don't change, even if she remains a complete monster, and I remain a self-interested sociopath, and Ruckus remains flamboyant and cheesy... we'll never come back to the Continent again! Things will be just the same as if ya killed her!" "M-maybe... maybe so...", the purple haired girl's voice responded, hesitantly. "But- there's more to this than just the necessity of needing a scapegoat... even if I put aside my personal feelings, to let someone like *her* get away with all the evil she has done... it's not... it's not exactly... well... right." "I know it ain't right!", I cried, devolving into childish sobs. "I know that it's unjust and terrible and awful! But I've seen way more of the good Sabarene than the bad, even if the bad is horribly, unimaginably bad! I know I'm being selfish, I know I'm making the wrong, unjust... the *evil* decision! That's... that's why I just stuck that knife where I did!", I sniffled. "I'll... I'll stay like this for the rest of my life. I'll remain blind- I'll- I'll never see again. This will be... this will be the punishment for all them crosses... and for the folks that I've hurt, too." I fell down on my knees, and crawled towards where I thought the feet of the purple haired girl was. "But -please!", I begged, hoping my words would pierce through the pain and the darkness. "Please, accept this! You're the only one who can accept this! You... don't gotta say what I'm doing is right, but- but at least give me a chance! Give me a chance to run away like a

coward, please! I... I don't wanna fight any more... I don't wanna do bad things anymore... but I don't want the folks I fought fer to die, neither! I- I want everyone ta be happy, even if- even if some of them don't deserve it!" For a moment, I heard nothing but my own breathing, my own whining and whimpering. But then... "Fine.", the nameless purple haired girl's voice responded, sounding tired, and slightly disgusted. "Take this monster and go. I'll revive as many people as I can with this gem. The Former Regent, The New General, Gino, Desnion, even your friend Mister Blue. I'll clean up the mess this albino bitch made, and I'll even bullshit her death for you." I heard someone take in a deep breath. "But in exchange, you are to leave this Continent, and never return. Ever." "I'll... I'll do that.", I sniffled, my hand still pressed over my eyesocket. "Trust me, you'll never see me, her, or Ruckus again." I seemed to hear a sigh in the darkness. "Oh, and, uh... sorry about making you do alla thi-" "Just LEAVE, ok!?", the nameless girl spat, her voice cracking. "You're so... gross!" I opened my mouth ta respond, but no words came out. No words needed to come out. I had got what I wanted, there wasn't much of a point in talking. I couldn't see the Nameless Girl's face, but from the tone of her voice and the irregularity of her breaths it was pretty clear she was upset, which meant she was unstable. If I tried to reassure her, or apologize, or comfort her, she mighta snapped and changed her mind, or even do the exact opposite of what I wanted out of spite. So I didn't speak anymore. I didn't give her advice on who to revive, or tell her specifically where Thief's body was located way out in the wastes. I just pushed myself off the railing, and blindly stumbled in the darkness, towards where I thought the exit was. I lost my footing and slipped on the icy floor almost immediately. "I got you, Four.", a gentle voice assured me, as warm hands gently stopped me from



falling over. I felt five warm fingers wrap around my right wrist. "Come on, let's go."

Pulled along gently by someone in front of me, and pushed against gently by someone behind me, I stumbled through the darkness, tripping over bumps and bodies until finally I was led to what had to be the stairs. "Alright.", I mouthed, hoping people could hear me. "Lead me up the stairs, and out of the main hall, and I can take everything from there." "But... but Miss Axeman Red Four, your- your eye-" "It's nothing.", I blathered, wincing a bit from the pain. "Just do my seeing for me, alright?" "B-but..." The mouish voice behind me trailed off. In relative silence, me, the person in front of me, and the person behind me scaled up what definitely felt like stairs. "Aw, shucks.", I cursed, halfway up the darkness. "What is it?", the calm sounding voice in front and above me asked. "Desnion and his pals...", I groaned, able to envision the Supreme Sibling and his cronies clear as crystal despite my slashed up retina. "Don't worry.", the voice ahead of me said. "I'll handle those hacks." "Please don't hurt them, Mister Lucas." the voice behind me urged. "At ease, General.", the voice in front of me boasted, sounding perhaps a bit too self-assured. "The only thing I'll hurt is their pride." In silence, but well-supported by the person behind me and well-guided by the person in front, I climbed up the rest of what felt like stairs. "We're at the lobby now, Four.", the voice in front of me said quietly. Instinctively, I looked around, but there wasn't much of a point in looking around, seeing as I couldn't, uh, see. "You're back.", a familiar sounding voice echoed from far away. "It wasn't like doggy was going to just ditch us, Dez.", an easy going voice sing songed. "The courageous cur came back, as expected.", a third, more boisterous voice bellowed. "She came back, but not entirely intact." the first voice commented, dryly. "You seem to be missing yet an eye, Axeman Red Four." "What a

stunning observation, Supreme Sibling!", the voice in front of me cried out, flamboyantly. "But I'm afraid I must correct you, she's missing *two* eyes! The labor of love she performed for this Continent has quite literally left her blind!" The voice in front of me paused, perhaps for dramatic effect. "Therefore, I think the only appropriate course of action for you to look deep within your heart, and allow us passage out of this-" "You and the Unionist are free to go.", the authoritative voice stated. "Ex-Sister Sabarene, of course, is not. No matter what miracles or mutilations you might have manufactured, I'm not letting a manipulative mass murderer run wild." "Yes, I imagined as much.", the voice right in front of me sighed. "If it has to be this way... THEN I, LUCAS GANDULFADORE EL MELLOI THE THIRD, SHALL PERFORM A GRAND DISPLAY OF MAGIC AND MAYHEM! PREPARE YOURSELF, BROTHER JULIA, SISTER CHRISTOPHER, AND SUPREME SIBLING LESBIAN!" The voice behind me gasped. "Mister Lucas, it's Desnion, not les-" "SILENCE!" the voice in front of me cried. "EVERYONE IN THIS RUINED LOBBY SHALL BEAR WITNESS TO MY GREATEST TRICK YET!" "Oh, are you going to toss your baton at us and run, Chinchilla?", the easy going voice asked. "No, I'm going to toss a XM84 United States military standard ordinance flashbang grenade at you, and follow that up with a standard issued SAS G60 stun grenade.", the voice in front of me breathed out, all flamboyance gone from its voice. "Then I'll run." "Wait, what-" I didn't see anything, but I sure as heck heard something. The points of my ears twitched violently as a cacophonous ringing sound shattered my eardrums. Before I could even really register what was going on, I felt myself be slung up on someone's shoulder and whisked away at a high speed. The ringing persisted for a long time, longer than I had expected. But as the ringing in my

ears began to die down, so did the movement of the person carrying me, until finally both the ringing and the movement died down completely. "...Are we in the clear?", I asked, as soon as I was sure I'd be able to hear my own voice. "Relatively clear.", the voice carrying me muttered. "We're out of the depot, but I haven't the foggiest clue where we are, or where we should go." "Um... I don't either, I'm afraid.", a second voice commented. "I forgot to read the reports my Saboteurs gave me, and I don't remember this part of the city. O-h, I know! Would it help if I described the surroundings to you, Miss Axeman Red Four?" I nodded my head. "Nah, I'll just take a look for myself." I pushed myself off of Lucas's shoulders, hopped onto the ground, and casually flipped up the black leather patch that covered my left eye. "Oh, we're in the Union District. You can tell cause everything looks and smells like sh-GAH!" I groaned, as I felt a metal finger flick against my ear. "What?!", I spat, as two ruby red eyes glared at me. "I was going to say spit, not-" "That's beside the point!", Sabarene hissed, her voice low. "I thought you were blind!" "And I am blind.", I countered. "My right eye is useless now." "It's your left I'm concerned about, imbecile!" I squinted my eye a little, still not quite used to the light of the rising suns. "What's wrong with my left eye?" "Nothing! Nothing's wrong, and that's what doesn't make any sense! I scooped the damn thing thirty rising periods ago!", the girl in the frayed black habit exclaimed, then glanced briefly at her right arm. "Oh... wait." "Oh wait what?", Lucas asked, still shirtless, still shivering in the cold. "I'm a little lost here." "There's not really much of a mystery behind it.", I whistled, putting my hands behind my head. "See, since I used that dang recovery module so much, I reckon my left eye just sorta grew back. Musta been around the time I was fighting Thief." "Oh, yeah, I guess that does make sense.", Lucas muttered, then took a

step backwards. "Wait, so you forgot you had your eye back this whole time?!" I bit my pinky nervously. "Maybe." "Maybe.", the blonde haired boy without a shirt repeated, blankly. "Maybe I was so caught up in the heat of the moment with the purple haired girl that I forgot my eye had grown back." "Or maybe you knew all this time and just deliberately concealed that fact from that Unassigned girl.", the white haired girl with the small black collar around her neck said, glancing at me with narrow red eyes. "Aw shucks, yer giving me too much credit.", I said, smiling bashfully. "You and Ruckus know I'm dumb as a buncha bricks." "Dumb or smart, there was no pointing in doing that to begin with.", Lucas said, his teeth chattering as he shivered in the cold. "Stabbing out an eye doesn't help anyone, yourself least of all." "You're wrong, Lucas.", I said, dropping the act. "If I didn't do what I did, then that girl would never have closure." "She would have had *actual* closure if you just let her kill me.", Sabarene snorted, arms crossed as she leaned against a half-rotted wooden pillar. "As it stands, you just crossed your heart, hoped to die, and stuck a dagger in your eye. I doubt your gesture inspired anything in that girl beyond a sense of nausea." "I can stomach nausea.", I muttered, as I glanced from side to side. "Anyways, we probably should git going. From here we just gotta go down an alleyway, and we should reach the jocks." "What's at the docks?", Sabarene asked, curious. "One of yer ridiculous looking ships.", I clucked, casually. "I re-appropriated it ta get here." The girl in the torn black habit looked at me with a sly smile. "Did you re-appropriate the crew, too?" "No, I killed them to a man.", I said, flatly. My eye opened wide, as Sabarene's shoulders seemed to slump down a little. "Oh hold on, wait a tick...!" I patted the back of my neck, and felt underneath the platemail to feel a small crystalline bump. I pinched the bump, and yanked out the

crystal shard. "Here, Lucas. This module was worried sick about you." Lucas accepted the small little crystal, but stared back at me, concerned. "Er, Four, you do know that the Universal Translator isn't sentient, right?" I plucked the crystal from his palm and placed it back in my neck. "You're still here, right?", I thought, quietly. I didn't receive a response. "U.T.?", I thought, unable to hear anything. "U.T.?", I thought, once more. "I'm not crazy or nothing, right?" I still didn't hear a response. My body suddenly shaking a lot more than it had been, I re-removed the shard and gave it back to Lucas. "Never let me use that again." "Are you sure?", Lucas said, as he put the module back into his pocket. "The Universal Translator is the most valuable thing I own. Without it I would have been dead a thousand times over." He flashed me a small little grin. "I can almost see why you'd anthropomorphize it, Four." "...Uh, so as I was saying, we gotta go this way to get to the docks.", I mumbled, stumbling down the ash covered alleyway in a bit of a daze. But I didn't think about the module anymore. Voice in my head or not, it had served its purpose. It didn't take too long to get back to the docks. There was an audible silence in the air as the three of us walked. The two of them wore the same expression as me. A nervous looking grimace, an insincere smile. A volcano was about to violently erupt, and we all knew it, but no one wanted to say anything, to be the first to herald the shitstorm. But though the thought of casual conversation terrified us, no actual people did. In and around the docks were some wounded looking Fiatists, some dazed looking Unassigned, and some dead looking Unionists, but they barely paid me, Lucas, and Sabarene a second glance as we sauntered past them. They probably had their own existential crises to worry about. We finally got to the rotten pier, and from the rotten pier we got to the metal plank that led into the giant stupid looking black ship. It was still

in the harbor, despite everything. And just like Thief had said, there was just enough people inside of the ship to run it. "A-axeman Red Four?", gasped one of the former Volunteers on the ship, as me, Lucas, and Sabarene slowly stepped onto it. "I thought you died!" "I did, but it didn't stick.", I exhaled, not even bothering to take off my armor and immediately slumping against a cast iron wall. "Does that mean you succeeded?", another of the black collared Volunteers asked, his or her face mattering to me as much as my left eye had. "Were you able to defeat the General?" "Yup-yup!", Sabarene chirped, happily plopping down against the wall across from me. "It really was something, you should have seen it!" "No way...", the Volunteer exclaimed, his or her mouth agape. "So... the Collective is defeated? The Independent Kingdoms are free?" "Um, not so much, no.", Sabarene said, nodding her head. "The Unionists surrendered to Sister Kundare, who apparently is the new General or something. In other words, the whole Continent belongs to the Collective now." The Volunteer I don't really remember's face went blank, like his or her dreams had just trampled on and crushed. "Oh, but, um, I don't think the new General will be as mean as the old one, so you and the rest of the Volunteers should be fine, probably.", Sabarene said, waving her hand in an attempt to comfort the black collared man, or woman. "I mean, Marston said something about freeing the Volunteers, and I don't think Kundare is the type to force traitors to the Collective into chains. Um, assuming they got revived, that is..." The Volunteer just stared at Sabarene, his or her face a mix of suspicion and abject terror. "W-who are you?", he or she stammered, stepping away from Sabarene. "Oh, I'm-" "A volunteer, like yourself.", Lucas said, quickly. "We found her in the General's inner sanctum." "You poor girl.", the Volunteer squawked, tears in his or her eyes. "Eh, she hasn't had it so

bad.”, I muttered, then cleared my throat. “I don’t mean ta be a bother, but wouldya mind leaving us alone fer a moment? We’re dead tired from all the fighting.” The Volunteer I don’t remember mumbled some words I don’t remember, then wandered off, leaving me, Lucas, and Sabarene alone in a small compact iron corridor inside a large black cast iron ship. “Alright...”, I huffed, pressing my palm against my wounded left eye. “Now what?” “Beats me, I didn’t plan this far.”, Lucas muttered, as he slumped down beside me. “To be honest, I thought I would be dead by now.” “Same here.”, Sabarene sighed. “Yeah, well, you’re not.”, I growled, as I took my eyepatch off of my right eye socket and placed it over my left. “So no more trying to off yourself.” The white haired girl flashed me a half-smile, and tugged slightly on the black collar wrapped around her neck. “Well, it’s not like my life is in my hands anymore anyways, right, *Master?*” I cringed. “Ya know that whole Master thing was just a spur of the moment kinda-“ “I know, I know.”, she said, calmly. “But it might be to go with anyways.” Lucas raised an eyebrow. “Did I miss something?” “Nothing important.”, I snorted. “Just keep an eye on Little Miss Genocide here, and keep an eye on me if ya think I’m not keeping a good enough eye on her. And keep an eye on yerself if you suspect that yer not keeping a good enough eye on me or on Sabarene.” “I only have so many eyes.”, Lucas said, glumly. He rubbed his messy blonde hair and smiled. “Besides, I don’t need to keep my eye on you anymore, Four. You’ve already proven yourself to be a good, upstanding person.” This time, I raised an eyebrow. “I have?” “She has?” “Well, relatively speaking.”, Lucas breathed out, tilting his head back to stare at the ship’s low metal ceiling. “In many aspects you’re still a work in progress, but... compared to the woman I knew...” A pained expression flashed across Lucas’s face, but he forced it off

with a smile. "Well, I don't think you'll be destroying dimensions any time soon." I paused, and then asked a question I didn't really want the answer to. "What the heck was that realm stuff about, anyways?" "I mean, it's as I said." Lucas yawned. "There are infinite realities out there, spaces and places which exist side by side and yet don't really coexist at all. I like to call them realms, Phi- Thief called them dimensions, but the short of it is that they are divergent paths of existence that seem to have a troubling tendency of converging even when all principles of quantum mechanics and general relativity state that even the most minute interaction between them should be metaphysically impossible." He tugged a bit on a messy lock of his blonde hair and continued. "Like, for example, you were born in a Realm where life managed to form on a planet located equidistantly between two suns, and I was born in a Realm where life managed to form on a planet which contained the state of New Jersey. Obviously, both possibilities have an astronomically low chance of occurring even on their own, so them occurring simultaneously isn't just impossible, it's contradictory. You can exist, and I can exist, but we shouldn't be able to exist together, because each of our existences should, in theory, deny the other." "Yet here we are.", I cooed, lightly flicking Lucas on the ear. The messy haired blonde boy shuddered at my touch. "Yeah, here we are.", he sighed, burying his head in his palms. "Man, this whole thing really got out of hand." "Um, sorry about that.", Sabarene said, bleakly. "Oh I had you figured out the moment I met you, General.", Lucas said, rolling his eyes. "I just didn't expect you to be working with *him*." "It was less a partnership and more a quid pro quo, actually.", Sabarene sighed. "He promised to donate a chestful of metal coins to my stall if I agreed to listen to what he had to say." She looked over her shoulder, through the still open hatch, out at the



smoldering ruins of Provesh. "And, um, I did." "Thief always did have a talent for bring out the worst in people." Lucas said, dryly. Sabarene lifted her head up and looked the blond haired boy in the eyes. "What was your relationship with Mister Thief, anyways? You both crossed between the realms, you both seem to know about the modules... are you the angel to his devil?" Lucas shifted uncomfortably. "It's... the other way around, actually." I glared at Lucas, and flicked his ear once against with my metal index finger. "Self-deprecation has limits, ya know." "I'm not deprecating, I'm telling the truth.", he said, sadly. "All that stuff about modules and protecting the world slash worlds, that was a lie. I came here so I could see you again, Four. That's it." "Seems like a selfless kinda selfishness, Ruckus.", I said, softly. "No.", the still shirtless boy said, shaking his head. "Thief... or rather, the man he once was... he was selfless. He was abrasive, insensitive, sarcastic, smug, and reckless, but he would always put the needs of others above his own. He gave and gave and gave and gave, even when he had nothing left." Lucas rubbed his eye, and smiled, slightly. "Even what he was doing in this realm was probably motivated out of a twisted sense of selflessness." "Twisted is understating it.", I said, dryly. "At least he's gone now." Lucas looked like he wanted to say something, but remained silent. "What?", I asked, unnerved. Lucas still remained silent. "Mister Thief isn't really dead, is he?", Sabarene said, filling the uncomfortable silence with her uncomfortable politeness. "No, he's- he's dead.", Lucas said, firmly. "This iteration of him, at least.", he added, quietly. "This iteration?" "Yes, this iteration, I just said that, there's no need to repeat it!", Lucas snapped, then calmed down. "Sorry. Sometimes I forget what seems like common sense to me is batshit crazy to normal people." "I don't think anyone here is normal.", I snorted, then glared into the blonde haired boy's eyes.

“So if I only killed one iteration of Thief, how many other iterations are there?” “How many stars are there in the sky?”, Lucas responded, dryly. “So there’s only about a hundred and thirty eight of him left, good ta-“ “I was speaking metaphorically!”, he shouted, then lowered his voice. “Thief, like me, like Mykchaela, and like another version of you, crossed realms. We crossed between space and time. The space part is simple enough, but it’s the time part that makes things all screwy. Once you demonstrate the ability to go back in time, it creates a Schrodinger’s Cat-like scenario.” Sabarene and I just stared at Lucas, blankly. “Oh right, right, you guys have no idea who Schrodinger is. Well, neither do I, to be honest, but Schrodinger’s Cat is a way of expressing that at the crux of any given decision, there are at least two possible outcomes, and until a decision is made, both of those outcomes are equally valid.” “Unless of course the decision has been made from the beginning and you’re only pretending to consider another outcome so as to make others think you’re compassionate.”, Sabarene added, sweetly. “We’re talking about metaphysics, not manipulation, Sister.” “It don’t matter what we’re talking about, the short of what yer saying is that Thief’s immortal, right?”, I cut in, feeling slightly agitated. “No. Well, maybe.”, Lucas answered, biting his thumb. “Sure, the Thief in this Realm doing this scheme was dealt with, but there might be another Thief from another Realm doing another scheme, from a timeline where he decided to have Cheerios for Breakfast instead of Frosted Flakes.” “Oh, so he ain’t immortal, he’s just theoretically infinite.”, I grumbled. “That’s much better.” “Well, it’s not much worse.”, Lucas responded. “It’s highly highly improbable we’ll ever have to deal with him again.” He bit his bottom lip and turned his head down. “Him... and Mychaela...” I gently laid my hand onto Lucas’

quivering shoulder. “Hey, those two... the Phil and Mychaela in your memories... they’re your friends. The folks you met here... they were just strangers who happened to resemble them. They’re Thief and Swordarm Red One, not Phil and Mychalea.” “And you’re Axeman Red Four, not Fortuna Splendour.”, Lucas said, sadly. I tightened my fist, and stood up. I looked out at what remained of Provesh one last time, and then slammed the hatch of the ship closed. “I’m neither.”, I said, my back still turned to Lucas and Sabarene. “If Fortuna Splendour is the future I’ve avoided, then Axeman Red Four is the past I reject. I won’t be held back by a fear of what’s to come, and I’ll move forward free of the shackles that once defined me.” I twisted my neck back at them, and smiled. “Y’all are welcome to do the same, if ya want.” “A-are you serious?”, Sabarene babbled, flabbergasted. “Of course I’m serious. What I said to you about wanting to want to change, what I said about being everything, and nothing... that wasn’t just spur of the moment nonsense. And if it was, well, I’m willing ta lie and act like it wasn’t. Right now, we all have a chance to try and live for something. Cause... if ya think about it, ain’t that better? Ain’t it better ta live for something, then ta die for it? Any idiot can just go and throw away their life – fer their ideals, fer power, for love... it’s a lot more impressive to live. And a lot harder, too.” “But what can I live for?”, Lucas sighed, staring at me uneasily. “I already fulfilled my promise, I already made sure that you didn’t turn out like Fortuna did. I don’t have anything else to do. At this point, I’m just intruding.” “Didn’t you say something about retrieving the modules?”, I asked, slyly. “I remember you telling me that they were a great threat ta the Continent, and what not.” “That was a lie, Four. It was just an excuse for me to tag along with you.” “Then make that lie a reality.”, I said, flashing Lucas a fangy grin. “I mean, ya don’t really need a reason to be

with me, but as much as ya say collecting the modules was a lie, it's a matter of fact that those things are dangerous in the wrong hands. Why not keep that little charade of yers up until you find something else to live for? At the very worst, we end up with more of those magical gems." "Um... I hate to be a bother, but where are we *literally* ending up?", Sabarene asked, biting her lip. "We're all exiled from the Continent, remember? I know you're going full tilt with this "turn over a new leaf" thing, but unless your dream is to live on a boat, you should really drop me off at Fremdos so Desnion will pardon you." "Like I give a crap about living on the Continent.", I snorted. "Besides, if that Unassigned Girl did as I said and revived Marston and Kundare, it's about to become a whole lot more boring." "But what about your friends?", Sabarene asked, her face deathly serious. "What about Mister Blue?" "Well, you and Ruckus are my friends now.", I said, knowing that the truth was a bit more complicated than that. "As for Blue... he's strong, and more importantly, he's smart. He'll be fine, uh... assuming that he's fine." "Guess I better get used to eating fish, then.", Sabarene muttered, then paused, then started to snicker at her own words. "...We're not gonna live on a boat.", I stated, but Sabarene continued to snicker. "Well, where *are* we going to live?" Lucas asked, resting his hands on the back of his head. "If we're banned from the Continent, I imagine we're going to have to get used to life on the high seas as pirates or something." He squinted at my shifted eyepatch, and smiled, goofily. "Oh hey, you can be the Captain!" "We're not gonna be pirates.", I said, lightly flicking Lucas on the ear. "We'll sail off the Continent, and go Offland." "Yes, and what's Offland, exactly?" "It's exactly as it sounds like, Mister Lucas.", Sabarene chimed in, finally over her snickering fit. "Offland is land that's not on the Continent, but usually we say offland to refer to a series of islands a good distance

away from Fremdos's shore." She narrowed her eyes. "Wait a moment, don't you know this already, Mister Lucas?" "Sorry, sorry.", Lucas said, holding his gloveless hands up. "Just as some people feign ignorance, I have this terrible habit of feigning knowledge." "Well, whether ya know or not ain't important.", I said, plainly. "Do you remember seeing those shirtless folks?" "What, you mean Nielente?", Lucas asked. "No, not- not Nielente.", I said, wincing a bit, and thinking for a brief moment that maybe I should have held on to the recovery module after all. "The shirtless folks in Provesh. Usually mixed up with the Unassigned. They have weird bronze skin, instead a white or brown like a normal person. Some of them even have brown hair, if you can believe that." "Stranger things have happened.", Lucas said, flatly. "So you're saying we're going to go there? Offland? What's Offland?" "Nobody knows, Mister Lucas.", Sabarene said, wiggling her fingers spookily. "The Offlanders who wash up on the Continent never speak to anyone but other Offlanders, and every ship that the Collective sent to reach the islands never returned." "That's a rather compelling argument to *not* go Offland, isn't it?" "Well, where else do you expect an infamous war criminal, a compulsive backstabbing liar, and an accomplice by inaction to go?", I asked, sweetly. "Christ, we really are the bad guys, aren't we?", Lucas groaned, then frowned. "Wait, I'm only an accomplice?" "No, you're a victim, Mister Lucas.", Sabarene said, sadly, softly. "You too, Miss Axeman Red Fo-UMPH!" "...He's not a victim.", I huffed, wiping her saliva from my lips. "Neither am I." "But... but you *are*.", Sabarene whimpered, on the verge of tears. "I did such awful things to both of you, and- and here I am, alive and well. I don't *deserve*-"  
"Deserve has nothing to do with it~", Lucas and I said, simultaneously. I narrowed my eye at the blonde haired boy, then turned back to Sabarene. "...As I... As we were

saying, deserve has nothing to do with it. Your death might mean a lot to a whole bunch of people, but your life means a heckuva lot more to me. It ain't fair, and it ain't just, but I ain't fair, and I ain't just. If it helps, view your continued survival as the ultimate victory of evil, or something." "Or view it as a chance to right the wrongs you've done.", Lucas added, gently. "I'd have to live for five thousand cycles to do that...", Sabarene said, ruefully. "Well, ya might as well shoot fer it.", I snorted. "Cause if there's an afterlife you're pretty screwed." "What, and you're not?!", the white haired girl blurted, punching my arm. "Course not, I'm perfect.", I laughed. Sabarene didn't laugh with me. Instead, she just looked down at the floor, expressionless. "Uh, look, I was just messing around." I blathered, backpedalling quickly. "I don't really think there's an afterlife-" "It's not that.", Sabarene said, quietly. "Then what is it?", I asked, somewhat concerned, somewhat afraid. "Well, you said you've rejected the name Axeman Red Four, right?", Sabarene asked, looking up at me and smiling broadly. "If that's true, what's your new name going to be?" "Oh, uh... Axe, of course!", I blathered, then crossed my arms confidently. Lucas shook his head and waved his hand back and forth. "Ehhhh..." "Uh, fine, how about... Manred Four?", I put out, feigning as much confidence as I could. "That doesn't really work either...", Sabarene muttered. "Well, what's a name supposed ta sound like?", I asked, rubbing my neck. "A name can sound however you'd like it to sound.", Lucas commented, "But usually you'd want it to have some kind of deeper meaning." "Deeper meaning, huh...", I mused. I closed my eye, and pretended to think. "How about Amelia?" "Amelia?", Lucas repeated. "Yeah, Amelia, I just said that, there's no need ta- aw, forget it.", I said, softly. "How does Amelia sound?" "Uh, fine, but why Amelia?", Lucas asked, unusually intrigued. "Did you pick it up from one of the books I had? I'm

thinking it was Slayers, but I only had volume 12 of Slayers on me, and Princess Amelia Wil Tesla Seyruun stops appearing in Slayers after volume 8.” “She can’t read, Mister Lucas.”, Sabarene said, bluntly. “Oh, right.”, Lucas muttered, then scratched his head. “Then why Amelia?” “Y’know, I don’t know. It was the name sunshine over there had me take when we first left Provesh.” “Oh yeah, I remember that.”, Lucas chuckled. “You were wearing white robes and calling yourself Sister Amelia, even though it was obvious you had no idea what a Sister was.” He tilted his head towards Sabarene. “So why did you pick the name Amelia?” “Oh, your mother.”, Lucas said, then froze up in horror. “Oh... your mother... who you-“ “Killed, yes.”, Sabarene finished, an eerie detachment in her words. “One of many causalities that occurred when several rural areas of Merchenze rebelled. I had the fields burned. My father perished as well.” I thought back to Marston’s tear filled words, and licked my dried lips. “Uh, maybe I should pick another name.” “No, stick with Amelia.”, Sabarene said, placing her hand on mine. “It’s a beautiful name.” “Fine, then... my name’ll be Amelia.”, I said, then paused. “Amelia Red.”, I declared, firm, and resolute. Lucas opened his mouth. “I don’t care if it sounds stupid.”, I blurted, somewhat defensively. “It’s my name and I’m sticking with it.” “That’s not it at all, Fou, uh- Amelia.”, the blonde haired boy said, gently. “Your name is just fine. But it’s as you said, you’re not Axeman Red Four, and you’re not Fortuna Splendour.” He got up on his feet, and walked towards the ship’s exit hatch. “And that’s precisely why I need to leave.” “Wait, what?”, I asked, shocked. “Didn’t you just say that you were gonna stay?” Lucas smiled, sadly. “It’s as I said. I came to this Realm because I made a promise to a friend. I promised her that I would ensure she turned out differently from the way she was. And up until recently, I thought I succeeded in fulfilling

that promise. But it wasn't me who made you change, Amelia. It was you. You overcame your own destiny." He shook his head. "No, it's not even that. You're someone different altogether. All of my fighting and fussing... it was pointless. I wasn't helping you avoid Fortuna's fate. I was actively steering you towards it." He tightened his fist. "So I'm going to leave, and end this perpetual cycl-AH!" Midway through his speech, Lucas tripped and fell facefirst on the ground. "Whoops.", Sabarene said, flatly, as she pulled back her extended shin. "The hell did you do that for?!", Lucas fumed, red in the face. "I didn't do anything, Mister Lucas.", Sabarene whistled, looking away from the blonde haired boy. "But maybe before you leave us forever and go out into the freezing cold, you might want to put on a shirt?" Lucas froze up. "Ah. Yes, that- that might be a good idea." The white haired girl rolled her eyes. "Oh, and it probably isn't my place to say this, but have you ever considered that maybe Miss Amelia might want you to stick around anyways?" "That- really doesn't have anything to do with it.". Lucas muttered, self-consciously. "It has everything ta do with it, moron.", I snorted, lightly flicking him on the forehead. "I don't really know what the deal is with that Fortuna crap is, and I don't think I'll ever know. If you were my lover in a past life or an enemy or both, I really can't say. Even if I could, it wouldn't matter anyhow. You – Lucas Gandulfadore Melloi the Third – are important to me. Not to the past me, not to the future me, but the present me, the *me-me*. And the *me-me* feels a whole lot better having you around then the *me-me* does not." Lucas looked at me with wet blue eyes. "That sounds absolutely retarded, Patchy." "It ain't retarded.", I chuckled. "It's differently abled." "Well fine.", Lucas huffed, crossing his arms. "I'll stick around a little while longer, but only to make sure that you and the albino don't end up conquering or



destroying this Realm. You two better be grateful, though. Most people aren't so lucky as to have an amazingly brilliant and talented Sorcerer at their disposal." I looked over to Sabarene, then to Lucas, then to Sabarene again. "Ok, are we good now?", I asked, gently. "Are we over our crippling guilt, anxiety, and fear of the future?" "Fuck no.", Sabarene snorted, then smiled. "But we can pretend to be. And, um, as you said... if we pretend we're good, if we lie to ourselves and act like we can get better... if we constantly lie and tell ourselves we're good decent people then maybe, maybe one morning we'll wake up, and-" "And we will be.", I finished, with a smile. "But I doubt that'll happen.", I lied.