

Adventure Incorporated Presents

Secrets of New Meritta Vol. 2

A Short Story Collection



Collected Stories

Omen

By Stephanie Crugnola

Royal Wedding

By Stephanie Crugnola

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By Anthony Reed

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Omen

“Wait!” Carter threw his arm out to block Nix from moving forward, the green of his scales just grazing the fiery red of her hair.

“I already checked, there’s no magic. We’re clear.” She rolled her eyes and continued moving forward without needing to duck.

“Just,” Carter grabbed the hood on the back of Nix’s robe and she grunted to plant her feet, “listen just because there isn’t magic doesn’t mean there aren’t any traps. Magic isn’t the only way to stop someone.”

“You’re just mad ‘cause you can’t do any,” she snapped, but she stopped anyway because she knew he was at least a little bit right.

Carter stood up a little straighter, proving only to himself that his strength was better than spells anyway, but as he did he had to swing his head to the side to avoid an arrow hissing past his ear.

“Murkas be damned, Quentin,” he growled, “a little warning?”

“Sorry, sor-sorry,” Quentin threw his hands up in apology and scrambled out from the tombstone he had been perched behind, “I just thought I’d see if there was a movement sensor...or... something.”

All five members of the party turned their heads in unison from Quentin to the arrow sticking into the ground just past the arch of the crypt. They waited for a moment and when nothing happened, Carter shrugged and let go of Nix’s hood.

By the time Nix finished scowling at Carter and trying to smooth out her always-wrinkled robes, Scurm had already pushed past both of them towards the dark entrance. They turned their focus forward and followed. Tyven, who held a monopoly on patience in the group, waited for Quentin to catch up before falling in behind the rest.

The day in Varina was warm and bright; the sky was so brilliantly clear and blue Tyven was sure she could see straight through to the heavens. The eerie blackness that waited right inside the crypt seemed too unnatural and out of place for such an otherwise perfect day. She took one last look up as a golden star shot across the sky. A shooting star in the middle of the day had to be a sign of good luck, so she centered the nerves that had been trying to rise inside her, and entered the darkness.

The heat had been weighing on the party all day, as they had arrived from the crisp mountain air of Emberfall immediately into the river-fed humidity of southern Varina, but as soon as they entered the crypt there was a rush of a familiar chill.

Nix reached a hand into her bag and fished around for a moment before closing her fingers around a small grey stone. When she brought it out she muttered a few words under her breath and the crypt suddenly was filled with a dull yellow light.

“Well I was right that there weren’t any traps,” Nix said, moving the stone around so the light bounced off of each wall, “but I’m not sold that Kaolith had the right place.”

The five of them had little room to move now that they were all inside. They had been expecting stairs or a tunnel once they entered, something that would lead them to the treasure they sought, but the crypt was empty and the space was tight. Carter spun around, scanning the smooth stone walls, and Quentin and Tyven hopped slightly to avoid being hit by his tail.

“Shouldn’t there at least be like, a dead guy or something in here?” Carter asked.

“Not necessarily,” Tyven’s soft voice hung in the still air. “Varina nobility are in the habit of buying tombs well before they pass so they can be sure the accommodations properly reflect their status.”

“Huh,” Carter grunted, “well this is the one Kaolith sent us to so there has to be something.”

“Or maybe,” Nix countered, “his calculations were off and we should just try another one. There are a hundred just like this in this cemetery.”

“You’ve met him.” There was a gruffness in Carter’s voice that got deeper when he was heated. “That man’s never been wrong about anything in his life.”

“I’m not saying he’s wrong,” Nix said, trying to toughen her voice to match Carter’s, “I’m just saying that maybe he was a little bit *off*.”

“What, do you think you’re better than Kaolith now?” Carter glared down at Nix. “You learn some new tricks and you think you know more than him?”

“That’s not what I’m saying.” Even though she was half his size, Nix wasn’t intimidated by Carter’s looming frame. “It’s just clearly there’s nothing here so we shouldn’t be wasting our time in--”

“Oh now Kaolith’s just wasting our time?”

“That’s not what I said, Carter!”

“Hey guys,” Quentin tried to cut through the yelling, “maybe let’s just settle down and--”

“Shut up Quentin!” they both snapped in unison.

“If Kaolith sent us to this exact crypt, then there is something we must be missing,” Tyven’s voice was calm and steady, and the argument was over.

“OPEN!” The tense silence was broken as Scurm started banging on the wall. “OPEN NOW!”

“Scurm, stop it,” Carter tried to grab him but he ducked under Carter’s arm and moved to start hitting another wall.

“OPEN!” He yelled louder, fists slamming into the stone. As he caught a corner with one of his blows, the rough skin on his hand cracked and blood started trickling down his arm. Numb to most pain, he continued wailing on the wall, smearing his blood in deep red streaks across the light grey stone.

“OPEN!” He screamed again, but his word was lost in the yells of the others as the floor dissolved from under them and they fell into the darkness.

The party fell in a heap on a cool, stone floor, limbs slumped over limbs and faces kneed into the ground.

“Get off,” Nix threw an elbow up behind her and it caught Carter’s rough scales. He grunted with offense but rolled over anyway, onto Quentin’s bony frame.

There were several more growls and blows that would surely turn to bruises, but eventually they untangled themselves and Nix grabbed her light stone from where it had fallen. She shone the light in front of them and could see that Kolith had certainly been right about the crypt holding more secrets than it initially presented.

Nix held her breath, expecting an “I told you so” from Carter, but it never came. They were all too shaken from the sudden drop to hold onto the argument of moments before.

The corridor ended twenty feet in front of them, a stone door inset from the rest of the wall. Next to it, there was a large, hollow, deep wheel that reached almost to the ceiling. Nix began walking towards it, casting her light around its gears.

“Careful,” Carter said with an unusual softness as Nix reached out her hand, “might... y’know... be a trap.”

Nix nodded, maintaining the civility, and cast mage hand. A bright red hand appeared in front of her, outline shimmering like heat waves, and she sent it to the wheel. The hand grabbed the side of the wheel and Nix's face screwed up in concentration and effort as she tried to pull it around.

Since no trap was triggered, Carter walked up to the wheel and added his strength. The wheel creaked and began to spin. As it did, the door in front of them began to slowly rise. They kept pulling the wheel around, using its weight to help propel the movement, and the door disappeared completely into the ceiling. Just beyond, they could see a room with hints of metal glittering at the edge of the dim cast of light.

Carter began to move forward towards the door, but as soon as he dropped his hand from the wheel the door slammed shut, casting a cloud of dust up around them.

"Murkas-be-damned!" Carter spat and coughed, clearing the dirt from his lungs as he jumped back from the door.

"We need to keep the wheel spinning," Tyven said, placing a hand gently on the side of it and raising her eyebrows towards Nix.

"I don't have a spell for that," she said, ducking her head into the wheel to see if it had any sort of extra catch.

"RUN!" Scurm pushed his way to the front of the group, "I RUN."

"Scurm," Nix rolled her eyes, "what are you talking about?"

"I RUN, DOOR OPEN." He said matter-of-factly, which was the only way he ever said anything, and stepped into the wheel. It was just large enough that his small frame could stand inside of it without ducking, and he took a few stomping steps. The wheel groaned and moved again.

As he picked up speed the door rose faster, and stayed open as Scurm kept running.

"GO!" He huffed, maintaining his pace.

Quentin looked to Carter and Nix looked to Tyven; both of them nodded and the four moved through the open door.

"We'll come back through once we get the knife," Carter assured Scurm, turning his back to enter the second chamber.

When they entered, they saw at least a dozen pieces of what looked to be broken silver statues strewn about the room. At the far end there was another door and in the middle there was a pedestal with a silver rod protruding from the center.

Carter picked up the piece of the statue nearest him, clearly no longer worried about traps, and examined it. It had a hole in the center and looked to be the face of a ram, its horns curled back and teeth bared. It seemed to be mocking Carter as he stared into its silver-sculpted eyes.

“Looks like feet with a long tail, maybe a monkey?” Nix called from across the room where she was examining one of the other pieces.

“I’ve got a head,” Carter called back, “ram though. Does yours have a hole through the center?”

“Yeah,” Nix said after flipping it over to check.

“Try it on the thing,” Carter pointed to the podium in the center.

Nix’s hands barely reached the top of the podium, so she handed the base of the sculpture to Quentin, who threaded it over the rod. A loud click echoed through the chamber, and before Quentin had a chance to take his hands away there was a sizzling sound and the base glowed red with heat.

Quentin yelped and swore, and as he struggled to pull his hands off the statue it crumbled to ash.

“I...I told you this stuff could have traps,” Carter said with a hint of embarrassment in his voice.

“I’ve got another piece here,” Nix said, after sifting through the pieces to find another base, “looks like a bear?”

She summoned her mage hand and grabbed the foot of the bear. “Let’s try it this way.” The silver was lighter than it looked and she was able to float it up over the rod and onto the pedestal.

They all held their breaths for a moment after the click sounded, then watched as the feet of the bear folded up into themselves, trapping Nix’s mage hand in a tight grip. She tried for a moment to will it out of the trap, but before she made any progress the statue base crumbled.

“Here,” Tyven walked up to the pedestal holding the silver hooves of a ram, and held it out towards Nix’s mage hand. Nix took a deep breath and set the statue through the rod. There was no sound, no trap. The ram hooves stood perfectly still on top of the pedestal.

"I've got the head here," Carter offered, and Nix ran to grab the third piece. This section had the curly fur of a ram's center carved into it, and when Nix placed it on top of the first piece, it stayed in silence.

Carter placed the head of the ram on top of the other two, and as he did the door to the next chamber opened. He gave a rough cheer and tried to move towards the open door. When he removed his hand from the statue, the door forcefully fell closed.

Nix rolled her eyes and Carter swore again, pushing his hand back onto the horns of the ram. The door slowly slid open once more.

"I'll stay," Quentin offered, "I can hold it down and who knows what else is in store through here so it's probably best if I just help you guys make it through."

Carter clapped Quentin on the shoulder with his free hand, causing Quentin to wince a bit, and they coordinated the shift of pressure on the statue. Once Quentin's slightly singed hand was in place and the door securely open, Carter, Nix, and Tyven continued through.

The next room was even larger than the first two, but it was filled with tilting columns. All three looked up cautiously, but the ceiling did not seem to be supported by the weight of them.

"What do you think?" Nix said, placing her hand on a column and looking back at Tyven.

"Do they move?" She asked in an answer, putting her own weight into one.

Under her pressure the column moved upright, scraping the top of the ceiling as it was centered. Nix put all of her weight into the column she was near, but her center of gravity wasn't high enough to tilt it. Carter offered his height, and straightened the column.

They waited for a moment and watched the door, but it did not move so they released the columns. Both fell back into their tilted state and Carter and Tyven tried again. They had tested six of the columns before Carter happened on the right one. As soon as he moved it upright, dust falling from the ceiling to powder his scales, the door slid open.

"By now I get it," he said gruffly, "you two go on and I'll hold this up."

Tyven followed Nix through the next door which seemed to be just an empty chamber. Nix cast her light over each of the walls in turn, trying to find whatever was in this room to open the door. On the far wall she found several stones that were offset from the rest, so she started adding pressure.

She pushed the first, and nothing happened. She pushed the second, and nothing happened. When she pushed the third, the door shot open and a ten foot tall man with skin as red as her beard and wings of metal and fire protruding from his back jumped into the room.

Nix leapt away from the buttons, and even though she took her hand away the door remained open. She swung her hands out in front of her and muttered a spell, casting a shield of fire between herself and Tyven, and the angel.

“Everything okay in there?” Carter’s rough voice yelled through the open door.

“Yeah just fine Carter,” Nix grunted back, concentrating on her shield, “no problems at all.”

“I can see the knife,” Tyven whispered as she looked into the final chamber. There was a spotlight glowing down onto a simple stone pedestal at the back of the room.

“Then go get it!” Nix yelled as the angel broke through her shield and batted her across the room. She countered by summoning two fire elementals that jumped into the face of the angel, making it stumble backwards a foot.

Tyven ran into the chamber and stared for a moment at the knife. Kaolith was right, this had to be the Dagger of Bound Will. It was a long silver blade with a brown leather handle wrapped in strips of red ribbon. She tentatively picked it up, and the light above her went out with a flash.

Below her, the ground started to rattle and rumble, and before she let panic set in she was already running. In the next chamber Nix was throwing spell after spell at the angel but it kept blocking them without taking any damage.

Tyven grabbed Nix’s arm and pulled her through the door with wide eyes signalling Carter to release his grasp on the column. It fell over and the door slammed shut, trapping the angel behind it.

“You got it?” Carter shook out his arms and raised his eyebrows at Tyven.

She nodded and kept running as the tremors in the ground continued to move towards them. They passed through the next doors; Quentin let go of the statue and Scurm stopped powering the wheel.

They could barely stand up as they reached the head of the tunnel, dim summer light peeping down from the top of the hole they had fallen through. Without pausing, trying to keep her footing from the earthquake below, Nix pulled out a smooth green stone from her bag. She threw it against the wall and a thin green circle cut like lightning into the stone.

The circle widened quickly, revealing the interior of a comfortable study. Quentin and Scurm jumped through first, followed by Carter and Nix, with Tyven checking behind her as she followed them through.

With a snap the portal closed and the ground under their feet was steady again.

“You’ve returned” a very old voice from a very old man cut through the heavy breathing of the party. His eyes remained fixed on the very old book in front of him, long, silver white hair cascading from his temples into the long, silver white beard cascading from his chin.

“We retrieved the dagger,” Tyven said, placing it on the desk in front of him.

His eyes floated up for a moment, examining the dagger and each of their faces in turn.

“Well Kaolith?” Carter asked tentatively, “is that it?” He tried to read Kaolith’s expression, but the wizard gave no hint of emotion.

“It can wait,” Kaolith said evenly, “I have more pressing business for you. Do you recall when I told you of the band of world-destroyers plaguing New Meritta?”

All five nodded silently.

“I’ve traced their next move and know where you must go.” Kaolith pulled a freshly marked map from beside his book and held it out.

Carter stepped forward, took a glance at the marking on the map, and stuffed it into his pocket.

Kaolith then held out a new green stone which Nix turned over in her hands before slipping it into her bag.

“Good luck in Emberfall,” Kaolith said, turning his eyes back to his book, “Apprehend them and bring them back here at any cost.”

A Royal Wedding

“Absolutely not.”

“Seriously?”

“I said no.”

“This isn’t fair, I’ll be the only one of my friends who won’t get to see it.”

“Tough. That’s life, I’ve made my answer clear.”

“I just don’t get why you won’t let me!”

“It’ll be a mob scene, a pickpocket paradise. You’re too small, you’ll get run over by the crowds.”

“Not if you come with me though!”

“I’m not going to spend my day watching this nonsense, the monarchy using all our tithes to put on a fancy show. You know, back in the good old days of Perrinith, they were ruled by the strongest, the fittest, a true leader and champion of—”

“Oh my stars dad, I know! You hate the dumb ‘new’ monarchy. Dad you’re not a thousand years old, stop talking about the ‘good old days’ like you were there.”

“I’m just saying it’s a reckless misuse of funds. With all of the wars brewing around New Merrita we’ve no time for gaudy parties.”

“It’s not a party, dad, it’s a wedding. A *royal* wedding! This might be the only time in our lives we get to see this! King Elletrix was king for like a billion years, King Darkheart might be the only other king I get in my lifetime! And she’s only gonna get married this once so like, it’ll ruin my whole life forever if I don’t get to go.”

“Pure foolishness, to try and—”

“What does it matter if it’s foolish? It’s fun, and she’s probably so in love, and he’s probably so handsome, and just let people enjoy something for a day! You said yourself we’ve got other things to worry about, why don’t we deserve a day off from thinking about wars and stuff.”

“You think the enemy is going to take a day off? Probably the perfect opportunity to move in.”

“Dad I am *begging* you, please take me...Mom would’ve loved this.”

“Don’t do that.”

“I’m just saying, she would’ve.”

“I...Yes. She would have.”

“So...?”

“If we get robbed or murdered I’m blaming you.”

“YES! Thank you thank you thank you!”

Celia Wiggins bounced up on her tiptoes to wrap her short, stubby arms around her father’s neck. Finnian Wiggins grunted grumpily but returned the hug with a gentler affection than his face might have shown.

For the next hour Celia was a blur, running around the Wiggins cottage to get ready. Finnian sat, drinking an early morning ale, telling her she looked fine in the hundred different outfits she changed into. She grabbed food and drink for lunch, shoved it into a satchel, and loudly declared that she was ready to go.

Celia had been waiting for the Royal Wedding ever since it was announced the month before. She had an absolute fascination with King Darkheart from the instant of her coronation and wanted to soak in every moment of her reign.

They had moved from Perrinith when Celia was six, the same age King Redridge was when she had taken the throne. Bands of Slayers, unhappy with a vampire leading their country, had set fire to outlying villages, hoping to cause change through chaos. All they caused was death.

Celia was at school, Finnian was at work, but Celia’s mother Iras had been caught at home in the blaze. King Redridge had visited each of the affected families, offering her condolences and assurance that those responsible had been caught and punished to the full extent of Perrinith law.

When she reached Celia, their eyes met on the same level and Evian felt the familiar pang of personal loss. She sat with Celia for a long time, telling her about her own father’s death at the same age. She invited Celia and Finnian to the castle for a tour, and ensured she would provide whatever assistance they would need. Finnian refused.

Since that conversation though, Celia believed that she was destined to sit on a throne one day. In her mind, she had all the right qualifications: she had reached age six and had lost a parent, which is pretty much all she knew about how someone became King.

Even though Finnian's roots traced back centuries in Perrinith, the place became unbearable for him to live in. He sought out work in another kingdom and within a month of Iras' death they were settling into their new home in Carapath.

King Elletrix afforded none of the same excitement that King Redridge had, he was just a boring old man.

Nine years had passed, and news of King Elletrix's death sparked inconsolable sadness in most, but an itching anticipation in Celia. When they announced King Darkheart as successor, she was pulled right back into the dreams of her childhood. No one had expected the Lady Darkheart to even be considered for the Carapath throne, and the scandal was thrilling.

The Lady Darkheart had never been groomed for the call of the monarchy, she was just a normal woman who had made her way to the top; Celia was inspired.

No one had any idea about the man she was supposed to be marrying, that news had come as quickly as her ascension to the throne. The rumors though, whispered that he was a brilliantly handsome adventurer: strong, dashing, fearless. Celia couldn't wait to see him.

She knew that it would be a challenge, getting her dad to agree to let her go, but it was a hurdle she was going to find any way over. She had tried begging, bargaining, and barricading herself in her room until she got too hungry and bored to stick with that tactic.

He was still bitter towards the monarchical system of New Meritta, and just didn't think the kings were doing a good enough job at keeping threats out. Once word spread that hordes of undead monsters were attacking in the south of Carapath, he talked for a week straight about moving himself and Celia to another country altogether.

Even though it came from a place of fear and protection, Celia just wanted to enjoy any connection to royalty that she could grasp. She knew the other Kings would be there, and was especially excited to see King Redridge again.

Celia grabbed Finnian's rough hand and pulled him out of his chair with not a small amount of effort. He groaned and finished the rest of his bottle, throwing it on a pile in the corner of the kitchen as he followed her to the door.

The day was perfect and Celia was right in predicting that she would have been the only one of her class to not attend the event. The streets were buzzing with excitement, fuller than they had

ever been before. Finnian pressed his hands over his pockets and scrunched his face up into the meanest scowl he could muster.

Celia bounced the whole way, skipping and twirling and practicing a fancy wave when she didn't think anyone could see her. Finnian's scowl subconsciously eased when he saw how truly happy she was. He knew that he was harsh, training her to work as his apprentice at his metalworking forge instead of letting her go to parties and other unproductive youth events, but he needed to keep an eye on her and set her on a path of safety and security.

As they neared the center of Morevia, they passed street performers and merchants selling high priced plates with the date, names, and pictures of the King and her soon-to-be husband etched into the ceramic. Celia stopped at every single one, taking in the sounds of each bard, clapping enthusiastically at each monologue recited or song sung, bouncing up and down on her toes. She examined every plate, comparing the image of the mysteriously lucky Clyde Harper and trying to decide which one would look most like him. It was clear that the merchants were no more sure of his looks than she was, some plates showed him with fiery red hair, others with a slicked back brown ponytail, and still more with wispy blonde curls.

The thickness of the crowd at the base of the Fortress made it difficult for Celia to stray any more than a foot from Finnian, and as they squeezed their way into the group of thousands who had convinced their parents much earlier in the morning to attend, Celia started to worry.

She didn't know what she had been thinking, of course there was no way she would *actually* be seen by King Darkheart or King Redridge, but she had been building up some incredible fantasy where she was noticed, pulled up to the throne, and all of a sudden best friends with the whole counsel of kings.

Celia blinked hard a few times to shake the childish thoughts out of her head, and took stock of her perspective. She could see most of the balcony, where the King and her husband would appear after the indoor ceremony to address the crowd, but she wanted a better view and to be closer to the road just in case they could catch anyone exiting the Fortress.

Grabbing Finnian's hand, she dragged him in between strangers, thanking her height for allowing her to snake her way through. They reached the main road and, happy with her new spot, Celia gave Finnian a toothy grin and a big thumbs up.

"Now what?"

"Now what, what?"

"How long do I have to stand here and wait for this thing to start?"

“Well the ceremony starts at noon which is like, in a minute, and that lasts an hour where they perform the traditional handfasting, which I heard because the King is new to the--”

“Yeah, yeah, okay. The ceremony is an hour and then they pop their heads out and wave at their *subjects*, and then--”

“Dad, shhh,” Celia elbowed him and darted her eyes around for anyone who might have heard, “be cool ok?”

“But that’s what they do, right? They come out and wave and we go home?”

“I mean, yeah basically, but it’s more than that. It’s their commitment to share their love with all of Carapath, showing that their union is for all of us to celebrate, and it’s a message of love, that love is what drives us and love is what binds us and love is what keeps--”

“Great, sounds great, sounds real productive. Can we yell back that we’d rather they share their wealth than their love?”

“DAD! NO!”

“I’m just kidding, relax,” Finnian tried to smile at the people next to them that had started to glance over, “I can’t wait to share in their love.”

Celia rolled her eyes and took a bottle of ale out of her satchel, handing it to him. She also grabbed a loaf of bread and block of cheese, splitting it between the two of them. The hour passed, hot and slow. Finnian got progressively more paranoid, moving his purse from pocket to pocket “*to confuse them*”, and even Celia was feeling the stress of standing in a tight crowd during the peak of summer.

Finally, though, the expected hour had passed and the whole crowd hushed with anticipation. Celia craned her neck around the very tall elves that had made their way in front of her, and stared wide-eyed at the balcony.

The glass paneled double doors swung open dramatically, and Celia gasped as King Darkheart stepped out. She had chosen to wear an enormous creation of pure black, rather than the simple gold gown that brides of New Merrita traditionally wore. The skirt stopped in the front at her knees, but billowed out behind her in a long train that had to be gathered to her side in order for her to fit on the balcony. The top was tight and corseted, showing off the rich tan of her skin. Her black hair was pulled back tightly, and the gold crown resting on top of her head shone brightly in contrast.

Celia had to work to pull her eyes away from the King to look at her husband. He looked nothing like any of the plate interpretations. His hair was fine and so blonde it was almost white. He was

slouching and the black suit he was wearing didn't seem to fit him quite right. Celia squinted, trying to figure out the expression on his face. He almost looked sad, his lips were set in a tight line and his eyes were cast down towards his feet.

She had not been entirely sure what to expect, but this certainly was not it. If he were a brave adventurer, shouldn't he be elated to be marrying the King? She looked powerful, stunning, and fierce, but he looked more like he was attending a funeral than his own wedding ceremony.

The rest of the kings followed onto the balcony and Celia's eyes dashed away from Clyde to King Redridge. She looked exactly as she had, the day she sat with Celia. She stood close to the awning of the Fortress, in a gown of bright purple, with a thick parasol resting over her shoulder.

King Greywood of Bradmont followed, stomping to the edge of the balcony as far from the couple as he could get, arms folded. King Garhand of Emberfall followed, slinking his way right next to King Darkheart.

King Calis of Varina stepped out to scattered applause, her gown made of a shimmering silk and covered in small diamonds, almost enough to steal the spotlight from King Darkheart's statement dress. She smiled, waved, and stood next to Clyde, grabbing his arm with congratulations and friendship. His expression did not change.

The crowd waited for a moment, expecting King Heramon of Ishtarra to be the last to join the other kings, but she did not appear. Murmurs started building in the crowd, hands were pointing and tapping the shoulders of their friends to make sure they noticed her conspicuous absence

"People of Carapath," King Darkheart spoke and the crowd snapped into silence, "I was once as you are now, a simple woman who lived to serve her King. But I knew this state had more in store for me, more in store for all of us. One day, you will inherit the treasures of Carapath, but not without your voices heard. We are Carapath and we are strong, noble, just, and true. I will lead you not just to safety, but to glory, if you stand with me. When the drums of battle beat, when the cannons roar, when the crowds sing of glory it is not just for me as your king, but for all of us. All! Of! Us!"

She accented each of her last words with a gesture towards the crowd, and, reaching her hands out to the crowd, they exploded into cheers. Celia looked up at her father, and even he was vigorously clapping. She looked at the faces of the other Kings, clapping politely, and then to Clyde, whose gaze had not moved from his feet.

Celia had expected a declaration of love, of companionship, or of hope, not this. She wondered if Clyde had even had a choice in the matter, or if this was some political match used to secure a relationship with another state or country.

As the kings retreated back into the Fortress, Celia began imagining a secret love for Clyde, a life that he was torn away from in order to serve his duty to his state. As the crowd started thinning and shuffling, she imagined a beautiful woman, blonde hair flowing in the breeze, crying at the edge of a cliff over her lost love and waiting for him to return to her in secret. This fantasy grew stronger as she blocked out her father shaking hands and sharing a toast with the people around him, cheering for Carapath as he never had cheered for anything before. The slam of the Fortress doors swinging open was the only thing to shake her out of her own mind.

The carriages began rolling through, and Celia again perked up. She wanted to get a closer look at King Redridge, at Clyde, and at the other kings she once had been so sure she'd join one day.

The carriages of King Greywood and King Garhand were the first to rattle down the road, shutters of both closed and wheels kicking up dust behind them. King Caris was next, and her carriage was open. She leaned over the side, blowing kisses and waving at all around her, welcoming the sound of applause and appreciation.

King Redridge's carriage was last, and although the windows were shaded, she still peered out to the crowds around her. Celia stood on the tip of her toes, sneaking even closer to the edge of the road. The carriage was moving slowly, and as it passed Celia felt her eyes connect with the King's. Evian's head cocked to the side and she smiled, letting her head turn to watch Celia as she passed.

Her eyes held a sadness that Celia had not seen all those years before, even though this was a time for celebration and that had been the time for mourning. As Evian passed, she turned her head again to the crowd, giving a weak smile.

Celia closed her eyes, locking the brilliant purple of her hero's eyes in her mind forever, and reached back to take her father's hand. It took a moment for him to notice, clinking bottles with strangers, but he clasped his arm around her shoulder and they began to make their journey home.

There was a heaviness in Celia's heart, leaving the wedding, where it had been so light and free before. Finnian, on the return, was as excited as Celia had been before, pointing out the merchants who were desperately trying to correct the images of Clyde on their plates after having finally seen him.

He babbled about the King "*finally getting their priorities straight*", and the promised protection of the people with so much renewed spirit that he did not notice how quiet his daughter had turned. She shuffled her feet, watching the light film of dirt on the road swirl up in front of her, only to step on it as she put her other foot down.

Celia looked down the road in front of her. She used to think the roads leading from the Fortress to her home were coated in gold dust, dissolving into pools of melted iron, but now she just saw dust turning to mud as the swamp grew thicker at the outskirts of Morevia. She thought about the fierce beauty of King Darkheart and the calm presence of King Redridge, and tried to find the source of her disappointment.

She wasn't sure if it was residual letdown from not being noticed as she had fantasized, or if it was the wording of King Darkheart's speech, or if it was the look on Clyde's face, but something in the day had turned her. The sun beat at the back of her neck and beads of sweat slid down her forehead, mixing into the tears that had started trickling from her eyes.

Kingsmeet

“We have arrived your majesty.” The dark elf guard in his hard chitin armor saluted the king from outside her carriage. She sighed, gathered herself and stepped down onto the hard cobblestones of the street beneath. The giant scorpion pulling the wagon chattered, its rider holding tightly to the reins. Layl Heramon eyed the creature and found a small amount of amusement at how out of place it likely seemed to the people of Safehaven.

Emberfall was far from Heramon’s favorite kingdom in New Meritta. Ash belched from the mountain frequently, covering the cities in a sooty grime that clung to stone, and clothes, and lungs. She also found the architecture dreary and boring. Square after square of brick. It was nothing like the elegant architecture of Vedriss. Vedriss’ colored glass, obsidian, and sandstone molded into ancient structures of vast beauty. But here she was, stuck in this dirty corner of the world, waiting for a meeting she was dreading.

Heramon and her men walked through the city to the meeting place chosen by King Garhand. The mansion belonged to an associate of Callien’s but Layl wasn’t able to get many more details. They passed through the guarded gate and Layl looked up at the mansion. She couldn’t be sure, but it looked like a large section of the wall on the second floor was newer than the rest of the building. Layl took one more resigned sigh and made her way into the building. Her guard contingent left her, meeting with Garhand’s guards to take places around the outside. As soon as she passed through the front door she found herself surrounded by the Knights of New Meritta. The elite force made up of chosen knights from all the kingdoms sworn to protect the council of kings.

“Your Majesty.” A knight standing outside the giant double doors of the main room in which the meeting would be held acknowledged her. It was one of Heramon’s, a man named Almar she had promoted a few years prior.

“Sir Almar, it is a pleasure to see you.”

“Allow me to announce you your majesty.”

“Of course.” Heramon waved Almar through the doors. He turned and stepped through the large double doors and Heramon could see that she was the last of the kings to arrive.

“Announcing, King Layl Heramon of Ishtarra.” Heramon stepped into the room. It was a grand ballroom, large columns and a great chandelier decorated the main floor. A giant wall of glass looked out the back of the ball room. On either side, a set of stairs led up to a balcony connected to the second story. It was more impressive inside than it was from the outside, Heramon had to admit. She found her seat at the table between Victoria Calis and Evian

Redridge IV. Evian nodded to her. Layl felt like she could sense in her vibrant purple eyes the same worry that Layl herself was feeling.

“Thank you for joining us Heramon.” Callien Garhand, King of Emberfall said with a steely hardness in his voice. Heramon shot him a dark look as she sat down. Garhand cleared his throat and glanced around at everyone in attendance with his one good eye. “I now call this kingsmeet to order.” Garhand was a grizzled old dwarf. Slight, and lean with a sallow face marred by large scars running on either side of the eyepatch over his right eye. Heramon had met Garhand when he was an adventurer, he had been a handsome man and a champion for good. Something in Garhand had changed. There was a darkness to him now. It worried Layl most because this was the happiest she had ever seen the man at a kingsmeet. Layered on top of the uneasy feeling she already had, Heramon was worried.

“For the first order of business, I would like to welcome our newest member. Many of you may know her for her role in King Calis’ court. What you may not know is how deep her connection to our dear departed King Elletrix went. Clearly she had earned the trust of the king and he has given us the great gift of her presence on this council. She has a sharp strategic mind, and we would do well to consider anything she might offer us on this council. King Darkheart of Carapath.” Garhand gestured at the woman in her luxurious blue dress inlaid with diamond studs. Darkheart stood and Heramon did everything she could do not to scowl.

Heramon quickly glanced around the room, looking to see if anyone shared her skepticism about the so-called Lady of Knives taking the spot as the King of Carapath. King Thormund Greywood sat with a sour expression on his face. Thormund had always been bad at hiding his emotions, and clearly he had a reason not to trust the relationship between Darkheart and Elletrix just as she had. Of all the kings on the continent, Thormund was the next closest to Elletrix aside from herself. They had enjoyed an unconventional relationship. Thormund would pound his meaty fist on the table, “If we are not serving the people of our kingdom, we have no right to rule.” Then Elletrix would spend the next hour trying to convince Thormund that whatever thing he was trying to get him to agree to would help the people of Bradmont by helping all of New Meritta. It was like a game to them and they had a deep well of mutual respect.

Heramon missed Elletrix. When she first became king, Elletrix and she had clashed many times. Layl had taken the throne with the intent of bringing back the old ways: the attacking, pillaging, and murderous ways of her people from before the Blade War. Elletrix was dogged in his pursuit to keep her following the path her predecessor had laid out before her. Her people had a hard transition from their old ways into finding a place in the world of New Meritta. Elletrix had convinced her that they would get there. In the time since, her people had started to make that transition. She had really surprised herself with how far they had come. Elletrix was so idealistic, so impractical; but he was also often right.

King Darkheart finished the speech she had been giving. Layl returned her attention to the

room. She could see the smug look on Darkheart's face and was glad she hadn't been listening. King Victoria Calis of Varina, one who had been associating with Darkheart for years, clapped softly. "Thank you, your majesty" Garhand's croaking voice came out back into the room. "I believe the good King of Perrinith had something she wished to address with the council at this time."

Evian cleared her throat and stood herself up on the chair she had been sitting on. Layl liked the young king, she was very mature for the 26 years she was; but being king from such a young age will do that to a person. Layl understood why the girl's father cursed her the way he had, but she did not envy the child. The life she was set to lead would be difficult, an eternity in the shape of a girl. "Thank you, your majesty. Noble kings of this council. I have come to you in this kingsmeet with the safety of my nation in the forefront of my mind. As many of you know, we have been beset by lizardfolk and gnolls who have murdered my people and burned our lands. My walls are holding at the capital, but I have lost much to the creatures. I am asking for help from each of you to send me troops and help me take back my land."

There was an uncomfortable shuffle. Victoria Calis was the first to speak, her black silk dress was heavily adorned with gold ornaments sewn into the fabric and she wore a mask of silver and gold. "My dear. There are many of us in the kingdoms dealing with a great many things. We cannot simply drop everything to rush in and hold your hand. My guards are busy trying to fight back the organized crime that is rampant in Varina. We don't have the resources, my dear."

"Your majesty."

"Yes, my dear?"

"No, you will address me as your majesty, your majesty." Evian stared angrily at the king of Varina. Victoria chuckled lightly.

"Of course, your majesty." Her dark eyes shot coldly at Evian from under the impassive mask. "No. Varina will not send help."

Heramon sighed quietly, it was clear from the tenor in the room this was not going to break Evian's way. It was right of her to stand up to Victoria, especially since it was pretty clear there would be no support from Varina, not that it would be of much value anyway. Heramon would try to turn the tables in her favor. "I can give you support, your majesty. Our military is not very large, but we can help."

"You could probably send regular citizens, Layl. They do still remember how to raid and murder don't they?" King Garhand sneered as he spit his nasty comment at Heramon.

Layl starred back at him sharply "I assure you they do." she said quickly with more venom than she probably ought to have.

“The fact remains, your majesty” King Darkheart said Evian in a cloyingly condescending tone, “We all face problems. We simply cannot commit troops to you on a whim. You lost your land. That was on you. It’s of no concern of ours.”

“Of course, your majesty, it would be of no concern unless my kingdom were to fall. Do you all believe they will leave your people alone?”

“There is no reason to believe they are looking for more land. The north would be plenty large enough for them and they would have no need to spread themselves thin.” Victoria added.

“Preposterous!” Evian stomped her foot on the wooden chair.

“Enough!” Garhand stood abruptly from the table. I think the point is clear here. King Heramon has offered her troops, and that will have to do. The rest of us do not have the resources to win back a land that could not be held in the first place.”

Evian let out a sigh. “Then you leave me no choice. I call upon the pact formed when this meet was created some seventy years ago. My people are in a time of crisis, and you are duty-bound as kings of New Meritta to aid them. This agreement has not been called on in the entirety of the time this council has existed, so I understand the weight of what I am asking, but I must call for conscription.” There was a wave of outrage at Evian’s words. Garhand, Darkheart, and Calis shouting over each other, Evian firing back. Heramon sat pensively. The child king took a large gamble invoking conscription. Each king would be required by law to send 20% of their troops and all of the Knights of New Meritta to aid the king. She would have three months with those soldiers. She must be able to provide food and lodging for them, and she would ultimately be responsible for refilling the ranks if they were to die.

Heramon looked at Greywood. Thormund stared down at the table sullenly. His lands were closest to Perrinith. If it were to fall, his people would be next for the lizardfolk and gnolls to turn to. He was so quiet. Unusually quiet.

Garhand slammed his gavel down on the table several times. “Quiet! The girl has invoked conscription, which is her right by the pact of this council.” Darkheart and Callis sat quietly, impassive as Garhand spoke. Evian, however, fought to fight back the flush of victory she was feeling. Heramon’s stomach turned over. Something wasn’t right. She had missed it. What was she missing? “Therefore, I, Callien Garhand, King of Emberfall, move to dissolve the council of kings and separate the kingdoms of New Meritta, returning them to sole sovereign rule.”

Heramon sat mouth agape. “W-what?” she stammered out, eyes wide, as she tried to process what was happening. She glanced around. Smirks had spread across Darkheart and Calis’ faces. Had they planned this? As soon as they were able to replace Elletrix they destroyed his legacy. Was Victoria responsible for installing Darheart as king in the first place? Was this the

long game?

“I second.” King Darkheart said. Heramon tried to regain her composure and collect her thoughts. The two of them and Garhand wouldn’t be enough to dissolve the council. It was too big a change.

“As per the rules of this council, the motion passes and two Yea votes are logged automatically, one for myself and one for the King from Carapath. King of Perrinith, you are next. I assume we know your answer, your majesty.” Garhand said with a slight smile on his lips.

Evian glanced at Heramon then looked back at Garhand. “Nay.”

Garhand nodded. “The count is two to one. King of Varina?”

“The King of Varina votes ‘Yea’, your majesty.” Victoria Callis gave a sitting curtsy as she gave her vote. Heramon grew tense.

“The count is three to one. King of Ishtarra, how do you vote?”

“The King of Ishtarra remembers the work the former king of Carapath put in to this council. The King of Ishtarra remembers what this world was like before this council held power. The King of Ishtarra votes ‘Nay’ and can scarcely believe that anyone in this room believes it wise to vote anything else.”

Heramon’s scathing commentary seemed to have little effect on its intended targets. Calis and Darkheart exchanged bemused glances. Technically, the host was given an extra vote when it came to a tiebreaker. They probably thought they had already won. Heramon refused to let something as important as this be decided by tiebreaker, however. There were protocols in place to protect the council. A tiebreaker could be contested which would allow time for debate and an opportunity to speak with advisers. She would have to find a way to speak with Garhand. He was the one most likely to be swayed.

“The count is three to two. King of Bradmont?”

Greywood sat quietly staring at the table. Too long. He sat quietly for too long. Heramon began to panic. “Thormund?”

“Your majesty!” Garhand barked. “You have made your vote. The King of Bradmont has the floor.”

Heramon shot a hot glare at Thormund, willing him to vote Nay. Thormund lifted his head and turned to look at Evian Redridge, her pale face seemingly even more pallid despite the impossibility of that.

“I’m sorry Evian. If we are not serving the people of our kingdom, we have no right to rule. I am already spread thin fighting the orcs and if you fall, they will come for me next. I have to protect Bradmont. I have to protect my people. I vote ‘Yay’.” Thormund stood from the table, and without making eye contact with Heramon he strode from the chamber.

“Four to two, the ‘Yays’ have it. I hereby dissolve the council of kings in New Meritta. Good luck to all of you, and safe passage home.” Garhand stood and left as quickly as Thormund had. Heramon sat dumbstruck as Victoria Callis and the Lady of Knives left arm in arm laughing all the way out of the ballroom. Layl sat for a long moment. Before she looked up into the quiet, contemplative face of King Evian Redridge. She truly and wholly looked defeated. She had come with a clever plan to call on the conscripture, but her opponents had been one step ahead of her. Heramon stood and moved slowly and quietly to Evian.

Layl took Evian’s hands in her own. “I will send my troops. Do what you can. Do not let your walls fall.”

Evian blinked, and nodded. “What do we do now?”

Layl’s face went grim. “I’m headed to Carapath before it gets too dangerous. I have a debt I must call in.”

Malorie the Strong Hearted

I was four years old the first time I met King Malorie the Strong Hearted. He was prince then, he had just turned five and my father was commissioned to paint his first official portrait. There are only two things I remember vividly from that day; the first is the overwhelming fear I felt upon seeing the castle at Morevia for the first time, and the second was Malorie's laugh. He giggled, high pitched and full of joy, through his entire sitting, squirming about on top of his horse and pulling faces while my father looked down at his canvas.

The rest of the day washes over me in a bit of a blur, recent memories conflating with the very first, but even now, if I close my eyes I can hear him laughing.

We were asked back five years later, marking the passage of time with paint, and by that time I had overcome my fear of the castle. It had offered such a welcome the first time that I held my head high with confidence as I strode beside my father, carrying his lighter bag of supplies. I looked around as we entered, seeing so much more of the grounds than I had dared to before. I held my breath excitedly as we waited for the prince inside the large stone chamber. His horse, Svad, had already been groomed and was tethered to a post at the far side of the room, and while my father set up his brushes and paints I went over to pet him. He was sweet and gentle, burrowing his nose into the palm of my hand as I reached up with a handful of hay from his feedbag.

Every movement in the hall made me jumpy, I had been waiting five years to see Malorie again, to hear him laugh. My father didn't know, but I had kept the rough sketch he had made from his first sitting, and studied it over the years. Sometimes I felt so foolish, starting at a hurried crayon sketch of a prince, but there was something about his white blond hair, cool grey eyes, and toothy smile that kept me coming back.

When Malorie finally burst into the studio, out of breath, he was far different than the image I had held onto in my mind. The first thing I noticed was that his hair had turned brown and there were lines streaking creases along his face. Could he really have changed so much so fast? I felt my own face for wrinkles, suddenly concerned.

As he started to come towards the chair though, he shook out his head and flecks of mud sprayed the stone floor. He used his sleeve to wipe his face and the lines began to disappear. He opened his mouth to speak, but at that moment the King strode up behind him, tugging at his collar with lips tightly pursed. He apologized to my father and told us through a strained voice that we would have to wait just a bit longer for Malorie to *compose himself*. Malorie giggled, the same joyful laugh, as his father led him back out of the room. Before the door closed I caught a glimpse of the King's hand shooting out and grabbing the collar of another boy, the same height and from the looks of it with the same amount of mud caking his face and clothes.

I had never met Maas or even seen him up close, but he was Malorie's twin brother, exactly four and a half minutes older than Malorie. This meant that Maas would, one day, inherit the throne of Carapath instead of Malorie.

The King gave the same short speech through the doorway of the chamber next to us, where I assumed Maas was sitting for his own portrait. As he spoke, the door to our room closed, stifling the speech outside.

When Malorie finally reappeared, he was much closer to what I had been picturing. His hair had darkened a bit, but not to brown, just to a rich gold color. He was taller, fitting on his horse far better than he previously had, in size and temperament. His smile hadn't changed though, and he still made light conversation throughout the day.

He asked my father all sorts of questions about his work, why he chose some colors rather than others, how he figured out proportions, and whether he would be *cool* enough to draw in some extra muscles. Then, he turned on me, firing question after question off about my life, the things I do for fun, what keeps me busy, whether I was going to become a painter like my father or if I was going to run away and have my own adventures.

I looked nervously at my father for approval before I answered any of his questions, and even when I did I was as vague and polite as possible. It was not standard for the subject to converse with the painter, and his being a prince made it especially awkward.

When the day was over, I remember him shaking my father's hand, and turning to me with his hand still outstretched. I curtsied, and he curtsied right back at me, pulling his free hand in to stretch an invisible skirt. He flashed another smile and I heard him laugh all the way back down the hallway.

The entrance for the portrait of his fifteenth year was far more dignified than his tenth, the King seemed to have gotten the wildness of his sons somewhat under control. His spirit remained the same, he was just as interested in asking questions about our lives, but they were more focused on the state of our village, our needs and desires as citizens of Carapath, and what the monarchy could do to improve our situation.

He spoke of his brother, the plans they had to scout villages like ours and ask others the same types of questions so that Maas could start implementing laws and regulations to help.

Whenever he mentioned Maas' name his face glowed with pride and admiration, it was clear that he valued nothing in the world more highly.

Twenty was a bit of a struggle, as Carapath was under attack. An army of undead had invaded from the north and Malorie and Maas were to be sent to the front lines shortly. My father painted him, upon request, at the head of an army, using sketches of all the men in our village to create the faces and bodies of the soldiers.

Watching him sit, silently on his horse, was unsettling and unfamiliar. Although I had assisted my father through many silent portraits, the stillness in this room weighed far more heavily.

Towards the end of the session Malorie apologized, telling us that his head was buzzing with maps, weaponry, and battle plans.

He pulled me aside as my father put the last finishing touches on the army around Malorie, leading me over to the corner where Svad was eating.

"I worry, Ameiah," he said, stroking Svad's nose absentmindedly, "I fear this may be our last meeting."

“Oh,” I struggled to put a sentence together. Being so informally addressed by the prince in so private a conversation after a day of silence caught me well off guard. “I’m sure you’ll be successful in the battle.”

“I know our armies are strong,” he sighed, “but father refuses to equip the front lines with magic and facing the undead I’m not sure we stand much chance with only one line of casters so far back.”

“Why won’t your dad...I mean the King...I mean His Majesty...” I trailed off, face flushing with embarrassment, but Malorie laughed.

“He doesn’t completely trust magic,” he said, answering the question without my having to finish asking it, “the last King was a very powerful Sorcerer and led the country into some troubled times. Father swore that he would temper the use of magic under his reign and not resort to using it as a weapon.”

“I see...” I didn’t quite see, the fact that Malorie was being so open about his fears was making me too nervous that I would say the wrong thing.

“I have no fear of death,” Malorie’s voice was even and he took his hand off Svad, placing it on my shoulder, “only,” he paused for a moment, “I fear the death of others. I’ve seen what war has already taken from our kingdom and I can’t bear to lose any more lives that could have been spared had my father not been so stubborn.”

He grew silent for a moment and I could sense the tension in him. It was difficult to tell, but I thought that I could see tears welling up in his eyes. He squeezed them shut for a moment before forcing a weak smile. He apologized and went back to rubbing Svad’s nose.

“Your majesty,” I started, unsure of what I could possibly say, “I—”

“Call me Mal, please.”

“I’m not sure I can, your majesty,” I stressed the last words for emphasis, looking around the room nervously.

“I won’t tell if you won’t,” he winked and smiled again.

“Ok...Mal,” I whispered the name, still worried guards would pop out of the stone and arrest me for misaddressing royalty, “have you told your fath—His Majesty—how you feel?”

“Only a thousand times,” he sighed, “I have tried to make him see reason, undead can’t only be fought with strength and steel, but he won’t listen. I’ve tried Maas too, but he isn’t in a position where he can publicly defy my father’s orders.”

I bit my lip, trying to think of the right thing to say.

“I’m sorry,” he started again after a moment, “I know I shouldn’t be burdening anyone with this, I just needed to get it off my chest and I know...or...at least I guess I hope you won’t let it slip to anyone in the castle that I’m questioning my father.”

“I already sent out a pamphlet,” I said, the same line my father would give me when I asked him to keep a secret.

Malorie threw his head back and laughed, pure and soulful laughter that bounced off the stone walls and flew right into my chest.

“For what it’s worth,” I said carefully, “I’m sure you’ll do what’s best for everyone, even if it means dressing sorcerers up like fighters and sneaking them into the front lines.”

“Thank you,” he said, still giggling, “I needed to hear that.”

He gave me a quick curtsy, smiling wide, but I could still see the worry behind his eyes.

As he left, my father and I both wished him luck in the war, and I said a silent prayer that we would see him again.

Five years of war raged on, and at the end of it my father and I were called in once more, this time to paint the heir apparent.

Prince Maas had been killed in battle, just as Malorie's troops had started to sway the balance of the war. He had, it seemed, taken my advice and started stocking his troops with casters of all sorts, using magic and muscle combined to defeat the undead.

The walls of the castle were draped with black hangings, in mourning for the lost prince, and even Svad looked tired and sad as we entered the familiar stone chamber.

I held my breath when Malorie entered, unsure of what to expect. He forced a smile as he entered, but it was with great effort. He spent the day making idle chatter, but it was clear that he was neither listening nor speaking with much great attention.

Once again at the end of our session he pulled me aside, away from my father's finishing touches.

"I wanted to thank you," he said. His face was heavy but his voice was still so clear and smooth.

"Oh," I stammered, "I don't think..."

"It was you that gave me the courage to finally start doing what I knew was right...I only wish I had taken your advice sooner."

"I'm so sorry about your brother," I blurted out too loudly.

"I feel like there's a hole inside my heart," he said, sitting on a stool, "half of myself is missing. I only pray to the gods that I'm able to do justice to his memory and one day lead this kingdom as nobly and justly as he would have."

"I know you will." I reached out my hand to comfort him, but pulled it back quickly, remembering who I was speaking to.

He smiled, with less effort this time, and took both my hands in his own.

"Just pray with me that death evades us for quite some time."

Death did not, however, evade either of us. In the next five years both of our worlds changed permanently. My father died of a sickness that swept into our village and took half our people, and the King died when a slow infection finally spread through a wound from the recent war. When we next met, Malorie was King and I was in charge of his first official portrait as such. He was a great man and a good King. He made mistakes; some of the other Kings took advantage of the fact that he was thrust into the position with very little preparation and did their best to catch him off guard in trades and treaties, but he did the best he could for his people. He did, as he so excitedly spoke of in his youth, make journeys around the country to learn what we needed, and he tried valiantly to provide as much of that as he could. He would have made his father and brother so proud. Every few years I would see him again, standing before me and speaking like old friends. As I put finishing details on his portrait he would pester me with questions and tease me as I worked. Afterward, we would talk, like we had when my father was working all the years before. Then I would pack my paints, and he would walk me to the doors of the castle.

Being king was hard on him, and it aged him quickly. For as much as he had lost, the hardest was losing Svad. His horse had been the only constant companion since his youth, and seemed to be willing himself alive to stay with his master. Just after Malorie's 40th birthday, he finally let go.

When he walked into the room to meet me the next time, it was as if the man I knew was trapped inside a thick shell. Painting him alone, standing in the center of the chamber, I noticed a darkness clouding over his bright grey eyes, and the shine fading from his golden hair. He was holding a new staff, a gift from someone – he told me – who was bargaining for peace in the kingdoms. At the top was a flaming purple crystal that swayed in the light and cast frightening shadows onto the stone floor.

Malorie's rulership had changed. Where he once focused on his people and what was best for them, he had become far more focused on the kingdoms and how they interacted with each other. He had started a war with nearby Bradmont over the rights to some forests. He had raised taxes each year and twice in one of the years. Whispers had already started around the kingdom. They no longer called him Malorie the Strong Hearted, they called him Malorie the Dark Hearted. Malorie told me that everything he did was to achieve peace, and his voice still seemed light and full of hope, but I left that session with an emptiness that even the loss of my father had not cast upon me.

The next time I saw him he was difficult and impatient. He barked orders at his servants in a way I never would have expected. His eyes were dark and his face lined with deeply set wrinkles. He spoke to me like had before but there was something wrong, something off about the way he carried himself. In the middle of the session he came over to look at the portrait and, apparently dissatisfied, he threw it and my supplies across the room.

He was quick to apologize, shaking his head; he seemed distressed over what he had done, as if something strangely unnatural had taken hold of him for those moments. I flinched, though, when he reached out to touch me, and we did not speak when the painting was done. He simply thanked me, and returned to his castle, leaving me alone in the stone chamber. Five years later, when he called on me again, I did not answer.

King Malorie Darkheart sent someone to my door every five years after that, but I refused to see him. His reign grew quiet; he no longer toured the countryside, but lived like a recluse, making decisions from behind the giant stone doors of the castle and the people resented him for it. There were rumors about his health and his state of mind, whether he was truly fit to be King at all or not, but nevertheless he continued to lead Carapath in peace.

This year I turned 74, I'm old and I'm tired, I've watched my kingdom that I love crumble and fall under a king I grew up with. There has been a great weight on my heart for thirty years, and I cannot let it sit anymore. When the servant knocked on my door this morning, requesting my presence for the King's portrait sitting tomorrow, I refused at first, as I have many times before, but I stopped. A wave of chills swept over me as soon as the thought crossed my mind. I must see him one last time. There is something left I must resolve. I slowly nodded to the boy.

A very old woman walks, shoulders hunched with the weight of several bags, through the grand doors of the castle at Morevia. She turns without thinking down a maze of corridors and settles into a large stone room. Slowly and carefully, she sets up an easel and a canvas, and lays out rows of brushes and paints.

The door behind her opens and a man strides in. He is old, but the weakness of age has not settled into his bones. He draws back his lips in a smile, revealing white teeth that should be yellow, and she allows herself to return his sign of affection in spite of herself.

They stand for hours in silence, a thick tension dancing between them. She uses her easel for support and he uses his staff, though the flames coming off the purple crystal at the top of it cast his face into shadow.

Hours pass, and the painting is complete. He nods at it approvingly.

"Ameiah," he says, his voice smoother than it should be. The old woman tenses, clutching at her chest as he says her name. "I am so happy you accepted my request this time. I have waited so long to see you again."

His voice is so familiar to her. Deep within this man she can hear the soft laughing boy with the golden hair. Behind the sallow wrinkled skin, behind the shadowy dark eyes, a strong heart was still in him, somewhere.

"It was not easy for me to return." her voice cracks and she blinks away a tear.

"I feel bad about the way things ended last time. I did not know what was happening to me, I had not learned to control my strength." He moves closer to her and she draws in tighter.

"Why?" the old woman asks, her voice trembling.

"Why what?" the man wears an inquisitive expression, it is not a question he is used to being asked.

"Why did you give up on the dreams you had for this kingdom?"

"I did what needed to be done to keep my people safe. When I was young, I was not strong enough to protect my people. I gained power, I gained wisdom, and I do what must be done."

The old woman shakes her head. "No."

"Why did you come back Ameiah? After all these years? Why now?" rage begins to build in the king. He is still so spry for his age. So strong.

"I needed to see how much of the boy I fell in love with still sat upon the throne."

"And?"

"Not enough."

The woman moves quicker than she has in years. From the cloth on her breast she withdraws a dagger. Taking advantage of the close proximity she plunges the blade into the king's chest, years of longing, love and regret radiating for a moment, and then she backs away. He looks down at the hilt with a face of shock and surprise. The old woman is crying as the king falls to his knees. The crystal on his staff flares brightly and the flames begin to travel down the wooden haft. As it travels over his skin his body darkens, even his hair rusts over. The old woman watches as dark shadow washes over the king's eyes. And he changes.

The old woman screams as the king looks up at her from the floor. He is not what he once was, a friend, a king, a man. He is something altogether darker. She turns to flee but she cannot

keep her footing, slipping on the stones of the all too familiar room. She falls to the ground and turns to see the creature looming behind her, its shadow falling across her. It opens its mouth and a dusty, mirthless chuckle escapes its horrible lips.

It says a word the woman doesn't understand, a word that resonates in her chest. It seems to shake her as it washes over her. She stares into his empty, chilling eyes as the word bounces around in her mind. Her heart stops beating. She lies on the cold stone floor in the palace of Morevia. The lich steps over her body and into the hall, slamming the door behind him.

Harper's Court

"Good morning sir! I mean....your majesty!" A voice was squeaking from underneath a pile of heavy robes. The sky blue silk, trimmed in a silvery white fur trailed along the floor completely covering the person carrying them.

"I mean King Harper!" The mound of fabric stumbled and squeaked as it shuffled through the King's chamber in the palace at Morevia, passing walls that looked as if they had been hastily redecorated and then the owner had, as quickly, changed their mind. Paint that may well have been blood, by the color, was coating the walls in a thin, scratched layer. It was clear someone had just started working to scrub and restore the walls to the clean blue color that peeked through the scuffs. Banners of black and red, featuring a collection of daggers piercing through a crown had been torn off the walls and lay in heaps at the baseboards, while sky blue banners with silver and navy peacocks were resting on a table waiting to be hung.

The figure bumped into the foot of the wide oak bed and toppled over backwards, peeking his head out from the neck of the robes. His eyes were wide and as blue as the silk he was tangled in, his hair jutting out from his freckled face in tight red curls.

"Sorry sir!" He squeaked, stepping out of the robes and gathering them up to lay them on the bed, "I mean your majesty! King Harper, your majesty...sir!" He jerked into a bow that yanked the robes off the bed and again onto the floor.

"It's...whatever," the King said, rolling out from under the heavy down comforter with a sigh. He walked over to where the boy was scrambling picked up the now heavily wrinkled robes.

"I'm so sorry your Harper! I mean your majesty!" The boy stared into the stone floor bouncing on his toes, unsure of whether to stay still or sprint to the door.

"Hey it's fine Pace," Clyde said, awkwardly patting the boy on the head in an attempt at reassurance, "I think wrinkles are more in my style anyway."

"Yes, sir...I mean--"

"Sir is fine," Clyde cut him off, "or just...y'know...Clyde...or whatever."

"Okay, sir Clyde," the boy's eyes were wide, glancing up into Clyde's face.

Clyde half chuckled as he swung the robe around his shoulders and slipped his arms through the loose sleeves. He did a bit of a twirl, half for the amusement of Pace. The boy had been

assigned to Clyde by his late wife, mostly in an effort to reinforce the fact that she thought he was no better than a child himself.

Over the short few months King Darkheart reigned, while Clyde tried to balance the already-strained relationship between the King and Adventure, Incorporated, he relied on Pace to cover for him if he were away for too long or the timing of his absence was causing unnecessary attention. Since Pace could never seem to remember which way was up, King Darkheart eventually just stopped asking.

His ascension to the throne was rather unconventional, so Clyde thought it best to keep as many things consistent as he could, plus, he found in the boy's sincere lack of skill endearing, so Pace stayed on as Clyde's attendant.

"You must be so excited for today," Pace squealed as he tugged the hem of the robes down to the floor, trying to smooth out some of the wrinkles, "your first day as real King! I mean not that you weren't a real King before, I mean you know, I know you've been King for like a few days already but you haven't gotten to do any real King stuff yet so like, are you super excited to start doing King stuff?"

"Uh," Clyde took enough pause to make up for Pace's lack thereof, "I guess so."

"Do you have big plans? Are you gonna change the way we do everything? Do you get to make big decisions? Who else is gonna be there? Have you met the other Kings? What do they bring you to eat?"

"Oh," Clyde shifted in his bare feet, "probably some meat I guess...or something..."

"Cool! Did you know that the cooks have a whole room for food here? It's as big as my house was! They have so much stuff that I've never seen before but then one of the cooks caught me looking and I told him I was lost but he yelled a lot of stuff probably you know cause cooks have a lot of secrets that they don't want other people to know but I tried to tell him I didn't know any secrets except that he keeps all the food in a room the size of a house which I figure everyone else probably already knows but anyway he was pretty mad."

"Yeah," Clyde slipped his feet into his shoes and waited to see if Pace had anything else to add. His big blue eyes were fixed on Clyde though, waiting for *him* to add to the conversation, and when neither spoke, they both started for the door.

"Sorry sir Clyde, sir!" Pace bowed, and Clyde wrinkled his forehead up to stop him, but thought better of it and headed out of his room.

He left Pace at the top of the stairs and made his way down to the King's Council room. This room had a similar feel to Clyde's bedroom, but it was clear that this room had been the priority

for redecorating. The blood paint had been completely removed and the peacock banners restored to the walls.

Already seated and waiting at the far end of the table was a collection of council members shifting uncomfortably in their seats. The room held a silence that resonated with the whispers of a quickly hushed conversation.

“Uh,” Clyde walked slowly and sat down at the open seat they had left at the head of the long table, “good morning.”

His words were greeted with cold, judgmental stares. A few of the council members muttered insincere good mornings, but most of them found the papers in front of them more engaging. Clyde swallowed hard against the growing lump in his throat.

“So, uh,” Clyde started, unsure of what, exactly, he was supposed to say, “I guess the first thing we should talk about is reaching out King Redridge, letting her know that we have troops ready to send north.”

“Your Majesty,” a half elf with greasy black hair and a long moustache cleared his throat. “While that sounds like an excellent idea,” his voice was dripping with sarcastic disdain, “we feel it would be best if we focused our energies...elsewhere.”

“Oh,” Clyde was taken aback at the instant rejection, “I mean, uh I know we have to send armies to the south to deal with the uh...y’know...undead stuff, or whatever, but--”

“Yes,” the ‘e’ was held three times as long as it needed to be, “we do need forces for the undead...*stuff*... as you say...but we must now act with full speed to reinforce the borders of Carapath.”

“Nah,” Clyde said offhand, “there’s no need... we’ve always been fine with Bradmont and Varina, we don’t need to change anything just because the Council of--”

“We surely do,” the gruff voice of the man sitting just to Clyde’s right cut in, “in times like these we need to prove that we are willing to protect our borders no matter the cost. We can’t let our attention slip. We must be ready.”

“I think,” Clyde struggled to remember the man’s name. He knew he was captain of the militia, but so many roles had been changed under Darkheart’s rule that he was still trying to wrap his head around who was who, “I think we need to adopt a different perspective than may have been suggested under past leadership. The threat of--”

“The threat to our home is more important than marching off to solve other people’s problems.” The gruff man’s voice was growing increasingly angry. Marston? Benton? What was it?

“Our allies-”

“Our allies can go to hell until we can be sure we are going to be safe!” The man was practically screaming.

“Enough!” Clyde slammed his fist on the heavy wooden table and fought to hold back the wince of pain. “I will not be interrupted again.” the gruff man pulled back in his chair, slightly surprised at the edge coming from the king. It was almost enough to destabilize Clyde but he pressed on, doing his best impression of someone in control. “Matson,” Ah, that’s what it was, “I know that you all think we need to like, stick with King Darkheart’s plan, but I just don’t think that’s the best way to move forward. I think we owe King Redridge all the help she can get, otherwise, y’know...we’ll be dealing with her lizardfolk and gnoll armies within Carapath borders soon enough. We’re sending a full battalion to Perrinith and that’s...final.” Clyde stood up from the table and did his best to keep his voice steady. “Look, I know that none of you think I should be...y’know...King, or whatever, but I am and you have to deal with it, so we’re gonna do stuff my way.”

A chorus of half hearted ‘yes, your majesty’s was mumbled, and Clyde nodded awkwardly, sitting back down.

The rest of the council was quiet and tense. Clyde managed to maintain control, but over time the agitation of the council members grew more apparent. Most of the ordinances dealt with mundane things, setting staff expectations and scheduling diplomatic meetings; the issue of sending Perrinith support had made for an unfortunately argumentative start.

The midday sun steamed as it hit the chilled windows of the castle when the council meeting finally ended. Clyde stood; he spoke with each of the advisers one on one, shaking their hands as they left except for Matson and the half-elf who left together too quickly for Clyde to have a word. When the last had gone, he collapsed back into his chair and let his head fall to the table.

He had just taken a deep breath to try and calm himself, when the patter of fast footsteps made him snap his head back up to see Pace’s head bobbing through the room, barely clearing the top of the high table.

“Sir!” he said, struggling to push in each deserted chair as he passed, “Sir Clyde! How’d it go? Did you get to sign a bunch of cool stuff? Did you all hug? Or did you all stand on the table yelling at each other? Did you get to tell everyone that you’re the King and they have to listen to what you say no matter what?”

“I mean...” Clyde chuckled, “kind of.”

“Cool, wow that’s so cool! Do you love being King so much?”

"It's..." Clyde tried to choose his words carefully, "it's a lot of work, but I think we're gonna do some good stuff..."

"I bet! I bet you're gonna be the best King we've ever had! I told my mom that when I went home this weekend but she yelled at me and said King Elletrix is the best King we've ever had but I just said that's 'cause you haven't met King Clyde! I mean King Harper, sir!"

"Your mom was right," Clyde sighed, "King Elletrix was the best King we've ever had."

"But you're gonna be even better, right?!"

"I dunno Pace," Clyde stared out of the huge stained glass windows that filled the opposite wall. He suddenly blinked and shook the straw blonde hair out of his eyes, seeing what he thought was a star shoot across the clear blue afternoon sky. "I really don't know, but I hope I can be as good as Carapath needs right now, til, y'know."

"I know..." Pace tried to sound serious, but he bounced up and down on his toes waiting for Clyde to elaborate anyway, because he didn't know. His explanation didn't come though, as Clyde stood up from the table, gave him a weak smile, and headed out of the door.

Jaques Slysong: A New Bond

Young Jaques cried and hid in his corner of the hold. To the other slaves it sounded more like a howl, and they stayed clear of him. Jaques had been trouble on the ship; he had tried to escape more than once. Jaques did not need to know their language to realize he was a prisoner. The beatings he had received after trying to fight had told him that. He had been taught about slavery in school just recently, but in his classes slavery was a thing of the past, a legend from a long long time ago during the Dark Times. Slavery had been recognized as an evil practice and strictly banned by the Greater Races thousands of years ago. Now young Jaques wondered if he would become a slave to these strange men without fur and teeth and claws and their strange language. The strange men had poked and prodded at him, inspected his teeth, pinched his ears, pulled his tail. One had been worse. One caressed his face, sniffed him, and laughed. That one scared Jaques.

Jaques felt helpless. He wanted his mother and father. He wanted to learn magic. It had been his manifestation celebration on the day he had been taken! So Jaques did the things any nine year old would do in his situation: he cried and offered up prayers to the Ancient Ones his people worshiped, the Tezcatlipoca.

Even at his young age, Jaques never would have imagined that praying to the Tezcatlipoca would summon one. In his clan, the Tezcatlipoca were elder spirits of stories and legends that often ended with a moral, and few in his society truly believed the spirits to be actual beings. And yet, while he was crying he suddenly realized that the boat had stopped rocking, and he could no longer hear the waves of the ocean, or the sounds of the men.

“Ahhh, you’ve stopped crying young one, good good!” said a voice from behind Jaques. The voice was smooth and silky, full of joy, eagerness, and predatory. When he turned around, there in front of him lounging on the ground, was a Tezcatlipoca. Jaques knew it absolutely. The creature resembled a Shifter, like Jaques, but much more... wild. He was a canine type shifter, with reddish brown fur, but instead of a human head with animal-like features, the Tezcatlipoca’s head was that of a large wild dog. All Jaques could do is stare and gape.

“Now, now, what do we have here?” said the Tezcatlipoca, “You are interesting... you are one of the Lycans, but not, no... you are beyond them. You should not be here and now...” the Tezcatlipoca paused, and then chuckled. “Yes you are interesting. And I think you will be doing fun and interesting things in this world... What is your name child?”

“Jaques” the boy managed to squeak out.

“Well then young Jaques, I am Huehucóyotl. You need not fear me, I heard your cries and have come to you with an offer. If you bond with me, become my pack and vessel, I will give you the power and knowledge to live in this world.”

“Ca-ca-can you take m-mu-me h-home?” Jaques stammered, finally beginning to find his curiosity and courage return.

“Ahh, now that is a wonderful question! Hmmm... Honestly young Jaques, I do not know... You are a very, very long way from your home, I think. Can you describe this home of yours to me?”

And suddenly Jaques felt the urge to tell Huehucóyotl everything; about his clan, about the sweeping buildings, the great domes, the hover carts... It all came out in a great bubbling gush. Afterwards, Jaques realized he could not tell how much time had passed. Suddenly he remembered that this was a Tezcatlipoca; he was speaking to an Elder Spirit, and blushed furiously.

Huehucóyotl let a silence fall between them after Jaques had finished. His bushy red tail flicked back and forth while he thought. "It will take many years, and the journey will be difficult, but if you are resolved to go home, we can try together, for I would like to see your home land. But first, you must accept me into your soul. You must let me live inside you." The Spirit reached out a hand; Jaques took it.

Eleven years later Jaques paced the deck of the Laughing Gull, scowling. Captain Avery leaned on the railing on the bow of the ship, smoking his pipe pensively, brow furrowed.

Eventually Jaques stopped pacing and let out a roar of frustration; the sea captain cocked his head at Jaques and raised a bushy eyebrow. “You know,” Avery said, “you’re not the only one who’s angry... we’ve all been screwed by Silverstorm. Going back to Varina, empty handed after having spent the entirety of our research funds, destroying one of Silverstorm’s personal vessels, the other one escaping... I assume it went back to Varina to tell that shit excuse for a nobleman. Our reputation is as good as done.”

“ZEY attacked US!” Jaques shouted back. He could feel the rage bubbling within him. “Silverstorm,” he sneered, bearing his fangs, “When we return to Varina, I will kill him. Mark my words ze wizard is dead!”

Captain Avery shook his head, let out a deep sigh and looked back out at the sea. They had been over things a dozen time already, but Jaques was consumed by his rage. Going back to Varina meant a death sentence for sure, and Avery liked his head where it was frankly. He took a deep breath and turned back to Jaques, ready to patiently explain again why they could not go home now, but Jaques stood staring blankly ahead. Avery had seen this before; once in a while

his friend would go quiet like this, and it didn't matter what you did, you could not break him out of his "trance". Jaques claimed to know nothing of the episodes, even denying they happened, but Avery knew better and suspected something more was going on. After every one of the episodes, Jaques had a new idea, insight, plan, or some scrap of information that he didn't have before. Honestly, Avery didn't care how Jaques got those snippets of information; it had saved the lives of the crew more than once since Jaques had been on board, but he did worry about his friend. So Avery waited.

A few moments later, Jaques blinked, locked eyes with Avery and grinned, "My dear Captain, I think I 'ave a plan to get us back into Varina safely, and get our revenge on ze Lord Silverstorm... What are your feelings on being a prrrivateer?"

Over the next five years Jaques, Captain Avery, and the crew of the Laughing Gull spent their time systematically tracking down and ransacking each and everyone of Lord Silverstorm's vessels. At first they simply sunk the vessels after raiding them and slaughtering the crews; then, after discovering that one of them was full of soon-to-be slaves, Jaques had another "episode" and a true plan was born. The slaves were dark elves from nomadic tribes in the deserts of Ishtara, and viewed themselves to be in the debt of the crew of the Gull. Avery and his crew taught the elves how to sail the ship they had captured, as well as how to fight on the open seas. Jaques' new plan was relatively simple: build up an armada, sail to Varina, depose Silverstorm. Technically, Silverstorm only had a bounty on their heads, so while most in Varina would turn any of the crew in for the money in a heartbeat, they would not be breaking the law by going back.

Finally, on the fifth year anniversary of their departure from New Meritta, Jaques' armada sailed into Varina's main port; an impressive 60 ships of various sizes, everyone crewed by former slaves, merchants, fisherman, and the formerly destitute of Varina who been wronged by nobility. The ships anchored themselves at the edge of the bay, and lined themselves up to form a blockade; Jaques and Avery intended to cut the Lords and Nobles off from their most important asset, their sea trade. They were smart; the armada set themselves out of range of cannon fire, and Varina's own fleet of battle ready sailing ships only numbered 40 when Jaques' armada sailed in. In short, Varina was locked in and out gunned. Jaques flew a white flag of truce on the Laughing Gull and waited.

As expected, one of the City's warships sailed and anchored their vessel a short distance from the Laughing Gull, and a very well decorated man, an Admiral Jaques guessed, came into view on deck and began speaking in a magically magnified voice.

"Her Majesty, King Victoria Calis, demands to know who exactly has the audacity to blockade our port, and why she should even consider parlaying with those who threaten her domain."

Jaques smiled and cast a minor illusion on his own voice.

“Jaques Slysong, at your service Admiral! We come only to seek recompense from a few of ze Varininan who have done terrible wrongs to ze people who currently hold zis blockade.”

Jaques nodded at a crew member prepared with a bow and arrow. The arrow had a scroll attached listing their demands. The archer fired, and Jaques watched as the arrow hit home, precisely on the deck not five feet from the now startled admiral. Felmare was the most talented archer Jaques had ever met.

The letter put their demands simply; first and foremost, the slave trade, illegal on paper but widely ignored by the nobles, would end. Furthermore, those ripped from their homes would be given compensation from the noble that had wrongly enslaved or purchased them.

To prove the legitimacy of their claims, Jaques and his men had been careful to keep any letters, reports, or items bearing a crest or seal from a noble family in Varina.

Lord Silverstorm in particular would be tried for conspiring to wrongly defame and accuse a member of the Bards College of theft, destruction of property, and murder. The Bards College was a very influential force in Varina, and under the current laws Silverstorm could be penalized by the stripping of his status and the forfeiture of all of his wealth and holdings to the parties wronged, in this case Jaques, Captain Avery, and the crew of the Laughing Gull.

If the nobles in question did not agree to these terms, the blockade would hold until Jaques and Avery could present their arguments before the next Kingsmeet. Slavery was officially banned in New Merrita, and those found harboring slaves could be punished with death, which was something King Calis would not risk. She knew of the slave trade, of course, she just chose to ignore it.

The changes were swift, and soon Jaques found himself in the former Lord Silverstorm’s place in Calis’ court. Silverstorm had been found to be the ringleader of the slave trade, and had summarily been exiled. It was there in court that Jaques met Hallarían Quiso, a powerful diviner and diplomat of Carapth in the service of King Elletrix. Shortly after meeting the pair secretly became lovers, under the guise of colleagues writing theories on Temporal Magics and the possibilities of alternate New Meritta’s existing in parallel timelines to their own.

“Would zat not be ze same thing?” Jaques asked, “An alternate plane of existence, especially one whose events are happening at a greater or lesser pace zen ze events of our own timeline, would simply be a branch of our own timeline, yes?”

Jaques looked over at his lover, his mentor, the beautiful elf lying naked next to him on the bed. The year was 1530, and Jaques was 32.

Halarian Quisoth paused and mused dreamily, “Hmmm, you make an excellent point my dear colleague.” She rolled over to face Jaques and traced a finger down Jaques well toned chest and stomach, eliciting a purr from the shifter. “But you forget, when I peer into these other existences, I use Divination magic; if you had been paying attention to our research like a good kitten you would know that the type of magic which manipulates time stems from the school of transmutation.”

Jaques sighed. It was an “argument” that they had had many times before. Still he pressed on. They were on the verge of publishing some groundbreaking theories!

“Yes, yes, *but*, what about ze spell Teleport? Is zat not ze folding of space and time to create a gateway from one point in ze space time continuum to a another point? Zat is conjuration, and in theory is zis not a manipulation of time and space?”

While making his point verbally, Jaques kissed the elf’s neck seductively. He would win her over to his point of view...

“Mmmm... Or,” Halarian said, enjoying the attention, “It could simply be a magical gate that connects one place to another.” She punctuated her argument by tilting Jaques head up and kissing him deeply on the lips. After the kiss Halarian looked Jaques square in the eye. Her face was very serious. “Jaques, why are you so obsessed with Time magic? I know you believe you come from the future, which I still say is just alternate version of our world, but you know how dangerous that magic could potentially be! A powerful enough spell could tear a hole in the fabric of reality and destroy EVERY possible reality! It could destroy existence itself! That is the kind of magic it would take to send you back to your world... would you really risk that?”

Jaques paused. His heart sank a bit. A part of him still wanted to return, but he knew the theoretical risk. The destruction of all existences, of all planes. He shuddered involuntarily. “No, my dear beautiful elven minx, no, I hope to learn how to stop such a zing from happening. After all, if creatures such as you and I can muse upon such topics, what of ze dragons? Or liches? What of any creature with a long enough lifespan and adeptness in ze high magics? No, I shall be a defender against such zings if zey should could come to pass.” He said, caressing Halarian’s cheek.

The elf smiled, seeming satisfied. She closed her eyes, wrapped her arms around Jaques and laid her head on his chest. “Jaques,” Halarian’s tone was different now; it was full of concern. Jaques was staring straight at the ceiling, mumbling to himself in his strange native tongue. Halarian had seen his episodes before.

Jaques did not like to talk about his episodes, but eventually Halli has gotten the truth out of him; Jaques was a warlock, bonded to an ancient Tezcalipoca, Huehucóyotl. It had been one

of many things about Jaques that intrigued her, but Huehue typically didn't talk to Jaques unless it was urgent. Normally Jaques had to call out for the spirit. Hallarían waited

Suddenly Jaques sat up and cried out, "No! Why now Huehue??? I'm finally happy! I... I do not even want to leave zis place anymore! I'm in love dammit!"

What followed chilled Halarian to the bone. Jaques spoke, but the voice was not his own.

"The time has come, child," said the ancient voice coming from Jaques lips. It was amused but stern. "The pact of Celestials has been reformed. The Dragons have been released and soon this land will fall to them. You must not. You will be my instrument of rebellion Jaques. You will help us fight for the natural way of this world. It is your destiny, and my right to use you as per our bond! Must I teach you a lesson, insolent pup?!"

To Halarian's horror, Jaques screamed and his body began to transform: the hair on his body grew more dense, his face elongated, and his fingers curled and grew. He clutched his head and howled as his features became distinctly more canine. Eventually, the transformation stopped, and before Hallarian stood a massive werewolf, staring at her, one razor sharp clawed hand raised and ready to strike her.

"Nooooo!" The beast cried, this time in Jaques' voice, "Stop, Huehue! Please! I'll go, just spare her! Zis has nothing to do with her, please, I'm begging you do not make me do zis!"

Then, just as quickly as the transformation Jaques returned to his normal form and sank to his knees, sweaty and shaking. Halarian rushed to him but he brushed her off and moved to gather his adventuring gear. "I have to go," he managed to croak, tears in his eyes, whilst buckling on his sword belt, "I'm sorry."

As he moved for the door Halarian grabbed his hand. "Jaques," she said, voice wavering, "I understand... I... I'll never forget you. Maybe someday we shall see each other again."

The bard turned around and let his eyes take in the beautiful creature before him "I hope so, Halli, I truly hope so," he said, wrapping the elf in his arms for the final time before he kissed her deeply. He would miss her dearly; *'Perhaps'*, Jaques thought to himself, *'this is what normal people mean when they talk about love. Yes, I think in another time or place we could have been happy together...'*

The sun beat down on Jaques, who stood stiff and still at the gates of the tournament area in Bradmont. Thanks to a skill his patron had taught him he was disguised as a guard, and keeping a watchful eye on those who entered.

You remember the plan pup? Huehuecoyotl whispered in his head. *Of course,* Jaques replied back *we wait to make sure King Clyde and his entourage enter the the tournament area, and follow them. When the timing is right we assassinate the newest King.*

Correct, Huehue responded approvingly *this should be an amusing headache for the Dragon King of Bradmont to deal with. From there we slowly work through the other Kings, making them appear as accidents... what distracts you pup?*

Jaques knew better than trying to keep his emotions from his Patron; their bond was too intimate for that. *It is my uncle Evan, there, the nasty glowering one parked over by the wall; he's waiting for something. It has been a very long time since I have seen him, but he is not fond of the dragons, of this I am aware... If he is here I am afraid he intends to do something rash.*

Oh? Intriguing... Huehue went silent, and Jaques knew that the spirit was already thinking of ways to use Evan to it's advantage. *There. Look, it is the caravan from Carapath. Watch.*

As the carts drew near, Jaques noticed two figures break off from the group and go towards Evan. It was Klug and Redbridge. That was odd; In the months and weeks prior Jaques had worked hard from afar to uncover who Clyde would use for teams in the tournament, but he dared not go too close to Morevia for fear that Hallarían, now the first Divinator, would detect his presence. To Jaques knowledge, Klug and Redbridge were Clyde's premier team.

At the same time, Huehue called to him. *Well now. Pup, who are those with the King? They have a strangeness to them. Look!* Five figures Jaques did not recognize were in the cart, two wearing masks and uniforms that clearly indicated they were one of the Usurper's teams.

I do not recognize them Huehue; the two whom I thought would fight for Clyde are talking to my uncle, can we listen?

Jaques felt the magic amplify his hearing

"... we sneak through the pits, and plant the charges. Once the King bestows his boon, I enact the ritual while he is in his true form and bring the arena down on his head. We take him out here and now." Evan said.

"Evan, that's a suicide mission. Look, let me talk to the Many Pennies; I know their story sounds insane, but..."

"FINE," his uncle exclaimed, "But I'll talk to them myself. There is one of them I trust. But even if they cannot help, I will gladly sacrifice myself to bring down the King, and even better if I get the Usurper or any of the others in the process. If it means freedom, I'll pay it with my own blood proudly. Let's go."

Oh ho, Pup! This is a turn I like! It sounds like they might do our work for us! Or perhaps better than we were planning. They might kill that Dragon, and all the other Kings with him, not just Clyde... I want to know more!

Huehue, my uncle... he... he plans on...

He plans on sacrificing himself for a cause he believes in, Pup. Your Uncle is someone you should admire. And it furthers my cause, so I'll hear no more dissent from you. Follow him.

Jaques did as his master commanded and followed his Uncle, Klug, and Redbridge into the Arena building.

Determining where Evan would meet the Many Pennies was easy; simply following Evan and changing his disguise every so often kept him unnoticed. Evan intended to go to the nobles box to meet one of these Many Pennies, an individual named Asher, while Klug and Redbridge headed down to the pits to prepare the "charges". Heuhue and Jaques jointly decided to follow Evan; both were curious about the Many Pennies.

By the time Jaques was able to sneak into the nobles box Evan was just finishing his conversation with Asher, "... Not the ring, the pits around the ring, where the fighters are."

"Ok... sure, I can... Yeah, that's fine... ok" the confused barbarian replied as Evan slinked away.

Interesting, Huehue thoughts communicated, It seems these Many Pennies will play a role today... Excellent. They have a strange scent to them Pup. Similar to yours when I first found you, but... different. Like you, they do not belong in this world, and they have arrived very recently.

Are you saying that they come from the same place I do?! Are you saying... Jaques heartbeat picked up.

Perhaps Pup, but... I do not think so, Huehue seemed to choose his words carefully, Yes, they do smell strange, and while there is a... similarity to your strangeness and theirs, it is not the same. I do not know what this means.

Relying on Hueue's gifts, Jaques managed to follow Evan, Redbridge, and Klug into the pits; they were employing their own illusion magics, but Huehue guided Jaques to a place nearby to where they stopped. And so they all waited. Asher eventually appeared, seemingly from nowhere. *Ahh, a druid!* Huehue called out in Jaques mind *Did you see him as a spider?* Jaques had not, but he got the impression Huehue was very pleased; Druids revered spirits like Huehuecóyotl, much like Jaques own people. In point of fact, Jaques recalled that many of his

clan who practiced the magical arts could change into various animal forms. He wondered, absently, if he had never left his homeland, would he have wielded similar powers to this Asher?

“... you get your ticket home and then we blow this fuckin’ place up.” Evan said, jolting Jaques out of his musing. In his mind, Jaques could feel Huehue’s excitement.

Pup this is even better than I could have dreamed! They will do our work for us AND we get to see where these strangers are from! He could hear the giddy, howling laugh reverberate inside his head; it was infectious, and while Jaques found himself grinning as well, a part of him held reservations.

Huehue... I... did you see? When the Many Pennies came with King Clyde... Halli... Jaques could feel Huehue sigh in annoyance. I only mean, Huehue, that... we could all die today if this place explodes and we are still inside... I am bound to you, and I will die for your cause if that is your desire but... you agreed, Halli-

Is to be safe, The spirit cut in, Yes that was our arrangement, I know. Jaques felt Huehue pause, thinking. For now we follow the one called Asher... He and this Redbridge can be stealthy, but you’re uncle will have illusion magic while they will not. They will need our help to place all of these devices they have talked about. There will be time to warn your mate later.

Jaques nodded to himself, approving and followed after Asher and the woman. Huehuecōyotl, was correct of course; Asher and Redbridge were incredibly stealthy, but there were too many guards. So Jaques did what he was trained to do, and reduced their numbers, hiding bodies. On one occasion he had to assume the form of one of a pair of guards, and caught himself looking directly towards the pair while they watched him pretending to make rounds. Quickly and casually he looked away pretending to be busy with his “guard duties”, so they could go about their sabotage efforts.

In another encounter, Jaques watched helplessly as Asher and Redbridged were forced to attack and kill a trio of guards he was unable to deal with before they arrived. *Stay your hand, Pup, Huehue said before Jaques could go into help, we must not be seen. If we reveal ourselves to them, we risk revealing ourselves to others; the more who know about us, the more likely the dragon will know we are here.*

When they finally finished planting charges Jaques reached out to his patron, *Huehue, they are finished... can we go to Halli now?* There was a pause. *Follow Asher back to the nobles box. Let us see what happens Pup.* Jaques nodded, knowing that was as good as he would get for the time being.

Jaques and Huehuecōyotl watched the bidding process with admiration as the Many Pennies deftly manipulated the bidding war.

Then during “The Bears” first team round Jaques saw something that surprised him; *Huehue, did you see that?!*

Gillik the Dwarf had just activated his shield and completely reflected a cone of cold the halfling wizard had just cast; Jaques knew if only one thing that could outright reflect a spell back on its caster deliberately: pure abjuration magic. Jaques had seen the effect years ago, back before he had come to New Meritta, when he was very young. Jaques still remembered the his schooling at a young age, and the advances his people had made through the discovery of the pieces of pure magic scattered throughout their land. He let Huehue access his memories of his lessons.

Very interesting pup, very interesting... these creatures are perhaps even more curious than you! Jaques felt Huehue smile *But do not worry, you are always my bond. Let us keep watching for now.* The match ended swiftly after the Cone of Cold attack, and in the intermission between bouts, Jaques noticed Jebeddo the gnome appeared to be talking to himself. He also noticed the gnome expertly pocket some items which were given to him from what appeared to be thin air; had Jaques not been actively observing the gnome he would have missed the exchange. When the gnome started to move towards the stairwell, Jaques quickly and carefully made himself invisible and followed him.

To his surprise, in stairwell Jebeddo encountered Halli. Huehue was giddy in Jaques mind, hearing that the pair were on their way down to the pit in order to give boons to the monk and dwarven warrior, but upon seeing the interactions between Jebeddo and Halli, Jaques felt the emotional turmoil rise within him. He felt rage and jealousy, wanting to lash out at the gnome, he felt his heart sink wondering if Halli had feelings for him at all anymore, and at the same time he felt... relief? Happiness even? Halli had found someone else in these dark times, someone with whom she could share a few smiles with, someone who could make her laugh, someone who could match her wit. How could Jaques deny her that? Lost in thought, he nearly dropped his concentration on the illusion spell, which earned him a rebuke from his patron.

Jaques shadowed the pair as they went about their clandestine mission, giving the fighters their secret items and bestowing the illegal spell. When the gnome finally departed, Jaques did not follow him immediately; he stayed instead, gazing at Halli from his invisibility shroud as the stairwell cleared out, wishing things could be different.

“I know you are there Jaques,” Halli said once they were alone. “Did you really think you could hide from me? I helped you learn you that spell. You can come out.”

Jaques let the spell fall. “I’m... I was not following you... ze gnome,” he began, suddenly feeling ashamed of having witnessed the interaction between Halli and Jebeddo.

“Yes, he and his friends are curious are they not?” she smiled broadly. “I take it you are here doing Huehuecōyotl’s work? Don’t worry, I’m not angry with you Jaques. It is good to see you are well.”

“Halli I... it... it iz good to see you too. Yes, I am ‘ere with Huehue... zere iz... mischief in ze works” he said with a shy grin.

“With you and Huehue here, I have no doubt,” Halli smiled in return.

“It iz not my plan zis time! Well now it iz not anyway... Evan,” Jaques began, but Halli stopped him.

“No, no, please Jaques, do not tell me. I have to be in the royalty box with the King, and he is far more powerful than myself in Divination magics. The less I know of nefarious plots the better.”

“Of course. No, you are right az always... Just be careful? Ze mischief will be very... encompassing if it works ze way it iz planned to... I would not want you to get hurt.”

“Oh Jaques...” Halli gave him a resigned sigh and a sad smile, “I do not have to be a diviner to know the dangers of the life I lead, working in secrecy with Evan and the others. But this is my choice. My life is my own to risk, and you have no claim to it. We both know that.”

Jaques nodded, and stared at the floor, unable to look the elf in the eye. “I... I’m glad you were able to find another who made you happy.” He said. “Seeing you smile and laugh... It reminded me of better times.”

“Me too.” Halli said. “I should go. The last round will start soon. Goodbye Jaques. I hope we see each other again someday.”

“I... hope so too,” Jaques said, wondering to himself if he would live through the destruction that was sure to come.

Jaques was a bundle of nerves watching the final match play out. In the end, while he was not the least bit surprised when The Bears won out over the Bissu Brothers, he found himself breathing a bit easier. The Many Pennies were victorious; they would get there boon, and Jaques found himself wondering exactly what that boon would be. They were a mystery to Huehue and himself both, and secretly Jaques wondered if, with the magic shield the dwarf possessed, they were not unlike himself...

A cold shock of realization washed over Jaques at that thought, the hairs on the back of his neck standing on end. Were they trying to go home? Is that what they would ask the dragon for? Was that even something the dragon could do? *Huehue?* Jaques probed *Is it possible?*

The thought of leaving this world now frightened him; it was the only true home he knew. Sure, it was exciting to think he could be among his own people once again, to find his parents, his sister... But that was a world he knew from only his earliest memories. New Meritta was surely more his home now, wasn't it? And he had made a promise to Hallarian.

Jaques felt something he had never felt before from his patron. Uneasiness, a lack of confidence in what the spirit said next. It caught Jaques by surprise.

*I do not know pup... that kind of magic is complicated. There are gates, to the different planes of Magic, to the Faewild, Shadowfell, Celestial Plane, Astral Plane... but you are not from those. You and those others are... similar. But not the same. None of you are from this world but I do not know how the dragon would get any of you to your homes. Your homes are... farther away. Beyond the planes as I know of them. Come pup, we must go and prepare; I can make you invisible and mask our presence to the dragon to a degree, but we must rely on the fact that he will be far more interested in these newcomers than in keeping an eye out for lurking *tezcatlipoca!**

Jaques nodded to himself and made his way down to the arena where the Many Pennies were being cheered on and congratulated by the peasants and nobles. On his way he managed to find a quiet corner in which to activate the *invisibility* and *nondetection* spells which Huehue had gifted to him.

As the halls of the arena emptied and grew quiet, Jaques silently made his way to the fighting pit where the dragon King of Bradmont had gone to meet his new champions, the Many Pennies. The shifter watched as the newly crowned champions tried to hide their secrets, and cringed as he watched them unintentionally frustrate the ancient creature; the last thing he needed was a gout of dragon's breath setting off the arcane bombs placed nearby!

Eventually the Many Pennies revealed to the King much of which Jaques and Huehue had already surmised: this troupe was from another plane of existence. What they revealed next was what got Huehuecōyotl's attention.

Ahh, yes... through the Divination leyline. That place, it is a connection point, a hub... the conjunction of all existences. To rip into that place... it will require a lot of energy from the Dragon...

Jaques felt his patron grinning in his mind, *Huehue, what do you intend to do?*

Pup, you wish for yourself to live, yes? If I can have my revenge on this Dragon today, I will give my life. Jaques heard a grim and raucous chuckle reverberate in his skull. I may even aid in destroying this world... Listen to me carefully Pup: When I command you to, you must follow the Many Pennies. Follow them as quickly as you can. If you do not, I suspect the explosion your uncle Evan makes will kill you. And if I destabilize the Dragon's focus enough to destroy the world in the process, you will cease to exist; so really, running after them is your only choice Pup.

What about Halli?!? Will she not share that fate? You promised me! You promised she would not be harmed! Damn it Huehue I---

PUP. The thought overwhelmed any of Jaques own. You wish to save her? You have precious little time. Go, now. Find her. If she can cast the invisibility spell you may both survive, if not you're only chance of living is leaving her behind!

Jaques was already sprinting through the hallways, using his keen sense of smell. Finally he found her, positioned at one of the arcane bombs. He let his invisibility drop.

"Halli! Halli! I... you are helping Evan?!? You know about ze bombs??"

"Of course Jaques!" She cried out in surprise and frustration, "This was our backup plan. Evan told me he may only be able to detonate about half of the explosions with his ritual, and it is my duty to make sure the second half go off. Now get out of here before--"

"No, you do not understand!" Jaques interrupted "It iz not just about killing ze Dragon any more! Zis world is more zen likely to be destroyed! This reality gone in smoke! Huehue is sure of it. Do you trust me??"

"End of the... What? I..."

In his mind Jaques heard Huehuecōyotl call out to him *Pup, you must hurry! He is changing into his Dragon form! He will tear open a portal soon!*

"Can you cast *invisibility*?"

"Yes"

"Zen do it now, grab my hand and follow me! If ze whole of zis reality is to be destroyed, do you not think your talents could be better used elsewhere? Do you not believe that zere are others who need your help? Jebbedo? Right now, in his reality zey fight Gorm. Ze same Gorm who caused all of zis!" Jaques was begging. He knew he had precious seconds. He began recasting *invisibility* and held out his hand.

For Halarian, Jaques words seemed to have hit home. Grimly she nodded, cast her own spell, and grabbed Jaques hand. Jaques ran as fast as he could back to the arena, nearly dragging Halarian along. As they rounded the final corner, the wails of Evan's ritual met their ears.

100 yards in front of them, they saw the massive dragon hovering in the air focusing all of his attention on a ragged portal.

PUP. GO NOW! He felt Huehue cry out in his mind. And then time seemed to slow down.

75 yards: The Druid Asher cast a spell while diving into the portal and the dragon faltered.

60 yards: The portal wavered, and grew larger, more erratic. The air felt electric.

45 yards: The Dragon brushed off the spell and began to right itself.

30 yards: Jaques felt a wrenching in his soul, and he watched as Huehuecōyotl took his true form: a great canine, sleek with glowing red eyes, perhaps a fifth of the size of the dragon.

10 yards: The Tezcatlipoca moved with blinding speed, latching it's sharp teeth onto the throat of the dragon.

5 yards: Explosions began to rock the building; Jaques could feel the heat on his back as he and Halarian were thrown through the portal and it snapped shut behind them.

All around them, Jaques and Halarian saw blue. Tunnels of flowing blue currents. They did not see the Many Pennies.

"Jaques... Where are we?" Halarian asked

Reflexively Jaques reached out for his patron... and found nothing. The connection had been severed. He felt hollow.

"Huehue... he's gone. I... No of course. He said az much..." Jaques said as he scrubbed a few tears from his eyes. "If Huehue had it right, we are inside ze leyline of divination. He said it was a nexus for all of ze realities..." he said looking around. "I suppose zis ends zat debate we were having all zat time ago... I believe I am indeed from another reality, just one very different from your own."

Halarian paused thoughtfully. "Perhaps we are both correct," she said eventually, "Who said that each universe is in sync with time? For there to be infinite realities, they would be existing infinitely in time as well. A reality, somewhere, is being born, just as one is dying... perhaps yours is out there in these tunnels Jaques, though I do not know how to find it..."

Jaques nodded thoughtfully. "So, what do we do now? I had assumed ze Many Pennies would be here, but with how unstable ze portal was when we entered... I think we may be lost."

"Notice where all the blue is flowing Jaques? Into the hallways. This dead end... I think it is a reality, if your Tezcatlipoca was correct about this being a nexus." Halarian said.

Watching the blue flow around them, something clicked for Jaques. "Zis blue... It is Magic I think! Pure magic! In my home world... zere were crystals of pure magic. Blue was divination. Zis," he gestured to the torrents of blue swirling around the tunnel that they were in, "to me it looks ze same as ze crystals but more... alive. Like blood before it has grown cold."

"So if the magic flows to this tunnel, or rather this reality... If we follow it to the source, perhaps we will find the Many Pennies!"

"It is a good as place as any to start! Better zen wandering aimlessly in zis place at any rate." Jaques said, "But we should go invisible again; who knows what lives in zis place, and I do not think I have ze powers I used to without Huehue." With that thought, Jaques tried to cast his *invisibility* spell. It failed.

"It appears," He said with grin that didn't look particularly hopeful, "zat I will have to rely on my physical abilities..."

"Do not worry Jaques," said the elf while she picked through her spell component bag, "I can cast spells for the two of us."

Soon enough the pair were once again invisible. They followed the currents of or magic for what seemed like hours, but the illusion of invisibility never fell. When the tunnel eventually opened up, they were overlooking a glowing symbol on the ground, the Many Pennies concentrating on it. A purple skinned figure with tentacles where it's mouth should be lowered itself from the ceiling, two large monstrosities with eyestalks in tow. In a sudden flash, all of the group in the glowing symbol with the exception of the half-orc cried out in pain and fell to their knees. The symbol grew brighter, and Jaques and Halarian could feel magic coming to a peak. Instinctively, still invisible, they rushed down to aid the Many Pennies, and as soon as they were both inside the glowing sigil there was a flash of blue light.

A twisting churning sensation followed, and Jaques felt like he was being stretched thin. As suddenly as the sensation had begun, it stopped, and the blue slowly receded from his vision. He was in a desert, and the full moon shone brightly above. He was no longer invisible. Looking around, Jaques did not see Halarian. Panic began to well up within him.

Reflexively he reached out with is mind and soul; Huehucóyotl was not there of course. But this was a different New Merrita. Jaques tried again. He howled out loud to his patron. He

needed Huehue more than ever. He was alone again. He had lost Hallarian. He didn't know anyone in this world. Huehuecōyotl did not come. Jaques dropped to sand, tucked his knees to his chest and cried to himself defeated. For the first time since he was a little child, captured, enslaved on a ship, he was alone again.

“Well now, what have we here.” The voice was smooth and silky, full of joy, eagerness, and predatory, just as Jaques remembered it. He looked up, and Huehuecōyotl was before him, as he had appeared in Jaques youth, a shifter like like himself, but with a fox-like head and an orange and white bushy tail. “You are certainly curious. You have the mark of my bond etched into your soul, yet I have never bonded with you. I have seen you before... No. Not you. But you. Tell me your story Pup.”