



REBIRTH & RETRIBUTION

PROLOGUE: NEW ENEMY

“Anything?”

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

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

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

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

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

He turned towards the radio operator.

“Petty officer, alert the knight and his men. I want them here immediately.”

“Aye aye, sir.”

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

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

“... President Manning and Chairman Byelikov will be meeting in Bendel later this week in commemoration of the one-year anniversary of the end of the Unification War, in other news-”

A hand reached out and cut off the radio.

“Lovely weather tonight, right Kyle?”

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

He scoffed and leaned his head back.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Very funny.”

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

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

Lee began howling with amusement. Kyle smirked in response.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Get up!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Good to see your ears work, trooper.”

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

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

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

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

Kyle looked towards him. “No shit.”

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

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

Thorne spoke up from behind.

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

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

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

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

Kyle scratched the back of his neck.

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

“Shut up Kyle.” Lee retorted.

Kyle shrugged his shoulders.

“Just saying.”

Lee knocked three times.

A grizzled and muffled voice responded from the other side.

“Come in.”

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

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

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

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

“What is it?”

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

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

Kyle nudged Lee’s shoulder.

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

“I see. Any details?”

“No, but it seemed important, sir.”

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

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

“Let’s go.”

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

Thorne piped up from behind the Knight.

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

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

“No, I don’t.”

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

Boone took notice of the man’s worries.

“I wouldn’t worry yourself too much, trooper. As long as you stick with me, you’ll be alright. I promise.”

Thorne smiled.

“Yes, thank you sir.”

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

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

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

It was Captain Sanderson, the commanding officer of the Navy personnel on the base. He stood eerily frozen within the center of the room.

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

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

"At ease."

The troopers dropped their salute in response.

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

The four men stood in front of the command table and a holographic display of the local area appeared. Though normally there would be indicators for local forces, the communications blackout only allowed for the map data to be shown.

The blue glow of the screen highlighted the captain's cleft lip and scarred cheeks, his skin almost looking like melted wax.

The captain's fingers moved with unnatural rigidity as he pointed towards their objectives.

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

Boone looked up from the screen.

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

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

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

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

"Is that clear?"

“Yes, sir!” said the troopers.

“Good. Now move out.”

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

The captain pulled out another cigar from inside his coat.

“What is it, knight?”

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

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

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

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

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

Boone began to smell the captain as he got closer, reeking with a scent of decay and rot.

The captain spoke in a low and serious tone.

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

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

“But you’re not.

Not here.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“No, sir.”

The captain smirked. “Good. Now leave.”

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

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

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

“Something wrong, sir?” asked Lee.

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

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

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

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

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

Lee jutted in. “Yeah, but this was different. I haven’t seen him act like that before. I don’t know.”

“Cut the chatter,” Boone commanded. “We’ve got a job to do.”

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

“Good luck, sir” one of them said.

Boone turned his head and nodded in response.

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

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

"Fancy lightbulb, sir" remarked Kyle.

"It's a little more than that" Boone replied jovially.

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

Kyle pointed ahead.

"See that?"

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

"Maybe they set a fire to stay warm."

"Possible" replied Boone. "But not certain. Stay alert."

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

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

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

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

"What could have caused all this?" Thorne inquired.

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

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

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

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

He looked down towards his chest.

"Sam, get out here. I need you."

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

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

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

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

"Of course, Boone."

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

Boone pointed towards Thorne.

"Stay with Sam. The other two, follow me."

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

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

"Clearly," snarked Kyle. "As if I thought it couldn't get any worse."

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

"Sir?" said Lee.

"*Shh.*"

Boone pointed to the mud ahead of them.

Footprints, clear as day etched into the murky soil.

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

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

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

“Smells like pork to me,” remarked Kyle.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Boone.”

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

“What is it? Where’s Thorne?”

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

“Xenon? Any idea what it could mean?”

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

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

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

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

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

“Yes, sir!”

The angel retreated into Boone’s chest once again.

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

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

No response.

They stopped and turned back towards the clearing.

“Thorne?”

Still nothing.

Boone went back up the mound to look for Thorne.

“Trooper, we have no time for...”

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

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

“He’s dead?” inquired Lee.

“We’re not alone then.”

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

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

A flash of light, evaporating the darkness.

A shockwave roars past them, battering the trees and their faces.

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

Crunching leaves and skittering footsteps surrounded them.

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

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

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

Fear was for others.

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

“Sir?” said Lee. “What do we do?”

The footsteps silenced for a moment, a brief reprieve.

Click

The faint pull of a trigger.

“Down!”

The air around them was torn apart by an unceasing fury of fire.

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

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

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

“Go! I’ll cover you!”

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

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

The relentless assault continued, their shots began to strike his barrier.

He continued to fire into the night. More shots struck his barrier, he couldn’t hold.

He retreated in the direction of his men, continuing to fire as he heard the crash of footsteps landing in the trench to pursue him.

Boone grabbed strands from the spool at his waist, ripping them apart accompanied by the sound of a violent guitar shred, now glowing red into a ball of holy fire. Tossing it behind him, the trench lit ablaze. He could hear the high-pitched screams of inhuman voices as he retreated further.

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

Respite.

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

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

“Breathe Boone.”

It was Sam, from within his mind.

He exhaled.

Ready.

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

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

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

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

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

“Help!”

Boone slid to an abrupt stop.

A massive creature stood no more than 50ft ahead of him, holding Kyle up by the neck.

Boone readied his rifle.

“Put the man down!”

It turned its head towards him.

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

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

Boone yelled out again.

“Do you understand me?! This is your last chance!”

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

It widened its jaws further.

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

Boone began opening fire.

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

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

An energy shield.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“We all heard stories of *your* kind as pups. Most thought of them as simple nursery tales. But our goddesses have shown us the way. Now *here we are*, with the pleasure to feel one breathing within my own paws!”

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

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

“I hope you don't break as easily as the others. I want this to last.”

She giggled, unhinging her jaw once more.

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

She lifted her head and turned towards him.

Another creature clad in glossy red metallic armor stepped up from behind her. He wasn't nearly as tall, though he was still larger than Boone. A neon green visor obscured his face. He had broad shoulders and a wide torso with a tapered waist and stood in a hunched posture. His abdomen protruded from behind like an ant. The black undersuit hid a strong physique underneath.

“Let me have my fun, Varg.”

“There are millions more of these things. Hundreds in that pen alone. Don't waste your time with one.”

She scoffed. “Of course, but it's been too *easy*... let me have my fun with this one. Besides, you wouldn't get it, s'hal...”

Varg shook his head in annoyance and walked away towards the base. “You're right, I wouldn't. Just make it quick, woman.”

She turned back towards Boone.

“Where were we? Oh, right.”

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

“Do you want to know how the other one died? He wasn't as fortunate. He tried to run. Too slow. I started with the hands. They seem to think they needs those.”

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

“He begged. Spoke. An animal begging for its life? How ludicrous. As if that made him anything more than meat.”

Boone's blood was boiling hot.

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

He wanted nothing more than to rip out her heart.

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

“The Queens will it so.” She smirked.

“RAAHHH!” Boone screamed with all his fury.

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

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

“I told you to kill that thing!”

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

“Just shut up and help me kill it!”

They began to sprint towards him.

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

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

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

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

But another swing from Boone bisected him straight down the middle, spilling purples organs and blood across the wet grass.

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

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

She vomited up blood.

“What, going to have your-“

Boone gave her no chance, picking her up by the shoulder and smashing her face repeatedly with wild haymakers accompanied by screams of pure anger. Face bloodied and bruised, he threw her back into the ground before crouching and stomping her head into the dirt, scattering gray matter and blood. He lifted his helmet slightly to spit on the corpse.

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

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

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

"Remember to breathe."

"I know, Sam."

He breathed in.

And out.

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

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

"Right."

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

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

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

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

The roar of a booming siren drowned out all other noises.

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

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

“It’s the knight, he’s here!”

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

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

“Is the captain still here?”

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

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

“But-

“Go!”

The trooper hesitated for a moment.

“Yes, knight.”

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

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

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

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

The captain turned to look at the encroaching Knight.

“Commander Boone? I wasn’t expecting you to-

A violent crack of fire and light.

The captain’s head exploded like a pinata, and his body slouched to the ground. Boone had shot him in the head with his revolver, shattering the glass behind him.

The men around him reeled in shock.

“What the hell are you doing!”

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

“The captain had been compromised; I’m assuming command here.”

One of the Gunmen pointed towards him.

“Sir!”

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

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

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

It extended its arms forwards as though beckoning them. The feminine frame twisted and stretched in an almost inviting manner.

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

A jagged smile appeared from the creature’s face.

Sharp tendril burst out from its body.

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

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

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

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

Human, that is.

He was the last.

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

A single voice cut through the fog.

“Boone! We need to run! Now!”

“Sam?”

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

It just stared.

“Run!”

He wanted to fight.

But he couldn't.

He turned and sprinted away.

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

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

He had to run, fast and far.

It might not be too late just yet.

He had to warn them.

ACT ONE: FALL

CHAPTER ONE: EMPIRE

One month prior...

The roaring winds rustled through the fur atop his head.

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

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

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

The world felt quiet.

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

“I could stay up here forever.”

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

He could hear a high-pitched cackling.

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

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

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

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

“It’s fine, Siv.”

She could never understand.

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

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

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

He rolled his eyes. *As if.*

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

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

“Nothing? Not even one interesting story?”

“Yep.”

“Really?”

“Unfortunately,” he said with a groan.

Siv sighed with disappointment.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Siv tracked a vessel roaring in the distance.

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

"Perhaps. Any reason you ask?"

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

"Just curious."

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

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

"Even now?"

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

"Yes, even now."

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

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

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

Arlo lay in silence.

His view shifted to the palace.

He turned his head towards her.

"I know they are."

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

"May I ask something of you, sir?"

"What is it?"

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

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

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

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

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

She stood up and crossed her front arms.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He lowered his head and softened his tone.

"Just please, don't."

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

"I'm sorry, sir..."

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

A deep screaming alarm echoed from beneath the clouds.

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

CURFEW IN FIVE PARCELS, it read.

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

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

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

“Will we be safe?”

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

Siv mumbled “Okay...”

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

Back to reality.

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

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

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

Siv lightly nodded.

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

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

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

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

Siv looked up to Arlo.

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

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

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

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

“Mind your presence!” screeched the irate ratoran.

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

Siv, stepped in front of him.

“Are you alright, sir?”

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

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

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

“Your Goddesses have abandoned you, maiden-folk! You have grown fat and weak, yes! For I have seen the folly; the truth! When the Mothers of the world return, who among you shall survive their just wrath? Repent; repent now I say! Or damnation shall befall us all!”

The ground quaked as the enforcers marched towards the preacher.

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

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

He pointed his sharp talon towards them.

“Your threats are meaningless, welp-servants! You no longer have divine right to your actions, no righteousness to your words! You serve no Goddesses, but the Deceiver! You fear not their absence, but their return! The maiden-folk shall know the truth, yes!”

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

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

Onlookers stood shocked at the sight.

A voice rang out from the crowd.

“His truth must not be silenced!”

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

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

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

A clinical female voice came from loudspeakers across the district.

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

The city went dark for a moment.

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

“Is it always this bad, Arlo?”

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

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

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

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

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

“Corrections Team, moving to contain.”

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

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

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

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

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

His meaty hand seized Arlo’s wrist.

“Surely you can spare but a moment?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“It was no problem, truly...”

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

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

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

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

"What was that about?" asked Siv.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What is it?"

The plate rang as he smashed it with his fist.

"It's welded shut!"

Siv stepped back, stunned.

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

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

Arlo turned his head towards the sound of rustling footsteps.

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

"Stay behind me, Siv."

She followed without a word.

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

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

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

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

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

The trio stepped closer.

Arlo’s voice was broken.

He was shaking.

“Don’t bring her into this or I’ll- “

The towering man barreled forward.

Arlo held his arm out, swinging his dagger wildly.

In vain.

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

“Stop it!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

The hulk let out a guttural roar.

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

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

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

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

The assailants let out a gasp of curiosity.

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

She brought her muzzle close and sniffed.

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

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

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

Siv sobbed, letting out a violent torrent of sadness.

“Why are you doing this to us?!”

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

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

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

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

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

A ball of hot plasma soared by.

The beggar was no more.

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

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

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

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

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

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

He lifted her head up.

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

She could barely utter a word.

“Arlo...”

“Siv!”

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

“Thank the Queens you’re alright...”

The shadow of their savior obscured them now.

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

Arlo turned to look at the man.

“I... I don’t know...”

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

“T-t-thank you...”

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

“Time for you to go home.”

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

Siv’s attention was focused only on the floor.

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

“I feel sorry for you, Arlo.”

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

“What?”

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

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

“We’re here.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Arlo continued to stare blankly ahead, as did Siv.

“Are you just going to stand there?”

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

“Sorry, father.”

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

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

“Yes, father.”

She pointed next towards the maids.

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

They jumped with excitement and glee.

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

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

“My beautiful pup!”

The woman careened down the stairs, directly before him.

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

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

“Mom, you can stop, I’m alright.”

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

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

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

“Ahem!”

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

“Yes, Chaji?”

“Inside.”

“Oh! I’m sorry!”

His mother returned him to the ground.

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

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

“Wait!” exclaimed Arlo.

Their floppy ears fluttered as they turned back towards him.

“Hmm?”

“What about Siv?”

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

“Who?”

Arlo groaned, “The meeb? My servant?”

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

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

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

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

She remained mute.

“Siv?”

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

“What?!” Arlo said, shocked.

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

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

“Right.”

“Siv, I- “

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

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

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

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

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

Arlo poked the portion before him with his finger.

“Son...” she growled in a low voice.

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

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

“Is that so?”

“Yes, father.”

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

Arlo lowered his head. “That’s it.”

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

“Are you going to do that right now?”

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

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

She turned towards the door of the hall.

“Wait!” Arlo exclaimed.

She stopped.

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

Chaji returned to her cushion.

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

Ojiri was wiping her own mouth with a cloth.

“Dear, please don’t be so hard on him. He just suffered through a terrible tragedy. I’m sure we don’t need to make it any worse for him. And besides, we have a busy day tomorrow and I need him at his best before the Council. News of the incident has already spread and they’re going to want his testimony.”

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

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

“Yes, father... but how did you- “

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

Arlo lowered his head, ashamed.

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

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

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

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

Arlo turned his attention away from his food.

“Why is this happening?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Hmm?” Arlo turned his head.

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

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

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

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

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

“So, when will that happen?”

“They’ve agreed to have her visit the Capitol with us tomorrow. That they agreed at all is truly a blessing from the Queens!”

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

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

Arlo bolted up from his resting position.

“Different?!”

Ojiri held her arms out towards him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Really? Was that necessary?”

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

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

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

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

Chaji took a deep sigh.

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

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

“You’re right.”

Ojiri smirked. “Aren’t I always?”

“Of course.”

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

“Could you please go talk to him?” asked Ojiri.

“I’ll go do that right now” she said quietly, her cheeks still rosy and warm.

“Thank you.”

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

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

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

“Arlo?”

He exhaled, closing his eyes.

Chaji cleared her throat.

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

“Sorry for what?” he asked in an annoyed tone.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Arlo pulled himself in closer. “Thank you.”

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

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

“I don’t think so.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Thank you, father.”

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

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

“I love you too, father.”

CHAPTER TWO: PURPOSE

“Arlo?”

He snapped from his blissful slumber, the software in his eyes taking a moment to catch up. He rubbed his face, bringing his senses back to reality.

He remembered it now, and the dread of what was to come followed closely after.

He was in a hovercraft, heading towards the Elanian Capitol. His mother sat across from him, absorbed in the tablet held between her claws. To his left sat Siv, curled into a ball and looking out her own window. Another meeb sat next to his mother, twiddling her thumbs and buzzing softly.

“Yes?” he asked, still drowsy.

“We’re almost there. Be ready.”

Arlo stretched his limbs. It almost seemed as though the previous night was a simple bad dream, and right about now, he wished it was. Of everyone it could have been, why did it have to be him?

A voice came from the craft’s intercom.

“Mistress?”

Ojiri tapped a device in her forearm to communicate with the cockpit.

“Go ahead.”

“Riots have grown in intensity. They’ve blocked off the main entrance. I’ll need to get clearance to land at the auxiliary platform.”

“Do it. Inform them we have precious cargo aboard.”

“Aye, mistress.”

The craft lurched as its course corrected towards the opposite end of the structure.

Arlo pressed his head against the window. The capitol stood in his view, a massive conglomeration of multiple overlapping triangular sections. At its center was a great tetrahedral spire that reached high into the air. Not nearly as imposing as the palace, but still impressive, nonetheless.

He could hear the clinical voice of the city’s monitor in the distance. “UNAUTHORIZED prophetic assemblies, disperse immediately. Please comply with all FAITHFUL.”

The gardens surrounding the capitol were swamped with hordes of rioters. Raging flames burned the precious violet and vermillion flowers. Monuments, museums, and other cultural attractions were desecrated.

And yet all he could do in the face of such insolence was stand by and watch. Maybe in another life he could understand their frustrations if he wasn't caught in the crossfire himself. He preferred not to think about it if he could help it, there wasn't much he could do.

Arlo looked towards a disinterested Siv, perhaps lost in her own thoughts like he was. He made an effort to scoot towards her. She simply paid him no mind.

He reached out to place his hand on her shoulder.

"Siv? Are you alright?" he asked softly.

Nothing.

He wanted to say more. Yet he glanced towards his mother and reconsidered. It wouldn't be a good idea now, and it was doubtful he'd have the right words.

A large hatch opened on the side of the building. A pair of fluffy wixles wearing brightly colored neon vests signaled them inside. The hovercraft passed the gate, the landing gear buckled as it came to a halt. The two immediately began to inspect the craft and performed routine maintenance as various cables attached themselves to the vehicle automatically.

Two capsules dropped from beneath the craft, unfurling themselves into synthetics in the likeness of nodes. They had an uncanny perfection in their face and an unnatural rigidity in their movement.

In perfect sync, they strode next to the exit of the craft.

Together they spoke in a monotone voice. "Stand back, obstruction of public figures is a criminal offense." The automatons continued to monitor their surroundings while repeating the warning.

As the ramp lowered from the hovercraft, Arlo spotted a node running towards them. The tablet she held slipped from her fingers, requiring her to pick it up with her tail as she continued onwards.

A small ovaloid servitor machine floated down from above, obstructing his view.

"Greetings, Councilor Ojiri. Welcome to the Capitol. You are now connected to the Neuronet, courtesy of Superior Systems. *Don't settle for good enough. Choose Superior!*"

The two Soremos reeled back as a jolt of pleasurable knowledge circulated through their neural interfaces.

"If you require assistance or would like refreshments, feel free to make a request using your neural link. Thank you for visiting. We hope you enjoy your stay!"

Ojiri and Arlo turned back towards the craft.

“Glik,” said Ojiri.

“Yes, mistress?”

It was the other meeb inside the hovercraft. Her antennae rose high.

“Inform the staff of my arrival and deliver this for me.”

Glik jumped as the node handed her a tablet, saluting as she landed.

“I’ll get it done mistress! Hut, hut, hut, hut...” The noise persisted as the gleeful meeb waddled off towards a nearby door.

Arlo signaled with his hand. “Time to go, Siv.”

She remained still in her seat.

“Arlo?” his mother called out. “What’s taking so long?”

He sighed. “*Come on. Siv...*”

Yet she remained persistent. Arlo tapped his forearm.

“Oww!” Siv jumped as an electric shock was administered from the pack on her back.

“I *said* it’s time to go,” Arlo grimaced.

“You didn’t have to shock me!” Her voice caught as tears gathered beneath her lashes. His arm twitched, almost extending towards her for but a moment before withdrawing himself.

I had to, he thought.

Ojiri was conversing with the node he saw earlier. Her fur was a creamy peach color that transitioned to a chocolate brown from the neck down, covered in form fitting professional attire with a shapely lower half. Their attention settled on him at once.

As he walked closer, he noticed her dainty paws come closer together, her posture tightening. Her tail seemed to swing side to side in an almost hypnotic fashion.

Ojiri extended her arm outwards in invitation. “Arlo, I’m pleased to introduce you to your new partner. This is Xiah.”

“Greetings,” she said with a smile, adjusting her glasses.

Glasses? That’s strange, Arlo thought.

“Greetings to you as well, Lady Xiah.”

The two bowed, pressing their foreheads against one another. She wasn't very tall, a measly eight and a half feet, it appeared. She still dwarfed him of course.

As they rose, he got a better glimpse into her jaws. It wasn't extreme, but he could see that one of her fangs was slightly longer than the other. No interface in her forearm either. *She must be a naturalist*, he thought. Or perhaps someone who wanted to appear as one.

"It's good that we finally meet, Baron Arlo," she said with a slight giggle. He couldn't help but join in too. "Your mother has spoken of you with great confidence."

"Mostly good things, I hope?"

He wasn't the only one observing. She studied him from head to toe, too carefully to be casual.

"That's for you to decide. I'm looking forward to seeing it for myself. You'll have to tell me more about your studies in bio-mechanical engineering when you have the opportunity, I find it rather *fascinating*."

She took a glance outside the closing hangar doors, still able to hear the distant chants of disgruntled civilians.

She turned her head back towards him. "How unfortunate our meeting couldn't have been under better circumstances. My deepest sympathies about last night, Arlo. I know it must be difficult for you, being watched by so many eyes now."

Arlo had nearly forgotten about the commotion outside; he was barely awake when he had seen it earlier.

He glanced around the interior. It was eerily quiet today. Such an important facility as this would normally be buzzing with activity, yet scarcely a soul walked the floors. Save for a few routine maintenance personnel and guards, that was.

"Thank you," he said. "I just hope this will all be over with sooner rather than later."

"I know it will, Arlo. I don't plan on sitting idly by. That is our duty, after all; to make a better world for our people. Wouldn't you agree?"

He was quiet for a second. "I suppose so. Is that what you're here for then? To... make a difference?"

"You could say so." Her mouth curved into a slight smirk. "The real question is, what are *you* here for?"

"I feel like you already know the answer to that."

"Perhaps." She kneeled. "And who might you be, little one?"

Siv met her stare without blinking. “You can cut the act, lady. Do all the Rukus smile like that when they want something?”

Xiah chuckled, squeezing Siv’s plump cheek. “Rather hot-blooded for an insect, aren’t you?”

“Bite my thorax,” the meeb growled.

“*Siv!*” Arlo hissed, mortified by her display of insubordination.

Ojiri stepped between them. “I think that’s enough. You’ll both have time for proper introductions later, let’s not waste any more time.” She shepherded them forward. “Come along now.”

Xiah wrapped her tail towards him, as if to interlock his own that didn’t exist.

“Oh, my,” she murmured with a subtle laugh. “Forgive me, Arlo. It just slipped my mind, truly.” Her face bore a slight smirk.

His face glowed hot; an unnecessary reminder.

“It’s alright,” he replied, though his mind told him it wasn’t.

Siv’s stare burned into the back of his skull now.

The group proceeded down the lengths of a great hallway, joined by other representatives and visitors. On either side were paintings of great figures from Elanian history. Alongside them were banners bearing script proclaiming, ‘*The One True Nation*’. The stained-glass ceiling seemed to illuminate the path before them with an array of assorted colors.

Arlo looked upon the heroes of Elanian past. Not just great political or military leaders, artists, scholars, and philosophers too. So many different races and creeds, yet still none bore a face like his.

The towering royal guards, clad in crimson exoskeletons with feathered helmets, seemed to talk amongst themselves. It wasn’t like them to indulge in such lowly behavior.

What were they talking about?

He felt the walls closing in, like he was an intruder. An enemy that didn’t belong. Something felt off about everything, wrong. Even if the faces of the others around them didn’t show it, he knew how they felt. What was this?

“Finally, it’s about time!”

Huh? Oh.

“The hearing is about to start, and you look *terrible!*”

It was a wixle of orange fur, wearing a ruby-colored tunic. He pulled out a duster from a pouch at his side and set about cleaning off Ojiri’s own red and black gold-speckled dress.

They were in the main chamber, a vast auditorium with hundreds of representatives.

“The Vermillion Guard is already here, no word on the Violet Guard however.”

He moved around towards her back side.

“I’m hearing rumors that the military is no longer supporting the regime and a few of the meeb hives are threatening to secede if their demands aren’t met.”

“You think it might lead to war?”

“I’m not sure, but something big is definitely happening.”

The wixle grabbed her massive tail and yanked it, causing some of the dust embedded into her fur to fly into the air.

“That’s quite enough, Valen,” she said, holding up her palm. “What of the Regent?”

“She will be here, just as planned. But there is something I need to... “

His verdant green eyes squinted as his attention was caught by the man beside her, who had sat quietly nearby.

Valen rubbed against his temples as he exhaled deeply.

“You can’t be serious, Ojiri. On a day like this? You know how important this is, why would you bring him here?!”

“I am well aware of the importance of today,” she said, unamused. “He has to learn one way or the other. And given his involvement in recent events, the council will want to hear his testimony.”

Valen brought his head closer to his fists as he pleaded with her.

“Then I have to question your judgement, Ojiri. You couldn’t speak on his behalf? This could be the most important day of our lives; we can’t throw this opportunity away!”

“Enough! He stays. There will be no further discussion of this topic.” Her three-eyed scowl sharpened. “Understood?”

The wixle lowered his head.

“If you say so. But I need to tell you something. Privately.”

“Very well.”

The two walked off towards an auxiliary passage. Xiah took her seat next to Arlo in the Soremo booth while Siv squatted on the floor below.

He dwelled on Valen's words. It was almost a relief, to know his fears were vindicated. But it still stung to know how others saw him. Something seemed off about what he said. *The most important day of their lives?*

Arlo looked out over the balcony before him. Numerous representatives were lined up across dozens of stands. The stands were split down the middle by a walkway leading from a massive gate towards the two thrones at the apex of the chamber.

The two thrones, just like the queens' emblem. Two overlapping right triangles sitting on their shortest side, one slightly smaller than the other.

Hundreds of vibrant banners hung above them. He could even see the Soremo flag, a red and gold banner with an angular stylized blade of fire at its center.

A few meeb's with anti-gravity packs whizzed by him, capturing footage of the scene alongside servitor synthetics.

"I'm not too sure whether to be jealous or grateful I'm not them," Siv muttered grumpily.

Xiah rotated her head in curiosity at the meeb.

"Your servant is rather talkative for a meeb, isn't she?"

Arlo let out a forced laugh of false confidence. "Yeah, sorry about that."

"Is there something wrong with her? A malfunction with her pack? Perhaps with some genetic therapy, she could be made more docile."

Arlo scratched the back of his neck. "I'm not quite sure, to be honest. I'll have to look into it later; I've just been too busy lately to worry about it much."

Xiah straightened her posture and raised her chin as she looked forward. "I would make that a high priority if I were you. Harboring rogue meeb's could be considered criminal negligence at best, or rebellious activity at worst."

"What if I can't fix her? What happens then?"

She gave a moment of silence. He already knew the answer.

"Better to cut off the source of an infection, than to let the whole body suffer."

Siv turned toward Arlo, horror spreading across her face. The look on her face filled him with dread.

"I'll deal with it later." Arlo's grip tightened against his scarlet tunic.

“I’ll hold you to your word, Arlo.”

Xiah removed her glasses, revealing a glistening hot-pink stare framed by deep, desaturated purple shadow.

“Your mother is something of an inspiration to me. She’s well respected among the members of the Council, something that can’t be said for most anymore. I would hate to see a simple incident damage her reputation. I’m sure you would hate to see that too, wouldn’t you?”

Arlo twiddled his thumbs, unable to lift his gaze from his own lap.

“Yes,” he said softly.

He shuddered when he felt a cold paw rest on his shoulder.

Xiah brought his attention toward her.

“I’ll be straight with you Arlo, it’s a cutthroat world, even more so since the queens have been absent. Look at all these people, Arlo.”

She pointed out towards the crowds. He could see how each of the representatives squabbled amongst themselves. Different races, different people. All here.

“Eighty nodes, eighty s’hal, and forty of the compliant races. All fighting for not just their people, but their own personal ambitions. Show any weakness, and they’ll use it against you. Are you cut out for something like that?”

“I... I think so. Yes.”

“Are you sure? I don’t think you are.”

He hesitated, unsure if this was some test or not.

“I don’t know.”

She ran her claws through his head fur with a prolonged and graceful stroke.

“Think about it, Arlo.”

He gave a light nod.

His head turned towards her. “Well, can I ask you how you ended up here?”

Xiah rested her head back and stroked her chin, pondering the question.

A voice spoke over the intercom. “Attention: The hearing will begin in five parcels.”

“Perhaps another time. You still owe me a proper night out. But for now, how about a drink?”

She pressed a button on the arm rest of her chair, leading to two tall glasses of a purplish-white liquid to rise from the console between them.

“Meeb milk?” Arlo questioned.

“Of course. A healthy mind and a strong body require proper nutrients.”

She raised her glass.

“To newfound success,” she proclaimed.

To newfound success.

They drank from their glasses. It was thick and creamy, with a sweet and slightly salty taste.

Siv rolled her eyes. “*Unbelievable.*”

“What?” Arlo asked Siv.

But the meeb would not pay any attention to him.

Xiah smirked as some of the milk stuck to her fur. He met the node’s gaze. He could feel a sense of warmth flowing through his body, not quite sure if it was from the drink or something else entirely. Something that both felt nostalgic but also entirely alien.

He wasn’t sure what to make of it.

It didn’t last long.

He could hear a door open nearby. Turning towards it, he witnessed his mother and Valen moving towards them at a brisk pace.

“There’s been a change of plans,” Ojiri said in a hurried voice. “You’ll have to speak on my behalf.”

Arlo nearly choked on his drink.

“What?!!” he shouted.

“There isn’t time, Arlo. Trust me.”

“Time to go, Ojiri,” said Valen.

“Wait! Come back!” He reached out his arms and tried to get up from his seat, but it was too late, they had already run back out the way they came.

Arlo’s back braced against his seat, slowly sliding down as he buried his face within his palms.

“Arlo? What was that about?” asked Xiah.

He remained frozen, shocked.

She shook him slightly. “Arlo? Speak to me. What’s going on with your mother?”

“I don’t know. She just said I had to speak on her behalf. I don’t know what I’m supposed to do.”

“Oh dear.” She pulled herself back. “This is all very sudden, isn’t it? You don’t have much of a choice, do you? You’ll have to speak before the council.”

The voice spoke over the intercom once more. “Attention: The hearing will begin in one parcel.”

“What do I say?” Arlo asked, fear in his shrill voice.

“Just try to think about what your mother would do. She knows best.”

“I... I can try.”

“Good.”

She lifted his chin up with her paw so he would look at her.

“Keep your chin up, Arlo. Straighten your posture. Be confident and don’t show any weakness or hesitation. Better to stay committed to the wrong words than to appear you don’t know anything. I know you won’t let me down.”

A light kiss on his forehead followed. His face grew bright red with glee.

“Thank you, Xiah.” He could scarcely find the words.

“It’s so cute when your face does that.” She returned her glasses to her face, placing that polished barrier between them again. “Now, get ready.”

Arlo’s attention was drawn to Siv.

“Doesn’t take much to get you going, does it?” the meeb snarked.

He paid her no mind; he had better things to concern himself with.

The murmuring and gossiping of the representatives began to die down as something caught their attention.

“All rise for the Regent!” commanded one of the royal guards.

All the representatives rose from their seats.

A figure appeared from behind a curtain on the central chamber. The room went dead silent as she entered. All lowered their heads in respect.

It was Regent Kyuki, a slender node of pure white fur.

Each step she took with her long legs was accompanied by the clack of her heels, her arms always held close together by her belly. She positioned herself at a podium in front of the two thrones, adjusting her fur cape and clearing her throat before speaking.

“Glory to the One True Nation,” she proclaimed, accompanied by the raising of her scepter.

“*Glory to the One True Nation!*” chanted the guards, as they ground their weapons in unison.

“*Glory to the One True Nation!*” replied the crowd, as they beat their chests as one.

She lowered her scepter, and the silence returned.

“Welcome, all. Please, take your seats.”

And so, they did.

“As I have in the past, I stand here before you on behalf of our most gracious heavenly Queens, Shala and Mayami, who tragically are still not with us today. Wherever they are, we faithful children eagerly await their return. For now, we offer a moment of silence in their names.”

There was not a whisper among them for a parcel, not even a squeak.

“We have important matters to discuss, so I’ll skip any further pleasantries.”

She pressed a button on her stand. The lights in the chamber dimmed, and the shutters of the glass ceiling closed. A massive hologram displayed a map of Elanus, a grand purple splotch on the great deserts of Tithe.

“As I am sure you are all well aware, insurgent activity has been steadily increasing the past few cycles.”

Red dots appeared across the map signaling rebel attacks. They numbered in the hundreds, maybe even thousands.

“We’ve had incidents in nearly every province and every major city. Fugata, V’relin, Iganoda, and now, even Tonmo.”

A ratoran representative wearing formal business attire raised her talons into the air.

“Yes, Director Ictha?” asked Kyuki.

The avian stood from her chair, adjusting the belt around her waist. “Thank you, Regent.”

She pressed a button on her wrist to activate her own display showing a graph of business statistics. “The Chiomo Group’s revenue is down nearly twenty three percent from the previous cycle due to this insubordination, and now our own supply lines are being attacked. I’m certain we are all curious to hear how you plan to address this problem, yes?”

She squawked with a much clearer voice than expected of someone of her species.

“Your concerns do not fall on deaf ears, Director. I’m sure you will all be pleased to hear that after negotiations with Chieftain Bibi, luvan auxiliaries of the Moonkin tribe will be providing their assistance to our peacekeeping efforts.”

She outstretched her arm, and the luvan chieftain rose, a pale white amphibian with an eyeless face and a grin of razor teeth.

The representatives clapped with formulaic lifelessness.

“With their help alongside local authorities, I see a swift and decisive end to this dissident activity. A return to normalcy, at last.”

“Thank you, Regent. The board will be most satisfied to hear your answer, yes,” said the ratoran businesswoman as she returned to her seat.

“Are we truly now allowing these *primitives* to patrol our streets in the name of safety?”

Heads turned towards the voice, followed by whispers of disapproval.

“Such barbarous patriarchs need to be kept on a leash, not ensuring the safety of our fellow woman!” yelled out a node representative.

The luvan chieftain hissed at the node.

“Quiet!” came another voice.

A deep guttural growl followed, originating from a figure who had positioned themselves next to the Regent. A beast so large, it even overshadowed the very Regent it stood besides, covered from head to toe in luminescent battle plate.

“Thank you, Garax,” Kyuki said to the hawx.

He nodded his diamond shaped head.

“Do not speak out of turn again, Lady Aoto. I speak with the authority of our Queens. An affront against my authority is an affront against our Goddesses. Is that clear?”

“But my lady-“

“Do I need to repeat myself?” Kyuki said with a clear sense of superiority. “If so, I’m sure the Spinebreaker here would be eager to show you how he got that name.”

The fungal monster vibrated its body, producing a cruel imitation of laughter.

The offender bowed her head in shame.

“Yes, Regent. My most sincere apologies.”

Kyuki turned her attention forward once more.

“It was not an easy decision to make, choosing one of the compliant races for this task. But you have my guarantee that no luvans shall act outside of the Queens’ law. If they do, you can expect the full wrath of my authority against their tribe.”

A s’hal representative raised his own hand.

“Yes, Lord P’tha?

The man stood up from his seat, bowing his head before speaking.

“Queens’ Shadow, I know we all appreciate your efforts in dealing with this matter. But I must ask if you have information regarding the origins of these attacks. If we do not stamp out the source of this corruption, what hope do we have of ending it? I am certain you know as well as any of us, that we cannot tolerate any displays that would undermine the council’s authority.”

The hologram split apart in a jagged pattern before disappearing. The other lights in the room would follow. A great quake shook the halls of the building.

“What was that?” questioned a voice in the crowd.

The concerned whispers of other representatives followed in the darkness.

Kyuki grounded her scepter thrice, pushing back the voices.

The lights returned.

“It’s nothing,” she proclaimed. “No further interruptions please.”

Even the royal guards began to glance around.

“As I was saying before, an excellent question, Lord P’tha. I have been personally leading an investigation into the matter with a handpicked team of our empire’s finest. After several gyres of research, I now have sufficient evidence to conclude that an old enemy, the Lii-san Clan, has been behind these attacks.”

“The atheists?”

“That’s impossible!”

Councilors squabbled amongst themselves.

The grounding of Kyuki's scepter numbed their whispers, but the faint sound of dissatisfaction remained.

"Ahem!" another voice, this time a meeb.

Not a worker like Siv, however. Taller, and plumper too.

She stood up and walked the floors of the auditorium; her long white gown draped across the floors. She adjusted the thick mechanical collar around her neck and tubes connected to the back of her head.

"My foremothers joined this union of their own volition. We were told that these anarchists were wiped out in the Fourth Great War. Yet here they are threatening us once again!" A fluorescent purple glow held her stare unnaturally wide, hardly matching the tone of her voice.

She struck her finger towards the Regent.

"Have the nodes forgotten their promise?"

Kyuki scratched the base of her horns. "I assure you, Matriarch Vidosa, that the nodes have not forgotten our pact with the hive queens. Perhaps if you were to spare some of your drones, then my investigations into this matter could be expedited..."

"Fah! Spare some of my males? I think not! I owe you nothing but my daughters! This is your problem to solve, Regent, not mine!"

Kyuki lowered her head. At times, it felt impossible to maintain order. The set of her face betrayed everything she could not say aloud: she wanted nothing more than to lay her claws upon the throat of that obese bug and suck the life from her overgrown teats.

But she couldn't do that. She was fortunate her bangs shadowed her expression, or else all the representatives would see the look of death upon her face.

She adjusted her back ears, which were tied into a bun, before raising her head once more.

"It seems you forget your place, meeb. Your property belongs to the queens. Your children belong to the queens. Your *life* belongs to the queens. You will give whatever is deemed necessary in order to accomplish their vision."

The ignorant bug cackled. "Curious, I don't see any queens here but me and my sisters. If you can't guarantee my safety, I see no reason to further entertain your theatrics."

Kyuki's claws etched their mark into the podium.

"Guards, remove the hive queen from the premises at once. Let her insubordination be known for the record." ordered the Regent.

Two of the royal guards grabbed hold of the emissary and her servant and escorted them away.

“Ha! Horn headed idiot!”

The emissary’s head went limp for a moment, silent.

“Huh, what?” the emissary sputtered as she regained control of her own body, the purple glow in her eyes gone. “Wait, what’s going on? I didn’t do anything! Help!”

She continued to kick and scream as she was dragged off to a secluded exit.

The crowds were in an uproar now; such action was unprecedented in these halls.

“A sign of the times isn’t it, Arlo?” Xiah observed. “When meeb’s forget their place.”

“Yeah, looks like it,” he replied, bewildered by the firsthand display of Elanian governance.

“You know I’m sitting right here, right?” said Siv. “Maybe my mother’s got a point.”

Arlo and Xiah both turned towards her.

“Siv, be quiet.” Arlo commanded, glaring at her with cold indifference.

“Yes, Siv. Listen to your master,” sneered Xiah with a devilish grin.

Siv stared at the two, her eyes flooded with sadness. She wanted to cry, but it wouldn’t do her any good.

“I’ll... be over in the corner, if you need me.”

She waddled off, head hung low, sniffing softly. She grabbed a pouch of Nutra-Mix from a passing concessions meeb, suckling quietly from the plastic nipple.

Arlo contemplated going after her.

“You did an excellent job of asserting yourself there, Arlo,” said Xiah with a smile.

No, there was no point. Not now anyways. He needed to focus on his duties.

“That’s enough!” yelled Kyuki. “To disrespect these most sacred halls with such insolence is not just insubordination, but heresy!”

A slow rhythmic clap came from behind along with amused cackling.

“Some authority,” said a droning female voice.

Kyuki turned towards the disturbance with a scowl of disgust across her face.

“Myra.”

The adjutant meeb, who was reclined sideways in her lofty seat, raised her four beefy arms. “In the chitinous flesh.”

The shroud around the brim of her mitre partially obscured her face, yet it could not hide her shit-eating grin.

There were four other seats next to her, though they did nothing but collect dust for cycles.

“So glad that you could join us, even if your fellow Violet Guards could not,” said Kyuki through gritted teeth.

“Oh, honey, you know I wouldn’t want to miss something as *entertaining* as this.” The inquisitor lifted her meaty legs and laid them upon the armrest of her chair. “Besides, it’s cute to watch you all play pretend.”

“Pretend?” Kyuki exclaimed. “You would certainly know a lot about playing pretend, wouldn’t you? What does the Inquisition even do anymore? This whole mess could’ve been resolved cycles ago if my own subordinates weren’t turned against me!”

“Not my problem, sweetie.”

Kyuki stormed off from her podium in the direction of Myra, the representatives devolving into petty squabbles and bickering behind her.

“I would have hoped that you of all people would show a little more respect for authority! Handpicked by the Violet Queen herself, yet here you are spitting on her memory with your uncouth appearance and childish demeanor!”

Myra straightened her posture, now upright in her chair.

“Don’t make me laugh. I’ve got more than enough respect for the big gals. This whole farce you have going on is a mockery of their work. But that’s not what you really care about, is it?”

The Regent brought herself closer to the meeb.

“Enlighten me then.”

Myra smirked.

“I’ve seen enough terrified faces in my line of work to know. You’re scared.”

Kyuki’s head recoiled back slightly.

“Scared?” she scoffed. “What do I have to be afraid of? A few rebels? Elanus has stood for thousands of years and not once has an enemy ever polluted these halls.”

“You’re afraid that it’s all temporary. That you have no real power. And once those dumb suckers figure it out, this whole charade is going to come crumbling down.”

Kyuki’s voice was a cool whisper. “You think you know me, do you?”

“Of course. I know how to make you squirm, in more ways than one if you know what I mean,” she said as she pointed her finger guns and winked.

Kyuki turned her head away.

“For the record, we were never a *thing*.”

Myra flicked her wrist as she inspected one of her other claws halfheartedly. “Don’t hype yourself up too much there, sweet tits. You’re not the first royal whose eggs I’ve scrambled.”

Kyuki sighed as she pulled at her own face. “What do you want, Myra? What is the point of all this? Just to watch me suffer?”

“It is entertaining, I’ll give you that. But no. I’m here to give you an opportunity.”

Kyuki scoffed. “An opportunity? What are you talking about?”

“An opportunity to reconsider your actions here. That whole spiel about the Lii-san returning? We both know it’s a hoax. Something much bigger is happening.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I think you do, sister.”

Kyuki stood silently for a moment.

“It’s impossible.”

“Is it really? I think you should know better than to doubt them.”

“No. I’m the one who’s kept us safe for all these cycles. They abandoned us. They aren’t going to come in here and take away everything I worked so hard for, not now.”

Myra wagged her finger playfully. “Someone really needs to think about their next words, *very* carefully...”

“Your presence here is nothing but the death throes of a failed religion.” Kyuki brought herself closer to the inquisitor and shrieked. “The queens are dead! I killed them! Me!”

Kyuki stopped to take a breath. The brief reprieve brought her attention to the sudden silence she found herself in.

“What?” came a voice from the crowd.

“Did you hear what she said?”

“That can’t be.”

Kyuki looked down. Myra held out a microphone in the palm of her hand, which she promptly tossed over her own shoulder.

“I tried to warn you, didn’t I?” Myra chuckled.

“You sniveling worm...”

Kyuki wanted to bring her wrath down on Myra, but the crowd demanded her attention. She rushed back towards the podium.

Their cries of disapproval were too loud, she could barely hear her own thoughts.

“Is it true? Did you really do it?”

No, I didn’t mean it like that.

“Heretic! We should be flaying her, alive!”

You can’t!

“The Regent is right, the Queens abandoned us!”

Is this the angle?

“Enough!” she screamed.

A deafening crack pierced through the noise.

A gaping burn mark was pressed into the ceiling.

The Regent had fired her own sidearm in anger.

“The Queens are gone! They’re never coming back! Do you want to sit here and squabble in their shadow? Or do you want to make something of yourselves?”

A moment of quiet.

“What shall we do? When the enemy is at the gate, and our people suffer on the streets they once called their own? The gods will not come to answer our prayers. The time has come for us to forge our own destiny. For all our sake.”

The representatives looked towards one another. Was there merit to her words?

“How can you be so certain?” said one of the s’hal. “They reigned for thousands of years. They gave us miracles of technology and clarity of purpose. Brought order to chaos. What is twenty cycles in the face of their grand design?”

Kyuki had to think on her feet.

“I know it... because they told me so themselves.”

The s’hal gasped. “Is that so?” he asked.

Kyuki nodded her head. “Yes, it is. For twenty cycles I’ve lived with this truth. This burden. To know that those we saw as goddesses were gone, forever. I couldn’t bring myself to let it be known.”

She outstretched her arms towards the crowds.

“Look at us. Tearing each other apart like animals. I knew if I told the truth, this would happen. But we cannot live like this any longer. If we are to survive this calamity, to build a better world for our people, our children, we must act. Who among you will follow me? Who among you will choose to save our civilization?”

A hand rose.

Then another.

And another.

More and more joined until over half had shown their support for the Regent. They cheered and clapped with renewed vigor.

Kyuki took a sigh of relief and shed a single tear. She had won them over, despite her fears. She looked back towards Myra, who rolled her eyes before rising from her seat. The inquisitor strode towards the podium with a flaunting hip sway and a slight smirk in her face.

“Step aside,” commanded Myra.

She slapped the Regent’s back, knocking her aside. Even though she was several feet smaller, her push held considerable force, causing Kyuki to stumble.

“Politicians...” she chuckled. “As spineless as ever. I’m glad to see that some things never change. All so eager to kneel before your new belly stroker, that you forgot to ask for evidence. So, I guess I have to.”

She raised her arms. “Where is the evidence!” She glared at the Regent. “Tell us, I’m sure we’d all love to hear more about these crazy rumors of an old enemy returning at last. Or perhaps these rumors are as empty as your promises of salvation?” The inquisitor ended it with a quaint smirk.

“The inquisitor is right.” came a voice.

Kyuki could hear more voices, she was going to lose control again. She needed to act fast before the whore ruined everything.

She leaned in front of the podium.

“Don’t think I would make such claims without sources to back them! The true reason you are all here tonight, is because I have invited our dear friend, Councilor Ojiri, representative of house Soremo, to share what she knows of this dangerous threat!”

A light shone on Arlo’s booth, nearly blinding him.

“Isn’t that right, Councilor?”

She looked towards the booth, and her duplicitous smile contorted into a look of confusion.

Arlo froze, a rushing wave of chills and needles pressing into every inch of his body.

Kyuki turned towards Garax at her side.

“Where is the Councilor?! And what is that thing?” she whispered.

The towering beast shrugged his shoulders.

Kyuki took a deep breath in and out. She can handle this.

“You there!” she yelled out.

Arlo turned his head side to side before pointing towards himself. In his glances, he noticed Xiah leaning off to the side, as if to appear she wasn’t associated with him.

“Yes, you! Who are you?”

Arlo extended the microphone in his booth. He attempted to speak, but the words could not escape his tongue. He could feel a thousand, no, a million eyes on him now. Not just the representatives, but all the Elanian citizens watching back home and in the city streets.

He had to say something.

“I’m... uh... Arlo. Arlo Soremo. Ojiri’s... son. Yeah.”

His inner psyche screamed at him as he waited for a response.

“Her son?” Kyuki asked, puzzled. “Oh, yes, she did have one of those. Well, *Arlo*, where is your mother now?”

“Uh, I don’t know.”

“You don’t know? What do you mean you don’t know?”

“She said she had to go; I don’t know where she went.”

This moid can’t be serious, she thought.

“Well then, perhaps- “

A deafening explosion rocked the halls, causing everyone to stumble and the lights to go out. A blaring alarm began to play, and the emergency dim red lights activated.

Panicked screaming filled the room as councilors glanced around erratically in search of a possible cause.

One of the royal guards sprinted towards the Regent just as she was regaining her footing.

“What is it?” Kyuki asked with urgency.

“Mistress, there’s been an incident! Terrorists detonated a smuggled explosives device at the main entrance, and now the agitators are pouring through! We need to evacuate you and the rest of the council immediately!”

“No!” she exclaimed.

“But mistress- “

“In our three-thousand-year history, not once has our great city fallen to any enemy. That cannot happen during my reign, I won’t allow it.” She pointed at him. “Take all available guards and slow their advance. Use any means necessary.”

“Yes, my Regent.”

The guard ran towards the main entrance, rallying others towards him as he did so.

Kyuki looked next toward Garax.

“Garax, can you locate the Councilor?”

The hawx activated a terminal hidden within the podium.

“No. Neuranet systems, disabled. Security systems, inoperative. Likely cause: sabotage.” His head rotated nearly one hundred and eighty degrees to look at her. “Your orders?”

“Take the remaining guards and scour the building, she couldn’t have gotten far. For now, I’ll deal with the boy. Go.”

Garax took his leave behind the curtains.

Myra was laughing now. “Seems like things are really starting to heat up now, aren’t they, princess? Sure you don’t want to backdown now?”

“Just shut up and watch, slut,” Kyuki remarked dismissively.

Myra gave a half-hearted salute as she returned to her chair once more. “You’re the boss.”

Kyuki returned to her podium. She could see many of the representatives scrambling for the side entrances. With the press of a button, all the doors were sealed shut.

“What’s going on?”

Some banged against the doors, hoping they’d open.

“Nobody’s leaving,” Kyuki exclaimed. “Return to your seats.”

The s’hal representative from before spoke up again. “But my lady, surely it would be safer if we were to leave?”

“The situation is under control.”

“I won’t wait here to die in this coffin!” yelled a node representative.

Kyuki pointed her sidearm at the crowd, an L-44 Projector.

“Sit. Now.”

They returned to their seats slowly, stifled by fear. Kyuki combed through her hair with her claws, still trying to cling to whatever sense of formality she had left.

“This hearing is not over with. You wanted evidence of the Lii-san involvement? Then you will have it. Arlo!”

She pointed toward him.

He felt his heart drop in his chest, this was it.

“You were the victim of an attack by these dissidents. You have firsthand experience. Please, share with us.”

His booth lifted up into the air, now hovering towards the center of the chamber. He tried to maintain his composure, staring blankly ahead as if not to pay attention to the hundreds of eyes looking at him from every direction.

A glance to either side as he descended, and he could get a glimpse of the looks on their faces. Confusion? Intrigue? Disgust? Or just simple indifference?

It mattered not; he was here.

The lights shone down on him; everything was quiet, save for the muffled sounds of gunfire beyond the doors.

Kyuki's paw came to rest on his shoulder. She bent down, bringing her muzzle close to his ear.

"Give them what they want," she whispered.

"But what do they want?" he asked, turning his head toward her.

"What do you think?" she scoffed. "Are you your mother's child or not?"

He winced as he felt her claws press deeper into his skin.

"I am. I'll do it," he cried as he held back tears.

Her grip loosened, offering him a brief reprieve.

"Good."

She stepped back; the stage was his.

He looked up. Millions of eyes were on him now. What did Xiah say? Lift his chin up, straighten his posture? Okay.

And so, he did. But what else? He should have been paying more attention to her advice than looking into her eyes like a damn moid-brained idiot. Maybe Siv was right, at this point he deserved this.

"Perhaps he has nothing to share?" said one of the lesser representatives. "If so, then I know we can all agree to adjourn this hearing, given the circumstances?"

"I second the notion!" came another voice.

"No, the boy just needs time to collect his thoughts.," Kyuki exclaimed. "Isn't that right, Arlo?" she said through gritted teeth.

"Tell us what happened!"

He had to say something, anything at this point.

"Hi... uh, greetings. I'm Arlo. Arlo Soremo."

"Get to the point... *boy*," growled the Regent.

"Yes, of course. So... as many of you may know, I was attacked last night. By some... *dissidents*."

He paused for a moment.

“And?” asked a councilor.

Thoughts collected; must keep going.

“And because they knew I was a member of the Soremo house, it shows their interest in attacking those of authority. One of the men who attacked me... he spoke of selling me to the Lii-san, perhaps for information.”

“Do you have any evidence to share?” asked Lord P’ta, the s’hal representative from before.

Arlo turned his head behind himself toward Kyuki. “May I?”

She gave a signal of acceptance with the flick of her hand. With it, the console in the podium rose once more.

Arlo reached behind head, pulling out a cord from the implant connected to his cranium. He inserted it into a port.

Then he closed his eyes. He imagined himself sifting through his memories, as though he browsed a great library. There were so many, scattered around him in every direction. As he moved, they flew by him so fast.

Ahh, there it was. The memory he was looking for.

He could feel it, the winds of the alley, the distinctive stench of trash, and the pain. The tightening grip against his wrist. He could feel it all again.

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

He didn’t want to look.

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

He was so helpless.

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

He didn’t even know himself.

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

Why couldn’t it end already?

“Why are you doing this to us?!”

Siv...

"We've seen enough," said Kyuki

Arlo snapped from his depressive trance. The projection of his thoughts before him fizzled away.

"Yes... Regent. Of course."

He pulled the plug from the port, and the terminal retreated once more.

"So, that's what happened," he said softly.

It was eerily quiet now; he was growing concerned about just what they would have to say.

"Hmm..."

It was Lady Aoto, one of the nodes again.

"It does lend credence to the Regent's claims, doesn't it? But how can we be certain that this agitator's words are genuine, and not just the hopeful fantasies of a desperate beggar?"

"Of course," said the Regent. "There is more. Councilor Ojiri was kind enough to elucidate me to the extent of the Lii-san presence in our midst. She has gathered information on Lii-san cells, information that her son here would be most eager to share with us."

"Huh?" Arlo gasped.

"Go ahead, Arlo."

He hadn't been told anything like this, what was she talking about?

"Regent, I wasn't told anything about that."

"You are supposed to be speaking on behalf of your mother. She surely would have shared such information with you, right?"

"No, she didn't."

They all turned their attention towards the doors now.

They could hear it now, the sounds of gunfire just beyond the door. The screaming of the rabid rioters and the barking commands of the royal guards clashing just outside. It was almost deafening.

"Why are we waiting here to die?! I am leaving, *now*!" Lady Aoto ran towards one of the doors.

A crack of electricity buzzed through the air.

It struck her head, causing her body to violently seize, her internal organs to rupture, and her eyeballs to explode.

She fell to the ground, a pitiful bloody mess.

“Nobody leaves!” screamed the Regent. “Nobody leaves until I get what I want!”

Arlo was motionless, his eyes ajar at the sight of the corpse. The other councilors bore similar expressions to his own.

A violent punch from a handgun bracing against the back of his head. His bodied quivered.

“Start speaking,” Kyuki commanded. “I know you have it, tell me what I want!”

“Please, I told you I don’t have it!” he cried.

“Liar! Tell me your mother’s secrets, or I’ll see if you’re as pale on the inside as you are on the outside!”

“My mother knows! She’ll be coming back for me soon, I know it! Please, please, don’t kill me!”

His crying turned to bawling and shrieks of desperation.

“I don’t want to die...”

“Then speak, you useless worm! I’m in control here! Me!”

Before she could pull the trigger, a sudden silence. The fighting had ceased. Was it over? Who had won?

He reeled over, something in his mind.

Both pain and pleasure and joy and despair and what was it what is this laughter and envy and

Violet

All was quiet

As it should be

The world became desaturated, still

No conflict of ideology

No conflict of thoughts

All was perfect

As it should be

And now, it truly begins

A flash of light.

He laid across the floor, his eyes barely able to open.

The great doors had flung open. The royal guards pushed through, forming up along the sides of the entrance and assuming their positions. A small amount of relief filled Arlo's heart, perhaps it was finally over.

His ears were still ringing, he still felt weak, unable to lift himself off the ground. What had just happened?

Something wasn't right. The guards were accompanied by average citizens, the rioters. Had they betrayed the council? The relief he felt departed just as quickly as it had arrived.

Kyuki gripped the podium, using it to pull herself up to her feet even as it appeared like her own body was fighting against her.

Dark purple bags and jagged stripes had appeared beneath her eyes. He looked at the others nearby; they had them too. Arlo touched his own face. He could feel it; they were present on his as well.

The Regent could barely hold up her own sidearm, pointing it toward the entrance.

"What... what is the meaning of this?" she asked, her words slurred. "What are you doing?"

She stood, mouth open.

Her arms fell to her side, her sidearm slipping through her fingers.

Her knees struck the ground.

"No..."

Two figures came through the door, their forms obscured by the brilliant glow around them.

It couldn't be, could it?

"So," came a female voice, almost paradoxically both deep and moderate in pitch at the same time.

“This is what our children have been occupying themselves with in our absence? These, lowly squabbles? I must say, I am rather disappointed.”

He could feel her, she wasn't just talking but speaking to his very soul.

“Oh, sweet plum. It has been too long, hasn't it?”

It was another voice, softer but also more energetic and vibrant.

The light faded as they approached, he could see them now.

Four arms and purple fur.

Shala.

An eyepatch and tan fur.

Mayami.

“It most certainly has, dear,” said Shala with a smirk, on both her face and with the second mouth that adorned her throat.

The royal guards raised their glaives into the air.

“Glory to the Eternal Queens!” they chanted.

The Elanian citizens that had accompanied them joined with cries of joy and screams of excitement.

“It can't be,” Kyuki exclaimed in disbelief.

Myra strode forward from behind her. “Told you so,” she bragged with a devilish grin.

Kyuki's head hung low, tears began to swell and drip from her eyes. “My queens, please, forgive me. I did all I could to maintain order, to keep all you had built from being destroyed.”

“Really going to try squirming your way out of this, aren't you?” Myra replied.

“No, I am no heretic! I never lost faith, I knew you would return! All I did was in the name of your vision, my queens!”

Mayami lowered herself in front of the pretender, lifting her chin with one of her paws, covered by a fingerless glove. She stared into her soul with the three eyes on the left side of her face, red, orange, and yellow.

“Kyuki, why must you lie?” she questioned. “I had hopes that what I had foresaw would not come to pass. It breaks my hearts, oh, why must it be so?”

“No, please, I don't deserve to die!” begged Kyuki.

The pair stood over the pretender for a moment.

“Don’t worry,” said the Violet Queen. “We’re not going to kill you. I have other uses for someone like you.”

“Yes, thank you my queen!”

“But make no mistake,” Shala said with a sterner voice. “There is still a price for treachery.”

She turned her attention towards the cowering councilors.

“The same goes for all of you. My beloved and I built this hall as a tool for the safeguarding of our nation. Not as a nursery for its most delusional. Yet I find you all inadequately suited for the task assigned to you. The time has come for a change.”

With the flick of her wrist, the regal attire Kyuki wore was gone, leaving her with nothing but her bare fur. She tried desperately to cover herself, but she felt a tightening sensation against her neck.

A collar had affixed itself, and the tug of a leash beckoned her to stand.

The other councilors who had shown their support for the pretender were herded into the central chamber by the royal guards, prodded at as though they were animals.

“A joyous day for all our children!” exclaimed Mayami as she lifted her arms up.

“And a most poignant reminder. There can be no tolerance for those that conspire against our vision, or those that stand in the way of salvation. Our patience is not infinite.”

“Yet we are still generous,” proclaimed Mayami. “We offer the sweetest gift for our believers; retribution!”

The crowds cheered and clapped with inexcusable fury and joy. The onlookers in the streets below were so loud, they could even be heard within the mighty spire.

“Prepare them for the festival, Grand Inquisitor,” commanded Shala, staring ahead with her six eyes, green, purple, and blue.

Myra bowed in respect. “It will be a pleasure, my queen. It’s good to have you back.”

Myra, along with the royal guards, led the councilors forward through the main entrance. Passing through the crowd, they would be beaten and whipped. A small price for their previous transgressions.

Arlo’s chest pounded harder, the two goddesses walked closer to him. Shala’s shadow encompassed him entirely. She was massive, over twelve feet tall. Small spouts of fire puffed out from her nostrils.

She squatted before him, her purple and gold surcoat draping the floor.

“Do not be afraid.”

And so he was.

His heart slowed, obeying her commands.

A simple thought crossed his mind, beckoning him to speak. But she raised her hand against it.

“You need not explain yourself. You have done no wrong. It is faithful youth such as yourself that will lead us to victory. Kyuki may have tried to use you against us, but I know your belief has not waivered.”

She placed one of her arms beneath his rear, lifting him into the air. He was so much smaller, he could sit squarely in the palm of her hand.

“Follow his example. The time soon approaches when all your faith shall be tested. There is yet still work to be done. But until then, a celebration!”

The crowd gathered around them, cheering on their new symbol.

For once, Arlo was glad to have so many eyes on him. They looked at him not with fear or disgust, but admiration.

Acceptance.

He could not thank them enough, the queens deserved so much more love than his heart was capable of giving. Such was part of their nature as his creators.

A familiar face pushed her way through the crowds.

“Arlo!” she called out, raising her paw into the air.

“Xiah?”

Mayami beckoned the crowd part to allow her to pass, and so they did gracefully.

“I was so worried about you!” she said with tears in her eyes.

Xiah dropped to her knees before the queens. “Forgive my insolence, my queens.”

Mayami looked up at Arlo, who still rested on Shala’s hand. “Oh, your mistress, Arlo?” she asked with a gleeful smile.

“Yes, my Queen,” he replied. “We’ve only just met, but I feel a great connection to her. A sense of belonging I haven’t felt before. Surely you meant for us to be together?”

The Vermillion Queen winked.

“Vermillion Lady,” Xiah interjected. “Goddess of love. It would be my honor to be betrothed to this champion of yours. I ask now, would you offer me your blessing?”

Mayami placed her paw upon Xiah’s forehead.

“You ask, and so you shall have it. Congratulations!”

Shala lowered Arlo to the ground and the two partners rushed towards one another. Embracing each other, Xiah lifted him up and brought him close, spinning in circles as they both laughed and cried with joy. Their heads nestled against one another.

“I love you, Xiah,” Arlo whispered.

“We’re going to do great things together, Arlo,” she replied.

Xiah lowered him to the ground, both of their eyes turning to Shala who stood next to them.

“Yes, splendid. But I must ask now to take him from you for a moment.”

“Of course, my queen.” Xiah backed away, smiling as she did so.

Shala and Mayami led Arlo behind the curtains of the throne. The royal guards positioned themselves to stop any others from following.

It was darker back here, various cables were strewn across the floor and glowing consoles and screens lined the walls. A piercing light lay at the other side, a pristine elevator amid the void.

With the press of a button, it ascended. He could see through the glass at the city around them. The red and purple sky dominated by streaks of dark green. There were still many fires and passing enforcer hovercraft, not everyone has gotten the news it seemed.

They were at the summit of the spire, an open observation platform that overlooked the chaos beneath them.

Shala positioned herself near the edge with Arlo. Mayami came to her side and adjusted her clothes, using makeup from a pouch at her side to prepare her.

“Ready?” she asked.

Shala smirked. “I’ve had some time to prepare.”

The two giggled.

A microphone rose from in front of her. Servitor machines ascended to capture the scene.

“The time has come.”

Her voice echoed through the city. Images of her appeared across every screen. The people were quiet. Only the wind spoke now.

“For twenty cycles, we have been gone. But our absence was not without reason. In our travels, we have found something of great importance. An old enemy.

Humanity lives.”

Arlo’s eyes widened. He’d heard stories of such creatures, demons. But he had always thought of them as just such, stories. He never thought he’d see the day when they returned.

“But this is not a time for fear, but for joy. With clarity and strength, we have pried them, and they have agreed to share with us the key. The final piece to enact our vision. It is as we promised so many cycles ago in our covenant to you, the Restoration comes!”

She raised her four arms into the air.

Mayami spoke up next.

“In one gyre of time, an emissary of the human nation shall come. As such we will prepare a great feast, a final tribute to all our struggles, all the sacrifices we undertook to reach this point. But until then, a celebration! We invite all the great artists, leaders, and scholars of our domain to come!”

Shala tried her best to maintain her stoic appearance, her partner’s joy was infectious. “The bounty of your faith draws near. Glory to the One True Nation.”

And so, the recording ceased.

Shala let out a sigh of relief. She turned next toward Arlo, kneeling in front of him.

“We want you to be the guest of honor, Arlo.”

He was surprised; all this came so suddenly. From being a lowly nobody to the queens’ champion.

“Why me?”

She patted him on the shoulder. “You’ll see, in time. But for now, enjoy yourself. You’ve earned a break.”

“And be sure to show your lady friend a good time, Arlo!” said Mayami.

Arlo chuckled. “Of course, my queen.”

She smiled too. “If you need help, I can come by and show you how to- “

“No, no, no!” Arlo said as he shook his arms and head. “That won’t be necessary!”

“Very well then.”

Two meeb's floated by, carrying another whom they dropped off.

"We believe this belongs to you," Mayami remarked.

"Siv?" Arlo asked.

Siv stood quietly before him, holding on to one of her arms nervously. Her antennae were dropped in front of her head.

She looked up to him, one of her eyes was dark purple and bruised.

"Siv, what happened?"

"Tried to get through the crowds to you," she said softly in a monotone voice. "Little meeb like me though? Ended up getting trampled. Yeah."

He reached his arm out towards her.

She pulled herself away.

"Just take us home. Please."

He nodded.

"Yeah... of course, Siv," he spoke, regret choking his voice.

A hovercraft came by the platform. Xiah was already inside. The ramp door opened, and Arlo and Siv sat inside. It left, heading back towards the manor on the other side of the city.

"Finally," Shala said as she stretched her arms. "I hate giving those big speeches."

"Yet you're so good at them, aren't you?" Mayami said jovially.

"So you tell me," she said sarcastically.

"Are you calling me a liar?" Mayami said as she placed her fists upon her waist and tilted her head.

"Just optimistic."

"You haven't given me reason to be otherwise."

The two hugged, Mayami's face squeezed against the Violet Queen's fat belly, her upright horns poking into her mighty bosom.

She lifted her head to look into Shala's eyes. "Soon enough, you won't have to worry about giving them ever again."

Soon enough.

Shala lifted her head up, activating a wrist mounted device on one of her two back arms.

A holographic projection displayed the image of an armored warrior, with a feather crest atop their helmet.

“Shala?” said the gruff and powerful voice of an old man. “I had just seen your message. An honor to see you again.”

“Likewise, Supreme Commander. Where is my daughter?”

“The Strider remains in stasis aboard her ship, the *Uneasy Justice*, as per your standing orders.”

“Good. Send the signal. It’s time to get things started.”

Arlo and Xiah stood at the entrance of the Soremo manor, awaiting her chauffeur. Siv sat on one of the steps.

“How are you feeling now, Arlo?” Xiah asked.

“I’m not sure. It all felt so strange, to be honest, I’m not sure this is even real.”

“I would hope not,” she said with worry. “I’d hate for this all to be torn away from you.”

“Me too.”

The two embraced for a few parcels, until the signature whining of a hovercraft could be heard behind them.

“Time for me to depart, Arlo. It’s been a pleasure.”

She made her way down the stairs, a guard exiting the craft beckoned her inside.

“Wait!” Arlo yelled as he reached out his arm. “Do you think we could spend some time together tomorrow?”

She turned back towards and smiled. “Of course. I’d love that.”

They waved, and the two went their separate ways.

Arlo stepped inside the manor. It was dark and quiet. Nobody else around. Siv walked off on her own toward her quarters. *Better to give her some space for now*, he thought.

Making his way down the hall, he noticed a light coming from an open door. Ojiri’s private work room.

He peeked his eyes through the narrow slit.

His mother was there, typing away at her terminal. Something unusual lay across her desk, connected to her device through a long cable.

“This archival record is Security Level: Black,” said a synthesized voice from the black box. “Authentication of clearance and confirmation of lineage required for access.”

She clicked another button.

“A-a-a-a-access granted.”

What was she doing?

He turned away from the door. Should he say something? His heart began racing, he wasn't sure what to do.

He couldn't.