

Part XXXVII: Team of Seven

Date: Yippah 4th, 114 A.U.

There was a loud grounding noise as the long concealed doors in the side of the mountain slowly creaked open for the first time in over a hundred years. Pieces of rock fell down, falling on the ground as the doors slid open to reveal the blackness behind it. Two shining beams of light shone out of it.

From out of the darkness, a slick low-hovering air ship moved out from under it, dust swirling underneath it, as it moved out from the doors, which slowly grinded shut behind it. The air ship moved forth for the first time in years, and away from where it had been stored for the many years since the Great Upheaval.

It was free.

A human named Astrid... ..A healer for the party...

Astrid looked out the window at the mountainous landscape as it moved by, Monty beside her. The last couple weeks had been so busy... they had almost made her forget what she had done. Almost. Astrid bit her lip and she thought back at the hectic planning that had eventually led into a fluid ceremony where the members of the Xavier team had been appointed and sent out on their mission a couple hours ago. And the hypocrisy of it. That they were going to send a murderer out to try and stop the elves. That they actually thought she was worthy to fight against the elves.

She wasn't.

An elf with ambition... ... An outlaw yet by birth

Rider looked forward as the air ship moved forward through the mountains and his mind flirted back to his past—about the last time he had been out here in the open. Jaigran Outlaw, an elf who had been named after the fabled Emperor of the elves. It was his unusual last name that had elected him to be a member of the prophesy. It was his frightening first name that led him to take the nickname of Rider.

And it was the same name that almost was a hint of whom he had become: how he had fled from the elves and found those rebels that still fought against the elves, continually pressing and working, mostly with the dwarves, to get their leaders to fight actively against the dwarves until an emissary from Araelia found him and brought him to meet Governor Astrid and join the prophesy.

So that he could use his ambition to destroy the elves.

A Sla'ad will lead the group... ... One who saw a slaughter great

Reynyagn checked the equipment at the front of the old machine to make sure that it was still running well. It still seemed to be working fine, despite being hardly used since the Great Upheaval. The Great Upheaval. Reynyagn's mind went back to that day when the elves began their attack on the inhabitants of Arquenian and committed themselves to a rigorous onslaught that brought about their rise to rule...

It had been on that day that Reynyagn had been finally made free from his previous captors and found his way to discover a small group of Sla'ad trying to survive. And it was then that he used all of his previous experiment to lead them and help them to be able to survive the horror of the days to come.

And now, he didn't know if they still lived.

An orc will help... ... One will betray his friends

Number 994 didn't particularly care for his part of the prophesy—if it was indeed a prophesy—and he found it kind of outrageous as well. That he would betray his friends? He hadn't betrayed them... Number 994 was racking up a wealth of information to be able to help to destroy the rebels once he returned to the Mothership.

And friends? For an orc, that sort of thing was an abomination. That a true-bred orc would have friends? It was an abomination, one that would only tear himself from the main cause. An abomination. Number 994 was slightly amused by the long speech and presentation that led up to the appointment of the Xavier Team. To think that seven people would be able to destroy the power of the Emperor.

Pure folly.

...will help elf... ...another will lose them all!

Zarien wished that the prophesy had been otherwise. That something else would have been prophesied about one of the two elves. That he would keep them all, instead of lose them all. Was his life all in the hands of fate? Was it fate that stripped him of his comrades and made him to lose his leg?

Was there a greater purpose in all of this?

Goblin will show great expertise... ... A warrior seeks to lead and yet it won't be granted him.

Flek wasn't completely sure why he was the one who sought to lead... Why was it him who wanted to lead and yet unable to do so? He understood why he was the warrior... and it was to his misfortune that let him know why he had great expertise, but why did he seek to lead? And what would the fact that he wouldn't be granted that leadership entail for their party and their success?

You know, Flek.

A dwarf who has a sign upon his head for his fixed place... ... one who bears Old Weapons.

Jroldin hesitantly put the golden corsha axe back into the box that he had originally found it in. According to Brother Tomas' indication, the strange corsha weapon he had found was once the Old Weapon of the Dwarves, a powerful artifact that once had great importance before it mysteriously disappeared. And ever so mysteriously reappeared when Jroldin happened to find

it. He didn't know what it was, but it was an Old Weapon. And Brother Tomas was sure that the prophesy had caused him to find it.

Jroldin was disturbed by that fact.

Seven members of the prophesy looked ahead to their quest along with their comrades: Reklen, Monty, and Brother Tomas all looking ahead to the demise of the elves. That their group of seven, along with their three companions, might be able to strike down the elven tyranny.

Part XXXVIII: A Message for the Emperor

Yippah 11th, 114 A.U.

Jaigran, Duke of the Upper Skies, Lord of the Lower Earth, First of the Supreme Elves, Highest of the Flyers, General of the Imperial Army, Emperor of Arquenya, was restless. Jaigran nearly smiled with amusement as all of his officials made up lame excuses to have absence. And Jaigran allowed them, a faint smile trickling along his lips. None of the officials wanted to be around him while he was restless... quite possibly because of what happened the last time he was restless. That was one hundred and eighteen years ago, when he first dreamed about the Mothership...

Jaigran stood up and rubbed his head with his golden gauntlets. As he did so, he reached into the secret compartment in his throne and drew out his long golden corsha spear. And doing so, he sat back down upon his throne in a state of mental peace, his stomach slowly moving in rhythm with his breathing.

He was such a hypocrite, yes, Jaigran knew. For all his talk about abolishing the old corsha for the new technology, he still clung closely to his weapon. The one that he had taken long ago... Jaigran was silent as he remembered his deeds of the past, when he remembered her, when he remembered what they...

Jaigran stood up, opening his eyes wide, as he readjusted his grip on his spear. He needed to do something. It was one hundred and fourteen years since he became emperor, and still, not all the races were in subjugation. Sure their long-going plans were reaching its fruition but still...

He was the Emperor of Arquenia! He was the General of the Imperial Army! It was high time enough that every single intelligent being bowed the knee to him, the First of the Supreme Elves! Whenever it came, even if it came at this moment, it was over a century too late! He had lived longer than a normal elf, yes, much longer, but he was going to make sure, even if it was at his dying breath, that he would see the world in complete subjugation to him before he died! He would-

At that moment, the doors flew open, and, muttering a curse, Jaigran quickly stashed his spear back into his throne as he walked forward. Two elven guards were holding back a struggling winged female elf. The elf looked mad, her long hair flying everywhere, her clothes unheveled, and her torn wings beating.

“Get it!” she screamed. “Get it out of me! Take it away!”

“What is this?” Emperor Jaigran asked, as he stepped forward.

“Help me!” the elf exclaimed. “Oh help me! Kill me! Rip out my throat and end my misery and the-“ Her voice morphed into a scream, and then, the sound from her mouth abruptly stopped. He moved his mouth, but no sound came out. Her eyes stared at Emperor Jaigran in horror and then, they rolled back into her head as she went still. And then, the elf spoke.

“Hello, Emperor Jaigran,” a cold low voice said. “It is a pleasure to meet you.” The two guards froze. Jaigran’s skin crawled at the low voice that emitted from the female elf.

“I am Emperor Jaigran,” Jaigran said, not willing to let this strange creature disturb his mindset, “the Emperor of Arquenia. What do you want?”

“I am the Guardian,” the voice said. “I am the one who has kept the world of Arquenia for over millennia. I have come to offer you a proposition.”

“You offer me a proposition...” Jaigran said, suspiciously. “What kind of proposition?”

“A deal; a mutual agreement of sorts between the two of us,” the voice said, the voice dripping with smoothness. “A way to establish your rule over Arquenia once and for all, where there is none who would dare oppose you.”

“And what do you want out of this?” Jaigran asked. There was always a catch.

“Power,” the voice said. “You may be ruler, but it is only by giving me power that you will be able to do so.”

“Forgive me for not being overly suspicious of your deal,” Jaigran said sarcastically.

“But-“

“My resident body comes from the Citadel of Tzel-Maret,” the voice cried out. “It is to that citadel that you must go.”

“Your resident body?” Jaigran asked, reaching for his gun he kept hidden.

The winged elf vomited all over the floor and a spasm went through it. “Go to Tzel-Maret,” the deep voice said. “My hold is passing... passing...”

Suddenly, the elf’s eyes snapped alert, a more feminine shriek emitting from her lips. Her body went rigid and moved upward, her neck twisting and her eyes following a certain upward trajectory. She opened her mouth and stared as if some invisible spirit had just exited her body. And then her body went limp and she fell, collapsing in the pool of her own vomited.

The guards started, reaching for their weapons in fear, and Jaigran himself found himself flinching in horror as he felt his face pale. Jaigran sucked on his lips for a moment, and then, finally, spoke to the cowering dumb-struck guards.

“Leave,” he said quickly. “Go and let no one disturb me.”

“Should we-” one of the guards began as one of them moved toward the elf.

“No,” Jaigran said, seeing his intent. “Leave her here and I will deal with her when she awakens. Now leave.” The guards quickly exited the room.

Jaigran was still for a couple moments as his chest heaved, adrenaline still racing. “The citadel of Tzel-Maret...” Jaigran slowly said, and he walked toward the map that hung on the wall portraying the geography of Arquenia. “The ancient citadel of Tzel-Maret...”

Part XXXIX: Beyond

Date: Yippah 5th, 114 A.U.

Far North the party now must go if it wants to succeed.

The trials that will try the group will bring it to the brink;

Despair must run o'er them before the culmination comes.

Till purified with fire it will stand against fire.

The machine slowly slowed to a halt. The doors opened, and Astrid stepped out into the blowing wind. She walked a couple feet forward to the crag that jutted out, overlooking the mountainous region under, above, and beyond her. In the middle of nowhere. Astrid shivered as Number 994 stepped beside her.

Astrid cringed slightly, still unused to being so close to a living breathing orc, but Number 994 seemed to pay her no mind. Instead he cocked his head and stretched out his hand. And, closing his eyes, he seemed to feel the wind as it rushed past and ponder. Astrid turned away.

“So how far north do you think we have to go?” Flek was asking as he stepped out from the vehicle.

“Far enough,” Reynyagn said as he stepped out beside him. “Most likely it will mean getting past the mountains here into the north beyond; the place where the orcs once lived. Some

place that will probably have its fair share of fire in it, at least, that's what the prophesy would seem to indicate."

"I don't particularly think I like what this part of the prophesy says will happen to us here," Reklen said.

"I know," Reynyagn said. "But it is through these trials that have been prophesied that we must go through, according to the prophesy, if we want to have any choice at succeeding in our mission."

"We're alone," Astrid said simply as she turned to look upon her new comrades. "There's nothing out here. Nothing except the wind and snow."

"Aye," Reynyagn said. "It's rather desolate..." They were silent for a few minutes as the wind rushed past.

"I suppose that's just as well," Zarien said, hobbling out from the vehicle. His mechanical leg had been giving him problems. "Because, if anyone's out here, it's going to be the elves. And I don't think I want to have our big confrontation with them quite yet. I'm hoping we're going to get something super-powerful out here to help us stand against them."

"That would be nice," Flek agreed.

"Well," Reynyagn said. "No use standing around talking when we could be doing something. I was hoping that we might be able to find some source of prey out here in the mountains to try and conserve our supplies."

"I'll be gone looking," Number 994 said, and with that he made his way down from the crag to search for prey.

“Very well,” Reynyagn said. “This morning I thought I saw some way for the machine to get fueled on solar power in the back when the machine is idle, so I’m going to investigate that. If the rest of you want to do whatever, that’s fine. Maybe someone wants to go help Number 994 hunt.”

“I’ll hunt on my own,” Reklen chirped, and with that he scampered off. Astrid watched as people left to their own tasks as Flek and Jroldin moved up beside her on the crag of the mountain.

“It’s no wonder you dwarves stayed underground up here,” Flek said. “Isn’t much up here that seems to be any good for you.”

“From what Reynyagn said, it seemed like beyond the mountains would be similarly desolate,” Jroldin said. “But the orcs ended up staying there.”

“True,” Flek said. “But... if Number 994 is any indication, it doesn’t seem that orcs would be the type of people to mind about solitude. Don’t seem to have any personality, that’s for sure.”

Astrid laughed. “I suppose that is true...” she said. “And any personality that Number 994 might have he seems to blame and put off on others. All that weird impersonal orc kind of stuff.”

“He’ll come around...” Jroldin said. “Eventually... At least I hope he does. Can’t have him stay the boring person in our party for long!” There was an awkward silence between them.

“I wish the prophesy gave us more information about what to do,” Astrid finally said. “Or even if we had a good idea about what we were looking for up in the North. I mean, we

don't know anything except that we're supposed to go up there. We're just wandering aimlessly!"

"Not really..." Flek said. "Reynyagn seemed to be trying to follow the star still... He said that there was some ancient custom about giving each star a certain position on the earth, and so he was trying to steer the vehicle on course to the traditional spot on the earth where the star would be in hopes that it would bring us anything. At least, he said he was going to... course that was weeks ago with the hectic hustle and bustle of getting prepared and getting sent out on our mission and everything, so he might have a different plan right now."

"Reynyagn is some person..." Jroldin said. "He gives me the shivers sometimes though. I mean, if he's blacker than the night! And he scares the jeepers out of me when he just pops up after he's been basically invisible in a dark enough shadow."

"He's not that creepy..." Astrid said, a bit defensively. "At the very least, he knows where we should be going."

"What's he doing?" They all turned to follow Jroldin's line of sight to Rider, who was standing alone on part of the mountain, gazing off in the distance back from where they had come from.

"He seems to be a bit of a solitary person," Astrid said. "At least for now he is... doesn't talk much at all..."

"Brother Tomas said it had something to do with his past before he came to Araelia..." Jroldin said.

“Well, I suppose that makes a bit of sense...” Flek said. “But sometimes I wonder about him... I do wonder...”

Part XXXX: Maneuvers

Date: Yippah 9th, 114 A.U.

“The elves have taken the Northern Crag,” the messenger said.

Freglak pursed his lips as he stood up. “How great of a force did they have?”

“We estimated thirty thousand troops have landed in the crag so far,” the messenger said.

“They attacked with a couple thousand—as well as a great many aircraft. Not the Mothership at the very least, but they still destroyed the guard of five hundred goblins and any other outposts on the crag.”

“What were the casualties?”

“Nearly all of our men were lost in the attack,” the messenger said. “However, they suffered heavy casualties. Estimates are coming in that they lost more than half of their attacking force and a good many airships. A few survivors said that they nearly won out against the first wave of elves, but after the second wave came in, it was too much.”

“They have a foothold in the forest then...” Freglak mused.

“Yes sir,” the messenger replied. “Major Erken says that his troops are ready and the plans are waiting to be executed.”

“Good,” Freglak said. “You may leave.” He walked toward the large circular table, otherwise known as the Codex, in the middle of the room that had been installed two weeks ago and pressed his hand on it. As he did so, the screen on top of it lit up and moved around to portray a map of the Great Forest. With some motions, he zoomed in on the northern part of the

forest and used some controls to add the elves to the northern crags at the top of the Great Forest and paused, thinking. Reynyagn had been planning for this, at least. Between some false spies to the elves and some other work, they had gotten the elves to attack in the north—just as they'd wanted them to. It was unfortunate that they had taken the crags, instead of a bit east of the crags, but it should do.

Freglak zoomed in a bit more and then jabbed at the icon of Major Erklen, selecting one of the options. As he did so, the map vanished to portray a picture of Major Erklen.

“Greetings, Lord Freglak,” a voice came in through the table, although the picture did not move. “I entrust you have received my message?”

“Yes, Major,” Freglak said. “Why did you not tell me via the Codex?”

“My apologies, sir,” the Major replied. “I had somewhat forgotten that we had put this communication in place.”

“Think nothing of it, Major,” Freglak said. “No harm done. Have any developments been made with the elves since you sent the messenger?”

“None, sir,” Major Erklen replied. “The elves seem to be waiting to see what we will do first.”

“Very well then,” Freglak said. “What ships do they have? Wait, no... Just input all the figures you know into your miniature codex device after our talk and send the information here.”

“I...” Erklen began. “I can do that?”

“Talk to one of the technicians,” Freglak said. “They’ll hook you up. I have all of your information, but if you can get theirs then that will help me fill in the battle scene here. I will relay commands via the Codex once I have your reports.”

“Yes sir,” Erklen said. “I will talk to the scouts and get a report back as soon as I can. I don’t think I’ll be able to get them in until an hour, though...”

“Very well,” Lord Freglak replied. “I’ll be waiting.” And with that he ended the communication. Freglak squinted, and rubbed his head. Reynyagn had told Freglak how Codexes like this were used for many different purposes—both concerning and not concerning their military, before the Upheaval. And so, digging into the large cluttered cellars of their palace, they had managed to find a Codex and Reynyagn had been able to give their technicians some tips about how to use it before they went. Reynyagn had been keeping up a steady stream of communication to Freglak while he was in their speeder but hadn’t much after he had reportedly found the dwarves and humans. After that, there had been no communication, though Reynyagn promised he would put him in touch with the dwarves...

Freglak suddenly looked at his watch and quickly stood up. He had an appointment with High Priest Jaine. And given recent events, Freglak did not think it a wise idea at all to keep the High Priest waiting.

“Lord Freglak.”

“Greetings, High Priest Jaine,” Freglak said, slightly bowing his head in pretend reverence.

“Please, sit down,” High Priest Jaine said as he gestured to the other chair at the oak wood table. Freglak sat down. The High Priest was silent for a few minutes as he contemplated the acorn in front of him.

“So,” High Priest Jaine said, looking at Freglak. “The elves have established a foothold.”

“You know already?” Freglak asked. “The news just came to me-”

“You know better than to ask that question,” High Priest Jaine responded. “Our knowledge goes far and wide. This attack displeases me, Freglak.”

“As it does I,” Freglak said. “But you would be glad to know-”

“Any threat the elves make is a threat to the Mothertree,” High Priest Jaine said sharply. “And it is your actions, Freglak, that have brought this attack upon us.”

“If you had a problem with my actions,” Freglak began. “You could have said before-”

“We both know that I did not need to say it,” High Priest Jaine snapped. “You seem to have a mindset that you can do things without our permission. You attacked an elven ship and brought all this upon us without our permission—and on the day of the Celebration. Furthermore, you told us nothing about the Sla’ad you had here until *after* he was gone.”

“You said you had knowledge of anything, did you not?” Freglak asked coolly. “I would expected you to know already that I was entertaining a Sla’ad in my quarters.”

“And we would have known, had you not hidden it from me,” High Priest Jaine said coolly. “Remember Freglak why it is that you are Lord over the Great Forest. It was not for nothing that we supported you over your opponent to be Lord.”

“And I respect that,” Freglak said. “But that was years ago. Besides which, the only reason you supported me was because otherwise my uncle said that you-”

“Who told you that?” High Priest Jaine interrupted, eyes mad with anger.

“My uncle warned me about the influence that the priests would try to exert upon me,” Freglak said carefully, treading dangerous ground. “Of course, much of what he said was folly as you are so-”

“Skip the vain talk!” High Priest Jaine snapped.

“And so he made sure he told me about most of his dealings over the years,” Freglak said. “He wanted me to know how I would be able to thwart the Priesthood of the Mothertree.”

“Heretic,” High Priest Jaine muttered. “I always knew he was, though-”

“The elves in the northern crags are soon to suffer a tremendous blow to their cause,” Lord Freglak said.

“And what then?” High Priest Jaine snapped. “You don’t mean to tell me that you think you can actually beat the Mothership, can you? The elves will not relent.”

“The Sla’ad, along with my top aide Flek have recently formed the Xavier Team,” Lord Freglak bluffed, even though he had no idea if they ever managed to form the team or not. “I am currently in league with that team to help bring down the elven empire. You respect the Prophet Xavier, do you not, High Priest Jaine?”

The High Priest opened his mouth, but no sound came out.

“Good day,” Lord Freglak said. “And take heed that you remember your place as well, High Priest Jaine. This is no time for political division, and I *will* be instrumental in the elves’ downfall. You may think that you control me, Jaine, but you don’t. I serve the Mother-tree and Her mission to bring down the elves over any other petty squabbles that I might get myself into.”

And with that, Lord Freglak left, leaving a gaping High Priest watching him leave.

Part XXXXI: Detour

Date: Yippah 8th, 114 A.U.

The rising sun cast its healing beams abroad to touch the rocky mountainside and the air ship that moved past it. Jroldin yawned as he left his quarters toward the front of the ship. Reynyagn was already out and staring intently at something up ahead. Jroldin moved next to Reynyagn and cocked his head to peer around him to see the mountains ahead.

“What is it?” Jroldin asked, seeing Reynyagn’s intent stare.

“Out there,” Reynyagn said, gesturing. Jroldin looked at where Reynyagn was gesturing and thought he could make out what Reynyagn was pointing at. It looked like a gray mass in the distance—almost looking like one of the mountains from Jroldin’s distance, though Jroldin thought it might be flying.

“What is it?” Jroldin asked.

“I’m trying to get some readings on it,” Reynyagn said. “But I think...” Reynyagn paused. “It’s rather far out and large enough that I suspect it to be an elven city.”

Jroldin focused on the small grey mass in the distance. “What?”

“A huge flying city,” Reynyagn said. “Picture it like one of the above-ground cities of old—just on a large base and having massive powerful thrusters on the bottom side that keep it afloat. It is in such cities that many elves live.”

“You mean...” Jroldin said. “That that’s-” The computer beeped and Reynyagn moved to see its reading.

“Yes,” Reynyagn said, looking at the screen. “That’s a huge floating elven city. And trust me. We don’t want to get anywhere near it.”

“We could go around it,” Jroldin said. “It looks like-”

“I’ve been checking that out,” Reynyagn said. “But the options aren’t terrible alluring. To the right, once we avoid the city we’d be moving toward a place blanketed by storms. And without a lot of tools in case the airship is hit, I’d rather not go there. And to the left we’d be moving back to the elves’ traditional homeland...”

“So?”

“I suppose it should be fine...” Reynyagn said. “But I worry about there being more cities there... I know that there are a fair amount of elven ground cities and labor camps there... And it will be higher elevation; I suppose this machine is supposed to do that, but given that we’ve only been trying it closer to the ground, I’m not sure how well it will withstand the higher elevation.”

“Well, if the problem there might be cities, given that there’s a flying city here, unless being off track is that bad...” Jroldin began.

“True,” Reynyagn said. “Better to go for a lower chance there than an automatic chance here of hitting a city. We go left then...” He began punching numbers into the computer as Rider came out.

“Greetings,” Rider said as he joined them. “What are you doing?” Jroldin quickly explained the problem and their solution.

“Very well, I suppose,” Rider said, and he pursed his lips as he clenched his hand into a fist. “I came from the elves’ traditional homeland.”

“Oh!” Jroldin said, intrigued to hear some of Rider’s mysterious past. “What did you do there?”

Rider said nothing for a moment before speaking. “I was a slave,” he said. “It’s unusual for an elf to be a slave, yes, but I was one. My parents had done something horribly wrong and so they got stripped of their status as an elf and were sent to work with the other races in the labor camps.”

“Labor camps?” Jroldin interrupted.

“It’s what the elves have done with most of the survivors from the other races,” Rider said. “They capture them and bring them to many of their labor camps where they do much of the menial labor required to keep their weak bodies from doing any work. It was at that labor camp that I spent the first ten years of my life at before I managed to get an opening and escaped. I nearly died, but I managed to escape. Fortune smiled on me so that I met with a dwarven scout party and joined them, and by that means managed to come into the mountains away from being constantly hunted.”

“Oh...” Jroldin said. “So that’s why you are an outcast.”

“Aye,” Rider said. “They treat them worse like animals, the elves do to the other races. Mind my words, Jroldin. There are few fates worse than being in the labor camps. I would sooner befriend a dog than one of those mongrel elves. I could strangle them all with my bare hands.”

Jroldin stepped back at the harshness of Rider's words.

“You wouldn't react so if you've seen the things that I have seen,” Rider said. “And I have seen things, Jroldin. Scenes that few, except perhaps you, Reynyagn—especially you given that you were a witness of the massacre—have seen. If you ever wonder why it is that you are fighting against the elves, go no further than to ask me. Or visit one of the labor camps for yourselves.” Rider spat on the ground. “Wicked beings.” And with that, he spun on a heel and left. Jroldin watched him go, unsure of what to say.

“He's seen awful things,” Reynyagn said, as if he was reading Jroldin's mind. “Things that have taken me over a century to wipe out of my mind. There are many horrible things in life, Jroldin. Take heed that you do not dwell upon them.”

Part XXXXII: Debate

Date: Yippah 13th, 114 A.U.

Iraina looked in the mirror as his stylist put the last finishing touches on his hair before Iraina put on the dark shades that he would wear until he got up on the podium, finishing off his look. His good looks, combined with his call to arouse the city to go out to war against the elves had gotten the youth well on his side; all that was now needed was to convince those in the city who had been alive for longer than that and were more firmly behind the aged Astrid. After checking with the stylist to make sure he was good, Iraina sat down in the seat in preparation for when the limousine stopped at the town hall where he would have his debate with the Governor. Iraina was ready.

The limousine pulled to a stop, and Iraina waited for his guards to get to the door before he opened it, smiling and waving to the waiting crowd. Raising his hand in the air as a salute, he met the many hands that were held out towards him and laughed along with the crowd as he made his way toward the town hall, grinning and having fun with the rest of the jubilant crowd. Get them worked up; get them in a frenzy about him—make them in love with him. It would only further to increase the votes.

“You have to be on top of things at this debate, Astrid,” her campaign manager was saying. “The spike you got for the Xavier Team is almost gone and you’re going to need something to convince the people who joined you for the Xavier Team to get back with you. You need to make them just as jubilant as before with any information that you have from them.”

“But the information we’ve gotten from them so far-”

“Make them excited, Astrid,” the campaign manager said. “Iraina’s lead is only growing in the polls; you have to come out and hit him now. Alright?”

“All right,” Astrid said, pursing her lips. “I’ll do it.”

Iraina stepped up to his podium and deftly removed his shades, placing them under the podium, as he smiled at the crowd. A moment later, Astrid came out to the stage and deliberately walked to the podium, crisply arranging herself there. Iraina noticed her tenseness and relaxed a little more. It would look good to the voters. He watched as the debate moderator came out and smiled. Their efforts to get a moderator sympathetic to his side had worked; now it was time to use all of his advantages to continue his rise to match Governor Astrid.

“This question is fielded to you from John Wilson from the eighth district,” the moderator said. “The question is, Candidate Iraina, you have said that you want to move aggressively against the elves. My question is, how do you plan on outmatching the forces of the elves?”

Iraina relaxed a bit. He had rehearsed his answer to this many times. “Well, Mr. Wilson,” Iraina said. “One doesn’t need to have greater forces than the elves to be able to defeat them. When the elves first rose to power, they didn’t primarily gain that power through the strength of arms but through the element of surprise. Thanks to some certain lax policies of our governor, we have refused to strike even though we are able.

I have evidence from a former cabinet member to our governor that shows that we have very detailed reports of the elves strengths and where their weak points are; furthermore, we have had such information for decades and have even been in positions to unleash a devastating strike against them. The only thing that has stopped us before from hitting the elves hard with a surprise surgical strike is because we have a governor who has consistently vetoed all efforts by us the people to try and regain our freedom. This is not acceptable; we have been subjugated by the elves too long—let’s stop electing a hesitating governor and elect someone who has bold plans to take that which is rightfully ours.” The crowd erupted in applause as Iraina smiled.

Let’s see Astrid try and defend against that.

“Governor, a thirty second rebuttal?” the moderator asked.

“Thank you,” Astrid said as the applause died down. “My fellow candidate here wishes to both take the glory and the claimed failures of my previous policies in office. As we heard him say, one of the best benefits we have in this battle is the element of surprise. But while my fellow candidate here has wished to take stabs at all my policies, he has forgotten to point out that the only reason we have the surprise is because I’ve given us that advantage through our years of secrecy. Before now we haven’t been able to strike against them because we simply lacked the strength. It is only a fool that strikes when he isn’t ready. But as I have shown throughout my record, I am willing and I have done my best to ready ourselves to be able to strike out against them. It is through my patience that we’ve had time to gather a team of prophesy to go out and fight against the elves. So, unless my colleague would like to take the glory for my work in electing the Xavier Team, let’s look at who really has the record of working against the elves, all right?” The crowd again erupted in applause. But Iraina was ready in his rebuttal.

“Governor Astrid has claimed,” Iraina said, “that we have been merely waiting for the right opportunity to strike out against the elves and that all the advantages we have are because of her. Now, people of Araelia, let me ask you. Why is it that for months of our campaigning here, our governor argued time and time again that there was no use fighting against the elves until she started losing her inevitability in the polls? She would like to take all the praise for the Xavier Team and use that to prove that she wants to fight aggressively, but who was on that side first? Time and time again in this election I’ve argued for an aggressive push while she has flipped her side just to try and win this election so that she can go back to the same-old policies. Well, let me tell you something. I’m not running for the same-old policies! I’m not flipping sides just to gain votes! Governor Astrid has emphasized her stable side over the years, but if she’s willing to change her stable side at a moment’s notice in order to gain votes, what does that say about the stability of her side?” The crowd roared in applause as Iraina noticed Astrid bite her lip. Governor Astrid fumbled her response as Iraina relaxed to the roaring of the crowd. His numbers were going to be rising. His numbers were going to be rising.

Part XXXXIII: Breakdown

Date: Yippah 10th, 114 A.U.

The harsh wind blew across the snow-covered mountains, blowing the snow around to find a new settling place as it whistled through the crevices. Blowing across the snow-covered valleys of the upper mountains Winding around spires and rocks, it blew past the stranded air ship in the process.

Rider watched the shivering Flek step of the ship into the freezing cold to join the others huddled around the front of the machine. Rider had been wondering how long it would take before Flek finally got the nerve to come out into the cold. Flek didn't really seem to like the cold.

"How is it?" Flek asked, putting his hands in his pockets to try and keep them warm.

"I..." Number 994 weakly said as he probed the machine with his mind. "I... I don't..." He scrunched his eyes shut as he pressed more firmly on the engine.

"I can't see anything on the outside to explain the breakdown," Reynyagn said. "Maybe-"

"Got it," Number 994 said, and he pulled back from the engine, opening his eyes. "I figured out where the problem was."

"Can you fix it easily?" Rider asked.

"I'm not sure," Number 994 said, pursing his lips. "I don't think so—at least—not easily. It's kind of hard to explain to you, but basically the elements weathered down part of the

machine that was unprotected—the machine wasn't made for this sort of terrain. From the information I gathered, I think there's a pretty good gash in the underside of this that we should check out. I don't think I can fix it, so I'll have to rework the system to go around the damaged spot. I'm not completely sure how I'm going to do that..."

"Well, best to get it raised up a bit or something," Reynyagn said. "And then we can take a look at the physical damage done. I think I might be able to move the machine up that much, so—"

"Don't move," Rider hissed, sliding a long corsha rapier out of its sheath. "There's something watching us." His eyes darted to where he thought he had seen the movement but he saw nothing—at least right now he saw nothing.

"What is it?" Astrid asked, an element of fear to her voice.

"I just sensed movement," Rider said. "Just be on your guard." They were silent for several minutes. Rider looked around but he could still see nothing. Maybe it was nothing, but still... His instincts rarely failed him.

"I don't see anything," Reynyagn said as he looked around. "Where was it?"

"Well, it was from that direction," Rider said, slowly gesturing with his head. "But then from that direction, I thought I—"

Whatever he was about to say was lost as suddenly, Zarien gave a cry, clutching his head, and collapsed to the ground. Flek spun around, reaching for his swords, as he moved to defend himself, but just as he saw his attacker he too clutched at his head and collapsed. Astrid and

Brother Tomas fell at the same time. Rider turned to see the attackers but saw nothing. Something flashed by his eye and Kailen and Jroldin also fell down.

“Where is it coming from?” Monty yelled, and fired his gun toward what he thought was the source before he too collapsed. It was now only Rider, Reynyagn, and Number 994.

“Get in the ship!” Rider yelled. “Maybe in there we can be safe!”

“I know what-” Number 994 began before he too clutched at his head. His eyes bulged and it seemed like for a moment he was fighting against it. But then he also went limp and collapsed. But Rider and Reynyagn were already moving. Rider made it to the door just as Reynyagn gave a cry. Tripping backwards, Reynyagn stared outwards as he flung his arms to either side while holding his head. Powerless to help his friend, it was all Rider could do to get in the vehicle before he watched Reynyagn fall back limply and off the cliff down toward whatever was below. Rider’s eyes followed Reynyagn’s descent as he bit his lip.

Rider slammed the door to the airship shut as his mouth opened wide, agape. Then he sharply turned, looking around through the windows at the world outside to try and catch whatever their assailant was.

They can't be dead. The rest of the Xavier team just can't be dead. Rider turned his head but couldn't see anything through the snow. Then, a dark figure emerged and walked toward them. Rider tried to see who it was, but couldn't make out any details. Leaping for the door, Rider slid the lock before leaping back, sword ready to meet the figure. Several other figures emerged, but thanks to the fierceness of the storm, Rider couldn't make out anything. He stepped back, almost paralyzed with fear, before he gritted his teeth. He *would* do this. He *would* rescue his comrades.

Making for the weapons stash, Rider withdrew a powerful blaster gun from the hold and had just begun to turn back when the front window of the machine shattered with a resounding clap. As snow blew into his eyes, Rider pointed the gun wildly, trying to see who it was. Before he could spot someone though, a sharp wave of pain cascaded into his mind, reducing his usage of his other senses. Rider shot wildly toward the front window as he stumbled back, unable to speak. The pain ripped through his mind as milliseconds seemed like minutes. Rider felt himself fall forward as his hands moved toward his pained head. Rider faintly remembered hitting the ground. But try as he might he couldn't remember anything else as the darkness came to meet him.

Part XXXXIV: Sereth

Date: Yippah 13th, 114 A.U.

It was in the dark of night when the aircraft flew over the jungle foliage and stopped as ropes dropped down to the ground. Four darkened figures slid down the ropes to the top of the broken-down building, pausing and pointing their guns around before making sure that the coast was clear. And with that, as the aircraft flew off, they quickly climbed down from the building, turning on their night-vision goggles, and began to spread out from the building, searching for their quarry.

“Sereth!” Sereth stood up quickly from the carvings she was examining and ran out of the corridors of the building out into the open air to see one of her companions running toward her.

“Sereth! Sereth! Oh, there you are!”

“Och, what is it, Flen?”

“There are some elves here to see you! They say that they bear an important message from the Emperor!” Flen said, near breathless.

A message from the Emperor himself. Fat chance of that. But Sereth knew that she had to go along. “I donnae like this,” she muttered.

“Yes, well they didn’t seem to have much patience,” Flen said. “So if you can come back to camp-”

“Well, best to not keep them waiting,” Sereth said, hitching her backpack up higher. “Ah well, let’s see what they want.” She walked with Flen back to the camp, where Sereth saw two of the elves pacing while the other two were looking at the supplies.

“What are you doin’ with mae supplies?” Sereth asked as she steppe forward. “And what didst ye want with me?”

“Ah, are you Sereth?” one of the elves asked, as he strode forward.

“Och, well, I don’t see anyone else a’respondin’ to the naeme,” Sereth said. “What do ya want with me?”

“We’ve been given an important message from the Emperor,” the elf responded. “We’re from the elven guard and have been given the duty of finding you.”

“And what do ya want me for?” Sereth asked, still doubting if they really were given their message from the Emperor.

“According to our file on you, you have done some work at Tzel-Maret, is that right?” the elf asked.

“Ah, yes, Tzel-Maret,” Sereth said. “I remember it like it were yesterdae; a magnificent citadel it was, and with many good artifacts. But what do ya want me for? I haven’t been to Tzel-Maret for ten years, I believe; haven’t gone that far up north for a while.”

“The Emperor requests your presence at Tzel-Maret,” the elf said.

“What are ya trying to pull on me? Do ya mean to tell me that the Emperor himself wants an archaeologist and historian such as myself to go all the way north to Tzel-Maret?”

“Yes,” the elf said. “The Emperor is planning a visit to Tzel-Maret and requests your services as a guide.”

Thoughts flew past Sereth’s mind faster than she could catch them. *Were they actually serious that the Emperor wanted her to come all the way up from here just to be his guide? But of course it would be an honor, but Sereth still had lingering doubts about their purpose... And what would the Emperor be wanting to do at Tzel-Maret?*

“Well, I suppose that I donnae have much choice but to comply,” Sereth responded. “I assume you have proper identification and papers so that I know that you’re not trying to pull something on mae?”

“We have the papers,” the elf grumbled, fishing them out of his pack. “Now will ya come with me? I have to signal the ship to pick us up?”

“Well, I suppose I ought to,” Sereth said and she looked back at her companions. “But wait, will ya? What are my companions supposed to do? I just can’t exactly leave them here and we still have to pack up our equipment and-”

“We only have room on the ship for one person,” the elf snapped. “Your companions are going to have to stay here until you get back—if you get back, that is. “

“Are ya threatening me?”

“For crying out loud, I’m not threatening you, miss historian,” the elf said. “But I am merely pointing out that the Emperor does and the Emperor wills and if he decides to take you around for whatever places he wants to be visiting, you could very easily be gone for a long time.”

“But, my frien-”

“Well, they’re going to have to stay here, girl. We don’t have the space for them and we don’t have much time either.” The elf pointed to the aircraft that was flying toward them. “Now the ship is close to arrival. If you wanted to grab any other possessions before we went, it would be best to do it now before the ship gets here. We need to get going up to Tzel-Maret immediately. We have to catch another aircraft that’s going there in time and the Emperor does not like to be waiting on people.”

“Yes, yes, I understand,” Sereth grumbled as she looked around to try and see what she would have to grab. She usually packed most of the things she had in the backpack she carried around in case she ran into an emergency in one of the ruins, but just to make sure...

“You’re leaving us?” Flen asked, running up to her.

“Well, I’m afraid so,” Sereth replied, pursing her lips. “I can’t exactly argue much with him, seeing that he has the warrants and all, and I can’t think of any other options. I’ll be back here sooner than you know it, Flen. Just stick around these parts and when I’m free of my duties, I’ll return. I hope I’ll be seeing you again, then.”

“Yeah... same here...” Flen said glumly.

“Hey! The aircraft is here!” the elf yelled. “Get on over here so we can take off!”

“Very well, very well, hold your trousers,” Sereth said. And with that she turned from her friends and her past life ready to embark the air craft to take her to see the Emperor at Tzel-Maret. Because somehow, Sereth doubted that her life was going to do anything but take a sharp dramatic change. But for the worse or for the better, she couldn’t tell.

Part XXXXV: Broken

Date: Yippah 11th, 114 A.U.

It was the cold that first let Astrid know that she was still alive. Astrid gradually came to feel the cold hard rock that she was lying on and her eyes slowly focused on the bodies lying around her. The headache and the stiff iron manacles let her know that she wasn't a ghost.

Astrid slowly pushed herself slightly off the ground as she looked at the members of the Xavier Team, all held to the wall with long chains that attached to the manacles on their wrist. All Astrid could remember was seeing Flek and Zarien fall and then collapsing to the snow as something overwhelmed her senses. That was when Astrid realized that they didn't have all the members of the party there.

Astrid forced her unmoving body as she counted the forms. Four, five, six, seven. No. She must have miscounted. But there they were: only seven. As she frantically strained at the chains, she tried to figure out who was there. The small figure was Jroldin, she could see Flek's goblin ears pointing out of his cloak, that was most certainly Brother Tomas' robe... Kailen's small goblin body she could finally make out, but she couldn't make out the last figure, shrouded by his cloak and the darkness. It had to be Monty, it had to be. Astrid wished that they hadn't decided to all adopt a similar garb of brown cloaks, at least for the Xavier Team. But—but that meant—since Monty wasn't part of the Xavier Team he didn't have-

"Monty!" Astrid shrieked as she moved at her chains. Some of the limp figures moved slightly. The last figure slowly rolled and his hood was undone. Zarien's sleeping face stared back at her. Astrid screamed.

“Ah, so our prisoners have awakened.” From outside their cell, a tall orc came into view. The blue orc’s slick black hair was tied back into a pony tail and black gauntlets were around his hand. “I hadn’t thought you would be awake so soon. Our pulse was made to keep you out for longer.”

“What did you do with the rest of them!” Astrid shrieked. “Where is my brother?!”

“Ah,” the orc said. “A pity it is. You see, some members of your party are just too clever for their own good. Your orc friend thought he could fake a knock out and then try to rescue you all. Some hero he is.” A faint smile trickled across the orc’s lips. “He only managed to grab one human—your brother I would assume—before he was taken out by a sudden avalanche and went over the side like that clumsy Sla’ad. It really was quite a pity that he had to go over. It all didn’t have to happen if he cooperated more. And we would have loved to have captured that Sla’ad. Quite a group you made.” A voiceless scream emitted from Astrid’s lips.

“Sad for them?” the orc asked. “Don’t be, lady. They got their just deserts for trespassing. And it may be that you will wish that you received their face by the time all is said and over. You have much explaining to do.”

“I won’t say anything to you,” Astrid said behind clenched teeth. There was a gruffled moan and some of her companions began to stir.”

“Oh, but that would be rather unrational of you,” the orc said. “Unless you happen to actually enjoy the pain of torture.” The orc inserted a key into the lock of the cell door and opened it, entering. “I was going to wait until more of you awakened, but there’s no reason to wait. How is it, woman? Perhaps you can begin by letting me know your name.”

“I won’t tell you anything,” Astrid snapped.

“Oh, why isn’t that sad,” the orc drawled. “I’m sure I could change your mind. Your companions, for starters. It’s about time that some of them awakened for questioning, isn’t it?” A light flashed in the orcs eyes and lightning burst out from his gauntlets, hitting Kailen’s small form. Kailen struggled and was lifted into the air as he gave a scream before the lightning stopped and he fell roughly to the floor. Kailen rolled as he tried to rip his cloak off of him. Other members of the party were awakening now.

“Your name is all I’m asking, lady,” the orc said smoothly. “It isn’t that hard, is it?”

“Leave her alone.” Astrid turned toward Flek, who was sitting up on one elbow while pointing a shaky finger at the orc. “We’re not going to tell you anything until you give us an explanation for this.”

“Ah, it is my turn to explain first, is it?” the orc asked, an edge to his voice. “Just think about this, goblin. It is *never* good to make rash promises.” Lightning again sparked at his gauntlets and before Astrid could do anything, a blast of lightning slammed Kailen, still recovering from the last attack, against the wall.

“Stop it!” Flek roared as he scrambled to his feet. “That’s my friend!”

“Ah, I know,” the orc said suavely as Kailen fell back to the floor. “That’s why I’m doing this, see? I can force you to do whatever I want without giving you anything. If you really must know my name, my name is Rishka. Now, will you give me your names, or must I turn the power up on your friend again.”

“I’m Flek,” Flek spat. “And her name is Astrid. What do you want with us?”

“Ah, but that’s the question I wanted to ask you,” Rishka said. “How about you tell me first what you are doing in these parts and what would explain your motley band.”

“And tell you all of our plans against you and your emperor?” Flek said. “I would sooner cut off my own left arm.”

A light flashed in the orc’s eyes. “Stubborn will you be?” he snapped. “Very well, I will test your request—but not on yourself.”

Flek lunged at his chains as, too late, he saw what was about to happen. A barrage of lightning hit the still staggering Kailen. Kailen clutched at his manacles as the electricity pulsed through it and was thrown back. He held out his hand, trying to stop the lightning but to no avail as Flek screamed for his best friend. Kailen tried to say something, but it was lost before there was a snap.

The orc stepped back as Kailen limply collapsed. “I will return when you are in a better frame of mind,” the orc said. “I can’t imagine it will be easy to have just lost your friend for your own impulsiveness. Maybe that will make you think twice before speaking rashly again.” And with that, the orc left as Flek collapsed to the floor in sobs as Astrid stared with eyes unfocused at the cell. Monty, Reynyagn, and Number 994 all gone by an avalanche, and now Kailen. The Xavier Team was broken.

Part XXXVI: Watching Shadows

Date: Yippah 14th, 114 A.U.

Caiman suddenly snapped alert, instantly looking around the hall before he made sure there were no approaching threats. He glanced at the other guards, but they remained alert and resolute. One glanced at him with a look that told Caiman that he should have been paying more attention.

Caiman stifled a yawn; it was his first day in this portion of the guard after all. Caiman had been recently moved up here due to an unexpected shortage of guards for Jaigran—and because Caiman was one of the better ones in his division. There was always a shortage of guards for Jaigran. Caiman had yet to discover if that was due to more guards needed or if the guards mysteriously disappeared in some incident with the Emperor. Caiman hoped it wasn't the latter.

Trying to keep himself awake in the middle of the night, Caiman bounced slightly on his heels before one of the guards glared at him. That's right. He was supposed to be resolute and stiff. Caiman tried to stand stiffly, barely looking at the other guards. He was beginning to wish he had been able to stay in his division—more relaxed and carefree with his friends—instead of having to be super-on-duty here both since they were guarding the Emperor and since they were outside the Mothership in some fast cruiser that the Emperor was using to go somewhere.

The Emperor never went anywhere.

Caiman wondered how his fellow guards would take a prank. One look at his fellow guards and he immediately dismissed the idea.

Playing a prank on one of them would be a baaaad idea.

At that moment, there was a scream from inside the Emperor's chambers. The guards instantly leapt up and rushed for the door, Caiman getting into the mob. The door opened first and Emperor Jaigran leapt out, his face as pale as chalk and a... a golden *corsha spear in his hand?* Caiman had thought that the Emperor had long ago dismissed them as aged weapons that were no longer good... But then again...

“My Emperor!” the tallest and eldest-looking guard cried. “What is it?”

The short emperor's gaze didn't leave the room. “Turn on the lights.”

“Excuse me?”

“Turn on the lights you blasted idiot!” Jaigran said, moving back. “I want all the lights on! Purge the darkness! NOW!”

The guards immediately bustled over each other to move in to turn on the light. Caiman tried to peek over their shoulders to see what was in the room, but he couldn't see anything in it—anything out of the ordinary that is.

“What is it, my Emperor?” the eldest guard asked.

“A Sla'ad,” Emperor Jaigran said, clenching his teeth. “There was a Sla'ad in there that tried to murder me.”

The guards moved further into the room. “I don't see anything...” the eldest guard began.

Jaigran's wings unfurled and Caiman had just felt the rushing air pushed back by Jaigran's wings when Jaigran had flown into the room and hovered face-to-face with the guard, his corsha spear outstretched.

“ARE YOU CALLING ME A LIAR?!”

“No, my Emperor!” the guard said, backing up. “I just thought-”

Jaigran dropped to the floor. For some reason that Caiman couldn't figure out, it seemed that Emperor Jaigran actually enjoyed being so short. Maybe it was because he could still order people around. Or maybe it was because... Caiman bit his lip to keep from laughing as he remembered a dirty joke that one of his friends had told him to humorously explain the reason.

“You didn't think,” Jaigran snapped. “There was some Sla'ad abomination in here that tried to murder me.” His eyes flitted from side to side and then he drew back. “The shadows...”

“The what?”

“The Sla'ad conceal themselves in shadows!” Jaigran roared. “Get lamps in here! Purge the darkness from the corners! He could still be in here!”

Caiman somehow wondered that in the far places of the room there could a Sla'ad hidden but he moved to do as he was told and came running back with a couple lamps to search the room.

“Search around the edges—now!” Jaigran said, moving to the center of the room away from the shadows. “Search every dark spot for the Sla'ad! He can't have gotten out of here!”

Caiman nervously searched, but thankfully found no trace of a Sla'ad.

“We can’t find any trace of one... sir...” the eldest guard said.

“There was a Sla’ad here,” Emperor Jaigran said, a strange look in his eyes. “He was here. He tried to kill me.”

“Sir, I-”

“There is a new change in regulations,” Jaigran said, his gaze darting around the room. “From henceforth there are always to be two additional guards around me with fire-poles.” Caiman had heard of fire-poles. They were long staffs that fire-orcs made that had a fierce light glowing at the top of the staff. “Wherever I go, I will be so accompanied,” Jaigran quickly said. “There will be no shadows nearby me for a Sla’ad to hide in.”

“Sir... you really don’t think that-”

“Shut up!” Jaigran yelled. “There is a Sla’ad stalking me! I thought I had seen glimpses—snips of something in the shadows watching me—waiting its time for the right moment to strike—Now do it! Or I’ll make *you* my living fire-stick.”

“Yes sir,” the guard said. “Caiman! Get over here and go find some firesticks!” Caiman nervously hurried over to the door as the guard held it open. Caiman glanced back at Jaigran who was putting away his weapon.

“Is there really one,” Caiman said. “Or did he dream-”

“Just get the fire-sticks,” the guard said in a low voice. “The Emperor’s word is the Emperor’s word. If he believes his dream, it is our job to do the same.”

“Wh-”

“Go.”

Part XXXVII: Scattering Wind

Date: Yippah 11th, 114 A.U.

Iron chains held him to the wall where he slumped, helpless and hopeless. Wifts of spirit and glimmers of the woman passed by him, a woman holding a cup of water, a woman with compassion in her eyes. A woman who didn't hate him. One who promised to work with her position in the Triumvirate to regain him his freedom. One who brought him books. One who helped him.

All in one motion torn away and put in the face of a maniacal foe who wished death and destruction for all races. An elf so twisted and corrupted that he would wrack his vengeance on his previous companion in the Xavier Team because she would not allow him to gain power. One whom Reynyagn had thought dead before he had seen her face as the Governor of Araelia. One who had too soon be torn away as Reynyagn had to accept his own destiny as one of the new Xavier Team.

A destiny which seemed all too sure to have a speedy ending.

A cold wind whipped the snow into Reynyagn's face as he contemplated what was underneath him for several minutes as his brain awoke. The cold penetrated his senses and warned Reynyagn of the coming danger. Sla'ad were much more vulnerable to the extremes than normal beings. Their ability of being unable to be hurt by most physical material came at an extreme price—their vulnerability to the elements.

Reynyagn stood up, rubbing his fur coat as he looked around. The last thing he remembered was stumbling off the cliff after being attacked by that orc. Now he found himself in the middle of a deep gorge with long cliffs around either side and a wind blowing into him. He would have to get moving—fast—before his body froze. Because once that happened, there was no going back.

Reynyagn quickly moved, trying to run through the snow as he looked for shelter. Reynyagn's run was a weak run. His joints already were stiffening. He should still be able to survive a couple hours, but... The distance he was able to cover each hour would dramatically diminish as his body continued to freeze up.

Rule Number 43: At any opportunity, use your enemies to benefit your cause.

Number 994 stared at Monty's limp body nearby as he looked back up at the great distance that the avalanche had carried them. They had gone far and deep. And his ruse had kept him alive. His companions were gone—either dead or captured. And that suited Number 994 just fine.

Number 994 slowly nudged Monty's body. Monty groaned and rolled to the side. Number 994 was slightly irked. As much as he didn't care for the human, Number 994 knew that it wouldn't be wise to be in an icy wilderness such as this and be alone. Besides—their companions were gone. He could always take out Monty. And Monty knew nothing of his true allegiances.

“Get up,” Number 994 said, nudging Monty some more. He wondered if Monty was dead. Bending down, Number 994 pushed Monty’s hood back, opening Monty’s face to the cold air. Number 994 wondered why Monty’s face was blue. Number 994 hesitantly poked Monty’s face, wondering if it was a dye. It wasn’t. Number 994 wondered why and how humans were able to change their skin color.

Number 994 had finished searching Monty’s pockets and pilfering all of the useful weapons that Monty had when Monty began to move. Number 994 stepped back, hiding his stolen items in his coat. Number 994 hadn’t thought he needed the coat—not like electric-orcs like him minded the cold—but then again, the coat was a pretty good place to hide stolen materials.

“Uhhhh...” Monty said. “What... what...?”

“We’re down here in gorge,” Number 994 said. “An avalanche carried us down.”

Monty looked around. “But what... what attacked us—where is Astrid?”

“Renegade orcs attacked us,” Number 994 said. “I tried to defeat them but got carried away in avalanche. Your sister was knocked out. I don’t know where she is.”

“We have to find her,” Monty said quickly, struggling to stand up. Number 994 put his hand out to help him up.

“We will leave the gorge,” Number 994 said, bobbing his head as if in agreement. If Monty was too intent on rescuing his sister, he could always kill him off if he proved to be more of a hindrance than an aid. It would be what the Garum would want him to do. Number 994 turned back to Monty, who was strangely fidgeting and bobbing and shaking uncontrollably.

“Why the shaking?” he asked, gesturing toward Monty.

“It’s called shivering,” Monty said. “It’s what we do when we’re cold. Don’t you shiver?”

“Only the weaker fire-orcs hate cold,” Number 994 said. “Our race born and raised here. I no suffer cold.”

“Wish I could say the same for me...” Monty said, continuing to shake in a shiver. “Do you think we can find shelter to build a fire?”

“We can find shelter,” Number 994 said, seeing the importance of finding a base to stop at to consider their options. “You can build fire if you have ability so that you can stop shaking in a shiver.”

“Good,” Monty said, trudging forward. “Tell me when you see one.”

“Aye,” Number 994 said, taking up the rear. “We will look for a shelter.”

Part XXXXVIII: Overextension

Date: Yippah 16th, 114 A.U.

Major Erklen peered through his telescope at the elven cruisers that were scouting along the premises. It had taken the elves a week to step outside of their now-fully fortified base but finally they were venturing in the right direction—away from their base and right to where Major Erklen wanted them.

Major Erklen held his breath as his finger hovered above the button that would doom the elves to die. Just a couple more feet... Major Erklen pressed the button. Suddenly, from the trees around the cruisers, goblins leapt out. Guns were fired, and the elves collapsed, their cruisers smashing into the trees. The goblins immediately let out a whoop and one fired his long range gun. There was a bang as the bullet flew over the forest. Escaping the tree line, the bullet suddenly self-imploded, creating a ball of fire that blew over the forest. Now the elves knew where they were.

Major Erklen pressed down the button on his walkie talkie. “All right—good work guys. The elves know we’re here. Now come back and make ready for their advance.”

The drop-planes came first. Zooming over the top of the foliage, it darted under the goblin attack ships as elves came pouring down ropes from the underside of the ship, falling down into the battle field that the goblins had before planned to have and immediately engaging in battle with the goblins.

Major Erklen nodded with approval as the next round of dropships to come were immediately decimated by a ready goblin attack force. Now the elves would be sure to come with more.

Sure enough, the next wave came, this time of sleek elven fighters. The goblin aircraft swerved around them as the elves poured their air assault upon them. More elven dropships cruised underneath the battle to bring more reinforcements to the scene. All was good—all was good for now. Major Erklen pushed a button to alert his soldiers that Phase I was over. It was time for Phase II: Retreat.

The goblins on foot suddenly fell back from the firing lines and fled as the aircraft did the same. After a moment of hesitation the elves followed, leaping toward the fleeing goblins. Just a bit further... a bit further...

Major Erklen's hand wavered on the button before he decisively pushed down, spelling the elves fate.

The forest floor was shattered as it blew to pieces underneath the over-confident elves, trees collapsing and fire exploding from the planted bombs. Missiles broke loose from plastic trees to collide into the elves attack fleet. Major Erklen stepped back for a moment as the smoke cleared. The battlefield was a chaos of blinded elves running over each other and looking for their wounded comrades. And then the ground gave out from under them—collapsing in on itself as the beams that had once held the ground up gave way. The elves fell down into the waiting regiment of goblins. There were some yells from beneath. And then there was silence.

Major Erklen stepped back, giving a sigh of relief. They had just dealt the elves a mortal blow that would take long to recover. The silent forest air was only broken by the murmurs of the goblins who saw the carnage that they had just done to the elves. Phase III had just been completed to the destruction of the elven army. And now they would advance to the crags and finish off the elves in the Great Forest.

That was before Major Erklen saw the great elven attack vehicle flying toward them.

“The goblin army is in retreat, sir!”

“I know it, blast it all,” Lord Freglak snapped as he worked the Codex. “Major Erklen has just informed me.” Freglak cursed under his breath. All the time that he and Reynyagn had worked on the elaborate trap and it had gone to smithereens. Although Freglak couldn’t tell yet whether or not the blame fell on Major Erklen, Freglak knew that Reynyagn wouldn’t have fallen into the same trap if he had stayed. Instead, the goblin forces had been taken completely unawares by the elven surprise assault right after they had lost what seemed to be a great portion of their army.

And now they were on the retreat.

“I want you to make that news front cover,” Freglak snapped to the anxious goblin reporter. “I want the face of that priest on the front of every paper so that the people can see who

it is that is causing our defeat. Go! Get it done!” Freglak watched as the reporter hurried out of the room to publish Jaine’s blunderous speech about what should be done about the elves.

Freglak stalked over to the window and looked out at the forest around him. For however much that defeat may have cost them, if he would be able to blame it on the priesthood he may yet accomplish more than his uncle would have dreamed of being able to do.

The priests had held control over the Great Forest for too long. His uncle had drilled that into him when young as his uncle tried to force the priest’s to have no other option than to make Freglak lord when he died. And having that training and seeing such an opportunity, Freglak was prepared to take it. If he could only manage to turn the populace against the priests and toward Freglak as their only possible savior, everything would fall into place. With the people behind him, he would have the power and backing to do nearly anything he wanted. And that would begin with the destruction of the order of priests. And the ordination of Freglak as the sole Lord-Protector of the Great Forest, a dictator with the complete power to do whatever he wanted. With everything at his disposal to strike back against the elven tyranny.

Part II: Wish Corruption

Date: Yippah 12th, 114 A.U.

Rider quickly took in everything in the room—the wooden desk, the array of trophies on the wall, the detailed maps of the region, the small assortment of weapons, the lack of torture instruments, and the physical nature of his questioner—as he was brought into the room and sat down in the chair opposite his questioner at the desk. The orc guards quickly exited as Rider quickly determined that it wouldn't be easy to get out of his hand cuffs. It could still be done though, and keeping his hands away from the questioner's view, began to fiddle with them.

“I am Farshore Garum, the leader of our noble tribe,” the questioner said. “I have heard that you claim to be part of the mythical Xavier Team who will destroy the elves.”

“I am,” Rider said, looking up. “My name is Rider of the Xavier Team who will destroy the elves and their empire.”

“I see.” Farshore bristled at the statement. “Do you think,” he said slowly. “That your motley band, which is unable to resist us, is able to not only resist but destroy the elves?”

“The prophesy said we would be tested in the northlands,” Rider said. “This is merely the testing. I believe the prophesy, and the prophesy says that we will be able to do it. We will escape your grasp.”

Farshore laughed at the statement. “Few have—even some of the best of Jaigran's legions have been unable to escape from us or our fellow tribes. You will be no exception.”

Rider's mind raced. “You are enemies of Jaigran, then.”

Farshore's gaze narrowed. "I am the one giving the rules here, elf," he said. "I am asking the questions. We are the enemies of all who would dare to trespass into our lands and show partiality to none. Thus is the state of the Northern Tribes."

"You may be assured that we will exit your territory as soon as possible," Rider said.

"And you may be assured that I will not take a simple apology as truth," Farshore snapped. "Too many have trespassed our lands and have claimed that they would never returned. What they neglected to mention was that they would tell their allies and bring the wrath of the Emperor upon us."

"We are different."

"No," Farshore said, letting a tingle of electricity run across his fingers. "You are not different from the rest of them. Like the others you would manipulate me to free you. Ah, but there is a price to pay for trespassing our lands."

"What kind of a price?" Rider asked nervously as he tried to free himself from the handcuffs.

"Ah, yes—the price for trespassing," Farshore said. "Some trespassers we have deemed better dead than alive. Others we have blinded to be put to use as slaves. Others have been used for... other... purposes. If you wish to avoid death, elf, I would suggest that you work to have a say in what you will be used for."

"Let us fight," Rider said. "Let us fight the elves and bring down their tyranny. You cannot stand against them."

Farshore laughed. "I knew you would say that, elf. Your kind is predictable. Unlike your expectations, however, I will grant your request, albeit under a different kind of answer than you may have wanted."

Rider's head jerked up. "You will free us?"

Farshore laughed again. "No, elf," he said. "You will be our warriors. That will be your punishment. You shall fight for us until you die." A chill ran down Rider's back as he began to get inklings about what Farshore was going to do. "Our spies have brought us word about an elven expedition into the lands. The Emperor himself will be coming for an unknown purpose. And so we will take our vengeance on trespassers. You will fight for us against the Emperor. But, of course, we can't have any doublecrossing..."

"What are you getting at?"

"Our medics will implant electric devices in your brains with enough power to send high voltage into your brain, killing you instantly," Farshore said. "And we will have the controls."

Rider swallowed. "So you mean-"

"Yes, elf," Farshore said. "Try to escape from our bonds and your freedom will be short-lived. Your sole purpose in life from henceforth is to serve us. And any disobedience will not be tolerated. Congratulations, elf. You have gained your wish."

"So I see," Rider said stiffly.

"Our medics will be in to see you and your companions soon once you've been neutralized," Farshore said. "Once your devices have been planted you will be free."

“A cruel freedom you promise,” Rider stated bluntly.

“It’s better than death or having your eyes gouged out as a slave,” Farshore retorted. “
Watch your mouth, elf. You serve us from now on and you will henceforth refer to me as Garum
as all orcs do. Any misdemeanors will bring you punishment. Do you understand?”

“I understand.”

Part L: Rebel Sister

Date: Yippah 15th, 114 A.U.

“So what exactly does the Emperor want in the ancient ruins of Tzel-Maret.”

“Emperor does as pleases,” a gruff winged elf named Hazael said. “Question him we do not.”

“Well, I know that yu do not question one the likes of the emperor,” Sereth replied as she plucked out a cheerful tune on her guitar. It always helped to calm her to play one of her instruments. And Sereth didn’t feel very safe with all of the elves looming about her and continually watching her. . “But I think that we still can know what the emperor’s purposes are.”

“Emperor not told us,” Hazael said. “I cannot tell you.”

“Well, if ye cannae tell the likes of me,” Sereth asked. “Could you at least let me use your little communicator thing to call my sister?”

Hazael’s gaze flipped down toward his prized communicator. “You want use military communicator for small talk.”

“Aye, I do,” Sereth said, strumming along as she kept her care-free attitude. “After all, service on the communicators is free, and I don’t see you using it.”

“They’re for strictly military use,” the lead elf snapped. “They’re not to be used for such frivolous purposes.” Sereth glanced at the lead elf and noted his arching eyebrows and stretched face. Proudful idiot.

“Who is this sister,” Hazael said.

“Och, well, her name is Cortna, though I don’t suppose that you would know who she is. She serves on the Mothership.”

The lead elf suddenly bristled and flipped around to stare at her. “Who?”

“Her name’s Cortna. Don’t know why you would care, though. Not like she-”

The lead elf stiffly walked toward her. “Long black hair? Red birthmark on cheek?”

“Well, yes! Do ya actually know her. I wouldn’t think that-”

The lead elf abruptly sat on the side of the table opposite Sereth. “This sister of yours is a known traitor to the Empire.”

Sereth’s gaze froze and her hand that she had been strumming her guitar with dropped as she suddenly realized that Cortna must have become more overt in her disgust for the Empire.

“She what?”

“She was part of a rebel organization who sought to cripple the elven defenses,” the lead elf snapped. “A traitor to the Empire.”

“Well, you cannae suppose that one who has been on the ground for the past decade is exactly in touch with her sister often,” Sereth said, throwing up a defense. “Besides, yu must have the wrong person. My sister wouldn’t do anything against the Empire.”

“Your sister did,” the elf snapped. “One of the leaders in the rebel group, I believe. She got her due reward.”

Sereth's flippant expression on her face froze as she tried to hide the terror behind her. "Och," she said, nervously laughing. "I suppose yu punished her for it, then?"

"She has entered into reeducation," the elf said, watching her face. "I believe that she had special care."

"Well, that wouldnae a be my sister then," Sereth said. "A loyal member of the Empire she is. The Mothership is a big place, ya know. Cortna is a common name."

"Cortna is common," Hazael agreed. "Sereth not seem traitor. Emperor wouldn't want traitor."

"I suppose," the lead elf snapped as he pushed away from the table. "I might do some background checks though—just to check and see if that rebel scum is related to you."

"Och, well, I'm telling you she's not," Sereth said. "Of course, given that I havenae a seen her for a decade, I suppose she could have turned traitor, but I donnae think—" That's when Sereth realized that the lead elf was already gone and that it was only her and Hazael in the room.

"We arrive Tzel-Maret soon," Hazael said. "Quick ship. Emperor should be waiting."

Sereth muttered something under her breath. "Well, I suppose I should be ready for the Emperor."

Hazael moved toward the door to leave and then quickly turned around, looking around as if to make sure that no one else was nearby. "Prepare sound story," Hazael said. "Emperor quick notice discrepancies. Watch back." And then he quickly flew out of the room.

Sereth jolted upwards as she realized what Hazael was saying. He knew then... He saw through her lies, and... he protected her. Sereth stood up. Best to be prepared for meeting the Emperor. Her sister had often disagreed with her about how to best deal with the Empire. But she had promised not to get involved in anything large when Sereth had decided that it would be best to avoid the situation then be in it. But it would appear that in a decade, Cortna had decided not to fulfill her word.

Sereth knew too well what reeducation would do to an elf.

The air machine slowly lowered itself down into a large enough space to land as Sereth gazed out at the abandoned citadel of Tzel-Maret. The memories were flying back to her of the place and of the different things that she had discovered there at her first archaeological dig. Sereth noticed the larger elven air machine that had already landed. It looked like they had already set up a camp. And as Sereth watched, she noticed a group of elves waiting. A short winged elf stood flanked by seven guards, each holding a fire-stick in one hand, and a gun in the other. Sereth cocked her head and wondered why they were all holding fire-sticks.

The machine landed and Sereth slowly walked to the door that was slowly opening and gazed out at the gangplank that was lowering. She gazed across at the Emperor of Arquenian and felt a prod in her back from an elf impatient for her to go. It was time to meet the Emperor of Arquenian.

Part LI: Mostly About Orcs

Date: Yippah 13th, 114 A.U.

“We have found people who claim to be your companions.” Reynyagn turned from talking to the orc to see the orc sentries along with Number 994 and Monty.

“Number 994! Monty!” Reynyagn cried out, running toward them. “I can’t believe they found you.”

“Aye,” Number 994 said. “Though, to be precise—we found them.”

“They came to us when we were scouting the ravine,” one of the sentries said. “It would appear that not all were taken by the northern orcish tribe alliance.”

“The northern orcish tribe alliance?” Monty asked.

“The largest alliance of the orcs apart from the Empire up here in the north,” the orc leader said, walking over to stand by Reynyagn. “We are one of the few tribes who have not united under their standard and who still seek to fight against them.”

“They captured our companions then,” Monty said, turning a heel. “They captured Astrid.”

“That is what we believe, yes,” the orc leader said. “Unless they, like you, escaped. I am Orglan Garum, ruler of the Farghorn Tribe of the Northern Orcs.”

“I am Monty, the brother of Astrid of the Xavier Team, and part of the Resistance against the Empire,” Monty said.

“I’m Number 994, previously under Unyih Garum’s standard, of the Imperial Orcs,” Number 994 said, lying about the “previously” line.

Even so, Orglan bristled at the line. “Unyih’s band?” he snarled. “You had better have your allegiances in line, Number 994.”

“As I do,” Number 994 lied. “I am part of the Xavier Team, am I not?”

“I suppose...” Orglan said, though he kept his glare. “Just as long as you stay there.” He turned to Reynyagn. “Well, I suppose we have more with us for our plan?”

“Aye,” Reynyagn said. “They’ll be happy to join us.”

“Happy to do what?”

“We can’t rescue our companions easily,” Reynyagn said, walking over to the desk that sat in Orglan’s main chamber. “The orcs that have them are too strong to face head on and it will be rather time consuming to seek them out.”

“So?” Monty asked, stalking over.

“So we have a better plan,” Reynyagn said, pointing to the map as Number 994 walked over. “Because it would appear that we have a striking opportunity here.” He placed his finger on the map.

“What’s that?” Monty asked. “It’s just some ancient city by the markings, so I don’t see-”

“Emperor Jaigran is at that city,” Orglan said. “Our sentries have with their own eyes seen the Emperor in that ancient city. He is guarded heavily—but less heavily than he would otherwise.”

“Wait-” Monty said, his head spinning. “Do you mean?”

“We’ve been planning an attack on Emperor Jaigran,” Orglan said. “In days we will be sending out our attack force to take them by surprise. And slay the Emperor of Arquenia.”

Number 994 shut the door slowly and then looked around in the small room that he was in. He let out a curse word as he stalked over toward the window. It would be clear that he would have to do something if he was going to save the Emperor from death. At the very least, he *was* the Emperor of Arquenia. He *did* have a heavy guard around him to keep him safe. But still... Number 994 had been impressed with the plan that Reynyagn and Orglan had drawn up for their surprise attack on the Emperor.

Number 994 didn’t like to be impressed by his enemies plans.

Rule 21: At all times, know who your enemies are.

Number 994 knew who his enemies were. He knew who his friends are. He would just have to figure out how to keep them from killing the Emperor without blowing his cover.

Number 994 didn’t like having to make plans.

This had been why he had been in his division in the first place. All he had to do was take commands and do them. He had his own area of expertise in monitoring the computers and he was good at that. He would keep the Mothership running and he would do it well. It was a

simple enough job. At least—it was until the Garum took him out of his proper place and, after a fantastical string of events, landed him as part of a team to destroy the elves. Ah, the irony.

Number 994 hated irony.

Number 994 looked out the window and, in the distance, could make out what he believed to be the mountain upon which Tzel-Maret was located. If only it were closer so that he could get there... If only-

But it wasn't that way. He was outside his field of expertise and he would have to do something to keep the plotters from killing the Emperor. Number 994 wanted to believe that the Emperor would be able to defend himself...

But Number 994 had a sinking feeling in his heart that the Emperor might just be caught off guard.

“I don't trust him.”

“Number 994 is a valuable member of our party; I'm sure his familiarity with how Unyihi's orcs work will be a major asset to us.”

“I still don't trust him,” Orglan snapped. “He's an Imperial orc. And everyone knows that Imperial orcs can't be trusted.”

“He's on our side—I've seen it,” Reynyagn retorted. “I'm confident that he won't betray us. If he had wanted to do that, he would have done it a long time before. Trust me on this, Orglan. Number 994 won't betray us.”

Orglan pursed his lips. “Fine. Have it your way, Sla’ad—but mark my words. I will trust you on Number 994’s allegiances but if you’re wrong...”

Reynyagn nodded. “I understand.”

Orglan lifted his head. “Yes, you would understand. The fate of this mission may land upon your trust of Number 994, Reynyagn. Make your choice well.”

Part LII: Tangled in Their Own Web

Date: Yippah 17th, 114 A.U.

Governor Astrid impatiently tapped her foot as she waited for her signal to go out on stage with the talk show host to talk about her campaign. She had argued this as far as she could go with her campaign manager but to no avail. All that her manager had had to do was to bring up the poll numbers—42% for Astrid, 43% for Iraina with 16% undecided, and Astrid knew that she had lost.

The red light flashed. That was the signal. Governor Astrid quickly walked on stage as she spotted the smiling talk show host, Julia Verne. Astrid saw right through her fake clip-on smile—just like she saw through Julia’s repeated claims that she was neutral in this race. Astrid knew right where Julia would be placing the ballot when election day came in two days.

“Governor Astrid!” Julia exclaimed, vigorously shaking Astrid’s hand. “Why, it’s so good to see you!”

“Same to you,” Astrid said, but she made no attempt to smile. No sense lying about things. Then again, her campaign manager would not be happy to see her like this on the most popular talk show in Araelia. Astrid managed to force a smile.

“Please, sit down,” Julia said motioning to the chair.

Astrid did so, eyes casting around to look for any opportunity possible to do something to change their footing. Astrid did not like feeling in an inferior position. And a conversation with

a talk show host who secretly wanted Iraina to win did not make Astrid feel like she was in a superior position.

“So, Governor Astrid,” Julia said upon sitting down. “The elections are in two days and you are currently at a deadlock with Mr. Iraina. How confident do you feel about this election?”

“Well, I haven’t been elected time and time again for the past hundred years because I failed,” Astrid said, cracking a smile. “No, I’m very confident that my voters, who have seen my record, see that I’m the candidate in this race who they can be sure will bring our city to greatness again.”

“It’s funny you should mention your reelection streak,” Julia said, her eyes beginning to narrow. “A good many voters have begun to be expressing concern that because of your long term in office, you can’t connect with the average person anymore—that you’re too aloof from the issues of the common man.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Astrid said, trying to choke back her anger. “I have seen no such statistic or poll about the voters. Look at my record. I have had an abundance of experience—both in serving as governor in Araelia, *and* as part of the ruling Triumvirate before the Great Upheaval.”

“Yes, the Great Upheaval,” Julia said. “Now, Mr. Iraina has raised the point that the Triumvirate were helpless against the elves and were unprepared for them. He brings up the point that you are at least partially to blame for the disaster. Do you think that’s what the voters want to hear?”

Astrid glowered at Julia's loaded question. "No government on Arquenia was ready to deal with Jaigran and his elves," she rebutted. "If the greatest minds alive couldn't see what was happening, how can that be held against me?"

"Well, for someone who holds their position in the Triumvirate as a pro rather than a con, I don't see how that can't be held against you, don't you think?" Julia asked. It was all Astrid could do to keep herself from exposing Julia for how pro-Iraina she was. Of course, Julia had dozens of different possible answers to both defend herself and make her look bad. Astrid sometimes wanted to strangle her.

"No, I don't see things that way," Astrid said. "I have had over a century of experience in government while my opponent has had none. I can't see all that experience as a negative for my side."

"Don't you think you've been in government long enough?"

"Excuse me?!"

"Don't you think you're monopolizing the governorship when there are plenty of citizens able to keep the job?"

"What kind of a question is that?" Astrid said, turning to gaze out into the video cameras, and through them to the watching audience. "There's no rule that no one else can run."

"But none of the people running are more qualified than you."

"I'm the best qualified candidate, yes," Astrid said, uneasy about where this conversation is going.

“So why don’t the voters think that way?”

“What?”

“According to recent polls, you and Iraina are at a deadlock,” Julia said. “If you’re the best qualified candidate, why have all these voters, who for the past century have supported you, suddenly turned aside to Iraina.”

“Do you have an answer for that?” Astrid said, laughing as she tried to turn it into a joke. “I mean, voters have a lot of issues they’re judging on and-”

“Well, according to the polls, the majority of people voting for Iraina are doing so because of his strong stance toward the elves,” Julia said. “Are you really better qualified to deal with them?”

“Yes; I’ve had a century’s worth of experience fighting against them.”

“You mean hiding from them.” Julia’s support for Iraina was becoming more and more obvious.

“No, I mean fighting them,” Astrid said. “We have not been idle for the past century, contrary to popular myth. There are a good many operations-”

“Name me one of them.”

“Excuse me?”

“Name me one of those operations,” Julia said, leaning back. “Name me one of the operations you undertook against the elves.”

Astrid smiled. "I would, except I'm under a restraining order. Strategic intelligence, you know?"

"So on the one issue that the majority of voters care about the most, you can't tell us why you're better than Iraina?"

"No," Astrid said. "You were there when I elected the Xavier Team. Is not-"

"You claim responsibility for the Xavier Team?"

"Yes," Astrid said. "I sent out the call and-"

"But I thought you believed in the prophesy."

Astrid's blood froze. "Of course I do, I-"

"Because the prophesy gives the star the responsibility for calling the Xavier Team, not Governor Astrid," Julia said. "But here you are, claiming responsibility for the star. So, I assume you don't believe in the prophesy?"

Astrid floundered for a response.

Part LIII: Slaves of the Mind

Date: Yippah 13th, 114 A.U.

Flek awoke to feel a dull biting pain in the back of his head, as if something had burrowed its way into his head and had latched itself there, some alien substance feeding off of his body. Flek put his hand back to peel whatever it was off of his head before he remembered what it was.

The byproduct of Rider's deal with the orcs that put him and all of his teammates into a permanent subjugation to the orcs.

Not for all of us, Flek.

Flek cringed and looked around at his sleeping companions before glaring, as if glaring back deep inside his head. *Yeah, yeah, material harm doesn't hurt you.*

You are not subjugated, Flek.

Flek paused and squinted. *What?*

Do you think that they can have such power over you when I am with you, Flek? Nay, but their implant is useless for you, except for the scars that now line the back of your head. Their little implant is powerless—it is unable to destroy you. I have rendered it null and useless to you. You do not need to fear it.

And my companions? But Flek already knew the answer.

The voice in his head laughed. *Ah, Flek. You know the answer yourself, do you not? I do not help them like I have helped you.*

Yeah, yeah, I figured that. But you are supposed to help me. Can you not do anything to aid us?

Ah, Flek, but you know the powers and the limitations of your power. I can help you, yes, but only so much as you can help yourself.

Flek gritted his teeth and watched as Jroldin began to stir. Wishing to get away from the smooth voice in his head as soon as possible, Flek walked over and nudged Jroldin. Jroldin rolled over and stared up at him.

“Wha...” Jroldin began. He then shook his head and sat up, feeling at the back of his head. “They did the operation then.”

“Aye.” Flek nodded. “We are now enslaved to them for the rest of our lives, unless by some miracle we manage to be made free of these cursed contraptions.”

“Bother,” Jroldin said. He stood up and brushed himself off. “I had wanted to be Jaigran’s slave, not the slave of a stinkin’ orc.” Flek laughed; he had heard plenty from Jroldin about how he tried to tick his captors off. Flek cocked his head as he realized that that must mean that there was some kind of security camera in the room.

“Anyways,” Jroldin said. “I suppose that would explain why they gave us our weapons back.” Jroldin walked over to their stack of weapons and pulled out his golden corsha axe. Flek snatched up his corsha arjla swords as Jroldin looked ponderously at his golden axe. He slowly swung it and then pursed his lips.

“I guess we should be moving out of this dungeon as well,” Flek said. “I mean, it’s not like we can really hurt them anymore.” Flek walked over to the door. “I could even cut through the locks now. Flek swung his swords around.

“Probably would be best not to,” Jroldin said. “I think they’d be throwing a temper tantrum up there if we did something that they didn’t tell us to do.”

Flek thought back to the lecturer who had told them all of their dos and don’ts of Rider’s agreement with Farshore before they had had the implant. “Might not be wisest to try and tick off people who have your life in the palm of your hand,” Flek said softly as he ran his hand around the lock. “They might just decide you’re better dead than alive.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Jroldin said. “They know that my secret powers are so great that they wouldn’t dare killing me and endangering their assassination plan for Mr. Jaigran.”

Flek glanced sideways at Jroldin’s bluff and then turned to their still unconscious companions on the ground. “How soon should we wake them up?”

“In time,” Jroldin said. “Might as well let them sleep now, hopefully in some carefree world where there aren’t any orcs. Say, that would be a good place to be in.”

“We wouldn’t have Number 994...” Flek said.

“He’s already dead,” Jroldin said.

“Oh...” Flek said, suddenly remembering Number 994’s death... and the death of his beloved counselor Reynyagn. Flek pursed his lips and turned on a heel. “The orcs did that to him too.”

“It really is a pity, isn’t it?” Flek turned around to see the speaker. Farshore smugly stood by the door, spinning a ring of keys around his hand. “It really *is* a pity how much we are in complete control and dominance over you and your companions.”

“Shut up,” Flek muttered as he walked over to the door.

“But of course, but of course,” Farshore said, and he laughed. “Get your companions up now. We have plenty of things to inform you of about our coming mission.”

“So much for happyland without any orcs,” Jroldin said as he turned to go arouse his companions.

But Flek lingered near the door for a moment as he stared at the smug leader. “We will be beginning our mission soon.”

“But of course,” Farshore said. “We can’t have Jaigran leaving before we’re ready, after all.” His eyes narrowed and he swiftly unlocked the cell dor. “On the contrary, we must get ready and get going as soon as possible to ensure a timely death of the accursed Emperor.” Farshore turned to leave. “Now go and wake up your companions. The guards will be waiting to take you to the planning room.”

Flek turned from the leaving Garum to look at the wakening companions. Slaves of the orcs, each and every one of them. But he was a slave of the mind.

Part LIV: Tzel-Maret

Date: Yippah 15th, 114 A.U.

“So this is the young elf-maid who has explored these ruins.” Walking as if he had an aura of greatness around him, the short emperor walked up, looking up at the tall elf, the emperor’s wings shadowing over him.

“Aye, I am Sereth,” Sereth said. “I came here with my parents about a decade ago, back when they were still alive.” An involuntary shiver went down Sereth’s spine.

“Very good,” Jaigran said, staring up at her with beady eyes. His black wings slowly flapped and he rose to meet her eyes.

“What does the noble emperor want here?” Sereth asked, swallowing back the knot in her stomach.

Jaigran laughed. “There is no need to burden yourself with my many titles,” he said. “You may call me emperor. As for my purpose here, I have come to seek out the Citadel of Tzel-Maret.”

Sereth’s eyes flicked up to the tall tower that overshadowed the city. “What’s there?”

Jaigran licked his lips. “There could be something; there could be nothing at all; call it a hunch, will you?” His eyes narrowed. “Come. We have wasted much time. Snow storms have kept us at bay ever since we’ve arrived.”

Sereth slowly followed the Emperor as he flew in front of her, accompanied by the guards with the fire-sticks. “So, my Emperor, if I am correct, you want me to guide you through the Citadel?”

“Yes, along with any information you can give me concerning this place,” the Emperor snapped as he flew down to the ground near a large tent. “Come in.” Sereth slowly pushed back the tent flap to follow the Emperor into the tent. The Emperor walked over to a short table, a map spread about it. Sereth walked over to the table.

“It was your parents,” the Emperor said, noting the look of recognition in Sereth’s eyes. “I was able to recover it given some unfortunate deeds concerning your family.” The tent flap moved behind her and Sereth noticed the lead elf from her ship enter. Sereth automatically flinched, still afraid of what he would do—or if he would tell Jaigran his suspicions about Cortna.

Jaigran tapped his finger, causing Sereth’s train of thought to break. “Pay attention,” the Emperor snapped. “As I was saying, my chief librarians, idiots that they are, could not find any real relevant information on Tzel-Maret except for its position as the previous fortress of the elves. I was hoping that you would have more to say than they had on this subject.” There was an edge to his voice.

“Ah yes, Tzel-Maret!” Sereth said, nervously laughing. “My parents did a lot of research on it before coming ‘ere to this place. I believe that at one point it was one of the chief cities and fortresses of the elves a millennia ago, or so. And, in fact, some sources suggested it might have even been the capitol at some point in time.”

“What happened to it?” Jaigran’s eyes seemed to dig deep into her, as if he knew her every thought.

“Well, I believe that it gradually faded from precedence,” Sereth said. “It was attacked by an orcish tribe seven hundred years ago and was raided and pillaged of many of its treasures. Some inhabitants returned, but I believe they were mostly a secretive bunch that clung to the old ways. I believe some of them were still around here, as well. We caught sight of one when we were here ten years ago.”

“Ah, those elves,” Jaigran snapped. “Some of my guards have enjoyed hunting them down. We can’t have any potential threats, of course.”

“Of course,” Sereth said, swallowing hard.

“You haven’t heard of any supernatural powers here, though,” Jaigran said.

Sereth searched her memory. “No, well, I’m afraid not, Emperor. I don’t remember anything about magical artifacts and such here, if that’s what you’re looking for.”

“Very well,” Jaigran said. He pondered the map for a few moments before looking up. “You may leave. I expect you to return here promptly at daybreak to guide me through the Citadel of Tzel-Maret. You will not be late.”

“Yes, sir,” Sereth said, not wanting to know what Jaigran would do to her if she was late.

“One thing, Emperor, sir...” The lead elf from the ship that had taken her here stood up and walked over to Jaigran. Sereth turned to leave as the lead elf whispered something in Jaigran’s ear.

Sereth had just pushed back the tent flap to leave when Jaigran spoke. “One thing, Sereth...”

Sereth slowly turned around, her gaze darting from the lead elf to the Emperor. “Yes, Emperor Jaigran?” A cold pit was forming in her stomach.

“Goran here has reminded me that you have a sister, do you not?” Goran quickly walked out of the room while Jaigran’s eyes stared her down.

Sereth swallowed hard. “Och, well,” she said, nervously laughing. “I’m not quite sure what Goran told you, but the rebel couldn’t be my sister. A stout Imperialist she is, just like me.”

“Ah, but like I said,” Jaigran said smoothly, a glimmer in his eye. “I *did* do the research on you before recruiting you, and as well as finding your parent’s map, I did come across an interesting bit of information.”

“Yu don’t mean to tell me that my sister *is* the rebel, do you, Emperor Jaigran?” Sereth asked.

“Ah, but it is true,” Jaigran said, slowly tracing his finger along the mouth as words slowly trickled out of his mouth. “But that’s not to worry about, of course. Your sister’s failings are not yours, also.”

“Of course, Emperor,” Sereth said. Behind her, the tent opened and Sereth turned to see who it was. Sereth’s mouth dropped.

Standing in front of her was what looked like to be a mirror—a duplicate image of herself staring back at her. But no. For this mirror was different. Her mirror’s eyes were glossed over,

her fingers displaying scars that Sereth knew that she didn't have. Her mirror image was clothed in the traditional garb of a soldier, carrying a fire stick and a gun. And the little twitch—the movement in her eye—no, but this wasn't a mirror. She looked identical, but there was something... something deathly different. And then Sereth went cold.

From behind her, Emperor Jaigran gave a low laugh. “You would be correct to say she is a stout Imperialist, Sereth. Oh yes, but she is indeed an Imperialist now.”

Sereth would have sworn. But she no longer seemed to have the ability to move her mouth. Her mirror image cocked her head, and then slowly walked past her, as if Cortna didn't recognize her sister.

And Sereth knew.

Part LV: Overlooking Peak

Date: Yippah 15th, 114 A.U.

The citadel of Tzel-Maret loomed in its crag over many of the surrounding mountains, dwarfed only by the mountain that it stood on, which towered high over the citadel that had nestled in its highest plateau, the citadel that had become the cornerstone of the fortress of ages gone by. Large elven airships constantly hovered and flew over the peak, in vigilance of their Emperor, an elf who had lived longer than any other elf that any could remember. It was this elf that they were going to assassinate.

Monty shivered in his brown garb as he tentatively stepped out of the white camouflaged shelter, looking around for any nearby aircraft. Monty regretfully shed his outer brown coat for the thinner white coat underneath and then lowered himself to the ground, crawling through the bitter snow, until he got to the edges of the cliff.

Looking down over the cliff below, Monty looked at the tall citadel that jutted out from the plateau and at the numerous smaller towers and walls and buildings around it. He noted the tan tents that the Emperor had set up and the larger colorful one that Monty presumed the Emperor stayed in. They had been so close for days now and there was still no sign of being ready to go down.

Sighing, Monty contemplated how much longer he would be staying out here. The fresh air was better than the stifled air in their small camouflaged tents, but...

The bitter cold of a prolonged winter in the mountains decided against Monty staying out. And, shivering, Monty crawled back to the tent, earnestly adopting his brown coat over his white one as he quickly stepped back in the tent.

Monty contemplated what move he ought next to make in Regicide, putting his hand under his chin as he thought hard. Reynyagn absently gazed toward him. Finally, Monty shook his head as he moved a piece.

“Dang it, you trapped that unit,” Monty said, resigning himself to a loss.

A semblance of a smile played across Reynyagn’s face. “So it would appear that I have.”

Monty put his arms against his chest to guard against the cold air that came in through the thin fabric of the tent. “When is that orc infiltrator going to get back with his report.”

“Orglan said that he would send another orc to try and infiltrate if we have nothing by noon tomorrow,” Reynyagn said as he gazed across the board. “Our infiltrator may be dead. Or he may not be able to get here yet because of the storms that have raged across these mountains for the last several days.”

“Tell me about the storms,” Monty grumbled as he reached for a stale piece of bread. “I have been freezing these past couple days because they won’t leave us alone. What I wouldn’t give to be a Sla’ad at this time.”

Reynyagn smiled, moving his arms so as to point out his bare arms, unmoved by the bitter accommodations around them. Leaning over, he moved two of his pieces to capture one of Monty’s.

“At the very least,” Reynyagn said, “we’ve had a good bit of luck hiding from the elven airships.”

“Yeah, well, that’s the least bit of luck we could have,” Monty said. “We could have gone with our missions days ago if we’d been able to get something from the infiltrator sooner.”

“It is all happening according to the plan of the Great One,” Reynyagn said. “And there is no use complaining against what he says.”

“I suppose you’re right,” Monty said, sighing. He pursed his lips. “I worry about Astrid so much... To be apart captured by orcs... possibly dead too, and she still has refused to come to believe.”

“She’s in the hands of the Great One, now,” Reynyagn said. “Our duty is to do what we can to return justice to this land, which is best done here.”

“I suppose you’re right,” Monty said, moving three pieces. “I just pray that it is in the plan of the Great One to keep her safe.”

Yippah 16th, 114 A.U.

“We have our report! We have our report!” An orc ran into the tent where Monty sat with Reynyagn and Orglan eating breakfast.. Monty hurriedly turned around to face the excited messenger, jubilant with the news of a report.

“What does he say?” Monty asked, intent to hear everything about the situation as possible.

“The snowstorms prevented him from getting his message anytime sooner,” the orc said. “He wasn’t able to get to the meeting point until dawn today. He confirmed that the Emperor is here, as we had already guessed.”

“At least that’s confirmed,” Reynyagn said.

“Yes,” the orc said. “He said that the Emperor is here to find something in the ruins of Tzel-Maret, possibly in the Citadel.”

“What could the Emperor want in Tzel Maret?” Orglan asked, looking a bit confused.

“I don’t know,” the orc said. “He was very tight lipped about the whole operation. As is, the snow storm halted his efforts and from what I can gather, the Emperor isn’t leaving till he finds whatever he’s looking for. He brought in some elven guide yesterday to lead him through the Citadel today to find his object.”

“The Emperor will be in the Citadel today, then,” Orglan confirmed.

“Yes,” the orc said. “He should be there right now, I would guess. He was very clear that he refused to waste any time at all in getting it done. Our spy also said that even if Jaigran found it today, that he’d probably stick around for at least tomorrow, but beyond that...”

“It’s done,” Orglan said, turning to Reynyagn. “You ready?” Reynyagn nodded.

Orglan turned back to the messenger. “Then tell every one to be ready. In a half hour we begin the operation just as planned. Everyone must be in their specific places. You got it?”

“Yes, zar!” the orc messenger said, and he left the room.

“It’s time then,” Monty said, standing up.

“It’s time,” Reynyagn said. And he tightened his sword-strap.

Part LVI: At the Brink

Date: Yippah 24th, 114 A.U.

Major Erklen quickly ran down the crag, making sure that all of the fortifications were sure and that all the soldiers in their place, armed with both a gun and a corsha sword for close combat. They had only recently gotten a large shipment of guns from Lord Freglak, who somewhere had managed to go around the ancient edict given by the priests forbidding guns as unholy weapons that the heretics used. Major Erklen did his best to avoid the sharp tensions between the priests and the government; he just did his job and ignored all the politics. Because, as every goblin knows, there's no surer way to die than politics. Unless you're a priest. The priests always win.

"Are all the forces ready?" Major Erklen turned toward his second in command, a goblin who he'd been relying on more heavily on with everything that he was trying to do to keep their forces from falling under the aerial might of the elves.

"What? Oh, yes sir! It is ready; everything ready is!" Flindle, his 2nd in Command rapidly said. Flindle was in charge of the aerial might of the goblin troops and in trying to keep back the greater elven attack ships that did a Mother's Tree worth of damage on their infantry whenever it got past the defenses.

"Good," Major Erklen said. "Do your best to keep back the elven fighters."

"I'll do my best sir—the best I will do!" Flindle said. "But, well, I'm sorry sir, but when I look at this campaign long-term, for long-term the campaign will be , we can't hold back the

elves forever, sir—the elves won't hold back forever. Many sacrifices must make we to keep them back for each battle—battles determine sacrifices.”

“I understand,” Major Erklen said. “I've been petitioning Lord Freglak to try and find some way to help us turn the tide, for without that, it seems that this will be too sure of a defeat for us and for our people.”

Flindle quickly checked in on his companions and then leapt into his aircraft, buckled himself into his seat and pressed a button to enter into the intercom. “Is everyone ready—everyone ready must be!” Flindle said. “Fly off the airstrip in order—as usual we will do things. I will go first and waiting—yes, waiting will be, but not for long. The battle soon must commence and again we must fight.”

Exiting the intercom, Flindle quickly checked all the lights and then pressed on the throttle to steer over to the broken makeshift runway. Flindle took a deep breath and then ran down the runway and broke up above the treeline to be flying above the forest. Cycling around, Flindle saw the great aircraft of the elves making for them and signaled Major Erklen. The elves were making the first move.

They were coming.

Their troops weren't prepared for the first bomb that was thrown, a bomb that ripped apart the left flank of their defenses and killed enough goblins before open fire from behind the trees took out a good many more. Major Erklen cursed and tried to rally up their defenses and

find the elves that were trying to lure them out with their guerilla warfare. Erklen wanted nothing more than to unleash their troops on the elves if not for the fact that such a move would require an abandonment of their defenses—defenses that represented the last defenses before the first major goblin city.

“Find them! Shoot them!” Major Erklen yelled, paying no attention to his own safety. “Use your flamethrowers and put those trees in blazes to draw them out! Move!”

A couple bullets whizzed by his head, but Erklen paid them no heed. “Hold your line fast!” he yelled to their flank’s commander. “Drive them out from the trees and shoot them down, but *do not break the defenses!*”

Flindle quickly maneuvered his fighter to narrowly avoid the missile intended for him. Zeroing in on part of the great elven aircraft, Flindle pressed at the release button, letting loose a barrage of bullets that smashed through the armor of the ship. Swooping down near the side of the ship, Flindle swiped at another button, releasing a magnetic plate-bomb that fell off the fighter and, propelled by an invisible force, moved hard to attach itself to the aircraft. Avoiding the bullets intended for him, Flindle flew away from the aircraft moments before the bomb went up, blowing up half the aircraft, leaving the other half to begin its plummet to the earth. But there were still many more aircraft.

All around him, their fighters were faltering. To his left, a fighter exploded after being hit head-on by a missile. A few still tried to swarm the greater elven airships and take them down, but the majority were doing all that they could just to avoid being killed by the barrage of the elven aircraft. Flindle had known that this would be a tough defense to make, but...

He had hoped that they might be able to hold out longer than this.

Seconds later, the exploding remains of another goblin fighter tore off the main engine of Flindle's fighter.

As hoped, the blazing inferno that was kindled in the forest drove out the elves. Hiding behind makeshift cover, the elves continued to press forward, moving to the feet of the crags to avoid fire. Erklen was sure that they would soon be attempting to scale it. He couldn't have been more correct.

Moving out from the trees, a regiment of tall winged elves burst out, quickly shortening the distance between them and the crags as they madly shot, sending defenders fleeing. Erklen spotted the equipment that three of the winged elves were carrying and instantly understood their strategy. All they needed to know was to make a foothold on the crags and put scaling equipment in place to get their companions with them on the cliff.

They could not be allowed to make such a foothold.

Flames shot from the rear of his fighter as Flindle went down. Everything wasn't working. He couldn't shoot anything, and steering was crazy, as if trying to control one's route while flying down rapids in a river. And there was no way to steer upwards. It was all one dramatic descent, a descent that Flindle could only see ending with a climatic collision with the ground.

Flindle maneuvered the fighter past the last line of trees into a plain that stretched for miles, free of trees and other tall obstacles except for a line of cliffs quickly approaching. Flindle moved the throttle to upwards but to no avail. As Flindle saw his life flash before his eyes, he watched the line of cliffs come up before him, thick ivy covering the cliff that he was about to hit. Flindle made the sign of the Mother Tree and prayed that he would have a merciful after life. There wasn't going to be anything else in this life for him.

Part LVII: Leap of Faith

Date: Yippah 16th, 114 A.U.

The iron-clad steam engine of ages past slowly moved into the underground station at a quarter past midnight, slowly hissing to a stop with a sudden outburst of steam. The gears locked. And then the doors opened.

The Garum exited the train first, attended by his four guards. He was followed by a group of six, all clad in brown cloaks and shivering beneath them because of the frigid air in the mountainous chambers.

“Guards!” Farshore Garum snapped, marching up to the nearest guard. “Is the blasted Emperor still here?”

“He’s still at Tzel-Maret, from all reports,” the guard timidly replied.

“At least we have that much,” Farshore snapped. “The winter snows on the track did well enough to keep us away, it was as if fate itself conspired against us.” Farshore turned on a heel to gaze at his travelling companions.

“Very well,” he finally said. “We’re here, and the garrison had better dang well be ready after the long wait they’ve gotten to enjoy.” He turned back to the guard. “Round up the garrison and make sure everything is prepared for our attack. We strike at daybreak.”

Astrid bundled a bit tighter in her clothes before slowly stepping out the door onto the cliff overlooking the world with the rest of her friends. Before them there was a narrow valley

between their mountain and the mount that contained Tzel-Maret some hundred feet up from where they were, as well as being across the mountain gap.

“I don’t want to do this.”

“I know,” Rider solemnly said, turning to Astrid. “But we must be brave. We must forgo our fear if we have a chance of standing against the ancient nemesis. We must have courage. For without it, we will surely fail.”

“Well said,” Brother Tomas agreed. “Well said, Rider.”

“How are we supposed to get up there?” Flek said, gesturing to the gap between them and the Citadel. “It isn’t as if there aren’t a dozen elven airships patrolling the area night and day to keep the life of their forsaken Emperor alive.”

“Farshore has a plan,” Rider reluctantly said. “Once we get up to the top of this mountain, he has a lot of mechanical glider sort of things that we can use to fly over to their citadel.”

Flek turned, a look of excitement in his eyes. “We’re going to be engaging in aerial combat? We’re going to fight with *wings*?!”

Rider smiled, and shook his head. “They’re not that good,” he said. “They’re basically hang-gliders that the orcs manufactured so that somehow they don’t get affected by winds. It’s a one-way journey over there and nothing else. According to Farshore, they are quite burdensome, so we’re not going to want to fight with those on.”

“Still,” Flek said. “Fighting with wings would have given us an advantage.”

“True enough, true enough...” Rider said. “Unfortunately, it’s an advantage that we aren’t going to be able to enjoy.”

“You fight in trios!” Farshore bellowed out. “You are to always stick together with your designated companions at all times while they are still living. Join up with other trios if you wish, but *stick together*. And be moving constantly! We can’t let them pick us apart. Orcs, you know your designated parts.” He turned to the Xavier Team. “Dwarf, shorter elf, and man: you three will be one group. The rest of you,” he said, gesturing to Rider, Astrid, and Flek, “will be the other. You understand?”

“Yes,” Jroldin said as Farshore walked off to go and deal with the other members of the assassination force. Jroldin turned to his two team mates. “You ready?”

“I’m ready,” Brother Tomas said, tightening the straps on the heavy mechanical hang-glider.

“As am I,” Zarien said. He turned, to look out at the impasse that separated them from Tzel-Maret. “At least, as ready as I could be.”

“You’ll be fine,” Brother Tomas said, encouragingly.

“As long as the elves don’t figure out how to take me out and have their orc friends train their lightning on my leg,” Zarien said, shaking his mechanical leg.

“I’m sure the protections Farshore and his orcs gave to your leg will be enough to protect it,” Brother Tomas said.

“Still,” Zarien said. “Anything could happen. My skill as a fighter has been drastically reduced since I lost it.” There was a tinge of bitterness in his voice.

“Well, at the least, you’re a better fighter than me,” Jroldin said. “I haven’t had nearly the experience you had.”

“Aye, but you got that.” Zarien jabbed his finger at the golden corsha axe. “And I saw you in the training center in that last city. And I’m telling you, there’s something different about that weapon.”

“Only like there is with all corsha weapons.” Jroldin shrugged.

“Yeah, but I’m telling you...” Zarien’s voice trailed off.

“No use bickering over our own skill before the battle,” Brother Tomas said. “You’ll both do fine.”

“Ready?!” Farshore’s cry came out from behind them.

“Yeah, we’re ready!” Zarien yelled. Other similar cries of ascent came from the other groups of trios. Jroldin bent down a bit and moved a bit to get a better feel for his wings before focusing on the plateau beyond and beneath him. And then the sound to go was given. And Jroldin leapt in the air, flying with the rest of the flock of warriors down to the Citadel of Tzel-Maret.

Part LVIII: Exploration

Date: Yippah 16th, 114 A.U.

The first orange beams of the morning slowly crept over and through the stiff mountains as the sun slowly began to emerge from the sky, shedding its rays on where Sereth sat, knees folded against her chest, on the top of the small crag overlooked part of the camp, and played her guitar, trying to find herself at peace with the world. But it appeared that the world was instead at odds with her, breaking whatever peace she had managed to keep to herself from the long journey from her archaeological dig to the ancient citadel with the reviled Emperor of Arquenian. An Emperor that had tortured her sister and shaped her mind beyond recognition. Sereth knew the truth. Cortna was gone, lost in the cage that had been created for her. And she would never return.

Sereth strummed harder, pouring out all her anger into her piece which vibrated across the mountains and cried out the pain and damage that had been wrought to the world. Burn. Everything would burn. Everything would burn into the world was made right.

“Sereth.” Sereth jolted up and nearly dropped her guitar as she spun around.

“Sorry for frightening. It is I, Hazael,” the tall winged elf said.

Sereth stepped back. “Oh, well it’s you... well, what do you want?”

“Jaigran plans on having guard today,” Hazael said.

“Well, I would assume he would, being the Emperor and all, but watchadoes that mean for me? It’s not like I’d try and kill him,” Sereth said, flippantly. *Well, actually, if I had the chance and the means, I might be tempted to kill him if he had no guards, but...*

“He plans have sister for guard.”

Sereth dropped her guitar, fingers flinging downward so that she managed to barely catch it before it hit the ground. Sereth’s head snapped up as she gazed at Hazael. “He what?!”

“He try to jolt you. Worried that you be rebel like her. Wants to keep you from doing it,” Hazael said. “Put on mask. No look distracted.”

Sereth pursed her lips hard. “I would...” she said. “With my bare hands... och, I don’t a know what I would do. Something else.” She sat down on one of the rocks. “I don’t even want to kill him, and... and all of this-” Her voice broke off.

“I know,” Hazael said. “But must hurry. Cannot be late.”

“No, I suppose I can’t,” Sereth said, slowly putting her guitar over his shoulder.

“Carry you, shall I, so you arrive quick?” Hazael asked, putting out his hands.

“Aye,” Sereth said. “I... Thank you.”

“What I can do, I do,” Hazael said.

There was a resounding crack, and then the ancient lumber collapsed, falling from its hinges into a pile of rubble on the floor as two of the guards instantly thrust their fire-sticks into

the darkness behind the door, causing all shadows to flee. Sereth pointed out with her flashlight and moved the beam along the walls and ceiling of the new passage.

“Get on with it,” Jaigran snapped.

“Ah yes,” Sereth said. “If my memory hold me right, I believe that this was part of an older bit of the citadel. It leads to a cellar of wine, if my memory holds me right. Good wine, it was. When it’s been held down there for so long, it-“

“Yes, yes, get on with it,” Jaigran snapped, looking around as if he expected an assailant to creep up on him. “I’ll take your word on it. If there’s nothing to see here, then move along.”

“Well, begging your pardon, Emperor, I don’t know if there’s anything there or not,” Sereth said. “I don’t exactly know what we’re looking for, so-”

“Our object won’t be in the cellar,” Jaigran snapped. “At least it shouldn’t be. We’ll investigate all other places before we look there. Trust me, Sereth. It won’t be down in the cellar.”

“As you wish, your Majesty,” Sereth cautiously said, trying to keep herself betraying her weakness and looking at her mute sister.

“And it won’t be any dark places either,” Jaigran said, obviously not done yet. “Higher in the Citadel, where there’s light. We’ll only go down into the underground portions of this Citadel if we’ve looked everywhere else first.”

“Y-yes, Emperor,” Sereth said. “We can go to the uppermost parts of the Citadel first.”

“Aye, we will,” Jaigran said. “Lead on, elf. Show us the other portions of the Citadel.”

“And this here was the Great Library of Tzel-Maret,” Sereth said, pushing past the rotting door into the great room featuring shelves full of moth-eaten books, fragile enough to shatter at a mere touch.

“What set it apart from other libraries,” Jaigran asked, seeming to have relaxed more to be partly enjoying her tour.

“Well, it used to feature a lot of the historical records and reports of the kings,” Sereth said. “That is the primary reason that many historians believe it to have been the elven capitol at one point. It was an outpost as well, so it featured a lot more foreign works than the other libraries in the country. As a matter of fact, if I have all my facts correct, I believe that it was well known as being an outpost for travelers from all around the place and was traditionally a place of diplomacy. Not that that specifically relates to the Great Library, I suppose, but it might explain why there were so many foreign books in this library.”

“Interesting,” Jaigran said, slowly picking up a book and blowing off the dust. A couple pages blew off with it. Jaigran looked at the book for a couple moments before slowly letting it slip through his fingers and collapse on the floor. Jaigran looked up.

“Search the library,” Jaigran ordered. “Report anything unusual you find.”

Part LIX: Landing

Date: Yippah 16th, 114 A.U.

As soon as the order was given, they were moving. Long sturdy ropes were flung out, falling down to dangle between the edge of the long cliff side of the mountain and the Citadel, dangling just above the balcony that jutted out from the Citadel, providing the excellent landing spot to begin their mission.

Gripping the rope, Monty ignored the butterflies in his stomach and swung out and down, holding onto the rope for dear life as he slid, nearly plummeting, as the balcony loomed closer and closer. Grateful to the gloves that protected him from rope burns, Monty fell the last couple feet of rope before falling through thin air for seconds before he landed on the balcony. His knees buckled and he collapsed as he put his hand on his gun, breathing hard. Then, slowly, he stood up and stepped aside from the rope for more to come down.

Beside him, Reynyagn and Number 994 slid down their ropes and quickly prepared for a possible attack. None came, and so they stepped toward the door leading inside.

“Good,” Orglan said, sliding down behind them and stepping into their group. “We have landed uninhibited. Let’s go and find the Emperor. The others will help to scour the tower.”

“Alright,” Monty said, gripping the gun more tightly. Slowly, he and the others walked into the tower. Dust clumped together on the forsaken crumbling walls, fungus growing up between the cracks and obscuring the once-beautiful artwork that had once adorned the walls, now a testament to how long the Citadel had been forgotten and left alone. At least until now.

The wind flew past him as Flek angled the glider toward the large window that he and his companions were supposed to fly through. As the glider began to slow him down, Flek passed through the window, bringing his feet up to hit the ground and slow down to a stop. Stripping off the hang glider, Flek quickly drew his arjla corsha swords as he quickly made note of everything in the room. The long rotting dining table. The broken picture on the floor. The shattered glass all over the floor. The broken plate.

Flek checked to make sure no one else was there before turning to Astrid and Rider. “You ready?”

“I’ve been ready for this day since I was born,” Rider said coldly as he drew his long sword. “When the day would come that I would draw out the blood of the immortal tyrant.” His gaze hardened.

“He isn’t immortal,” Astrid said as she checked to make sure she still had her pouch full of herbs and medicines.

“How else could an elf have survived this long?” Rider asked bitterly. “I wish it were not so, Astrid, but there’s no other answer. He has gained immortality, or at least long life, through some means or another. We must kill him.”

Astrid drew her corsha knife partway out of its sheath before abandoning it for the gun she had. “Very well. I’m ready.”

“Good,” Flek said. Loping toward the door, he swung, turning his side, as he threw himself into the door. The rotting door broke off its hinges as Flek landed, spinning around with his corsha blades, as he checked for intruders before quickly standing up.

“Coast is clear.”

“Someone’s been here already.” Brother Tomas bent down to gesture at the foot prints and the missing dust upon the dusty floor. “Quite recently I might add.”

“The Emperor and his cohort,” Zarien said.

“Perhaps,” Brother Tomas said, standing back up. “It could merely be a scouting force, but yet...” He slowly nodded. “It’s as good of a lead its any. We would be fools not to follow it.”

“Aye,” Zarien said, as he pressed himself against the wall before quickly sliding down around it to the next corner. “Coast is clear.”

“Good,” Brother Tomas said, running to where Zarien was, Jroldin running to catch up with his short legs.

“The Emperor cannot hide forever,” Zarien said, and continued to make his way down the wall to the next corner. “We’ll catch him before that.”

Sirens blared outside as Sereth instinctively moved for cover. “What are the sirens for?!” she yelled as Jaigran spun around, grabbing his communicator from his belt.

“What’s happening?” Jaigran yelled into the communicator.

“A group of orcs are attacking the camp!” his aide’s voice came in.

“Orcs?!”

“Yes, sir,” he replied. “Remember Operation Northland where we scoured the Northland for the rebel orcish tribes? I believe those tribes are attacking it.”

Jaigran swore. “How many of them? Where are they!”

“A good many sir. They’re coming in through mechanical hang gliders. Some scouts say they saw some fly into the Citadel.”

Jaigran swore again. “Fight them off. Call in the elven scout ships and get them to stop their descent. Send a whole regiment into the Citadel to meet with me and kill any intruders.”

“A whole regiment, sure? But, compared to our small defense force here, that’s taking out-”

“Do it!” Jaigran yelled. “No questions asked.”

“Yes sir.”

The communicator clicked off and Jaigran savagely put it back in his belt. “Wedge the book shelves against the door!” he yelled. “There’s an attack on the camp by some rebel orcs, some of which are in the tower. We don’t know yet how powerful or smart or how many they are, so we’re going to take no risks. Barricade in the door and then stand your ground!”

Farshore looked down through his telescope at the battle unfolding on the Citadel between the still-growing amount of orcs on the plateau and the forces of the Emperor. He could see the elven scout ships coming from afar off. Let them come. They would come, but they would miss the key part of their plan: the assassination force that would take out the Emperor.

Part LX: Breakthrough

Yippah 16th, 114 A.U.

“I’m picking up something!” Orglan said as he held his ear to the strangely shaped communicator. He listened for a bit before quickly turning it off. He turned to Reynyagn, Monty, and Number 994. “Jaigran is barricading himself in the library. They’ve spotted other attackers.”

“A pity that they know we’re here,” Reynyagn said as he looked around, as if he could see the library. “At least we know where he is. Will your device alert you if they begin to speak again?”

“Yeah, it’ll beep,” Orglan said, tucking it into his belt. “And they won’t know a thing.”

“Excellent,” Monty said. “Can you radio to our ‘eyes’ outside and see if they can see a library within any of the windows?”

“Yes,” Orglan said, taking out another communicator. “I’ll tell them our radio wave hacking paid off.” He quickly gave orders to the orcs outside and then snapped it shut. “Let’s move.”

The group of four ran down the corridor, listening for the sounds of other inhabitants, and ready to attack if needed. To fulfill their mission, they’d have to move—fast. And now that their element of surprise was gone, they were just going to have to use their speed and get to Jaigran before he made ready his escape. They ran down the hall toward a long flight of stairs moving upward and downward and paused, catching their breath.

“I say we go down,” Reynyagn said. “There’s more levels down so there’s a greater chance that he’s down there and up here. If he’s up there, he won’t be going anywhere, either, if we’re on the lower levels.”

“Let’s move,” Orglan said, and moved down the stairs, the others following. Running down the flight of stairs, Orglan stopped at the door, examined it for a moment, and then undid a bolt.

“It’s locked from the inside,” Orglan said, pushing the door open. “Strange.” The group of four moved quickly down the new corridor.

“Get to the side!” That was all the warning that Astrid got before she saw the group of elves move out from the corridor, guns a blazing. Too little time to move to the side, Astrid was about to throw herself to the ground to try and save herself before something slammed into her. Astrid went flying against the wall, caught at the last moment by Flek, who pushed her into a doorway before deflecting one of the bullets with his blade.

“That was a close one!” Flek yelled as he stepped out into the open hall, blocking all the bullets with his swords as he glanced over at her. “Keep under cover!” And then Flek was moving, running past Astrid’s line of sight as he went to engage the firing elves. Rider quickly glanced at her from his doorway at the opposite side of the room, as if to make sure she was safe, before peering around the door frame to take a shot at one of the elves.

Astrid sighed and resigned herself to a position of non-assistance as Flek and Rider fought the battle for her. The fighting went on for a minute before Flek suddenly came back, gun shots still sounding, as he whirled his blades around, blocking all of the attacks.

“They have too many reinforcements coming up behind them!” Flek yelled. “You two! Get out behind me and run down the hall and make an escape! I’ll fend off their shots.”

“But-” Astrid began.

“I’ve been doing this since I was young!” Flek yelled, expertly blocking each and every bullet. “They can’t touch me! Now move out!”

Rider moved out first, obviously seeing the logic in Flek’s argument, and Astrid followed, running down the hall as Astrid stole glances to make sure that Flek was still alright, standing in the middle of the hall reflecting all their bullets.

They rounded the corner and had just begun to run down it when Flek appeared around the corner and raced to catch up with them. “Move!” he yelled. “We have to lose them! Now!”

“We’ve barricaded the second doorway, sir.”

“Good!” Jaigran snapped. “Now are there any other doorways that you haven’t noticed yet?!”

“We’ve cleared the premise of the room, sir,” the elf said. “There are no other doorways.”

“Finally did your job, then,” Jaigran muttered. He looked around the room as he shook his dark wings. “Blast it; I’ll never be able to look out and see if the skies are clear unless I contact that blasted aide down in the camp. Where’s the nearest window, Sereth?”

“Well, I’m not exactly sure, sir,” Sereth said, looking around for some instrument to play to try and calm her ever heightening anxiety. “We’re within the center of the citadel right now. There should be some in the outer rooms, but we’d have to get there first!”

“Look at the map I gave you!” Jaigran yelled. “See where the nearest window is and how easy it is to get there! We’re just sitting ducks in this room if the orcs find us. I have to get out of here!”

You need to get out of here; you don’t care a thing about us... Sereth pursed her lips as she flung open the map, spreading it out across the floor, and suddenly, remembered what her father had done. Placing her hands on two different rooms, she held them tight, letting the warmth from her hands flow into the map.

The heat activating the technology imbedded in the thick paper, suddenly a holographic image of the tower sprung up from the paper, forming a three dimensional model of the tower.

“It does that?!” Emperor Jaigran asked, losing his irate tone of voice for a moment.

“Well, yes sir; I had forgotten about this earlier,” Sereth said, placing her hands on the map and moving them in different directions to zoom in through part of the tower. “My father created this technology when he began his archaeological work, but never told me how to make it myself. I had almost forgotten that he had done this... So here is the library...” She zoomed in on a part. “So the closest window-”

Suddenly, the door to the library splintered and an elf, a dwarf, and a human burst in.

Part LXI: The Face of the Emperor

Date: Yippah 16th, 114 A.U.

Jroldin had just smashed his axe into the door, breaking it in pieces, when everything seemed to happen at once. Zarien gave a yell and began shooting his gun as Jroldin tried to see what was happening. Brother Tomas' gun was a roaring as Jroldin did everything he could to block the bullets coming toward him. Everything seemed to move differently—the bullets moved slower—his arms almost had a mind of his own as they moved upwards and down to block the bullets as Jroldin moved into the room, along with Zarien and Brother Tomas. There were multiple elves lying dead on the floor with others behind book cases. A short elf with overlooming black wings was making for the doorway along with some female elf.

Cortna. Zarien's mouth dropped open as all of his feelings flew toward his head. Cortna was but feet away. With the Emperor. With a roar, Zarien ran forward, shooting at any of the remaining guards. He heard Brother Tomas yell something behind him, but Zarien didn't care. Darting around the bend, he moved to again catch sight of the fleeing Emperor, and Cortna, running behind him. Zarien pointed his gun. And he fired.

With super-natural quickness that wasn't right for an elf, Jaigran spun around, bringing up a corsha spear to block the attack. His lips moved into a snarl and he pointed a golden finger at him as Zarien took note of the golden gloves that went around the Emperor's hands. They looked like the kind that the orcs used to work their magic. But Jaigran wasn't an orc. He couldn't use magic.

Crackling lightning spun out of Jaigran's hand, a dance of fire interplaying with the electricity, and surged toward him. Too late, Zarien moved to the side. But, at the last moment, the electricity moved, spinning into fragments as a golden corsha axe moved out in front of him, nearly lopping his head off, as the electricity buzzed around the corsha, slowly dissipating.

Zarien stood back up to stand with Jroldin and pointed his gun at the Emperor, and at Cortna who had moved to the side, not wanting to be in the fight. Cortna looked different, as if she had something that just didn't make sense. It didn't even look like she recognized him! Zarien's gaze hardened as he turned back to the Emperor.

"You're fools!" Jaigran yelled. "Fools to try and come here! Who are you, that you think you can outface me?"

"I am Zarien," Zarien replied curtly. "Zarien... of the Xavier Team." A look of shock played across Jaigran's face as he realized whom Zarien was claiming to be.

"And I am Jroldin," Jroldin added on. "The Priest-King of the Xavier Team."

But the Emperor had already gotten over his shock. Ignoring Jroldin's proclamation, Jaigran leapt toward them, swinging his spear around to impale Zarien. Stepping out, Jroldin brought up his axe, blocking the blow as he moved to the right; Zarien moving to the left and shooting at the Emperor. A snap of the fingers and a shock of lightning afterwards, and the bullet was gone. Jroldin stepped back as Zarien did the same, both of them preparing for the Emperor's next assault.

But it never came. Leaping to the side, a fire ball spun forth from Jaigran's hands, consuming the door next to him in a large explosion. As flames flew forth, dry sparks landing on

some of the books, Jaigran made for the door way. Zarien looked as Cortna gave a cry and ran toward the flaming books, using her satchel to try to put the fire out.

“Come on!” Jroldin yelled, and ran out the door after the Emperor. Zarien started, and then paused, spinning around as he ran over toward Cortna.

Cortna had just managed to barely keep the flames from eating up the books as Zarien moved beside her, putting out the last flame. He turned to look at Cortna and Cortna looked at him, a hint of fear in her eyes, and a look of confusion.

“Cortna!” Zarien said, drawing her close to him as his feelings overcame him, bending down to kiss her. “I-I don’t know what to say.”

Cortna flinched, stepped back from his embrace, and then stared at him. “I…” she began. “I’m not Cortna.”

“What are you talking about?” Zarien asked, confused. “You are-”

“I am Cortna’s twin sister, Sereth.”

Where was Zarien?! Jroldin looked around, but, to his dismay, could not see Zarien as he continued to try to chase the Emperor. But the Emperor was too quick for him. Beating the air with his wings, the Emperor flew beyond him, using his wings to move faster than him, as Jroldin began to grasp the hopelessness of his cause. Where was Zarien?

Emperor Jaigran paused as he neared the window, looking outside before quickly backing up, looking around to make sure that the idiot dwarf hadn't found him. Outside there raged a calamitous battle, fighting going on everywhere as the elven airships were coming in to quell the rebellious orcs that were ransacking their camp. He pushed his communicator to speak to his aide, but nothing lit up. He pushed a few more times before angrily slamming it to the floor. It wasn't working. And without that communication, there was no telling how safe it was for him to venture forth into the midst of the battlefield.

He looked from side to side to make sure that no intruders were coming and then paused. Why was he afraid of this Xavier team? Why didn't he go and make mincemeat out of their men? They weren't anything to be afraid of. Jaigran pursed his lips. The fools, to think themselves the real Xavier Team. It mattered not that the dwarf had golden corsha weapons. He would merely kill the dwarf and then take his weapons for his own. Jaigran unfurled his wings. And then he flew toward the corridor.

Part LXII: Duel to the Death

Date: Yippah 16th, 114 A.U.

The sounds of a battle were already ringing through the corridors of the Citadel as Reynyagn, Number 994, Orglan, and Monty dashed down the hall, looking around for any sight of the ongoing fighting.

“Who would be fighting in the Citadel?!” Monty yelled.

“Remember?” Orglan asked. “According to our leaks through Jaigran’s communicator, one of the other tribes of orcs is attacking this place!”

“Are they friendly?” Monty asked.

“No!” Orglan said. “At least, I’d be surprised if they were! Chances are they’re our enemies. We can only hope that they’ll see the Emperor as the greatest thought here! Otherwise, Jaigran’s got this thing won!”

Moments after those words slipped out of his mouth, a group of three orcs dashed into the hallway from an intersecting corridor. It took an instant for Number 994 to realize that their markings weren’t those of the Emperor’s orcs as he threw himself against the wall.

A barrage of chain lightning cracked through the corridor as Monty threw himself to the floor, Orglan battling it with his own energy, while Reynyagn ignored the lightning coursing threw him, taking great strides toward them. As the orcs turned to move, Reynyagn swung his corsha long sword around, slicing through the orcs and throwing one of them against the wall. An instant shock force from Number 994’s fingers quickly ended its agony.

“So they’re not totally on our side,” Monty remarked.

“Just keep on going!” Orglan said. “Jaigran’s bound to be close! We have to get there before he gets away!”

“Move!” Flek barely had time to shove Rider the remaining couple feet into the intersecting corridor before he threw himself to the ground, lightning and bullets blazing above his heads. Rolling, Flek brought up his blades to block the shots at him before he leapt backwards through a doorway, landing besides Astrid.

“Quick! Give me your gun,” Flek said. Snatching Astrid’s gun from her open hands, Flek stepped out to take a couple blasts at them before ducking back.

“I can’t do so well against orcs and elves,” Flek quickly explained to Astrid. “There’s too many of them for us to deal with them as we did before. We’ve got Rider safe. Now we just have to keep ourselves alive.”

“Where can we go?” Astrid said, quickly scanning the premises of the room. “There’s no exits or windows!”

“There’s always a way,” Flek said, stepping back as he quickly shut the door, bolting it. “Barricade the door long enough for me to get us out of here!” Flek ran to the large bed and quickly scurried up one of its post. Stabbing his corsha blades up, he quickly began to move them up to cut a circle in the wall. To get themselves out of the room before they ran out of time.

The ambush came upon them fast. Just as soon as Monty and Reynyagn had cleared the door way, the Imperial orcs moved out of it, throwing lightning around. Grabbing Monty by the arm, Reynyagn ducked into a side corridor.

“We have to keep moving without them,” Reynyagn said, referring to Number 994 and Orglan. “They can fight them off well enough, and we need to find Jaigran before it’s too late. He’s had plenty of time already to escape; it will be a wonder if he hasn’t escaped already.”

“Wait!” Monty yelled, pointing ahead in the hall as he ran to keep up with Reynyagn. “The person who just got out of that side corridor there! Isn’t that-”

“Jroldin!” Reynyagn skidded to a stop as Jroldin reflexively brought up his axe in a defensive position. “No, it’s me!” Reynyagn said.

“Reynyagn? Monty?!” Jroldin asked, mouth dropping. “But how-“

“We don’t have time!” Reynyagn said, trying to keep his mind from going off into the rabbit trails about how Jroldin had also gotten entangled into this mess. “We need to find the Emperor!”

“I had seen him a couple minutes ago before-” Jroldin began.

Footsteps. Reynyagn spun around just in time to see the barrage of lightning headed for them. Throwing himself forward, Reynyagn put himself between him and Monty, absorbing the lightning as it harmlessly dissipated in his body. Reynyagn crouched, straightened up, and then boldly stepped forward as the figure came into view.

“So. Not only are you long-lived, but you’re half-orc also.”

“You could say that...” The winged elf slowly stepped forward, holding his golden corsha spear in one hand, and pointing with one of his golden gauntlets with his other hand.

“And who do you pretend to be? Another member of your supposed Xavier Team?”

“Monty, get in a side corridor,” Reynyagn hissed. “One shot with his lightning and you have no defense. Just stick there and shoot with your gun if need be. Jroldin has his corsha axe to protect him.”

Monty moved to the side as Reynyagn looked back to face Jaigran. “Aye, I am, even if you have lost belief in the prophesy,” he said. “I am Reynyagn, last of the Sla’ad. “ A look flashed across Jaigran’s face. “Yes, you know me, don’t you.” Reynyagn took another step forward. “The only Sla’ad to survive the massacre that you led. The Sla’ad you longed to kill although Astrid stayed your hand. Oh yes, I know you, Jaigran. And it’s good to see you again before I kill you.”

If Jaigran feared him, he did not show it. “I had almost forgotten how hard it was for you to forget what happened,” he calmly said as he continued to slowly walk toward Reynyagn. “How you could never forget everyone that you lost on that day. A pity you didn’t die there too, or that your Triumvirate friend Astrid had been able to keep you alive. But that matters not. I took down her power on that fateful day and now I will finish my work with you.”

“Go ahead and try,” Reynyagn said calmly, as he brought back his sword as he prepared for the assault that was now inevitable. “A duel to the death between you and me. A duel to decide the fate of the world.”

“Oh yes, go ahead and pretend like you have a chance.” Flames shot out from Jaigran’s glove, moving out past Reynyagn as they hit the ground, creating a wall of flames behind

Reynyagn. “A duel to the death—you and I—without those allies of yours. Die well, Reynyagn.”

And Emperor Jaigran moved forward.

Part LXIII: Stab in the Back

Date: Yippah 16th, 114 A.U.

Rider loped down the corridor, ears attentive to the sounds of battle raging up ahead. He readied his gun as he rounded to the corner, thinking he was ready to see whoever was fighting up ahead. He wasn't.

Before him, Reynyagn and Jaigran were fighting. Reynyagn—who was supposed to be dead if the orcs were to be trusted—which they weren't—but that was besides the point. Jaigran—the Emperor of Arquenian—fighting there and well within his grasp. Rider pointed his gun, having prepared himself years before for the day when he would be able to end the life of a tyrant. And, with Jaigran in his sights, Rider fired.

Number 994 batted the chain lightning away with a flick of his hand, sending another current to send off the lightning of the attackers before striking with his own. They were nearly all gone by this point. Just a couple more and he'd be able to make his move.

Beside him, Orglan grunted as he absorbed the brute force of an attack before sending out with his own, a curious wave of lightning that crackled and leapt around the sides of the walls before zooming in on its targets. Screaming in pain, the orcs fell. Number 994 looked around to make sure they were gone, and then stepped closer to Orglan.

“Nice work!” Number 994 said. “We've got 'em.”

“Aye,” Orglan said. “Now to figure out where Reynyagn and Monty got.”

“Aye,” Number 994 said, sending an electric shock into the back of Orglan’s head at the most vulnerable pressure point. “But not for the reasons that you might suggest.”

Orglan collapsed, rolling to look back up at Number 994 as his lips moved. “Why-”

“Because I’m Number 994, an Imperial orc,” Number 994 said. “And I am going to protect the rightful Emperor of Arquenian.”

“I... I knew-“ Orglan began as a spasm rolled through his body.

“You know nothing,” Number 994 spat. “Rest in peace, traitor.” A thread of lightning moved from his fingers to Orglan’s forehead. And then Orglan was still. Number 994 looked up, and then quickly took a couple steps away from Orglan’s body. If any of his “allies” asked, the other orcs had killed Orglan. Number 994 looked around a bit before quickly moving forward. The life of the Emperor was in danger. And, if he had to, he would do nearly anything he could to preserve the life of the Emperor.

“It appears that you haven’t lost your touch,” Emperor Jaigran snapped as he blocked Reynyagn’s swinging attack with his spear, shooting out a beam of lightning from his gauntlet to temporarily skew Reynyagn’s vision. Bringing his spear around, Jaigran thrust it at Reynyagn’s abdomen. Reynyagn bent around, swinging himself down to the ground and rolling up back on his feet to block Jaigran’s next attack.

“If I only had my corsha rezquiert as well, you would be all but beat,” Reynyagn snapped. He blocked a few more attacks before trying to press again to make some of his own. “Unfortunately, your goons took it from me when they kidnapped me last month.”

“Ah, so the great Sla’ad is powerless without his whip, is he?” Jaigran asked. “And here I thought you didn’t like our slaves in the labor camps while you’re all around here complaining that you don’t have your battle whip, though you might frame it in more professional-sounding names like rezquierts.”

“Don’t try to twist the facts,” Reynyagn snapped. “I’m not falling for them.”

“And I’m not falling for yours,” Jaigran said, narrowing his eyes. He leapt up, moving faster than Reynyagn brought possible as he brought down his spear.

Suddenly, the sound of a gun blared, and Jaigran whirled around, moving his spear as if reflexively to stop the bullet in its path, incinerating it instantly as it touched the hot corsha end of the spear. Reynyagn looked to see Rider moving forward, and then swung his sword up to attack Jaigran.

Jaigran quickly blocked, moving around as he sent a barrage of lightning toward Rider. Rider flung himself to the side, letting the lightning pass as he dropped to his knees. Rider yelled something that Reynyagn couldn’t understand and then fired several more gun shots, which Jaigran easily blocked.

“I don’t know how he can shoot lightning!” Reynyagn yelled as he battled Jaigran. “But he can!” Rider drew his corsha sword as he moved forward, trying to use it to deflect some of the lightning. Reynyagn quickly nodded. Together with Rider, they should be able to hem Jaigran in. There was only so much one could do when he was outnumbered two to one.

Jaigran swore and flicked his palm while blocking with his other hand. A stream of fire poured out, but Rider was ready. Throwing himself away from the flame and forward, he rolled

past the wall of flame that Jaigran had attempted to make and brought up his sword to attack the Emperor.

Moving fast, Jaigran flew to the side of their attacks, blocking with his spear as he shot lightning out at Rider. Rider ducked and blocked with his sword as Jaigran swung at Reynyagn, using his body to try and force him into a corner. Reynyagn evaded him.

“Cortna’s sister?!” Zarien asked, bewildered. “But, but-”

“We’re twins,” Sereth said. “And, well, just trust me on this. You don’t want to meet Cortna.”

“She’s still alive?!”

“She might as well be dead,” Sereth snapped, still feeling a bit awkward after Zarien’s reaction when he thought she was Cortna. “Now listen—if you’re going to go kill the Emperor, you’re going to have to go now.”

“But-“ Zarien began.

“She isn’t here,” Sereth lied. “Now go!”

Zarien paused, and then ran out the door, the brown-cloaked man following him. Sereth bit her lip and then rushed back to the chamber, hoping and praying that Cortna was not among the dead. She had just met an elf who loved her sister, the Emperor was being attacked, and her sister might be dead. What else could frazzle her?

Number 994 crept softly up to the battle and edged around the wall, paying close attention to the burning flames that almost formed a solid wall between him and the fighting, the flames that were on either side, closing in the battle and slowly lessening the playing field between Rider, Reynyagn, and the Emperor. So Rider was still alive... But it mattered not. Not in the long run—as long as he kept them from killing the Emperor.

The Emperor was moving at speeds above the natural abilities of an elf, constantly blocking and using his lightning powers and weaving through the battle to try and overcome the two-on-one weakness. Number 994 didn't know how Jaigran could use lightning. But he also didn't care. All that mattered was that now it would be two-on-two. Except he had the element of surprise. Number 994 narrowed his eyes on Rider. The Sla'ad would resist the lightning. That meant he had one go to take out Rider before he was discovered. The elf would die.

Jaigran moved his spear from side to side to block the attacks as every alarm bell in his head gone off. Because of his walls of flame, he had cut off all possible exits. And now the two "Xavier Team" members had him cornered—one on either side. He had to get out of there. Jaigran brought up his spear, moving it to block each of the attacks as he moved back against the wall. They attacked again and Jaigran moved to the center, moving his wings below him as he already began to duck, Reynyagn and Rider swinging at him.

Everything seemed to happen in slow motion for Jaigran. The two swords, swinging above his head. His hands moving as they thrust the spear up toward Rider's unprotected chest. Rider already moving to avoid the spear. The splash of lightning, as, from some other source, an attack hit Rider dead on, stunning him. The look on Reynyagn's face as he tried to figure out

who had just paralyzed his friend. And the upwards motion as Jaigran thrust the corsha spear into Rider's chest.

Rider fell back, his head thrown back as blood gushed out of his wound. Jaigran was already moving to block Reynyagn's attack, but he had already lost it. From out of the corner of his eye, Jaigran saw Reynyagn's sword fall. He felt it as it began with a scratch on his shoulder—a scratch which widened and deepened as Reynyagn slashed him across his body. As excruciating pain filled his senses, Jaigran flew back, flying through the wall of flames as he tried to remember where the room with the window was.

He hit the ground, brushing past the Imperial orc as his gaze flashed across his chest and at the blood. IT was too deep. The blood was too much. He couldn't survive. Jaigran tore past the door into the room and threw himself out the window as the rest of his body fainted. Jaigran gripped the corsha spears hard as darkness descended upon him. Was this how it was to all end? The mists of darkness slowly closing in? Jaigran's wings beat upward as the darkness descended. And he knew no more.

Part LXIV: The Elder Dragon

Date: Yippah 24th, 114 A.U.

The impact came softer than Flindle had imagined it to be. Instead of running into straight stone, the stone bent before him, the ivy covering the rock swishing from side to side as Flindle plunged into darkness. It began to dawn on him that the ivy must have been hiding some sort of entrance to a cave or cavern nestled deep within the mountain. And whatever was hiding in it, Flindle was sure to find out—if he survived that is.

Trying to steer it, Flindle finally leapt out from the plane, throwing himself through the glass of the side door at what he hoped was a rock face. It was. Flindle hit it, scrambling on it for dear life, and waited there for a moment, gasping as pain from both flying through the glass and hitting the wall caught up to him. Thanking the Mother Tree for his life, Flindle slowly clambered along the wall and then dropped down, careful not to hit the glass. He looked forward.

Ahead of him, there was an explosion as the plane hit what must have been the end of the tunnel, fire and debris flying everywhere as it illuminated the long descending tunnel that Flindle was in, and then a great cavern at the end, where the plane had exploded. There was a flash of reflection and, suddenly curious to what it could have been, Flindle moved forward. He ran down through the tunnel emerging into the chamber as the burning fragments of the exploded plane began to fade into the darkness. And then there was a rumbling growl.

Flindle leapt to the side as flames suddenly shot up, illuminating the chamber as the light reflected off of the heaps of gold, jewels, and other valuable vessels strewn about the chamber.

And at the growling dragon that was slowly getting up, stretching itself out as it turned to gaze at Flindle as the darkness again set in.

Flindle moved to the side but the dragon was quicker. With a roar from his throat, flames again shot out, catching a piece of wood in the chamber to provide a more permanent light in the darkness. The dragon turned to stare at Flindle. The dragon was not the largest dragon as far as dragons went, at least, if the tales were to be believed. He wasn't the smallest, but more in the middle, but with long streamlined wings and an agile body that turned as the dragon moved to focus in on Flindle. His ears were long and curled into long green-like whips that were up in the air before bending down behind him. Flindle had heard tales, stories of a dragon that lurked in the Great Forest, the Elder Dragon they had called him: the dragon who had stalked the forest from the beginning of the time. But the priests had declared all those stories to be rubbish and old wives' tales. And so Flindle had believed it too. Until now.

Flindle hesitantly held out his corsha blade, to make it clear to the dragon that he wouldn't be going down without a fight. The dragon bared its teeth and pawed at the ground, breathing fire down to cause the ground to crack and bubble, red light emitting from the ground as the dragon roared again at Flindle. He was going to have to do something to keep the dragon from incinerating him—and fast.

“I do not want to attack you—attack me do you not want to do,” Flindle said rapidly. “Friends we can be—friends against the elves as well. Peace between us—peace have we and I shall leave the chamber most rapidly!” The dragon bared its teeth menacingly.

Suddenly, Flindle moved to the side. There was a roar, and a cascade of flames hit the rock where he had been, causing the stones to glow. Skidding on coins, Flindle threw himself to

the side, flipping over as he landed neatly on the dragon's back, brandishing his sword as he prepared to stab the dragon with the burning corsha. Marks lined itself on the dragon's neck—marks according to legend that dragon slayers had put on him when trying to kill him—proof of the dragon's identity as the Elder Dragon.

But the Elder Dragon had different plans. Mounting on his haunches he sprang forth, moving around to try and shake him off. Grasping for anything, Flindle grabbed the closest thing he could to hang on, which happened to be the end of the dragon's long ears. With a roar, the dragon suddenly took flight, flying forward up the tunnel as he shot flames out in front of him. Flindle gave a cry of surprise, moving the ears some as he quickly realized how he could direct the dragon's movement by holding onto and moving the ends of the ears. There was a burst of flames in front of him, and then they flew through the flaming ivy back into the outside world.

The elves landed with firing going all around them as the winged elves threw the ropes over the side to let up their companions. Too late, Major Erklen was running toward the chaos, seeing everything crash in front of him as many of the goblins scattered before the elves as more began to climb up to join them.

“Forward! Cut them off! Take out their foothold!” Major Erklen yelled, but he could already see that it was going to be too late. The winged elves had made a wall all around where they had flung the ropes and were guarding it viciously, taking several hits from guns before they finally went down, replaced by more elves who had already gotten up the cliff.

Now the goblins were charging. Wielding their corsha weapons, they leapt at them, finally beginning to take away their foot hold from the cliff. Several gun shots went off behind him, and suddenly Major Erklen realized the point of all this: a distraction—that while they distracted them here, they would reign ruin behind them. It was all lost.

Major Erklen turned to see many of the goblin defenders shot down as he turned to look at the trees and at the elves sallying out. And then at the fiery explosion that took out the ground in front of them.

And then Major Erklen saw the Elder Dragon.

Part LXV: Flight from the Citadel

Date: Yippah 16th, 114 A.U.

Reynyagn panted, hands on knees, as blood dripped from his sword. Throwing aside his sword, he ran to Rider, who had already collapsed and was lying on the ground, the blood flowing out of him, powerless to help.

“Rider!” Reynyagn yelled. “Rider! Can you hear me?!”

“I...” Rider said, and he coughed. Blood ran out the sides of his mouth. “I can hear you for now...” He coughed again, trying to move his mouth into a smile. “Is... is he...”

“I gave him a mortal wound,” Reynyagn said, ripping some cloth from Rider’s pants to try and quench the bleeding. “There’s no chance that he’ll survive, Rider. Jaigran will die.”

Rider pushed Reynyagn’s hand away from trying to heal his wound. “No... it’s... it’s too late...” He looked up, as if gazing beyond the ceiling. “What... what will...”

“The Great One,” Reynyagn said, seizing the moment. “You must believe in him, Rider. You must trust him.”

“The... The Great One... I believed as a youth,” Rider said. “I-I haven’t thought of him in years.”

“There’s still time,” Reynyagn pleaded. “There’s still time.”

“Time,” Rider said. “Time. I-” Rider’s mouth dropped and he leaned up on one elbow, one hand shakingly pointed upward. “It’s... It’s *him*.” For one long moment, Rider was frozen

in his position. And then he fell back, one last breath winding its way out of him. Reynyagn slowly bent over and closed Rider's eyes.

“This is the highest level of Red Alert!” The elf roared into the communicator. “The Emperor is being attacked! We need all forces in the Citadel now!!” He kicked dirt away toward a still-smoking body. “The enemy down here is dealt with. I want a full force storming the Citadel and exterminating any and all intruders and possible traitors. Get on it—now!” Thrusting his communicator into his belt, he stepped forward through the smoking bodies of the dead as he gazed up at the Citadel of Tzel-Maret. If the Emperor was even wounded, they'd all have hell to pay.

Reynyagn leapt through the flames, shielding Rider's body in his arms as he ran forward before skidding to a stop, his gaze meeting that of Jroldin's and Monty's.

“What-” Jroldin began.

“They're dead. Both of them,” Reynyagn said. “We have to get out of here. The elves will be swarming the place if they aren't already doing so. Jroldin—where are our fellow companions?”

“I don't know!” Jroldin said. “We lost them in the chase through the Citadel. I-”

There was a move behind them, and Reynyagn spun around, dropping Rider's body and drawing his sword before seeing that it was only Number 994, having just jumped through the flames.

“You caught up,” Reynyagn said, picking up Rider’s body again. “Is Orglan behind you?”

Number 994 shook his head. “He died in battle with the other orcs.”

“Too many have died,” Reynyagn said, adjusting his grip. “We have to get out of here.”

“But the other members-” Jroldin began.

“We have to find them as we leave,” Reynyagn said. “Now come on! We need to move!”

Flek brought down his hand, helping to hoist Astrid up through the hole he had made before taking off running, dragging her along with him.

“We—we have to slow down-“ Astrid said.

“Not if you want to live we don’t,” Flek said, racing ahead. “They’ll be on top of us any minute now!” Racing out of the room they were in, Flek ran down the hall. “Can you run any faster?!” he yelled, holding Astrid’s hand in one hand while he brandished a sword with the other.”

“I’m stumbling along as is!” Astrid yelled. “Absolutely not!”

You have to help me. Give me strength. Flek slowed down and then, quickly sheathing his sword, moved both hands backwards to wrap them around Astrid as he hoisted her onto his back before she could protest, hoping and praying for enough strength to do everything that he needed to do.

Strength belongeth unto the strong, Flek. Run. Energy flowed through his bones as Flek began to break into a run, redrawing his swords as he listened to where the battle seemed to be coming from. Rushing feet could be heard underneath, and the still calm of the aftermath of a battle ahead of them. Flek could smell it in the air.

They came into a library covered with books fallen on the floor and blood. Bodies littered the scene. The only living people were two female elves, who turned around to stare at them. They looked identical, except for a touch in the eyes of the one. A touch that Flek knew as something close to madness. The touch that made them just not right.

“Get back!” Flek drew his swords and stood up, brushing Astrid off his back as the one elf cowered in the corner, trying to restrain her twin, who drew her gun. The twin with the gun, the one with the touch of madness in the eyes, glared at Flek.

With one deft motion, Flek chopped the gun in two and then pointed his sword at them. “Has the Emperor been here?!”

“Yes!” the elf who looked some-what normal shrieked as she attempted to restrain her twin. “He went that way—followed by an elf and a brown-cloaked man.” She pointed toward a side door.

“Tomas and either Zarien or Rider,” Flek said. “Good. Now just mind your own business.” He grabbed Astrid’s hand and turned to go.”

Suddenly, a winged elf rushed into the room, brandishing his spear. “Touch not elves.” He gritted his teeth as he pointed his gun menacingly at Flek. “One step to them, you die.”

“Hazael!” The saner of the two elves spoke. “They-they were just about to be going.”

Flek brandished his swords as he nudged Astrid. “Get to that door,” he whispered, before turning to the new elf. “We have no business with you,” he said. “I do not wish to fight you if possible. If we must, then I will slay you.”

“No fight we do,” Hazael said. “We at peace.”

“Good,” Flek said, not understanding why the elf just declared peace with him. But he wasn’t going to question it. And Flek followed Astrid out the door.

“Brother Tomas!” Zarien ran up to catch up to the brown cloaked figure who was trying to fight off two elves while hiding around a corner. Moving around the corner, Zarien slid down to the ground as he made two shots, hitting both of the elves. Zarien picked himself up and turned to Brother Tomas.

“You are here,” Brother Tomas said. “Good. We must hurry.”

“Yeah, I know,” Zarien said. “But where to?”

“Wherever the Emperor may be. I’ve been searching the passages but to no avail. I thought I had heard commotion up here, but-“ Brother Tomas gestured to the burning flames that were consuming a nearby passageway. “The battle seems to be beyond the flames. At least it was. Now-”

“What’s that sound of feet?” Zarien pointed down the corridor. “People moving—and fast.”

“Could be guards,” Brother Tomas said, crouching and getting ready for the attack.”

“Let’s move,” Zarien said, running forward as he moved by the wall. “It could be whoever was fighting. Maybe-”

Suddenly, the figures burst around the curve, turning their backs to continue away from Zarien and Brother Tomas. But then Zarien recognized the black form of the living shadow. But no... it couldn’t be...

“Reynyagn?!”

The black figure turned, carrying the body of an elf. “Zarien!” The Sla’ad moved toward him, along with the rest of the group. “It is indeed I, Reynyagn.”

“But-“ Zarien said. “You were dead. I-”

“Not dead yet,” Reynyagn said grimly. “Though I’m afraid Rider is.”

“Rider-”

“And the Emperor,” Reynyagn said. “The elves are storming the place from the looks of it. We have to get out of it.”

“Rider’s dead?! You killed Jaigran?! The elves are storming the place?! What-”

“No time to explain,” Reynyagn said. “If we get to the upper levels of the Citadel, we should be able to get back up the way I got down here—if we do it fast.”

“Hey... not to interrupt anything...” The group turned to see a familiar looking goblin standing behind them along with a woman gasping for breath. “But I think we may have met before. The name’s Flek. I assume you all are my comrades, some of whom were supposed to be dead?”

Commander Eryan swore as he quickly flew the airship over toward the Citadel. This day of all days—the day when he was to be out on long patrol with his men, was to be the day that the Emperor was attacked. He quickly eyed a balcony on the top part of the Citadel—the perfect place to land his men.

He held up the intercom. “Prepare the cables for action. I’ll be flying to hover right next to the Citadel to drop you off on a balcony. Be ready to fight off the attackers.”

Flek swung his swords around as he battled off the horde of elves and orcs that had fallen upon them as they had come up the stairs. Gritting his teeth, he threw himself into the action, letting him lose himself in the fight to emerge with the group dead, some of the other members watching him as if in shock that he could have beaten off all the attackers, though he had had some help from Zarien and the other members.

“Come on,” Flek said, trying to catch his breath. “We need to move do we not?”

“Yes,” Reynyagn said, running forward as he struggled to keep holding Rider’s body. “The balcony should be just up ahead. There’ll be ropes leading up.”

“And if they’re not there anymore?!” Flek asked.

“Then we’ll make do with what we got.” Reynyagn’s voice was cold. “Killing the Emperor is an impressive feat. We’ll be lucky to escape with our lives.”

Commander Eryan drew the airship up, moving it to be as close as it could be to be right over the balcony. Seven feet up from the balcony was as close as he would be getting it. He watched as grappling hooks went down, tying around the balcony and the elves began to slide down. That was before things began to happen unexpectedly.

A goblin leapt out on the balcony, and then some elves and an orc. Then a Sla'ad. Commander Eryan knew something was wrong, and reached for the intercom. The goblin leapt, killing the elves that had landed as he shimmied up the ropes. Commander Eryan barked out a warning to the fellow airships and then turned, picking up his gun as he made sure the machine was in a stable hover and ran to the door. He had just made it there when the door flung open. Burning blue corsha met him there.

Part LXVI: The Watcher

Date: Yippah 16th, 114 A.U.

Slowly, the tendrils of consciousness began to be again felt as he slowly realized that he was lying on the cold stone ground. Alive. Pain still rippled through his stomach as Jaigran slowly managed to stand up. His shirt was ripped and torn aside to reveal the gash across the stomach. But the gash was not as mortal as it once had been. It seemed less shallow—less long—as if his flesh was knitting back together. The blood had stopped, though there was a small pool under him.

Gripping his corsha spear, Jaigran managed to use it to stand up, leaning hard against it as he looked toward the window on his right, through which he must have come, and then the corridor stretching out to the left. Jaigran could see that he was high up in the Citadel. Nearly to the top. He hobbled toward the window, looking out to see what was out there. Below, elves mulled around, airships hovering overhead. A deathly silence filled the air, a signal that the battle had drawn to a close. Their attempt at assassination had failed.

Jaigran brought his wings up before realizing that it would not work. They were torn, and would need to heal. He would have to go down on foot. Hobbling forward, Jaigran moved down the hall, which began to curve around into a circle. A door emerged to his right, on the interior of the circular hall way, and stairs on his left. Jaigran moved toward the stairs to leave, and then paused, turning toward the door.

Something gripped him. And no matter how much Jaigran rationally justified his decision to move toward the stairs, he knew—he knew that he was supposed to go through the

door. And, hand shaking, Jaigran slowly opened up the door and stepped into the central room on this level of the Citadel.

The circular room was tiled with elaborate patterns, unnaturally devoid of any of the dust that had accumulated in the other parts of the Citadel. Mosaics adorned the walls, scenes of battles and of golden corsha weapons. And, in the center of the room, reality ended.

A pillar of nothingness stood in the center of the room, a pillar indescribable with human terms. All Jaigran knew was that, in that pillar—if it could be called a pillar—reality ended and nothingness stood in. The hairs on the back of his head stood on end as he slowly stepped toward the pillar. And then it spoke.

Jaigran. A voice physical, and yet not. A voice almost mentally spoken, but yet physical. A voice which transcended reality. A voice that Jaigran remembered. The voice of the elven girl who had burst into his chamber. And Jaigran knew that he had found what he was supposed to find in the Citadel.

“I-I am here,” Jaigran said, planting his feet firm as he leaned on the spear.

You have arrived, the voice acknowledged. *You have come to find me.*

“What do you want with me?” Jaigran’s voice came out as a whisper.

I am the Watcher, the voice said. *I am the sustainer of the world. And I have chosen you.*

A chill went down Jaigran’s spine as he again spoke, repeating words. “What do you want with me?”

I offer you power, Jaigran. I have chosen you to free me from my bondage so that you may be Emperor over all.

“How can you give me that power?”

I am the Watcher. A being—if it could be called that—made out of the same nothingness stepped out from the pillar, slowly taking form until it became the translucent image of an elf, tall and with a look in his eyes, a look which told everything about how powerful the elf esteemed himself to be. *I am the sustainer of the world.*

“What do you mean?”

Who governs the world? Who keeps the world on its course around the sun? Who keeps the planet from hurtling into the unknown or being cast into the sun? Who formed the golden corsha objects long ago as a safeguard against evil? The being gazed at Jaigran. *I, the Watcher, have done this.*

“You lie.” Jaigran was shaken.

I lie? Ah, Jaigran. You know the truth in your heart. All this and more will I show you. Within me lies the power to rule over all. I can give you the world, Jaigran. I can destroy your enemies. The being extended out his hand toward Jaigran.

“What does it cost?” Jaigran knew that there was always a catch.

Items of nothingness came out of the pillar, forming illusions of objects—a spear, a rezuquiet, a pair of gloves, an axe, a rapier, a pair of arjla swords, an axe, all formed out of golden corsha.

To be freed from my prison, all these objects you must collect, the Being said. The golden corsha weapons, endowed with power to defeat enemies, power that can be used to open my prison that I have been kept in for millennia. You have two of them already, the only reason that you still stand before me alive.

“What do you mean?” Jaigran asked, suddenly realizing the immense vault of power that he stood before.

Do you not know that your wound was mortal for an individual? Why have you outlived all other elves? The secret lies in the golden corsha, Jaigran. One would have not been enough, but two have sustained your life. You are not holding ordinary corsha weapons, Jaigran. You hold the weapons of legend.

“I already know that,” Jaigran said tersely. He knew that they were the weapons of legend—that’s why he kept them, though he had all other times gotten rid of corsha for guns.

You trust in them like a child—hoping and praying that they will save you, but having had no evidence to prove your hopes, the Watcher said. Until now. There was a tingle on Jaigran’s spine, and he slowly turned to see, hanging above the door, a golden corsha rapier, waiting to be picked up. Jaigran slowly walked toward it, and then moved his wings—surprised that the cuts on the wings had already healed, as he picked up the rapier with his other hand, now carrying three golden corsha weapons.

He slowly turned and came back to stood before the Being. “Now what?”

See how soon your wounds have healed. Jaigran looked down to see with astonishment, a mere scar across his stomach, the skin red and inflamed—but rejoined and connected again—the cut gone. Jaigran looked up in frightened wonder.

You must collect the four other weapons. A weapon was given to each race. You now have the humans' spear, the elves' rapier, and the orcs' gloves, which have let you control the elements like I have. You will take the others and bring them unto the place that I have made to free me.

“Why should I trust you?”

I offer you power. I offer you life eternal, even as I have. I will continue to open my plan so that you will see how you will be Emperor of the universe. I will walk beside you in my body that I have formed of air. You must use your three golden corsha weapons to free my illusion.

“Free your illusion?”

My illusion that I have made is bound to this chamber. With your golden corsha weapons, you can free it to walk beside you. IT has no power of its own—fear not—but it is my spirit, with which I can walk beside you and instruct you. You can decide whether or not you fully trust me later. Join me Jaigran. I will give you the world. The being held out his hand toward Jaigran. And Jaigran took it.

Part LXVII: A New Era

Date: Yippah 19th, 114 A.U.

“It’s going to be down to the wire here,” Astrid’s campaign manager said as he flipped through the touch screen interface of the television to come to the news casters talking about the map of Araelia and its twelve districts, numbers flashing as polls were being tallied to determine the winner of the race for governor.

“Exit polls put you slightly ahead, 52 to 47, in Districts 3, 4, and 5,” the campaign manager said as he hovered the pointer over the screen. Districts 3-5 were the key districts that the election was going to hinge on. Districts 8-11, as well as District 2, were solidly behind Astrid, while Districts 1, 6-7, and 12 were solidly for Iraina. The election thus hinged on those three districts, the winner being whoever took the majority of the districts, or, in case of a tie, whoever won the popular vote. And although she had more secure districts, none would be won in the landslide that Iraina’s were going to be won by—meaning that unless she managed to come out with seven of the twelve districts, Iraina would win.

All of the polls agreed on the fact that Iraina would win the popular vote. It was going to be all that Astrid could do to scrape out a win from Iraina’s teeth. The soft murmurings coming through the door to her left reminded Astrid of the crowd that would be gathering in the large meeting room that she had set up to give her speech, whether for victory, or for concession.

“60% of the results for District 2 are in,” the campaign manager said as more campaign aides came in, watching the screen intently. “It has you beating Iraina by about thirty percentage points.”

“We already knew that I’d win District 2 by a landslide,” Governor Astrid snapped, uneasy by how close this race was going to turn out. “Iraina never even tried to compete there. There are results being called for other districts, are there not?”

“All the districts except for districts 3-5, as well as District 11, are being called for the expected winner,” the campaign manager said. “District 11 for some reason hasn’t been called yet by the talk show host.”

“It will back me,” Governor Astrid said brusquely. “It always has.”

“All of the districts have traditionally backed you...” the campaign manager murmured.

“IT will back me,” Governor Astrid said, and she stood up, pacing around the room. “But as for the others... what did I do wrong? Iraina has had a fragment of political experience compared to me; he’s been a businessman all of his life! I saved the city from extinction by the elves!”

“Human’s minds tend to overlook the deeds of the past,” her campaign manager stated. “Yes, your work in saving this city have won you many, many elections in the past, but it would appear that over time, their memory of how much you did has weakened.”

“But I brought it back into play!” Astrid exclaimed. “I pulled all the strings that I could to remind me of my work, from reminding them in the Remembrance Ceremony, to calling for a Xavier Team to try and show them what I’ll do, and by all means, my call was actually the real one!”

“Aye,” the campaign manager agreed. “If it never transpired that we actually got men, the rumors of it being political spiel would have become a centerpiece of the campaign.”

“Just as well as they got no wind of it,” Astrid said, pacing. “But I did it! I brought together a Xavier Team, which should have secured the election for me.”

“Your interview this week was disastrous,” the campaign manager reminded her. “And Iraina put a lot of money into attacking this strength of yours. Besides the which he galvanized and excited the youth of the city to strongly back him.”

“The screen!” One of the campaign aides exclaimed. Astrid turned to see the breaking news flashing across the screen: Districts 5 and 11 had been called for Astrid.

Astrid breathed a sigh of relief. “There’s six districts,” she said. “District 11 fell right in as expected. How is the popular vote running?”

“A deadlock,” her campaign manager answered, looking intently at some numbers on the screen. 53% backing you, 47% backing Iraina. Of course, many from Iraina’s districts aren’t completely in.”

“We already knew he’d probably win the popular vote,” Astrid stated. “We just need one more district to win and then it’s over. I’ll secure the governorship, and begin a new era in implementing all of the plans that we have begun to execute to deal with the elves and support the Xavier Team.”

Iraina returned into the room, taking off his shades, as he came back from speaking to some of his supporters. “Anything new called?”

“You were here when District 5 went for Astrid an hour ago,” his manager said. “District 3 has been called for you, and District 4 is close for being called.”

“And District 11?”

“It went for Astrid when District 3 was called,” his manager said. “Remember?”

“Give it time.” Iraina sat down in his chair and picked up his glass of lemonade.

“District 11 will support me by the time all the votes are counted.”

“It’s one of Astrid’s strongholds!” his manager said, confused. “Why-”

“I’ve done some work with the district,” Iraina stated bluntly. “It will fall for me.”

“You did work outside our plans?” his manager said. “Iraina—I plan your whole schedule—You couldn’t have-”

“Shut up and watch the results,” Iraina snapped. “Watch and learn. Watch and see how I win this election.”

“District 4 has been called for Iraina.” The campaign manager watched Astrid’s face as she pursed her lips, obviously disappointed.

“What of the popular vote?”

“95% has been tallied,” the campaign manager said. “52% for you, 48% for Iraina.”

“So I may yet win the popular vote,” Astrid said, taking a deep breath. “Which districts still need to report?”

“A couple hundred more votes from District 4, but the majority are still from District 11,” her campaign manager said. “They’re expected to come in in a couple of minutes.”

“So District 11 ought to be mostly for me,” Astrid said, taking a deep breath. “So I ought to win the popular vote. What’s the vote currently in District 11?”

“55% for you, 45% for Iraina; 90% reporting,” her manager replied. “It should continue that trend, more or less.”

“So I’ve won it,” Astrid said, a calm suddenly breaking over her.

“In every likelihood, yes,” her campaign manager replied. “I’ve been crunching numbers, and you’ve won it, Astrid. Iraina’s been defeated. He has basically no hope of winning.”

“Good,” Astrid said, standing up. “Best to probably wait for the final results though, before I make my victory speech.”

“They’ll be in any time now,” her manager began. “If you want to, you might as well-”

“Breaking news!” one of the newscasters broke out in a louder voice. One of the campaign aides instantly turned up the volume. “The last results are in with an astonishing conclusion. District 11 now has 100% of the vote tallied, and, in a remarkable upset, pretty much all of the remaining 10% of the votes have gone for Iraina, making him the winner of District 11, 51 to 49%. Iraina has won the election.”

“But—but that’s not possible!” Iraina’s campaign manager was flabbergasted as Iraina stood up, putting on his shades as he prepared to give his victory speech.

“I told you that I’d win out on District 11,” Iraina said.

“But-but that was one of Astrid’s secure districts!” the campaign manager said. “She was beating you by 10 percentage points?! How could the remaining 10% of the vote go almost unanimously to you! It’s impossible! Look at the numbers, IRaina! Of the remaining percent-”

“I won it,” Iraina said confidently. “And that’s where we’ll leave it. Now, if you excuse me, I have a crowd to address. A new era has been born in Araelia. And I will lead this era to victory.”

Part LXVIII: Leaving the Past

Date: Yippah 17th, 114 A.U.

The aircraft flew overhead as they huddled in the cave, waiting for the entourage of planes to fly by, terrified of being found out. After the aircraft had been gone for several minutes, cautiously, Hazael stepped out, looking and making sure that the elven aircraft were gone, flying off in the distance, before gesturing to his comrades.

Sereth stepped out, supporting Cortna, as she looked across the skies. “They’re gone.”

“It appear so,” Hazael solemnly said. “All elves gone. See; the Citadel burns.”

Sereth’s head whipped around to see the smoke and the faint light of flames licking from the Citadel, now a couple miles behind them. “Aye,” she said. “It ‘twould appear that they are burning the remnants of what they ‘ave left behind.”

“We’re on own, without them,” Hazael said. “Alone.”

A shudder of realization went through Sereth. “Aye,” she said. “We’re alone here, in the Northern Mountains, with only ourselves and our speeder.” Cortna groaned, and moved, as she began to awake. She looked around, a nervous look in her eyes, as tremors began to pass through her.

“There was a battle,” Sereth quickly lied. “We were knocked out and the Emperor left without us.” Cortna shakily nodded, moving her mouth, but without any sound coming out. So weak. So different. Sereth bit her lip to keep back the tears.

The elven aircraft slowly flew through the air, passing by mountains and valleys, as those inside wondered about what would be their future.

“We failed,” Astrid said, dejectedly. “We did all of that do stop him, and he still survived.” Flek bit his lip as he tried to figure out how the Emperor still lived. They had just intercepted a message from the Emperor to the Mothership proclaiming that he was still alive.

“I-I don’t know how he could be,” Reynyagn snapped, a tinge in his voice. “I had given him what was most definitely a mortal wound—and I know what is and what is not a mortal wound. How could he have survived?!”

“Obviously something happened,” Zarien said. “I don’t know what, but the unmistakable fact still remains—the Emperor still lives. And Rider lies here dead.”

“We can do no more than to give him a proper burial,” Brother Tomas said. “Give him a proper burial place to rest his head one last time.”

“Where?” Reynyagn asked. “Here in the middle of nowhere?”

“I know techniques to preserve his body for a short while,” Brother Tomas said. “We can still have many days before we need to find a proper burial place for him, hopefully a place that isn’t in the middle of a wasteland.”

“Where are we going, then?” Flek asked. “Our plans have been ruined with the continued life of the Emperor. Where now shall we go?”

“Forward as we had before planned,” Reynyagn said. “We had planned already to go to the traditional point on this earth that our star lies. Without any better plans, I propose that we continue there. There is no other reason to stay here.”

“Yeah,” Monty said. “I don’t feel like going back and helping the orcs in their tribal war, and I doubt the orcs would want us for much else.”

“The orcs?!” Astrid suddenly gave a shriek as she leapt up from her seat, her face growing a deathly pale.

“What about the orcs?” Reynyagn asked.

“The implantations!” Astrid cried. “We’ve left them—they’re going to kill us?!”

The snow flew past them as they clung to one another atop the speeder, bits of snow flying in their faces as Sereth tried to shield herself from its blast. Mountains loomed ahead of them, and behind them. She held on to Cortna tightly, who was sandwiched between her and Hazael. In front, Hazael kept his gaze strictly in front of him. Hazael. It was only through his quick and effective plan that had got them to escape the camp while it was still in confusion and leave the cursed Emperor and his flock for good. To leave to find a place to recover—a place outside of his venomous glares—a place where they might be able to bring Cortna back to life.

“I cannot find any notice of them,” the orc growled. “All the other captured elven guards support the elf’s story of them getting into an airship and flying off. They all testify that there was a chase after them, but that they ended up getting away.”

“They escaped!” Farshore snapped, and he swore. “Such excellent warriors... all flown the coop... and the Emperor still alive.” He dug his heel into the ground as he seethed. “So,

they think that they can escape us. They think that they can break the deal that they made with me.”

“It would appear, from some sources, that they may have gone with Orglan’s group,” the orc said. “As you know, Orglan attacked the Citadel with us. Apparently, some of their friends that we had left for dead on the mountainside were still alive, and joined Orglan. The elven sources cite them as having joined the rest of the Xavier Team as well as one of the orcs, when they boarded the ship.”

“Orglan!” Farshore said, and he again swore. “He took the rest of the team to fight against me!”

“Orglan’s body has been found dead in the Citadel,” the orc informed Farshore.

“At least one good thing happened apart from losing so many of our men!” Farshore snapped. “But he’ll still have a replacement leader. One who has captured the rest of the so-called Xavier Team.” Farshore gritted his teeth. “Go press the button—you know the one that I mean. Let them escape and think they’ve won the day. They’ll learn too late who controls the power of the minds.”

“I had not anticipated this development,” Reynyagn said as he paced the chamber quickly. “I knew that they had captured you—but not how they had done so. This news is disturbing. We’ll have to return you—as soon as possible—to the orcs if we’re going to preserve your life.”

“But if we return to the orcs-” Jroldin began.

“We’ll figure out how to get terms of freedom when we get to that point,” Reynyagn said.
“But you’re no good to us dead.”

They will not die.

What? Flek’s head quickly moved as he listened to the voice.

The implants in their head have a limit of fifty miles. You are beyond that point.

“They won’t die,” Flek quickly said. “We won’t die, I mean.”

“How so?” Reynyagn turned to fix his eyes on Flek.

“The implants in our head have a limit—fifty miles or so, I think—if my memory is correct,” he said. “I’m almost positive we’re fifty miles away from them now. Their machinery can’t reach this far.”

“How do you know this?” Reynaygn asked.

You spied on them.

“I managed to overhear their conversation,” Flek lied. “They were speaking of the limit and of trying to make sure that we’d stay close to their radius.”

“I had better make sure we’re fifty miles away...” Reynyagn said, moving to the computer.

“You’re a life saver, Flek,” Brother Tomas said. “If you hadn’t over heard your conversation...”

“Sixty miles away from the Citadel—that ought to be more than sixty miles away from their headquarters,” Reynyagn said. “They have no power over you anymore.”

The speeder slowly ground to a halt and Sereth cautiously stepped off, looking around at the wilderness before them. The mountains rose high, but a pass could be seen, a pass through the mountains that would eventually lead them to freedom. Hazael stepped beside her as Cortna moved to stand by Sereth, gazing at the setting sun.

“We have a new birth of freedom,” Sereth said. “Freedom apart from the clutches of the Emperor.”

“New live have we,” Hazael said. “We must use it wisely.”

Part LXIX: Rise of the Elder Dragon

Date: Yippah 24th, 114 A.U.

Major Erklen threw himself under the barricade as flames shot forward in front of him, the flames intermixed with a green acid that dissolved a goblin behind him as flames shot through its body. Rolling over, Major Erklen thought fast. The elves had a dragon—a *dragon* of all things. And Major Erklen instantly knew that any chance they had was done. The elves had run them over. There was nothing to do but to retreat. Major Erklen reached for his horn. And then a voice came through on his walkie-talkie.

“Sir? Major Erklen, sir?”

“What? Is that you Flindle?”

“Yes, sir, Flindle it is, sir!” Flindle said wildly trying to control the Elder Dragon’s movements to keep it from destroying their forces and keep it focused on taking out the elves.

“What do you want?!” Major Erklen yelled. “In case your air fleet haven’t noticed, we have a freakin’ *dragon* assaulting our forces. We can’t compete with both the elves and their dragon! I’m about to call a retreat.”

“Yes sir, know of the dragon I do, Major Erklen, sir,” Flindle said. “I am on the dragon—on the dragon I am, sir! Found it have I and control it—control it I have, sir! I am still trying to maneuver it, but we will attack the elves—attack the elves I will try, sir! Don’t call a retreat yet! Win the battle yet I might!”

Major Erklen put the walkie-talkie down as he looked up to gaze with astonishment at the dragon wildly flying around as it spewed its rain of acid and flame—increasingly growing to be more acid and less flame—over the forest as it began to dawn on him. Flindle was controlling a dragon. The universe had seen strange things. But none quite as strange as this one. Even his dreams weren't as paradoxical as this. Major Erklen pinched himself and felt pain. No, not even his dreams were as wild as having Flindle tame a dragon.

“Ahhhhh!” Flindle gave a cry as the dragon dove. He pulled up on the dragon's ears, forcing the dragon to move up toward one of the elven airships. The dragon gave a roar and spat out acid, now only mingled with a small amount of fire, as it flew toward the ship. The acid burned through the elven attack ship as the dragon rose up to smash into the bottom of the ship. Its tail swung around to wrap around it as its claws scratched it, as if trying to pry open a nut to get at the sweet fruit inside.

Guns began blazing from elves shooting with their guns out of the airship but the bullets just ricocheted off of its scales. The dragon roared and moved up, spitting acid through the windows as elves inside clutched their faces. The acid burned the metal as the dragon's tail smashed into the front of the ship, disabling the elven airship which finally collapsed, breaking in two as the dragon flew up, spitting acid and flying down to munch the screaming elves in its mouth before moving back up, Flindle scrambling to control it again, as it came face-to-face with the elves bearing in on it.

Three helicopters, guns at the sides, formed a triad as they bore in on the dragon, as if hoping to keep it from taking out the rest of their air force. Guns began blazing, enraging the Elder Dragon, and Flindle gave a sigh of relief as he went lax on the Elder Dragon's ears, knowing that the Elder Dragon's primal instincts would lead him to do just what Flindle wanted to do.

The Elder Dragon dove, and then came up, smashing into one of the helicopters and tilting it upwards in the air as its tail came around, smashing the rotary blades and wrapping his body around the helicopter, breaking it in on itself as Flindle struggled to hold on, nervously watching the bullets blazing around him.

Finishing off the helicopter, the Elder Dragon instantly moved to the next one, spitting out acid that burned through the central part of the helicopter's blades. As if it already understood how the helicopters work, the Elder Dragon flew around to engage the last one, as the other helicopter fell behind them. The Elder Dragon made short work of the last helicopter.

Major Erklen watched in amazement as the Elder Dragon finished taking out the helicopters before turning and swooping down toward the goblin defenses, now nearly swarmed by elves as they were doing everything they could in keeping the elves from gaining over half of the plateau.

“Get down!” Flindle's voice came crackling through the walkie-talkie. “I'm going to scourge the plateau of the elves.”

“MOVE!” Major Erklen yelled, blowing his horn. “Retreat!!” The goblins scattered as Erklen saw the Elder Dragon banking around a curve to come straight-on at the other side of the plateau. Major Erklen ran towards their pre-determined escape route.

Acid sprayed behind him, the elves screaming and running as the dragon flew low across the Plateau, snapping at the elves and decimating their ranks before rising up and turning around before going back for another bout, taking out any of the remaining elves before going back up into the air to engage the other elven attack ships. Major Erklen watched the Elder Dragon attack the head air ship and then reached in his pocket. It was high time that Lord Freglak was alerted of the news of the sudden development.

“It’s over.” The priest slapped a copy of the most recent newspaper before High Priest Jaine.

“I know, you blasted fool.” Jaine stood up, slamming his dagger down upon the headline of the front page, highlighting the sudden defeat of the elves. “All of our protests against the Elder Dragon look ridiculous now.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Nothing.” Jaine gritted his teeth as he glared at his subordinate priest. “Don’t you see?! We’ve lost. Freglak blasted us in his speech to the people about his victory over the elves. We played in this game of diplomacy and we’ve lost. There’s no sense calling it anything else. Our stock is defeated. Lord Freglak has won.”

“We’re going to obey him, then.”

“Oh no.” Jaine shook his head as he opened his mouth. “We have been defeated. But we have not been destroyed. Freglak may have won. But he will still be brought to fear the edge of a dagger. He may have won. But he will certainly learn to feel our bite.”

Part LXX: At the End of the World

Date: Yippah 21st, 114 A.U.

The aircraft, now nearly out of fuel, slowly hovered down before touching the ground, steam coming out as it came to rest on the rocky earth. It was silent, and then a door opened up, a ramp folding out onto the ground from the ship. Eight figures walked down it, two figures carrying a body between them. Behind them, the ramp folded back up and closed in on itself as they looked around their surroundings.

They were on a large plateau that overlooked the rest of the volcarren wasteland. In front of them, the plateau ended and the earth dropped to form the depression in the volcano. Although long dormant, none of the Xavier Team especially felt like going near to examine the volcano.

“So. This is it,” Astrid said as she turned. “This is where the star pointed.”

“This is where the star would be on earth, yes,” Reynyagn said. He gestured to the star that brightly shone overhead, illuminating the dim of the twilight. “This is it.”

Astrid slowly shook her head. “So we came here for nothing.”

“That might not necessarily be true...” Brother Tomas said as he ran his hand along one of the rocks that jutted forth out of the plateau.

“There’s nothing here,” Zarien said coldly. “We’re here in the middle of a volcarren wasteland. We travelled for days and have nothing to show for our efforts. We came to the North looking, hoping to find a purpose. We have found nothing. Only the dead bodies of our

friends. Kaln, Rider—both dead thanks to our journey here.” She bit her lip. “We have nothing to gain. The ship is nearly out of fuel, which means we’re going to have to walk all the way back through the mountains. It’s over.”

“We must not lose hope,” Reynyagn said, picking up a long stick from the ground to use as a staff. “We must hold onto the promise of the prophesy.”

“And look where it’s brought us!” Number 994 said, looking around him. “Here! The prophesy took us here!”

“Far North the party now must go if it wants to succeed...” Jroldin murmured.

“What?” Astrid turned toward him.

“Far North the party now must go if it wants to succeed,” Jroldin said, speaking in a louder voice, as he spoke the words that he had once been forced to memorize. “The trials that will try the group will bring it to the brink; Despair must run o’er them before the culmination comes. Till purified with fire it will stand against fire.” Jroldin shook his head as he gazed around them. “Don’t you see? The prophesy knew of this! It knew that we would suffer here—we would be purified in our journey—but we would be purified with fire—we would be purified only after we’d be brought to the brink of despair. Don’t you see?” There was silence before anyone spoke.

“Yeah, I see,” Number 994 said. “I see that the prophesy promised our own failure and destruction. Really makes me trust that we’re win this whole thing. It’s over.” Ripping off his gauntlets, Number 994 stalked over to the stone where they had lain Rider’s body, leaning against it as he stared down at the ground.

“We must leave them,” Brother Tomas said in a low voice, moving over toward Monty. “It is time for the Xavier Team to make their own choice.” Slowly nodding, Monty walked with Brother Tomas back to the airship, going back up into the inside.

“I... I want to believe...” Flek said, sitting down upon a rock as he adjusted his cloak. “The star promised us so much! It-”

It failed you, Flek. You were promised much and the star failed to deliver on its promise. Look around you. Do you see the star working to bring your victory? Or do you see it working to bring you to despair...

It... Flek tried to protest. It promised that-

It promised failure. You're following a prophesy that promises failure. Flek stared down at the rock.

“We have nowhere to go, now...” Astrid said, sitting down and leaning on the rock next to Number 994. “Just to be out here in the middle of nowhere with a ship about to lose any fuel to return us. At the very least, I suppose that when we die, we’ll at least be able to say that we almost killed the Emperor. We almost won freedom for ourselves before we lost.”

“We almost freed the nations of Arquenia...” Zarien whispered as he sat down on the opposite side of the rock to Astrid. “We almost delivered in on our promise...”

“We haven’t lost yet,” Jroldin said, gritting his teeth, as he laid his axe against the rock and sat down on the other side of Number 994. “We still have hope... right?”

“We still have hope, Priest-King,” Reynyagn said, as he pointed to the star, leaning on his new staff. “Look to the star! It has not yet failed us! We must continue to trust in the prophesy!”

“A prophesy of despair,” Jroldin murmured. “If only I could feel better about my belief of the prophesy... a prophesy I want dearly to believe... a prophesy I believe by my intuition... but a prophesy which my heart rejects.”

“We must look to the star!” Reynyagn repeated. “It is the star of promise! It is a star that has guided us this far along! It is a star that will continue to guide us.”

“But then why are we here?” Flek asked as he stared at the rock under him. “Why are we here of our places, if not to bow down to despair?”

“Maybe it is because the Xavier Team was never complete,” a new voice said, coming from the crater of the volcano. “Maybe it’s because the seven were never full.”

And everyone turned to look.

Part LXXI: Augger

Date: Yippah 21st, 114 A.U.

A tall humanoid reptile stood at the brink of the cliff overlooking the hardened volcanic rock below. Dull red scales went all around his body. A long tail twitched and he looked at them from his narrow black eyes.

Reynyagn reached for his sword as he stared at the reptilian being. “Who are you?”

“I am an augger,” the reptilian being said. He walked over toward them, putting his hands out to show that he had no weapons—apart from the claws on his hands.

“What is an augger?” Flek asked.

“I am an augger,” the augger said. “The auggers are the seventh race of Arquenia.”

Flek took a step back. “There are only six races.”

“Yes, that’s what you would believe,” the augger said, licking his hand. “We don’t get around much.” Silence reigned for a few moments.

“What is your name?” Jroldin asked.

The augger looked up. “Would that I had one. Alas, but because of my ancestor’s crimes, my name was stripped from me long ago. Call me Augger, after my species.”

“Your name was stripped from you?” Flek asked.

“Eight generations back,” Augger said. “My ancestor was a wicked augger and betrayed many of our kind into the hands of hunters. For his crime, he and his descendents were stripped of their names and banished from Araelia.”

“An outcast yet by birth...” Astrid whispered.

“What?” Reynyagn asked, not quite hearing her.

“An outcast yet by birth,” Astrid said louder. “The prophesy! One who was an outcast because of their birth!”

“And augger late will come to join,” Augger said.

“Excuse me?” Reynyagn asked.

“The second line of the third stanza of the prophesy!” Augger said. “A Sla’ad will lead the group and Augger late will come to join. I am the augger late to the party.”

“What did you say that line was?” Jroldin asked.

“A Sla’ad will lead the group and Augger late will come to join,” Augger said. “Do you not know it?”

“It finishes the rhythm!” Reynyagn said, a look of shock on his face. “It fixes the proposed errors in the prophesy! But it couldn’t be... I mean—how could a line so crucial go missing from the prophesy...”

“Slayers,” Augger said. “Six hundred years ago, a group of slayers determined to slay the auggers and wipe their name out from all sources because of the hatred that they hated our kind with. My ancestor betrayed many of my kind into their hands, causing his banishment. The

slayers did what they could to wipe the auggers name from the books, an effort which succeeded. The races forgot the last race, and of those who heard of us, we were dismissed as legend.”

“I can’t believe it,” Brother Tomas said, a look of awe on his face. “I mean—how could we have missed it?”

“Men have missed larger things,” Augger said. Silence loomed over the group for a while.

“So,” Reynyagn said. “There’s a seventh race of Arquenia.”

“There is,” Augger said, smiling.

“Do you have relatives around here?” Reynyagn asked.

“Oh,” Augger said. He cocked his head. “I suppose you would have forgotten.”

“Forgotten what?”

“We auggers are not like you humans, or elves, or dwarves, or any of the other races,” Augger said. “You have genders, male and female. We have only one gender.” Jroldin tried to understand what Augger was saying.

“And so we reproduce differently,” Augger said. “Only by death does life spring forth. Throughout our life, we carry a sort of egg in us. The egg only hatches once death comes upon us. Generally, the egg only contains one augger, although twins have not heard of. And when we were first created, twins were much more common.”

“So your ancestors-” Reynyagn began.

“Are all dead, yes,” Augger said. “My genealogy have not had twins since my ancestor’s betrayal. In addition, auggers are by habit a nomadic people. Except for those who live in Araelia, many live out on their own, such as myself. Of all the races, we seem to care the least for relying upon each other.”

“Then how do you know so much?” Jroldin asked. “I mean, you know the Xavier prophesy, you know the different races... If you are a loner, then how-”

“Memories,” Augger said. “We are not like the rest of you. Because of how slowly we reproduce and because we were almost made to live on our owns, we have been blessed with the gift of perfect memories. We auggers never forget. And memories are passed down. I remember all of the memories of my ancestors before me, all the way back to the first augger to be created.” There was again silence.

“I think my brain is beginning to hurt,” Flek said.

Augger smiled. “I suppose that it would be expected. It is not every day that you discover a new race in Arquenia, especially one as different as we are. But it matters not. You were called here by the star, though you may not have known it, and the star has called the members of the Xavier Team together. And now, together, we will have much time to learn and grow as we understand each other.”

“I suppose so,” Zarien said.

Part LXXII: Looking Forward

Date: Yippah 21st, 114 A.U.

The campfire popped and crackled as the new wood was thrown into the fire. Around the fire, seated on stones, were the seven members of the Xavier Team, along with Brother Tomas and Monty. Augger munched on the rock that he held in his hand as the other members of the Xavier Team watched him curiously out of the corner of their eyes, still trying to figure out how he was able to eat *rocks* of all things.

“So,” Brother Tomas said, asking the question that had undoubtedly on the minds of the members of the Xavier Team for a long while now. “What are you going to do now?”

“I can fix your machine,” Augger said, putting down his rock that he had been eating. “Using some of the lava from this volcano, I can construct a device that will act as an engine and fuel to get us a good ways. At least until we should be able to come up with some civilization. One of my ancestors was a bit of a genius with heat-based technology.”

“Somehow,” Brother Tomas said, “Although that will help, something tells me that getting out of here isn’t your only problem.”

“No. You’re right that it’s not,” Reynyagn said gravely as he put down his plate of food. “We have learned that Emperor Jaigran is a whole lot harder to defeat than we had before planned. Somehow he survived a mortal wound, and that puts him on a whole new level. He now knows that the races are not as much in subjugation and in fear to him as he once thought. He may have survived. But he’s going to be a whole lot more cautious and careful to make sure

that there isn't a next time. And we never figured out what was so important for him to get to Tzel-Maret."

"We need to work to turn the tide," Zarien said. "We're not going to be able to get him the same way—not unless we show him that it's the only way to work. We need to show him that we're powerful enough to wage a full-out rebellion against him. We can do that by striking at his bases."

"What do you mean?" Jroldin asked.

"The slave camps," Zarien stated bluntly. "The entire elven empire rests on the brunt of their slaves, made up from the races that have been captured by them, as well as disobedient elves and orcs. Entire cities are comprised of these slaves and their masters, having the work of bearing the brunt of providing for the entire elven civilization. We want to take them down? Disable the slave camps—at least enough of them that it sends warning signals to Jaigran that he can't just ignore us."

"There is another important item that should not be discounted," Augger said. "Namely, the golden corsha weapons."

"You mean my axe?" Jroldin asked.

"At the beginning of time, a golden corsha weapon was given to each of the seven races of Arquenia," Augger said. "An axe to the dwarves, a spear to the humans, a rezquiet to the Sla'ad, and so on. They were given for the purpose of defense, with the promise that they were to be our salvation if things go wrong. That the golden corsha weapons would bring peace again to Arquenia. You have one, Jroldin. From what you told me of the battle, Jaigran has the

weapons of the orcs and the humans. It is likely the orcs that give him his powers over the orcish magic.”

“What do you think we ought to do, then?” Flek asked.

“Find the golden corsha weapons,” Augger said. “Find the weapons and wield them against Jaigran. If the promises are to be believed—which they are—we will want to use them as we fight against the Emperor. And continue to follow the prophesy.”

“The prophesy,” Reynyagn said. “You knew of the part of which we knew not. Are there other parts that have been lost to our memory?”

“The full prophesy is outside of my knowledge,” Augger said. “Xavier was alive during my ancestor’s time and the prophesy was not told to my ancestor in its completion, but I will recite what I do know.”

“The wars go by the kingdoms fade and new kingdoms will come.

New nations rise new earthly powers and yet the world endures.

But yet a greater threat than any that have come before.

A greater threat now rises yet and still will break the shore.

Its power grows the kingdoms fade and all becomes entrapped.

The greatness of the nations will all be ascribed to it.

But yet a hope still stands!

But yet a hope still stands!

A team will rise out of the dust and out the ashes sure.

A member one from every race will bring it to a close.

And when it's fruition is met it will go out for sure

To smite the power that has come to take away its peace

The power that is above and beyond all that lives and breathes

A power that yet threatens to destroy the earth with fire.

But now a hope doth rise!

But now a hope doth rise!"

A human named Astrid and an elf with ambition.

A Sla'ad will lead the group and Augger late will come to join.

An orc will help elf and goblin will show great expertise.

A dwarf who has a sign upon his head for his fixed place..

The seven will be unified in purpose and in mind

But yet a hope secures!

But yet a hope secures!

A healer for the party and one who bears Old Weapons.

A warrior seeks to lead and yet it won't be granted him.

One will betray his friends and another will lose them all!

An outlaw yet by birth and one who saw a slaughter great.

These qualities they all must have if they will seek success.

And now a hope will rise!

And now a hope will rise!

A sign will arise in the sky to call the team together

A burning ember dark will rise and proclaim an emergence

The sign will gather together the team to rise to fight

To fight for good, to fight 'gainst evil, to fight against the darkness

And now a hope is here!

And now a hope is here!

Far North the party now must go if it wants to succeed.

The trials that will try the group will bring it to the brink;

Despair must run o'er them before the culmination comes.

Till purified with fire it will stand against fire.

And now a hope is tried!

And now a hope is tried!

For darkness now is rising that will spread throughout the land;

A Watcher wakes and seeks to gain a pawn to help himself.

But the pawn seeks to be a co-ruler with the Watcher.

The Watcher makes a plan to give all power into their hands.

To destroy all with burning fire poured out from the sun.

Will now the hope rise up?

Will now the hope rise up?

The rising hope must rise if it will destroy the darkness.

Two leaders from among them will seek to lead them as one.

Although in unity, yet one from the group may rebel.

The traitor seeks to undermine what all their work have wrought

His struggle with the demon will determine victory.

Will the hope yet go on?

Will the hope yet go on?"

Augger stopped speaking and suddenly light shone forth from the star, a blue beam hitting the fire, extinguishing it as a pillar of light rose up to the star, now directly ahead of them, as they stood and looked up in awe at the star, now blowing bright, and the words still ringing in their ears of the promise of the prophesy.

The Xavier Team was now complete.

Epilogue: Rising Tide

Date: Yippah 19th, 114 A.U.

The aircraft slowly moved into the first-class docking slot in the Mothership, cranes and mechanical arms moving out to slowly bring it into port, the ship finally coming to rest in the landing dock in the Mothership, the hangar doors into the landing dock slowly closing as a gangway was stretched out to slowly rest on the floor, steam emitting from the ship.

Two guards with firesticks came out first, abolishing any shadows around them as two figures followed them. Wings overshadowing him, Jaigran strode forward, golden gauntlets on his hands as in one hand he held on to a spear. His other rested on the hilt of his corsha rapier, which he had attached to his belt. Some of the elven nobles murmured and gestured. Why was the Emperor in possession of those weapons which he had long ago dismissed as old-fashioned?

A tall elf walked next to the Emperor, his eyes slanted upwards as he haughtily gazed at all those around him. His skin was pale, and he walked strangely, as if he hadn't walked before. And, to the keen-eyed, he cast no shadow. Even Jaigran had the pale illusion of a shadow, brightened by the two guards with fire-sticks firing. But this elf had none. When asked, he gave only one word to who he was. The Watcher.

Jaigran cruelly smiled as he walked out of the landing dock, moving to his headquarters. For one hundred and fourteen years he had ruled, seeking to stamp out the remaining opposition, but now it no longer mattered.

He would burn them with fire.

