



The Arqueñola
Saga

The Arquenian Saga

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Thanks to Seth Rosamilia for the Awesome Cover

Book I: The Star

Prologue: The Massacre of the Sla'ad

Date: 13 B.U.

“The Council says that they will offer us peace if we swear to flee to the Northlands and to never return,” Falshorn said. Dead silence fell upon the group.

“*If* the Council is to be trusted,” Reynyagn said.

Falshorn solemnly nodded. “If they are to be trusted. It is a risk that we have to take,” he said. He paused. “I don’t see any other rational option, though. We have been packed into this ancient fortress, the armies pounding upon our gates. Thanks to the failures of our previous leaders, the Council refuses to trust us and we have no chance of appeasement. If we don’t make the choice we’ll be slaughtered. They have threatened to begin bombing us if we don’t agree. We have no way out of this fortress.”

Silence once again fell upon the group. Reynyagn solemnly sat down, folding his shadowy hands over his chest. “So be it,” he said.

“Then let us take it to a vote,” Falshorn solemnly pronounced.

“We accept to your terms of peace,” Falshorn said, speaking into the phone. “We agree to leave the Northlands and... and to never...” His voice caught. “And to never return.”

“Excellent,” a voice came from the other end. “We have prepared vehicles for your group.”

“You...what?” Falshorn asked, confused.

“We have no wish for you to stay longer than at all possible,” the voice said. “Open the gates and we will begin to send them in.”

“Oh... Well... alright... many thanks!” Falshorn said, and slowly put down the phone. “Open the gates!” He slowly walked back down toward the Grand Chamber where the rest of the people were gathered as others begin to lower the gates. It seemed like such a good deal... almost too good to be true...” Falshorn had a sinking feeling about this deal... but they didn’t have any other chance... right?...

Falshorn paused, as if he was about to go back on his decision... But it was too late for that now. They would soon be coming down into their underground fortress. Best to meet them at the gate.

He entered the Grand Chamber. “They are sending down vehicles to bring us to the Northlands!” he announced. “They should be here soon!”

“Wonderful...” Reynyagn said... “They’re sending vehicles to help us? Don’t you think-”

“I don’t know what to believe either,” Falshorn yelled, cutting Reynyagn off. “But, still—this is our only chance! Otherwise-”

There was a sudden crash, and Falshorn turned to see the right wall cave in. “What is-“ Falshorn began. Seven Council hovercraft burst into the room, fully loaded with three soldiers on each.

“Ah! Here already!” Falshorn said nervously, as he stepped down from the podium. “I suppose it was easier to break through-”

A being leapt off of the lead hovercraft. He looked like a dwarf... but he was too agile, too thin. He in all appearances looked like an elf... but he was too small to be an elf. All of the sudden, the elf drew two corsha swords from his belt. The twin blades shone an electric blue as he leapt forward.

Falshorn’s eyes burned. “What are you-” he began, and leapt forward, reaching for his sordaya. A corsha arrow pierced his heart first. His eyes wide open in shock, Falshorn collapsed to the ground.

The elf gave a roar of approval and leapt forward, cutting down two of the Sla’ad down. “Give no parley!” he screamed. “Kill all of the Sla’ad!” The Sla’ad fled from in front of him. The elf never could get used to them. Best described as being humans made out of darkness, as gray creatures in the shape of humans, the slightly transparent ghostly Sla’ad could only be killed by weapons made of corsha, that burning metal that cut through stone as if it were butter.

Utter mayhem burst forth as more hovercraft came in, bringing more warriors. The Sla’ad were slaughtered, helpless and without any chance to retaliate. Blood dripped from the elf’s hands as he thrust his sword into another Sla’ad, the Sla’ad toppling over. The elf’s hands shook with realization of what he was doing, the ends of his mouth upturning in a bloodthirsty joy. He spun around, surprising a woman and her baby that had been trying to escape. The elf stalked towards her.

The woman clutched her child and backed into the corner. “Please!” she protested. “Have mercy upon a poor widow and her baby!” All of the sudden, the elf heard a voice behind him and turned. His friends were running off of a hovercraft that just arrived.

“Jaigran!” Astrid, a female human ran over, a look of shock and worry on her face. Running up to him, she bent slightly down and grabbed his wrist, and pointed his corsha sword toward the ground. “What are you doing?”

Jaigran hated it when others had to bend down to speak with him, an elf of all creatures! “The Council’s orders,” the elf, Jaigran, said. “After the abomination the Sla’ad did when they razed Fralium to the ground, they decided they were never to be trusted; they are all to be destroyed.”

“All of them?” Astrid asked, as some of their other companions came up to them. “But we promised peace!”

“Where have you been?” Jaigran spat out. “They disregarded their promises, so why should we keep ours?”

Astrid backed away. “Jaigran... what... what’s happened to you?”

“Nothing!” Jaigran spat. “Except I’ve learned how dark the world is.” He spun around, as if to make toward the widow and her baby.

Astrid grabbed Jaigran’s shoulder and whirled them around. “Jaigran... they’re... she’s just a widow... it’s just a baby.... They’re no threat at all... just leave them be...”

Jaigran paused, and slowly closed his eyes. “You... you’re right...” he said. “She... she’s just a woman...” And he began to walk away with Astrid. But then, something on his wrist caught his attention, and he slowly lifted up his arm. The bracelet. Her bracelet. The bracelet she always wore... before... before the Sla’ad-

Jaigran breathed heavily, clenching his teeth, as he lifted his arm up into the sky. Something broke inside of Jaigran. And, pushing away from Astrid, he turned; he turned toward the widow and her child. And he raised his sword into the air.

Part I: Flek

Date: Amanela 1st, 114 A.U.

“Sardu. Morben. Sardu. Morben.” The chanting ran throughout the trees of the Great Forest.

“Behold! The Mother Tree!” the priest shouted, his voice rising in the air. “All bow down to Her Greatness that has protected us from the elves on high!”

“Sardu! Morben!” the crowd cried.

“To the Mother Tree we now bear reverence! Let the sacrifices come forth!” the priest cried.

“Shut it off...” Freglak groaned.

“But, but you promised-“ the goblin said.

“I said turn it off!” Freglak yelled, and the goblin turned off the TV, ending the chanting of the goblins.

“Good riddance,” Freglak said, and wiped his hand across his face. He glared at the goblin. “Not a word to the High Priest about this!”

“Yes sir!” the goblin said timidly.

“You may go now,” Freglak growled, and the goblin left. Lord Freglak, lord of the goblins, had long ago lost faith in the Mother Tree, which was only a huge long-lived tree. He had finally convinced the High Priest to let him skip the annual Celebration of the Mother Tree in exchange for watching it on TV, but had grown sick of the murderous mayhem already. Lord Freglak swore under his breath, and then stood up, crossing his arms. He uncrossed them to push a button to open up the sound system.

“Flek!” Freglak yelled. “Get in here!” He stopped pressing the button, and sat down in his couch, slouching, and he began to file his fingernails.

Flek burst into the room. “Lord Freglak!” he said bowing. “I am here at your command!” Flek was an average height for a goblin. His great cunning and thinking on the fly, had brought him up through the ranks of the army until he was now in a position so great that he could have become the general of the whole goblin army if he wanted. As it was, Flek had no need of that position and instead was a goblin warrior independent of the army and commanded only by Freglak.

“Listen up,” Freglak said. “All the rest of the goblins are off bowing and giving homage to some stupid tree that they think will save them from the elves. Sickening homage it is. But that is beside the point. All the priests are off adoring the Mother Tree. They wouldn’t notice if we sent off a team of goblins armed with guns to go off on Operation Capture.”

“Yes sir!” Flek said. “I’ll lead off the team right away!” He made, as if to leave, and then turned. “I assume that you have nothing against my using the corsha weapons to accomplish the mission?”

“Of course not,” Freglak said. “Just because I’m not an Old-Weapon-only activist like those stupid priests doesn’t mean that I’m for guns-only. Go ahead and use your weapons and get this mission done already!”

“Yes sir!” Flek said and he scampered off. Flek had long gotten used to Freglak’s personality and his hidden hatred for the priests and their outrageous customs. Flek didn’t care at all for the Mother Tree, but he’d bow down to it or whatever would most advance his position.

Flek got in the elevator and punched the button to go down to the garage. The doors opened, and he ran out, to meet the rest of the team waiting for him. There were ten in the party in all, not including Flek. Flek walked past them, high fiving some and exchanging quick comments with others.

“Reklen, my man! You’re looking alert today!” “Kailen! Glad to know that you recovered from your sickness in time!” “Cornun! Let’s look a bit more upbeat shall we!” Flek paused at the end of the line and clapped his hands together. “All right! Let’s get started on Operation Capture, shall we? Kailen! What were the latest coordinates for the elf ship?”

“The ship was last tracked at B14 N20,” Kailen said. “In other words, when I last checked ten minutes ago, at the current speed it should be past the Great Forest in around an hour.”

“Great,” Flek said. “Are the missile teams ready? Everything must be perfect for this play.”

“The missile teams were ready when I last checked,” Cornun said. “They await your signal!”

“Good,” Flek said. “Let’s get loaded into the ship!” Flek tried to pace his breathing as they got into the airship. This was the operation that they had been planning for the past twenty years, the plan they’d been hoping for ever since the Great Upheaval. After this mission, the elves would know of their power, and would be confident of that they still existed. The dense foliage of the Great Forest had kept them safe from the elves from seeing them, and their technology had disabled their radars, but after this, the elves wouldn’t be blinded by it anymore. They would know.

Flek shook his head and then boarded into the ship with his crew. “Get the hatches open and let’s send this thing off! Everyone get in your positions!” He went and strapped himself into his seat along with the eight other warriors, the other two goblins manning the vehicle. Flek felt the vehicle move forward and heard the grinding as the hangar doors opened. The machine began to tilt upwards and Flek closed his eyes. The machine made a humming noise and then there was the sound of an explosion as the machine took off into the air. Flek felt himself pushed back in his seat. It became harder and harder for him to breathe and he felt a burning pain in his chest. Flek gritted his teeth and shifted his head as the machine rose into the air.

The High Priest turned his eyes from the sacrifices to see the airship bursting from the Capitol and quickly rising into the air. His eyes narrowed. His duty was with the Mother Tree now, but afterwards... Freglak would have to answer to him about this.

Part II: Astrid

Date: Amanela 1st, 114 A.U

“A corsha miner has been injured in mining district D7,” the loudspeakers announced. “Help is requested immediately.” Astrid muttered something under her breath as she moved toward the ambulance. She hoped it was a quick and easy fix; this was going to make her miss the annual Remembrance Ceremony.

Getting in the ambulance, she nodded to her co-worker, which had gotten in the driver’s seat. “Let’s make this snappy,” Astrid said. “Ok?”

“I’ll do my best,” the man said as he drove the ambulance out from the hospital parking lot. The hangar doors opened, and the ambulance moved out.

Lights shone down from the lights in the Great Cavern as the ambulance made its way down the street toward mining district D7. The ambulance made its way through the streets for ten minutes, sirens blaring, before it turned down into a tunnel that connected the Great Cavern to the Dyorvak Cavern.

Astrid tapped her fingers impatiently against the door of the ambulance as she watched the lights fly by on the tunnel ceiling. The ambulance was one of the more higher-tech vehicles in the city of Araelia, using the best hovering technology available. Astrid always had secretly wanted to be able to sometime get outside with one of these hovering vehicles to see how far they would be able to get off the ground, but, of course, it was too dangerous.

The vehicle pulled into a large cavern, though it was smaller than the Great Cavern. The ambulance moved around the outer side of the cavern and started passing tunnels to different mining sections. D4, D5, D6...

“D7! Turn left here!” Astrid said.

“I know what I’m doing,” the man said. “Relax, Astrid...” The ambulance pulled in through the tunnel until it emerged in a much smaller cavern than the others. There were some low buildings near the entrance to the cavern. Half of the cavern was empty, small corsha remains scattered throughout the area. The other half was full of corsha stalagmites and stalactites growing up and down out of the ground.

The ambulance came to a halt a couple yards away from the nearest corsha stalagmite, and Astrid jumped out, carrying her medical kit with her. Weaving her way through the corsha outcroppings, she looked for a wounded miner, staying as far away from the corsha as possible. The corsha glowed, bringing light to this cavern. It was the burning corsha metal that slowly grew in certain caverns, that was used for all the weapons, not including guns. The burning corsha could slice through most substances, one of the exceptions being itself, once it had

expired and merely become a normal metal that didn't burn at all. Astrid knew more about corsha than she wanted to. Too many miners got hurt by an accident with it. And with corsha, any accident was a bad accident.

Astrid heard a cry and ran over to a miner, propped up on the ground, two of his buddies next to him. "What's the matter?" Astrid asked, running over to see the miner.

"Was mining..." the miner said through gritted teeth. "I slipped, and the corsha cut my leg..."

Astrid knelt down and examined his leg. The miner had a three inch wide gash that began right below his knee and ran down his leg. The miner and his two friends seemed to have been trying to stop the blood, but there was still blood flowing.

Astrid opened her medical kit and got out a strip of gauze, and carefully laid it and then began to press it against the wound. "Hold it there, please," she said to one of the miner's two friends, and then rummaged through the medical kit. Getting out her supplies, she waited for the gauze pad to take effect before taking it off. The cut had stopped bleeding so Astrid examined it more. The wound was deepest and most open in the middle. It was going to need stitches.

"This might sting some," Astrid said, as she opened a bottle. "I'm going to be using this to clean off the wound first. I'm going to have to put some stitches in for the wound." She dripped some of the liquid on a washcloth and then slowly ran it around the wound.

Astrid turned to see the ambulance driver beside her. "Michael!" she said, reading his name tag. "Go get me the supplies for putting in stitches!" Michael ran off, and Astrid picked up a bottle. She took some out of it and prepared a shot.

"I'm going to be giving you a shot close to the gash to numb up the wound for the stitches," Astrid said mechanically and she gave him the shot as Michael came back with the kit that she needed.

Astrid waited some for the shot to take effect, and then drew a slightly thicker needle from her pack. "Now here's the part where I'd rather you didn't look at the wound," she said. "I'm going to be running the needle around the wound and I need to know if you can still feel pain, or if the shot has taken effect. If you feel any pain, tell me." The man looked away and Astrid began slowly running the needle around the edges of the wound.

"Ow, that was painful," the miner said.

"Ok..." Astrid said, continuing to run the needle around the wound.

"That was slightly painful..." the miner said. "This is fine... slightly more painful... very painful..."

“Ok,” Astrid said and withdrew the needle, waiting some more to let the shot take more effect.

“I’m going to try that again,” Astrid said after a few minutes, and redid it. This time the miner said anything. “Ok; good,” Astrid said. “We’re now going to do the stitches. You can watch if you want, but if you feel any queasiness or nervousness, I’d rather you stopped. The last thing we want is for you to faint here.” Astrid turned to Michael, who handed her a curved metal needle that was attached to a thick thread. Taking a deep breath, Astrid pinched the skin together with her hand and began to thread the thread through the wound.

Astrid slammed the door shut and withdrew her breath as Michael got into the ambulance. “Whew! Glad that’s over!” she said, and looked at the time. It was 12:45. The ceremony would be starting in 15 minutes. “Try to get to the hospital as quick as possible. I don’t want to miss much of the ceremony.”

Part III: Zarien

Date: Amanela 2nd, 114 A.U.

Four minutes. The captain had handed him the time bomb that he was supposed to plant in part of the most advanced, most guarded, and most infamous air ship in the whole world and he had only been given four minutes to get in, plant the bomb, and get out.

Make that three minutes and fifty five seconds.

Zarien mopped the sweat off his brow and then quickly dived into the air pipe. The air pipes were the way that they had finally figured out how to get through to sabotage the Western 4th Command Center. The prep crew had somehow managed to cycle out the robots that roamed the air pipes looking for intruders for, coincidentally, another four minutes. Zarien clambered down the pipe, activating the sticky gloves for the hundred foot drop into the lowest levels. Zarien took a couple turns before he came to it. The great pit, as the prep crew had jokingly called it. The shaft that would get Zarien down to the bottom level of the Great Airship without having to go anymore advanced forms of security. Zarien took a deep breath and with a yell, jumped down, counting as he fell.

"One...two...three...."

As soon as Zarien counted to the number six, he stuck his hands out. The sticky gloves attached to the metal duct and Zarien jarred to a stop, his arms feeling as if they'd break because of the stop. If he had been any race other than being an elf, Zarien was sure he would have broken one of his arms, if not worse. Zarien took a couple deep breaths, and then dropped the remaining ten feet to the bottom.

Landing lightly on his legs, Zarien crawled through a couple more feet of air pipes to come to a ventilator. Quickly cutting it with a rare corsha knife, he clambered into the room and checked the time on the time bomb. Two minutes and forty five seconds. He hadn't done it fast enough. He had done demos and prep for this before. And he needed to get through the air shafts in a minute to have enough time to do everything.

Oh well. Guess there's no escape this time.

Zarien burst out of the room into the hallway, gun in hand. From prep and demos, he knew right where the guard would be. Before he could even see the guard he shot, twice, one hitting the guard, the other hitting the video camera. They were both inactive by the time he could see them.

Zarien ran down the hall and then burst through a door into the computer room. The room was huge, almost too huge for being only one of the twenty power rooms that was used to

power the west side of the Great Airship. A blast in here would desolate this part of the airship. And then the rebels would be able to continue their plan.

Zarien threw the time bomb like a frisbee to have it hit a computer and then slide to the floor. The time bomb had been made tough. Zarien watched it land, and then fled the room. He had seen the time before he had thrown it. He had two and a half minutes remaining. Because once the bomb exploded, everyone in the near vicinity was probably going to die.

Zarien dashed down the hall toward the door to the ventilator, when suddenly, two armed elves dashed around the corner to meet him. Zarien's mouth dropped open. This was never part of the arrangement. All of the elves were supposed to be asleep after the wild chaotic celebration of Victory Day! There weren't supposed to be any extra guards running around down here!

Zarien threw himself to the ground, firing his gun. Gunfire sprayed where he had just been. Two shots and the armed elves were down. Zarien picked himself up and dashed into the room, throwing himself into the shaft and clunking his head.

Ignoring the pain, Zarien scurried to the main shaft and looked up. it was a long way up. Zarien leapt up, using the sticky hands to clamber up the wall. Zarien was going to die if he did it the normal way. He had to take risks. Zarien didn't wait for one hand to properly attach before he moved himself forward, hanging by one hand at a time and ignoring the sticky pads on his feet. Using them would take too long.

Ignoring the tense pain of his arms, Zarien moved up the shaft. One of his hands slipped and he barely held on. He continued on, making good time. His mind raced. This was faster than he'd ever been in the practice simulations. Maybe he'd actually be able to get out of here alive!

Suddenly, Zarien heard a whirring sound above him and looked up to see a dark shape descending. Zarien opened his mouth slightly and then gave out a loud yell of indignation. The prep team had promised to divert all the robots! They said they'd been positive that the orcs wouldn't be able to discover it in enough time to catch him! Gritting his teeth, he scurried up, trying to get to the exit pipe before the robot. He was getting closer... closer...

Zarien threw himself into the exit pipe just as a mechanical arm of the robot grabbed his angle. Zarien gave a yell and jerked back, grabbing the corsha knife. Slicing through the robot's arm, Zarien threw himself further back into the tunnel when he heard a muffled sound behind him. And then a cosmic wave smashed into him.

Part IV: The Remembrance Ceremony

Date: Amanela 1st, 114 A.U.

Jroldin fidgeted in his seat in the great “outside” auditorium. The outside part was a big joke to him. Less than half a percent in this crowd of around one hundred thousand people could have ever seen the real outside. It was great in size though... Jroldin would give it that. Anything to support a population of around half the size of the whole city was large enough to be called great.

Jroldin wished he didn’t have to attend the Remembrance ceremony. He had been to it every year all sixteen years of his life. But his dad had said that he had to lest the media think anything bad about him. For once, Jroldin wished that his dad wasn’t such a big figure, being the head of the Resistance Bureau of Investigation and all.. then he might be able to skip this event, but no... The Remembrance ceremony could at least have something different each year so that they didn’t just do the same thing over and over again...

Well... The crowning point of the ceremony, the Rememberance Session, had to be the same. All the dances and presentations before and such were different, but they were all so boring! Jroldin had just had to sit through two hours of watching all of it. Some lame form of entertainment. Jroldin would much rather have gone to the arcade for his version of true entertainment. And now they had been waiting a half hour for the Remembrance Session to begin so that the whole stupid thing could be over.

There was a mass cheering throughout the crowd as Astrid, governor of Araelia, walked onto the stage, her face nearly grotesquely enlarged over the movie screens designed to help those who weren’t as fortunate to be in the first couple hundred roles. Jroldin leaned his head back to see the screen. Seeing what Astrid would look like enlarged like this would be amusing at the least.

“Welcome fellowcitizens of Araelia and fellowmembers of the Resistance!” Astrid said. “According to my statistics we now have 96,600 citizens of Araelia here and 5,100 dwarves from the various cities of the Resistance!” Jroldin watched her enlarged wrinkles move as her mouth opened wide to speak, giving a clear look into her mouth. Her face looked large and plastic on the screen. You could really see how old Astrid was on the screen. Jroldin wasn’t too sure about how old she was. It was one of those things he was supposed to know but he didn’t. Jroldin was guessing 147, but he wasn’t exactly sure.

“Today is the 114th anniversary of the Great Upheaval, when the elves turned against us and rose up into the skies,” Astrid said. “Today is also the 96th year that we have performed the Remembrance Ceremony, to remind those born after the Great Upheaval, what we have lost.” The video cameras zoomed out from Astrid to catch the big screen behind her. Jroldin was a bit saddened, as now he couldn’t stare intently on her enlarged plastic phase and looked again toward Astrid. The curtains were pulling back to reveal the screen where they’d show the documentaries during Astrid’s speech about what happened long, long ago.

“One hundred and twenty eight years ago,” Astrid said. “The Kingdom of the Sla’ad, under the leadership of Falknor, declared open hostilities upon the human kingdom of Farlund, seeking to claim more territory on themselves.” The screen behind her saw Sla’ad, armed, running out to battle. The Sla’ad looked like ghostly shadows on the screen.

“For a while it was just Falknor and the Sla’ad fighting it out,” Astrid said. “Until the bloody and horrible day of Fralium came.” A sad music came out upon the loud speakers and the screen showed a city, razed to the ground, rubble all around. “The Sla’ad made a surprise attack on the thriving city of Fralium, and using powerful bombs and their military force, completely razed the city to the ground, killing all but for a few of the previous inhabitants of the city. The human kingdom of Farlund soon after collapsed.” A low drum beat began to play through the loudspeakers. “And thus, following the horrible tragedy, the races of the world combined to fight against this pressing darkness. Screenshots showed of each of the six races of Arqunia, the dwarves, the humans, the elves, the orcs, the goblins, and the Sla’ad. “And, following Xavier’s Prophecy, they elected together one member from each race to join together to form the Xavier Team, to smite the Sla’ad and free the world from the upcoming evil. I was selected to join the team for the human representative, and also... Jaigran.” A slide flashed on the screen of Jaigran’s face, his eyebrows narrowed and his face hardened, staring down as firelight lit up his face.

“Our team did well at first,” Astrid said. “Believing ourselves to be the team that was prophesied by Xavier we did well, leading the armies to battle, handling espionage and sabotage missions, and ultimately breaking down their defenses.” A slide showed of five people from each of the different races excepting the Sla’ad, running through a corridor, weapons ready for a battle. Astrid looked a lot younger.

“Finally, having with the help of all the nations crushed the Sla’ad, we held up almost all of the remaining Sla’ad in the world in the Fortress of Varasheet. Their leaders killed and most all of their defenses gone, the Sla’ad begged for mercy.” A slide showed of a fortress, the slide entitled the Fortress of Varasheet. The fortress was mostly underground, only parts of it sticking out.

“The Council granted them mercy upon the condition they went to the far North, never to return,” Astrid said. “But then, the disaster struck.” Scenes showed of a wall being blown up, armed forces running through, and Sla’ad fleeing. “It soon became obvious that the Council had lied to the Sla’ad, and, under the leadership of Jaigran, who operated this apart from the team, slaughtered all the Sla’ad that were in Varasheet.” A slow drumbeat could be heard across the sound system. “The team had done its work, but all was not well. Jaigran, fueled with ambition, rose up in the eyes of the Council and soon became the head of all the armies of the elves. The now General Jaigran, in 7 B.U. then went to the Council to seek to be made a member of the Council in replacement of the recently retired Council member.” Footage showed on the screen behind Astrid of Jaigran, entering into the room and talking with the Council members, although

now sound was heard. “At that time, the different races and nations were governed by a Council made up of three different members that oversaw world affairs. The position went to me rather than Jaigran,” Astrid said. “And this act infuriated Jaigran. He claimed that he had been the best choice and vehemently left the Council room. He then left the capital city Erenspeth and went to his own people.” Footage showed of Jaigran leaving the council room, ablaze with anger.

“General Jaigran soon became the spokesman and the voice for the elves, impassioning many of the elves about their ancestral heritage and of their great deeds. He even reached out and called upon the orcs also, seeking to unite the two races into one faction. As the elves and orcs were joined to him, he secretly worked on his greatest plan of all, the Mothership.” The slide showed a rotating view of the Mothership, a mammoth white air ship. “Five miles long and two miles wide, the making of the ship was a feat in and of itself, much more the fact that it was constructed in only seven years and that it was able to be kept secret from the outside world.”

“Finally,” Astrid said. “General Jaigran came once more to the Council. Coming to us, he demanded that the Council should be governed by one ruler over them, and that that member should be him.” Footage showed of the scene. “Of course, we denied him the power. Angry, he threatened us, and told us that we would regret this day for the rest of our lives if we did not relent. And of course, we refused to give in. And then he unleashed his final plan.” Footage showed of him yelling, and of armed elves bursting into the room. “Having previously overwhelmed the guards, the attack party took us by surprise and held us hostage. Blowing up the wall, a small aircraft came down to carry us off.” Footage continued to be shown of the scene. “And, taking us away, he drove it into the elves’ borders and to the site of their colossal feat, the Mothership.” Footage again showed of the ship.

“Taking us on board, the Mothership took to flight, and, with the elves slew of air vehicles that they had created, unleashed a devastating attack on the capital city, Erenspeth. Erenspeth defenses were outclassed and outmatched and, bombed, the city fell, being utterly devastated and razed to the ground.” Images showed of the smoking remains of the once glorious city.

“Having destroyed Erenspeth, the elves then made a massive and quick assault against all the other nations, with the orcs on their side. With the Mothership on their side, the elves were able to destroy all opposing aircraft and made it clear to all who the masters of the skies were. It soon became apparent that it was no longer safe to stay above ground. But by then, it was too late.” Images showed in rapid succession of the different major cities under attack from the air.

“The dwarves managed to escape much of the destruction in their underground cities, but the other races were not so fortunate,” Astrid said. “As we all know, all humans were either destroyed or enslaved to the elves except for those who escaped to the underground tunnels. The goblins likewise were scattered, and no one knows what has become of them. We still believe

some to be alive, but if they are, they would be like the Sla'ad, having been devastated and forgotten." A graphic showed of the map of the world, slowly being overcome by red.

"Having destroyed all opposition, the elves and orcs then took to the sky, finishing the Great Upheaval," Astrid said. "They soon began to create flying cities and soon it became apparent to all that the elves' abode was in the skies, just like all the poems and prophecies said. Proclaiming himself emperor, and the elves as the master race, Jaigran thus became the ruler of all Arquenian." An image showed of the official image of Emperor Jaigran that was perpetuated.

"Except for us," Astrid said, almost in a whisper. "The ruler of all except for those who have joined the Resistance, the group of dwarves and humans who still seek to win out against Emperor Jaigran and the elves! Today I am now proud to announce that Araelia, the only free human city in the whole world, has now hit the mark of having 200,000 inhabitants!" Cheering erupted throughout the stadium.

Jroldin suddenly shook his head. How did... How had he become so captivated by the presentation? He'd seen it every year and it was so boring and yet... Jroldin scratched his head.

Astrid waited until the cheering to die down. "And now, as my last words before the Remembrance ceremony ends," Astrid said. "I would like to recite the words of Xavier's prophecy. Although my team believed ourselves to be the team, it has become obvious that a greater threat than the Sla'ad has come." Astrid closed her eyes as curtains moved across the slide. And then she spoke.

"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!”

Jroldin leaned closer to hear the words better in time for when Xavier messed up. All the lines had a clear beat and rhythm except for one, about which there was a slew of debate about. Jroldin’s personal opinion was that Xavier was no true prophet, just a rambling old man, and that here he had showed his fallibility in messing up his poem.

“A human named Astrid and an elf with ambition.

A Sla’ad will lead the group

An orc will help the elf and goblin will show great expertise.

A dwarf who will not believe in my prophesy today.

The seven will be unified in purpose and in mind

But yet a hope secures!

But yet a hope secures!

Jroldin smirked. Another place where Xavier had messed up. He had counted seven members when there had only been six. Jroldin was sure that there was a lot of attempts by scholars to try to make up for that fact. Weak attempts to try to explain an obviously failed prophesy.

“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!”

Silence fell upon the group as Astrid finished reciting the prophesy. Jroldin yawned. Finally. The Remembrance Ceremony was over and now he would finally be able to leave and wouldn't have to return for at least a year... hopefully more than that.

But Astrid wasn't finished. "Thus the words of Xavier's prophesy," she said. She fell silent for a couple moments before speaking. "It has now been one hundred and fourteen years since the Great Upheaval and four hundred and eighty nine days since Xavier first recited the prophesy." Jroldin's ears perked up. This was new. And it was an unwritten rule of the Remembrance Session that everything had to be exactly the same year after year.

"The elves have been authority for so long, and we have no powers to stop them," Astrid said, her voice ringing out over the auditorium. The curtains behind her rolled back to reveal footage of the Mothership, of the floating cities, of the elves airship fleet, and upon elves in military attire. "They have taken the skies and now rule them with an iron fist! It has become clear to all that no earthly weapons can stop them!" Jroldin cocked his head. It was clear to all? Maybe most humans who still trusted in prophesy and the Old Weapons, but definitely not for most all the dwarves.

"But we have no need to fight with earthly weapons alone!" Astrid called out. "Not when we have Xavier's prophesy on our side! The time past should suffice us to have stayed hidden and to do nothing! The time has now come for us to take action! The time has come for us to call into affect a new team, one appointed by Xavier's prophesy, to go and take back that which has been lost to us by the elves!"

"This day I pledge unto you that we shall not remain in hiding waiting for the elves to exterminate us! Our hope for victory against the elves is found in the words of Xavier's prophesy! We will not rest, we will not truly rest, until we will find the candidate for Xavier's prophesy to go back and win back that which the elves have so unjustly taken from us! And that team, armed with the prophesy, shall give this land a new birth of freedom, that peace may rule the land and that we shall not be in hiding anymore! The change and the resurrection movement starts now, for freedom, and by Xavier's prophesy!"

And the crowd erupted in mad jubilation.

Part V: Operation Capture

Date: Amanela 1st, 114 A.U.

High above the thick canopy trees of the Great Forest, five elven airships quickly moved across the sky with precious cargo, a rare Sla'ad. Commander Elnyan, the man given the duty of bringing this Sla'ad to the Mothership, glanced at the detection screen once more, even though he had already glanced on it innumerable times on the trip. The detection screen showed how many intelligent living beings were within a three hundred mile radius of the airship. Even though every other time he had checked there hadn't been any, although there had been an occasionally one far off away, Elnyan was still paranoid. If he messed up on this delivery, there would be consequences. And Elnyan didn't want to think about what those consequences would be.

Flek gritted his teeth as the airship continued to accelerate, flying up past the canopied trees of the Great Forest and up into the air. Flek could see the airship afar off. He slowly moved his hand to his watch-like contraption on his wrist, painstakingly annoying the pressure that was put on his hand to fly back against the seat because of the rapid acceleration of the vehicle. Flek put his hand over the contraption and waited, as the airship quickly drew closer to the five elven ships and he slowly mouthed out the words. Three. Two. One.

Flek pushed a button on his watch. Two seconds later, from a place well beyond where the elven ships were, Flek managed to spot four air missiles soaring out, flying toward the four airships guarding the central one. Flek again mouthed out words. One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Six. Sev-

The missiles hit their targets dead on, sending an explosion of fire and metal shrapnel flying through the air, the explosion hiding the center ship from view. Flek could feel his airship begin to slow down as it began to near the last elven ship standing. Flek noticed the elven airship accelerate as it flew past the fiery remains of the other ships. Flek sighed and turned away and began to tap his fingers, impatiently waiting for the signal.

"Constant velocity now reached," a mechanical voice said. Flek quickly unbuckled his seat belts, along with all the others.

"All right!" Flek said. "Get out your boarding gear and prepare to make landing!" Flek quickly buckled on his landing gear, a backpack with a tube coming out of it that was connected to a large gun-like contraption. After fastening it, Flek moved to the back of the airship, his other comrades following him. A large hole soon opened in the floor, revealing the elven ship beneath them.

“Get in the lineup!” Flek said, and the goblins began to lineup behind him. Flek watched as the elven ship changed its velocity several times, trying to shake off the goblin ship. Flek waited for a good moment, and then fired the trigger on his backpack-gun contraption.

A rope flew out from the gun, a suction cup at the end of it, flying down until it attached itself on the ship. As soon as it attached, the rope went taut. Flek went flying down toward the airship, and pushed another button on the backpack. A parachute blossomed out of it, helping to slow his fall. But still the airship loomed closer. With a jolt, Flek hit the airship, and fell forward onto his face, the impact jarring his bones. Flek shook his head, got up, and raised his arm, making the sign for the next goblin to come down.

The goblin came down, and then another, and another. Flek wasn't sure how many they'd be able to get down on the airship before the elves realized what was happening and would try more drastic moves. Finally, on the eighth member coming down, the elven airship took a quick plunge downwards. Flek staggered backwards, holding onto the taut rope for support. The eighth member flew wildly around the air as he was pulled closer to the ship. The airship continued to plunge down toward the trees and Flek felt a chill grow in his heart. *What if the elves are going to go kamikaze to keep us from getting the Sla'ad?*

Suddenly, the airship rocketed upward and Flek breathed out. They were safe. Well, all except for the hapless eighth goblin. The eighth goblin, Kailen, the general pessimistic one of the group gave a scream as he continued to fly downward and went on to smash against the trees. Flek heard a sickening crunch. The rope continued to wind up, pulling Kailen's smashed body onto the top of the aircraft. Flek shuddered.

Flek held down another button on his watch. “All right, Cornun,” he said. “Seven of us have safely landed. Kailen got smashed against the trees, so he isn't with us anymore. The elves know what's up right now, so no use sending any more men down to get smashed against the trees. We'll finish this out from here. Over.”

“Received your message,” Cornun's voice said. “We await further instructions. May the Mother Tree be with you. Over.”

Flek shut off communication and looked at the other men, swiftly nodding. “All right!” he said. “Let's get moving! We have to get in here, get the Sla'ad, and get the heck out of here as soon as possible. Can't waste time trying to kill all the enemies in here. Reklen! Get the explosion going!”

Reklen, an unusually small goblin, moved out away from the group, going against the rope that attached him to the airship, and then put a metal plate on the top of the airship. The metal plate snapped to the top, and Reklen ran back to them. As soon as he was back, he pressed a button on a small device he held. An explosion shook the ship back and forth as the explosion opened up a hole in the ceiling.

Flek waited for the place to cool down a bit before speaking. “Ok!” Flek said. Unbuckle your backpacks and let’s move down there!” Unstrapping his backpack, Flek ran lightly across the roof and dropped down into the hole, landing in a corridor.

And with two groups of guards running toward him from the two opposite ends of the corridor, fully armed, and ready for battle.

Part VI: Truth or Mere Politics?

Date: Amanela 2nd, 114 A.U.

“Well, Justin, I must say that regardless of whether or not the speech was merely for political purposes, or whether she truly meant everything she said, that was really a great speech,” the newscaster said.

“Well, I can’t disagree with you there, Reagan!” Justin said. “Either way we look at it, that *was* a very motivational and moving speech; very nicely planned there by Governor Astrid. Although, as we have been hinting at, there has been some controversy about whether or not the Governor actually meant everything she said, or if she was merely using here platform as the leader of the Remembrance Session as a façade for her campaign purposes.”

“And that’s something that a lot of members from Iraina’s political team has really called foul on,” Reagan said. “Although we have yet to get an official response from Iraina himself, a lot of prominent members in his campaign team have really denounced Astrid for unjustly using her position to try to sway votes to her cause.”

“And really,” Justin said, “Iraina’s campaign team needs everything that they can get to pull ahead. Recent polls show Astrid still at a 30% lead in the polls, which, although it is great, really, I think it’s pretty impressive for someone running against Astrid to get.”

“Which brings us to our next talking point,” Reagan said. “Has Astrid weakened over the years? Just ten years ago, we all would have thought it impossible for someone to actually have a slight bit of a fighting chance against Astrid. After really saving many from the elvish destruction, she’s had the Governorship of Araelia for 112 years now. But now, we actually have someone opposing Astrid, and doing a pretty darn good job at that. Let’s look at what Reed, the lead spokesman for Iraina, has to say about this.”

A video popped up on the television screen of Reed, a dark-colored man who was standing behind a podium. “Well, we also saw it,” Reed said. “Quite a big speech coming from Governor Astrid. But what I want to ask you is, does she really mean it? As we all know, throughout her last 28 terms of being governor, she has stuck to a very non-militaristic very passive view to how we should interact with the elves. And now, all of a sudden, once Iraina comes up saying that we should actively fight against the elves, *now* she says that we should fight against them? I don’t know what you think, but I think that this is mere political talk, campaign promises, aimed at to do nothing else but to try and win this political campaign instead of actually thinking about what is best for Araelia. Furthermore-“

Astrid turned off the television. She was going to have to get to the hospital soon to perform her duties as a nurse, and she didn’t feel like continuing to listen to all the talk about what Governor Astrid truly meant by her speech. Astrid had managed to get to the

Remembrance Ceremony only an hour late, which although it meant that she had to skip half of the dances and presentations, she had still been able to see half of the dances and presentations and also seen the Remembrance Session, a session of which she was sure would write down its name in history.

Astrid thought that Governor Astrid, her namesake, had been telling the truth when she had added on to the last part of the session. She seemed to sincere to just be doing it all for political garbage. Astrid shook her head. Enough of thinking about politics and true meanings behind words. She was supposed to get to the hospital. And she wasn't going to be late because she was thinking of nonsense.

“Good thing you're here, Astrid,” the secretary said, ruffling through a folder. “A man named Jeffrey Taylor has just arrived here. He was transported here by ambulance because of a heart attack. All of the other doctors are currently employed or still trying to get here, and so as head nurse, I'd like you to go take charge of the situation. He is in emergency room 3”

“Right away, ma'am,” Astrid said and quickly hurried down the corridor to emergency room 3. She hoped that it wasn't so bad that she wouldn't be able to perform the duties by herself. She could probably get promoted pretty well in the system if she was able to pull this one through.

“And here's the computer's report on Mr. Taylor,” the nurse said. “I haven't had time to look at it yet, so...”

“Thank you,” Astrid said, quickly scanning the computer report. She paused, and her head cocked, and she tapped at the figure. This was odd... this didn't seem to look like a normal heart attack would... Although to the more untrained mind it would, Astrid knew for certain that this wasn't usual. The heart attack seemed much too weak to do such damage...

Astrid opened her mouth to speak when suddenly there was a gasping noise. Astrid turned to see Mr. Taylor, on the operating table, jerk up, staring intently at Astrid, and then his eyes went dull and his limp body collapsed to the table. And the heart beat meter let out a high pitched sound of alarm.

Astrid left the room, a bit shaken, and still quite puzzled. It was indeed the eighth death that she had seen in person, but that didn't avoid the chill that flew through her bones. And she still didn't understand the computer report. None of it made sense. The heart attack was much

too weak to have put him in this state of condition, and yet, there he was, dead. It just didn't match up.

Astrid was so intent on the report, that she didn't realize the man walking up to her until she nearly collided into him. She jerked her head up. "Oh, excuse me..." she said. "It was my mist-"

Suddenly, the man grabbed her by the shoulders and shoved her into a broom closet, letting the door close behind them, dim light showing through the cracks of the door.

"Wha-" Astrid asked, fear coursing through her heart.

"You had better not show that report to anyone," the man said. "Unless you think that your life is worthless. Which it is."

Part VII: Unyih Garum

Date: Amanela 2nd, 114 A.U.

“Red alert! Red alert!” The siren went on wailing even though everyone had already heard it over a dozen times. “Western 4th Command Center down! Lack of communication! This is red alert! Red alert!”

Unyih Garum shook his head and gritted his teeth as he flew down the road in the hovering motorcycle-like contraption, modified for its specific use in the Mothership. Coming to the turn, he made a sharp spin of the wheel to the left and cruised into a parking lot before leaping out and walking through an open door to the Western Computer Control Center.

“I want reports *now* of the damage!” Unyih barked out. An impressive size for an orc, Unyih’s had golden skin, a sharp contrast to the normal blues and reds of orcish skin. He had been gifted with the dual-gift of wielding fire and electricity, in contrast to all other elves, who could only wield one type which was decided by their genes at birth. Wielding electricity was the more dominant factor in the genes, but there were a good many who could wield fire. Unyih Garum could do both.

“The Western 4th Command Center has been, according to all reports, sabotaged, zar!” a blue orc said, running up to him. Unyih glanced at the number on his forehead. 997. It was an OK rank for an orc tasked to be on the Mothership.

“What are the reports about who did it?” Unyih barked out.

“We have found some security footage of an elf throwing a bomb into the main computer room, Garum, zar!” Number 997 said. “According to reports, the elf got down through the air tubes. The cycle was changed right after the last check on that system to cycle the robots away, giving the elf time to get down there. Our people are still working on identifying the elf! Much of the framework of the Western 4th Section, as well as all its software, has been undermined, and-”

“Cease report,” Unyih snapped. “Others will deal with framework issues. What task was the 4th Command Center tasked with doing?”

“The Western 4th Command Center was mostly tasked with managing the Western Prison as well as helping with various other, normal tasks, to run the Western 4th Section, zar!” Number 997 said.

Unyih thought about that for a moment before giving orders: “I want your team to reprogram the other systems to temporarily perform the work that the sabotaged Command Center got done as well as their own, and to identify the elf who was the cause for this! I also want you to find out who cycled out the robots. Now get to it!”

“Yes, zar!” Number 997 said, and bowing, turned around and returned to his comrades. Unyih Garum briskly left the room, taking a quick glance at his watch, before getting on the hovering motorcycle and speeding out back onto the road. He put his hand in his pocket to pull out a cell phone, one specifically made for communications within the security force of the Mothership. Unyih seriously doubted that whoever was in charge of this was just trying to do some sabotage work that could be quickly cleaned up. In fact, Unyih had a pretty good idea of the larger scheme that they were trying to pull off.

“Hello!” Unyih said. “I want all teams in the 3rd, 4th, and 5th Western Sections to provide immediate backup to the Western Prison. I want all men stationed at the Western Prison to be on code red alert immediately and to be prepared for a planned jailbreak from the outside!”

“Yes, Garum, zar!”

“Yes, zar!”

“Yes, Garum, zar!” The responses begin flooding back as Unyih put down the cell phone and accelerated on the motorcycle. Whatever rebel group it was, he bet they were going for the prison. And Unyih wanted to make sure that their scheme didn’t get any farther than the sabotaging of the 4th Western Command Center.

Unyih Garum arrived at the intersection of one of the halls leading to the main center of the Western Prison to find it a scene of chaos. A quick overview of the situation told him that most of the Mothership forces were in the halls outside, trying to get into the main center of the Western Prison, barricaded presumably by the rebels. The Mothership forces were hiding around the corner, popping out only briefly to shoot and try to hit someone, before popping back. Unyih watched the exchange of fire going on for a couple moments before gritting his teeth.

“You’re getting nowhere by this!” Unyih roared. “We need to take them down, now!” Stepping out from behind the corner, Unyih gazed down the hallway at the makeshift barricade and at the guns pointed out of it. Unyih let out a roar of rage and stretched out his hand before the rebels could do anything. A stream of lightning mixed with fire shot out of it, hitting the center of the barricade.

With a huge explosion, the barricade was up in flames, screams emitting from behind it. Unyih quickly walked forward, eyes alert, as he drew near. Bullets began to randomly fly through the screen of smoke and fire, none of them hitting him.

Unyih sent a wave of crackling electricity through the smoke screen and satisfactorily heard screams of pain as he hit his target. “Follow me!” Unyih snapped to the cowering elves behind him, who grudgingly replied.

Stepping up to the barrier, Unyihl stretched out his hand and let the fire wrap around his hand. Then Unyihl made a motion with the hand and all the fire snuffed out, the smoke beginning to clear. Unyihl bent down and picked up the charred table that had made a barricade, an impressive feat for an orc, as all orcs were physically extremely weak, and tossed it to the side, to reveal a shocked group of elves who were trying to herd escaped convicts through a door.

Unyihl gave a roar and shot out another wave of crackling lightning, picking out his targets. The lightning struck each of them, lifting them up into the air. Unyihl curled his fingers into a fist and the victims suddenly grasped at their throats. A tighter fist and all muscles in their body went tense. The elves behind Unyihl ran out from behind him, shooting down other rebels. Suddenly, Unyihl released his fist and extended his arm, sending all his victims flying against the wall with sickening crunches.

Already the rebels, mostly elves, were fleeing the room. A couple tried to shoot at Unyihl. Unyihl mindlessly sent out electric pulses, making the bullets bounce off from its original course. Another wave of electricity, and the hapless shooters were caught in Unyihl's power. Unyihl curled his hand into a fist. And at that same moment, the computers kicked on again, and the doors of the hall that led to the jail cells slid shut.

Part VIII: Jroldin

Date: Amanela 2nd, 114 A.U.

Jroldin slowly walked downstairs to the kitchen, wondering what they had for breakfast. They had been running out of food lately, and it always took a while for his dad to remember to get to the store. And as for Jroldin's mom, Jroldin wasn't completely sure what happened to her. The only thing that he knew was that she was gone, and that he had only vague impressions of her. Dad didn't like to talk about it much.

Jroldin managed to find some slices of bread hiding in the drawer that had all the pots and pans. His dad usually liked to try to hide food there to make sure that he had something to eat and hadn't yet found out that Jroldin had discovered it. Jroldin took two of the four slices and put them in the toaster before sitting down at the table, waiting for them to be done.

Leaning back in his chair, Jroldin took down the calendar and threw it away. It was a new year. Jroldin wasn't sure that they had a new calendar for the year 114, and, after fruitlessly looking until the toast popped, Jroldin gave up and sat down again to eat his toast.

Glancing at his watch, which had the date on it, Jroldin started mentally counting the days to his seventeenth birthday and Naming Day. It was a dwarvish tradition never to name the child until his seventeenth birthday. Until then, the child just took his father's or mother's name and added the abbreviation for Junior, Jr, somewhere within his name. Sometimes their name could be kind of awkward, like with Jroldin's friend Mjrark. And sometimes the name was near unpronounceable and so they'd just pick some nickname for them. Jroldin never completely understood this specific dwarvish tradition.

Jroldin wasn't exactly sure what his dad was planning for naming day. Naming day was traditionally the day that the new dwarf adult moved out of the house and got a job and such, but his dad hadn't talked about it at all, or if Jroldin would be able to choose his own name, as the tradition had developed at this time, or if he was going to go back to the old tradition of him just choosing his name. In fact, his dad hadn't talked about Naming Day at all. Jroldin wondered if it was intentional.

Finishing his toast, Jroldin put his plate with the stack of plates in the sink and walked toward the counter, where he saw a note. He briefly scanned the note. Nothing interesting, just dad saying that he'd be later than usual, just as he'd been the last couple weeks. It figures. His dad was trying to work on some uber-secretive case, as always, and tended to be late.

Jroldin sat down on a couch and wondered what to do. Upon the ending of the last year, he was now in the awkward situation where he was done all of his schooling, but didn't really have much to do since no one hired anyone younger than seventeen. At least in the dwarf section of Araelia. Jroldin pondered trying to get a job in the greater, human, section of Araelia.

It wasn't a regular occurrence for a dwarf. Jroldin shrugged; it wouldn't be that long for naming day; I mean, he wasn't one of those dwarves who had their naming day toward the end of the year and had a whole year free, so Jroldin didn't worry about that.

Picking up the phone, Jroldin decided to call Mjrark to see what he was planning on doing today. Dialing his number, Jroldin waited for the phone to ring a couple times, before he remembered that it was kind of early in the morning, and Mjrark's family generally slept in late. Just as he heard an angry voice say hello on the other end, Jroldin put the phone back on the receiver. He hoped that Mjrark's family didn't have caller ID.

At 11:03 sharp, three pairs of eyes watched Jroldin as he left the house to go to a meeting with his friends. Sitting in a parked car, the three men watched as Jroldin got into a hovercar and drove off.

"Follow him," one of the men said, and the car soon revved up, and moved out into the street, tailing Jroldin.

"According to what he said to his friends on the phone, he's going to the Marclay Arcade," one of the other men said. "So we don't have to follow him directly there. Just take another route."

"Do you have the bug to plant on him?" another asked.

"Yeah," one of them replied. "I've got it. It'll be an easy job. Just go in, make a distraction, get the bug on him, and get out of there. We've done tougher things before."

"Just so long as it works out fine," he said. "Boss'll be mad if we mess up this job."

Jroldin swaggered into the Marclay Arcade, looking around for his friends. Spotting them, he jogged over to where they were in a group, trying to decide about what to do.

"They got some new shootin' games over to the left," Mjrark was saying. "Or we can continue our adventure at the Five4Fighting zone to the right."

"New is good," Jroldin said. "I say let's try something new. Five4Fighting is gettin' old." As they continued to discuss what to do, Jroldin didn't notice the man coming behind him. Too absorbed in his conversation, he didn't notice the small antenna carefully placed in his hair. He did notice a man running away from the arcade, but he didn't think much about it.

Perhaps he should have.

Part IX: The Assault

Date: Amanela 1st, 114 A.U.

Commander Elnyan held his head in his hands in sheer panic. The ship was being attacked—and the radars didn't even sense all the new intelligent beings, even though it was obvious they were here! In desperation he grabbed a phone and quickly dialed the number.

“Hello? HQ!” he said. “This is Commander Elnyan with the captured Sla'ad! We've got huge trouble here—huge! The radars aren't working so a group of goblins are assaulting the ship and have almost broken in! They blew up the guardships with missiles! YES! The radars aren't registering anything! ...” An explosion shook the ship. “Look! That's them getting into the ship now! The radar must be broken or something! I'll try to get us out of this, but I don't know... yes... yes sir!” Elnyan slammed down the phone in indignation. His fault. The radars malfunctioning was his fault. Elnyan gritted his teeth. He *would* get this ship back to the Mothership in one piece... or else.

Glancing at the guards coming up behind him, Flek leapt into the air, grabbing his two arjla corsha swords from the twin sheaths strapped onto his back. The arjla swords were a work of goblin mastery. Unlike most swords, these swords had two half-spherical metal parts that attached to the handle of the sword. Flek pushed a button on the handle and the two half-spheres snapped shut to form a sphere with a hole on the one end for Flek's arm. Inside the sphere and along the scabbard there were various buttons and sliders for Flek's hand to move. By pushing different buttons and sliding different sliders, Flek was able to make the blade rotate, as well as come down at an angle so that the blade made a 90 degree angle with the handle. A true work of mastery, arjla swords were hard to make and expensive to buy, especially when they had the burning corsha metal for their blades. They were also extremely difficult to use. But, when used well, arjla swords were a terror on the battle field.

Landing on the ground, Flek ran forward, slicing the air with his swords. The elves began to fire their guns. Flek watched the bullets speed toward him. Flek flicked the swords and sliced the bullets speeding toward him in half. The mysterious properties of corsha allowed it to in some way enhance one's reflexes and reaction time so that corsha weapons could actually be used to block bullets.

Blocking all the bullets, Flek made one last leap to reach the started elves and attacked them. The corsha blades swung through the air, hitting their targets. From the corner of his eye, Flek saw other goblins leaping down to help. In short matter of time, the battle was all over, with no casualties.

“All right!” Flek said, pinning the last elf to the wall. “Here’s the deal. Either you tell us where to find the Sla’ad, or I’ll kill you. Let’s be quick now; I don’t want to waste time.”

“Th-the Sla’ad?” the elf asked. “Go to the left... take the second hall way to the right and he’s in a cell there! Please don’t kill me!”

“Thanks for the information,” Flek said. “Can’t have you fighting against us, though, so I’m afraid...”

“No!” the elf shrieked, but it was all too late.

Reynyagn had been asleep in the pitch-black cell when the explosion woke him up. His eyes flickered open and he slowly stood up. The elves had been stupid enough to put him in a darkened cell, a perfect cell, if one were possible, for a Sla’ad. Reynyagn slowly walked over to the door and waited. Something was up. He knew it. And whatever happened, he’d be ready for it.

Folding his hands, Reynyagn walked back and sat down in a darkened corner against the wall, waiting to see if something would happen. He had waited five minutes before he heard noises outside the door and immediately stood up. Reynyagn silently ran over to the door, his feet not even touching the ground, but instead only hovering an inch above the floor when he stepped.

A brilliant light cut through the door and Reynyagn tensed. A corsha sword; one thing he knew already: the intruders weren’t elves or orcs. None of them would dare stoop to using an Old Weapon. Unfortunately, that also meant that the invaders had in hand the one weapon that could kill a Sla’ad. With a creak, the door swung open. Reynyagn moved behind the door and watched as the intruders entered. Two goblins entered the room, looking around. One held two arjla corsha swords, the other was small and held two corsha daggers. Reynyagn gauged his opposition before making his move.

“That lying elf-” the tall one began. Suddenly, Reynyagn materialized out of the shadows. The tall one gave a small cry of surprise before Reynyagn grabbed him in a headlock and drew him back into the darkness.

“No wrong moves or I snap his neck,” Reynyagn said. “Tell me what you want. Now.”

“We’re here to rescue you!” Reynyagn’s captive said, no fear expressed in his voice. “Come now; release me. Snap my neck and the rest of my crew will be more than happy to kill you.” He gestured to the rest of their force outside the door. “Come now; what would be the purpose of coming in here if not to rescue you? To capture you for ourselves? We’ve got bigger enemies than the random Sla’ad.”

“Fair enough,” Reynyagn said, releasing the goblin.

“Name’s Flek,” Flek said. “Now that we’ve got you, let’s get out of here. Our airships following overhead!”

Flek ran toward the door, Reynyagn following. “Why leave the ship, though?” Reynyagn said. “The guard force stationed on this ship is pitiful. As long as you disabled the guardship, why not take this ship? I can steer it, and think about how valuable an elven ship could be in our hands?”

Flek stopped running for a moment, paused, and cocked his head, before grinning. “Let’s do it,” he said.

Part X: Ignoring a Threat

Date: Amanela 2nd, 114 A.U.

Astrid swallowed hard, gazing at the gun that she saw in the man's heart. "What do you want?" she whispered.

"I believe I've already told you that," the man said. "I want you to give me the report and give the doctor this one." He handed out some sheets of paper.

Astrid hesitantly exchanged reports. "Why are you doing this?"

The man's face hardened. "That's none of your business. Just do as I tell you and no harm will come to you. And don't tell anyone that I spoke to you. Just remember. We have men watching you." Astrid bit her lip. "You got it?"

"Yes," Astrid managed to squeak out.

"Good," the man said. "Now get out of here and act like nothing happened. You're a good girl. Just continue on your job, don't meddle where you shouldn't be meddling, and everything will be fine."

Astrid slammed the car door shut and drove off. That had been a nerve-wracking day, but she had gotten through it. Except it wasn't finished yet. Astrid checked the rearview mirror to make sure that she wasn't being followed. She didn't believe the man that he'd send men after her. He was lying. If he had enough accomplices to follow her and she was important enough to be followed everywhere...

She wasn't. Astrid was sure of it; she was a rational being. And so she was going to only logical place to go with a crisis such as this. The Resistance Bureau of Investigation. And she had a copy of the real report. Because the man who held her up forgot one thing. The report had still been on the computer.

"What? Who's here to see me?" Oldin asked, not looking up from the reports on the computer.

"It's some woman who says that she has to talk with someone," the man said. "She said something about Marlin's death, so I thought it important enough to tell you."

Oldin sighed. "Very well... if it has to do with Marlin's death, send her on in."

The man left and after a couple minutes a flustered woman entered the room. Oldin spun around in his chair. “Yes?” he asked.

“My name’s Astrid Harlung,” the woman said. “I work at the Westvale Hospital and was trying to save Marlin Taylor before he died. The man said that he was important.”

“Yes, yes,” Oldin said, a bit bored.. “But go on. Did one of our men call for you, or why are you here?”

“I’m here because I was threatened by some man concerning the circumstances of Marlin’s death,” Astrid said bluntly. Oldin sat up in his chair. “The report concerning his death was... well... a bit strange. His heart attack was, to say the least, way too weak to have caused his death. Things just weren’t working out. While I was going to hand off the report to a higher-up doctor, though, a man pulled me into a closet and threatened me.

“He said that I had to exchange the real report for a fake one that made the heart attack seem much more fatal. He said that he’d have men following me, but I’m not important enough for him to actually follow me, so I ignored his warning. I have the real report and a photocopy of the fake report here.” Saying so, she put them down on a table.

Oldin’s eyes widened and he pulled the two reports toward him before looking up. “Well, at the very least, as shown by the reports, you’re clever enough to actually be able to help us with this,” Oldin said. “You aren’t stupid.” He gazed at the reports before brushing them aside. “I’ll have to get some other expert look at these.” He leaned back in his chair. “On the other hand, you might be more important than you once thought.”

Astrid bit her lip. “What do you mean?”

“I mean,” Oldin said, ruffling through some papers. “That Marlin wasn’t just an average guy. He was one of our spies and had some big stuff about a case that we’re working on. He was going to get them to us. And then he died.” He tapped his fingers against the arms of his chair. “And from your report, I believe that he didn’t just die. It seems like someone found him... And killed him.”

“So... what does that mean for me?” Astrid asked, a bit worried.

“It means that there’s a chance of you being followed,” Oldin said, leaning forward in his chair. “You might be more important than you think. However, there’s no reason to get paranoied. I still think the chance is slim, though there is a chance. Now here’s my advice. Chances are they might try to make you think you’re followed—make sure that you spot some people watching you, and such stuff, just to make sure that you think you’re followed. Also, get some weapon, pepper spray, or a gun or something. Take this also.” He handed her a watch. “It’s not a normal watch. You can open the top and push a button. Doing so will alert us of danger. Marlin had figured out big stuff, and I mean big. If you’re in danger, we don’t want you

dying, as you could be a very useful witness. Now, do you remember anything of your assailant?"

"Um..." Astrid said. "Not really... He had a long coat on and I think I remember seeing a mustache... But I don't remember getting a good look at him before he drew me into the darkness of the closet... so no..."

"Too bad," Oldin said. "Listen, just in case you are followed—you probably weren't—but if you are... I'll have one of my men drive your car out back. I'll lead you to the back door and then drive off. Come back if you have any info. Oh, and... It probably isn't necessary, but just in case... watch your back."

Part XI: Aftermath

Date: Amanela 3rd, 114 A.U.

Zarien slowly blinked and gradually came to the realization that he was not completely dead. But Zarien just lay there and closed his eyes, unmoving, letting the waves of air from some air conditioner wash over him. He tried to remember what exactly happened, but he couldn't exactly remember much, except for the wave of pain that crashed into him.

And suddenly Zarien opened wide his eyes.

A cold fear wrenched his heart and Zarien realized what had happened. He knew that he didn't have to look. He already knew the truth. But he looked anyways.

Zarien slowly lifted up his left leg, or what remained of it. His leg ended at his knee, a bionic leg continuing from there on.

Zarien swallowed hard.

There was a noise, and the door to the room he was in opened and an elf came in. It was Razan. "Zarien, it's good to see that you are awake," Razan said.

"Yeah..." Zarien said, a lump in his throat. "I suppose so." Zarien couldn't help from staring at his left leg.

Razan shifted his weight awkwardly. "So..." he began.

"What happened?" Zarien interrupted, trying to ignore the elephant in the room. "with the attack that is?"

Razan sighed. "It was a disaster," he said. "It was all going fairly well, albeit ignoring you not being able to fully escape in time. We got in the prison, were getting our friends out... but then it struck."

"What struck?" Zarien asked.

"He struck," Razan said. "Just came out of nowhere. Apparently we missed the big news of the week throughout the Mothership: the Garum was displaced."

"There's a new Garum?" Zarien asked, confused. The Garum was the head orc who was in charge of all the orcs in the world."

"Aye," Razan said. "His name's Unyih. A powerhouse he is. He just came in as we were trying to accomplish our mission, and, ignoring the bullets coming at him, absolutely devastated our base. We lost more than half our force, though we were able to save many from

the prison, but we still suffered significant loss. We're still trying to reorganize and tally up the full damages."

"So nothing's going well," Zarien said, clenching his fist.

"At least you're still alive," Razan said, lowering his voice some. "We almost lost you, you know."

"That's great; just great," Zarien snapped. "So how long do I have to be in bed?"

"The doctor suggests a couple days," Razan said quietly.

"How nice," Zarien said. "You can go now."

"I'm sorry," Razan whispered, and with that he left.

"How is he?"

"Physically he's okay," Razan said. "Emotionally he's not. He was pretty upset when I left. Probably isn't too hard to figure out why."

Cortna solemnly nodded. "I suppose it is somewhat to be expected."

"I guess..." Razan said.

"How much did you tell him about what happened?" Cortna asked.

"The most I had to convey the story to him," Razan said. "I just told him that we lost more than half our force, not much else."

"So you didn't tell him there were only eleven of us left," Cortna confirmed.

"Aye," Razan said. "Didn't tell him that. Given the mood he was in, I did not think it wise."

"I don't disagree," Cortna said, pursing her lips. "Probably best to break that news in to him when he has been able to recover some emotionally."

"For our sakes he better do it fast," Razan said, walking down the hall and looked back over his shoulder at Cortna. "Because we need him now, more than ever because of how few of us are remaining. And if he doesn't start shaping up soon... well... things aren't going to get better very quickly."

Zarien sighed as he continued to stare at his left leg. He knew that he shouldn't have gotten so mad at Razan. But he couldn't help it. After all the trouble he went through and losing his left leg, he had hoped to hear good news about how the mission went—not that it was a complete flop and that they had lost more than half of their force. And Zarien was pretty sure that Razan had purposefully left some stuff out.

Pushing aside the covers, Zarien turned ninety degrees and slowly let his legs drop to the floor. He didn't care what the doctor said. He was going to walk. Letting them hit the floor, he painstakingly stood up, trying to figure out how to use his new leg. Zarien breathed hard and slowly took a step. And he collapsed to the floor.

Zarien bit back a yell of anger from emitting out of his mouth as he lay on the floor, helpless, and with pain shooting through his body. It wasn't supposed to be this way! The robots should have been put on a different circuit, the extra guards should have been there, he should have been able to get out in time, and he should still have his whole left leg. They had promised that if he practiced hard enough in the simulator to figure out how to do it that he would come to no harm. Fat promises they were.

Zarien bit his tongue to stop a tear from running down his cheek. He was an elf; he shouldn't be crying like a child. But Zarien couldn't keep the tear from making its course down. He had lost his leg; they had failed their mission. He couldn't walk. He couldn't do anything except lie in bed. It was all lost. Everything was lost. And Zarien couldn't do anything about it.

Part XII: The Sign

Amanela 17th, 114 A.U.

Jroldin suddenly sat up alert, staring into near-pitch darkness. He heard a clock nearby ticking and looked at his watch to see the time. 12:00 exactly: what a coincidence. But then, as his eyes adjusted to the darkness, Joldin realized that it wasn't pitch darkness; there was a faint glow upwards. Jroldin looked up to see it, but the glow still seemed to be toward the top of his head, as if his hair was glowing or something.

Jroldin made his way in the dark to the bathroom, flicked on the light switch and as the light came on, gasped, and leaned on the door to support. Around his head was a circlet of gold with a blue sapphire affixed on the front, providing its light. Surprised, Jroldin tried to take it off, but his hand passed right through it. Jroldin played with it some more before giving up on trying to take it off.

He shook his head, and the immaterial circlet moved around with it. Jroldin frowned. He'd ask his father about it in the morning—if he was there, Jroldin tried to remember what his father had said the night before. Had he said he would or wouldn't be there before he left? Jroldin forgot. Hopefully it was that he would be there.

Jroldin was trying to find some food for breakfast when he heard his father coming down the stairs. Jroldin waited as his dad came into the room. "Hello, Jroldin," his father said, barely glancing up. He started his routine of getting the coffee ready while Jroldin tapped his foot.

"Um, dad?" Jroldin said, after a short while.

"Yes?" his father asked. He glanced up, but paid no attention to the circlet. Jroldin glanced in the reflection of a metal bowl to make sure it was still there.

"Dad!" Jroldin said, a bit exasperated. "Don't you notice it?"

"Notice what?" his father asked, staring straight at him.

"This!" Jroldin said, gesturing to the circlet.

"What about your head?" his father asked. There was no trace of a smile on his face, as if he was joking. "Are you referring to Naming Day?"

"No!" Jroldin said, although he did want to hear his dad's opinion on naming day. "I'm talking about the glowing circlet on my head?"

His father stared straight at him, a look of perplexion on his face. “Your what? Stop pulling my leg, Jroldin!”

“I’m not!” Jroldin said. “I really do have a circlet upon my head!”

Jroldin’s father stared at him. “What... um, Jroldin... There isn’t a circlet on your head.”

“What are you taking about Jroldin?” Mjrark asked. “There ain’t any circlet on your head...”

“Really? No...” Jroldin said. “There really is one!”

“Stop playing around,” Mjrark said. “Are you coming over to the arcade today?”

“No... no, I don’t think so,” Jroldin said. “I’d like to figure out what’s up with this circlet first.”

Only some people gave Jroldin odd stares as he walked down the street. Jroldin was going to the only place that he thought would be helpful: the Great Cathedral. Jroldin’s general opinion was that the people there were crazy mystics who believed in some god of some sort and didn’t have any touch with the real world. But then again, Jroldin’s circlet didn’t seem to touch the real world at all either, so Jroldin was hoping he could get somewhere.

Jroldin slowly pushed open the door and went into the church, feeling a good bit awkward. He hadn’t been here for who knows how long. His dad used to come some since his mom did, but they had gradually stopped going.

The church was quiet and Jroldin didn’t see anyone around. “Hello!” Jroldin said, a bit loudly. It was of his impression that there was usually at least one priest of some sorts in the church.

Jroldin heard some noises from above and waited. Finally, someone pushed open the door from the large sanctuary and came into the vestibule. He was wearing the traditional robes of a priest.

“Hello, young dwarf,” the priest said. “What would you li-” The priest stopped and stared at his head.

“You see it?” Jroldin asked.

“What do you mean?” the priest asked. “Of course I see your circlet with the glowing jewel!”

“You’d be the first,” Jroldin said. “Nearly no one I’ve talked to can see it. And the thingie isn’t material.” Jroldin passed his hand through the circlet.

The priest slowly cocked his head, which seemed to Jroldin to be a strange reaction for one who had just been shown something immaterial and yet real. “Why don’t you join me in my study?” the priest asked. “We’ll be able to better talk there.”

“Would you like anything to drink?” the priest asked. “Water perhaps? Lemonade?”

“No thanks,” Jroldin said, as he watched the priest pour himself a big glass of lemonade.

“Now then!” the priest said, sitting down in a chair. “Back to your circlet. You say that not anyone can see it?”

“No,” Jroldin said, moving a bit in his seat. He felt uncomfortable being interrogated by the priest like this.

“Well...” the priest said. “Interesting... What about on your journey here? Did any passerbys see it?”

“Some gave me odd glances...” Jroldin said.

“Well...” The priest said. “I might have some ideas... of course, it all depends on who it is that can see and can’t see it. Tell, me... um... what’s your name again?”

“Jroldin,” Jroldin said.

“Jroldin then,” the priest said. “Tell me, do you believe in the Great One?”

“No,” Jroldin said. “Not really.”

“Oh...” the priest said, pursing his lips. “Well that gets rid of the option of the Priest-King... So who couldn’t see it?”

“My dad and one of my friends,” said Jroldin.

“Interesting,” the priest said. “How about I call Brother Pietre? He’s more skilled in this area of expertise? You wouldn’t mind waiting...”

“I suppose not,” Jroldin said, waiting until one of the priests tried to shove a belief in the Great One down his throat.

“Then I’ll call him,” the priest said standing up while taking a sip of lemonade. “He should be able to help us with this.”

Part XIII: Freglak

Date: Amanela 1st, 114 A.U.

“Sir! The High Priest here to visit you!” the intercom said.

Freglak cursed and quickly shoved all the notes on Operation Capture in a bookshelf before sitting back down. “Come in!” he said, fidgeting. The doors opened, and the High Priest entered, a sort of high and royal air about him. The High Priest sat down on a seat and looked at Freglak, waiting for a response.

“Welcome, O High Priest!” Freglak said, bowing his head in reverence.

“Greetings, Lord Freglak,” the High Priest said coldly. “What a pleasure it is to see you.”

“The pleasure’s all mine!” Freglak managed to cough out.

The High Priest gazed at a loose thread on his ceremonial gown that he was wearing before looking up. “You watch the Celebration?”

“But of course!” Freglak said. “I watched above and beyond what you asked me, seeing the whole Celebration!”

The High Priest snarled. “The Celebration is still going on, you oaf.”

Freglak whitened. “My utmost apologies sir...” he said. “I *did* go above and beyond what you asked... though perhaps I exaggerated a bit.”

“Perhaps,” the High Priest snapped. “I also noticed the airships that went off from the Capitol in the middle of the ceremony.”

“Were there airships going on?” Freglak asked, nervously looking around. “I had no idea! I can’t be in charge of everything that happens in the Capitol you know.”

“They looked like attack ships,” the High Priest rebutted.

“And you know just as well as I do that we have no attack air ships to speak of!” Freglak said. “Now if you have managed to spot such attack ships, just bring them to me and-”

“You don’t *publicly* have any attack ships,” the High Priest interrupted. “But whether or not you secretly do is a different question altogether.”

“That’s ridiculous!” Freglak said. “Are you trying to say that I sent some attack force in a ship to-”

At that moment, the door burst open and Flek romped into the room followed by the rest of his team and a Sla'ad. "Operation Capture a success!" he said. "We got the elves' airship too and-" Flek's outburst of joy stopped as he noticed the High Priest. Freglak cursed.

The High Priest glowered. "You, sir, are an impeccable liar, and will be duly punished after I speak with the rest of the Council of Priests," he snapped.

"And you ain't have nothing against me!" Freglak said, standing up. "So I had an attack ship go off during the Celebration of the Mother Tree. I'm allowed to do that, as long as I watched the Celebration, which I did."

The High Priest glared at Freglak. "Which we both know that you didn't, even if I have no proof for that," he said. "I'm warning you, Freglak. We will not tolerate such irreverence to the Mother Tree!" And with that, head high, the High Priest exited the room.

Freglak watched him leave. "Shut the door," Freglak said, again cursing. Then he shook his head and readied his composure, smiling, as the door closed. He stood to greet them. "Excellent work team!" he said. "And to whom do I have the honor?" he asked addressing the Sla'ad.

"My name is Reynyagn," the Sla'ad said. "A ruler of my people and the sole survivor of the Massacre of Varasheet."

Freglak slightly blanched at the mention of the massacre. "Well it is a pleasure to meet you, Reynyagn," he said. "I am Freglak, Lord of the goblins." He turned to Flek. "You say you got the air ship?"

"It was all Reynyagn's idea," Flek said. "We took the idea and we now have their ship in the hangar to study and to use."

"Excellent," Freglak said. "You will all be rewarded for your work! You can now go! I have prepared a small feast for you all which the servants will guide you to. Flek, you can stay here with Reynyagn and I." The rest of the goblins exited the chamber and Reynyagn and Flek sat down. Freglak stared with interest on the Sla'ad's dark ghostly body.

"So," Reynyagn said, breaking the silence. "Why did you so choose to attempt to rescue me?"

"It has been always my goal to be able to strike out against the elves," Freglak said. "We saw this as the perfect opportunity to deprive the elves of a captive and to possibly gain ourselves an ally."

"So I see," Reynyagn said, and paused. "You have likely saved me from excruciating torture from the hands of the blood-thirsty elves and for that I thank you." He again paused. "How do you want me to help you?"

“What do you mean?” Freglak asked, taken aback by the question.

“I mean what I mean,” Reynyagn said. “Do you want me to be a soldier for you? Do you want to just allow me to return home? Do you want me to go home to raise an army for you? Do you want me as a strategist? I am not saying that I will do whatever you say, but I wish to know how you seek to use me.”

“I believe that would be for you to answer,” Freglak said. “What are your skills? What are your desires? My goal is for you to help us as best you can in destroying the elves. How do you claim you can best help us with that.”

Reynyagn smiled. “I can sense the tinge of distrust in your voice,” Reynyagn said. “And I find it understandable; you won’t simply let me return to my people because I claim it is the best way to fight against the elves. As a leader, I have a duty to serve and lead my people, but as being rescued, I have a duty to you because you rescued me. Some say that I am a natural-born leader; I will not necessarily say so. Some say I am one of the best strategists who have ever lived; if that it is so, it is only because my companion Falshorn is dead.” He grinned wryly. “Some think that I am too quick to distrust people; I will not deny it.”

“So I see,” Freglak said, trying to gather all the information in.

“How do you believe we could best continue to strike against the elves?” Flek asked.

“You already told me how you have been able to disable their radar’s effects,” Reynyagn said. “I know well the tactics of the elves, having studied them over the past century-”

“You’ve lived for a hundred years?” Flek interrupted.

“I already said I was present at the Massacre of Varasheet, which was well over a century ago,” Reynyagn said. “Sla’ad live long and watch many centuries go by, and some even watch millennium. Although you may not forget it, you goblins too will tend to live to ripe ages of 430 and 450 if you do not kill yourselves before hand with your recklessness.” Flek cracked a smile at this. “However, they who attain that are few and rare among you. Like I said, I have studied the elves over the past century and know their tactics. They will likely send a medium scouting force to try and figure out what has happened here and why their radars haven’t been working. I suggest we formulate a plan to utterly crush that scouting force when it arrives.”

“I like it...” Flek said. “Wait for them to come and then slam them with our forces...”

“Your advice seems sound,” Freglak said. “I offer you a deal, Reynyagn. Serve me and help me for six months, and then you can be free to stay here or to return to your people or whatever you so desire. Is it a deal?”

Reynyagn considered the proposition and slowly nodded. “It is a deal,” he said. “For six months I will aid you against the elves and after that I will be free, free from my duty to you as my rescuer, and will stay here or go to my home or whatever I so desire.”

“It is a deal then,” said Freglak. And they shook hands on it.

Part XIV: Looking Back, Looking Forward

Date: Amanela 16th, 114 A.U.

Bong. Bong. Bong

The bells of the Great Cathedral slowly poured out a slow long peal that moved throughout the Central cavern of Araelia. Astrid closed her eyes, unwilling to see the dead body of her great grandmother anymore.

Bong. Bong. Bong.

Her great-great-great-grandmother had lived to a ripe old age of 187, old enough to have seen the great calamity and collapse that followed the Great Upheaval. She had been a wise mentor to Astrid, and they had been very close. Astrid had confided some with her great-great-great-grandmother about the whole issue with Oldin and Marlin and the man who threatened her and such, and she had just listened; she had already been unable to talk at that point. But it had still helped Astrid to be able to talk about it. And now she had finally died after struggling against the paralysis that had taken over her body.

Bong. Bong. Bong.

Astrid felt a tear slowly run down her cheek but she didn't look up. Most of her family was there, and some of her grandmother's friends that were still alive. A nice small funeral; exactly how things were done at Araelia. At least she would be given a final resting place where she would be in peace, outside of the troubles of this life.

Bong. Bong. Bong.

Astrid shook her head and looked up. The rest of her family were paying their last respects to the body before leaving. Astrid looked at the body as her family members left. She almost wanted to go over, to bid her ancestor one last farewell. But what good would it do? She was dead, and would soon rot in the ground. What point was there in bidding her farewell? She was already gone. Same with burying her. It was just a lifeless body, a corpse of what it once was.

Bong. Bong. Bong.

Astrid stamped her foot; if her brother had known her thoughts he would have accused her of being too pragmatic. Maybe it was her pragmatism that caused her to have such a hard lump in her throat. Biting her lips, Astrid moved to exit the sanctuary of the Great Cathedral.

Bong. Bong. Bong.

“Really, Astrid, I don’t see how you can just view her as a corpse,” her brother, Monty, was saying. “I mean sure, she is that, but her spirit still lives!” They were at the reception after the funeral, and Astrid was once again getting into a long theological debate with her only brother, Monty.

“And I don’t see how you can believe in the Great One,” Astrid said. “I mean, really. If there was some god watching over us and protecting us, why have we received so little knowledge or instruction from him other than rambling prophecies?”

“But you believe in the prophecies!” Monty said, laughing.

Astrid pursed her lips, a bit frustrated. “Only because they’re something to hope in,” she said. “I mean, let’s look at this realistically.”

“Yeah,” Monty said. “I mean, look Astrid. For all you claim on always being realistic, you don’t always act in conformity to what you claim. You love the festivals, the Remembrance Ceremony...”

“Like I said, they’re something good to hope in,” Astrid repeated.

“You know what your problem is?” Monty asked. “It’s that your too stubborn. You claim to be one thing and will be resolute in that, yet you also stay resolute in your practices which don’t conform to what your claim.”

“And your problem is that you don’t take life seriously enough,” Astrid said. “I mean, really, at least if I will temporarily stop taking it seriously, it’s only for a time to try and refresh myself from the truth.”

“Yeah, that’s exactly what I’m talking about,” Monty said. “Your view of life is so cold and hard that you need something to escape to. You act as if we’re in some dark dystopian future.”

“We are!” Astrid protested. “We have been for the past one hundred and fourteen years.”

“But not as much as you claim,” Monty said. “Yes, we have to live here in hiding, but, because we’re a secret, the elves have left us alone. It’s your worldview that prevents you from seeing life for how it really is and that keeps it hard and cold for you. You wouldn’t be able to live if you didn’t escape from it every once and a while.”

“Your point being?” Astrid asked.

“Why believe in such a cold dark worldview when there is something better offered?” Monty asked. “It’s like choosing to sit in a cold dark room when you could go to a warm beach, where you can relax and realize what a great place you’re in.”

“Your warm beach is all a façade,” Astrid responded. “It seems all nice and all, but what does it offer after death? Nothing.”

“Well at least before death it offers a hope that you can trust in, unlike with you,” Monty said.

“No it doesn’t,” Astrid said. “It has all these moral rules and regulations and stuff that you have to follow.”

“But... but Astrid,” Monty said. “You like rules? You hate it when there aren’t any rules and where everything is disorganization and chaos! Remember what happened the last family reunion?”

Astrid thought back to the last family reunion—overall a state of chaos do to a lack of planning and responsibility from certain members, including Monty. Astrid shamefully remembered the night where she really lost her temper about all of it—a scene that she’d try to block out of her memory.

“These moral rules and regulations that even you will like didn’t just come out of nowhere,” Monty said. “They were given to us by one greater than us.”

“Someone who just left us to die in the grim dark future,” Astrid said. “Xavier was the last prophet, and while I live to get lost in his prophesy and hope that it’s true, really... you’re too much of an optimist, Monty.”

“Well at least what I do is consistent with my worldview,” Monty said. “While you openly admit that you contradict your own worldview.”

“I have to,” Astrid quietly said.

“Aye... that you do,” Monty said and paused. “Anyways, are you going to eat your dessert? If not I’d love to take it.”

Astrid nearly choked on her mouthful of water. “We go from a deep discussion to one about food?”

Monty shrugged. “Best to change topics at this point,” he said, putting his fork into Astrid’s dessert. “Anyways, you know me. If you’re not going to eat your dessert fast enough, you’ll have to share with me.”

Part XV: The Survivors

Date: Amanela 6th, 114 A.U.

“They what?!” Zarien’s shriek voice ran throughout the air.

“We’re the only ones left,” Cortna said quietly. “Everyone else... is gone.”

Zarien bit his lip and leaned more on his walking stick for support, trying to keep from growing outraged, as he counted the remaining eight elves and three orcs. “Why. Didn’t. You tell me!” he said, his voice tense.

“We didn’t want you to be more upset,” Razan said, his voice calm. “As it is, we need you. The doctor said you should be in bed for at least a week, but we can’t afford that time; we have to try to regroup and stay alive—and hope that they didn’t capture any of our comrades to try and torture our whereabouts from any of them.”

“So then,” Zarien said. “We’re doomed.”

“Excuse me?” Razan asked.

“We’re doomed,” Zarien said. “There’s only a handful of us left, they know of our existence...” Zarien gritted his teeth. “It might as well be over.”

“No,” Cortna said. “We’re still alive and well. If it needs be we might have to leave the Mothership, but this battle is not over, Zarien. Don’t lose hope.”

Date: Amanela 8th, 114 A.U.

Zarien leapt into the air in the training room, shooting guns at the targets. All was going well. He had made it past the third level of The Arglan, a computer-automated game with levels progressing in difficulty that tested a soldier’s skill. Zarien’s best was to get to level 6. Zarien ran down the virtual corridor, and then his body shrieked with pain as he misstepped with his left leg.

And then he was rolling on the ground in agony, the real mixing with the virtual, pain shooting up his left leg, unable to walk, unable to do anything but feel the pain, the silent pain that crippled his whole body.

Amanela 9th, 114 A.U.

“I fear for Zarien,” Razan softly said as they watched him. He was hooked up to a lot of cords and wires, a metal helmet on his head, as he jumped and leapt and moved, trying to get through The Arglan.

“As do I,” Cortna replied. “He’s been so... so upset and moody since he lost most of his left leg.”

“Aye,” Razan said. “Sometimes when he has his fits I wonder if he’s going to go mad with insanity. The string can be stretched so taut.”

“I pray that the string does not break,” Cortna replied.

Amanela 10th, 114 A.U.

“The only rational explanation for all their searching is that they’re trying to find us,” the orc said. “My hunch is that they’re trying to figure the whereabouts of the computer that revised their system so that they can find us and hunt us down.”

“Trash it,” Zarien said.

“Excuse me?”

“Trash it,” Zarien said. “Whatever computer we used—get rid of it! If we leave it we’re going to have to either leave our hideout for some new one on the ship, or leave the Mothership forever. And with either of the other options, we won’t need it. Shortcircuit it or something—whatever you need to do! We can’t take the risk that they find us.”

“I believe that Zarien speaks the truth,” Razan said. “We can’t take the risk that they find us. And Zarien’s reasoning is well done. If we leave it here we’re going to have to leave—and if we leave...”

The orc sighed. “Very well then,” he said. “We will shortcircuit the computer and its programming and trash it. I will warn you though, that after we do that, we won’t be as beneficial to our cause as our greatest power will be taken away.”

“You’ll still be able to attack and all,” Zarien snapped. “Or just get a new computer! It shouldn’t be hard to—” Zarien suddenly paused and covered his face. “Nevermind,” he said. “I’m sorry.”

“You say that you’ve found it,” Unyihi growled.

“Yes, zar!” Number 997 said. “We figured out the whereabouts of the computer that they used to hack onto our system.”

“Very good then,” Unyihl said. “We will then collapse the last parts of their rebellion. Come with me.”

“Me?” Number 997 asked.

“Aye,” Unyihl said. “You know the whereabouts of this place, do you not? You will help to lead our troops to their hideout. And then we will crush this resistance once and for all.”

“There,” the orc said, stopping his flow of lightning into the computer. “The computer is dead—useless. They won’t be able to track us anymore.”

“Good,” Zarien said and breathed a sigh of relief. “Thanks. Anyways, I have night watch tonight, so I’ll be going.”

“Very well,” the orc said. “Keep yourself safe, Zarien.”

“And you too,” Zarien replied.

Amanela 11th, 114 A.U.

“In the old training sections of the Mothership,” Unyihl said. “Clever...” He and Number 997 looked down at the entrance to the old training sections of the Mothership.

“We tracked the computer to somewhere in there,” Number 997 said. “So that’s where they should be.”

“Excellent,” Unyihl said. “Are you able to fight?”

“Yes, but...” Number 997 began.

“Come with us,” Unyihl said. “It is just after midnight—they won’t be awake. It will be a quick case of coming in and sorting it all out. All right?”

Number 997 knew better than to question Unyihl’s better judgment. “Yes, zar!” he replied.

“Good,” Unyihl said. “Spread the word to the other troops. We’re going in.”

Part XVI: The Priest-King

Date: Amanela 17th, 114 A.U.

Jroldin felt a bit awkward as he watched Brother Pietre and Brother Tomas continue to stare at his glowing circlet.

Finally, Brother Pietre scratched his chin. “Well,” he said. “It does not appear like there are very many options open to us if we look to the prophecies.”

“And yet it seems like it ought to,” Brother Tomas grumbled. “I mean: the circlet symbolizing the king, the jewel symbolizing the priest...”

“Aye, the Priest-King,” Brother Pietre said. “Jroldin, are you sure you don’t believe in the Great One?”

“Yes,” Jroldin said, almost laughing. “I’m sure that I don’t.”

“Hmmm...” Brother Pietre said. “If I remember well, Trishkaya did have that odd prophesy of a man who would claim to be a priest who would seek the crown and kill many to become the king.”

“Except that whats-his-faces’ elf lord already fulfilled that prophesy,” Brother Tomas said.

“Maybe it isn’t in the prophecies!” Jroldin said, a bit exasperated. He didn’t understand why all priests had to think that everything that happened had to do with a prophesy.

“Yes, I suppose not...” Brother Tomas said. “Except that the circlet screamed Priest-King to me... there are other options, I suppose.”

“Perhaps we should take a survey,” Brother Pietre said. “See what the differences are between who can see it and who cannot.” Jroldin closed his eyes. As much as he wanted to know why the circlet was on his head, he wasn’t too sure if he liked this option...

“Hello! What’s your name!”

“Do you see a circlet on his head? No? Nevermind then...”

“Do you believe in the Great One?”

“Have you ever met Jroldin before?”

Jroldin was quite relieved to go back in the Great Cathedral after interviewing random people for an hour. They returned to Brother Thomas' quarters.

"Well," Brother Pietre said, ruffling through the notes. "There does seem to be a rather clear theme in them... Except for the old man who seemed quite insane, there was a general trend that, except for you Jroldin, anyone who believed in the Great One, and only them, could see your circlet."

"Priest King," Brother Tomas immediately interjected.

"If I may," Jroldin butted in. "You keep talking about it but I have no idea what it is—what is this Priest-King?"

"Well, I'm hoping that it's you," Brother Pietre said. "The Prophet Xavier, who gave his famous prophesy that is recited each Remembrance ceremony, made a prophesy about a specific member of the party, who is generally known as the Priest-King. Although the specific wording of the prophesy has been lost today, the general theme of it is still remembered. Basically, in the prophesy that he gave, he mentioned that one anonymous figure would carry the Old Weapons..."

Jroldin partially tuned out as Brother Pietre talked on and on and on about this prophesy and that one. At one point even Brother Tomas looked a bit bored.

"... But anyways, as I was saying, the Priest-King is basically a priest who will bear the old weapons who will have such a leadership to be known as the Priest-King. I explained the other things that Xavier said about him."

Jroldin breathed a sigh of relief to know that it was over. "I'm not the Priest-King," he said. "I don't believe in Xavier's prophesy, I think it's stupid, I don't believe in the Great One, and I definitely am not going to become a priest."

"Pity..." Brother Tomas murmured. "Jroldin, if I may ask, why do you not believe in the Great One?"

Jroldin knew that this question had been coming. "Why should I?" he asked.

"Because of the records," Brother Tomas said. "From about to around two thousand years ago, many historical documents that are generally trustworthy have spoken of very frequent communication between the High Priests and the Great One. Even after that communication mysteriously stopped, some still gave prophesies from the Great One, many of which have come true, like the one about the priestly elf lord who became king that Brother Pietre briefly touched on in his speech." Jroldin thought that he faintly remembered Brother Pietre saying something about that.

“Furthermore, the Great One offers life and hope to us here on earth, life and hope that we cannot attain of ourselves,” Brother Tomas said. “I mean, what do you believe happens after death, Jroldin?” He started to drink more from his glass before realizing that it was empty.

“I dunno...” Jroldin said. “I guess we die and then... nothing.”

“Rather saddening outlook, is it not?” Brother Tomas asked. “That after life there is nothing? Doesn’t seem to be much meaning in that.”

Jroldin shrugged. “Fine. I believe in the Great One,” he said. “What should I do now?”

Brother Tomas looked a bit startled. “Well, I suppose you could pray to the Great One, if you actually believe...”

“I’ll do that later,” Jroldin said. “Let’s talk about this prophesy. What exactly am I supposed to do if I’m a Priest-King?”

“Don’t you remember?” Brother Pietre asked. “You will be the union of the king and priest for Xavier’s Prophesied Team. You would have a certain measure of authority, though indeed balanced out by the leader of the Team, the Sla’ad-”

“Wait, so I’d be this king-person,” Jroldin said. “But there’d still be a different leader?”

The two priests exchanged glances. “I’m not sure how it would exactly play out,” Brother Tomas said. “But yes... Some have suggested that the term king really refers to the destiny of the Priest-King after the Team destroys the growing evil... but yes, that is how the prophesy goes.”

Jroldin stood up. “I’ll think about it,” he said. “I’ll come back tomorrow.” And as the two priests watched, Jroldin walked out the door.

Part XVII: Merely a Façade

Date: Amanela 1st, 114 A.U.

Flek leapt over to a branch of a nearby tree, which served as makeshift streets for the woodland goblins. Ever since the Great Upheaval, the goblins had been too worried to make streets or have anything out in the open that the elves could discover. Therefore, they had made their home in the huge trees of the Great Forest, using the branches of the trees as streets and the trees themselves for their buildings.

Briskly running underneath the dense foliage of the trees, Flek moved away from the main trees that compromised their city and to the outskirts, where he lived. Although most chose to rather live near the city, Flek chose to live in the outskirts, mostly alone. Where he could contemplate his true self. And where no one else would know it.

Jumping down from a branch, Flek neatly landed on the ground and opened the door to enter the tree, shutting and locking it behind him. A subconscious breath of his relief emitted from his lips as he unbuckled his two arjla corsha swords and hung them up on the hooks. Putting them up, Flek braced himself on the outer trunk of the tree.

“I know you’re here,” Flek whispered as he looked around the empty cavernous inside of the tree where he lived.

I’m always here, Flek. Flek stared straight ahead as he did his best to ignore the voice in his head. He gritted his teeth. “Why?”

You know why, Flek. You asked for me. You asked for it. Regrets?

“No!” Flek snapped. “Just stay out of my head!”

Ah Flek... the voice inside his head chuckled. Do you really want that? Do you really want me to leave?

Flek bit his lip. “Shut up.”

Shaking his head, Flek walked over to the pantry, ignoring the whispers inside his head. He had removed a piece of edible tree bark from the pantry and was walking to the table, when suddenly his body shook and the bark fell from his grasp. He stared at it as his knees buckled and he collapsed to the ground.

“What do you want?” Flek spat.

Control, Flek... control... Not to just feel the experiences and help you when you want. I am not your slave. Give me my own chances to control you.

“Why would I do that?” Flek asked.

Well, Flek, let me just ask you one thing. Do you want me to leave you? Flek bit his lip. He thought it was wisest not to answer that question. I thought not... I don't ask much, Flek. Just to share your conscious and to be able to actually have control of a body every once and a while. Well, Flek?

“You’re a brute,” Flek said in a monotone voice.

I desire your answer, Flek.

“Fine.” Flek said. “If you don’t mind me, I’m just going to relax here while you do who knows what, Have fun, you brat.”

Ah, the language, Flek... the language... It really is unbecoming for such a great warrior as you. And without Flek willing it, his arm moved.

Amanela 3rd, 114 A.U.

“Brethren; Priests of the Mother Tree, I, Jaine, High Priest of the Mother Tree bear greetings!” the High Priest said. “Today I bring up the issue of Lord Freglak, who claims to profess belief in the Mother Tree.” Many of the priests seemed to perk up at that. “As we all know, Lord Freglak did not attend the Great Celebration of the Mother Tree two days ago. He claims to have always watched it. And yet when I questioned him, he showed himself to not be consistent in his story.”

The High Priest’s eyes narrowed. “We do not have evidence on this, but I will beg you to begin to think about him. And I ask you to question his beliefs. Does he really believe in the Mother Tree? In his public life he’s all for it. But, as we all know, his private life is a different matter, although he may try to keep it well hidden. How long, I ask you? How long will we continue to let such an idea go unnoticed.”

The High Priest licked his lips. “We do not have evidence yet to take action against him. But we can still watch and wait for him to make a mistake if he truly privately does not accept the Mother Tree. Watch him brothers. And be forewarned.”

Part XVIII: Not Finished Yet

Date: Amanela 18th, 114 A.U.

“Urgent care right away needed! A man is having a heart attack on Raymond Drive, House 234!”

Astrid gazed forward as the hover-ambulance quickly drove down the road, sirens blaring. Michael was driving again. This time there were others in the car than just her, unlike when she had been going to help the corsha miner on Remembrance Day. Of course, that hadn't been with a heart attack.

The ambulance arrived at the house and Astrid leapt out with another doctor and two nurses. They hurried to the door, which was opened by someone inside.

“I'm Mr. Falloway's brother!” he said. “He's in the living room!” As they hurried in he turned to Astrid.

“Excuse me...” he said. Astrid thought he looked a bit familiar. The others brushed by her.

“Yes?” Astrid asked.

The man gave her a piece of paper and suddenly Astrid knew why he looked so familiar. “Here's the report you will substitute with the one the computers will generate,” he murmured. “Make sure that everything goes well. IT won't go well for you if it doesn't.”

Astrid glanced around, trying to gain time. “I can help you,” she suddenly blurted out.

The man seemed a bit taken aback. “How?”

“You seem to need someone in the hospital to help you with these kinds of things,” Astrid said. “Would it not be nice to have someone actively trying to help you?”

The man's eyes narrowed. “How much do you want? No, scrap that. I'll contact you later about this, Astrid. Just do this mission well and perhaps you'll stand a chance.”

“Quick! Move to the hospital!” Astrid shut the doors to the back of the ambulance while the others finished securing the stretcher as the ambulance began to move. They began connecting him to wires and computers to try and keep him alive, while Astrid felt the enormous weight of the paper in her pocket. She wasn't actually planning on joining them; their tactics made her want to vomit. But she could still try to play a pretty convincing spy.

Astrid glanced at the reports the computer was making as the man was hooked up. It was looking very similar to the report she had seen before with that Marlin guy. Astrid looked at the computer and at the report. As the doctor tried to hook him up and save his life, Astrid slowly

drew out the report and quickly fidgeted with the computer to make the results seem more normal

“It looks like a Level 5 Heart Attack, sir!” Astrid said, while quickly stuffing the false report back into her report. The hospital had recently began to classify heart attacks on a certain scale. Astrid turned back and began to help them, while keeping an eye on the false report that the computer was making. And suddenly, the reality about what she was doing struck deep and pained her. She could be trying to save this man’s life—if it even could be saved, depending on what these men did to him. But instead she was falsifying a report about his heart attack.

Astrid fumbled with the key for a bit before finally getting into her house. Mr. Falloway had died before they had gotten to the hospital. Oldin was pleased that she might actually be able to get inside what was going on here—but he did give her an extreme word of caution about her life. It seemed that he wouldn’t have recommended offering to join them. He said it was way too dangerous. But Astrid had, and that was that. But still...

Astrid slowly flicked on the light switch as she moved to the kitchen. The weight of having decided to falsify the report than to try and save the man’s life, assuming he could be saved, still clung to her and pained her. She couldn’t deal with it internally. For all that she might now be a good spy, Astrid realized that she didn’t really want anything to do with it. It was a stupid decision she’d made without thinking about it. And it wasn’t as if she’d be able to get out of it now.

Astrid leaned against the fridge. She would have gone to her great-great-great-grandmother on any other day and told her everything, even if she couldn’t have responded. She still would have had someone to talk to. But now she was dead. Astrid’s mind briefly went to Monty. If she would talk to anyone about it, it would be him. Astrid slowly put her hand on the phone and was about to call him, but then she shook her head and let her hand fall to her side. She knew what Monty would say. He would tell her that she shouldn’t be doing all this lying and double-crossing.

Astrid opened the fridge to find something to ring. And then the phone rang. Almost wishing that it was Monty, she picked up the phone. It wasn’t Monty.

“Hello, Astrid,” the voice said. “I’ve come to talk to you about the little deal you proposed.

“All right,” Astrid said, biting her lip.

“Here’s the deal,” the voice said. “We’ll pay you by a case-to-case basis. Now, right now there’s a patient in the hospital who almost died from a heart attack. He needs to die. You have a package in the mail box that contains a shot and a liquid to put in the shot. We have

arranged it so that tomorrow you will call upon him. I want you to inject the man with the shot. The liquid won't be traceable.

Astrid bit her lip harder. A rivulet of blood flowed down it. "What will this shot do?"

The man laughed. "Come now, Astrid, are you really that ignorant?"

No. No I'm not. "But killing him..." Astrid began. "I'm not so-"

"It's either he dies or you die," the man snapped. "Don't be stupid Astrid. You were the one who offered after all. Do this job and you'll receive five thousand in the mail box. Either do this job or get the money, or you'll find that no matter however much you try to hide, you'll find yourself with a knife in your back. Goodbye Astrid." And then the phone clicked.

Part XIX: Number 997

Date: Amanela 11th, 114 A.U.

Number 997 nervously followed Unyihl and the other troops as they slowly moved into the old training sections of the Mothership. He knew that he had had a good reason to not want to be the one to tell Unyihl where the rebels were holed up. Number 997 quickly reviewed the ninety nine rules he was supposed to follow when in a battle.

Rule 43: Never show a trace of fear to your opponent.

They rounded the corner to startle an elf. Number 997 broke rule 43 as the elf tried to attack Unyihl. A blinding jet of fire smote him in the chest and, without resistance, the elf crumpled at Unyihl's feet, a hole burned right through his body.

"Move quickly and stealthily," Unyihl growled. "And let no one get past you. We must not—we will not let any escape."

"Yes, zar!" they all said. Number 997 only mumbled it.

"Let's move then!" Unyihl said and broke off into a quick jog, the others following. They turned the corner to find a steel hangar door in their way. There was a place to speak; it seemed like voice recognition was needed. Unyihl scanned the situation.

"All right," Unyihl growled. "On the count of three, we'll all let loose a lightning barrage at the door to break it down. And then we murder 'em all. You got it?"

They all nodded. *Rule 23: Conserve your lightning energy as much as possible; you never know when a greater foe might come along.*

"1!" Unyihl said.

Rule 56: Always obey your superiors without question, even in your inmost self.

"2!"

Rule 82: Always aim for the weakest point possible.

"3!" Crackling energy flew through the air as all the orcs sent a barrage of lightning into the weakest point on the door—the top where it would be raised. The lightning struck it, flowing around the wall. The wall began to snap and Unyihl applied a touch of fire to the lightning. The electrical current began to find its way up to the circuits.

At that moment, Unyihl sent a beam of liquid fire to the top of the door. Fire flowed down the door and there was a huge explosion as the door fell down, flames licking the metal.

“Move!” Unyihi said and ran across the door, unaffected by the heat and flames. He whispered something and the flames disappeared. After making sure the fire was gone, Number 997 ran across with the rest of the soldiers into the old training sections of the Mothership as an alarm went off.

Alarms blared, a red light blinking on and off in Zarien’s room as he flicked the switches to turn on his leg. It took a bit for the leg to warm up, and Zarien didn’t think he had time. He managed to trip/make his way to the door and opened it. Razan was racing by.

“The front gate’s down!” Razan yelled, drawing his gun. Mind racing, Zarien hobbled down to the corner, readying his gun. He looked around the corner.

Razan, Cortna, and other elves were hidden in artifices in the wall shooting out at the group of elves and orcs running toward them. The lead orc was golden color and Zarien’s blood chilled. An orc who had both genes. And Zarien had a pretty good idea who this orc was.

A beam of fire shot out from the orc, hitting the metal walls around the artifice where one elf was. The elf gave out a horrible scream as his body melted to the wall. Zarien bit down hard. Blood began to flow from his lip.

Drawing the gun, Zarien made a shot before jumping back into the corridor. He peeked back around. The rebels were still shooting, but it was becoming apparent they had nothing. At that moment, Cortna leapt out of her artifice and, hair blowing behind her, ran toward Zarien.

“Back!” she yelled as other elves began to follow. “We’ll take them down at another spot!” Together the two of them ran down the hall.

“What-” Zarien began.

“Not now,” Cortna snapped, and then her posture changed as she looked at Zarien while she ran. “Zarien...” she said in a softer voice. “If... if I don’t survive this, I want you to know that I-”

A bolt of lightning struck Zarien’s false leg. Zarien gave a scream as his leg stopped working. Already in forward momentum, Zarien fell flat on his face as shots whistled overhead. Zarien tried to move the false leg as it slowly tried to get back to life.

“Zarien!” Cortna screamed and tried to pick him up. Zarien looked back. Only Razan and two others were still alive, running as fast as they could.

Rule 23: If you see a good opportunity, take it. Focusing his eyes on the female elf trying to help the fallen elf, Number 997 shot a narrow beam of electricity. Number 997 widened his eyes. That had been his best one yet. The electricity hit the elf and threw her backwards, sending the other elf almost to the ground, but he managed to regain his balance. The female elf hit the wall and was still.

“Woah...” one of the professionally trained orc soldiers said. Number 997 was suddenly in high spirits. At that moment, the other elves took off down another corridor.

“Number 997 and 1023, go after that other elf!” UNyihl said, gesturing to the hobbling elf turning the corner. “We’ll take the others!” And with that, Numbers 997 and 1023 were alone in the corridor.

“Let’s take him,” Number 1023 said, and the two of them raced after the elf.

“Leave,” Cortna breathlessly whispered. And then she was still. Fear running through his blood, without looking back, Zarien hobbled around the corner as his leg began to move properly. Running faster, Zarien ran toward the back entrance, but he could hear his pursuers rounding the corner.

Thinking fast, Zarien looked behind him, pointed his gun, and fired at the figure emerging from the wall. Bang! The orc fell down. Looking forward, Zarien managed to open the door and leap through it in one fluid motion.

Slamming the door shut behind him, Zarien thought fast. The escape pods to get out of the Mothership were a couple sections away—but possibly close enough. Leaping onto one of the rebel’s motorcycles, he revved up the engine and took off as the last orc broke through the door. Zarien looked behind him, and then at the road ahead. He felt a thrill of exhilaration run through his blood. It was time for a chase.

Part XX: Astrid, Governor of Araelia

Date: Amanela 17th, 114 A.U.

“Hello, this is Governor Astrid’s office,” the cheerful voice said. “Unfortunately, Governor Astrid, nor her secretary, is available right now. Please leave a message after a beep.” The computer beeped.

“Greetings, Astrid,” Brother Tomas said. “This is Brother Tomas from the Great Cathedral; hey, I have word from you—I think that we found a member of Xavier’s prophesy, so-”

He was interrupted as Astrid swept the phone off the receiver. “Greetings, this is Astrid.”

“Ah, greetings!” Brother Tomas said. “As I was saying, I don’t know if you recognize me-”

“I remember some conversation we had a while back,” Astrid said. “Please, continue.”

“Anyways,” Brother Tomas said, “Today a dwarf came in—his name’s Jroldin; he’s the son of Oldin, head of the RBI. He had this glowing circlet on his head with a blue gem in it—this circlet was immaterial. Also, only believers in the Great One could see it. Due to other information, we believe him to clearly be a member of Xavier’s prophesy—the Priest-King.”

Astrid swept all of the items on her desk to the floor, the papers fluttering through the air, as she began scribbling stuff down. “How old is he?”

“Close to sixteenish I’d guess,” Brother Tomas said. “Given his name, he hasn’t had his Naming Day yet, so he wouldn’t be quite old enough...”

“I want to meet with him as soon as possible,” Astrid said. “How soon can I talk to him?”

“He said he’ll be coming back tomorrow,” Brother Tomas replied. “I’ll bring him to you then. Any specific times, or...?”

“I’ll make the time whenever you show up,” Astrid said. “I’ll have my experts on standby.”

“Great,” Brother Tomas said. “I suppose I’ll see you then, then.”

“See you then,” Astrid said, and she put down the phone. She took a couple deep breaths, and then forced herself to smile. It seemed that her speech had had some effect. In truth, that part of the speech was more to arouse her campaign supporters than anything else, but

Astrid *did* want to raise a team for Xavier's prophesy to take down the elves. She pushed her hand down on the intercom.

"Greta!" she said. "Please get the experts on Xavier's team to be on stand-by notice. We'll be having a dwarf coming in tomorrow who is suspected to be one of the members of the prophecy."

"A recent poll came out yesterday... It was given out by the Murdok Pollster."

"What was it?" Astrid asked. She was in the middle of a campaign meeting with her campaign manager to discuss how to best keep the lead over her rival, Iraina. The Murdok Pollster was one of the most reliable polls for elections.

"According to the poll, 13% were undecided, 34% supported Iraina, and only 53% supported you," her campaign manager said.

Astrid sucked in her breath and bit her lip. A mere 53%... she still had a huge lead over Iraina, but the gap was continually closing. "That isn't good," she said.

"No, it isn't," her campaign manager replied. "Iraina has jumped 5% since the last poll and more have become undecided. Iraina's campaign has gained a lot of traction since he showed his plan for launching a huge offensive assault on the elves, and the traction doesn't seem to be stopping."

Astrid bit her lip. Iraina had released a very vague battle plan for taking down the elves a week ago that had become a huge hit. Even though the battle plan was extremely vague, the notion that he was actually trying to make plans had given him much needed traction.

"You're going to need to directly address his plan," the campaign manager said. "You have the debate with Iraina in five days and that's going to be a key topic."

"I know..." Astrid said and groaned. "I probably should make some speech before then showing why such an offensive plan is such a bad idea... What free dates do we have?"

"We could do it right before the debate," the campaign manager said, pulling out his calendar, marked up with all of the appointments that Astrid had. "We could try for it two hours before the debate so that you can get everyone motivated and up with you and then, as he'll have hardly any chance to respond, you should be able to blast him with it during the debate."

"That sounds great," Astrid said, nodding. "Book me up then, call the news companies and everything. Do you have a speech writer yet?"

“No, but...” Suddenly the door opened and a monk in a brown habit entered in with a dwarf, upon whose head was a glowing circlet of gold, a sapphire impressed in the center.

Astrid turned to her campaign staff. “Well, like I warned, it appears that our time is going to be cut short,” she said. “So we’ll finish this at the time that we already planned ahead for tomorrow. All right?” They agreed, and the campaign manager moved out of the room as Astrid moved her swivel chair over to the intercom.

“Greta!” she said. “Please send the Xavier’s prophesy experts in!” She then released the button and turned in the chair to look at them. “Please sit down!” she gestured to some nearby seats. The two of them sat down as the Xavier’s prophesy experts entered the room. Astrid gazed at Jroldin.

“So,” Astrid said, “you’re the one who the prophesy is at least partly about.”

“Well...” Jroldin began.

“I think so,” Brother Tomas interrupted. “Of course, we might be wrong, but if we’ll right...”

“The sign does seem to be in accordance with the Priest King,” one of the experts said. “A circlet for kingship, a sapphire for priesthood—a sign upon the head of a dwarf... It’s almost too good to believe...”

“There is only one way to tell for sure,” another responded. “According to the prophesy, a sign in the sky will draw the prophesied team together...” He locked eyes with Astrid. “I believe it would be wise to send a crew above the mountains.”

Part XXI: Elves vs. Goblins

Amanela 12th, 114 A.U.

Sirens went off and red lights flashed as the goblin's radars picked up several large aircraft coming their way—fast. Leaping out of bed, Flek ran as fast as he could toward the goblin capitol, hoping he wouldn't be late. Ten minutes later, he burst into Freglak's chambers where Freglak was hurriedly making plans with Reynyagn.

"Flek; you're here!" Freglak said. "Good—they'll be upon us in another five minutes if they continue on at the same rate they've been going this far. Thankfully our radar stretches out pretty far. Just stay here and be ready. So what were you saying?" He turned to Reynyagn.

"They most likely have several smaller scouting aircraft searching way out in front of them," Reynyagn said. "I wouldn't be surprised if they've already found us. But that matters not. Are the missiles ready?"

"Yes, everything is ready for us to use," Freglak said. "We'll shoot them down as soon as they get close enough."

"Be ready for anything," Reynyagn said. "I'd expect them to have some tricks up their sleeve that we don't know about—anything could happen."

"Then again, they weren't planning to come across a whole city and fighting force..." Freglak said. He walked over to the window and watched the sky. Reynyagn and Flek walked with him.

"Should be any minute now..." Freglak muttered. Suddenly, a powerful search light lit up the sky and there were muffled explosions as they saw missiles began to coast through the air at some dark aircraft.

"It's a mild attack force," Reynyagn snapped. "I hadn't expected them to send this much. If I know them—" Suddenly, one of the aircraft dove toward the ground as the missiles hit the other aircraft, causing explosions to fill the night air.

"It's a transport ship!" Reynyagn said. "They're landing an attack force!"

"I'll take them," Flek said. And with that he rushed out of the room.

Are you ready?

Of course I am.

Flek leapt in the air, higher than any other goblin could, as he saw a sleek small elven aircraft coming his way. The machine was open to the air and the elements, and was twelve feet long. About eight feet in from the front, the elf sat, controlling the cruiser.

Flek landed neatly on the elven cruiser and leapt forward before the elf could do anything. His corsha blades silently whipped through the air, cutting off the elf's life, as Flek jumped up to grasp a tree branch and use his momentum to propel him forward. Landing on the ground and running through the brush, Flek emerged in the clearing where the elf craft had landed. Armed elves were pouring out of the transport. They were ready to battle. Flek heard a noise and spun around to see Reklen beside him.

The small goblin grinned and Flek nodded. "Let's get to work."

Ignoring the fact that they were far outnumbered, Flek and Reklen burst out, Reklen scampering along the ground, Flek running toward them, using the time distraction the corsha weapons mysteriously gave him to block all the bullets. Out of the corner of his eye, Flek noticed more goblin troops running in.

Flek quickly met up with the first group of elven troops that ran toward him. The corsha blades illuminated the night air as they sliced through the elves. Flek leapt in the air and spun, laughing as he cut through them. This was so easy. By him, Reklen leapt up to tackle the head of one of the elves. The elf gave a cry as Reklen clawed at his face. Flek turned to go back into battle—but turned too late.

Flek gave a cry as piercing pain rippled through him and Flek was thrust ten feet backwards as lightning crackled in him. Flek noticed the corsha weapon drawing a lot of the lightning into itself, but it wasn't enough. The lightning came from a blue orc, surrounded by his elven comrades. By him, goblins lay on the ground, unconscious.

Out of pure instinct, Flek suddenly thrust his corsha blade into the air to block a bullet and stood up. The orc sent a bolt of lightning crackling toward him. Leaping into the air, Flek let the lightning pass right unto him before quickly making a zig-zag course toward the orc, blocking the bullets with his corsha weapon, avoiding the lightning with his body.

His comrades were not so lucky. All around him, Flek could hear the goblins dying as they tried to do the moves that Flek was making and failed at doing so. Flek wasn't surprised at their failure. Few could match his power.

Suddenly, a figure appeared as if out of nowhere right next to the orc. A long thin corsha blade slashed through the shocked elves guarding the orc. The orc sent a barrage of lightning against his mysterious attacker. Blue lightning crackled around the figure's silhouette. Flek saw the mysterious being arch his back, but he said nothing. Bullets shot right through the figure.

The being slowly lifted its corsha sword as it arched its back, and then it fell. The orc's limp body fell over.

Flek sprinted over to come to this being's aid. It was indeed Reynyagn. As the elves learned that Reynyagn couldn't be hurt by the bullets, Reynyagn and Flek fell upon them, cutting them to pieces. They stood no chance. Flek leapt into the air, his corsha blades rotating through the air to stop all shooting bullets, and came down in the midst of the elves, quickly cutting them to pieces before they could do anything. This was too easy... Then again, few goblins were as good as him.

A loud noise filled the air and Flek turned to see the transport ship trying to take off. *Oh no you don't...* Flek sprinted toward the ship and leaped high to grab on, but it was too late. Even as he jumped, he saw that it would not be far enough. The transport ship flew up past his reach, and as it did, Flek saw a star far off in the distance. The bright blue star shone brighter than the other stars, making the stars that should have been close to it unable to be seen. Flek blinked, thinking it was a nearby light. But no. It was a star—a bright blue star. And its presence engulfed all the other stars.

Part XXII: Murder

Date: Amanela 19th, 114 A.U.

Astrid flashed her ID card and the sliding doors opened. She stepped forward, feeling the weight of the item in her pocket and bit the inside of her lip. As she walked through to the ward, out of the corner of her eye, she noticed a man dressed as a doctor pass by and look at her. And her blood chilled. It was him.

Astrid turned to keep her gaze forward and breathed heavily. If she didn't kill him, she would die herself and they'd find another way to kill him. It wouldn't be wrong of her to kill the man! He would die eventually—less people would die this way. She couldn't truly save his life! Any rational person would have made the same choice as her in this situation. There was nothing wrong about it.

Opening the door, Astrid entered the ward to where the man lay, sleeping, on the bed. She was supposed to check his blood pressure and other readings. Slowly, Astrid checked the man's blood pressure and then looked at other readings while she slowly drew the shot out of her pocket. She stared down at it and almost felt like throwing it away from her, but she only clenched her fist around it.

Astrid slowly walked over to the man and drew the covers back to reveal his arm. Astrid slowly lay the point of the needle over the man's vein and her breathing quickened. Murder. She was going to kill a man. Her pursuers could probably blackmail her about this later to make sure that she kept with them. Once she killed him, there was no going back.

Astrid swallowed hard and gripped the side of the bed to steady herself. *Focus, Astrid. Focus on the assignment.* Slowly, Astrid slightly raised the needle up a bit, and then she jabbed it into the man. *Ok, now focus. Just push it down and inject the fluid.*

Astrid bit her lip and tried to will herself to inject the fluid into him, but she still didn't press it in. Her heart beat faster. She knew that she had to do it now. If someone else came in and saw her, she would be in huge trouble. The note on the needle said it would be untraceable. No one would know that she did it. And if she didn't do it, she'd just find herself dead the day later.

Astrid's breathing quickened, and she closed her eyes, feeling the blood pulse through her veins. And then, gripping the side of the bed, Astrid tightened her grip on the shot and pushed down on it, injecting the fluid into the man. Astrid felt her legs nearly give way, but she held herself up until it was all injected.

Opening her eyes, Astrid breathed hard as she lifted the needle up. Her hand shook and the needle dropped, clattering and rolling on the floor. Biting back a curse word, Astrid knelt

down and snatched up the needle, shoving it back into her pocket. She had just killed a man. She, a nurse, had just killed her patient.

Astrid's whole body quivered and she suddenly collapsed to the ground, tears running down her face. How could she do this? How could she have just murdered a man? She had become like the people she had been trying to stop! She had just murdered a man. She was a murderer.

Bile rose in Astrid's throat, and she vomited on the ground, coughing it out and mingling it with her tears. After a couple minutes she slowly stood up and swallowed hard, lifting up her tear-stricken face. It was over. It was all over. She couldn't be a nurse anymore—no, not after what she'd done. She'd leave, run away somewhere away from all this conspiracy, and she'd never return. She no longer had any place, no longer had any life here again. She couldn't stay here. She couldn't live with herself. A guttural cry of lament left Astrid's throat, and she moved forward, making for the door.

Suddenly, the door opened, and Astrid leapt back, almost screaming before she saw who it was. And then her jaw locked. Him.

The “doctor” looked at her and cocked his head. “You finish checking him, yet?” he asked, sending a glare at her.

Astrid slowly lifted the needle out of her pocket. “It is finished,” she whispered.

The man smiled. “Ah, well done, well done...” he said, and nodded. “I'll be seeing you around.”

The man put his hand on Astrid's shoulder, but Astrid shoved him off and pushed forward, leaving the room and nearly running through the corridor, not thinking of anything but to be able to escape the hospital before anyone could discover her deed.

As she ran through the waiting room, she heard someone call her name, but Astrid ignored them, running down to the parking garage and getting in her car. Inserting and turning the key, she backed the car up and then drove out of the parking garage, turning down the road and riding as her thoughts twisted and turned. It would have been better to die than to do that.

Slowly, Astrid pulled out her cell phone and swallowed. She didn't want to. She wanted to leave without talking to anyone again. But she knew that she should. Slowly flipping open the cell phone, she dialed Monty's number.

Monty was getting ready to drive off to go to guard Governor Astrid, as was his duty as a member of the Araelian Guard, when his cell phone rang. Opening the front door to leave, he flipped open the cell phone and put it against his ear.

“Hello?”

“Hello, Monty?” a voice said. Monty recognized it as Astrid’s voice, but there was something different about it; Monty could tell! He wasn’t sure what it was, but Monty knew something was wrong.

“Yeah, this is Monty,” Monty said. “Astrid?”

“Monty!” Astrid said. “I need to talk to you! Now! Please!” Astrid’s voice cracked. “Can you take some time off of work or something? I need to talk with you now in person.” Monty bit his lip and stared at his watch but then he sharply jerked his chin up. His sister needed him, and from her voice, Monty knew that something was deeply, terribly wrong.

“Uh, yeah,” he said, and then more confidently. “Yeah, Astrid,” he said. “Just come over; I haven’t left yet. I’ll just call in and tell them that I will be preoccupied for a bit today.”

“You sure?” Astrid asked.

Monty nodded before remembering that Astrid couldn’t see him. “Yeah, I’m sure,” he said. “You sound like something’s wrong, don’t you? Some things are more important than my job.”

“Thank you!” Astrid said and Monty heard her sob. And then the phone clicked.

Part XXIII: The Chase is On!

Date: Amanela 11th, 114 A.U.

Zarien pressed his foot hard against the pedal and turned his body some to move the hover motorcycle around curve. If he could only get to the 7th District of the Mothership, he could get to the escape pods and get the heck out of the Mothership. Where he would go, Zarien did not know. But he knew this much. There was nothing for him left here. All of his companions were dead. There was nothing left for him.

He heard a noise behind him and swerved to the side to see a bolt of lightning rush past him and smash into a hovercar ahead. Debris went flying and Zarien ducked his head down as he moved past the explosion before keeping his eyes ahead on the road. He didn't have much time.

Swerving to the side to avoid other cars, Zarien looked behind him at the orc navigating after him, and tried to make out the number on the golden band around his head to see how good he was. But Zarien couldn't make it out from this far of a distance. And he didn't want to get any closer to that orc than he already was.

Number 997 swerved past the cars as he kept his eye on the elf up ahead. He couldn't let him get away; Unyihi would have his head for that. A car moved up in front of him, blocking his way. Number 997 nearly panicked. Slowing his motorcycle down and shooting out a web of electricity, he quickly hijacked the car's system to move it to another lane before stepping down again on the pedal to speed up past the car and after the fleeing elf. Number 997 wondered where the elf was trying to get. He wouldn't have much chance alone in the Mothership.

The communicator on Number 997's wrist buzzed. "Number 997, this is Unyihi Garum. The rebels have been destroyed. Where are you? Over!"

"Number 997 to Unyihi Garum, zar!" Number 997 replied. "I'm chasing the last rebel down the high way! We're currently passing through District 5 right now upwards through the districts. Backup would be appreciated. Over!"

"Back up will be sent. Keep your eye on that elf, over!" Unyihi responded. And then the communicator was silent.

Rule 74: Always keep your full attention on your target.

Keeping his eyes locked on the fleeing elf, Number 997 swerved from side to side to try and catch up with the elf, but he couldn't get very far. The elf kept maneuvering so as to keep

out of his grasp. Number 997 gnashed his teeth. The elf had probably had plenty of experience with this, and he—he had none. And Number 997 feared Unyih's rage.

Unyih kicked at the elf's body and the elf groaned. Unyih gestured to two elves, a male and a female elf and snapped his fingers. "Take these two to Emperor Jaigran for questioning!" he snapped. "Everyone else clean up this place and look for other information! I'm going to go take down that last elf!" Quickly leaving the rebels area, Unyih made for the District Three Transit Station. Each district had a transit station where a super-powered train ran through quickly transporting people from district to district.

Normally, although it was speedy, it could be a long wait depending on the schedule, but Unyih didn't care. He could tinker with the train's machinery to get it to come to District Three fast enough. And it would be the way that he'd be able to catch up with Number 997 to take down the last elf and to crush the rebel's opposition once and for all.

Finally, Zarien flew by the sign for District Seven, having survived multiple attacks from the orc, including one from the orc electrically controlling a car to try to send it crashing into him. The orc had almost gotten attacked by the inhabitants of the car for that, but, unfortunately, he'd managed to get away.

Spinning the wheel, Zarien flew down a side road that had a sign of leading to the escape pods. He just had to get in one of the escape pods and get away—and fast. Zarien drew his gun. Shooting madly, he shot down the two surprised guards and whizzed through the open gate, looking at the lines of hatches to the escape pods. Quickly deciding what course of action he would take, Zarien brought his legs around and leapt off of the motorcycle, nearly falling face first, but barely managing to level himself on the side walk. Zarien dashed over to an escape pod and hit the button, opening the door, as the orc flew through the gate on his motorcycle.

Leaping into the escape pod, Zarien barely avoided a bolt of lightning and made for the controls. He would start by shutting the doors of the escape pod, but he knew that the orc would too easily reverse that with his lightning powers. He just had to get out of the Mothership and leave. And fast.

Zarien's hand hit the blast off button as he heard a noise behind him. As the escape pod's engines roared, Zarien suddenly gave a scream and arched his back as electricity pulsed through him. His quivering hand barely managing to keep a hold of his gun, Zarien shot backwards and the pulsing electricity stopped as the escape pod dropped, having left the ship, and plummeted down through the air.

Zarien spun around as he grabbed for the wheel to see the orc a bit dazed. The orc pointed his finger at him, but Zarien shot first, the bullet breaking through the orcs glove and into his hand. The orc gave a cry, and fell back as Zarien leapt forward, unheeding the quick descent of the escape pod, and grabbed the orcs other hand, twisting his other glove off. Without his gloves to conduct his powers, the orc was helpless. Zarien turned back toward the controls, ignoring the dazed orc, whom Zarien thought might possibly come in handy if he was chased, though probably it would more be when they were chased. Zarien put his hand on the steering wheel and looked forward before beginning to control the escape pod. He was free from the Mothership—but Zarien was sure that their battle was far from over.

Part XXIV: Kidnapped

Date: Amanela 18th 114 A.U.

Together with Brother Tomas, Jroldin walked away from the capitol back toward home. Jroldin still hadn't been able to tell his father about his affairs with Astrid and being a member of the prophesy. Oldin continued to come back from work after Jroldin went to bed and elave before Jroldin awoke. Jroldin was considering writing a note tonight.

That day had been a lot of bustle about perhaps finding another member. Apparently there was some "ambitious" elf who was an outcast from the rest of the elves that lived in Araelia. Jroldin knew that the elf, Rider, was one of the few elves that safely lived in Araelia, and he supposed it was about time that they began to gather other members of the prophesy. Brother Tomas had explained that there were actually two elves in the prophesy, making the seven elves work—there was an ambitious elf, and then a pair of an orc and an elf that would come together.

"So," Brother Tomas said. "It would appear that you are indeed a member of the prophesy!"

"No kidding..." Jroldin murmured. According to the scouting party that went up above the mountains, the exceedingly bright blue star had appeared. Jroldin mentally remembered the lines of the prophesy that Brother Tomas had recited. He wasn't exactly sure why Governor Astrid hadn't included these lines in the Remembrance Ceremony, but she hadn't.

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.

And then the party will be ready to go forth to war.

And purified with fire it will stand against fire.

And now a hope is tried!

And now a hope is tried!

Brother Tomas had been grilling him both on this and also the other words of the prophecy during the breaks during the endless interrogations and questionings of the Governor Astrid and her experts. Between lots of work today and the day before, they'd gotten a lot of work to do since Brother Tomas was resolved that Jroldin memorize the prophecy since he was convinced Jroldin to be heir of the prophecy. Forasmuch as Jroldin didn't particularly enjoy memorizing the prophecy, it *was* a much-needed relief for a lot of information being dumped into his head about the prophecy and its fulfillment and explanations for why it was true and all that other stuff that the experts told him.

Jroldin still wasn't exactly sure about the prophesy—but he was considering it, and he did find the ways facts seemed to be lining up with the prophesy kind of odd. At the very least, Jroldin publicly accepted the prophesy, as he did with accepting the Great One. But deep inside his heart...

“The second line of the fourth stanza!” Brother Tomas suddenly said.

Jroldin thought a bit before speaking: “A warrior wants to lead and yet it won't be granted him,” he recited. “Right?”

“Close enough,” Brother Tomas said. “Now-“

Suddenly, a car screeched around the corner and squealed to a stop nearby. “Someone's in a hurry,” Jroldin casually remarked, walking closer to it to see who was inside. Suddenly, two men leapt out of the car from each side, each of them holding a gun.

“Ru-“ Brother Tomas yelled and turned to run, but a man grabbed him first, just as another grabbed Jroldin, levering guns at them. ‘

“Get in the car,” one of them snapped. “Now!”

“But-“ Jroldin began.

“Now!” the man said, and shoved Jroldin into the car. Sliding on the seat, Jroldin moved to get out, but Brother Tomas was shoved next to him, and then the armed men sat on either side, shutting the car doors, doing everything as easy as it were clock work. The car's engine revved, and suddenly the hover car shot forward, moving again into the busy streets.

Jroldin looked from side to side, and then took a bag of half-eaten crumbled chips from his pocket. He had no idea where that came from. Maybe from the cafeteria that he had lunched at with Governor Astrid... Sticking a chip into his mouth, Jroldin looked at the guard next to him.

“Where you taking us?” he asked, his mouth full.

The man looked at Jroldin with disgust. “None of your business,” he snapped. “And what are you eating?”

Jroldin stuck another handful of chips into his mouth. “None of your business,” he retorted.

Raising his hand, the man brought it down, smacking Jroldin on the cheek and snatching the bag of chips from his hand in the same move. Rolling down the darkened window, the man threw the bag of chips out the window before rolling it back up. Rubbing his smarting cheek, Jroldin turned to Brother Tomas, who was folding and unfolding his brown robe.

“Brother Tomas,” Jroldin asked. “Where do you think they’re taking us? And why?”

“I don’t know,” Brother Tomas solemnly replied. “Although I suspect that-”

“No talking amongst the prisoners!” one of the guards snapped. Jroldin sully fell silent. Stupid guards. Stupid kidnapping. But it probably wouldn’t matter in the end. His father would save him. He had put a tagger on him a couple years ago after some of his father’s enemies had tried to kidnap Jroldin to use him as insurance against his father. So his dad would be able to save him in due time.

“Put the blindfolds on,” one of the men said. “Can’t let them know where I’m taking them.”

“But-“ Jroldin said.

“No buts!” one of the men rebutted. And with that, despite Jroldin’s initial struggling, the blindfolds were put on. And Jroldin continued the journey there in blindness and silence.

Part XXV: Called by a Star

Amanela 13th, 114 A.U.

“You said you wanted to speak to me?” Freglak leaned back in his chair as he looked at the shadowy figure.

“Aye, you and Flek,” Reynyagn said, slowly sitting down.

“What of?” Freglak asked. “Of our battle? Those elves won’t know what hit them.”

“A strong scout force it may have been, but it was still a scout force,” Reynyagn firmly said. “This is only going to be the beginning of a long conflict, which doesn’t help my request.”

“What request?” Freglak said, suddenly sitting upright.

Reynyagn seemed to dodge the question. “Have you seen the bright blue star in the north sky?”

“Who hasn’t?” Freglak asked. “But what does that have to do with anything?”

“There’s a certain prophesy that you may have heard of,” Reynyagn replied. “Have you ever heard of Xavier’s Prophesy?”

Freglak pursed his lips, and then suddenly nodded. “Ah yes!” he said. “There was that group of people during the war against your people that said they were chosen by Xavier’s Prophesy, was there not?” Freglak was happy he remembered his history lesson from long ago.

“Yes...” Reynyagn slowly said, and he paused. “It’s a famous prophesy that describes a team that would fight against the greatest evil to come upon the land.” He paused. “There was a group that thought themselves to be the prophesied back then. Now it is found though, that there is a greater evil.” He paused again. “I believe that Flek and I are both members of that prophesy.”

“What?” Flek asked, suddenly alert, and surprised.

Freglak had a perplexed expression on his face. “What?” he asked.

“To go deep into the prophesy at this point would be unwise,” Reynyagn said. “But it speaks of certain people. A goblin with great expertise. A Sla’ad that would lead the group. Another part speaks of a warrior who seeks to lead, presumably Flek, and one who saw a great slaughter, which I did at the massacre. It speaks of a burning ember in the sky that will call the team together. For decades, I’ve believed that the prophesy spoke of the elves and a team to stop them, but I awaited a clear sign.” He cleared his throat. “We now have it.”

There was silence for a bit. “Ok...” Freglak said. “So... What’s the point?”

“My point,” Reynyagn said, and then he stopped, and sighed. “My point is that I would like to request of you permission for Flek and I to go North to follow the star to join the rest of the team.” Freglak’s mouth dropped open.

“You want to do what?” Flek asked.

“I know it is asking much of you,” Reynyagn begin.

“Well it sure does!” Freglak said, a bit ecstatic. “You expect me to let my best strategist and my best warrior to just run off North, without any sure indication that I will see them again!”

“Correct,” Reynyagn calmly said, and Freglak stopped, still flabbergasted. “I ask much of you,” Reynyagn agreed. “Especially with the elves sure to be preparing to chase you down for attacking them. And yet I still ask it.”

“But-“ Freglak began.

“Put as many guards as you want with us to make sure that I won’t escape,” Reynyagn said. “And I swear that, if either we aren’t the members of the prophesy, or if we fulfill it, that I will come back to you and serve the rest of my six months helping you.”

There was silence. Finally, Flek spoke. “What is this team supposed to do?” he asked,

“Defeat the elves once and for all,” Reynyagn said. Again, there was silence.

“I don’t know...” Freglak said.

“Look,” Reynyagn said. “We all want the same thing here: to destroy the elves. Believing the prophesy, I think it’s the best, and dare I say? The only way to destroy the elves. To refuse to let us go would be... would be probably cutting off the only means of defeating the elves.”

“I still don’t like it,” Freglak said glumly.

“I know,” Reynyagn said. “And I do sympathize with your plight, but I think it must be done. Do you believe it? Do you believe the prophesy?”

“I’d never even heard of it before...” Freglak murmured.

“I think I have...” Flek said. “I mean, I don’t know exactly where or how I learned it, but... I don’t know... It’s just like I intimately know it some how, I...”

You wonder how you know the exact wording of the prophesy, Flek? The voice in his head laughed, and Flek suddenly froze, an icy chill going down his spine.

“I beg of you,” Reynyagn said. “Because of my oath I swore to you before, I will not leave without your permission. But I beg of you, Lord Freglak, I beg of you! Let us go out so that we can fulfill the prophesy. And when I am able, I will return to serve my months.”

Freglak was quiet for a moment, and then he slowly exhaled. “What choice do I have?” he asked. “Am I going to allow my own pride and selfishness keep you here when I could be destroying our only chance of victory?” He slowly shook his head. “I can’t do it. I don’t want to. But what choice do I have?” He slowly nodded. “Go then, Reynyagn. I’ve never heard of this prophesy before, heck, I don’t even believe in prophesies. But I know this one is true. Don’t ask me how, but I do.” He raised his head. “Go then. Go with Flek, our fastest airship, and as many goblin warriors as you want. Follow the star. And when you are done your mission, return here. Oh...” And he turned again to Reynyagn and Flek. “And be safe. And destroy those blood-thirsty elves once and for all.”

Part XXVI: Confession

Date: Amanela 19th, 114 A.U.

Monty twisted the wheel sharply and moved into his drive way. Parking the car next to Astrid's, Monty got out and walked up to the front door, a bit concerned for why Astrid had been so eager to talk to him, and about the tone in her voice.

Entering the house, he came to his small living room to find Astrid sitting on a chair drinking a cup of tea. Monty noticed remnants of tears in her eyes, but what he was more concerned of was the tea. Tea! How in the world did she get tea? Monty knew for a fact that he hadn't bought any tea, and he was pretty sure that Astrid hadn't gone out to get some... The nearest place selling hot tea was twenty minutes away or so, and Monty didn't think Astrid had brought it from her house, so how in the world...

"Monty," Astrid said, acknowledging her brother's presence, and her voice cracked.

Thoughts of where the tea had come from instantly left Monty's mind. "Astrid," Monty said, concerned. "What's the matter?"

"You know that something's the matter then," Astrid said.

"It's kind of obvious from your expression and how you're acting," Monty said, his line of sight drifting towards Astrid's cup of tea. *No. Don't think about the tea.*

"I guess so..." Astrid said, and stared at the cup of tea for a bit, Monty joining her in doing so. *Did she bring little packets of tea with her and then she heated it up here? But she couldn't have boiled hot water—the oven had nearly blown up after that kitchen experiment, and he still had to call a repairman for that, and the microwave, which had been broken for a year. Wait; no. Not tea. Don't think about it. Astrid has a problem, and-*

"I killed a man," Astrid suddenly blurted out.

Monty sat up more upright. "You what?"

"I killed a man," Astrid said, and Monty fell silent. "I secretly murdered him at the hospital."

"But..." Monty began, his mind racing. "Why..."

"Two weeks ago," Astrid said. "Two weeks ago, a man died at the hospital from a heart attack. And this heart attack wasn't a normal attack." *Hold on...* Thoughts began quickly connecting together inside Monty's head. "I was going to report it to a head doctor, but before I could do it, a man threatened me."

“You’re our informant?” Monty burst out, his mouth dropping open. “My own sister was the informant, and Oldin didn’t tell me? No wonder...”

“What?” Astrid asked, her train of thought obviously lost. “How do you know Oldin, and how did you know—wait—are you?”

“Suppose I just spilled the beans there,” Monty said. “Yeah; I’m not really a guard for Astrid, except at ceremonial times to maintain my illusion of being one.”

“You’re part of the FRI,” Astrid said.

“I am,” Monty confirmed. “But wait—why?”

“If you knew anything about my going-ins and going-outs as an informant, you would know that I offered the man that I would help him in order to get closer to what was really going on,” Astrid stated. “That was yesterday. And I got home to learn that he had accepted my offer. My first job was going to be to go into the hospital and to secretly kill a man with poison that they had failed to kill.”

Monty tried to keep a calm level composure and not flip out like he was tempted to do. That would make Astrid real mad for him to flip out like that. Monty bit his lip and tried not to show much of a reaction.

“I did it,” Astrid stated bluntly, and tears rose to her eyes. “I didn’t want to do it, Monty! I didn’t want to do it! But he said if I didn’t then he would kill me and then they’d go along and finish the job themselves, so it wasn’t like I’d be saving this man’s life, or anything, and—oh Monty...” Astrid burst into tears and her grip loosened on the cup of tea. Too late to do anything, Monty washed it fall, tea sloshing out of it, and then smash. It broke all over the carpet. And it was Monty’s favorite mug too.

Astrid stopped. “Oh...” she said. “I—“

“Never mind the tea,” Monty said. “So... What do you think then about this? If you don’t think there’s any higher being or reason for the morals—” Too late, Monty realized that that statement was unwise of him to say at this time.

“Shut up about the higher being stuff,” Astrid snapped, and then her composure slackened. “I feel awful, Monty!” she said. “At this point I wish that I hadn’t done it; I wished that they’d just have gone along and killed me. Would’ve been better then this.” She paused. “I’m going, Monty. Unless you can convince me otherwise—which you can’t—after talking with you, I’m leaving. I’m leaving Araelia and going who knows where. As far as I can away from here, the espionage, and the hospital. I’ll start a new life elsewhere. And you’ll never see me again.”

Monty was a bit shocked by this. “Where are you going?” he asked. “I mean, you’d kind of stick out like a sore thumb in all those dwarven cities.”

“I don’t care,” Astrid stated bluntly, and then she was silent.

“So...” Monty said, trying to think of what to say. “I mean, I can kind of sympathize with you, Astrid. Once you’re in that position when you know that the man’s going to die either way, and it’s up to you... It’s not a very good position to be in in the first place... and after having done the deed, your feeling of guilt is understandable... I... I don’t know what to say, Astrid.”

“You always have something to say about things like this,” Astrid said.

“Yeah, when it’s a random person in the paper that we’re discussing about in relation to theology,” Monty said. “But not when it’s my own sister, I... I’m kind of speechless, Astrid, but...” He squinted. “No; you shouldn’t go.”

“Why not?” Astrid snapped.

“You can’t run away forever,” Monty said delicately. “You won’t be able to escape your remembrance of the deed, Astrid. It’s going to follow you like a ghost, continually haunting you. Even when you think you’ve escaped the guilt of your sin, you’re not going to be able to until you confront it and deal with it head on. Until then, you’ll just be being chased by the remembrance of it. You might be fine in a new place for a couple weeks, or months at the most. But you won’t be able to escape it, Astrid. You can’t run away forever.”

“But then...” Astrid asked, looking desperate. “What can I do?”

“Repent,” Monty said. “Realize the guilt of your action, and –“ And, suddenly, Monty heard a foot step behind him. And then there was a sound of a gun being loaded.

“I suggest that you don’t try any funny moves, either of you,” a voice said. “Or else you’ll get a taste of this.”

Part XXVII: Exterior Conflict, Interior Conflict

Amanela 11th, 114 A.U.

Number 994 slowly tried to regain conscience slowly. There was a terrific pain in the back of his head, and for a bit, Number 994 couldn't remember what had happened. And then he felt the burn down the center of his palm and remembered all—leaping after the elf in the escape pod, being shot through the arm, getting his gloves taken away, and then shoved backwards to hit his head against the floor. Must've knocked him out.

“ATTENTION!” a loudspeaker blared from outside. “THE ELF REBEL AND THE ORC 994 ARE COMMANDED TO CEASE AND DESIST THIS REBELLION!” *What? I'm not helping the elf!*

Rule 3: Never, ever give up, no matter what the odds

Quickly standing up, trying to ignore the pain in his hand, Number 994 leapt forward at the elf. So what the elf would crush him in physical combat. Maybe he could dislodge him enough so that the chasing defense force would get him. At least, Number 994 assumed they were chasing him—he couldn't think about what else was shooting at them. Falling through the air, Number 994 grabbed the elf's neck with both hands and squeezed.

The elf jerked back and grabbed his gun as he fell back, trying to twist around. “Get off of me, you idiot!” he yelled. Number 994 knew he couldn't win it with the elf having the gun, so as the elf fell, he leapt forward, moving his legs apart to jump over the elf, and reached out for his gloves so that he could conduct electricity to nullify the elf. Unfortunately, the elf was too quick.

Number 994 felt the elf grab the end of the shirt and pull back. Not strong enough to resist, Number 994 halted in his motion and fell back, landing hard on top of the elf. With a quick move, the elf kicked the orc off of him, scooting back and pointing the gun at the elf, aiming at his head. And then an explosion racked the pod.

Number 994 flew against the side as the escape pod spun, while the elf's hand snaked backwards to grab the wheel. He seemed to be trying to steer but to no avail—the shot had broken the controls. Number 994 smiled coldly as he stood up.

“THE ORC AND ELF HAVE NOT STOPPED. THEREFORE, THEIR LIVES ARE FORFEIT AS TRAITORS TO THE MOTHERESCAPE POD AND WILL BE DESTROYED!”

“I'm not a traitor!” Number 994 yelled.

“They can't hear you,” the elf snapped, keeping a close eye on the orc while he tried to steer the vehicle away from the chasing defense force. “Dang it! The thing's broken!”

“I can fix it,” Number 994 said. “I'll get us away from here.” Number 994 inwardly grinned. This elf was going to die.

“Why would you suddenly help me!” the elf said, frantically spinning the wheel as it quickly descended. Another explosion was heard in the back of the escape pod.

“You heard them—they think I’m a rebel and my life is forfeit with them,” Number 994 said. “Figure might as well try to live.”

The elf gazed at him suspiciously. Number 994 moved forward. “We’re going to crashland,” he said, and grabbed his gloves. The elf didn’t resist, but merely pointed his gun at him as Number 994 placed his gloved hands on the controls. Sending electric probes through the metal, he moved his hands to create link points to the controls and sent a surge of electric current to it, instantly connecting mind and motherboard. Removing one hand, with the other he readjusted and reflowed electricity around the broken points to his hand to steer. He mentally thought and the airescape pod shifted to the right, narrowly avoiding being blown up. Number 994 was in charge of the escape pod. And then, without looking at the elf, he briefly stopped controlling the escape pod to send a thundering bolt of lightning at this rebellious elf. He missed with the bolt, but a sidecurrent of lightning still caught him.

The elf gave a cry as he was flung back against the cabin. Number 994 quickly looked back. The elf’s head was bleeding and his gun was worthless at this point. Regaining control of the escape pod, while keeping an eye on the elf, he steered more to the right and worked to avoid the gun bullets while slowly trying to mentally turn on the loudspeakers. Finally, he found their electronic point and turned them on.

“THIS IS NUMBER 994!” he cried out. A huge gust of wind suddenly hit him from behind, but Number 994 thought nothing of it. “I HAVE REGAINED CONTROL OF THE ESCAPE POD FROM THE REBEL! I AM NOT ASSISTING THE REBEL. I NOW SEEK TO RETURN THE TRAITOR TO THE MOTHERESCAPE POD!”

“I’M KIDDING!” the elf roared. Number 994 swore heavily and turned around to see the elf, having grabbed the two emergency jet packs, wearing one, and having the other in his hand. He was standing near the wide-open escape hatch, and Number 994 could see the Motherscape pod defense force pouring down upon them. Blood trickled down the elf’s head. The elf grinned and the Number 994’s heart seemed to freeze, as he realized that he should have been paying more attention to the torrent of air that had been hitting him.

“Good bye!” the elf said, and, dropping the extra jet pack, flung himself out of the back, quickly descending from sight. Too late, Number 994 saw a barrage coming toward the underside of the escape pod. With a huge explosion, Number 994 felt an elephant thunder through his mind as all of the electronics he was connected to were violently disconnected and broken. It was as if someone had ripped his mind in two.

Number 994 was flung back against the glass windshield of the escape pod as it plummeted, no longer able to be in control. Number 994 slammed back against the wall and looked up just in time to see another barrage coming toward him. And then the escape pod hit something in the front of it. The glass shattered, and Number 994 fell, seeing a tree above him and the escape pod. The escape pod exploded in a ball of fire. And then Number 994 hit the ground.

Part XXVIII: Separate Too Long

Date: Amanela 18th, 114 A.U.

Oldin hung up his coat as he shut the front door, walking into the kitchen. For the first time in ages, he was home on time and would be able to talk with Jroldin. The next day was to be his Naming Day. Oldin rubbed his head. He had taken out a lot of his busy work schedule, what with Astrid trying to get deeper in her spy network and more investigations and all, but he had gotten everything set up at the Cathedral and had gotten all of the nearby relatives and such. For some odd reason, the priests there had recognized Jroldin and said that he'd been coming quite often to the Great Cathedral as of late and had been talking with some of the priests. Oldin didn't quite know what to think of that.

Jroldin had been acting strange as of late, what with the circlet he thought was on his head and all. It was probably long due for the two of them to talk, both of recent events, and of what Jroldin wanted to do in the future. Oldin felt guilty; he hadn't talked with Jroldin at all about what Jroldin wanted to do after Naming Day. At the very least, he had been able to pull some strings to have the whole day of tomorrow off.

"I'm home!" Oldin called out, while opening a cupboard to where he had stashed away some food to have dinner with Jroldin. He had actually managed to go to the store and grab some stuff earlier. Oldin overturned the pot to where he had hidden it, but was met with nothing. Jroldin had found it first. Oldin sighed, and laughed a bit, before turning around.

"Jroldin?" He was met with the silence of the house. Oldin frowned and cocked his head. He would have thought that Jroldin would have been here by now. A beep emitted from the answering machine and Oldin walked over. Oldin pressed the button on the answering machine to listen.

"Greetings Jroldin, this is Governor Astrid," the voice began. Oldin looked at it in shock. Governor Astrid wanted to speak with Jroldin? "A new expert came in who wanted you to see the new star; he said that because the prophesy spoke of it, he thought that you should see it. We also brought in the elf, and thought it would be best to see it together. Brother Tomas will be over to pick you up around midnight. I apologize for the late time, but to see the star, it will take a while to get through security and stuff to get outside. If there are any problems with this, please call me or Brother Tomas. Thank you." And with that, it ended.

Oldin leaned against the wall, trying to comprehend what had happened. Not only did Jroldin seem to have met with Governor Astrid and some priest, that he seemed to know, but they were also arranging him to go outside the mountain to see some star. And a prophesy! What the heck did Jroldin have to do with a prophesy? Jroldin hated those things... And to go outside the mountain... Oldin had never done that, and he didn't want to think about all the strings that the Governor would have to pull to get Jroldin out there. And Governor Astrid was doing all this for Jroldin? Oldin put his hand on the phone. He had been apart from his son too long. It was time to call Governor Astrid.

“Ah, Master Jroldin...” the man said. “Please, sit down in front of me...”

Jroldin looked at the man sitting behind the desk and then, slowly sat down in the chair. “What do you want?”

“I am the one asking the questions here,” the man said sharply. “And you’re the one who’ll be doing the answering.” A beeper in front of him buzzed, and he quickly looked down. “Ah good,” he said. “It appears that Astrid has checked her mail box... but never mind that for now.” He looked back up at Jroldin. “What do you know of the prophecy that you seem to be a part of?”

“You seem to know a lot about me,” Jroldin said. “You trying to write an article for some celebrity magazine?”

The man’s eyes narrowed. “This is no time for jokes!” he snapped. “My business is of no concern to you.”

“I’m hungry,” Jroldin said. “Could we perhaps stop this interrogation for a bit so that I can eat? I always think better on a full stomach.”

“No,” the man snapped. “What do you know of the prophecy?”

“Well, the Governor recites it every year, so you should know the prophecy,” Jroldin said. “And you already know that I am a part of it. What are you, a stalker or something?”

The man leapt up, banging his fist against the table. “You are being an impeccable idiot!” he snapped, seething, and then calmed down a bit to go back to his still voice. “You will answer my questions or there will be consequences,” he said firmly. “So how about I get a bit more specific. Are you going to go along with Astrid and the prophesy?”

“Why shouldn’t I,” Jroldin said. “If I do, that means I get to be part of a team beating bad guys. You are a bad guy, right? I thought it might be fun to get to beat you up with a big group of friends and all, and-”

The man drew up a gun from beneath his desk, and slowly placed it on the table. Jroldin stopped midsentence. The man acted like nothing had changed. “What do you know about your dad and his case?”

“What’s the gun for?” Jroldin asked. “You trying to threaten me by its presence.”

The man glared at him. “Why-”

“Yeah, my dad trained me to be too smart for you,” Jroldin said. “He knew that sometime I would be kidnapped to use against him. You do know he has a tracker on me, don’t you?”

The man looked surprised. “What?”

“Aw, crumbs,” Jroldin said. “I forgot to mention it when your goons kidnapped me. Yeah, he has a tracer on me so he can always find me if I was kidnapped. He’s probably coming to get me with all his big guns and stuff.”

“Stupid tracer,” the man said and swore, pressing a buzzer.

“Trying to get it off me?” Jroldin asked. “My dad will still be able to find my last location and find your all-too secret hideout. Kind of fun, huh? Anyways, if you want my tracer, it’s right behind my ear. Figured might as well save you the trouble of looking so this gets over soon.” Two men came in the room.

“The kid has a tracer on him,” the man behind the desk said. “He says its behind his ear. That probably isn’t the only one. Strip him and search for any other tracers, then put him and the priest in a car. We have to leave the hideout. I have other business to take care of. Now move on it!”

“Yes, sir.”

Part XXIX: Emperor Jaigran

Date: Amanela 12th, 114 A.U.

“All Hail Emperor 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 Arquenial!” the herald called out, and all those present in the throne room fell to their knees to bow down to Emperor Jaigran of the elves, all except the two erect rebel elves, who only stood the taller. Before them, Emperor Jaigran sat upon his throne, two pure white wings bursting out behind him.

Flyte genes ran throughout the elven race, and one to two out of every thousand elves was gifted with wings, which began to grow when they were three, and came to fruition when an elf came of age at ten. They then stayed with the elf the whole life before withering, decaying, and falling off around the age of forty five, which was shortly before when an elf generally died of old age. Emperor Jaigran was an exception to this rule, having already lived nearly one hundred and fifty years and still showing no signs of old age. Many rumors abounded to why he had not yet died, but it was clear that he wasn't planning on dying anytime soon.

Emperor Jaigran rose from his white ivory throne and slowly strode forward. He was small for an elf, being only four feet high and thus a dwarf to the usual-seven foot elves. However, his size did nothing to lessen his intimidating presence. As he walked down the aisle toward the two chained rebels, elves and orcs moved to the side, not wishing to be anywhere close to him. They had all heard stories of his rage.

“So,” Emperor Jaigran said as he strode forward. “You would not bow down to your Lord and Emperor?”

“I would never bow to one as murderous as you until I lost complete sense of my body,” the male elf spat, although Emperor Jaigran noticed a twinge in his eyes. Emperor Jaigran noticed many things.

“Have not my men worked on you throughout the night?” Emperor Jaigran asked, seeing the bags under their eyes. “Tell me, do you really want to endure that again?” Both elves subconsciously winced, and fear was evident upon their faces.

“We got much information from these two rebels,” Unyih Garum said in a gravelly voice. “By the time we were done with them, information was spewing out of their mouths to keep their wretched skin untouched by our methods.”

Emperor Jaigran noted the shame on their faces and laughed. “Come now,” he said. “There is no point in denying the fact that you fell to it. What shame is there in telling the truth

when all your companions have been destroyed? Your cause is hopeless and your lives are in the palm of my hand.”

“You can break our bodies, but you can’t break our spirits,” the female elf said softly.

“Can I not?” Emperor Jaigran asked. “If you spoke the truth, then why did you give in to our torture? Your words may speak one thing, but your actions speak another.” He laughed and put his hand on the female elf’s chin, despite her struggling. “What is your name?”

When she refused to speak, Unyih Garum answered. “Her name is Cortna, zar,” he said.

“Cortna,” Emperor Jaigran said, a touch of honey flowing from his soft-speaking lips. His voice was soft, even though the words he spoke were not. “I could break you, do you know that?” Cortna averted her gaze. “Ah yes,” he continued firmly. “I could break your body and spirit so that you were in total subjection to me. You could not resist it. I could make you so that you no longer knew what reality was. Do you think you could resist it? Of all the people I have tried it on, only one woman resisted it, a past companion by the name of Astrid, and she was unusual.”

Emperor Jaigran watched her eyes. “Do you wonder that I admit my one defeat?” he asked. “It would appear that you think me as a lying scoundrel. But that is untrue. Truth is the one thing that keeps the world alive. Truth reigns supreme under my domain, and while I speak with you, I will not lie, and neither will you, unless you want your skin flayed and bloodied. Tell me, Cortna, do you want to be broken?”

A slow tear trickled out of Cortna’s closed eyes, and she did not answer.

“Swear allegiance to me,” Emperor Jaigran said. “Or I will first slowly deal with your friend here, and then I will deal with you. I *will* break your spirit if you do not relent.”

A sob burst out from Cortna’s throat and then she began to weep. She made as if to collapse, but the guards on either side of her held her up.

“Already you have lost your resolute spirit,” Emperor Jaigran softly murmured. “What is the point of this prolonging agony? Swear allegiance to my name!” He turned to her companion. “And what of you? Will you follow the same fate as her?”

The elf kept a stoic face. “You claim to want truth above all else,” he said firmly. “And yet you threaten to make it so that we know no truth by threatening to cause us to no longer know what is reality. But you underestimate us, elf. We are the same kind as you, and we are the same with our brethren down on the earth, and even with these orcs, who you secretly treat as underlings. We are not the Master Race, and you are the lowest creature ever to be born, and to the dust will you die with a wretched death.”

Emperor Jaigran smiled. “Really,” he said. “Your confidence betrays you. If you have not already in the night’s ordeal, you will be recanting your words quicker than your mouth can move.” He turned to Cortna. “Well?” he asked. “Swear allegiance, or think about the methods that you experienced last night. And play them in your mind again, but seven times worse, and done to your companion before your eyes. What will it be?”

Cortna sobbed and slowly looked up, tears falling down her face and trickling down. Another sob escaped her mouth and she spoke. “I...” she said, and then she began to further sob as Emperor Jaigran and all of his men watched. Behind Jaigran, some elves laughed mockingly.

“I swear allegiance,” Cortna softly whispered.

“Louder,” Emperor Jaigran commanded. “And fully.”

“I swear allegiance to Emperor Jaigran,” Cortna said louder, as tears trickled down her face. “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 Arquenian; I swear allegiance and bend my mind, my spirit, and my full being to his one and supreme will, this I swear.”

There was silence before Emperor Jaigran spoke. “Well done,” he softly said. “But not good enough. Ah yes, I can see your face, and I can see through your eyes, those twin gateways to the mind. There is yet resistance in you, is there not?” He paused. “Guards!” he yelled. “Take the two of them back into the doctoring cells. I care not for the life of the male elf. Use him to break her completely and totally to my will. And when she is broken, bring her back to me. Thus saith the Emperor.”

Part XXX: Over Plain

Date: Amanela 17th, 114 A.U.

A small slick enclosed cruiser that was a bit bigger than the hover cars that were commonly used before the Great Upheaval, and was also better armored and manned with guns, flew ten feet above the grassy plains of the Renior. Inside of the vehicle were two goblins and a Sla'ad.

“These plains used to mark a constant feuding point between the elves and the humans,” Reynyagn was saying. “The elves’ lands were to the west, while the humans in the east, and this was where their boundaries met and intermingled. Usualy it was only diplomatic struggles as opposed to wars, but it was still a constant feud before...” Reynyagn paused.

“You know a lot about this sort of stuff,” Flek casually remarked while moving a piece in his game of Regicide against Reklen. Reklen was the only person that Flek could really call a good friend, and thus he was the only person Flek wanted to bring with him. Reynyagn was watching the game and sometimes commenting on their moves.

“I should,” Reynyagn said bitterly. “I watched the whole drama play out of the elves’ attack, though in prison.”

“In prison?” Flek asked.

“It was the only reason I escaped the Great Massacre of the Sla'ad,” Reynyagn said. “I watched Falshorn and all of my companions die; they only took me hostage, having scattered and destroyed all the other Sla'ad, for specimen use I suppose and such. Fortunately for my sake, I suppose, after capturing me, they didn't do much with me except to leave me alone.” There was heavy bitterness in his voice. “Sometimes they came to talk with me or question me, but not often. Only one human seemed to care about me, and she was specially targeted and killed by the elves for her high government position.”

“I'm sorry,” Flek said, making a move.

“Do not be overly sorry for me,” Reynyagn said. “I may have been in prison, but they gave me a fair amount of freedom in how much information I could absorb. It was because of the readings and studies and watchings of the affairs of them that I got a foundation to be able to lead the scattered Sla'ad. Without that, I do not think I would have been able to keep us alive and under the threat and watching eyes of the elves in the sky.”

“Well that's all good, I suppose then...” Flek said, pondering the position on the board.

“Where do you think the star leads?” Reklen asked, his enjoyment of his advanced position in the board obvious.

“I have been trying to track it,” Reynyagn said after making sure that the vehicle’s automatic straight course would still be going well. “According to my estimates, it appears to be pointing north to the mountains.”

“Wonder what we’ll find there,” Reklen said. “The other members of your prophesy team?”

“That’s what I’m hoping,” Reynyagn said. “Back in the old days, the dwarves had control and rule over the mountains. Mayhaps we will still find some of them in the North. I pray that they have not been completely exterminated by the elves. If we find no one, then I suppose that we’re just going to have to set up camp there and wait until we find someone. The prophesy said that the star would bring all of the members together, and I trust the prophesy to eventually bring them all here. Depending on how things play out, I’m hoping to hit the mountains in four days or so. If my memory suffices me, though, I think there’s a good bit of jungle around the mountains, so we’ll have to see how that is.” At that moment, a beeping noise began. Reynyagn moved to the controls as Flek made a move on the board.

“Flek!” Reynyagn said. “Reklen—come up here.” The two moved up to the front to see some sort of air ship in the distance.

“An elven craft?” Flek asked.

“And not just any elven craft,” Reynyagn said. “Look at the size of it that’s on the radar! That isn’t any of their flying cities, and for it to be that size and not to be one of their cities means one thing: the Mothership.” A chill ran down Flek’s spine. He had heard many stories about the Mothership, the head of the Imperial Fleet of the Elves that roamed the skies searching for any survivors down below to either kill them or enslave them in one of their work cities.

“It’s coming toward us by the looks of it,” Reynyagn said. “And there are usually a lot of smaller vehicles flanking it and looking for people. So there is no way that we are going to let ourselves get anywhere close to that beast. So we’re going to turn to the east away from them and pray that they don’t notice us on the radars.”

“This machine has our radar-scrambling signals,” Flek commented.

“Mayhaps it will lead them off,” Reynyagn said. “Mayhaps it won’t. You forget that they now know that your people live in the forest and that their signals aren’t reaching them. I wouldn’t be surprised if they’ve already figured out that somethings wrong.”

“Wait!” Flek said. “You don’t think that the Mothership is heading towards-”

“You can pray that they don’t,” Reynyagn said. “The Mothership would indeed be useless for its ship since the trees in your forest would block off them using the Mothership to attack—at least—it would very much slow it down, but the amount of men on it...” Reynyagn

seemed to ponder it. “At the very least, I’ll send a message to Lord Freglak,” he said, sitting down at the computer. They’d gotten an operating system to correspond with Lord Freglak through a satellite in space that had been put up before the Great Upheaval and had been since long-forgotten. “Although I’m not sure if there’s anything he would do. In the Mothership’s one hundred and fifteen year history, it hasn’t lost any battles. And it’s won huge battles, and razed great cities. When thinking about the Mothership, remember this. It is because of that monstrosity that the elves were able to conquer Arquenian. And it is with that that they rule the skies.”

Part XXXI: Strangers Thrown Together

Date: Amanela 19th, 114 A.U.

Astrid groggily woke up to see her vision constantly focusing and refocusing as she tried to figure out where she was. The coldness of the room, the hardness of the rock, and the unfamiliar people around her was her first clue that she wasn't in her bed at home. And then it hit her. Literally.

“Ow!” Astrid said.

“Sorry,” the dwarf said. “Didn't see ya there. What are you doing on the ground anyways?”

“I was sleeping,” Astrid said, sitting up.

The dwarf looked at her floppy mattress nearby. “I kind of thought that was what that was for,” he said, gesturing to the mattress.

“Look, I move in my sleep, ok?” Astrid said. “And I just woke up here; I have no idea where I am or whatever.”

“Ah,” the dwarf said. “The name's Jroldin. You're in a nicely caged prison cell, courtesy of whoever kidnapped us here. Who are you?”

“Astrid,” Astrid replied. “I'm a nurse.”

“How'd you get to have your brother as a spy?” Jroldin asked.

Astrid's eyes open wide, suddenly awake. “How did you know he was a spy?”

“The guards were talking about it,” Jroldin said, and he shrugged and then grinned. “That and I looted his pockets.” He flashed an FRI badge in her face. Astrid inwardly groaned.

“Anyways,” Jroldin said, “How'd you get the honor of being brought to this cell. The guards seemed pretty ticked at you. They said they were going to have to deal with you. What'd you do to offend them?”

“I'd rather not talk about it,” Astrid mumbled.

“Just try and make them really ticked at you,” Jroldin said. “And then the questioning goes easy.”

“But I don't want to make them ticked at me,” Astrid protested.

“Well, not in that way,” Jroldin said. “But I mean-”

“You’re a nurse named Astrid?” Brother Tomas said, stepping up.

“Yeah,” Astrid said, wondering how a brown-robed priest got in here. “Why?”

“Yeah, why?” Jroldin asked.

Brother Tomas pushed his spectacles up his nose. “Remember Jroldin?” he asked. “The prophesy? A woman named Astrid? And a healer in the party? Doesn’t it seem a bit coincidental that you could meet up like that? Mayhaps the prophesy is calling you together!”

“What prophesy?” Astrid asked.

“Xavier’s prophesy!” Brother Tomas said. “About the team of seven who would save the world from destruction!”

Astrid stared at Brother Tomas. “You think I’m a member of the prophesy?”

“Well, maybe not,” Brother Tomas said. “But I would not automatically discount it. After all-”

“What’s up with the glowing crown?” a voice said from behind, and Monty entered into the flickering firelight.

“What crown?” Astrid asked.

“The crown on the dwarf’s head, of course,” Monty said. “The freaking thing glows! I can’t believe the guards didn’t confiscate it from him.”

“I don’t see any crown...” Astrid said, wondering what had happened to her brother.

“Long story,” Brother Tomas interjected. “Basically not everyone can see his crown. But, given that this cell is probably bugged-”

“They already know about the crown, remember?” Jroldin asked. “They bugged me.”

“Still-” Brother Tomas said. “It still isn’t wise to be giving them a continuous stream of information, and-”

“Ah, why, Brother Tomas!” Monty said, stepping forward to shake Brother Tomas’ hand. “It’s so nice to see you. I must say that I am a bit confused about why you are in a cell, but, I suppose it might be nice to see you all the same. Oh, and I’ll take that back,” he said, snagging his badge out of Jroldin’s hands. “I wonder why they didn’t take it when they searched me, though...”

“I dunno... the guards seem rather stupid if you ask me, as well as whoever is listening to the recording they are playing since they bugged the cell,” Jroldin said. “You know, they

seem to lose their temper a lot, too. I was talking with one of their leaders, and boy, was he ever angry.”

“It doesn’t seem wise to be getting the leader angry...” Monty said, and he put a finger to his lips as he reached up the wall.”

“My dad taught me all my tricks about dealing with nasty gang leaders and such,” Jroldin said. “I suppose that also means I outrank you?”

“What?” Monty said, removing something from the wall. “I don’t get your... oh...”

“Yep,” Jroldin said. “Remove the ‘jr’ from my name, and I’m Oldin, leader of the FRI, and giving me a higher rank than you.”

“Very funny...” Monty said, and he looked around. “I wonder where we are.” Putting a finger to his lips, he pointed at an object in his hand—a bug. Monty crushed it.

“Fraid I can’t help you there,” Jroldin said. “I asked, but he got rather mad. Although that might have been because I included the timeshare comment...”

“There are better things to do than to make people who hold your life in their hands to be ticked at you,” Monty said.

“I suppose,” Jroldin said. “But-”

At that moment, there was a loud explosion up ahead. Running feet and gunshots soon fired. Monty instinctively ducked and reached for where his gun would have been if it hadn’t been confiscated. “What was that?”

“Oh that?” Jroldin asked, leaning relaxingly against the wall. “That’s probably my dad crashing in to break me out. See, when they searched me for my dad’s tracers, they didn’t search me terribly well to see if I had a second tracer, and so they didn’t find the one in my mouth. Oh well; I suppose there are worse things in life than the bad guys being thwarted in their evil plans. Have fun failing, Mr. Bad Guy bugging us! I’ll see you in the jail cell!”

“Well, I just kind of removed the bug...” Monty muttered. “So he ain’t going to hear that.”

“Awww...”

Part XXXII: Nemesis Unite!

Date: Amanela 15th, 114 A.U.

Zarien was rudely awakened as his body jerked to the side. Eyes wide open, Zarien looked up into the eyes of the orc.

“Hello, rebel elf,” the orc said. And then a web of lightning shot out from his hand, connecting with various points of Zarien’s body. As Zarien went rigid, the orc lifted him in the air.

“You... were... dead...” Zarien forced out of his unwilling lips.

“Not quite,” the orc snapped. “And the Mothership is gone! I have searched for it for days and have not found it!” His eyes narrowed. “And you’ll pay for it!”

“Wait!” Zarien forced out. “Don’t kill me!”

“Give me one good reason not to kill you for ruining my life!” the orc snapped.

“Your... life... isn’t... ruined...” Zarien said, arching his back in pain. “Join... me... you... may... hate... me... but... together...”

“Why should I help your worthless skin!” the orc said. A bolt of lightning later and Zarien was thrown against the tree. Zarien collapsed and looked up.

“Any suspicious moves, and I’ll hold you in the air again,” the orc snapped.

“Two... are... better than one... in survival,” Zarien gasped out. “And there.. are no longer... any rivalries... between us... now that the elves are gone... right?”

The orc seemed to think about this for a moment. “And wait for you to backstab me.”

“That... would be foolish...” Zarien said.

“I’m not going to be doublecrossed,” the orc said bluntly.

“Your chances of survival... are better with me...” Zarien said. “Please... keep my gun if you don’t trust me...”

The orc thought about that for a moment, and then picked up Zarien’s gun from where it lay nearby. “Deal, elf,” he said. “But the moment I spot an elven patrol, you’re mine.”

“Whatever...” Zarien said, slowly standing up as he leaned against the tree. *I’ll just escape the moment I see an elven patrol...* “What’s your name?”

“Names are for the uncivilized,” the orc said. “For those who aren’t organized enough to have a better system. I am Number 994, the nine hundred and ninety fourth most powerful orc in Arquenian.”

“You don’t... have a name?...” Zarien asked, still a bit breathless from being thrown against the tree.

“Names are for those races that are disorganized,” Number 994 said.

“What-ever...” Zarien said. “So I’m disorganized. What’s next?”

“Your friends are all ours and dead,” Number 994 said.

The reminder stung Zarien. “Would you shut up, if you have any feelings at all?” he snapped. “Look, I just lost all of my friends and all you’re doing is gloating.”

“I...” Number 994 said, but he was then silent.

Zarien wiped his face. “I’ve hunted some the last couple days out here, but don’t have infinite bullets in my gun.”

“Animals are easily stunned,” Number 994 said.

“I guess we won’t starve then,” Zarien said. “It would be good to find some civilization though...”

Number 994 narrowed his eyes. “I suppose you wouldn’t mean elven civilization.”

“I was more hoping for a forgotten tribe out here,” Zarien said. “More civilization than those blasted elves got. Why do you even care for the elves? All they do is exalt themselves over you.”

“We are equal with the elves,” Number 994 said, though his voice betrayed a bit of doubt. “There will be no tribes either. The Mothership’s radars would have picked them up; they would just as easily have been captured or killed.”

“There *are* mountains up ahead,” Zarien said. “Maybe the Mothership didn’t go so far and we can find dwarves.”

“They’d shoot us on sight, genius,” Number 994 stated bluntly.

“I can live with that,” Zarien said. “We’ll find some way for them to accept us. Now are you going to go along with me, or not?”

The orc muttered something under his breath that sounded akin to ‘I was supposed to be the leader here.’ “Fine,” the orc said. “But don’t think that you’re so cocky and in charge here, rebel.”

“I won’t, I won’t...” Zarien said. “Name’s Zarien, by the way, as we’re actually personal enough to have names, which is much more than what I can say for an orc.”

A small shock ran through Zarien’s bones. “Careful what you say, rebel.”

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“It would really be nice if I could actually call you a name instead of a number every time,” Zarien grumbled. “Don’t orcs have nicknames?”

“Rule Seventy Seven: An orc’s sole purpose is to serve the greater good to the expense of his own good,” Number 994 said. “Any personal item, such as a name, is better nil than there.”

“Do you really believe that?”

“Course I do,” Number 994 said, though there was a bit of hesitancy to his voice.

“Just admit it and rebel,” Zarien said. “It’s not like anyone can stop you out here. We can start anew—make a new place without the constraints of everything old.” The orc stopped and paused. Zarien turned, and the orc stared in the distance, a sign of hope tingling in his eyes.

But then he shook his head. “The Emperor’s fleet would in due time find us and kill us,” Number 994 said. “Apart from the Emperor, there is no life.”

“Yeah?” Zarien asked. “Well I’ll be the first to find life outside of the Emperor. If I do that, then will you join us? Or would you rather be alone trying to find your way again.”

“Well...” Number 994 said.

“Yeah, yeah, I know the answer...” Zarien grumbled. “You would like it, but you can’t say anything against the greater good and what nots and-”

“Elves!” Number 994 cried.

“What-” Zarien began, but then he was flung against a tree.

Number 994 pointed with one hand, and kept Zarien electrically pressed against the tree with the other. “A speeder! The elves have come! I am rejoined!”

Part XXXIII: Takedown

Date: Amanela 19th, 114 A.U.

“Move, move, move!” Oldin yelled into his walkie-talkie as he shot down another hapless guard. “Swarm the hideout, grab the leader, and get the prisoners! Now move!” Oldin didn’t usually participate in the forefront of their missions, but with his son’s life at stake, nothing was going to keep him away from the forefront of their mission. After speaking with the Governor last week, he likewise had the Araelian Guard working with the FRI. Astrid was very frantic to keep his son from death.

Stepping forward, Oldin quickly leapt into the hole that their explosion had created and pressed himself against the wall of the hall way, automatically aiming his gun in the right direction, before inching down the wall, keeping an eye on his wrist device that showed where he and Jroldin were. At long last, all of his training with Jroldin about what to do when captured and all of his precautions against it had born fruit. Nevertheless, Oldin would have been happier if all of his training with Jroldin had been wasted than for this to happen.

“Clear the records!” the man screeched. “Detonate the explosives and get out of here! Fred and Mike! You come with me to get the prisoners! Now move!” Brushing past the men who were putting fuses alongside the doorway, he hurried toward the staircase to their makeshift prison. Stupid guards. Stupid Jroldin. Thanks to the smart-alek son of the FRI head, their whole division of the mission had been compromised and blown open. It was thanks to the second bug that they had placed in the cell that had cued them into the reason for their compromised cover. He would have strangled Jroldin for this if not for the fact that the boss still wanted him. But there were other ways of taking revenge.

“I hear footsteps,” Jroldin said. “Someone’s coming down the stairs.”

“Someone to put a bullet in the back of our heads no doubt, or to transport us to another facility, if they have one!” Monty said. “They’re not just going to let us get away scot-free if they’re coming down for us!” From below, they heard explosions and sounds of fighting. Suddenly, an armed figure burst in through the prison doors, followed by two other men. Jroldin recognized the man as his questioner.

The man pointed his gun at them. “No wrong moves!” he screamed out. “Or else!” He turned to the other men. “The dwarf is the only important one. The others-”

“Move!” Monty yelled, and tackled his sister to the ground as bullets whizzed overhead. At the same moment, the floor collapsed.

Jroldin flailed his limbs as he fell through the floor with Brother Tomas. A moment later, and Monty had leapt after them, holding a struggling Astrid. Jroldin hit the ground hard and rolled to the side, apparently in the middle of a gun fight. On one side, multiple members of the Araelian guard collapsed. Jroldin spun his head to see a couple gang members a couple feet away—two holding guns, the other holding a long box made out of some strange-looking material.

Ignoring the pain in his right side, Jroldin leapt up and leapt towards the nearest gun-man, still a bit dazed from the explosion that had blown apart the hall way. Unfortunately, the gunman wasn't totally dazed. As he neatly sidestepped Jroldin, Jroldin instead tackled the middle man that was holding the strange box

The man collapsed and dropped his box as bullets whistled overhead. Jroldin glanced to the side to see Monty leaping after a man while Astrid moved back and Brother Tomas made for Jroldin. Grabbing the box, Jroldin leapt up and smashed it against one of the gunmen.

The box slammed into the man, but only surprised the man. As Jroldin stumbled forward, he felt something jut forward out of the bottom of the box. It seemed to be an iron pole. Using it to grasp better, Jroldin slammed it again at the man, and, as the man fell back, the box broke.

The box flew away, part of the box melting, to reveal a corsha battle axe. But, instead of normal colored corsha, the axe head was golden. Just as Monty and Jroldin had taken down the two gunmen, a new troope came running around the corner—five gang members, readying their weapons.

Ignoring all else, Jroldin ran forward, swinging his axe, suddenly emboldened. As the bullets flew toward him, they seemed to move slower, and his aim more cleaner. As if by instinct, Jroldin sliced the bullets as they sped toward him, melting them with his axe. And, as the gunmen turned to leave, Jroldin swung forward with his axe

The weight of the axe surprised him, and Jroldin lurched forward along with the axe, cutting through a man and toppling forward, narrowly avoiding burning himself with the axe. As if by instinct, Jroldin swung the corsha axe up to block another shot. Two men toppled over, killed by Monty's shooting. *He must have taken a gun from one of those gunmen.*

Wishing that he had had foresight enough to do that, Jroldin rolled around and flung the axe, killing the remaining two gunmen. The corsha axehead sliced through them and went into the wall, its axehead going completely into the wall so that only the handle stuck out. *Oops.*

And then Jroldin saw the man pointing a gun right at him—the man that Jroldin had thought that Monty had killed. *Bigger oops.* And the man squeezed the trigger.

Part XXXIV: A Star Shall Lead Them

Date: Amanela 18th, 114 A.U.

“You’re... mad...” Zarien forced out as he tried to escape the electrical field that the orc had put him in. “Let... me... go!”

“Shut your clamour,” Number 994 said as he hailed the speeder.

At that moment, Zarien managed to move so that a tree was in between him and Number 994. As the electrical current fizzled, free, Zarien ignored the burning pain in his chest and, grabbing a long stick as a weapon, leapt out on the opposite side of the tree, readying the stick to thrust into the orc’s neck.

Number 994 turned and shot a bolt of lightning. Ducking, Zarien moved forward and leapt once more to come down upon the orc, smashing his makeshift spear into Number 994’s chest. Before he could do so, something hit him from up ahead. A wide net, its ends holding heavy metal balls, crashed into him, his feet catching and his body being pushed back so that he flew backwards onto the ground as the net closed around him.

Desperate, Zarien struggled to get out of the net, but it was too late. The speeder slowed to a halt near the orc, and someone leapt out. It was... a goblin?

Looking much too small to be a goblin, the goblin scurried forward and leapt on top of Zarien as it brandished a corsha dagger. “Your life is in our hands,” the goblin said.

“No!” Number 994 protested. “You’ve got the wrong person! I’m the rebel! It’s the orc that-”

“Don’t move, elf,” another voice said. Zarien turned to see two more figures coming toward him, the orc slowly following close behind. One of them was a goblin. The other was a tall dark form that made Zarien shiver. Could it be? He had heard stories about what Sla’ad were supposed to look like, but he had never imagined...

“Speak, elf,” the Sla’ad said. “We will not take your life without reason.”

“I am not Jaigran’s soldier,” Zarien snapped. “It is the orc who is your enemy here, and not I. I have been fighting against Jaigran and his Empire while mister orc here has been doing what he can to stop me.”

The Sla’ad turned to the orc. “Is this true?”

“If I wanted to kill the elf, I would have done so days ago,” Number 994 said slowly. “As is, after we escaped the MOthership, we have been together for the most part, just going who knows where, though partly after that blasted bright star in the sky.”

“You were attacking him when we arrived,” the taller goblin pointed out.

“I thought you were elves,” Number 994 replied curtly. “And I didn’t wish to die.”

No one spoke for a bit. “Just let me go,” Zarien said. “The orc has admitted my innocence. I think we can trust him as long as we don’t meet any other elves. I think.”

“The star...” the Sla’ad murmured.

“What?” Zarien asked.

“You were following the star,” the Sla’ad said.

“So?”

“An orc will help elf...” the Sla’ad murmured. “An orc and elf together following a star...”

“Your point?” Zarien asked.

“There is a prophesy,” the Sla’ad said. “One about the downfall of the greatest evil to rise in Arquenian and the only way to stop them. The Xavier Prophecy.” A chill ran down Zarien’s spine. He knew about the Xavier Prophecy, although the Emperor did his best to burn any copies of it.

“We too have been following the star,” the Sla’ad said. “I, Reynyagn, a Sla’ad perhaps to lead a group as well as one who saw a great slaughter. My companion, Flek, a goblin with great expertise who possibly is the warrior who seeks to lead. Only you...” He cocked his head. “The orc will help elf, yes... But which... Mayhaps one of you would be the betrayer...”

“And I lost them all,” Zarien said.

“Excuse me?”

“I lost them all,” Zarien said, painstakingly standing up while still in the net. “The prophesy said one would betray his friends and another would lose them all. Not less than a week ago, all of my friends were killed by an attack of the Emperor in the Mothership. If we can get the orc to betray his friends...” Number 994 didn’t seem particularly pleased by this proposition.

“The star will guide us,” Reynyagn said. “According to the prophesy, the star would gather the members of the prophesy together. Will this plan for the prophesy work? I see only one way of finding out whether or not we really are the members of the prophesy...”

“Follow the star north into the mountains,” Zarien said, gesturing to the mountains.

“Aye,” Reynyagn said. “According to my calculations, with the help of some charts on our machine, it seems that we must go far north beyond the mountains to where the star’s position on the earth would traditionally be held.”

“We go north then,” Zarien said, as the smaller goblin cut the ropes of the net that he was in.

“If your friend decides to come with us,” Flek remarked. “I mean, if he’s a traitor to the cause and is all for Emperor Jaigran and all.”

“I will come with you,” Number 994 said. “But I will make no promises about my allegiance and about where my proper place truly is.”

“The prophesy will sort it all out,” Reynyagn remarked. “If he’s good with coming with us...”

“We go forward,” Number 994 said.

Part XXXV: Naming Day

Date: Amanela 19th, 114 A.U.

A low hollow note sounded on the gong and Jroldin nervously shuffled his feet as he peeked out from behind the door at the small group of people gathered in the Great Cathedral. His heart was still racing a bit from nearly getting killed after a gunman tried to shoot him before the gunman realized that he had shot all of his bullets already.

After that hadn't been any less chaotic either. Between scourging the hideout of the gunmen, meeting up with his dad and learning that his dad had actually remembered about Naming Day, and being rushed out here, his heart was still racing. Brother Tomas was beside him, and Jroldin spotted Astrid and Monty out in the audience. Brother Tomas had wanted them to come to try and talk with them and Governor Astrid later, after the Naming Day ceremony. He was pretty convinced that Astrid was part of the prophesy. Jroldin watched as the doors to the sanctuary opened and Governor Astrid came in, followed by four guards and... an elf!

Jroldin remembered what Governor Astrid had said about finding an elf that possibly was a member of the prophesy, but still, to have an elf for his Naming Day ceremony... This fact only made Jroldin more nervous.

Jroldin slowly turned toward Brother Tomas who was standing beside him, waiting with him. "I'm so nervous," Jroldin said.

"Such feelings are not uncommon," Brother Tomas said.

"Yes, but..." Jroldin said, and he sighed. "I don't even know what I want my new name to be."

"Do you have any ideas?" Brother Tomas said. "Most people generally have some idea or another, or..."

"I never talked about it with my dad," Jroldin said. "And I don't know... I don't really have any good ideas..."

"Well, a name is a serious thing..." Brother Tomas said.

"Thanks," Jroldin said. "That's real encouraging."

"I'm sorry," Brother Tomas said. "I would give you some help, even some personal experience, but, being a human..."

"Yeah, I know..." Jroldin said, and he leaned back against the wall. "I just hope I can figure something out in time..."

“I’m sure you will,” Brother Tomas said reassuringly. Just then, Oldin came around the corner of the hall way on his left. Jroldin glanced to the right at the door leading to the sanctuary before turning back.

“Hello Jroldin,” Oldin said, wiping his brow. “Sorry I’m a bit late; I was meeting some people at the door.”

“That’s okay,” Jroldin said, and he pursed his lips. “I just...”

“What?”

“I dunno...” Jroldin said. “I just don’t know what I’m going to do up there—what I’m going to say, what name I’m going to make for myself, I...”

“You’ll do fine,” Oldin said kindly. “I myself didn’t come up with my name until I was asked to give it, and then it just came out of my mouth. Perhaps it will be the same for you.”

“Maybe...” Jroldin said, still a bit unsure.

“You’ll do fine,” Oldin said. He turned to Brother Tomas. “Are you ready?”

Brother Tomas nodded. “Everything in place.”

“Then if it’s fine with you and you’re ready enough,” Oldin said, gesturing to Jroldin. “Then we’ll begin.”

Jroldin breathed softly, for once actually enjoying every bit of a ceremony. But, throughout it between the dripping of oil upon his head and the long-winded speech by Brother Pietre, his mind racked for a possible name to give himself. Finally, Brother Tomas gestured to him, and Jroldin’s heart pounded. It was time for him to give the traditional speech. And at the end of it, to give his name.

“Greetings, all,” said Jroldin. “I... I’ve been thinking a good bit about what I should say here, and what I should give for my new name...” Jroldin paused. “I confess that I’m a bit frightened with choosing a new name, a name that will stick with me for the rest of my life. And I suppose the previous events of today between being kidnapped and being rescued and all of that doesn’t help with my nervousness.” Some people in the crowd laughed. “But,” Jroldin continued. “I suppose that I’m not just able to procrastinate here with my name like I have done so often with my homework.” A lot of people laughed in the crowd this time, and Jroldin smiled. “But I suppose that this isn’t something I can procrastinate like my homework. It’s something I need to do. And looking ahead to my future, seeing as a good many people think that I might be the dwarf in Xavier’s prophesy, I suppose that it looks like it *is* time for me to really grow up and become a man. And that’s what this day is supposed to be for a dwarf. To

become a man. To grow up.” Jroldin paused. “And to be honest, I’m not ready for this. And not because I don’t want to become a man. But because I’m not there yet. I’m ready, I think. But I’m not there yet.

“But I suppose that perhaps it doesn’t matter,” Jroldin said. “Perhaps the Naming Day is just supposed to point one ahead to something, even though he isn’t there yet, and so...” Jroldin took a deep breath, and in that moment he decided. “And so I will give a name to point me ahead for the thing which I seek. And so, as is customary with this Naming Day ceremony, my name is no longer Jroldin. This day my name is Jacob.”

“However, if you look at me, I am not a man. I am not close to being one. The Naming Day is to point me ahead... But how can I have a new name when I am not yet a man?” Jroldin paused. “Therefore, I look ahead to the day when I can inherit the name Jacob, but until then...” Jroldin paused. “Until then my name is Jroldin. Just Jroldin. Until the day cometh when I will inherit my new name. Then I will be Jacob. But for now I am Jroldin. Just Jroldin.”

Part XXXVI: The Xavier Team

Date: Amanela 20th, 114 A.U.

“So these are the great mountains in the north...” Flek said as the cruiser began to make its way on a winding route up the mountain that was already obscured by the darkness of the night.

“Not quite...” Reynyagn said. “There are greater mountains further north than these, although these are regarded by many as the northern mountains as few other than the dwarves, orcs, and a few elves ever ventured further north...”

“The orcs?” Flek said. “I know why the dwarves since they live here, but why...?”

“The orcs lived in the northern mountainous regions,” Reynyagn replied. “Although they had a few outposts and cities down here, south of the dwarven mountains, they stayed to themselves primarily north. The only ones who had contact with them was the dwarves, and the elves, seeing as their lands to the west went far enough North so that they had contact with them. It is likely for that reason that they, being the more reclusive of the races, were willing to join themselves with the orcs.”

“Ah, ok...” Flek said.

“We are not more reclusive than other races,” Number 994 stated.

“Perhaps, perhaps not,” Reynyagn said. “Perhaps what has been in the past is not the same in the present. However, I am no judge of the present; I have not seen many orcs or read anything about them now. But I do know the facts of the past, as cited by many well-known and reliable historians.”

“Does your knowledge explain to you why the Emperor has lived so long?” Zarien asked.

Reynyagn was silent for a moment. “The Emperor has indeed lived much longer than the average elf,” he said. “By far... As for why he has lived so long...” Reynyagn paused. “I do not know. I have heard rumors... inklings of things... but nothing conclusive, and so, I do not have any answer for you.”

“I wonder if there are any dwarves up here...” Reklen said.

“I hope so,” Flek said, joining in Reklen in gazing out the window.

“I would tend to doubt it...” Reynyagn said. “If the dwarves survived, they did so by staying hidden, not by staying out... and also given the darkness of the night-”

“What’s that?” Reklen said, gesturing to a light in the distance.

“You all ready?” Governor Astrid asked as she got into the old elevator.

“I suppose,” Jroldin said as he looked up at the ceiling. He moved back to make space for Brother Tomas, Astrid, Monty, and two guards. He stared back at Rider, the elf whom he had recently been introduced to: the elf whom Astrid thought could possibly be a member of the prophesy.

“Then we’ll go up,” Governor Astrid said, pushing a button. “We’ll go up to the surface, and once again see the night sky that has been hidden from us for so long.” The elevator doors closed and the elevator slowly made up its shaft—a path that it had not often travelled—up toward the surface far above—a freedom which so long ago had been taken from them.

“Keep your position on that moving light,” Flek said, eagerly moving up next to Zarien.

“I’m working on it, I’m working on it,” Zarien said, spinning the wheel to follow the light in a chase up the mountain. “This machine isn’t exactly made for quick chases though...”

“I’m trying to chart its course and what kind of machine it might be,” Reynyagn called from where he was at another part of the controls. “I may be able to get a reading on it.”

“Is there a way to get to the roof of this vehicle?” Number 994 asked, gesturing to the ceiling. “If we get close enough, I can safely take it down without hurting its inhabitants.”

“There’s a hatch in the back,” Reynyagn said without taking his eyes off of the controls. “You can get it up there and see if we can get close enough for you.”

“Will do,” Number 994 said, and he ran back to the hatch.

“Getting closer...” Zarien said as he spun the vehicle to try and keep up with their target’s erratic route.

“What is that?” Flek asked.

The elevator doors that had been concealed in the face of the mountain slowly opened and cool air slipped in to its passengers. And slowly, they stepped out into the plateau and the cold night air. To their right, shining in the star, was a bright blue star. Transfixed to the glow, as if moved by some outside force, Astrid and Jroldin stepped forward at the same moment.

“It’s...” Astrid said.

“It’s captivating,” the elf Rider said, stepping beside them. “It is the call of the star. And it is calling us for a purpose: to strike down the elven tyranny.”

The vehicle screeched to a halt, and slowly, Reynyagn stepped out, eyes captivated by the sight in front of him, as Flek, Zarien, and Number 994 followed him, Reklen following close behind.

In front of them, the electric blue star shone forth, illuminating the night sky, silhouetting the figures in front of it.

“It’s just a star...” Reklen mumbled.

“Yes,” Reynyagn said, stepping forward as the others followed him. “But it is so much more... It is calling the team toward them.”

“It... it is as if I know my destiny...” Zarien said. “That after all these days, I know what I should be doing.”

“A sense of duty non-conforming to the good for all orcs is wrong,” Number 994 said. “And yet...”

“It is our destiny,” Flek said, stepping forward toward the figures also looking to the star. “And it is a destiny we must embrace.”

The figures near the star turned toward them. “Who?” one began.

“We are the members of the Xavier Team,” Reynyagn said. “And we are here to fulfill our destiny. We are the hope of Arquenian.”

End of Book I

Book II: The Northlands

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 Arquenian, 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 Arquenian! 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 Arquenian. “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 awaked.” 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 seen. 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 Unyihi Garum’s standard, of the Imperial Orcs,” Number 994 said, lying about the “previously” line.

Even so, Orglan bristled at the line. “Unyihi’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 Unyih'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 Arquenian 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 donts 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 Arquenia. 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... ooh, 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 askew 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 shakily 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 rezaquiet, 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, uneased 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 begun 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...” Reynaygn 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,” Reynaygn 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 Arquenian.”

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 Arquenian.”

“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.

End of Book II

Book III: The Quest

Prologue: Forged from Fire

Date: Kornun 18th, 114 A.U.

The pale elf walked down the metal catwalk over the raging flames beneath, metal pounding on metal as the steel was slowly forged out of the fires below for the parts needed to upgrade the Mothership into a higher model, able to do all that would be necessary in light of the hastening cataclysm that would shake the very foundations of Arquenian. Walking down metal stairs, the elf walked over toward the head foreman of this plant, who deftly saluted him as he saw the pale elf coming toward him.

“All hail, Watcher of Jaigran,” the foreman said, bowing his head. “I have been expecting you.”

“Aye,” the Watcher said coldly. “I have come for a report of all the progress that you have made over the last month.”

“We are well past the half-way point in preparing the upgrades for the Mothership,” the foreman said. “We’ve tested out our models in space quite profusely over that time. The air exchange unit still has some trouble adjusting to the vacuum of space, but we have it in near-working condition.”

“I see,” the Watcher said, his voice devoid of any emotion. “And the workers?”

“A few of the goblins tried to cause a revolt two weeks ago, but they were quickly put down,” the head foreman said. “There haven’t been any problems since then.”

“I see.” The Watcher was quiet for a few moments as the metal banging on metal continued behind him, sparks flying in the raging flames. “How durable are the models?”

“Excuse me?”

“How durable are the models?” the Watcher said. “Have you taken into account what would happen if there was a collision in space? Would the Mothership hold or not, and how extensive and lengthy would it be to fix it?”

“I-” the head foreman began, and the Watcher suddenly realized the answer to his question.

“You haven’t tested its durability?!”

“I never thought!” the foreman began.

“It is your job to think of these things—not mine!” the Watcher snapped. “Your lack of foresight could cost us lives. The life of the Emperor himself, as well as all of elven civilization is at risk here! It is your job to think of these things, not mine!”

“Forgive me, my lord,” the foreman said, falling on his knee. “I have failed in my duties and I beg for my life.”

“Get up,” the Watcher snapped. “I am in no mood for your pitiful groveling. You will do better next time or you will be thrown into the flames that you have stirred up. Do you understand?”

“Yes, my lord.”

The Watcher turned to go, his feet slowly climbing the metal stairs as he walked over the precipice of flames, gazing from side to side. How fierce were the raging flames. But it would be nothing like the flames that would purge the world of their enemies.

Part LXXIII: Murmurs of Awakening

Date: Kornun 20th, 114 A.U.

High Priest Jaine applied the holy oil to his forehead, bowing several times as he approached the Mother Tree, now deserted and forsaken of all of its former followers. Although his thoughts were supposed to be empty—leaving his thoughts open for the Mother Tree to imprint her conscience upon, they were anything far from it. Before there would have been an audience—priests and goblins coming to see one of the monthly addresses to the Mother Tree. Instead today, Jaine could only see a couple goblins who were standing around, but Jaine could see that they weren't here to see him.

Everything had gone wrong for the Mothertree. It had all really started with Freglak's uncle, and the scheming plans he had devised before they had managed to replace him with his nephew Freglak—a disastrous move in retrospect. Freglak had learned too much from his uncle about why the priests were evil and how he was to thwart them. Jaine had been itching for month to gain the leverage to be able to replace Freglak.. But it was his alliance with the Elder Dragon that had broken the nearly-frayed bond between them. After that, they had had no choice but to publicly denounce Freglak and replace him as Lord, electing a goblin named Narlen in Freglak's place, a goblin they had thought they could easily influence.

Unfortunately, the populace was well against them and quickly decried this move. With Freglak a hero, Narlen had received several death threats from anonymous goblins before he publicly renounced the Mothertree and pledged himself solely to Freglak. And then... Along with Freglak's public mockery of the Mothertree and the continual victories being won out by the Elder Dragon, their group of priests had turned into a laughingstock. The believers fled—even many of the priests renounced their vows and joined Freglak's side. And Freglak was anointed the sole Lord-Protector of the Great Forest, marking the completion of his rise to utter dominance.

Now all that was left of the worship of the Mothertree was a corpse—a ghost of what their belief once was—the only remaining priests ashamed of their duty—and all their believers scared into hiding to avoid the public mockery and shame that was now synonymous with the worship of the Mother Tree.

“Great tree of the ancients,” High Priest Jaine muttered, invoking the holy script. “Sole protector of the Forest.” *A title which the heretic Freglak has claimed for himself.* But Jaine tried to ignore the thoughts within him as he continued his prayer. “Oh Great Mother of us all, the Tree from which we gain our life and meaning!” he cried out, but he knew his heart was not in it.

“Oh... Oh Mother Tree...” Jaine fell on his knees as he broke the long-held ritual, with no one else around to see the first break in their ritual in the past one hundred and fourteen years

since the Mothertree saved them from the elves. “Your people have forsaken you!” he cried out. “The Lord of the goblins has committed sacrilege, usurping your title and power for himself as he tries to make war against the elves without you! He has broken the traditions, spurned the holy symbols, and committed sacrilege against you! Your followers have dispersed—forsaking faith and fearing shame and have so rejected you! Only a handful of your true followers remain! Am I to be the only one who still believes in the promises?” Jaine cried out in distress. “Am I to be your last one standing when all else have gone away? Am I the last in a long line of believers? Why have you rejected us and let your people to go astray? Your people have forsaken you for another—bring vengeance upon them! You have seen what the heretic Freglak has done—how he has made an unholy pact with the Elder Dragon of old—how he has spurned the use of the old weapons with the profane guns. You have seen how he has publicly put himself forth as an alternative to you—wrestling the status as ‘Protector of the Great Forest’—a status which belongs to you alone! Rise up and be our deliverer! Bring your call of vengeance!” Jaine slowly looked up, tears streaming down his face. “Don’t let your knowledge pass out of our memory...” he whispered.

A pulse rippled out of the Mothertree as the grass stalks bent and the trees swayed in the invisible storm that shook the earth as High Priest Jaine stared up at the rippling Mothertree, the moss peeling off of it as it shuddered. Before his eyes, a door opened up, the wood moving and twisting aside to form a dark passage that descended into the Mothertree.

“Come.” High Priest Jaine stayed kneeling, too breathless to move—too scared to dare that his wish might have come true.

“Come,” the voice repeated. *“Come. And I will teach you the secrets of the Mothertree. You will be the scythe in my hand to wrack vengeance upon my foes. Come. And I will teach you how you will be my prophet.”*

And High Priest Jaine entered into the Mothertree, which slowly closed behind him.

Part LXXIV: Interrogation

Date: Kornun 19th, 114 A.U.

The boy and the girl talked softly as they marched with the rest of the slaves back, eyes darting from side to side as they scanned the people around them, pretending that they had done this forever—that they were used to the life of constant tending of the immense fields and vineyards that provided the food and drink for the luxurious elves. They wore their cloaks high, hiding their faces as much as they could underneath their hoods. As they came to the large apartment complexes, segregated by the different races represented, the group split in several directions, according to the different races represented, each moving through different doors as the elven guards there checked to make sure that each one was authorized.

Moving through the doors, the two humans moved quickly, racing to be the first to the elevators. Getting in the first car up, they waited as it moved up through the floors before getting to floor #19, the only ones to get off at that floor. The moment the doors closed they moved fast, and the boy pressed a button hidden under his watch, glancing back at one of the security cameras as, after a moment's hesitation, it moved to face the blank wall. Running down the hall, they quickly came to a room number. The boy quickly unlocked the door before the two slipped in, locking it behind them, before they moved into the bathroom, shutting the door in front of them as they waited.

“He had better have been ready for our signal,” the girl whispered. “If he-”

“He’s trained,” the boy hissed. “He’s done this forever. He’ll have gotten the signal to shut off the security.” Footsteps were heard outside and both of them were silent as they heard the key twisting in the door. The door opened, and the footsteps came in. They heard the door shut as the person beyond walked further into the room. Now.

The boy quickly opened the door and stepped out, the girl following. Suddenly aware of the other people in the room, the older man who had entered spun around, his scarred face contorting as he opened his mouth to scream.

“Shhh.” The boy lunged forward, clamping his hand on the man’s mouth as the man struggled for a few minutes and then stopped, his eyes bulging.

“We’re not here to hurt you,” the girl said in a quiet compassionate voice. “We just want to talk with you. The security’s off, so they won’t know about this. You’re free to talk.” The boy slowly took his hand off of the man’s mouth.

“What do you want?” the man spat.

“Your name is Hagion, right?” the girl asked, her soft eyes gazing up into him. But he scorned her gaze.

“What’s it to you?”

“My name’s Astrid, and this is my brother Monty,” the girl said, undoing her hood to let it slip off her head. “We’re part of the Resistance.”

“The Resistance?” Hagion had a disgusted look on his face. “And what makes you think I won’t report you.”

“We’ve done our research,” Monty said earnestly, his head now uncovered. “You were a key general during the War against the Sla’ad were you not?”

“What of it?” Hagion snapped, taking off his cloak. “Why are you here?”

“We’re looking for this object.” Monty pulled a picture out of his pocket of a golden rezquiert—a long glowing whip that was a primary Sla’ad weapon.

“I’ve seen many a rezquiert, but never a gold one,” Hagion said. “I don’t recognize it. You can go now.”

“It was known as the Arglem,” Monty said softly.

A spark seemed to go off in Hagion’s eyes. “The Arglem?” And then he shook his head. “I’ve never heard of it.” He began untying his shoes.

Monty gave a growl of annoyance, but Astrid spoke first. “We’re not elven spies,” she said softly. “We work for the Resistance and are getting closer to overthrowing Jaigran. Your information could help us dearly in winning back this fight. You were part of the entry group into the Sla’ad capitol. Surely you at least heard of the Sla’ad’s fabled weapon.”

“Sorry,” Hagion said, his scars contorting as he shrugged, kicking off his other shoe. “I haven’t heard of it.” He took off his shirt as he sat down on his bed, revealing the numerous scars on his stomach. The white hairs on his chest moved as he stared up at them. “You ought to leave.”

“You’ve surely heard of it,” Monty snapped. “What’s in it for you? I suppose there’s no need for you to turn around. It’s already obvious that you have many scars on your back from the elven whips. Why are you resisting us?”

“I have no need for this conversation,” the man said hoarsely, turning as he hung up his shirt, revealing the scars that Monty predicted would be on his back. He turned back to face them as he shook his head, his bitter eyes staring at them. “You will gain no help from here. Just leave.”

“But-”

“Look, it was the one Sla’ad treasure we never found, alright?” Hagion snapped. “The Sla’ad took it somewhere else for safekeeping and we never found it, except for snatches of some Keystone Chamber where it might have been hid. Now go!”

“But—“

“It’s too late for you anyways so I might as well say,” Hagion said. “Your cover was blown. I was supposed to stall you until they caught you.”

“What?!” Astrid shrieked. “But you—why?”

“I had no other choice,” Hagion whispered. “I’m sorry.” There was a loud noise at the door. “Now go!” Hagion yelled.

Monty ran to the window. “Move, Astrid!”

Astrid ran after him as Monty threw himself out the window. Astrid took one look, and then in a split-second decision, wrapped her arms around a surprised Hagion as the door behind them exploded. And then she threw themselves out the window after Monty.

Part LXXV: Laying the Lines

Date: Kornun 22nd, 114 A.U.

Oldin, head of the FRI, looked up from his desk to see ex-Governor Astrid come in. She didn't have an appointment, but she didn't need it—even if she wasn't Governor of Araelia anymore. She wearily sat down at one of the swivel chairs and turned to face him. After quickly signing a paper, Oldin turned toward her.

“Just got back from a long foreign policy talk with Iraina and his crew,” she said. As the caller and initiator of the Xavier Team, she had managed to get some policies and positions at work before she left to basically become the official head of the Xavier Team. Meaning that she was the one who had all the contact info of the Xavier Team and that everyone—including the new Governor of Araelia, Iraina—would have to go through her first.

“How'd that go?” Oldin asked.

“It was alright,” Astrid said, sighing. “We got into a long debate about what the Xavier Team should be trying to do. We got our first message from them in a while. Apparently they decided to split up in their search for the Sla'ad's rezquiert weapon. Some of them were going to follow a lead to find a slave in the elves' slaves camps while the others were going to go find the Sla'ad tribe that Reynyagn was a part of and try to glean info there. Anyways, Iraina wants to insert more control over the Xavier Team since he thinks they could work really well together if coordinated with our other spies among the elves. And I, of course, think that things should just be left to them, especially since it's so hard to send messages to us without the elves intercepting them that the communication lag would make it near impossible to work. He says that it's high time that we stop worrying about the elves intercepting us and just take the risk since, according to him, the reward outweighs the risk.”

“I see,” Oldin said briefly, not wanting to get into the power conflicts between Iraina and Astrid. “Any news from Jroldin?”

“He says he really wanted to be among the group that was infiltrating the elf work camps, but couldn't,” Astrid said. “The others agreed he was probably the most qualified to being a spy—thanks to you—but in the end they found it would be better for him to be with the other group.”

“Well, I guess that's how it works...” Oldin said, tapping his finger before looking back up at Astrid. “Would you mind if I asked for your advice?”

“Go for it.”

“Well, you remember the operation we did that had captured the other Astrid as well as Jroldin?” Oldin asked.

“Course,” Astrid replied. “Go on.”

“Well, apparently the group was more deeply rooted than the one hideout we broke into,” Oldin said. “Because it keeps coming up. And we’ve been trying to narrow it down. Unfortunately, since then we’ve had five people who have been important to the case killed by some freak heart attack. So somehow this group can kill people via stimulated heart attacks or something like that. And according to new info we’ve collected, they appear to be connected with the elves.”

“What?!”

“They’ve been sending out low-level signals out of the mountain, heavily encoded of course,” Oldin said. “And some source is sending them back. We discovered this a couple months ago. The question then became who they were communicating with. Our potential leads have been frustrating—most of our communicants have been killed by this gang—but we’ve found lots of small money transactions from a more open elvish-sympathy gang that runs throughout several other dwarven cities. And given that there aren’t many people they could be communicating with outside.”

“Got it,” Astrid said. “So what do they want, and what are you doing about it?”

“That’s the problem,” Oldin said, frustrated. “We don’t know what they want. All we know is that the low-level operation we were tracking that captured Jroldin and Astrid was merely a façade to try to hide the other parts of this operation. So for now, we’re just trying to gain information. We’ve talked a good bit with Iraina of course, and he’s helped us some, but we’re not getting much anywhere. So I wanted to know if you had any advice.”

“Well, I don’t have all the information and people that I used to have,” Astrid said. “So I’m not completely sure... But if you’re correct that their whole drug-running operation was merely a coverup—well, it seems a strange coverup to pick. And if they are conspiring with the elves...”

“It means they’re a step ahead of us,” Oldin said. “That they know about where we are and are probably planning to attack us. Iraina has begun to put together a better defense system, as well as trying to intercept and stop these transmissions without either of them knowing. And we have our best experts trying to decode their signals, though we haven’t had much success yet... I feel like we’ve been caught by surprise... And we’re going to have to really step it up to get past the base that they already have here in order to stop them from spreading their tyranny into the mountains.”

Part LXXVI: Home Again

Date: Kornun 17th, 114 A.U.

Reynyagn stood on the crest of the hill, gazing down into the valley as he knew that he had finally found them. Jroldin, Augger, and Brother Tomas came up behind him to stare down at the valley and at the huts in it.

“Is this it?” Jroldin asked.

“This is it, I believe,” Reynyagn said. “My tribe. Stay here until I can assure them that you aren’t their enemies.” And with that he began walking down the hill. It had been two months since the Xavier Team had split in half on the search for the fabled Sla’ad golden weapon known as the Arglem, the weapon of the kings. They hoped that with two golden weapons, they would be able to better stop Emperor Jaigran. They had thus split in half to follow two different leads—half had gone to find a man named Hagion, who had been a key general in the war against the Sla’ad.

Number 994 had discovered his name in the slave camp directory and so half of them had gone to infiltrate the slave camps and find him. The other half, which Reynyagn was a part of, had gone to find Reynyagn’s former tribe in hopes of finding information about the Arglem there. They had pre-decided to meet in a certain location at Kapton 2nd to regroup and share their information concerning the Arglem. And finally, after a month of wandering through the remains of the former elven empire, they had found Reynyagn’s tribe.

Reynyagn’s pace quickened as he moved down the hill and entered into the valley, legs moving faster and faster as he ran down the hill, the dark forms of the Sla’ad coming into more clear focus as he drew near. A couple turned to stare at this newcomer as Reynyagn slowed down as the downward curve of the hill ended, now moving through flat ground. Two Sla’ad came up to meet him, each holding corsha spears. Reynyagn noticed the reel around their belts—evidence of the rezquiets that they had ready to draw.

Reynyagn slowed down as he put his hands up to signify that he was not a threat. The two Sla’ad came up to him; Reynyagn was surprised not to recognize either of them.

“Who are you?” one of them asked. “I don’t believe I’ve seen you before.”

“My name is Reynyagn,” Reynyagn said. “Former leader of this tribe.”

Goblet’s clinked and people sat back down in their allotted places as the chatter began. Jroldin looked around, marveling at the numerous Sla’ad that sat at the table—more Sla’ad than

Jroldin had ever seen in his life. Course the only Sla'ad that he had ever known beforehand was Reynyagn, but still...

Reynyagn hadn't left his wife's side since they had arrived. Jroldin couldn't pronounce his wife's name. Reynyagn was seated near the head of the table next to his wife, as were the rest of them. After everyone was served, the Sla'ad at the head of the table stood up.

"Greetings to our new arrivals and our old friends," the Sla'ad said. "For those new arrivals who have not met me, my name is Tzjearjlan, the leader of this tribe. We welcome to the table Reynyagn, former leader of this tribe, as well as many of his friends."

Taking the cue, Reynyagn pushed his chair back and stood up. "Greetings," he said. "It is good to rejoin you all, though I confess that there are many of you whom I have not met before. I suppose a word of explanation needs to be said for a couple things—my life, as many of you thought me dead—and my travelling companions.

"As many of you know, I haven't been with my tribe since Traje of this year, when I went missing on a reconnaissance mission. My group of warriors were ambushed by elves, who caught us by surprise, slaying all of us except for me, whom they spared in order to take me to appear before Emperor Jaigran." Low murmurs went throughout the crowd. "Thankfully, their plans were not brought to fruition. While being transported to the Mothership, while flying over the Great Forest, the elves themselves were ambushed by a group of goblins, who took them by surprise, overcame their ship, and freed me.

"I was then brought into the goblin civilization in the Great Forest. In order to answer any future questions, there is a large civilization of goblins in the Great Forest who have kept themselves alive by scrambling the elves' radar so that they didn't realize that they all existed. I was introduced to the goblin's leader and became involved with their scheme to make the first major assault against the elves since the Great Upheaval. Those plans were quickly changed.

Jroldin listened as Reynyagn detailed how he and Flek decided to follow the star to find the rest of the Xavier Team, how they met up with them, about the human and dwarf civilization, and about the plans they made in Araelia about the Xavier Team before being proclaimed and sent North. He went on to detail their capture, their assault on the Emperor, their discovery of Augger, and then of what they had done since they found Augger.

"And here we are today," Reynyagn said. "Three members of the Xavier Team along with one of our friends. It is a great joy for me to be in your presence, back with my tribe, although it will not be for a long time. I come bringing friends, and a promise of hope through the Xavier Team."

There was applause and Tzjearjlan stood up again. "It is good to have you back, Reynyagn," he replied. "As you have told your tale to us, so it is fitting for me to tell you of our

tale since you left. After your capture, your tribe was set upon by elves, who had taken notice of them. Your tribe managed to fend them off before going into hiding, where they came across my tribe. Our twin tribes were both weak and so we joined to be able to better survive. We began camping in this valley four months ago, after finding the deserted birth-place of the Mothership in a valley neighboring ours.”

Jroldin’s ears perked up at this. The birth-place of the Mothership? What was that? But Tzjearjlan continued. “We will do our best to help you and your Xavier Team to find the Arglem to be able to bring down the elves. Tonight will be a night of feasting and celebration. Tomorrow we will gather together a council and discuss the Arglem and the Mothership. A toast, for new friends and old!”

“A toast!” And glasses clinked.

Part LXVII: Field of Battle

Date: Kornun 21st, 114 A.U.

“The Mother Tree has spoken to me.” High Priest Jaine addressed the remnant of the priests of the Mother Tree, seated around a round table. “The Mother Tree has finally spoken after decades of silence and has made known unto me her mystery and what we must do to reclaim our fallen followers.”

“The Mother Tree has spoken?” It was the eldest of the priests that was speaking, one of the few that had been around during the Great Upheaval and had witnessed how the Mother Tree had saved them from the wrath of the elves. Jaine was the only other priest who had witnessed their salvation that still believed in the Mother Tree.

“The Mother Tree has again spoken,” Jaine said. “It was during my address to her that she heard my prayer and spoke unto me. I was given the privilege of entering into the Mother Tree itself where she spoke to me.” He lifted up two golden corsha arjla weapons and gently placed them—still in their scabbards—on the table. “The Mother Tree gave these to me—the first and most powerful of the Old Weapons—which were given to us to protect our people. Lost for decades, the Mother Tree has returned them to us and has shown me how we will bring back her followers. The Mother Tree will rise again.”

The Elder Dragon snarled and a flume of fire erupted from behind the bars of the metal cage. Freglak stepped back, before drawing closer to look at the Elder Dragon which was snarling inside, caught by the chains that held it in its prison.

“Tamer—tamer I have made it, sir!” Frindle said. “It is still evil—evil it is, sir—but I can control it well!”

“I know,” Freglak said, turning from the cage. “Your victories the past couple months have been obvious.”

“But are you not here—you are here are you not because of the last battle?” Frindle asked. Frindle had lost control of the Elder Dragon during the last battle and he had nearly destroyed the goblin’s forces before Frindle had managed to retake control of it and keep the elves from winning much ground.

“That was one of the reasons for why I came,” Freglak said, turning toward Frindle. Behind him, a group of goblins were practicing their shooting. “I thought it would be wise to check up on how the Elder Dragon is doing to make sure that it wouldn’t happen again.”

“It was an accident—an accident it was, sir! I was trying new reins as opposed to using his long ears—reins I was using sir! It was the second battle and I hadn’t made them tough enough—tough enough they were not and I lost control. I will make sure it doesn’t happen again, sir!”

“Yes...” Freglak muttered. “Well, it is a pity that I already put down those priests and their blasted Mother Tree. They would have had my head for this.” He looked up. “So what are you doing for the next battle?”

“I will use his long ears again for the next battle, sir!” Frindle said. “His ears will I use until I make better reins!”

“Very good,” Freglak said and turned to see Major Erklen coming toward him. “Major Erklen, it is good to see you!”

“It is an honor to see you as well, Lord Freglak,” Major Erklen said. “I apologize that I was not here to see you when I first arrived. I was detained by other matters.”

“It is no urgent matter,” Lord Freglak said. “I assume there are no new developments since we last communicated via the Codex two days ago.”

“No, sir. We are still preparing for the next assault of the enemy,” Major Erklen said. “Would you like to see our defenses?”

“Aye.” Lord Freglak walked with Major Erklen toward the defenses away from Frindle and the snarling Elder Dragon.

“You were mentioning the priests when I came up?” Erklen asked.

“Oh, that,” Freglak replied. “I was just mentioning to Frindle that it was good that the Elder Dragon catastrophe did not happen while the priests still had influence over the people.”

“Aye,” Erklen said. “You did well in putting them down. Their stock has been utterly defeated.”

“Yes,” Lord Freglak said. “I shan’t expect to receive any more trouble from them any time in the future. All that remains is for the Mother Tree to be destroyed by some fashion for the corpse of the group to finally die. But enough about the priests and their blasted dying cult. How is our war progressing?”

“You can see our defenses here,” Major Erklen said as he arrived at the top of the cliff where they had set up the embankment. It overlooked the edge of the Great Forest, the forest falling behind it while down from the cliffs the open plains began, upon which Freglak could see the elven airships hovering about

“I see,” Freglak said, gazing up and down at the various anti-aircraft missiles that they had set up. “Do you have any idea from the elves how long they plan on continuing to pursue our forces? They have been driven out of the Great Forest and don’t have much hope of winning anything while we have the Elder Dragon on our side.”

“I have no idea,” Erklen said. “It’s strange though... It’s almost as if they’ve given up in some fashion. The amount of reinforcements they have been getting have been lessening over the past couple months as if they are giving up their effort to exterminate us.”

Freglak narrowed his eyes. “It isn’t like Jaigran to concede a battle. Mark my words, Erklen—I smell deceit.” Freglak paused for a few minutes. “Keep up the fight, but keep alert for any information you can glean from them. Because I’m sensing a surprise that they’re preparing to spring upon us. And I don’t like surprises.”

Part LXXVIII: On All Sides

Date: Kornun 19th, 114 A.U.

Astrid felt the air breezing by her as she fell, still managing to hold the petrified Hagion in her arms. Astrid managed to point her one arm left, moving her pinky finger down to press the button as she tried to point while clinging onto Hagion, who had been knocked out by the impact of them flying through the window. Instantly, a wire with a small claw on the end flew out, hitting the top of a nearby building and somehow clinging on to it as Astrid suddenly rocketed forward toward the building. She had a metal contraption on her right arm wove all around the outer side of it, almost like a second arm compressed against it but made out of metal, that connected to the metal backpack that fueled her transportation wire. The building grew closer and closer and suddenly they were over it—Astrid releasing the mechanism on her arm as the wire snapped back into place.

Monty was already ripping his cloak off as he was frantically calling in their support via his radio-earpiece. Letting Hagion down for a moment, Astrid quickly took her cloak off to provide access to what was beneath, revealing the clothes and weapons he had kept hidden from the elven guards. Around her belt she had two guns, two knives, and a couple grenades, along with some other assorted tools.

“Why did you bring him?” Monty yelled as he ran toward the edge, his eyes darting to find the next escape plan as Astrid watched the elven airships coming toward him.

“He’ll be useful!” Astrid frantically said as she aimed her right arm toward another building as she hugged Hagion with her left arm to keep him up. “Besides he’s light.” She hit the mechanism and the wire shot out, wrapping around an antenna on the other roof as she rocketed forward, Monty flying beside her as he yelled something into his earpiece that allowed him to communicate with the rest of the group. Gunshots blared around them as the elven airships got closer.

“I need you to change directions in flight!” Monty roared as he gestured at another building. “There.”

“But-“

Now!” Monty’s wire went limp as it whizzed back into his arm contraption as he fell, turning as he pointed at the next building, the wire again flying out. Trying to hold onto Hagion, Astrid loosed the contraption as the momentum carried her forward, frantically pointing as she felt Hagion slipping from her arms. The wire flung and grew taut on the next building and they were flying again.

“This is code red, please get to your stations,” a loud robotic voice blared. “This is an emergency. Intruders have invaded the camp. Repeat. Intruders have invaded the camp.”

Astrid staggered as she hit the roof of the next building, barely remembering to let the wire mechanism to get back into her arm. A trapdoor in the roof opened, and before Astrid could say anything, Zarien leapt out, slamming it behind him.

“Flek’s coming as soon as possible and Number 994 is safe,” he gasped, looking behind them toward the elven airships that were quickly narrowing the distance.

“Next roof,” Astrid exclaimed.

“Do we have enough wire?!” Monty gestured at the large gap between their building, the last of the apartments, to the other buildings that were farther away from the elven airships.

“No,” Zarien answered for him. “Run for cover!” The trapdoor he had come out of began opening. “I’ll get them!”

Zarien made it to the trapdoor just as the first elf emerged. Zarien socked him on the jaw before slamming the trapdoor on him as Astrid dragged Hagion behind a generator, shots ringing all around. Quickly depositing Hagion, Astrid pulled the pin on the grenade and leapt up, standing atop the generator to see the elven airships nearly on them as she threw the grenade, throwing herself forward for cover as the ground raced toward her.

The hard metal of the roof hit her face as skin tore, an explosion ringing overhead. Astrid rolled, bringing up her arms to try to block the shrapnel, but the airship hadn’t been close enough yet to rain shrapnel down. Her arm still over her face, Astrid looked up as the other airship flew overhead. And ten elves dropped down on cables.

Astrid leapt up, grabbing for her gun as Monty slammed into them. Knocking one off balance, he grabbed the elf’s automatic gun and opened fire. Astrid scrambled back as Monty ducked behind a ventilator, bullets flying into the ventilator as Astrid scooted next to Monty. From the corner of her eye she watched the elves aim their guns at Zarien, struggling with the elves in the trapdoor.

Astrid screamed as at the last moment, Zarien grabbed the last elf fighting him and threw himself behind the elf, using the elf as a shield as the bullets ripped into the elf. The other elves moved toward Zarien and, throwing aside his shield, Zarien slipped down into the trapdoor.

Gunshots suddenly blasted across the roof. Astrid screamed and dove for cover but she was already under cover. A figure dropped from the sky into the middle of the elves and light flashed. The figure leapt and ducked, weaving his corsha blades through the elves before they had a chance to react.

Flek killed the last elf before gesturing toward the ship that had halted above. “Come on!” He yelled. “Number 994 is in there! We don’t have much time!” He gestured toward more elven guardships that were flying closer.”

“But Zarien-”

“I’m in communication with him!” Flek said, gesturing to his earpiece. “We’ll pick him up soon! Let’s go!” A ladder dropped down from the ship, and, running for Hagion, Astrid moved toward the ship as the elven ships drew closer. Monty was there waiting at the ladder and, grabbing Astrid, held her tight as the ladder began lifting up into the ship. And, with merely seconds to avoid being pummelled by the elven airships, it began its flight away. And the chase began.

Part LXXIX: Plans for War

Date: Kornun 22nd, 114 A.U.

“Emperor Jaigran!” The Watcher stalked in through the doors that the guards had opened for him as Emperor Jaigran turned from a table full of scattered papers and diagrams concerning the upgrades to the Mothership that had finally started to be implemented on its structure, though some of the upgrades still had to be designed.

“Ah, I see that you are back from your re-energizing trip, or whatever you call it,” Jaigran said as the guards shut the doors behind the Watcher. Jaigran turned back toward his drawings as he made some notes on one of them.

“The name doesn’t matter,” the Watcher snapped. “What matters is that you’re skimping on the work that you’re supposed to be doing.”

Emperor Jaigran bristled as he turned around to face the Watcher. “I have been Emperor for 114 years and you dare say that I-”

“I have been alive for longer than you could even dream of living, you fool!” the Watcher snapped. “A lot longer than any sane being should live. Am I to know that you have dropped all plans of aggression against the goblins? And why is it that I have not heard anything about our operations among the Resistance for months?”

“There was no point in continuing the operations,” Jaigran said as he turned back to gaze at the diagrams. “The plan we came up with months ago basically rendered further infiltration and invasion useless.”

“You underestimate your enemies,” the Watcher snapped. “The Xavier Team nearly killed you six months ago!”

Jaigran glowered as he turned back to stare at the Watcher. “And I’ve doubled up my guards since then.”

“All I’ve seen is your cowering under light and making sure every shadow is made bright because you think there’s a Sla’ad waiting behind every corner to massacre you!” the Watcher complained, gesturing at the bright lights overhead that left the room shadow-free. “Don’t you realize the power that the goblins and the Resistance hold?”

“They are a petty force that thought they could destroy the strength of the elves,” Jaigran retorted. “I was well on the path to annihilating them before, and now that our new plans will kill them all anyways, there is no point in going on.”

“There is a prophesy that could well spell out your defeat,” the Watcher snapped.

“I fulfilled Xavier’s Prophecy long ago,” Jaigran said. “There really-”

“You cut corners and twisted words to make sure that there were no Sla’ad in your team,” the Watcher said. “Furthermore, the new Xavier Team rediscovered the race of the auggers and gotten one of them to join their team, even though you still think they’re creatures of legend. Fortunately, the prophecy likewise tells of their possible demise and doesn’t assure them victory.”

“Then we have nothing to worry about,” Jaigran said.

“Only because I am doing your work for you!” the Watcher snapped. “I have a traitor on the Xavier Team who is working with me—how I got one of them to betray their team is none of your business. But you still have the goblins and the Resistance to deal with. I don’t care how puny you think they are, but there’s no point calling checkmate while the game is still far from finished. We can have no loose ends.”

“What do you want me to do?” Jaigran snapped.

“Fortunately for you, I got some help with the goblins,” the Watcher replied. “Some stupid goblin who thinks that an abnormally large tree is a god or something. The fool has no idea of the true purpose and power of the tree he has named the Mothertree. I’ve set things in motion to culminate in a rebellion against Lord Freglak of the goblins. But the rebellion will only help if you go back to committing troops to the battle against them and stop ditching your own soldiers.”

“Fine, fine, fine,” Jaigran muttered. “I’ll tell Unyihl to organize some reinforcements to continue the war there. What else?”

“The Resistance,” the Watcher snapped. “According to the rumors I’ve heard, you haven’t had any communication with your infiltration there for months. From what I heard, you got so close to destroying the Resistance, and now-”

“I’ll do that again too,” Jaigran snapped. “If only to please you. What’s the use doing it all anyways? They’ll be killed either way.”

“I prefer not to have any potential problems in our equation to victory,” the Watcher said, eyes narrowing. “I’ve seen more history and more events than even the auggers could dream of and I’ve seen too many a despot fall by underestimating his opponents. We will not let that happen again. You will get back on track in wiping out any potential opposition and we will destroy the Xavier Team. Do you have me clear?”

“Yes,” Emperor Jaigran glowered. “I understand.”

“Good,” the Watcher said, walking over to the table. “Now what do we have here?”

“The latest reports from our research stations for upgrading the Mothership and our other ships,” Jaigran said. “The ‘civilian Motherships’—or whatever you want to call them—are going as planned and should be ready weeks ahead of schedule, if everything goes as planned.”

“Everything never goes as planned,” the Watcher muttered. “Have you done research on the Arglem?”

“I haven’t been twiddling my fingers the past few months,” Jaigran said. “I’m still trying to find that stupid elf archaeologist that deserted after Tzel-Maret but have mostly given up on that. She and her brainwashed sister seem to be long gone. I’ve extracted information from some of our slaves that were part of the war against the Sla’ad, but have only gotten hints and scratches of where it was. According to them, the Sla’ad had enough foresight to hide the Arglem elsewhere, in some ancient secret treasure trove, before our forces invaded their chief city.”

“Then the path ahead of us seems clear, does it not?” the Watcher asked. “The Sla’ad hid it, so the Sla’ad will find it. We need to find some of the remaining Sla’ad and learn the whereabouts of this trove.”

“Already prepared for,” Jaigran replied. “We’ve been tracking the path of a wandering Sla’ad tribe through a region in the ancient empire of the Sla’ad. They cover their tracks well, but not well enough. Within a week or two, we should pinpoint their current location.”

“Good,” the Watcher replied. “Seems like you aren’t a total waste of an emperor.”

“You already knew that,” Jaigran replied. “There’s a reason, after all these centuries, that you picked me to orchestrate your rise to power.”

“Even immense minds such as mine can forget things in the heat of the moment,” the Watcher replied. “By working together, we *will* rise above all the other races of Arquenia.”

“And they will rue the day that they failed to bow the knee before me,” Emperor Jaigran said. “In the day when we rule over all.”

Part LXXX: Council of Sla'ad

Date: Kornun 23rd, 114 A.U.

“I hereby call this war council into order!” Tzjearjlan declared, banging the gavel as the Sla'ad and the Xavier Team members sat down around the round table. “This is the 723rd War Council since the beginning of the Great War of Arquenya. Would our secretary read the minutes of our last council?”

“Seven hundred twenty three?” Jroldin whispered incredulously to Reynyagn as the secretary began reading off minutes.

“Our people still view your War against the Sla'ad as never having fully finished,” Reynyagn whispered back. “In our reckoning, your forces were betrayed by Jaigran when he ascended into the sky and you all joined us in the Great War of Arquenya, as our people call it. Because I used to lead this tribe and because I was the last leader of the Sla'ad, our tribe has taken the mantle of the leader of the Sla'ad upon itself and our tribe is mostly followed by all the other wandering tribes. This is thus the 723rd War Council since the day when we, under the tyrannic King Zzyanvyar, attacked you and began the War of the Sla'ad, hereafter referred to as the Great War of Arquenya.” Jroldin was still trying to figure that all out when the minutes were done being read.

“Today we call Reynyagn, Leader of the Xavier Team, to speak concerning his desires in this new development in the Great War,” Tzjearjlan said. “Reynyagn, would you like to speak for your party?”

“Aye, I would,” Reynyagn said, standing up. “I come here today to let you know of this new development, of the formation of the Xavier Team, and of our search for the Arglem as being a key object in the Great War of Arquenya. We are searching for the object and would appreciate any aid in this matter.”

“I was one of the many servants of King Zzyanvyar,” one of the Sla'ad said, standing up. “I was privy as a silent aid during many of the initial war councils and heard their discussions on the Arglem. As the war began to progress very bad for them as they didn't get any of the allies they sought for but were being pushed back by the other races, they contemplated trying to use the Arglem to turn the tide, but those for it were always strongly opposed by the dissenters. In the end, with the war pressing against their gates, they voted to take it and many of the other Sla'ad treasures and key weapons and to hide them in a secret place where those that came after them would be able to recover and use them. The war was already lost for them and they didn't want their most precious weapons and plans to fall into enemy hands.”

“Was the location of this trove discussed?” Reynyagn asked.

“The location of the trove was a secret known by only a few of the Council,” the Sla’ad said. “They didn’t want the information tortured out of those who knew, so only three, one of them being King Zzyanvyar of course, knew the whereabouts of the trove. They hired fifty workers to hide it and seal it in the mountains and then murdered the Sla’ad in order to keep the whereabouts known only to a few. I believe that they also equipped it with traps that were only known to the three Sla’ad, in order to prevent any from gaining access to it. Of the three, King Zzyaanvyar and General Riksha were slain in the Invasion. Only Lord Arglemanov’s fate is unknown. He fled the city with me and many of the other Sla’ad when the walls were breached. We were separated soon after and I have heard nothing of his fate since then.”

Jroldin listened as different Sla’ad asked the other Sla’ad many questions about statistics and ways to find Arglemanov and other such boring matters. Jroldin had nearly fallen asleep out of boredom when the conversation finally moved to a new topic.

“We will now turn to the matter of the Mothership’s birthplace,” Tzjearjlan said. “Would the honorable secretary please bring the Xavier Team up to date on the current situation of our exploration there?”

“Yes,” the secretary said, standing up. “Four months ago we settled here after finding what appeared to be where the elves built the Mothership. Further inspection proved that our guess was correct and that it was in a neighboring valley that the elves built their colossal engineering feat. We have made several journeys since then and have made a full report on our findings. We have a detailed map of the area here,” he said, bringing out a map which he placed on the table. “We have found what appear to be old computer files that have been corrupted and somewhat ruined, but which appear to have blueprints of the Mothership on it. We have found some partially-destroyed physical blueprints as well and at our last meeting by a unanimous vote elected to form a committee with the task of trying to piece together all of the blueprints and information into one coherent document.”

“Would the chairman of that committee please rise and give a report on his committee?” Tzjearjlan asked.

One of the Sla’ad rose. “Since the last meeting, we have been diligent in doing as the Council commissioned us to do. We have scanned all the physical blueprints into our computers and have transferred all the computer data we have found as well. It has taken us numerous work, but we’ve begun to piece many of the files together to begin to form a computer layout of the Mothership. We estimate that it will take us another month at least to combine all the documents that we have and estimate that we will retain at least 80% of the original blueprint source for all of our files.”

Jroldin continued to listen as they discussed the Mothership—how it was formed, how long it took, the possibilities of creating their own Mothership, and the possibility of visiting the site. Finally it was decided after much argument, that the Xavier Team would visit the site the

following day in order to glean any information they could. The Council would recess until after the Xavier Team returned and would then meet again. And with a final vote, the meeting was over. Jroldin wondered how people here could seem to enjoy this meeting. Much less how they could stand seven hundred of them.

Part LXXXI: Not Enough Time

Date: Kornun 19th, 114 A.U.

Zarien dashed down the hallway of the apartment building as he hoped he would get to an elevator before the rest of the elves did. He had barely managed to fend off the elves down the trap door, but by the time they were killed, there wasn't enough time to board the ship along with the others. Punching a button, Zarien waited as the elevator ascended to meet him.

The doors opened and Zarien had just enough time to see the orcs in the elevator before he leapt to the side. Shooting madly, bullets flung into the elevator as a crackle of lightning flew out, almost hitting him. This wasn't going to work. Mind racing, Zarien pulled a grenade out of his belt and pulled the pin, flinging it into the elevator before jumping aside. One orc tried to escape but it was too late as Zarien shot him down. A couple seconds later the grenade went off, blowing the elevator and the orcs inside to shreds. He wouldn't be able to fight off all the elves that would be downstairs. He needed to get out another way.

Running at one of the doors, Zarien shot at the lock a couple times before kicking it open. A dwarf turned to see him and gave a roar of anger as Zarien leapt passed him towards the window.

"Sorry!" Zarien yelled, and twisting to go back-first, threw himself out the window. Glass pierced his back as he twisted, pointing at one of the buildings and fired the zip-line to bring him over to the building. Airships flew overhead, still focused on the escaping ship of the Xavier Team. Bother.

"We're trying to get back around to find you, but I'm not sure how we're going to do it!" Flek said. "I just got word from Number 994 and he said he'd be able to meet us at the meeting point."

"Just forget about me!" Zarien said as momentum carried him forward to a roof of the building he had flew to. "I'll just escape my own way and you can pick me up outside the camp when everything's quiet. Just get out of here and we'll meet up later!"

"Alright," Flek said, and the line went dead. Leaping off the building, Zarien aimed for the building furthest set apart and closest to the quarries. He had just enough line to get there and he could escape in the quarries. Zipping through the air, Zarien watched as the airships still didn't seem to notice him. Releasing the line just before impact, Zarien flew over the parapet of the building and onto the top. And then a wave of electricity flooded his senses and everything blanked out.

“Get up.” Zarien groggily shook his head as he found himself held up by two strong elves before the presence of an orc.

“Ugh,” Zarien said, and his eyes narrowed as he tried to regain focus. “What do you want?”

“I am Number 1,314,” the orc said. “I am in charge of security at the labor camp. Who are you and why did you come here?”

If only Number 994 had been with him. Zarien knew that a 994 would easily be able to best a 1,314 in the orcish hierarchy. “My name is Zarien,” Zarien finally said. “I’m a member of the Xavier Team.” The Emperor already knew that the Xavier Team existed, so it shouldn’t be too much of a help to know that they had been here.

The information had its intended effect and Zarien watched the fear flash through Number 1,314’s eyes. If he just was able to be free, Zarien was sure that he’d be able to overpower them. Course getting out of this slave camp would be a whole other problem to deal with.

“Why are you here?” Number 1,314 spat. “According to all reliable history, Emperor Jaigran was part of the Xavier Team, not whoever you think you are.”

“We’re here to overthrow your rule,” Zarien said casually. “And whether we’re the real Xavier Team or not, we nearly killed your Emperor last Yippah, so if your Emperor is afraid of us, you ought to be too.”

“You lie,” Number 1,314 spat. “I heard nothing of an assassination attempt on the Emperor.”

“Probably because he’s too embarrassed to admit it,” Zarien retorted. “Did you hear of the Emperor’s trip to the Citadel of Tzel-Maret? It almost ended in disaster for your favorite tyrant.”

“I had heard rumors...” Number 1,314 muttered before looking up. “Very well, elf. You’ve sealed your own fate then. We’ll send you in the next transport ship to the Mothership and will send you to Emperor Jaigran to deal with. Guards, take this elf to the prison cells and guard him well. I’ll alert the Emperor about this development.”

Zarien was only in the cells for a couple hours before the guards came again to get him.

“The Emperor wants you delivered to him as fast as we can,” the one guard spat. “And so it’s off to the Mothership for you.” Zarien glowered at them as they hauled him out of the room and led him toward the transport ship, all the while trying to figure out if he could escape

and if not, what he was going to say to Jaigran in order to best preserve the cause of the Xavier Team. He supposed it was too much to hope that Flek and the others would be able to rescue him. By the time they realized that they had waited long enough for him to show up at their appointed place, he would be long gone. A pit began to form in Flek's stomach.

He was led into a metal garage, a large transport ship waiting and ready for takeoff. "They've put enough guards to keep you secure," one of the guards sneered. "And the goblins aren't going to rescue you like they did your Sla'ad companion." Zarien jolted. Since when had the Emperor connected that the Sla'ad they had captured which the goblins had freed was the same Sla'ad that was part of the Xavier Team? Or maybe it was just too obvious.

"We'll see about that," Zarien spat. And with that, the guards transferred him to a new set of guards that led him into the transport ship. He was strapped down in a seat in a dark room in the center of the ship, blindfolded and gagged—as if not having a blindfold or a gag would help him much—and then the door to the cell was shut. And Zarien heard the rumbles as the transport ship took off into the sky. There was a hissing noise and Zarien thought he smelled something as his senses gave way. He realized that it was knockout gas just as he finally lost consciousness.

Part LXXXII: Home of the Auggers

Date: Kornun 23rd, 114 A.U.

In the center of the ancient meeting place of the Council of Arquenia, there stands a circular stone platform that rises a foot off of the ground. Above it, the ceiling opens up, creating a hole in the roof the exact shape of the platform and directly above it. In the center of the stone platform is a blue circle, bearing no significant purpose at first glance. But in the middle of every day for millennia, an electric blue beam moves across the sea and land, passing over the stone platform in the center of the platform. For millennia, this passing over the blue dot has marked noonday in Arquenia. This platform is therefore called the Noon-Marker. For millennia, the blue beam of light that stretches far up into the heavens beyond has remained steadfast in its faithful marking of noonday.

Until now.

“I call this meeting to order!” the Chief Augger said, standing up. His name was Grandine and his generation of Auggers had led the people for centuries. Fifty eight years old, he was already growing weary of his task and looking ahead to when he could pass into the blessed place of the Great One and his next in line would take his place. But his time would come. And for now he was to do his task.

“Thank you, Brother Grandine,” another augger said, standing up. His name was Tragun, the keeper of the Noon-Marker, like his father and his father’s father before him had been.

“I come bearing a report of the strange events concerning the Noon-Marker,” Tragun said. “As we all know, for millennia, the Noon-Marker has been faithful in keeping the time of noon. But in the past five months, the Noon-Marker has been wavering. It appears to follow a ten to fourteen day cycle of its wavering away from the Noon Marker. Each day, the beam of light moves further and further away from the Noon-Marker, passing through the city as we have noticed in alarm. Every ten to fourteen days, the beam then seems to reset itself, passing again through the Noon-Marker, before beginning another cycle of moving further and further away. I have studied its happenings for the past months, and, seeing as the Noon-Marker seems to be broken and this is not a temporary thing, we have called this meeting to discuss its going on.”

“I will speak,” Yarvil spoke. One of the sages among the auggers, Yarvil was one of the few that delved deeply into the vaults of the collective memories of his ancestors. Most auggers didn’t, being warned away once for the many gruesome and horrible scenes and memories contained in the collective memory. Few auggers braved the reliving of the memories of their fathers and continued to delve deeply into their memory, but those that did so were regarded well among the augger kind. Those were the sages, and the leaders of the auggers.

“My memories stretch back to the setting of the Noon-Marker,” Yarvil said. “It was on this island that we were all created and here that the Great One formed the thrones for us, gave us the Seven Golden Corsha Weapons, and appointed the First Watcher to be the guardian and keeper of Arquenya. It was the First Watcher who set the Noon-Marker to track time, and it is upon this that we have relied on for the millennia. In the past couple months, I have tried again to contact the Sixth Watcher, but it has been in vain. As he has been ever since we returned to this island following our near extinction in the mainland, the Watcher did not respond. As we have concluded time and time before, the Watcher appears to have moved on to another Central place. And so we can find no help there.”

“This wavering of the Noon-Beam is not a light thing to be taken up,” another augger said. “For years it has been a constant setting of time for us. Now, with the wavering of the Noon-Beam, time itself seems to be wavering. How long will it be before the Noon-Beam must decide to go back to a constant or to veer off the edge? And with the wavering of the Noon-Beam, time itself must either stay constant or come to a perpetual end. The Noon-Beam must be fixed and set back to its proper state.”

“It is a thing that only the Watcher can do,” Grandine, the Chief Augger said. “We had never before in the generations previous have had to orchestrate and run such things as the Noon-Beam. In the first age, it was the Watcher who ran it and who kept the planet in motion. With the silence of the Sixth Watcher, such grave events must drive us to make a greater effort to discern where the Sixth Watcher has went and how we might bring the Noon-Beam back into its proper place in time.”

“We have two options then,” another augger said. “To venture outside our island to the mainland of Arquenya... or to enter the doorway of the Watcher.” Silence fell upon the group.

“Venturing to the mainland would be folly,” Grandine finally said. “From our last reports from our scouts, the elves still have control there, and they would capture us at first sight. No. We must stay here outside of their domain. Which would leave only one option, and one that I am ready to take. We must enter the doorway of the Watcher.”

“No one has done such a thing since the creation,” Yarvil said. “It is forbidden to enter that domain which the Watcher alone may walk.”

“Yes, the Watcher said that we must not enter therein,” Grandine said. “And as the Great One has commanded, we are to submit to those in authority. But the Watcher has been gone for centuries. He might be dead. We must discover what happened to him in order that we might fix the Noon-Beam and align it again to the Noon-Stone. We must do what no augger or any other race has done before. We must enter the domain of the Watcher.”

Part LXXXIII: Going Rogue

Date: Kornun 20th, 114 A.U.

The two guards were taken out before they even knew what was happening. The two elves had just walked by when suddenly they had turned on them, one slamming the other hard against the corridor wall, while the other punched him in the solar plexus. Another hard bang to the head and they both were out. Hazael quickly fished the keys out of the one man's pocket and opened the lock. Sereth ran in, flicking on the lights, as they came to Zarien's limp body, tied to the chair.

"Quickly. Not much time have we." Hazael said. Sereth quickly fished out her knife and quickly broke Zarien's bonds, ripping his gag and blindfold off of him.

"He'll still be unconscious for several hours at least," Hazael said. "I'll take him." Lifting him up, Hazael slung Zarien over his shoulder and the two of them dashed out of the room, quickly shutting the door behind him. Feet tapping down the corridor, they moved down some steps into the small dark room where the escape pod was. Hazael quickly dumped Zarien in the escape pod next to the sleeping Cortna.

"Get them both buckled into their seats," Hazael said. "I'll get us out." They had slipped Cortna some sleeping pills so that she wouldn't know what was happening. Her knowing what was going on seemed to always end up in trouble, as she would inevitably try to alert the elves about what we were doing. Despite their hard work, they still found themselves unable to break through what the elves had done to Cortna's mind in their re-education chambers. They had nothing left but hope, a blind hope that had showed itself to be placed in nothing concrete so far.

Sereth moved them into two of the four seats and fastened them up while Hazael moved to a computer in the room, quickly hacking into it to access the main control panel to send energy into the escape pod. The elves generally locked the escape pod so that only the commander of the ship could activate, so as to deter escapees from easily escaping during it. Unfortunately for the elves, Hazael's field of study was in computers, and he had become quite adept at hacking into them ever since he made the choice to finally separate himself from the elves instead of being a spy among them.

"Done," Hazael finally said as lights in the escape pod went on. "Let's go." Dashing toward the escape pod, Hazael stepped in and shut the door behind him, sitting down at the control panel and pushing the button to let them out. The floor began tilting as it opened up underneath them as Hazael pulled some levers as the escape pod dropped. Pulling the steering wheel, Hazael flicked a switch and jets flamed out behind the escape pod as they propelled themselves through the sky, away from the elven ship.

“There we are,” Hazael said, breathing a sigh of relief. “And assuming they don’t catch us now and chase us down—which they shouldn’t—we’re home free.”

“Good thing,” Sereth said, stretching her limbs. “I grew tired of hiding out in that ship long ago.”

“Bringing Cortna didn’t help anything...” Hazael reminded her.

“I know,” Sereth said, sounding a bit exasperated. “But, I mean... I don’t know... I know it isn’t rational or anything, but...”

“I know,” Hazael said quietly. “But sometimes we must lay aside fears. Must accept logic.”

“I know...” Sereth said, biting her fingernails. “But... I don’t... I can’t trust anyone... I don’t know...!”

“Explanation not needed,” Hazael said. “I know how emotions trump logic.”

“Emotions aren’t trumping logic...” Sereth said. “It just... I don’t know...” She muttered something else but Hazael couldn’t catch it as they continued to move away from the airship. After ten minutes, when the elven airship was far out of sight, Hazael gave another released breath and pulled a lever to slow the escape pod down.

“Alright,” Sereth said. “We’re free from the ship. You want to input the coordinates of the rebel’s ship.”

“Yes...” Hazael said as he began typing in stuff to the small screen. “What are the current coordinates of the ship right now?”

“I believe it was last right above the previous human capitol...” Sereth said. “So somewhere around 200, 351. Once there, we can send out radar and communicate with the rebel ship and cue into it.”

“Sounds good.” Hazael typed in the coordinates and the ship rotated before rocketing out in another direction as they both relaxed in their seats, the ship moving forward over the ground as it moved toward the place of the ancient human capitol.

“So...” Hazael said. “How will you break it?”

“Excuse me?”

“How will you break it to Zarien?”

“Oh... you mean Cortna...”

“Yes. Did he not think you Cortna last time?”

“Yes...” Sereth said, her cheeks reddening at the scene. “I... I hadn’t realized then how close the two of them were... Hopefully Cortna will still be asleep when Zarien awakes so that the first thing he notices isn’t her, well, her problem.”

“Yes,” Hazael said. “Do you know where Xavier Team is?”

“Not the rest of them, no,” Sereth moaned. “If I did, I’d take him to them and not have to deal with what he’s going to say when he hears about Cortna. But they haven’t used their radios with the other team at all, so I haven’t been able to spy in on them... Which means we have to take him to the rebel base.”

“That’s bad?”

“Oh, I don’t care what happens to him when at the rebel base,” Sereth said. “I worry about what his reaction will be when he meets me and remeets Cortna. I mean... if he does like Cortna...”

“He’s won’t leave us alone, yes,” Hazael said. “And you don’t like it.”

“She’s my sister,” Sereth said, a bit defensively. “And I don’t want his affections to go elsewhere.”

A small smile grew on Hazael’s face. “I see. Well. Go on we must.”

“Go on we must,” Cortna agreed. And they flew forward through the sky.

Part LXXXIV: Warning Shots

Date: Kornun 30th, 114 A.U.

“Ah, former Governor Astrid.” The man whirled around lazily on the chair where he slouched against it, flicking his fingers against the armrest. “How good it is to see you again.”

“Same to you,” Astrid said coldly, sitting down at a chair opposite him as she flipped open her briefcase, filing through the various papers neatly organized inside. “Good to know someone is having a relaxing time.”

Iraina laughed, taking off his sunglasses as he looked at Astrid, letting his sunglasses balance on his fingertips. “And I see that someone still has not given up the feud of the election. Isn’t that supposed to be over now? Bi-partisanship and working together to get the job done?”

“Well, when you define bi-partisanship as making sure that your way is the only possible way, I guess so,” Astrid said, pursing her lips, pulling out a stack of papers. “Here’s my report.”

Iraina took the stapled stack of papers and began to look through them. “Unless I’m mistaken, we’re really not that different in that area, me and you,” he drawled. “I mean, from what I heard, you had to do a whole lot of wrangling to get yourself as the official spokesman of the Xavier Team before I took office. Suureee, that was a really bi-partisan, nice thing to do for the new governor.”

“Yes—well—it was my duty,” Astrid snapped, trying to keep herself from blowing up again at Governor Iraina.

“Yes, and silencing any real attempts of bi-partisanship before it could begin by forcing our competing principles to continue to clash with each other.” Iraina lowered the stack of papers to gaze directly into Astrid’s eyes. “I believe I got as much of a referendum as we could get that last election. The voters wanted a change of leadership—new blood to start flowing in the government—a change that you’re not accepting.”

Astrid bristled at Iraina’s attack, wondering why the debate between them had switched between matters of policy to matters of fairness. “I had started a task with the Xavier Team,” she repeated, almost as if she was still reiterating her talking points of the election. “And I mean to see it finished.”

“The voters didn’t want you to finish it,” Iraina whispered. “They wanted me to take control of it, an effort that you are confounding with your refusal to share your duties with anyone else.”

“Yes, well, I think my experience in war is much better than yours,” Astrid said, reassuring herself of her extensive experience working against the elves.

“Oh, we’re not going to go there again,” Iraina said. Holding up the stack of stapled papers, he moved his arm to the side and dropped them on the floor, listening to the papers flutter and crash against the carpet. “If you’re not willing to come to a compromise about this issue, this will mean extreme measures. And I don’t want to go there.”

“Then don’t,” Astrid said. “You can begin by reading my report on the current progress of the Xavier Team and trying to work with me about how we can guide them to their goal of destroying the Emperor.”

“Oh, so I get to work with you now!” Iraina said. “So perhaps that means you can give me the means to contact and receive messages from the Xavier Team. Maybe I can actually put some of my own foreign policy into play!”

“The Senate gave me that job,” Astrid said. “I can’t just give it to anyone else.”

“Oh yes, the Senate,” Iraina said smoothly. “The Senate you forced to follow you. Now I’m looking at the facts, Astrid. And I’m seeing a different set-up in Senate than when you were governor. And any act that Senate passes can be revoked.”

A flash of heat went through Astrid. “What do you mean?”

“I think you know what I mean,” Iraina said, his voice hardening as he lowered his voice again into a whisper. “Either work—truly work—with me, Astrid. Let me actually have the ability to get what I want passed, as the voters put me in office to accomplish, or I’ll go public with this.”

“You can’t go public with military affairs!” Astrid snapped. “There’s a reason these meetings have been behind closed doors. The next thing you’ll be suggesting is to make all of our espionage efforts public information!”

“I’m not going to share the nitty-gritty details,” Iraina retorted. “But I will tell them how you refuse to work with me in any meaningful way or to accept my advice. I’ll bring a proposal to Senate to revoke your status as the Spokesman of the Xavier Team. And I’ll get the public behind me to make the senators all vote to put me back in control of foreign policy, like you were as Governor. Isn’t that the Golden Rule? Do unto others as you would have them do to you? Something tells me that if you won, you wouldn’t want me butting in your way by being the Spokesman for the Xavier Team and forcing my foreign policy beliefs down your throat.”

“It isn’t like that!” Astrid protested.

“Then work with me and give me access to the Xavier Team!” Iraina demanded. “Look at my proposal to give more direct orders and suggestions to the Xavier Team and to be in a more constant flow of communication with them. At least be willing to compromise. Or else

we're going to have to take this to a further authority to get this settled once and for all. You already received your referendum on your policies. Now give up your power."

"I can't let you ruin the Xavier Team," Astrid whispered, her eyes flashing.

"I see." Iraina's eyes narrowed. "Then you have drawn the battle lines, Astrid. I have no other solution. It's time to take this to the higher authorities."

Part LXXXV: The Birthplace of the Mothership

Date: Kornun 25th, 114 A.U.

Jroldin stepped out of the tent, letting the flap shut behind him. They had gotten to the valley that the Mothership had been built in late last night and so hadn't bothered to look at any of it until the next morning. The place had been deserted for over a century, but no one had bothered to clean up. Tools were somewhat scattered around, and a lot of the scaffolding was still around. Jroldin could see the built-out depression where the Mothership had once rested, small towers surrounding the depression where workers had once used the towers to enter into the Mothership. A century of decay had done its work though, and the place was in a bad need of repair. Jroldin went over and sat on the edge of the small cliff that formed part of the depression of where the Mothership once rested and started eating the apple he had brought with him from the tent.

A couple minutes later, Brother Tomas joined him, bundling his robe around him as he sat and cast his gaze around the area. "Well," he finally said. "This is it."

"Yep." Jroldin said. "The birthplace of the very bad. Maybe we can use it to make a Mothership for us."

"Probably not," Brother Tomas reminded him. "Remember—the elves' radar would pick up something that bit."

"True..." Jroldin said, sighing. "Oh well..."

"Besides," Brother Tomas reminded him. "That's not the way that the Xavier Team is supposed to overwhelm the evil."

"Right..." Jroldin said. "But how are we supposed to overwhelm Jaigran?"

"I've been doing research on it as much as I can out here, since I brought a lot of books with me," Brother Tomas said. "Though I did have to leave a lot of them back north at the volcano that we found Augger since we had to hitchhike over a lot of the mountains after the machine broke down. But I've arrived at certain conclusions. Not the least of which is that you play an important role."

"Me?"

"Yes, Jroldin. From what I could glean from what we still have of Xavier's prophecies and other such works, the Priest-King plays an important role in the party. But it appears that most of it has to deal with the aftermath. The Priest-King seems less important for the Xavier Team to defeat the great evil, but seems to be an integral part of establishing peace once the evil

is vanquished. Once Jaigran is defeated, the prophesy would indicate that you will be essential to recreating peace and order once his reign is ended.”

“So what does that have to do with how we defeat him?”

“I don’t think that the prophesies indicate that the cause will be won as a part of some massive battle, Jroldin,” Brother Tomas said. “In other words, although it may happen that way, I think it will involve figuring out exactly how Jaigran plans to bring a greater cataclysm on the world—which the prophecies indicate will happen—and then stopping him in some sort of final showdown. Our battle won’t be won by the strength of our forces, but by the Great One working through the Xavier Team to accomplish his purposes.”

“I see...” Jroldin said, still not fully believing in the Great One, as heard a voice calling them from behind. “Well, it appears that it’s time to break up camp.”

“Yes,” Brother Tomas said. “It’s time to explore the birthplace of the Mothership.”

“And this is the central planning building,” a Sla’ad whose name Jroldin didn’t think was even possible to pronounce was saying. He was standing in front of a very large tower that Jroldin gawked at.

“That building was all for planning?”

“Yes. From the records it seems to have been the building in charge of this whole operation. A lot of planning meetings and blueprints being drawn up here to direct the Mothership’s growth,” the Sla’ad said. “We got most of our maps and blueprints from this place.”

“And they just left a lot of the blueprints out?” Reynyagn asked, incredulously.

“The then-General Jaigran didn’t have much time to waste,” the Sla’ad said. “From the reports we picked up, the Mothership was behind schedule—as would be expected for an engineering feat like this—and Jaigran didn’t have time to wait to cleanup before he wrought the Great Upheaval. And once their swift-striking elven fleet had desolated a lot of the world, they didn’t see much point in cleaning up much of their paperwork, having already taken control of basically all the world. Some of the blueprints were taken as reference to make the floating cities, but the others no one bothered to clean up, leaving a treasure trove for us.”

“I can imagine...” Augger remarked. “It always is striking how throughout the course of history, people are so easy to assume victory before it is finally wrought. And how their missed facts always seem to backfire in the end, however long it may take.”

“And it looks like it took us a century, but we still managed it,” Brother Tomas said. “Many thanks to the Sla’ad here.”

“Anyways,” the Sla’ad said. “There’s a large blueprint on the wall you may be interested to see to give you a picture of the massiveness of the Mothership. It was attached to the wall, so we couldn’t remove it, but we took multiple photographs of it.”

Jroldin stared at the large Mothership blueprint that spanned the wall, a preliminary blueprint that showed some of the most important features of the Mothership. Five miles long and two miles wide, the Mothership was sketched against the backdrop of one of the elven cities, showing the mind-blowing largeness of the Mothership. The control room of the Mothership was huge—nearly the size of a building for all the variables in it. There were massive dorms sketched for the Mothership, along with what looked like to be a giant extendable sword that lowered from the Mothership, but Jroldin wasn’t quite sure if it really was a giant sword.

“This was only a preliminary sketch of the most important features to include,” the Sla’ad was saying. “So it is by no means an accurate sketch, but it shows a lot of the most important features of the ship.” There were huge blasters the size of buildings sketched on the ship, along with the resources needed to stock what seemed to be a small city’s size of inhabitants. And as Jroldin stepped back before the sketch depicting the Mothership in its full majesty, there was only one thought in his mind.

How are we supposed to stop this thing?

Part LXXXVI: Moving On

Date: Kornun 20th, 114 A.U.

The sun's breaking rays had just begun to peak over the mountains as the foursome entered the long-abandoned quarry, looking for any trace of Zarien. Astrid glanced back at the forest behind them, back where they had hidden the airship, Hagion standing guard, before looking back ahead into the quarry. Monty began signaling Zarien with his walkie-talkie as he moved in, ducking into a side-cleft of the quarry as Flek, Number 994, and Astrid followed him in, making sure that no one could see them (not that anyone was supposed to be in the deserted quarry) as Monty continued to try to signal him.

"He's not responding," Monty said. "He might have broken his walkie-talkie in his escape. Spread out and see where he's hiding." The foursome split up, nervously looking around as they combed the relatively-small quarry, but an hour later when they had all come back, Zarien was still nowhere to be found.

"We have tracked the signal of their radios to one of the quarries we had been working at decades ago," the orc said. "I've pinpointed it here on the map."

"I see," Number 1,314 said, gazing at the spot on the map before looking up. Take a well-armed force of elves and orcs and capture these intruders who worked with the elf. Take them alive if need be, but if they put up too much of a force...

"...Don't be afraid to kill them."

"We have to assume the worst," Monty said. "If he didn't get here, then he must have been captured."

"He said that he'd be able to get back easily, though," Flek protested. "Maybe if we gave him just a bit more time..."

"No," Monty said. "I've worked in enough secret missions and operations to know that we can't just assume that. If Zarien had escaped he would have made it here easily, and if not he would have used his walkie-talkie. Most likely he made some mistake and was captured, and got his walkie-talkie taken from him, which means..."

Monty jumped up from the rock that he had been sitting on. "We have to go. If they're anything more than complete fools, they would have received our messages and will be sending out a force to capture us. We have to vacate the area immediately."

“But what about Zarien?” Number 994 asked, running behind them. Forasmuch as he was still unsure what he should think about helping a team dedicated to taking out the Empire, and as much as he blamed Zarien for getting him into this muddle, he still seemed to have a curious bonding to him, an explainable sort of friendship with the elf.

Rule Number 23: Never let yourself be friends with anyone, especially the enemy

But Number 994 wasn't sure if the rules worked in this situation. Not that he'd been trying to keep them as of late. He had broken so many since joining them, there wasn't any hope of becoming a normal orc again among the ranks of the orcs of the Mothership.

“There are some planes heading this way,” Flek said, gesturing to some planes flying up from the city in the distance. “We have to find cover. Now.”

“The forest is up ahead once we climb out of this quarry!” Astrid said. “We have to get there in time.”

“Move quickly,” Monty said. “Use the ziplines to get up the quarry!” Using the ziplines, they moved up out of the quarry and began racing toward the trees, racing for cover as the airship came up behind them, firing as they drew closer. Trees rushed by them, gunshots firing behind them. Number 994 looked back to see two of the planes trailing behind, but one having already made it to the forest—and a large group of fighting elves and orcs ziplining down from the ship. Their escape hadn't worked according to plan; Number 994 didn't think they could outrun them and make it to their ship and get it into the air before they were shot down.

“Behind us!” Number 994 yelled, and he ducked behind a tree, preparing his lightning. There shouldn't be any orcs in the group that were higher than him in lightning; Emperor Jaigran tended to pick out the best of the orcs to serve on the Mothership. Getting a group of orcs down might be a little more tricky, especially given that Number 994 was much more skilled in using electrical equipment than fighting with lightning, but he still thought he had the advantage with the other companions. The other members of the Xavier Team moved behind trees as Flek scurried up one, disappearing into the foliage, as the group of enemy combatants moved forward.

Number 994 leapt out, sending crackling lightning among their ranks as they dove for cover. Flek dropped down from above, slicing through the surprised guards with his corsha blades as Monty and Astrid fired their guns. The lightning orcs turned towards Flek as Number 994 desperately tried to counter their lightning powers to keep them from overwhelming Flek. One of them was shot down by Monty, another killed by Flek. Number 994 brought down two others, leaving five elves, surprised that their elite force had been cut down so quickly by these strangers. Two of them were instantly shot down. And then Number 994 stunned another as Flek brought down the remaining elves.

“I just stunned this one,” Number 994 said, running over. “We can get info out of him.”

Flek lightly kicked the elf, who groaned in response. Number 994 pulled him up, giving a light shock of electricity to get the elf up and moving, staring at the four people that now surrounded him.

“What do you want?” he spat.

“Just some information and we’ll let you live, by my word of honor,” Number 994 said, making a halo of lightning around his head to try to frighten him into giving information. “We were caught by trying to communicate with an elven rebel named Zarien. What do you know of him and where is he?”

The elf stared at them, conflicted between telling and keeping his mouth shut for a few moments before he spoke. “He-he’s gone!” he blurted out. “Number 1,314 sent him off to the Emperor for questioning! He left last night—he’s gone and I had nothing to do with it!”

“He looks like he’s telling the truth,” Monty muttered.

“Then that’s all we need,” Number 994 said. And he stunned the elf again, who slipped into unconsciousness as Number 994 stood back up.

“He’ll live,” Number 994 said. “When he comes to his senses at least. And now we need to go.”

“What about Zarien?” Astrid asked.

“We need to track down the Mothership,” Monty said. “It’s time anyways to be leaving to meet up with the others at the meeting point. Once we meet up with the rest of the team we’ll try to figure out where the Mothership is... and how we can rescue Zarien.”

Part LXXXVII: Rebirth of the Mothertree

Kornun 29th, 114 A.U.

“The elves have begun to press stronger on our forces, sir,” the hologram of Major Erklen spoke. “We have held our ground and are continuing to make progress, but it has become evident by the ships going to and from the elven forces that they have finally begun to bring their own reinforcements to the battle. As such, our current forces will not do. We need more reinforcements to continue to fight back the elves effectively. I now stand to receive my orders, sir.”

“I will gather more goblins and more equipment for you to fight the elves,” Lord-Protector Freglak spoke. “The elves have finally realized that they are in danger of being defeated by us, but their realization has come too late. Attack them in one large assault to bring them down before enough reinforcements come. We will visit a colossal humiliating defeat upon them. And they will know that their reign of terror is coming to an end over Arquenian.”

“You have heard the tales. You have believed the rumors. You have seen the sacrilege that has been committed day after day upon our grounds,” Jaine whispered as he moved in front of the audience, his shoulders hunched, a wild look in his eyes. “You have seen the blasphemy that has been committed in front of our faces day by day by our Lord, the goblin who would claim the title of Protector for himself. You have asked—you have questioned your beliefs because the Mothertree slumbers. You have wondered if power yet resided in the Protector of the goblins. And I stand before you to announce that it does. The Mothertree still liveth and has appeared to be, anointing me to proclaim a new Order of the Mothertree. The infidels and the hypocrites have been purged and now we stand to bring together a new Order—an Order where we will rise to greatness such as has never been seen before. The Mothertree has awakened. And we will rise out of the ashes.

“Do you question my words? Do you ask for signs? Do you seek proof, proof that the Mothertree still lives and that she slumbers not? O ye of little faith, that ye doubt the word of the High Priest, the spokesman of the Mothertree. Yet has she heard your cries and your pleas. She accepts your request. Behold! The power of the Mothertree!” There was the whistling of the wind in the air and the branches of the trees swayed back and forth as the small audience looked around, wondering if High Priest Jaine had finally snapped into insanity.

Suddenly, the branches moved, morphing as they moved together, surrounding Jaine like a halo as they moved around, new shoots growing off of them as the dead branches burst into full bloom, weaving into a wreath as the audience below them gasped in amazement and wonder.

“The Mothertree lives!” High Priest Jaine cried out as the Mothertree stretched out its branches again to its original position. “She has awakened to restore parts of the old and to awaken a New order! We live by the rules that we were founded on, but we go forward in a new future and mission that the Mothertree has revealed to us! As the Spring brings forth new life on the barren tree, so will we reclaim our former glory and more. The Mothertree has spoken to me and this she has said: ‘From the race of the goblins, I will call forth an order to bring an end to the reign of the elves. I will restore the former glory of the goblins and by my power will you stand upon the necks of your enemies.’ Thus has the Mothertree spoken! You have seen your power; now stand in awe and bow your heads. Proclaim the Mothertree as your own again and spread the news that the Mothertree liveth!”

“Liar!” There was a hush, as Jaine looked across the crowd, to see who had spoken.

“You lie!” A goblin stood up, pointing his finger at Jaine. Jaine knew who he was. Myrik was a feisty media person who ran a popular show on one of the television networks, and an adamant supporter of Freglak.

“You have conjured tricks to try to throw a veil over our eyes,” Myrik continued. “What is this miracle you claim to show us but an illusion—something which never happened but which you made us believe happened. If the Mothertree is what you claim it is, prove it. Like you had any possibility of doing so.”

Jaine narrowed his eyes, seething hatred toward Myrik. Like he could control the Mothertree with the flick of a button. The blasphemy of Myrik’s claim. Jaine opened his mouth to speak, but before he could speak, a loud groaning went through the tree and Jaine stepped back.

Wind passed by the Mothertree and it swayed. Suddenly, large roots burst up out of the ground. Myrik gave a scream as the roots suddenly grasped him, lifting him up into the air as he struggled, the roots producing spikes which drove into his flesh, rippling through him as he gasped out an inaudible word. And then the root doubled down, sinking to the earth as it took Myrik down with him, the earth closing again over them as Myrik disappeared from sight.

Silence fell upon the crowd as they stared at the ground, looking like nothing had happened. A couple news reporters fled, wishing that they had had the foresight to bring video cameras to capture the incident on tape.

And then Jaine spoke, speaking in a whisper that the listeners strained their ears to here. “Behold her power,” Jaine whispered. “The blasphemer has gotten what he wished for. The Mothertree has wracked her own vengeance on the goblin that would dare stand against her. The Mothertree lives and a new Order has risen up to carry her spirit and her power on to victory. Now go out and spread the word. Let it ring in the treetops: The Mothertree lives.”

Part LXXXVIII: Awakening

Date: Kornun 21st, 114 A.U.

The sun was shining directly into his face when Zarien woke up, finding himself no longer in a darkened room, but in blinding light. Startled, and expecting to find himself in the Mothership, Zarien turned around as he realized his lack of any real bonds apart from the seat belt to find himself in a small airship that looked like an escape pod. There were two elves—one with wings, in the front row of the ship. And Cortna, asleep, was sitting across the small two-foot aisle from him.

“Cortna!” Zarien said, moving to undo the seat belt that loosely held him in.

“Stop.” One of the two elves in the front turned back to look at him, alarm in her eyes.

“Hey!” Zarien said, staring at her. “You were that elf that were at the Citadel-”

“Yes, I’m Sereth—the one that you mistook for my twin sister,” the elf said curtly. “And before you continue-”

“But I haven’t seen Cortna for such a long time,” Zarien said, undoing his seat belt. “I-”

“Stop,” Sereth snapped, and Zarien noticed a tinge of pain in her eyes. “That’s why you have to stop and listen,” she said in a quieter voice. “Cortna... she isn’t like she used to be, Zarien.”

“What do you mean?”

“I... I don’t know how you used to know each other,” Sereth said. “Although since you’re part of the Xavier Team, I would assume that you met her in the resistance group she was a part of, but... She got captured, Zarien.”

“I know,” Zarien said. “I thought she was dead—but she’s still alive, and-”

“The Emperor indoctrinated her, Zarien.”

Zarien’s blood ran cold. “What?!”

“The Emperor broke her in order to gain all the secrets he could from her before forcing her into submission,” Sereth whispered, one tear running down her cheek. “She won’t recognize you, Zarien. She is a devout Imperialist, although she doesn’t know exactly what Hazael and I are doing. She’s barely alive, almost like a robot in how she conducts herself... She’s broken, Zarien. She’s broken.”

The escape pod slowly pulled into the port of the relatively small ship, workmen guiding it in and making sure it was secure before the door opened and the inhabitants came out. With some quick words to the workers, the group continued inside, Sereth holding Cortna tightly, Zarien trailing behind, not exactly sure about what to do, as they walked in.

“I’m going to take Cortna to her room so that we don’t have to mask our words while talking to the leader,” Sereth said. “You two can go on ahead; Hazael, you can introduce Zarien to him, and I’ll return soon.”

“Let me help with Cortna,” Zarien quickly volunteered. “I-”

“You will do no such thing,” Sereth snapped, whirling around to face him. “She is my sister and you have no right upon her.”

Zarien opened his mouth to respond, but couldn’t get the words out. How was he to explain how deep his relationship with Cortna had been, or what it might have been?

“I have no sister,” Cortna emotionlessly muttered as Sereth prodded her along down the hall.

“Let’s go…” Hazael said quietly, and after a moment’s hesitation, Zarien followed.

Zarien hadn’t been expecting the leader of the elven resistance group to bow to him the moment they met.

“But of course it is my duty,” the leader, an elf named Rezja responded as he straightened up. “After all, as a member of the Xavier Team, you are one of the seven leaders in our effort to overthrow the elven anarchy. We’ve been tracking you for some time though we haven’t managed to make contact with you yet.”

“I see…” Zarien said, and then he suddenly jerked up. “You’ve been tracking us?!”

“Over your radios,” Rezja said. “Don’t be alarmed. We have limited access into the elven central system, but we’ve intercepted the waves enough so that they think they’ve already analyzed their content when they haven’t. The elves have a greatly sophisticated tracking system for radio waves. You were lucky to get caught by us.”

“I see…” Zarien said again, pondering this for a minute before looking back up. “So how many men are part of your group.”

“Well, our number is embarrassingly few,” Rezja said. “There are less than a hundred men and we only have a handful of bases around the elven ships. Still, we’re working on it, and given that we only started a year ago, we feel like we’ve made much progress.”

“I assume the elves think this airship is one of their own?” Zarien asked.

“It’s in their computer systems as some exploratory ship or whatever,” Rezja said.

“Was our group in contact with yours?” Zarien asked, narrowing his gaze.

“At the time that your group was in operation, we were still working on making this ship and giving it the right specifications to escape the elves’ notice,” Rezja said. “It was a month or so after your group met its final demise that we began looking for contacts in other places.”

“I see...” Zarien said, repeating the phrase for the third time that meeting as Sereth entered the room.

“So, why are you here?” Rezja asked.

“I’ll speak for him,” Sereth interrupted. “We were watching their mission to rescue Hagion. They found and rescued Hagion, but Zarien here got captured. He was on route to the Mothership when we broke him out of his prison. We haven’t been able to pick up any communication from the rest of the Xavier Team, and so we brought him here.”

“And what do you plan to do here?” Rezja asked.

“Figure out how to get back with the rest of my team, before they plan some big search and rescue mission to find me,” Zarien said. “Can we contact them?”

“Unfortunately, not,” Rezja said. “Although our equipment can pick up your signal and make the elves think that they’ve already examined it, our equipment can’t send out a precise-enough signal to communicate with your channels. It’s a bit complicated to someone non-versed in your field, but basically we can receive anything from a 2.6 to a 3.0 signal, but we can’t narrow down what your signal is enough to know if it’s a 2.718 or a 2.743, and so on. Our best hope of returning you to them is to wait until they use them again, either to communicate to each other, or with your Resistance base back home, and hopefully they’ll drop a hint to where they are or where they’re going.”

“Shoot,” Zarien said glumly. “I had left it up to the others to know the precise location of our meeting place is... So I’m stuck here?”

“Unfortunately, yes,” Rezja said. “Until they can use their long-distance radios... You’re stuck.”

Part LXXXIX: Departure

Date: Kornun 27th, 114 A.U.

Reynyagn left the rest of the Xavier Team, finishing up their packing, and ran across the field, his shadowy form moving fluidly through the landscape until he came to his old tent and slipped in. His wife came up to meet him, gazing at him with sad eyes.

“I’m sorry,” Reynyagn whispered, embracing her. “It seems wrong that after being gone for so long, at a time when you counted me dead, that I should return for such a short time, only to leave again.”

“You must,” his wife replied, biting back her visible tears. “What comfort would it be to me if you rejected our cause of taking down the Emperor in order to stay with me? Our children need a better future. You are doing an honorable thing, Reynyagn, one you were trained your whole life to be able to accomplish. All of your achievements have led you up to this task. How can I stand in the way of you accomplishing this purpose? Go, and may the blessing of the Great One be with you.”

“I love you too,” Reynyagn replied. “And as soon as our victory is won, I’ll come back to get you.”

“I know,” she replied. “And I will keep waiting until that day comes, Reynyagn. Until death do us part.”

“Well,” Tzjearjlan said. “I regret that we could not welcome you here longer—I would have been intrigued to hear more of your mysterious kind that has been kept hidden for so many centuries—but I suppose that it is your duty to carry on and figure out how you can stop the Emperor and his army of elves.”

“Yes,” Augger said. “I believe that when it’s all said and done, that many will be looking for more information about us, as I can scarcely feign that we would still be kept hidden when the war is over. I hope to try to return to the chief city of the auggers, whose location I have found in my memories, and try to make restitution there for what my ancestor did. And then with all the augger-slayers gone, mayhaps we may again come out into the open.”

“I hope so as well,” Tzjearjlan said. “Though to tell you the truth, I expect your experience will be one similar to many here. We have all suffered harm at the hands of the elves. Yours won’t be the only group coming out of isolation, though you have experienced it more than the rest of us.”

“Aye,” Augger said. “Did Brother Tomas give you the spare radio to communicate with us?”

“He did indeed,” Tzjearjlan said. “We’ll notify you as soon as we’ve collected all the blueprints of the Mothership into one master document. And always know that if you ever need us, we have the resources to lend you not only our men for war, but also to try to lead the other wandering Sla’ad tribes into sending men to join you in making war on the elves.”

“I thank you for your support,” Augger said. “I know not what our plans will be once we have found the Arglem and once we have the blueprint of the Mothership, but we’ll have a lot more than we started with. And perhaps by working together with the goblins and the Resistance, we will be able to come up with a plan.”

“I hope so as well,” Tzjearjlan said. “Fare ye well with your travelings.”

“And with yours.”

Reynyagn shut the door on the luggage hold before stepping back to look at the ship that they had prepared, which the Sla’ad had graciously donated them to be able to quicken their return to the assigned meeting place to meet up with the rest of the team. The Sla’ad had given them all the information they had on the Arglem and where it might be found, enough to at least guide them in a vague direction of where the Arglem might be. Reynyagn hoped that the rest of the team had been able to gather the rest of the information they’d need to find it. And with a deft nod, he moved to the cockpit where the others were ready.

The Sla’ad waved them off as they went, moving upwards into the air before they leveled out to cruise over the plains. And with that Reynyagn breathed out a pent-up sigh. They had accomplished their purpose for their leg of the journey. Their part of this mission was over.

“Well,” Augger said, obviously feeling the same feelings as Reynyagn. “That trip went well.”

“Yes,” Brother Tomas said. “Not only do we have as much information as we could get, although I suspect we all would have wanted more, but in a few months, they ought to have as close to a complete blueprint of the Mothership done, which would unarguably aid us in defeating them if events so transpire.”

“Yeah...” said Jroldin, generally agreeing with everyone else there. “Now to put the information we have into action.”

“Yes,” Brother Tomas said. “And may the blessing of the Great one be upon us.”

Part XC: Plans in Motion

Date: Kornun 30th, 114 A.U.

Arzjlan slouched against the tree, wondering why they still had to keep watch for the elven airships. He hadn't seen any in all the times that he'd been on watch, and he'd been on a watch many times for their tribe of Sla'ad. Nevertheless, it was his duty, and it was a duty that he had sworn to fulfill.

Straightening up, Azjlan looked through the night vision goggles at the sky around and still saw nothing, before looking around at the hills around. Ever since the elves had taken control and few dared to walk in open ground, without anyone to hunt them, the wild beasts had grown more and more numerous and spread out, no longer confined to the places where they could best hide from them. That, in Azjlan's mind, was what he most was to look out for: wild animals that could tear their camp to shreds. There had been quite a few times that he'd had to fend against them.

Azjlan turned again to gaze out at the night sky, running his gaze across the sky but still saw nothing.

Ten elves slowly slid down on ropes, guns in their teeth as they silently exited from the silent airship. According to the radar, there was one person outside the camp, on one of the hills around it. But he still had not seen them. Moving silently, they moved forward toward the tree where they had finally deduced that he was. For a sentry—if that was what he was, which most of the leaders had assumed—he had forgotten the most obvious rule. Never turn your back to one side. Once this Sla'ad was incapacitated, they would have free rein to drop their elves all around the other side of the camp and surround it before coming in.

Azjlan rubbed his head as he looked back up at the sky before looking at his watch. His watch should be over soon. It probably wouldn't hurt to go back and see where his replacement was. Straightening up he moved beside the tree and by chance looked back. And Azjlan screamed.

Moving down the hill as fast as he could, Azjlan heard the shots firing behind him, feeling many of them bounce off his elusive flesh. Even the fact that the gun shots couldn't hurt him seeing as he was a Sla'ad didn't make Azjlan feel any better. He had failed his tribe. At a most crucial time.

“Attack! Attack! We're under attack!” Azjlan roared as he rushed forward. “We're under attack! Get to your arms!” Sla'ad started bursting out of the tent as Azjlan moved

forward, watching with his night vision goggles as all around the outskirts of the camp, elves slid down on their zip lines. How could he have failed his people at such a crucial time?

Azjlan quickly joined the others, having left the elves behind for a moment as he turned toward them. “They’re surrounding us on our sides!” he said. “I beg your pardon—I failed—”

“None of that right now,” their leader, Zavarja roared. “Get all of the women and children behind us, Hzavlar. We can’t be compassed about on our sides. We will take down the elves from this side and then form a battalion to guard those behind.”

Azjlan turned around to see the elves coming down the hill, guns firing, as Hzavlar ran back to gather the rest of the people. Azjlan began to feel his spirits again moving upward. If the elves thought that the gun bullets would hurt them, they would be woefully unprepared for the revelation that gun bullets had no impact on Sla’ad. And after their Emperor had marked the corsha weapons as ancient and outdated, there would be no chance of them having the one weapon that could hurt them. Azjlan drew out his corsha rezquiart as the elves rushed upon them, the Sla’ad drawing their weapons to repel these foolish elves.

Suddenly, the elves twisted and turned, pulling glowing daggers out of their pouches as they suddenly hurled themselves upon them with a new vigor. Azjlan gave a cry as many surprised Sla’ad were instantly cut down, not expecting the elves to have corsha weapons on them. Swinging his rezquiart, Azjlan slashed the face of one the elves as the elf stumbled backwards as several Sla’ad behind him drew their guns.

Guns fired, but before they could meet their target, an orc behind the elves sent them flinging aside with his lightning bolts. No, no, no. Azjlan hurled himself forward, swinging his rezquiart around like a mad man. There was a sudden blow to his head. And, seeing stars, Azjlan fell back into darkness.

“I just got a message back from our commander,” the Watcher said. “Our forces quickly surprised and overcame the Sla’ad with an elaborate feint of pretended ignorance. They captured two of the Sla’ad for you to question—an older Sla’ad who was part of the defense forces at the capital city, and a younger Sla’ad, who may be a useful tool to get the older Sla’ad to succumb to our methods of re-education.”

“Very good,” Emperor Jaigran said. “Perhaps they would also know about the Sla’ad who stalks me.”

The Watcher bristled. “You are mad, Jaigran, if you still believe in a Sla’ad that stalks you.”

“I am not mad!” Jaigran snapped. “I have seen him lurking in the shadows, never leaving them for fear of being seen, but merely waiting and biding his time. I nearly died once before finding you. I will not let him get at me again.”

“You have mixed nightmare with reality,” the Watcher retorted. “For such a brilliant mind to have conceived the Great Upheaval, you already appear to be falling to the paranoia that have haunted so many a great ruler. It is such paranoia that have caused their downfall.”

“I will not fall for this,” Jaigran snapped, glaring at his ally. “I am following by your principles: namely, to leave nothing loose and to assume nothing about the enemy. I will not be defeated by some cheap assassination. We will question the Sla’ad about many things once they’ve been re-educated. Teach them all the things you want. But I will ask them my questions.”

“Very well.”

Part XCI: Whirling Clouds

Date: Kapton 2nd, 114 A.U.

Oldin wearily sat down at his desk, his eyes glancing at the new watch that sat on his hand. It had come out a week ago and had quickly become the rage of Araelia, nearly selling out in a couple of days, although the company promised that they had more coming. Not only a watch, it also was able to access your cell phone and form a holographic image of the person you were talking to, if they were also using the watch. And as a result of an impressively large and successful ad campaign, the C-Watches were all the rage. And Oldin, though he generally didn't pay much attention to fads, had liked the technology enough that he had fitted his whole team with them.

Oldin quickly brought up the files showing their tracking on the mysterious elf group that had been sabotaging their every effort to track it down. The group still seemed to be connected with the inexplicable heart attacks that had now killed ten of their best men. It had gone up far too much to be a mere coincidence; no, Oldin was sure that they were connected—that they had figured out some way to kill a man in a way that it looked like a heart attack. And there they had been stuck for months, continuing to try to find leads, and having the leads dashed at every corner as each of their men that was just about to make a huge lead was suddenly killed by this rogue group.

Oldin pursed his lips. They needed a plan. They had to come up with something new—some ingenious way to break through the hold that this group had put them in for so long. They had tried always having microphones on their agents, but the elven rebel group had managed to tangle their signals in response. And as much as he had tried to help, Iraina still hadn't come up with any solution either, keeping them in a state of gridlock, unable to do anything against the elves while the elves danced around with their plan, unscathed from the attacks.

Oldin was getting desperate, which was never a good thing. Because when he was desperate, he'd end up trying to do the job himself. And as much as he might try to rationalize it, Oldin knew that being desperate never helped anything. But, standing up, Oldin decided that he was desperate. And there really wasn't any avoiding what he wanted to do right now. So he headed out the door.

The latest lead was a man named James McDonnell, who seemed connected with the elf group. Oldin had already figured out that the man was gone for the day on business. And so it was time to investigate. He could have assigned it to someone else, but those plans never worked. Oldin had tried purging their system many times to hunt out spies or bugs, but had so far failed. And so, not wanting to get another agent killed, he was taking things into his own hands.

Slinking toward the house, Oldin checked for noticeable cameras and then ran up to the door, unlocking it with a fake key he had before letting himself in, shutting the door behind him. It was the standard type of house in Araelia, with the room layout nearly identical to his setup in his house.

The computer brought up no interesting results, although Oldin did manage to find the security tapes, quickly running their high-tech password-breaker to get in and editing it to erase the couple hours in which he'd be at the house. After making sure that all the security cameras were off, he continued the search. At the very least, the fact that James would have security tapes was something. An average citizen wouldn't have as many security cameras as James did, giving further ground to Oldin's suspicions.

Oldin quickly placed a bug on his telephone before moving upstairs. There had been a lot of security cameras placed near a section of the hallway, a section which Oldin was curious to investigate. After walking around in the other rooms, he was sure of it. In all other houses of this type, there was a closet in the hallway that didn't appear to be in this house, which meant...

After much trial and error, Oldin finally found the tiny slit to place his fingers in and opened the secret door, revealing the hidden closet within, full of C-Watches and what looked like various prototypes for it. Oldin furrowed his brow. How was this connected to it? He remembered noticing that James worked for the company that produced the C-Watches but was this just so that no one else could see the company's work beforehand, or was it for a darker purpose? And why would James have brought the prototypes here? Oldin remembered the workplace that James had converted his basement to and wondered if James took them home with him to try to fix at his home office. After gingerly taking a couple of the prototypes, Oldin shut the door and stepped back. That had been surprisingly easy—too easy for sneaking into the house of a suspect.

After making sure that everything he had moved was in its proper place, Oldin swiftly exited the house, a lot on his mind as he quickly got to the car and began driving back to the office. He had run a guard around him to keep him from being shot by the terrorist group, but he'd managed to make this mission without them. Now to get back to the office and make sure he was well-protected there as he began to figure out what the link was between the terrorist group, James McDonnell, and the C-watches.

If there even was one.

Part XCII: Moving On

Date: Kapton 3rd, 114 A.U.

It was approaching midday when the aircraft with the rest of the Xavier Team finally arrived. Flek, Astrid, Monty, Number 994, and Hagion stood and watched as the airship came to land in the midst of the ruins of the Fortress of Varasheet, the sight of the great slaughter that had commenced when the last of the Sla'ad were finally routed, and when Jaigran finally broke and gave into the passions that were fueled within him.

“Greetings,” Reynyagn said, disembarking. “It is good to meet you. Where is-”

“Zarien was captured by the elves,” Monty said quietly as Reynyagn’s companions came around behind him. “Hagion has been immensely helpful in figuring out where the Arglem might be... But we have grievous news about our party as well.”

“So. Zarien is captured, there’s a spy in the midst of us, but we have a pretty good ball park for the Arglem?” Brother Tomas asked, confirming what they had just discussed over dinner.

“Yes, as well as your information about the Mothership,” Flek replied. “Hagion here has confessed to hearing as much from the officials. There isn’t any way to get around it. We have a spy in the midst of our half of the group.” Silence fell over the crowd.

“It has to be your half?” Reynyagn said quietly. “It couldn’t be that-”

“No,” Flek responded. “From what we’ve found from Hagion and from what happened, they knew the intricacies of the plan too well. It couldn’t be from something we told you, and it isn’t possible that someone else intercepted the airwaves and betrayed us, though that could have also happened. Of the five of us: Astrid, Monty, Number 994, Zarien, and I—one of us is a traitor.”

“The rising hope must rise if it will destroy the darkness,” Augger whispered. “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. It’s all recorded in the prophesy.”

“A demon,” Reynyagn remarked. “What demon do we struggle with?”

“The word was not used then as it is used now,” Augger replied. “Back then, the word was not used literally as much as it was used to signify a burning desire—a evil desire fueled in the persons heart that was their chief vice which they had to conquer. What the prophesy is

saying is that one of us is struggling with something. And that our success depends on whether or not they win, or the ‘demon’ inside of them wins. This is the struggle that I believe the Emperor struggled with. He lost, and so I believe that although for a short time it appeared that the Xavier Team had won, it has become all too apparent that they lost epicly.”

“What are we to do then?”

“What can we do?” Jroldin asked. “If the prophesy is true, and I do believe it to be true—then we don’t have much of a choice here. Or at least—only one of us has the choice. Someone here is a traitor among us. His course isn’t set in stone, but he will have to decide whether or not he is going to go over to the passions that is committing him against us, or if he will reject it and fight with us. The only solution for the traitor who now sits among us is to turn back from the course that he has begun to set himself to and beat back the desires inside of him. What other choice *do* we have?”

“We can let our group take the lead since none of us can be the traitor. and leave the others in the dark, but what will that gain us? There are two leaders among us that the prophesy indicates will seek to unify the group, whom I believe are Reynyagn and Augger. Why were we given two leaders? Nothing in the Xavier Prophesy has been said with no reason. We were given two leaders so that we might be able to damper the traitor, to keep him down until he can change his mind and stop betraying us. We must split into two halves, Reynyagn leading the one and Augger leading the other. They are both beyond reproach and will act as the two who correspond with each other. We have been given a ballpark from Hagion on where the Arglem might be. We must now function separately, as we have done in order to get this far, in order to secure it.”

“You have indeed mastered the prophesy...” Reynyagn murmured. “What you have said is evident now that I look back. We must keep the traitor as much under control as we can until he can repent, if that is to be his goal.”

“And what about Zarien?” Astrid asked. “He’s been captured and is already at the Mothership by now. What are we to do with him?”

“Nothing, if we are to refrain from sabotaging the entire mission,” Reynyagn said softly. “We have to trust the prophesy and the Great One to guide him back to us. To rescue him would require us infiltrating the Mothership, a task which we are woefully unprepared to do. Our only chance will arise once the other Sla’ad finish the blueprints they have been compiling of the MOthership, and by that it may as well be too late.” Number 994 stared at the ground.

It was dark as Number 994 stared at the canopy of the tent above him, his heart beating as he tried to keep back the impulses and the whispers that were arising inside of him. How else

could they have been betrayed? He had put his full mind in key with the computers as part of his job of making sure none of the alarm systems went off at the prison camp. He had heard that it was possible before—that he would have to have absolute concentration in order to keep his thoughts from running out into the systems he would be working with. And he had known all of the plans.

He still had not completely decided what to do with the Xavier Team. After the long journey south from the Northlands, he had been reconciled so much with Zarien, and he had seen their efforts so much that he had nearly been on the breaking point of mentally abolishing Emperor Jaigran for good and being in full heart and spirit with the Xavier Team. But now it seemed like he was already marked as the traitor—that he was already unconsciously fueling them with information. And if he couldn't stop himself from betraying his teammates then, how was he to stop himself now?

Part XCIII: Shifting Momentum

Date: Kapton 10th, 144 A.U.

“High Priest Jaine is now taking the stage,” the newscaster announced as the camera flashed to him. “The weights and expectations of many are now looming after Myrik’s strange disappearance which some who still cling to the faith in the Mothertree claim was her act. We now turn it over to our reports at their scene as they record Jaine’s remarks.”

“We are gathered here again at the request of the Mothertree,” Jaine said, beginning in a soft voice as Lord-Protector Freglak watched with narrow eyes at the television screen. “The Mothertree has spoken again, calling us to listen to her as she reveals her will through me. Your leaders have deserted you, having deserted her herself long ago. We fight a losing battle against the elves, lost already because our leaders have abandoned their faith in the Old Weapons. They have forsaken the weapons of old, and we will fall by their might. Do you hear the words of the Mothertree? No victory can be wrought with the Old Weapons.”

“We’re beating the elves!” someone from the crowd cried.

Jaine turned toward them. “Are we?” he whispered. “Are we? Behold, a battle rages this day. And I tell you the truth—a truth to those who came here looking for a sign, for some exciting miracle from the Mothertree. This is the word of the Mothertree for you, O sign-seekers. Beyond all expectations, our forces will lose their winning streak today. The battle that rages today will be a catastrophic defeat for our forces—the sign of the Mothertree that we are helpless without her. Hear the Word of the Mothertree!”

Lord Freglak leapt up. Was Jaine really so stupid so as to base his ambitions on a guess? Or did he know more than he should about this situation? A knot began to form in his stomach, and he raced for his phone.

The first onslaught of elves at their cliff was beaten back easily. Major Erklen looked with pride and their anti-aircraft weapons that had so beautifully beaten back the first wave of elven troops—and they hadn’t needed the dragon’s assistance! After Flindle had nearly lost control of it, Major Erklen had been trying to keep it back and unused as long as they didn’t need it to win. They couldn’t afford another setback.

His phone rang and he picked it up. “Yes?”

“Erklen? This is Lord-Protector Freglak!” the voice boomed in. “Listen—I need you to be absolutely prepared for the elves. High Priest Jaine has just predicted that the elves are going to launch an assault on you today and completely overwhelm you.”

“They just began it,” Erklen said, looking at the next wave of airships coming up from the desert. “But you needn’t listen to the prattling concerns of a deposed priest. He has no power anymore.”

“I’ve told you before about the so-called ‘miracles’ he has wrought,” Freglak said. “We can’t take any risks!”

“I’ll play it safe,” Major Erklen said. And after Freglak gave him one last warning, Major Erklen shut his phone. The missiles went out again, streaking toward the elven airships that again too easily failed to avoid them and were horribly shot down. The elves were complete fools—this would be an easy assault to put down. The third wave came up and Erklen nodded his head.

Suddenly, there was a roaring and Major Erklen turned to the side to see a whole battalion of airships coming from the side—in a part of the desert the elves had never set up camp before. A whole legion of elven reinforcements were behind them—how had this gone unnoticed?

“Unleash the Elder Dragon!” Major Erklen roared as he ran back from the front line. “The elves have got in reinforcements! All hands to the guns to repel the enemy!”

There was a roar, and the Elder Dragon burst up through the trees, Flindle on his back, as he watched Flindle guide it toward the approaching onslaught. Guns went off and Erklen watched as the elven forces fought back. The first two waves had been a feint, Erklen clearly saw—a chance to get them to waste their ammo. Now trying to avoid the missiles, the attackers quickly took out many of their missiles as the Elder Dragon kept back the other flank.

There was another roar from the Elder Dragon and Erklen narrowed his eyes as he watched them fight. Something was wrong. The Elder Dragon seemed a bit off—too unpredictable and seeming to go every which way, tossing and turning so as to escape. And then it broke.

Wheeling away from the aircraft it shot out hard towards their defenses, breathing fire as it decimated a whole squad of goblin gunners in an instant. With a yell Erklen sprinted away from the fire just in time to see the dragon wheel and snap its whole body, trying to dislodge Flindle, but failing. As the goblin aircraft came out, the Elder Dragon surged towards them, breaking them in pieces as the elves came in behind.

“Get control of the Elder Dragon!” Major Erklen roared into its walkie-talkie toward Flindle. “Take it down at all costs!”

The phone rang and Lord-Protector Freglak moved to grab it. It was Erklen.

“Yes?” Lord Freglak asked. “What do you have to report to me, Major?”

“The elves,” Major Erklen gasped out through it. “They got in reinforcements that we hadn’t noticed before, Freglak! We were completely unprepared for this assault! And the Elder Dragon got loose again!”

Lord Freglak’s heart chilled. “What are you saying, Erklen?”

“It was a rout—a bloody routing of our forces, Lord Freglak! We didn’t stand a chance against them. By the time Flindle regained control of the Elder Dragon, it was too late. We have been pushed back from the cliffs back to our previous line of defense in the forest. And from what we see, the elves just got a whole new load of reinforcements following after the battle. I completely failed to see it coming, Lord Freglak. I-”

Freglak shut the phone, cutting Erklen off and stared at the wall in numbness. They had been pushed back, fine. They could lose a battle every once in a while. But High Priest Jaine had been right. Beyond explanation, he had known what was going to happen.

And for the first time in his life, Freglak began to doubt his unbelief in the Mothertree.

Part XCIV: Swirling Smoke

Date: Kapton 4th, 114 A.U.

Flek. Flek's hair stood on end and then he whispered his reply, in a voice low enough so that the other's around couldn't hear him.

"What?"

Our alliance is having some unintended side effects that I'm worried of.

The voice sounded more compassionate than usual. "What kind of effects?"

Didn't you hear what Jroldin said last night? The 'demon' may not be physical, but it could be. And though I'm not a demon, words are figurative. And I could very well be the one who will unintentionally make you the traitor. Have you not thought of this?

"I... I have considered it..." Flek said slowly.

We can't let this break the bond, Flek, the voice said coldly. You still need me, even as I need you. But we are might be able to lessen the effects.

"What do you mean?"

I will depart from you with a portion of my spirit and only leave the part that makes you as skilled of a fighter as you are, the portion that gives you unbelievable skill. But I will not speak or communicate, or use your body anymore until the traitor is found it. We can't risk it otherwise.

Flek pursed his lips. "Very well."

Kapton 5th, 114 A.U.

Astrid sat up in bed, blood chilled, as her cold arms grasped the metal railing on her bed before she caught her breath again. Only a dream. It was only a dream. For the ninth time in the past couple months, she had had another dream concerning her murder of the man in Araelia, an event which she had tried to block out of her memory for the most part. But it was still occurring.

Astrid left her sleeping quarters into the empty main room of the ship as she looked out the glass windows at the darkness around the ship, where it rested on the ground. After nearly being suicidal after the murder and on the brink of leaving Araelia forever, she had gotten caught up in the whole Xavier Team ordeal and had been distracted from having to deal with the

consequences for her actions. She had almost forgotten about it. But her subconscious mind still remembered. And the dreams haunted her.

“I didn’t want to,” Astrid whispered, as she placed her hand against the cold glass, wishing not for the first time in her life that she had made a different choice there, that her old choice could be undone. But there was no forgiveness for her—no way to make it that her sin never happened. And though Monty claimed that the Great One offered forgiveness and a way to start a fresh life, Astrid still wasn’t fully convinced that he was right.

Kapton 6th, 114 A.U.

“So this is it,” Jroldin said as he looked up and down at the ruins of the city nestled in the crag of the mountains.

“This is it,” Reynyagn said. “The former capitol city of the Sla’ad Empire. It was a glorious city back in the day, albeit one that was swamped with the corruption of the tyrannic king.”

“I suppose there’s no reason not to do it now, then,” Augger said. “If we are going to split up, we might as well do it now.”

“Yes,” Reynyagn said softly. “Augger and I have the radios, and so I suppose it’s better to do it sooner rather than later. Hagion will work with Augger and his team on going around the neighboring mountains with the information that Hagion was able to give us about the troop movements and the strategic decisions made when attacking the chief city, and I’ll go with the other group to investigate the city itself and what traces of the Arglem we can find there.” And after bidding each other farewell, the two groups separated, on their separate ways on course to find the Arglem.

“The Sla’ad couldn’t have had their treasure trove on that half of this mountainous area,” Hagion was saying as he gestured toward part of it. “Our troops were primarily in this direction and had its extremities on that mountain and this one. So unless they chose to undergo severe risks to place it on our side, it likely is beyond us, closer to where the mountains reach the sea at the end of the Sla’ad empire.”

“Which mountains is the most likely?” Flek asked.

“The further away from the battle lines, the more likely I think they’d be,” Hagion said. “I’d almost wonder if the trove was placed in one of the mountains adjacent to the sea, though the sea is miles away from the city, if only because if part of their back-up plan was to escape by ship, then the trove would be right next to them and on their path of departure.”

“The Sla’ad we spoke to never seemed to give the impression that escape by ship was an actual option,” Augger commented. “Actually, just remembering what he said, he indicated that the sea was mostly controlled and watched by the dwarven fleets and that was why there wasn’t any escape that way.”

“Yes, you’re right,” Hagion said. “Just needed to jog my memory a bit there. Yes, the Sla’ad were caught between two opposing forces on land and sea, and the elves very much controlled the air, even at that time before the Great Upheaval, so that there was not only nowhere to run, but few places to hide it as well.”

“It would have to be invisible to those in the air as well,” Monty said. “Mayhaps in the pits of the mountains we’d have a better chance of finding it.”

“Further down and further in then,” Astrid said. And so they went.

Part XCV: Abrasive Clashes

Date: Kapton 7th, 114 A.U.

Zarien waited as his ship pulled into the docking base of the rebel's homeship before stepping out, side-by-side with Hazael as they walked down the corridor to give the debriefing to Rezja. He had been out for the past week-and-a-half gathering intel and secretly visiting their rebel bases in three different places, finding out what they had and restocking them with weapons. This was the kind of work Zarien liked doing—actually doing something physically meaningful rather than going on treasure hunts for the Arglem.

Zarien didn't regret his decision to join the Xavier Team, but he'd much rather to be able to physically see the work and progress he was making with material gain as they continued to build up the network of elven and orcish rebels against the Emperor rather than trying to find various objects to help defeat him. They entered into the main chamber as Rezja was discussing something with Sereth. She sent a sideways glance their way as Rezja looked up to see them.

"Ah, greetings!" Rezja said. "How did the mission go?"

"The mission went well," Zarien said. "We've compiled our reports on the three rebel groups we visited and have sent them into the database that you can access. We have likewise given them all the weapons that they requested and things seem to be running well."

"Good," Rezja said. "We just got word back from Lord Freglak after sending a message to him at your request, Zarien. He has agreed to ally with us and to assist each other in whatever means necessary. Sereth and I were just preparing and figuring out which information would be the most beneficial for him to use."

"I see," Zarien said, looking at the files at the computer next to the two of them.

"The goblin lord send us a strange reply," Sereth said. "He's very demanding as well."

"Nevertheless, his assistance will be quite invaluable to our cause," Rezja replied. "I just wish that we would be able to get people down to get in touch with the Resistance soon. As of yet, we have been met with a lot of difficulty in contacting them."

"They have a quite elaborate security system," Zarien replied. "I've seen it, so I know. Didn't look into it with much detail though, so I have no idea how to contact them." After briefly going over the details of what happened in their trip, the trio left, leaving Rezja alone to sort out which information would be the most useful to Freglak. Exiting the chamber, they came to an intersection in the hall.

"I head over to mess hall," Hazael said. "You come, Zarien?"

Zarien shook his head. "I'd like to be able to talk to Cortna first as I haven't seen her in two weeks, seeing as I didn't get to see her before we left."

Sereth bit her lip. "Fine," she finally said. "I'll bring you to our room, Zarien. We'll meet up with you soon, Hazael." And with that, they walked down the hallway as they parted company from Hazael. Zarien couldn't see why Sereth was so annoyed at his request. What was so wrong about wanting to talk to Cortna? For some reason, ever since they had first met, Sereth seemed to have something against Zarien and seemed to be rather possessive of her sister. Zarien still couldn't figure her out.

Stopping at one of the doors, Sereth fiddled in her pockets for a key and then, fishing it out, unlocked the door to walk into it. Cortna was sitting on a stool, a paint brush in her hand, intermittently jabbing at the canvas in front of her before getting more paint on the brush. Zarien looked at the garbled mess of a drawing that she had made, which looked close to being an actual picture of something, but garbled enough that Zarien couldn't make out what it was,

"What-" Zarien began.

"It's one of the therapy methods that one of our doctors suggested she do to bide the time," Sereth said quickly. "Supposed to make her use the other side of the brain more instead of being all strict and programmed on account of Jaigran's redacting. It would be best not to disturb her."

Zarien stepped forward, leaning to the side to catch a glimpse of Cortna's eyes as she stared intently at the canvas in front of her, moving the paint brush to grab more paint before jabbing again at the canvas.

"Hello Cortna," Zarien said. Cortna turned to stare blankly at him before looking back at the canvas.

"Don't disturb her!" Sereth reminded him.

"I haven't seen her in weeks," Zarien said, stepping closer to Cortna.

"So?!" Sereth hissed. "That doesn't mean you can just barge in here and demand your own way."

"I'm not doing that," Zarien said defensively. "I just want to be able to talk to her; maybe I'll be able to help."

Sereth simmered. "Fine. Go ahead. Talk to her."

"Can't we have some privacy?" Zarien asked. He knew what to try to talk to Cortna about, what might make her the most likely to remember him, but he didn't feel comfortable talking about it while Sereth was hovering like a raven ready to swoop down on her prey.

“This is my room,” Sereth said through gritted teeth. “What do you want to tell her that I can’t listen to? This is my sister after all.”

“We had been ‘dating’ for a couple months before she was captured,” Zarien reminded her. “You’re not the only one that can lay a claim to her.”

“Oh yes, so you just get to come in her and usurp authority from me,” Sereth snapped. “You know—all you did for her was to allow her to get captured and re-doctrinated by the Emperor. I’m the one who saved her from her captivity.”

“You think *I’m* to blame for that?!” Zarien retorted. “We were a group—a faithful alliance back in the Mothership. I lost my leg because of what I was doing. We all went into the situation well aware of the dangers that we’d be risking as part of a rebel group, just like you took risks to join this one.”

“I’m the one who saved her, and I’m going to make sure that she recovers,” Sereth said. “And just because you might have been dating her before she got indoctrinated, that doesn’t mean that you can just barge in right now and take control.”

“You think *I’m* barging in?” Zarien asked. “Look, is my request really so hard? I just want to be able to see Cortna and be able to talk to her without you always ready to seize on whatever words I say. Is that really too hard to ask?”

“Yes,” Sereth snapped. “Now if you want to say something, say it now.”

Zarien’s expression darkened. “Fine. Be that way, Sereth,” he snapped, marching to the door. “Fill her mind with everything you want and refuse to let anyone else help. You know, I did think we were allies here. But no—Sereth just wants her own way, like she always does. Well you can just be that way. Show how selfish you are without any cost. You know—I lost my leg in my battle against the Emperor. Your sister lost her mind. It would be nice for you to show some self-sacrifice for a change.”

Part XCVI: Discouraged Hopes

Date: Kapton 7th, 114 A.U.

It was the skeletons that first met them as they first entered into the city. Bombed-out depressions littered the ground around it, the front gates of the city blasted open. Skeletons fell all around, casualties of war that had never been buried. As they came into the gates, they faced the ruins of a city ravaged by war and time, buildings broken down and bombed out, and then left to decay into ruin. The palace of the Sla'ad still stood, but as they came closer to the chief palace, they saw that it had been ransacked and glutted by the troops that came in, many of the fancy ornaments that might otherwise be on it having been taken off long ago.

“I would have expected the palace to be hit more heavily,” Jroldin was saying.

“The Sla'ad evacuated the city before that,” Reynyagn replied. “Although it may not seem like it, the palace is a military arsenal. Hordes of machine guns and anti-aircraft missiles were lodged within, though concealed from plain sight. It was the primary defense of the city back in the day, but when it became clear that it was not enough, they evacuated the city.”

“I see,” Jroldin replied. “Are we exploring it then?”

“If we are to find traces of the Arglem anywhere, it would be in here,” Reynyagn said. “The discussions took place in this palace, and so I would think that any hint of where it might be would be found in here. They would have had to kept diagrams or maps of where it is somewhere.”

“Unless they burned them or disposed of them by some other means,” Brother Tomas reminded him.

“Yes,” Reynyagn said. “We are indeed hoping that they did not dispose of them—at least not completely. It's a shot in the dark at best. But it's our best shot. And since we have to be apart from the other group, we have to do something. And given that there's just three of us here, well—we won't be wasting a lot of manpower at this.”

“The tourist's guide to the Sla'ad Palace,” Brother Tomas murmured, flipping through some of the pages. “Look at this!”

“Yes,” Reynyagn said, running over. “It was a bit of a tourist attraction in spare time, although only a few floors were open to the public. I know that the defense systems were apart from the area open to the public, but we might be able to find something to help us.”

“Looks like the throne room was here,” Jroldin said, pointing.

“Ah yes,” Reynyagn replied. “The throne room. The throne was actually removed a couple decades before the city was destroyed since it wasn’t comfortable enough and they wanted to renovate it into an office similar to the ones that the other rulers had, but the name still stuck. That might be the best place to go.”

“Ransacked. Utterly ransacked.”

“I suppose it isn’t too surprising,” Brother Tomas responded. “Given that this was indeed the main command center of the Sla’ad, I suspect they had a lot of buttons in here and other important papers that were kept here that the attackers decided to take.”

“Aye—though they didn’t have to take everything in it,” Reynyagn replied, putting his hand on the bare walls. “But I suppose this option is taken out. What other important rooms can you find on the map?”

“Just lots of reception rooms or museum rooms, or other rooms that really have no relevance to our goals here,” Brother Tomas said, frowning. “It points out a couple of staircases that lead up into the restricted areas though, so I guess that’s where we’re going to want to be heading.”

“And unfortunately, I don’t think we could find any maps up there,” Reynyagn mused. “It’s not like you’d have maps of the entire facility.”

“If it was partially stationed as a military camp, you might,” Brother Tomas pointed out. “I know that there are maps in some of our military structures back in Araelia, so we might be able to find something like that on the walls here.”

“True enough,” Reynyagn replied as they exited the room, going to the nearest staircase. “I do hope that we are able to find something up there, though. To do all of this searching and not to be able to find anything would be rather disappointing.”

“I’m afraid that we might have to be disappointed already,” Jroldin commented. “Look.” Reynyagn looked up to see a staircase leading up. The door was open, and a previous security keypad that would have required a password to get into was blasted open.

“I see,” Reynyagn said, pursing his lips. “The attackers one hundred years ago were a step ahead of us. It’s unlikely that we’ll be able to find anything up there. But we can hope.”

“I couldn’t find anything in my section,” Jroldin said discouragedly, again meeting up with the rest of the group. “Everything of importance was ransacked, and anything behind was

either furniture that didn't have any hidden drawers or anything, or just litter that the soldiers left when breaking in."

"My section was the same," Brother Tomas replied. "I'm afraid that our searching here has been mostly a wasted effort."

"Hopefully the other team will have gotten further then," Reynyagn replied. "Because our searching here? Well, it seems to have been a wasted effort."

Part XCVII: Ambassador

Date: Kornun 29th, 114 A.U.

Melor slowly walked past the Noon-Stone and past the hall of thrones toward the white gates of the Watcher. The room was empty as Melor stepped forward, preparing himself to do the unthinkable—to trespass into sacred ground in order to find out what happened to the Watcher. Slowly, Melor put a hand on the doors and opened them. Brilliant light filled his eyes and he stepped inside.

Melor blinked. This hadn't been what he expected. He stood on a roadway that cycled down into some central chamber. All around him was a black void, although the white stones glowed. Melor turned to see the doors behind him. According to popular folktale and sayings, the place of the Watcher was supposed to be ethereal. Melor had expected his body to be destroyed upon entering, but it still lived.

And that troubled Melor.

Slowly, Melor walked down the road, which cycled down in a spiral first around empty space, and then curled into the cylinder chamber. An arch marked the way in, and Melor entered. Lights lit up as he entered the hallway, which curled around the outside of the cylinder. Writing could be seen on the wall as well as drawings which Melor slowly read as he passed through before he realized what it was. The Prophecies of Xavier. There was the whole prophesy at first, the prophesy about the Priest-King, and then other prophecies that Melor had never seen nor heard of before. He paused, searching through his vault of memory but came up void about these other prophecies—the Prophecy of the Healer, the Prophecy of the Warrior. When had Xavier written these? Melor was troubled, but he continued going down the descending hall until the inside wall opened up and Melor could step in and see the chamber that he was in. Ornate carvings detailed on the walls—scenes of famous events in Arquenian history. Melor would have stayed and gazed at the drawings for hours on end, but he had work to do. Moving down the hall, now a balcony that curled around the outer edge of the cylinder, Melor finally came down to the bottom to see what was there. In the center of the chamber stood a circular stone. Seven indented regions circled a swirling blue void in the center of the stone, although Melor couldn't figure out what the regions were for. Melor looked around, and, seeing nothing, slowly placed one hand against the void.

Who are you? All of Melor's senses went black as Melor found himself in nothingness, a voice speaking to him.

I am Melor, representative of the auggers! Melor cried. *I have come in search of the Sixth Watcher.*

There was a pause before the being again spoke. *What do you want with me?*

I have come to ask for your guidance and aid, Melor replied. For centuries we have come to you for help but have received no answer. And so I have come to discover why you have remained silent and if you would be willing to help us. After millennia of working perfectly, the Noon-Stone has begun to decay, the beam not hitting at the right place and so we have begun to worry about the fate of our planet. Might you help us, O Sixth Watcher?

There was silence before the Sixth Watcher spoke. *You should not have come here.*

I apologize profusely for treading on your sacred ground, Melor replied. But we had no other choice given your silence. Nevertheless, I cry out for pardon.

You cry out in vain, Melor of the auggers. I know why the Noon-Stone has broken. I am the cause for it and by my edict the Noon-Beam is signaling your coming destruction. All your pleas to me will come in vain. I have already chosen my vessel to herald the coming of a new age. And you are not part of it. Burning pain exploded through Melor's mind as Melor cried out in blackness. And then his consciousness slowly faded from reality.

Kapton 6th, 114 A.U.

“It has been seven days, and Melor has not returned,” Grandine said solemnly. “Because he has not returned, although I do accept that time might indeed flow differently in the habitation of the Sixth Watcher, we cannot wait any longer. The Noon-Beam has continued to fluctuate and so we must accomplish the second stage of our plan by sending an augger to the mainland of Arquenia to learn what has happened and find an answer for the changing Noon-Beam.”

“I agree,” Yarvil said solemnly. “Whether by committing sacrilege, or by discovering that the Sixth Watcher is no more and there is to be no more escape from that place, Melor has not returned, and we cannot wait any longer for him. We must indeed find an augger strong, brave, wise, and talented to go to the mainland of Arquenia and discover what the other races have done there since they rejected this place.”

“Do we have any nominations, then, for which augger might best fit this task?” Grandine asked.

“I nominate Ranvier,” Tragun, keeper of the Noon-Stone, replied. “Coming from a rich lineage of auggers before him, Ranvier has delved into his memory enough to be wiser than most, although he doesn't delve into it as deeply as some like Yarvil have. He has shown himself to be brave and strong in the encounter with the Seabeasts, and has a determined heart that will stick true to the task.”

“Are there any other nominations?” Grandine asked. Silence fell over the room. “We shall bring this matter to a vote then. All for Ranvier being our nomination to the Arquenian mainland?”

“Aye!” a chorus of voices shouted.

“And opposed?” There was silence.

“The motion passes,” Grandine announced. “Ranvier will be our ambassador to the Arquenian mainland. And may he discover the secret of the Noon-Beam.”

Part XCVIII: Under Mountain

Kapton 10th, 114 A.U.

“If I was a buried treasure, where would I hide myself...” Flek mumbled.

“Or where would you hide one, if you were an evil Sla’ad king,” Monty replied. “Honestly, we’ve just been wandering around in circles. I have no idea where we are going to be able to find it.” They were all sitting on a ledge on one of the mountains that they had been searching the past few days, and had come up empty.

“If I was a Sla’ad king...” Hagion mumbled, thinking carefully. “I mean, it’s not like he had many options about where to hide it. They hadn’t lost complete control of the air yet, but they were still carting several treasures around, and they had to be doing all of this in secret.”

“Why didn’t they just bury it under the palace?” Flek asked. “Maybe-”

“The Sla’ad who was sitting at those meetings told us it was hidden in the mountains,” Augger replied. “And with them in danger of being bombed out, I’d doubt they’d hide it close to where the main fighting was. It would have had to be a secretive attempt, but they had to bury it somehow.”

“They didn’t have much time,” Hagion replied. “From the beginning of the siege to when we finally broke in was a relatively short amount of time. If they had carted over lots of heavy equipment, we would have noticed. We were attempting to keep a tight surveillance on this area.”

“Of course, Sla’ad tend to be able to blend in and not be as visible given their dark forms,” Monty mused. “And if they were trying to do this in quick order, then I’d suspect that they might have found a large cave with a narrow opening to try and hide these in so that they wouldn’t have to do all the work of making their own little catacomb.”

“Of course!” Hagion said, jumping up. “It makes complete sense now! The Caves of Dragla.”

“The caves of what?”

“The Caves of Dragla!” Hagion said. “They were a well-known network of caves in these mountains that had been a fairly well-populated tourist attraction until, after the war, they appeared to collapse after all the bombs that went off and the fighting. They would have been a perfect place to hide treasure. Especially if you closed off the entrance to the caves first.”

“Do you know where the caves are?”

“Not exactly, but they were in Dragla Mountain,” Hagion said confidently. “Somewhat near the bottom. And so we have to be able to find the entrance there.”

The team stared at what looked like to be a large landslide on the mountain as Hagion slowly nodded his head. “Yep,” he said. “This is it. This is where the Caves of Dragla once were.”

“Well, at least we found them,” Flek said. “But how are we supposed to get through into the caves? That’s a massive landslide right there! To get through that landslide is going to cover some machinery—machinery that we don’t have, I might add.”

“To get through the landslide, yes,” Hagion mused. “But not if we decide to enter the caves by another way.”

“What do you mean?”

“The Caves of Dragla went all over the place and was a whole series of caves and tunnels,” Hagion replied. “There may be another cave that’s closer to the surface which we could just dig down to. I did see some machine in the aircraft that we had that would help us in digging. We just need a map of the caves.”

“I’ll call Reynyagn then,” Augger replied. “If there are any maps to be found, we’ll be able to find them in the city.”

“That was Reynyagn,” Augger replied as he put his walkie talkie back into his bag. “He just called to say that he was able to find a map of the Caves of Dragla. We decided that it would be too complicated for him to try to direct us how to find it while he’s over there, so, since he’s been doing nothing for the past couple days, unable to find any good leads in the ransacked palace, he and Jroldin and Brother Tomas are going to be coming to re-join us.”

“Is that safe?” Number 994 asked nervously. “I mean, if one of us is the traitor—”

“Well, given that they haven’t been able to find any information from where they are, we really don’t have any reason to continue separate,” Augger replied. “They’re going to have to come here. And once we breach the opening of the Caves of Dragla, well—then we will be able to figure out what we should do about the traitor.”

Part IC: Plotting the Route

Date: Kapton 9th, 114 A.U.

The Sla'ad stood before Jaigran, limply trying to keep on his feet as the Emperor stalked toward him. Bitterly, the Sla'ad looked up at him, the scar across his face, as his eyes shot bullets at the approaching emperor.

“Murderer,” the Sla'ad whispered. “I hate you.”

“Azjlan wouldn't have died if you had cooperated better,” Jaigran replied. “And I see that you are before me because you have finally relented. Where is the Arglem?”

The Sla'ad bit his lips before finally answering. “We hid the Arglem in a treasure trove with the rest of the great treasures of the Sla'ad,” he finally forced out. “We hid them in the famed Caves of Dragla and then sent a landslide over the opening to seal it off.”

“I see...” Jaigran said. “You have done well to finally relinquish your information. And what of the Sla'ad who haunts me?”

“What?”

“The Sla'ad who hunts me—who is always stalking me—always in the shadows—looking for its chance to attack me,” Jaigran spat. “The Sla'ad you have appointed as an assassin. What of him?”

The Sla'ad's eyes grew large. “I—I have no idea what you're talking about!” he cried out. “I have never heard of any such thing—we were never close enough to the Mothership to try to send an assassin up to kill you. I swear, Emperor—I am innocent concerning this matter! I know nothing of it!”

“I see,” Jaigran murmured, before looking back up at the guards. “I have no use for this pitiful wretch. Send him to the labor camps, but make sure to log which labor camp you send him to in case I need to speak with him again. Take him away.” The Sla'ad slumped in resignation as the guards dragged him away. Jaigran let them go before quickly running to his table where all the maps and books were laid out. The fabled Caves of Dragla. So, it would appear that the explanation that they had been destroyed during their bombardment of the capital city of the Sla'ad was wrong. No. If the wretched Sla'ad was correct, then they were purposefully buried by Sla'ad seeking to hide their hidden treasure. All the pieces were falling into place. The last thing that remained was to plan his course to the Caves of Dragla, to take the Arglem for himself.

Kapton 10th, 114 A.U.

The Watcher waited as the ship came into the Mothership, docking before the door slowly opened and he stepped out, accompanied by two guards on either side. He looked back with satisfaction to see a very faint shadow playing behind him on the floor. He was only able to gain a shadow after his times of rejuvenation, a shadow which quickly disappeared, but which was useful nonetheless. Striding forward, the Watcher didn't leave the launch dock before he noticed Emperor Jaigran making for him, six guards accompanying him—four of them with lights to dispel all of the shadows. The amount which the Emperor had degraded into believing this vain superstition disturbed and disgusted him to a certain extent, but there was little that he could do about it.

“Greetings, Emperor Jaigran,” the Watcher said. “It is nice for you to be the one to find me, rather than me searching for you.”

“Yes,” he replied, rather absent-mindedly. “How was the trip?”

“Your forces ought to be making heads-way in the battle against the goblins shortly, possibly by today,” the Watcher replied. “The priest who is convinced that I'm his god has been consolidating support, and I've arranged things to make a humiliating defeat for the goblins by your hands. What of you?”

“We have successfully taken the information from the captive Sla'ad,” Emperor Jaigran replied. “According to him, the Arglem was hidden in the Caves of Dragla before they were sealed in with a massive rockslide. I have a ship ready for us to immediately leave.”

The Watcher's eyes sparked and he stared at the Emperor. “The ship is ready now—to immediately leave?” he asked. “Why such the urgency to find it?”

“We already know from your spy that you implanted in the Xavier Team that they are searching for the Arglem,” he replied. “We can't risk the chance of them getting to it before us.”

“I see,” the Watcher said, pursing his lips, as his mind ran through the information. “Very well. We must be of haste in order to claim the Arglem before they have. What size airship do you have?”

“We have a Class III warship,” Emperor Jaigran replied. “And three regiments of guards to go along with us.”

“Three regiments of guards?” the Watcher asked. “Why so many?”

“If the Xavier Team is also looking for the Arglem and our paths happen to again cross, I'm not taking any risks,” he snapped. “They nearly killed me in Yippah because I wasn't prepared. I'm not going to find myself in the same position again. We have enough guards at the Mothership, and so we're taking three regiments with us.”

“Very well,” the Watcher replied. “You have prepared well for this trip; I’m impressed.”

“Well, I wasn’t the Emperor because of nothing when you chose me,” he reminded him. “As essential as you are to our plan to destroy Arquenian, I am quite adept enough to prepare for my own affairs.”

“Quite true,” the Watcher said. “Now where is this ship that you mentioned? We must leave at once.”

“It’s two docks down from this one,” he replied. “Let us therefore go and take the Arglem. And so get a step closer to victory.”

Part C: Breaking Through

Date: Kapton 11th, 114 A.U.

The traitor moved swiftly through the night, running with the radio to a secluded place, where he quickly began punching buttons before opening up the back of the radio to reveal the secret switch: the switch that changed it from receiving radio waves to sending out radio waves. The traitor flicked it and quickly turned the dial to the right channel, taking a deep breath before beginning his call.

“Greetings,” the traitor finally said, holding down a button that initiated his voice. “This is the Traitor of the Xavier Team, Code Name 2352 calling in. Do you read me?” He quickly flicked the switch back to receive input.

“This is the Watcher, Code Name 2532 responding,” the voice came crackling through. “What do you have for me?”

The traitor flicked the switch back. “We have decided that the most plausible place for the Arglem to be is the Caves of Dragla,” he replied. “We suspect that the Sla’ad likely hid the Arglem there before covering it with a landslide, and then afterwards blaming it on the bombs that went off all around the capital city when the other forces attacked the city. We are planning on rejoining with the rest of the group tomorrow and using some of the miner equipment that we have in the ship to try and break through at a different point than the rock slide, where the cave seems close to the surface. Over.” The traitor flicked back the switch again.

“Your information confirms the information that we already have,” the Watcher replied. “Emperor Jaigran has received the same intel from a Sla’ad that he tortured for information. We are currently on route to the Caves of Dragla to intercept you and to take the Arglem before the rest of the Xavier Team can. I will do my best to arrange things so that we can reunite, and hopefully convince the Warrior to fall like his predecessor. Are you good with our plan? Over.”

“I am good with the plan,” the traitor replied after flicking the switch once more. “Once we find the Arglem, I will make sure to wrest it from them before they know what is happening. I will reveal myself once and for all that we might again reunite. The Xavier Team will crumble before our upcoming plan. And they have no chance of stopping it.”

It was three hours past midday and the machine was still laboriously working at the earth while Jroldin yawned. The mechanical digger was small and it worked slowly, mostly just being in the airship in case they needed it, as they wanted some backup if they had to dig, but they hadn’t packed one powerful enough to be able to do much good, given that a more powerful digger would have taken a lot more space. As is, they had made considerable progress in

digging down into the earth in the past three hours since he had arrived with Reynyagn and Brother Tomas to show them the map for where they ought to be digging, but unfortunately it appeared that the Caves of Dragla were further down than they expected.

“So what’s going to happen when that digger finally breaks through the rock and hits the roof of the cave,” Jroldin asked, the question suddenly popping into his head. “How are we going to keep it from just plummeting into the cavern?”

“We’re not,” Monty replied. “We discussed this to some length before you got here with the map. However, we don’t have enough rope that would be strong enough to hold the digger in place so that it wouldn’t fall once it hits the roof of the cave. And so we’re just going to let it plummet into the cave. It’ll probably break beyond repair, but there really aren’t any other options that we have. Course—if we see when it first starts to break through and are able to turn it off before it breaks the ground apart too much, we might be able to save it, but if not, we probably won’t need it. I’m not sure why exactly we brought it in the first place, but am glad that we did, for the rare opportunity such as this when we’ll need it.”

“So will there be traps in it?” Jroldin asked. “I know if I was going to be burying some treasure that I’d be sure to put lots of traps around it so that no one else could sneak around and take it.”

“I’m not sure whether or not they would have, but I suspect so, following your logic,” Reynyagn replied. “Chances are they would have put traps in place that would be able to kill many an unsuspecting treasure hunter, but they may have designed the traps in such a way so that Sla’ad wouldn’t be hurt. We had a strong belief that our race was the race that would be the superior race able to overwhelm all others, quite similar to the belief that the elves now hold. And so I suspect they would have put the traps in place so that Sla’ad—like me—wouldn’t be harmed. At least, I hope that would have been the case.”

“So what do we do once we have this Arglem,” Astrid asked. “I know that we’re not quite sure how we’ll be able to use it to defeat Emperor Jaigran, but what’s our immediate plan? If we still have the traitor lurking among us, what are we going to do after we have it? Are we going to need to split up again?”

“I don’t know...” Augger said. “Although I’m hoping, although it might be quite irrational, that the Arglem may be able to shed light on this matter. In recent days, I’ve been beginning to ponder the role of the Priest-King in all of this. Although it would not be his only role, given that the prophesy told that there would indeed be a traitor among us, I’ve been beginning to wonder how Jroldin would factor into all of this. As the Priest-King, I wonder if he’d be able to do something to use his priestly powers to discover the traitor by some means or another.”

“Don’t look at me!” Jroldin said, uncomfortable by all the looks that he was now getting. “I have no idea *how* I’m supposed to be the Priest-King in general, so I have no idea how I’m supposed to be the Priest-King in specific. Maybe it’ll just come upon me in some way, I don’t know. But... I dunno. I can’t really control my power that much. I mean, sure I had that good idea about splitting up in the first place, but...”

“His time will come,” Brother Tomas replied. “But in the mean time we must press on and put our trust in the Great One to discover and reveal the traitor. For we can do nothing else.”

Part CI: Uniting Threads

Date: Kapton 11th, 114 A.U.

“We’ve finally gotten a signal from their radios.”

“What?” Zarien asked, jerking up his head to look at Rezja.

“We have a signal from the radios of your fellow Xavier Team members and have pinpointed their general location,” Rezja said. “We caught it last night. They’re near the capitol of the ancient Sla’ad empire. I’ve already done the preparations to get a ship ready.”

“Wow,” Zarien said, taking a deep breath as he tried to catch up with everything that had happened. “When am I supposed to leave?”

“In half an hour,” Rezja said. “Unless you had any reason to leave later, which I didn’t think you did. Hazael and Sereth plan on going with you.”

“Sereth wants to go with me?” Zarien raised an eyebrow.

Rezja pursed his lips. “She didn’t volunteer for the slot if that’s what you mean,” he replied. “But we need three people to go, and you’ve only worked with them.”

“Is Cortna coming?”

Rezja shook her head. “I convinced her that she’d be safe here.”

“I see,” Zarien said and he took another deep breath. “Well, as you said, there’s not much point or reason for me to stick around here much. I’ll just grab my stuff and then I’ll be off...” He thought for a moment. “Once we reunite though, do you-”

“Just use your radios more,” Rezja said, smiling. “Relay information to us through them and we can intercept them without the elves noticing. We’ve got all the details worked out; Hazael and Sereth have a more detailed game plan since they were up last night when we got the message in.”

“I see,” Zarien said. “Well, I’m ready to go.”

They had been flying for a couple hours since leaving the rebel ship. It was going to be a one to two day’s journey to the old Sla’ad capitol and so they hoped to arrive there midday at least on the 12th. Zarien looked at some of the gadgets from where he was up front with Hazael. Sereth was in the back. The two of them were still on almost-non-speaking terms following their disputes over Cortna.

“So,” Zarien finally said. “I guess that they’ve found the Arglem here?”

“They think so,” Hazael replied. “The Caves of Dragla they suspect to hold it. They separated for unknown reason and thus used walkie-talkies. They now rejoining together.”

“Strange that they’d separate,” Zarien mused. “Though I guess that if they were trying to find it, then it would make sense to split up in order to cover more ground.”

After a while, Hazael leaned over toward Zarien. “Your conflict with Sereth should end.”

Zarien bristled a bit at the notion. “Our conflict? Our conflict is not my fault.”

“Maybe,” Hazael replied. “But do you really still want the fight between you when you leave?”

Zarien pursed his lips. “I’m not the one who’s being all exclusionist and overly-protective,” he replied. “Look—I don’t like this fight any more than you do, but I’m not the one that you should be looking at here.”

Hazael sighed before turning back to the driving controls, looking at the map as Zarien glared out the window. If anyone was to be found at fault here, it was most definitely Sereth, the one who had started this whole thing. Him? He didn’t have any fault in it. None whatsoever.

“Well,” Hazael finally said in a louder voice so that Sereth could hear him. “I hope that you can reconcile enough to accomplish our mission. Rezja has many things he wants us to accomplish there. We’re fighting an empire, and so unity is imperative among our ranks. Even if you can’t be unified, maybe you can at least act like it and put a face on to inspire others. Because betrayal and uncertainty in the ranks is the one thing that will absolutely seal the deal for our alliance.”

“The spy is ready and prepared to accomplish his side of the deal,” the Watcher said. “Once we land, we’ll be all ready to take over. They’re not going to know what hit them.”

“Good,” Emperor Jaigran replied, as he moved his piece on the board in the game that he was playing against the Watcher. “Any interesting intel from him?”

“Only that which we already knew,” the Watcher replied, pondering the board. “The Xavier Team has likewise discovered that the Arglem is likely hidden in the Caves of Dragla and are currently working to recover it.”

“Bother,” Jaigran snapped. “How close are they to finding it?”

“Not close enough, from what the spy said,” the Watcher replied. “They have to break through the caves a different way because of the immense landslide that the Sla’ad used and so it ought to take them a while to get in. Besides, now that I think about it, I think it may turn out to be highly useful if they end up getting it first.”

“How so?”

“Think about it,” the Watcher replied, moving a piece. “What do you think the Sla’ad put in there? If they’re going to hide their whole treasure trove in this cave, you can bet that they’re going to protect it extremely well. I’d be shocked if they hadn’t placed a whole arsenal of traps ready to trap the unsuspecting adventurer, in their attempt to make sure that no outsiders found it. If the Xavier Team gets to it first, that only means that they get caught by the traps first. And if they’re lucky enough to get past all of them, it still matters not. There’s only one pathway out of the Caves of Dragla. Once we land, all that we’ll need to do is put a heavily armed squadron around that entrance and that’s it. They’ll be trapped like rats and will be easily exterminated. And with the traitor on our side, they won’t know what’s coming. They’re not going to know what’s coming until it’s too late.”

Part CII: Rebellion

Date: Kapton 7th, 114 A.U.

Oldin lifted up the newspaper to see the front page cover of the vote that had been gotten in during the wee hours of the morning. A Senate vote of 62-38, barely squeaking by the 60% majority needed to revoke the previous arrangement where Astrid had been given complete control and connections to the Xavier Team. After a long week of Iraina publicly revealing much of his discussions with Astrid and pressuring for a vote to give him the power he claimed he deserved, he had finally gotten it. And so after much lobbying, the votes were in, compete with five senators who had once been stalwart supporters of Astrid reluctantly switching sides to give the win to Iraina.

The bell ringed. “Come in!” Oldin said and looked up as ex-Governor Astrid came in.

“Ah, Astrid—it’s good to see you again,” Oldin said as he put down the paper. “Although after reading about last night’s big news, I suspect that this isn’t going to be a very enthusiastic discussion.”

“No,” Astrid said, pursing her lips. “Iraina got his way. Again. And in doing so, he’s completely screwed up everything for the Xavier Team.”

“Not to rub salt in a wound, but you *were* kind of asking for it.”

“What?!”

“Come on.” Oldin stared at Astrid square in the face. “You know, as much as I may have wanted you to win in the election, I think that Iraina was right in this matter. It took much winning over for me, but honestly, since he *is* governor, he ought to have a right to these privileges. And given that you weren’t willing to share them with him, I think that you got what was coming to you, regrettably. Some more tact in dealing with Iraina might have been advised.”

“I had thought that I had my loyal group of 43 that would be able to resist any attempts by Iraina to push it through Senate,” Astrid said, pursing her lips. “Unfortunately, they were not all as loyal as I thought.”

“Regardless,” Oldin said, “it’s old news now, I suppose. Do you still have any power?”

“I still have my position,” Astrid said. “Albeit with the power to be the sole communicator of the Xavier Team stripped from me and given to Oldin. Which probably means that I’m reduced to a figurehead with no real power. Since I strongly disbelieve that Iraina would actually call me for advice on foreign policy plans that involve the Xavier Team.”

“Probably correct,” Oldin said. “Either way, I wish you the best regards in the situation.”

“Yes...” Astrid said, pausing as she thought.

Oldin cocked his head after a minute of silence. “Did you have something to say?”

“Ye...” Astrid began, but then she shook her head. “No, no... That’s it. Thank you.” And exchanging goodbyes, she left. Oldin watched her go thoughtfully. Somehow, he didn’t think that Astrid had just come in there to exchange talk about the vote. She had come into the room wanting something from him—he was sure of it. But somehow in the course of the conversation, she had changed her mind. It shouldn’t matter. Whatever her private thinking was, it shouldn’t concern him in this matter.

There was a running of steps, and Oldin looked up to see two Araelian guards come in, quickly looking around before exiting. He stood up, perplexed to why his work space had just been invaded. “What-”

“I’m sorry,” came the voice, and Iraina stepped in. “I hate to interrupt your work, but have you seen ex-Governor Astrid?”

“She left here five minutes ago,” Oldin responded.

“Crud.” Iraina snapped his fingers before wearily sitting down in a chair. “And the subway left two minutes ago. So she’s long gone by now.” The subway was located only a block from Oldin’s headquarters.

“Why are you looking for her?” Oldin asked with curiosity.

“I assume that you’ve read about the vote that happened last night and the significance of it?” Iraina asked, gesturing to the newspaper on his deck.

“Aye, I did,” Oldin responded. “Astrid and I were talking about it while she was here. But why is it so important that you find her? She ought to be back soon enough. She doesn’t take long trips away from Araelia, or you could just phone her if you have any questions. Though why are the Araelian guar-”

“She took off with them,” Iraina said, interrupting.

“What?”

“All the communication equipment that she’s been using these past couple of months to talk with the Xavier Team,” Iraina said. “They’re gone. From what we could gather, after she heard the vote, she packed up her stuff, grabbed the communication equipment, and high-tailed it

out of here after stopping to talk with you. After learning from an unsuspecting aide that she was coming here, we tried to get here in time, but apparently, not soon enough.”

“Wait...” Oldin said, his mind reeling. “You mean-”

“Yes. She stole the communication equipment and there’s no other way for us to communicate with them,” Iraina said bitterly. “Upon losing the vote, she’s decided to take things into her own hands.”

Oldin pursed his lips. “I see,” he said, before sighing. “I tried to warn her—to try to help her to understand how she’s on the wrong side of this. But... I don’t know. She’s too prejudiced against you for some reason. And so I guess my talk didn’t do anything good. I almost wonder if she came here to ask for my assistance before realizing that I wasn’t on her side in this issue.”

“I see,” Iraina said, sighing. “Given this development though, do you think—with the dwarves—that you could-”

“Of course,” Oldin said, waving his hand. “Think nothing of it. I’ll alert the dwarven government and the rest of the FRI to keep an eye out for her. Ex-governor Astrid is now a criminal and a fugitive that has stolen government property. And she has just made our Wanted list.”

Part CIII: Unmasked

Date: Kapton 12th, 114 A.U.

Astrid rolled, unable to fall asleep. They had broken through into the cave late last night and had decided to wait until morning to break in. But, both curious about what they were about to find, and still awake after a boring day, she was still awake.

Restless, she left her chambers, exiting the ship as she stood in the cool night air. A shadow moved in the distance, and Astrid's hand reached for her gun, slowly stepping forward. Why was he...

Astrid stepped forward, determined to follow him.

The traitor moved forward, getting ready for his last radio signal. Quickly pushing the buttons necessary, he spoke. "This is the traitor of the Xavier Team, Code Name 2352 calling in. Do you read me?"

"This is the Watcher, Code Name 2532 responding," the voice finally came crackling through. "Why are you calling me?"

"They have broken through to the caves below," he replied. "How soon will it be until you arrive?"

Astrid drew closer. Who was he calling to at this hour? And who was he calling to? She moved forward around the crag, about to ask him what he was doing, and then stopped. His voice was different—deeper. And there was an edge to his voice—one that she had never heard before.

And, suddenly, a horrible pit forming in her stomach, Astrid took off running.

There was a sudden noise in the background—the sign of an eavesdropper. He was being watched. Suddenly, fear jolting through his senses, the traitor spun around to see a dark shadow moving. This wasn't according to plan. And, charging forward, the traitor drew his sword, ready to stop the threat.

Astrid looked back, blinking as brilliant light from the corsha blade shown towards her.

“Stop!” Astrid shrieked, as everything seemed to fall to pieces around her. “What are you-” But he didn’t stop. Firing one bullet behind her, which he quickly blocked with the corsha blade, she took off running, even though she knew it was faster with him.

“Red alert!” Astrid shrieked into the walkie talkie, hoping that someone was up at the ship. “This is Astrid calling in—I’m south of the ship and am being chased by the traitor! Someone get over here fast!”

Number 994 sprang up, thoughts running through his senses as he received the message that was sent into the ship, thankful that he had slept while connecting himself to the ship. Astrid was in trouble.

“Get up!” he roared, placing his hand on the light switch and electronically turning all the lights on. “Astrid’s in trouble!”

Heart pounding, Astrid charged forward, sweat running down her forehead, as pure adrenaline drove her senses. He was catching up. And Astrid knew that if he caught up to her, he was going to kill her. What had happened to him? It couldn’t be—could it? Was it possible that he had been the traitor all along? And after all that they’d been through together...

Slipping, Astrid skidded, flying forward as she landed hard on the ground, rolling over to see him coming up closer. In desperation, she fired the bullet, trying to ignore the fact that she was shooting a gun at the person who had once been her friend, even while knowing that he would easily block it, which he did. Scooting backwards, she watched as he leapt forward, preparing herself for the impact which was sure to come.

But it never came.

A bolt of lightning suddenly struck the traitor in the chest, throwing him back as the corsha blades flew from his hands. Hitting the ground, still shocked that he had been attacked, the traitor leapt up again only to be hit by another lightning strike, before collapsing to the ground. It was over.

Monty gripped Astrid tightly in her arms as she wept, while pointing his gun at Flek, lying stunned on the ground, feeling ready to pound the goblin into the dust for almost killing his sister.

“Why did you do it?” Monty asked viciously as Flek seemed to regain consciousness. “Why did you betray us?”

Flek groaned, looking up. “Wha...” he began, looking confused. “Where am...”

“Don’t play stupid with us,” Monty spat.

“Let’s be tactful,” Jroldin said, stepping between the two of them as his eyes flashed. “You are under questioning Flek for your treasonous acts and for your attempted murder of Astrid. As the Priest-king, I claim the role of judge. Why have you done this?”

“I...” Flek said, still looking confused. “What do you mean? I... I just fell asleep, and...”

“I will destroy you.” The foreign voice emitted from Flek’s lips as he contorted, before it broke, Flek suddenly stumbling back as realization filled his eyes.

“No!” Flek cried out, now in a normal voice. “I thought—no—you said that-”

“Who said what?” Reynyagn asked.

“No!” Flek cried, rolling as if he was grappling with some invisible foe. “Don’t—you can’t-”

Suddenly, his pupils went black, and Flek sprung up, arms outstretched, looking ready to kill. A bolt of lightning again felled him to the ground before Reynyagn and Augger sprung forward, pinning him down as Jroldin forward.

“You will never win!” the deep menacing voice came out of Flek’s mouth. *“You will be destroyed. All of you will fall under my-”*

“No!” Flek’s voice again emerged. “You can’t have control of me! Let me...”

“I. Am. The real Flek.” Beads of sweat began to emerge on his forehead.

“What is wrong with him?” Reynyagn asked, looking agitated, as he looked toward Jroldin for guidance. “In all my years-“

“I can’t keep him back for much longer!” Flek cried out, again in a normal voice. “I... can’t...”

Jroldin stepped back, feeling caught by all the attention suddenly thrust on him after he tried to take his role as the Priest-King. What was he supposed to do now, with Flek grappling with some imaginary foe? What was he supposed to do? Anxiety beat into him as he realized that he didn’t have much time, Flek again clawing at the ground as his pupils blackened. Fretting, Jroldin was about to give up when suddenly, a wave of peace passed through him, as he recounted the words of the general prophesy, and of the words of the prophesy specific to him to mind.

He was to be the Priest-King.

“Stop,” Jroldin said, stepping forward as he glared at Flek—or at whoever had taken control over him. “Your reign over Flek is over.”

Part CIV: The Last Act of the Priest-King

Date: Kapton 12th, 114 A.U.

“Flek is gone,” the unearthly voice hissed. *“He has no power over his body anymore! He has sold himself to me and to me he shall ever remain!”*

“Nay,” Jroldin said, stepping forward to bend down over Flek. “But by the power of the Priest-King, I will fulfill my purpose. Your reign over Flek is over.” Reaching up, Jroldin hoped behind hope and grasped the ethereal circlet, taking it off. To his wonder, his hands, although they felt emptiness, now held the circlet.

“No!” the voice hissed. *“It isn’t possible! You can’t-”* But Jroldin, ignoring the voice, pushed the circlet down on Flek’s struggling head. Immediately, there was a flash of light as Jroldin moved his hands back. There was a smell of burning as ethereal flames of fire licked the circlet, Flek’s body convulsing. Out from the circlet, there rose an ethereal being in the shape of an elf, now cloaked with flames, who pointed at them, trying to say something before there was a rushing of wind. The spirit flew back, and suddenly all was silent. And Flek’s body fell limp.

Reynyagn and Augger stepped back. “Did...” Reynyagn say, looking at Flek’s lifeless body. “Is—Is Flek-” He stopped, unable to say the word. And then Flek’s body moved, his head turning, as slowly Flek opened his eyes into the moonlight, and at those around him.

“I... I met him at the Mothertree years ago,” Flek said quietly as everyone around him listened. “He promised me to give me power and skill beyond that of a goblin’s natural ability if I would let him in. And... And I did. I was a weak goblin before that, one who wanted so much, and so I accepted him. I have come to regret that choice.”

Reynyagn pursed his lips. “But... but you didn’t know... You didn’t realize he had that much control over you?”

“I always knew that he could,” Flek said quietly. “Part of the deal was that I’d let him take control of my body at some points so that he could experience it again. But I was always able to stop him—or so I thought. He always needed my permission, and after we learned there was a traitor, I thought this might be it, but he swore he wouldn’t take control over me anymore. He said that he’d leave. But...”

“He didn’t,” Monty said, a tone of disgust in his voice. “And you believed him.”

“I know,” Flek said quietly. “He must have taken control over me while I was sleeping. And I... I was completely unaware of it...”

“Well,” Reynyagn finally said after a long pause. “I suspect we all already know without explaining how catastrophic that was—and how much worse it could have been had it not been inverted. Either way, from what Astrid said, the elves likely know our plans. And, for better or for worse, the Priest-King circlet is now permanently on Flek’s head.”

“I can see it,” Jroldin finally said, looking up. “It’s on his head—but I can still see it.”

Brother Tomas turned toward him. “Does... does that mean?”

“Aye,” Jroldin replied. “I have finally put my faith in the Great One.”

Reynyagn lurched to the side as four swords suddenly swung up at him on the floor, bouncing off of them as his shadowy form moved to the ground.

“It’s really a good thing that we have you here,” Astrid said as Reynyagn moved around the swords, the others slowly following behind. “If we didn’t have you, and if the Sla’ad hadn’t made all their traps Sla’ad proof.”

“Well, that’s why the prophesy called for one from each race,” Reynyagn replied, bouncing his hand off of one of the sword blades before moving on. “For situations such as this.” This was the fourth trap that they had so far encountered while going through the Caves of Dragla, further proof that the Sla’ad had hidden the Arglem here.

“Either way, we really need to get out of here soon,” Monty said, glancing at his watch. “We don’t know how much longer we have before the elves get here.”

“We can fight them back,” Astrid said. “I mean—we nearly defeated them at the Citadel of Tzel-Maret.”

“Yes, but then we also had all of my fighting power,” Flek reminded her. “I still had the being strengthening my skills. And believe me. Without them, I’m a worse fighter than Jroldin.”

“I find it hard to believe that,” Jroldin muttered. Everyone laughed.

The elven ship slowly hissed down, gaining a secure footing before the door opened and the elven guards came marching out, bearing guns and fire-sticks as Emperor Jaigran and the Watcher stepped down in the midst of them.

“They likely know that we’re coming,” the Watcher said solemnly. “After gaining all my memories from the other part of myself that inhabited Flek, I believe they are smart enough to figure out who I, through Flek, had been calling in the middle of the night.”

“It matters not,” Jaigran said, beating the air with his wings as he rose up. “Guards! Surround the hole—the only entrance into the Caves of Dragla! Fixate our heaviest artillery there, and then we go in. They’ll be traps like rats in a hole. And there’ll be no escape.”

“The elves!” Zarien said, ducking to the side. “They’ve found them!”

“And from the looks of it, they know that the rest of the team is down there,” Sereth said with growing horror as she watched as they began setting up heavy guns and cannons around the drilled-in entrance to the Caves of Dragla. “Look at how they’re pointing all of the guns down! Given everything else we heard-”

“They trapped like rats in hole,” Hazael said solemnly. “Unless we stop them, the rest of the Xavier Team is doomed.”

Part CV: Humiliation

Date: Kapton 12th, 114 A.U.

It was all over the newspapers. How Jaine had predicted the stunning results of the last battle where the Elder Dragon had broken loose and their forces had been utterly decimated. About how new video footage had shown up showing the Mothertree moving and strangling Myrik—footage that apparently had been kept under lock and key before then. A whole new speech by Jaine proclaiming himself as the High Priest of the Mothertree and espousing his belief about how the Mothertree would lead them into a new golden age over the elves. And although he hadn't cried for the dethroning of him yet, Freglak knew it was coming. Jaine was subtle—spending time in his speech to speak out against all of his military practices. The next speech would be the results of all this—the culmination of Jaine's surprise surge from being completely destroyed to being a surging force—the next speech would call for a new Lord-Protector of the forest and for the dethroning of himself.

Freglak closed his eyes, tapping his fingers on the table. How he wished that Flek and Reynyagn would still be here—he could use Flek's amazing skillmanship in battle, as well as Reynyagn's supreme intelligence. But no. They had left to beat the elves, and so he was left by himself to figure out how to dispose of this rising threat. And Freglak knew what a distraction and a possible upcoming civil war would mean in the greater picture. A civil war at this time would be to give the victory over to the elves.

“You could authorize an assassination attempt against Jaine, sir.” Freglak looked up to his aide, remembering that he was supposed to be in a conversation here.

“I could...” Freglak said, lost in thought, before pursing his lips. “I fear that it would only enflame things beyond repair, though.”

“How so?”

“I suspect that Jaine is expecting that,” Freglak replied. “After all, he is fully aware of the fact that I know that he plans on moving against me. And that I'm going to do whatever I can to stop his attack—which I will. Which means that he probably has a set of bodyguards, as well as a plan for how to make this all backfire. Just picture it. Hours after a failed assassination attempt, Jaine comes out with a prepared speech blasting me for trying to kill him, getting all the new followers of the Mothertree behind him, and leading a full assault against me. Given the sky-rocketing support of the Mothertree in the past few days, combined with news that I tried to kill their major leader, I suspect that it would be to give up the whole battle to Jaine. He would win in a heart beat.”

“What do you plan on doing then, sir? I mean, not to disagree, but won't nearly the same thing happen if you don't attack him, once he decides that it's time to take full control?”

“He’ll try, but at least he won’t have the argument that I tried to assassinate him,” Freglak growled. “And in case you didn’t get the hint from the speech that I gave yesterday, I’m publicly espousing my renewed belief in the Mothertree in the hopes that I might be able to make some compromise with Jaine in order to retain power in some way.”

“And you think Jaine will take it?”

“No, but the people might,” Freglak muttered. “No, Jaine has known enough of me over the years to know that I’m not going to be his little puppet. But what matters right now is who will have the support of the populace. As long as when the battle lines are drawn, the vast majority aren’t behind him, thanks to all the arms and weapons we have, we will be able to defeat him in an all-out combat, although I fear that such a combat will give a huge lead to the elves. My only hope right now is that I’ll have enough support of the populace that the two of us can compromise, that in doing so I’ll force Jaine to work with me or else dash all of his hopes down the drain.”

“Not to be presuming, sir... But what about the Mothertree?”

“What about it?”

“I saw the footage, sir... What... What do you think it is?”

“There were too many witnesses for it to merely be good video editing,” Freglak said. “I... I honestly don’t know what it is. It’s impossible that the tree actually be some divine being, but I don’t know how to explain it otherwise.” He pursed his lips. “Either way, it doesn’t matter. Just make sure that all of our troops and aides are kept away from the near-vicinity of the Mothertree just to make sure that nothing happens. And if war comes to war...” He thought about that. “Well then, we can put Jaine’s claim to the test that the Mothertree will not be destroyed with explosives.”

“Lord Freglak gave another speech today.”

“I saw,” Jaine said, not looking up. “A last-minute defense to try to reconcile with me. He knows that the deal’s up. He knows that he’s doomed.”

“So what will our response be?”

“We will meet with him like he requested,” Jaine said, a smile playing across his lips. “I will talk to Lord Freglak face-to-face, and I will make myself clear with him. He *will* respond to all our requests and submit his will completely to ours. Or else he will lose his throne. There is no other alternative.”

Part CVI: Holed In

Date: Kapton 12th, 114 A.U.

Slowly, Reynyagn pushed the door open, almost fearful about what traps they might find next. He opened the door into darkness as he thrust his torch out. All around them, gold glittered as gems hung on the wall. And at the end of the hall filled with treasures was the Arglem, shining out on its perch.

“The Arglem,” Flek said. “After our long search we have it.”

“Maybe that means I won’t have to keep following you all around throughout Arquenia then,” Hagion mumbled. And then, there was an explosion in the distance.

“Keep moving!” Emperor Jaigran roared, as the rocks piled down into the now-larger hole, consolidating as they began to form a ramp downward. More engineers worked and more rocks tumbled, now making a better slope as elven soldiers began to move downward into the caves.

“We have them properly caught now,” Unyihi Garum rumbled. “Shall I lead my battalion of orcs down into the caves to take them?”

“Go,” Jaigran replied. “Leave the Sla’ad, the augger, and the goblin alive, but kill all the others. I wish to question the Sla’ad and the augger, them being the two leaders of the group, especially since we have not heard of these auggers before. As for the goblin? The Watcher wants him, and I will not question his decision.”

“Yes, zar!” Unyihi replied. And with that, he gave a bellow to his orcs and they descended along with the elves.

“They will fare no chance,” the Watcher said as he watched them go. “The Xavier Team is trapped.”

Zarien quickly moved inside the vehicle as the elf fell down beside him, the bloody knife now in Zarien’s hand as he moved quickly through it, Sereth and Hazael following him.

“How many more guards?” Hazael asked.

“Hopefully no one else is in here,” Zarien hissed as he moved to the control panel of the Xavier Team’s ship. But there might be some still in here trying to find stuff out about us. You and Sereth can go check while I contact the rest of the team.” Sereth shot him a warning glance

about him ordering her around, but Zarien ignored her. Quickly pushing buttons, Zarien strained his memory before remembering how to work it, quickly bringing up the communicator to contact the rest of the Xavier Team.

“Zarien to the Xavier Team. Zarien to the Xavier Team. Do you read me?” Zarien waited, hoping for a response. After two minutes, a reply came.

“This is Reynyagn.” The voice was curiously devoid of much emotion. “What do you want?” The response puzzled Zarien for a bit before he realized why Reynyagn was acting this way.

“Hey,” Zarien said. “Look I get it that I could be just Jaigran’s manipulation or an imposter or anything, but let’s move beyond that. I’m currently in your ship aboveground. The elves have found you here. If you heard an explosion within the past ten minutes, it’s because the elves just created an easy passageway down to the cave systems and have the entrance up here heavily guarded. I really hope that you know of some other exit down there, because otherwise, basically you’re trapped. And Jaigran’s sending a whole boatload of troops down there to find you.”

Reynyagn kicked at the ground anyways. “Shoot,” he finally said.

“Well, I guess that settles it,” Monty mumbled. “If he was an imposter, I don’t see what Jaigran would gain by telling us this. Because assuming that he’s telling the truth...”

“We’re in huge trouble,” Reynyagn replied. “And if he’s lying, we don’t have much to lose. We need to get out of here—fast.”

“How?” Flek asked. “You heard them—right? The only exit out of here is blocked!”

“The Sla’ad have to had put another exit in here—some method of escape or easy entrance without exploding their way into this place,” Reynyagn snapped, quickly running through the hall of treasures as he threw them aside. “There has to be some exit—otherwise from what Zarien said, we’re doomed.”

“Speaking of Zarien, he’s still on the other line,” Number 994 said, taking the walkie-talkie from Reynyagn. “I’ll talk to him and see what he can come up with.”

“There’s a lot of writing on the walls,” Jroldin murmured as he looked at the archaic lettering. “I can’t make out what it says, though...”

“It’s a tribute to their king and their cause, whom they’re hailing as martyrs,” Flek quickly said. “I don’t know how I know that,” he quickly interjected, uncomfortable from all the

stares that he was now getting. “I don’t know when I learned that language, but that’s just what it says, okay?”

“I won’t question it,” Reynyagn said, picking up the Arglem and its sheath and strapping it onto his belt, bending down to look at the pedestal the Arglem had been on.

“We’re really doomed,” Astrid said nervously as she grabbed a gun off the walls. “I don’t feel prepared to take out scores of elves, and I don’t think-”

“Yes—I’ve got it! A map!” Reynyagn yelled as he held up the aging parchment, quickly scanning it. “It’s a map of the Caves of Dragla! We’re here... and it looks like we came in here.”

“There’s another exit,” Augger murmured as he looked at the map.

“Aye,” Reynyagn said, grim-faced. “And from the looks of it, we can get there, but the only route that connects us to that part of the cave system is right between us and the invading elves.”

“So you’re saying-“ Jroldin began

“We’ve got to get to that route before they do unless we want to fight our way through all those elves. Otherwise, we’re doomed.”

Part CVII: Narrow Encounters

Date: Kapton 12th, 114 A.U.

Reynyagn moved quickly through the tunnels, leading the group as he listened hard, but still found himself unable to hear them. They were nearly there to the passage that they needed to get to—the passage between them and the elves. They just had to hope that they'd get there first—or at least quickly enough so that they could quickly defeat the elves in their way before moving in.

Rounding the corner, Reynyagn skidded to a stop before backing up before peeking back around to see the squadron of elves and orcs marching toward them. They had made their tracks too obvious when coming here, making it easy for them to be tracked. There were too many elves and orcs—and too many of them in unison. Reynyagn thought hard.

“We need a distraction,” Monty said. “They’re continuing to march on us—we have to stop them!”

“Precious few of them have corsha weapons,” Reynyagn said, unslinging the Arglem. “I’ll blend in the shadows. Stay back until I make an adequate enough distraction. And then charge.”

“So now what?” Sereth asked as she pushed the door closed to the outside. “We have your old vehicle. We’re basically trapped in here thanks to all the guards out there as well. What’s your plan?”

“To save the rest of the Xavier Team,” Zarien muttered as he tapped at the computer. “How big are these caverns?”

“The caves of Dragla?” Sereth asked. “They’re huge! One of the seven natural wonders of Arqenia! They say that-”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” Zarien said with a wave of his hand. “We don’t need to get into the whole science of it. “Are there any tight passages?”

“Well, it *is* a cave,” Sereth said, a bit scornfully. “There are tight passages, but-“

“Here’s the map,” Zarien said, pointing to a photocopy of the map of the Caves of Dragla. “How many narrow passages are there?”

“Not many...” Sereth said as she peered over it. “I mean, there are some, but-“

“We can take that chance,” Zarien said as he quickly began pushing buttons to turn the vehicle on.

“What are you doing?” Sereth cried out in shock as Hazael just watched, a growing smile on his face.

“I’m turning this thing on of course,” Zarien said, a wry smile playing across his lips. “And we’re going to go save the Xavier Team.”

He emerged out of the shadows, blinding light whipping around them. Troops fell back in confusion as the shadowy figure emerged, rippling light pouring out of him as it took the form of a whip, weaving around them and slicing through them as soldiers screamed out in pain, falling all around them.

“Take him out!” Unyih Garum yelled as he shot a bolt of lightning at the Sla’ad. But like the stories went, the lightning did nothing. The only thing that could hurt a Sla’ad was intense heat. But the Garum had intense heat to offer.

Fire poured out of his gauntlets as he stepped forward, shooting lines of flame at the Sla’ad who quickly dodged them while moving to the side beyond the field of battle, taking out some of the fleeing outskirts as he moved around them.

“Don’t let him get away!” Unyih Garum yelled, charging toward the Sla’ad. “Fire-orcs come with me! You three with the corsha weapons! Everyone else charge down the tunnel! His friends can’t be far behind!”

“Move. Now. While we still have the chance.” Monty gave the command and they moved, Jroldin and Flek in front with their corsha weapons. Flek didn’t really think he would be able to deflect the bullets with his weapons given his loss of power, but he was going to try. If someone had to die among them, it was going to be him.

Shots rang out as the others began taking out the battalion in front of them, but Flek could already see that it wouldn’t be enough. Not enough of the troops had been killed or distracted. There were still too many of them to handle—and they were nearly covering the passage they had to get to now.

Bullets sped his way. He ducked, barely managing to block one as another sliced a line across his knuckles, pain blossoming as he rolled, biting back his emotions. He was lost. He was completely lost. He was in the middle of a war situation and it was just as he feared. All his power was thanks to the Watcher. Everything else in him was worthless.

The head orc was good. Unyihi Garum—assuming it was him, as the golden skin seemed to indicate—knew exactly what it took to kill a Sla’ad, picking the only people out of the group that could kill him while leaving the rest to chase down the rest of his party. And Reynyagn hadn’t been counting on that.

Dodging a ball of fire, Reynyagn spun, moving down to the ground as the Arglem flung itself out, crackling around a helpless orc as his flames did nothing to keep the Arglem from ripping into him as Reynyagn jerked back, ending the orc’s life as he moved to the side quickly. He couldn’t do this forever. He had to get back to the others—fast. Reynyagn was just beginning to make his plans when there was a noise in the distance, and Reynyagn looked up to see it coming right at them.

Few would have had the insight to drive a ship into the Caves of Dragla, Zarien thought with a wry smile. Yet he had. Quickly driving it into the enlarged hole that the elves had made before they had figured out what was happening, Zarien had merely followed the squadron of elves to here, where they were fighting back a desperate Xavier Team. Too late they saw him coming as Hazael moved the machine gun, shooting them down.

“How are we going to land?!” Sereth yelled. “We need to keep this intact for the return journey!”

“I don’t know!” Zarien snapped. “We need to shoot all of them down so that they have enough time to board!” Zarien maneuvered the machine to the side as he prepared to give another sweep of the chamber. Too late he saw the gold-skinned orc pause from shooting fire balls at Reynyagn to fix his stare on them, lifting up his gauntlets. Lightning flung out of his fingers. And powerless to stop, Zarien could only try to vainly move the machine out of the way in time before lightning hit.

Electricity coursed through the machine as Zarien was flung from the driver’s seat. Everything spun as Zarien struggled to keep his balance.

“Get out!” he heard a roar, and then he was swooped up by strong arms as Zarien barely managed to think straight enough to see Hazael holding him and Cortna as they crashed through a window. Glass broke through his arm as they broke out of the ship and into the cavern. He twisted his head just in time to see the ship crash into the battalion of elves.

“Get in there!” Reynyagn yelled as he dodged the last fireball before hurdling over the crashed ship, killing several elves with his crackling Arglem. “This is our chance!” Get in there.

Moving quickly, Flek ran toward the passage as he gestured to the others. He didn't know how Zarien had gotten their ship down here, or who the two other elves with Zarien were, but he didn't need to ask. The crashed ship had killed enough of the elves and had scattered enough of the rest that the passage was wide open. Flek ran into the passage just behind Reynyagn.

“Get in here!” Reynyagn yelled toward the winged elf holding both Zarien and the female elf. “We can escape here!” The winged elf swooped down as the others came in, shots ringing out all around.

“This passage is narrow enough—you need to collapse it!” Monty roared as he pointed to Reynyagn's Arglem as Brother Tomas, the last of their group, came in. Reynyagn swung the Arglem upwards.

No. They couldn't. Unyih Garum was furious. Jaigran had let these elven rebels take a whole ship into the tunnels—completely ruining his scheme! They were all but escaped now as Unyih blindly charged forwards as he saw them collapsing the tunnel with the Arglem. With one last desperate attempt, Unyih leapt on top of the fallen machine, lightning crackling from his fingertips as it shot forward. Rocks came down as the tunnel collapsed. But the lightning hit first. And Unyih felt a tinge of accomplishment as he watched the brown-cloaked figure collapse to the ground. And then the entrance to the passage caved in.

Part CVIII: Escape

Date: Kapton 12th, 114 A.U.

The cave crumbled around them as they dashed through the passage into the other half of the Caves of Dragla, rocks breaking around them as they moved out of the passage into a new network of caves. Jroldin tried to stop to catch his breath.

“We can’t stop now!” Augger said. “If we stop, we’ll be holed in too easily! They’ll be swarming the place soon!”

“How are we supposed to escape then?” Astrid yelled. “Our ship’s crashed!”

“Our ship is large enough!” Zarien said. “We brought a big enough ship here so that we could take all of you, if needed!”

“About time someone started to pay attention to important details,” Hagion muttered.

“We can control it remotely as well!” Zarien said. “It’s the latest of it’s kind and whatever. So I can call it to move directly to where we will emerge!”

“Well if that isn’t the newest thing,” Monty said. “You’re a life saver, Zarien.”

“Just make sure that you don’t call it until we’re near the exit!” Reynyagn said. “If they see the ship leaving and chase after it, we won’t have much time to escape!”

“What do you mean you’ve lost them?” Veins bulged in the Emperor’s face.

“Well, I’m not the one who let a whole freaking airship go down into the caves,” Unyih Garum snapped, letting himself fire back a shot at the Emperor for once. “The machine wrecked havoc on our forces and decimated most of them when it crash-landed!”

“We. Were not. Expecting others out here,” the Watcher said, slowly forcing the words out. “And we certainly didn’t expect any other team members out here to decide to drive an airship into the caves. They caught us by surprise. It won’t happen again.”

“So where are they now?” Emperor Jaigran demanded. “What happened to them?”

“They dashed into a passage and then collapsed it behind them,” Unyih Garum snapped. “I managed to electrocute one of them before it closed, so one of their pitiful lot is dead, but we couldn’t follow them. I checked the map and apparently they knew what they were doing. We were in one half of the cave complex and they just escaped to another—one that’s only connected by one passage.”

“The passage they collapsed,” Jaigran snapped, cursing.

“It matters not,” the Watcher said in a low voice. “Why does it matter to us if they are in the other passage? There are no other exits. They’ll be trapped.”

“At least one would hope,” Unyih Garum replied. “I watched them down there. Their strategy rested on getting into that passage and they looked willing to put everything on the line to do so. They had the full opportunity to flee from us, and once the airship crash-landed, they could have tried to beat us, though it would have been hard for them to do so. But they didn’t.”

“What are you suggesting?” The Watcher stood up, eyes narrowing.

“I’m suggesting that the Xavier Team isn’t stupid,” Unyih Garum snapped. “They fought like they had an escape plan. And I’m betting they did. We assume too quickly that there is no other exit from the other half. I’m suggesting that that assumption may not be completely accurate.”

“I don’t think I’m wondering anymore why this exit tunnel was kept a secret for so long,” Astrid muttered, brushing away cobwebs.

“From my brief calculations, I suspect that we’ve travelled far enough away from the actual caves that we’d be under the city by this point,” Jroldin remarked. “The tunnel looks manmade.”

“I suspect depending on where we show up that we may very well emerge in the palace,” Reynyagn replied. “Given that this tunnel wasn’t used while the Caves of Dragla was a tourist attraction, and given its secrecy, I suspect that it may very well have been intended to be used as an emergency exit.”

“One which the Sla’ad king didn’t use?” Monty questioned.

“The King of the Sla’ad evacuated the city before it was fully taken over before he was finally beaten and killed in a battle outside in these mountains,” Reynyagn replied. “He wasn’t forced into using this emergency exit, and so he didn’t.”

“And here’s the exit,” Augger said, as they rounded the corner to see a spiraling stair case. Quickly moving up the metal stairs, Augger opened the last door and they emerged out of a secret door in the wall into a room which looked familiar to Jroldin.

“The throne room!” Jroldin said.

“Aye,” Reynyagn replied. “The throne room of the Sla’ad. A well-placed back exit for the king. We’re out, so you can go ahead and signal your ship to pick us up, Zarien.”

Jroldin finally sat down, catching his breath, as he did a quick head count of those in the room. His first count was two over the number that they had, and he briefly wondered why there were suddenly eleven of them, before he remembered that Zarien had returned with two companions. But then there should have been twelve of them... Who-

“Brother Tomas!” Jroldin suddenly blurted out, leaping to his feet. “Where is he? Why-” He stopped as he was met with a couple of averted gazes.

“What happened to him?” Flek asked, obviously in the dark as well.

“Not all of you saw it,” Reynyagn said softly. “It happened just as we collapsed the tunnel. One of the orcs hit him with his lightning bolt.”

“But, but-“ Jroldin stammered, trying to come to grips with what had happened. “Why did we-”

“We couldn’t stop to wait with the tunnel collapsing all around us and so I gave the order to go,” Reynyagn replied in a grief-stricken tone. “I didn’t have enough time to pick up his body before he was buried. I... I’m so sorry, Jroldin.”

“First it was Kaln, then Rider, and now Brother Tomas,” Zarien said softly as they rode in their airship, having successfully completed their escape from the elves.

“We knew coming into this that there would be risks involved,” Augger said. “I only wish that the risks would not have already come to such a great head-count already, when we still are far from our goal.”

“We must press on,” Reynyagn said. “We have two of the Golden Weapons already. We can’t give up now.”

“We must go forward,” Flek said. “Move forward to claim our destiny as the Xavier Team. And may the blessing of the Great One be upon us.”

Epilogue: Declaration of War

Date: Kapton 14th, 114 A.U.

A fly buzzed around the pavilion where Lord Freglak and High-Priest Jaine sat, discussing politics, the stage opened up so that any who passed by could see them, although they had set up equipment so that they couldn't hear. Newscasters stood outside discussing their predictions for this meeting. They met behind closed doors—but doors of glass—a precautionary measure to keep any devious play of assassination.

“We don't have to be political enemies,” Freglak continued. “We can seize our victory over the elves if we put aside any of our previous quarrels and work together at our ultimate joint goal of defeating the elves. Let's face the situation rationally. You need my leadership, and I need your prophesy. And the rest of the goblins need to see us united. You have surely adequately proven the power of the Mothertree. Together we can destroy them.”

Jaine sat for a moment contemplatively before he leaned in, his thin lips opening as his tongue flickered. “Nice speech,” he said. “But not good enough.”

Freglak stiffened. “The people want unity,” he said in a low tone. “You've seen their reactions to my speeches the past couple days. They love it.”

“Ah, yes, the general populace loves to hear propaganda,” Jaine said. “They eat it up. But I think that, between the two of us, we both know that their loyalties have more shifted toward the Mothertree than toward you.”

“A loyalty which I shifted back with my call to unity, what of it?” Freglak asked, trying to move on. “They need to see unity, and so I don't see why we should continue to bicker amongst ourselves.”

“The words of the one who knows that he's already the underdog,” Jaine mused, but then his tone sharpened. “Let's look at this realistically. Your stock has been utterly defeated. That's the only reason that you're begging here.”

“I'm not-”

“Let me finish,” Jaine snapped. “I am the victor and you are the underdog. So you will hear my terms on this, and about all other issues. We can stand unified for the public—whatever we need to do to get them behind us so that we can beat the elves. But the war will be done according to the rules of the Mothertree. No profane weapons like guns or tasers, but by the Mothertree's standards, and by the Mothertree's strategies. That will be our compromise.”

Freglak bristled. “Compromise?” he snapped. “What kind of compromise is that? Do you expect me to become your puppet?”

“I expect you to do whatever I tell you to do,” Jaine said coldly. “You obviously have shown yourself inadequate for the task of defeating the elves. The public knows that only the Mothertree can bring us victory. You *will* obey our requests because we have been already declared the victors.”

“And if I refuse?”

A smile played across Jaine’s lips. “I think we both know the answer to that, Freglak,” Jaine whispered.

Freglak stiffened as he pondered it, before he violently stood up. “Very well,” he said coldly. “I believe that this meeting is done.”

“And the conclusion?” Jaine asked, standing up, still smiling.

“I believe that we both know the answer to that,” Freglak replied. “You obviously are unwilling to work with me and have so committed political suicide. Enjoy your war.”

“Oh, I will,” Jaine said, eyes narrowing. “And we will see who has actually committed political suicide, Freglak. Pray to your gods, if you have any. You’ll be needing them.”

End of Book III

Book IV: The Watcher

Prologue: Ambassador of the Auggers

Date: Kapton 14th, 114 A.U.

Ranvier, ambassador of the auggers, was on a mission to discover the secrets of the Noon-Stone and why it no longer went about its course. He moved under a tree as he noticed the airship coming up, pressing himself against it as he watched it move toward him. It may be that the elves' reign over the main continent had already been destroyed and the airship may now be hostile, but he wasn't willing to take many chances. He had already decided that the best course of action was to travel until he found civilization and could question a non-elf about the current state of Arquenian.

"The life source is right below us," the elven pilot said. "We just passed right over the source and it's still there. It must be a fugitive or nomad of some sort."

"Either way, land the ship," the elven commander replied. "I'll tell the orcs to prepare to engage the being, whomever it may be. And we will discover why it has strayed so far from the fold."

Ranvier watched the ship landing with worry. Had they somehow spotted him? He put a hand to his gun, preparing to fight if needed. They may yet be possible allies, not enemies. He watched from behind the tree as a door opened, and then as orcs began to step out.

Orcs. Ranvier searched his memories. They had allied themselves with the elves. He couldn't take the chance. It was time to run.

Bolting, Ranvier moved toward the forest that was nearby, hoping to find cover there. He didn't dare shoot at the orcs unless they shot first. They may yet not be with Jaigran's orcs. A lightning bolt sailed past him, singing the air. That was it. They were enemies.

Spinning around, Ranvier turned to fight, firing several shots as the orcs moved closer, but the orcs were already ready. An explosion filled his mind as he was hit, stumbling backward as another hit him, his consciousness quickly receding as the blackness set in. His last thought was that he had just failed as the ambassador of the Auggers.

And then there was blackness.

Part CIX: Moving On

Date: Kapton 15th, 114 A.U.

“So where are you going next?”

“We don’t know,” Reynyagn confessed, sitting in a ring of chairs with the rest of the Xavier Team, Sereth, Hazael, Monty, and Rezja. “We didn’t have any immediate idea of what to do after we got the Arglem.”

“I see,” Rezja replied. Following their miraculous escape from the Caves of Dragla, the Xavier Team had decided to go back with Sereth and Hazael to Rezja and the group of rebel elves in order to recuperate and plan their next mission.”

“We have two of the Golden Weapons to Jaigran’s three,” Flek pointed out. “The Golden Weapons play an essential role in this battle, so I would think that the battle is leveling out as we get more and more equal. We need to find the others.”

“What more are there to find?” Astrid asked.

“One was given to each race,” Augger replied. “Jroldin has the weapon of the dwarves, and Reynyagn wields the weapon of the Sla’ad. Jaigran appears to have the weapon of the orcs since he can use orcish magic, and if he wields a spear, that would be the weapon of the humans.”

“I don’t know what the other weapon is, but he got it from the Citadel of Tzel-Maret,” Rezja said. “That much we have picked up on our communication espionage.”

“Then he most likely has the weapon of the elves,” Augger said. “Meaning that the last weapons still out there are the weapon of the goblins and the weapon of the auggers.” There was silence as the members thought.

“What do you know of the weapon of the auggers?” Jroldin asked.

“Little,” Augger replied. “I know where it was once kept from my memories, but that place was destroyed by the augger slayers. I am confident that my augger brethren are in hiding and not slain, but I do not know where they hid themselves. Alas, for my ancestor’s betrayal of his own kind.”

“Jaigran shouldn’t know it either, though,” Monty pointed out. “And if we can only get the other, we’ll be equal with the Golden Weapons. We almost beat him in Tzel-Maret, when he had one more than us. When equal, and with all of us together, we most assuredly ought to have a fighting chance against him.”

“What do you know of the weapon of the goblins, Flek?” Zarien asked.

Flek pursed his lips. "I had never heard of golden weapons until I began on this quest. Unless..."

"Unless what?"

"If it's somewhere in our forest, then there's only two people, or groups, that could have it," Flek said. "Either Lord Freglak has it somewhere in his military arsenal, or, which I'm afraid is probably the more likely possibility, the cultic priests who worship the Mothertree have it."

"The priests of the Mothertree appeared weak, though not completely powerless, when I was among your kind," Reynyagn said. "Besides which, they believed the prophecies. If they believe in Xavier's prophecies, which I would assume that they do, they should jump at the chance to help us."

"Assuming no further conflicts escalated between them and Lord Freglak," Flek muttered, before raising his voice. "In all honesty though, that seems like the best plan that we can go after at this point. We need to be more powerful before we challenge Jaigran again, and this seems like the best way. And I would be glad to see my lord again."

"Perhaps you could also bring him messages from us," Rezja asked. "We've been trying to send ambassadors to him to join us together against Emperor Jaigran but have not received a reply yet."

"We'll talk to him," Reynyagn said. "As long as we get there safely, rest assured that Lord Freglak will begin to send you a response."

"I miss seeing you here," Hazael said.

"Hey, I will too, but we should be back here soon enough assuming everything goes well," Zarien replied. "This seems like it's becoming our main base of operations. I don't think your friend will like it very much, though."

"Sereth... Sereth will manage," Hazael said slowly. "She just need to learn to adjust. You do too."

"Yeah," Zarien said, shrugging it off. "We'll see."

"...So I'll be gone for a while, okay?" Zarien asked, talking slowly to Cortna while she tried to build some structure with blocks. "I'll be back as soon as our mission is over. Don't forget about me, can you try?"

Cortna said nothing, pursing her lips tighter as she balanced another block on top of another.

Zarien bit his lip as he leaned closer. "I love you, Cortna," he said, lightly kissing her on the cheek before standing up. Cortna stiffened, and after waiting to see if he might get any response, Zarien moved toward the door, taking one last glance at her before closing it behind him.

A single tear rolled down Cortna's cheek.

The engines began to roar as Zarien hiked up the last of the many bags he had been dumped with, trying to put most of the weight on his mechanical leg as he hobbled over toward the gangplank.

"I put the correspondence and intel for Freglak in the third compartment," Rezja was yelling to Reynyagn over the roar of the engines. "He should find the information quite satisfactory."

"I'll make sure he gets it!" Reynyagn replied. "We sent some messages to Araelia as well to see if Governor Iraina will establish any connection with you. Ex-governor Astrid, our primary communicator in Araelia, has been unclear recently of her communication with Iraina, so I'm not completely sure what's going on there, but we'll keep trying."

"Many thanks!" Rezja replied. "Have a safe voyage!"

"And keep yourselves safe as well," Reynyagn replied. "We've got a firm base here that could do much to help our cause. If we can keep it."

Part CX: Civil War

Date: Kapton 15th, 114 A.U.

“Today marks a new day for the race of the goblins! As the media leaks earlier this morning have revealed, your high priest has refused to listen to common sense and join with me! Jaine has utterly refused to work together with me and has declared his own war against me to instate himself as head!” Freglak roared. “And so we must stand together now, my fellow goblins. It’s us against them! We who would destroy the elves who have for so long remained a blot upon our fair land are now being attacked by our own priests who refuse to help me against the elves! If they are not against the elves, then they are indeed for the elves! Warriors of the goblins, unite! Too long have we lain under the foot of the merciless High Priest! Jaine must give up his position to another and they must not be allowed to stop our victory over the elves!”

Kapton 16th, 114 A.U.

“The Mothertree has spoken,” High Priest Jaine said solemnly. “The victory that your Lord promises is built on vanities. Your troops have been defeated again and again because you have forsaken the Old Weapons and your belief in the Mothertree. You have seen the Mothertree’s power. You have seen what it can do. The time has now come for us to slay those heretics who denounce her power and her voice. I *am* the Prophet of the Mothertree! Lord Freglak shall be lord no longer but will be dethroned. It is time for a true prophet and a true priest to take the kingship of the Great Forest. The Mothertree will save us from the elves. But first we must wage war with the heretics.

Kapton 17th, 114 A.U.

The first gun shot of war erupted in the early morning when a group of Lord Freglak’s warriors stormed the headquarters of the Great Forest Network, the 2nd Largest news station among the goblins, and the one that supported High Priest Jaine. The equipment was destroyed, and the bloody bodies of the most ardent critics of Lord Freglak were discovered. The attack was passed off as a group of rebels who had nothing to do with Lord Freglak, but within a few hours, the truth was discovered. The survivors of the news station, taking security with High Priest Jaine, soon got the equipment to broadcast their news from behind the protection of the priests, calling all goblins to arms against Lord Freglak.

War had begun.

Kapton 19th, 114 A.U.

“The priests’ defenses are too strong,” Major Erklen replied. “Most of our warriors are scared to death of the Mothertree and won’t go anywhere near her.”

Freglak leaned over the map which detailed the defenses already put up in the city, as the Mothertree and his Capitol had become the two meeting places of the two new factions that were setting themselves up both in this city, and across the rest of the Great Forest. He had recalled Major Erklen from the line of battle against the elves in order to put down this rebellion.

“Bah. Blast the Mothertree,” Freglak snarled. “Just annihilate it and send the troops in.”

“You know we can’t do that,” Erklen reminded Freglak. “There are too many of our warriors that still believe in the Mothertree but just think that we need a different High Priest than Jaine. If we destroy the Mothertree, we’ll be facing huge desertions.”

“The Mothertree is their god,” Freglak pointed out. “Kill their god, and the rest of their religion will collapse. Once we show that she is not the all-powerful deity they claim she is, the rebellion will end.”

“*If* we can destroy it.”

“It’s a tree, Erklen!” Freglak snapped. “How could it escape a mass bombing?”

“Do you want to know the answer to that question, my lord?”

Four hours later, the first real battle of the civil war began in the trees of the city. Three squadrons of goblins sallied out from the vicinity of the Mothertree under the direction of the priests in order to break the blockade forming around the Mothertree. The blockade was broken and the defenders wiped out, but few of the attackers survived to tell the tale to the High Priest. Although they wielded the Old Weapons, the guns and ammunition on Freglak’s side and shot many of them down before they could come close. And although once they got close enough, Freglak’s troops were utterly decimated, too many had died in the charge to get there. The casualties had stacked up so great that they could not afford to do so again.

“Freglak thinks that he has bested us,” High Priest Jaine murmured as he stood atop the Mothertree looking at the city around them, smoke rising from the trees where fire was raging, as skirmishes were sparked all around the city between those fighting for Freglak and those fighting for the Mothertree.

“Our casualties this day have been great,” the priest standing next to him said. “If we are to attack him again, we must have a better plan.”

“The Mothertree will provide our needs,” Jaine replied smoothly. “Let Freglak think that he has won the battle this day. We will merely laugh at him when the tables are turned on the morrow. I have spoken with the Mothertree today and she has revealed much. Freglak has already lost another crucial battle to the elves on the warfront today, although Freglak has yet to hear about it. The Elder Dragon has broken loose once more. The troops of war are gathering. And the Elder Dragon will be our key to victory.”

Part CXI: The Watcher's Plan

Date: Kapton 17th, 114 A.U.

“The Xavier Team has two weapons to our three,” the Watcher said as he paced. “Not only are they gaining stronger in power, but the two weapons are essential to our plan.”

“I'm all ears to your plan,” Emperor Jaigran said as he lounged on his throne. “Most all of the ships have been outfitted. They're ready for takeoff.”

“We need to get their two weapons and claim the other two first,” the Watcher snapped. “Don't act like your part is done already!”

“But it is,” Jaigran said, a smirk on his face. “My job was to oversee our ships being prepared to enter into outer space. Your job was to find the Seven Golden Corsha Weapons.”

“And I *have* done it—for the most part, that is,” the Watcher snapped. “The weapon of the goblins is practically in my hands. And the one the auggers have likely is in the Council Chamber of Arquenian—which is where we'll be heading anyways once the other weapons are claimed.”

“So what's your point?”

“We need bait,” the Watcher hissed. “If the Xavier Team knew that we needed all seven Golden Corsha Weapons to wrack the final and devastating end of our plan, they would hide themselves and the weapons where it is nigh impossible to find them. They already are hiding from us. We need to find some way to draw them out so that we can take their Golden Corsha Weapons if we have any chance of survival.”

“My plan has nearly hit its fruition in the human's chief city of Araelia,” Jaigran said. “Within a couple weeks, the city should be ours. No doubt we can find worthy members there to act as bait. Ex-Governor Astrid for example? I much look forward to a chance to meet her again...”

“You can wrack whatever personal revenge you want to on your previous Xavier Team member in due time,” the Watcher snapped. “For now, we must make sure that all your calculations are correct. Where is Unyih Garum?”

“He's waiting,” Jaigran said, pushing a button to page him. A couple moments later, Unyih Garum entered the room.

“I am here, zar,” Unyih Garum said, bowing respectfully. “You wish to hear my report?”

“Yes,” the Watcher said. “What is the progression of the tests?”

“The ships will withstand Outer Space, and we have tested our food production thoroughly to make sure that they will still work in the far reaches of the galaxy, at least until we arrive at the other planet you mentioned,” Unyih Garum said. “The Mothership is still being outfitted, but it should be finished in around a week. All of the major upgrades have been done and what is left is minor, though quite essential, tinkering and work inside the ship.”

“I see,” the Watcher snapped. “You are quite positive that all of the tests worked.”

“I am staking my own life on it,” Unyih said. “We will be secure.” He paused. “There is much, though, that you have not yet informed me of.”

“Such as?”

“Why are we so quick to leave Arquenian,” Unyih rumbled. “Why are we deserting this planet and moving to a new one instead of impressing our domain over this one. If your final form is as powerful as you have said, why do we not use it to crush them? You have promised answers, but always later.”

A cruel smile played across the Watcher’s face. “I suppose it is due time that you learned the full truth,” he said standing up. “Believe me, Unyih. My final form is enough to devastate the rebels, but we cannot hunt down every one of them. There will always be those hiding, those whom it is impossible to stamp out by ordinary means. And so I have gone for the un-ordinary.

“I am the Watcher. The one appointed to be the guardian of Arquenian. I have immense power over Arquenian—far more than anyone else could dream of. I am the one who keeps the world running. I keep Arquenian in its constant orbit around the sun. And without it, I tell you, it will truly fail.

“Have you not noticed the unusual days—the unheard of temperatures and climates? The world is already beginning to destruct since I have left my chamber. The planet is falling apart, but I am still holding it together.”

A chill ran down Unyih Garum’s spine as he suddenly realized what the plan is. “You-” he began, and then he stopped. “You mean...”

“Yes,” the Watcher said. “When we leave, Arquenian will no longer be able to keep moving. Once we leave, the planet will spin helplessly out of order until it finally is drawn in by the gravity and is set for a collision course with the sun. We will leave. And Arquenian will be consumed with flames until the whole world is perished. And so we will destroy Arquenian.”

“You never told me he was that powerful!” Unyih Garum hissed, speaking quickly to Jaigran as they walked down the corridor. “He has the power to destroy the world, has a final form that he claims is utterly devastating and yet—”

“And yet... what, Unyih?”

“And yet you still trust him!” Unyih Garum snapped. “What prevents him from turning on you once you have given him all this power and making himself the leader!”

“The situation is more complicated than you may think,” Jaigran said. “Believe me, Unyih, I have considered this. I would not be surprised if he ends up turning on me.”

“Then why do you still trust him?” Unyih snapped. “What will you do to stop him once he has attained such power?”

“The Golden Weapons are powerful—more powerful than even the Watcher seems to realize,” Jaigran replied. “I have tested their power. I will indeed unleash him once I have gained all seven of the weapons because of how essential he is to my plan. But I have also set up a plan to stop him from betraying me. Believe me, Unyih. I have thought of everything. The rebels will be consumed in flames. And we will move on to victory.”

Part CXII: Shadows of the Past

Date: Kapton 18th, 114 A.U.

Flek stared out the window as the earth rushed by below as they flew over the plains. After months of traveling, he was finally returning to his homeland and to Lord Freglak. So much had happened since he'd last smelled the pine scent of the trees and felt their rough bark. But as much as Flek wanted to see the sights again, a cold pit of dread was forming within him.

So much had happened. He had gained much. And he had lost his power.

Flek knew that he couldn't have his power anymore. He had been a fool to make the deal with the spirit in the first place, and his deal had nearly destroyed the Xavier Team. And yet, as he anticipated the re-entrance into the fortress and into the courts of Lord Freglak, it bothered Flek how much of his renown and prestige among them was built on empty vanities and nothing.

Or even how much his own entrance into the Xavier Team—as the Warrior—had been build no such vain promises. Promises that he only kept by the wretched being that had lived inside of him. All gone.

He turned at the noise to see Astrid entering the chamber that he was in. Glancing at her, he turned to look back out the window, watching as the earth rushed by.

“Hey,” he finally said to Astrid as she walked next to him.

“Hi, Flek,” Astrid said, and paused for a couple minutes as they just watched the earth rushed by outside. And then she again spoke.

“You've been spending a lot of time here, haven't you?”

Flek shrugged, not exactly paying attention to how much time he'd spent here since they'd left. “I guess; why?”

“I know how you feel,” Astrid said, sitting down next to him and Flek glanced at her briefly. What did she mean?

“What do you mean?” Flek asked, giving voice to his question.

“You know how I murdered the man in Araelia,” Astrid said after taking a deep breath.

“You might have mentioned it before,” Flek said. “I have a vague recollection, but no real memory of it, though.”

“I became involved with a government espionage program against a group of, well, I don't know what they were doing—but they were terrorists of some sort,” Astrid replied. “And I got trapped as a spy for the government whom the terrorists trusted.” She licked her lips. “Long

story short, I found myself in the position where I either helped them to murder one of my patients at the hospital, or they'd kill me. And so I chose to murder my patient." She bit her lip. "It's taken me a long time to get over it, mostly with Monty's help. But listen, Flek. Don't let your guilt consume you. It nearly drove me to suicide... You have—you have to figure out what you want to live for. And why."

"So when did you finally decide?" Jroldin asked, still shocked that Number 994 hadn't originally been on their side at the creation of the Xavier Team.

"I... I can't hang my decision on one moment," Number 994 replied. He had just been explaining to them the truth about his loyalties. "Up until the Citadel of Tzel-Maret, I was still looking and waiting for the right opportunity to betray you, but then..." He paused. "Things seemed to change after we joined up with Augger and began our long trip back. We spent a long time together in our slow journeying, and..." He pursed his lips. "I broke the rules of the orcs. And I committed my course. I was still worried, though... The prophesy of Xavier worried me that I might end up being the traitor..."

"But thankfully you weren't, and it all turned out relatively well," Zarien said, concluding. "Though I must say that I can't believe that you still hated my gut all that time and still managed to keep your self-control."

"Rule Number 52: Never betray your emotions. Betray your emotions and you betray your whole plan," Number 994 said, raising an eyebrow. "I lived by the rules. I still do in many ways... It's hard to break old habits."

"We should be arriving at the goblin city within the next five days," Reynyagn said, gesturing at the map.

"Yes; we've been making good time so far," Augger replied. "What should we be preparing for?"

"Prepare for anything," Reynyagn said, pursing his lips. "When I last left, Lord Freglak had been beginning a war with the Emperor. While I hope that the strength that I saw in the goblins would be enough to keep back their forces, the Emperor is powerful. The goblin empire may very well be mostly in ruins. We need to be prepared to fight off the goblins, and, if their empire still exists, to deal with tensions between the goblin priests and Freglak."

"These priests intrigue me..." Augger said. "You said they worshipped a tree?"

"An abnormally large tree, but yes," Reynyagn said.

“Interesting...” Augger said, shutting his eyes. “I seem... I feel like I have an inkling in my memories... Some hidden thought and memory of my ancestors that bears some resemblance to this... Something that may lend its insight on why the goblins worship the tree... But I can’t remember it.”

“We still have a lot of time left before us before we arrive,” Reynyagn reminded him. “We’ll have time.”

“We’ll have time enough,” Augger agreed. “We only have so much time though before we can push off the final confrontation with the Emperor. We must move fast.”

Part CXIII: Walking in Circles

Date: Kapton 15th, 114 A.U.

“I am a bit perplexed by your findings,” Iraina said, raising an eyebrow. “Despite the extreme lack of evidence, you want me to take so bold a step?”

“From the meager evidence we’ve been able to gather, we’re running out of time,” Oldin replied. “Their deadlines are coming up and we’re hapless to stop them. We need to get all of your available men on this now. In addition to this, I’ve been getting dangerous reports that they have started to make movement out of Araelia toward the outside. Have you been posting security there?”

“I’ve posted heavy security in the outside tunnels since we last talked and have done checks on all the corridors,” Iraina responded, raising his eyebrow. “From our end, the tunnels are completely safe. We have plenty of scanners and high-tech equipment to make sure that there are no trespassers.”

“Either way, we need more men on the field,” Oldin said. “We don’t have enough manpower to staff this operation. We’re getting the run-around by the elven terrorist group, and all of our agents that have gotten close enough are dying.”

“I can try to help, but we aren’t exactly high on man-count either,” Iraina said. “Remember that ex-Governor Astrid is still at large, wherever she is hiding among the dwarven cities. She’s wracked terrible damage on us from her betrayal. We haven’t gotten any word from the Xavier Team since, and most of my men are out searching for her.”

“The dwarven government is still trying to find her,” Oldin said. “From what I’ve heard, they’re narrowing down on her, though. They should be able to track her down and capture her within the next month.”

“Well, at least we have *some* good news,” Iraina replied. “Now have you gotten any more word yet on your investigation involving James McDonnell and his connection to the C-Watches?”

“No,” Oldin said. “We’ve still been tracking him though, and it’s from our spies on him that we’ve been getting word that he might have found a way to access the outside tunnels. We haven’t gotten complete confirmation yet, though, although I’m sure that we’ll be getting confirmation soon. I’ll need some warrants from you, though. Once we’ve verified that he’s found a way in, I’ll need warrants to allow my men to do a high-level search of those tunnels to figure out what they’re doing.”

Iraina's eyes flickered and he paused. "Very well," he finally said. "I'll send that task off to one of my underlings, but I can't promise how quickly they'll be able to get it done. All the paperwork that needs to be done in the bureaucracy and such."

Oldin cocked his head. "Bureaucracy was never a problem before," he said, somewhat astonished. "This is for an FRI investigation—what do you mean we're going to have to wait to get warrants? We need to stop this elven terrorist group before the deadline."

"Much has changed since before," Iraina said, pursing his lips as he fidgeted. "Those warrants were issued during Astrid's time—were they not? There's been an unfortunate buildup of bureaucracy since then, and I haven't been able to stop that."

Oldin leaned in. "What are you talking about?" he asked, very confused. "There hasn't been that big of a build-up, has there?"

"Oh, probably not," Iraina said, standing up and suddenly taking on a different tone of voice. "I just don't want you to expect them tomorrow, that is. It might take a couple of days, alright?"

"Alright..." Oldin said, suddenly mystified by Iraina's sudden change of tone. "Just get them to me as soon as possible, alright?"

"It's already done."

"I need you to get more men following McDonnell," Oldin snapped as he re-entered headquarters. "I'm getting warrants made from the Governor for permission to get into the outside tunnels. Make sure that he actually has procured access into them, and then send out a full search party into them. Don't get my permission first. We can't waste time anymore."

"Yes, sir," his second in command replied. "What should they be looking for?"

"Anything and everything," Oldin replied. "Iraina says that all his searches have come up empty for anything in the outside tunnels. The elven terrorists are thwarting him somehow. And we dearly need to figure out how."

"The plan has nearly reached its completion," the messenger said to the man shrouded in darkness. "All of the equipment has been set up in the tunnels for launch day. A few final connections need to be made, though, so that they'll be triggered upon command. We'll still need to work on it for another week until its finished."

“Very good,” the man shrouded in darkness replied. “I’ll be sure to let the Emperor know about this development. And what of the C-Watches? Are they according to plan?”

“They’ve tested a few of them out, nicely handling some of Oldin’s most annoying agents in the process,” the messenger said, grinning. “They’ll work magnificently on launch date, clearing the way for the awakening of a new era in Arquenia.”

“I’ve been hearing reports that Oldin’s beginning to get suspicious,” the man shrouded in darkness replied. “He knows too much about McDonnell. McDonnell has been too sloppy in his work as of late. Dispose of him silently.”

“Yes, sir. Any other commands?”

“No. I’ll alert the Emperor of our findings so that he’ll be ready to accomplish his part on the grand finale of this magnificently executed plan. The work is nearly finished.”

“Do we have a date yet?”

“For the launch date? Oh, I think we do,” the man shrouded in darkness said. “Pass it on to your executives. I’ve already set everything else in motion. Kapton 30th will be the Launch Date. On Kapton 30th, our plan will be brought to fruition. And Araelia will be ours.”

Part CXIV: Layers of Deceit

Date: Kapton 18th, 114 A.U.

Ranvier, the ambassador of the auggers, knew that he had failed. He had started off with such a glorious purpose—such an important mantle to take hold of. And he had fallen captive to the first enemies that he met.

“I should have been more ready...” he murmured. But it was all too late now. They had come unto him twice already looking for info and intel on who and what he was, but he had refused it. He supposed that it would only be a short time until they began to torture him and he’d have to see how much he could withstand before he caved.

Ranvier pursed his lips. It wasn’t supposed to happen this way! But it had. And he had failed as an ambassador.

“The augger has been quite stubborn to release his information on what he is and why he is here,” Unyihi Garum said. “I was planning on torturing him tomorrow in order to gain intel.”

Jaigran narrowed his eyes, thinking. “He’s our first specimen,” he said. “You do realize, Unyihi, that this is the first augger we’ve been able to meet? The only other one that we know of in existence is the one with the Xavier Team. We can’t be too quick to harm him.”

“Then what do you suggest, zar?”

Jaigran paused, and then a smile flooded across his face. “A trick,” he finally said. “A masquerade and a play put in front of him, and with him as an actor. We will take a group of elves and stage a breakout to free him. And after he thinks he’s freed, we’ll see what information we can coax out of him then.”

Ranvier nervously looked from side to side as the sleek ship moved quickly through the sky. Just minutes before he had been whisked away from the giant elven ship which his rescuers had termed ‘the Mothership.’ His rescuers had managed to break into his prison and free him most expediently, quickly killing the guards in their way before rushing him out just as the elves started to wake up to what was going on.

Ranvier watched as the ship dodged the bullets, but the elven response from the Mothership seemed sub-par to what he would have expected and they kept going as Ranvier gradually relaxed. Two elves, an orc, and a dwarf manned the ship.

“Wow...” Ranvier said, finally getting a chance to talk. “I don’t know who you are... But I owe you a lot.”

“We’re part of the Elven Resistance,” the dwarf said. “A group of us banding together to resist the Imperial Elves and their plan to dominate Arquenia. Our spies discovered your presence, and we couldn’t let you be captured by them. Although, to be honest, I’ve never seen your kind before.”

“My kind... my kind is isolated from most of the world,” Ranvier said slowly as he exhaled. “I guess we have a lot to discuss.”

“Greetings,” Jaigran said, shaking Ranvier’s hand even while he sweated. “I am Nordheim, the leader of our resistance group.”

“Another elf?” Ranvier asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Unfortunately, many of the other races have been driven into hiding due to Emperor Jaigran’s horrific policies,” Jaigran replied as he masked his true emotions. “There are not many of them to be found. And so us elves have had to rise up against the murderous intentions of the rest of our kind.”

“Well, that’s understood,” Ranvier said wearily as he sat down.

“Well,” Jaigran/Nordheim said. “I must confess that although I commissioned the party to rescue you, I don’t know much anything at all about you or your kind.”

“My name... My name is Ranvier,” Ranvier replied. “I’m an augger, the seventh race of Arquenia.”

“The seventh race?” Jaigran/Nordheim asked, feigning astonishment.

“We were almost exterminated centuries ago,” Ranvier said. “Most of us who lived escaped to an island out in the middle of the ocean where the Council of Arquenia used to meet. We dwell there now.”

“The Council of Arquenia...” Jaigran/Nordheim mused. “Strange—I’ve never heard of it.”

“Most likely wiped out of the history books like everything else that the Augger-slayers did,” Ranvier said. “I could go into it more now, but it used to be where representatives of all the races of Arquenia would come to meet and discuss politics and world affairs.”

“I see,” Jaigran/Nordheim said, nodding. “We can delve into that later. I must confess though, that it’s somewhat hard to adjust to this new sight. To think that there was a seventh race all this time and that we’ve just been missing it!”

Ranvier nodded solemnly. “It’s been a tragedy to the augger people to be driven out,” he replied. “We would have come back... But before we could, we heard of the elven Upheaval and the tumult that has caused.”

“Yes,” Jaigran/Nordheim replied. “However, that raises another question... Why are you back?”

“I have come to seek an answer to the fluctuation of the Noon-Beam,” Ranvier replied. “Since I see from your face that you’ve never heard of it, let me explain...”

“You catching it?”

“Every word of it,” Unyih Garum replied as he looked at the stream of video coming in from the secret cameras placed all around the room that Jaigran and Ranvier were in. “We’ll have everything to decipher.”

“Excellent,” the Watcher replied, nodding. “The augger has fallen completely into our trap. We will take all the information that we need from him, and then... Then—well—we will have plans for our captive augger.”

Part CXV: Escalation

Date: Kapton 21st, 114 A.U.

“Your role is crucial to our survival—do you realize that?” Lord Freglak asked as they quickly walked down the hall.

“Yes, sir—our survival dependent upon my role is, my lord,” Flindle replied. “The Elder Dragon is our ace in the hole, it is!”

“But it is an untrustworthy ace,” Lord Freglak snapped. “Listen, Flindle. The past couple battles you have continued to lose control of the Elder Dragon. If it continues to break free from your control, we’re finished.” He turned to stare at Flindle. “Are you positive that you’ll be able to control it this time? I don’t know why you were able to control it so well at first and why now you seem unable to control it, but we can only use it if you can assure me that you will be able to keep it under bonds.”

Flindle shuffled his feet. “Promises, I cannot make sir—the promise I can’t make!” he said mournfully. “If only I could then I would, but my would does not make the could possible! I don’t know why he is continually able to escape me! It’s like some new spirit enters into him and he becomes altogether too violent and devious to thwart my wishes! I can’t promise anything anymore.”

Lord Freglak sighed as he stopped to lean against a window. “The whole thing’s crashing in,” he murmured. “Jaine’s troops are being bested, but he is far too resilient. He has been preparing for this for longer than I have and has built an excellent defensive structure around and with the Mothertree. We need more time to be able to crack his defense open—and we don’t have time. We have virtually no real defenses against the elves—and the elves are seizing upon that opportunity like a dog does with a bone. We need to crack open Jaine’s position now in order to turn around quickly enough to stop the advance of the elves. A stalemate with Jaine means checkmate for the elves.”

“What are you saying, sir?”

Freglak sighed again. “I’m saying…” he pursed his lips. “We can’t continue with the status quo any longer. We’re going to have to throw it all in this time. Our next attack on his defenses is at noon today. You’re going to lead the troops into battle on the Elder Dragon. Our scientists have supplied a vial of liquid that will be enough to knock out the Elder Dragon and will give it to you in a needle. If the Elder Dragon breaks free of your control, use it to knock him out. We cannot let it turn against our own troops. Everything is crucial at this point, Flindle. One little mistake will doom us to the elves, while one breakthrough will decimate Jaine. Do you understand?”

Flindle shifted his weight uncomfortably, realizing how much weight now rested on his position. “Yes, sir.”

The Elder Dragon is moving from his cage. The warriors of Lord Freglak prepare for another assault...

“I will prepare my own defenses,” High-Priest Jaine mumbled as his whispers were snatched away into the darkness. “Will the Elder Dragon prevail?”

The Elder Dragon will prevail over the ones who now hold it captive. Today, I will make it clear to the armies of Lord Freglak who truly holds the reins of the Elder Dragon and show them the power that I will unleash upon their forces. The Elder Dragon will turn against them once and for all this day. And I will make sure that they are crippled from ever assaulting us likewise again.

Flindle came down fast, holding onto the Elder Dragon for dear life as he controlled him, moving to the side to avoid a barrage of bullets before the Elder Dragon spat fire upon the sacred bark of the Mothertree, burning a goblin in the process, before cycling up to come down once more upon the tree, trying to create a large enough diversion to let the troops break in on the eastern side where they now attempted to swing up onto the Mothertree and so establish a foothold.

“Quicker,” Flindle whispered as they came down once more, Flindle ducking as bullets sailed past, loosening his grip on the Elder Dragon’s reins for just one moment. And in the same moment, the Elder Dragon moved. Straining past the chains, the Elder Dragon flung itself to the side, rolling, as Flindle looked up just in time to see the brown branch of the tree flying toward him.

Pain smacked Flindle’s face as the reins were wrenched from his control, his tongue tasting the cool moss, as his body wrapped around the branch before falling, stumbling and rolling, before jumping up as bullets whizzed past him. The Elder Dragon was loose. And it had finally broken free.

He had to stop it.

Ducking and moving forward, Flindle unsheathed his corsha blade, using it to help him stop the bullets as he moved closer to the Elder Dragon who was now flying upwards, away from the tangled branches of the Mothertree. Just a bit closer—if he could just catch up in time to inject the chemicals that he’d been given-

Flindle lurched forward as something grabbed at his foot. Flindle spun around to see the branch of the Mothertree morphing, smaller branches shooting out of it as it wrapped onto his knees and wrists. Flindle gave a cry but it was too late as he saw the Elder Dragon cycling down, fire bursting out of its mouth. And Flindle's vision was filled with a fiery explosion.

"We're finished." Major Erklen slammed the papers on the table bitterly as he shook its head. "It's done. We're doomed."

Freglak slowly closed his eyes. "I..." he said quietly, and he shook his head, wiping his eyes. "I had come... I had come to bond with Flindle..."

"Blast it," Major Erklen snapped and cursed. "To be so close... what happened?"

"I don't know," Freglak said quietly. "But it's cut off our last reasonable attempt to stop Jaine."

"Reasonable attempt?" Major Erklen said, looking up.

"We only have one more chance," Freglak said quietly as his gaze met Erklen's. "One last-ditch attempt to smoke Jaine out of his hole before the elves break in."

"You don't mean-"

"We have no other choice. Bring out the bombers."

The bombs began dropping as the sun set. Explosions that tore goblins asunder, breaking bones, and scattering dirt. A turmoil of fire rained down on the Mothertree as the deluge of destruction was dropped upon the Mothertree, completely surprising Jaine's forces. For fifteen minutes before Jaine's forces could bring enough anti-aircraft missiles to the fight, the goblins bombed the Mothertree, covering it in a field of smoke. Slowly, the smoke began to dissipate as all goblins eyes were turned toward the Mothertree, to see if their hero, their god, had withstood the final solution of their goblin lord.

Slowly, the smoke lifted. The tree was torn in many places. The moss was ripped off, and lingering embers still cooled in the Mothertree. But the Mothertree still stood. Suspending all belief, the bombs only dealt minor flesh wounds to the tree, failing to break in to the root belief.

And at that moment, fear clenched Lord Freglak's heart. And Freglak finally believed in the Mothertree.

Part CXVI: Realm in Chaos

Date: Kapton 22nd, 114 A.U.

The voyager ship of the Xavier Team descended to meet a city ravaged by war.

Lingering smoke still rose from the broken bombed-out buildings and trees in the city, flames still flickering within their hollows. Dead bodies lay on the ground, corpses mutilated and stripped as they lay silent on the ground. Bare trees encircled the palace which still stood, though slowly breaking down. And at the other side of the city, a large black circle encircled the Mothertree which still stood, although worse for the wear.

Reynyagn gravely surveyed the situation. “The elves must have broken through quite recently,” he said. “Keep your eyes peeled—they may still be around. The palace seems like it’s still standing—we must make there quickly.”

Flek said nothing as he stood, silently surveying the city broken and battered down, slowly lowering his head in sadness. He paused as the others began to move toward the palace. And then, slowly, still shaken, he went on.

“Hail Lord Freglak.” Freglak looked up, face still stricken, as his expression was eclipsed with a sudden shock and astonishment as his mouth dropped to see Reynyagn enter into the room, followed by Flek and a group of other beings, members of each of the races, along with some reptilian being that he didn’t recognize.

“Yo—you,” Lord Freglak stammered as his knees gave way, causing him to sit down. “You... You’re here.”

“We’re here,” Flek said softly, sensing the passion behind Freglak’s voice. “And I...” His voice broke. “I’ve seen the city,” he said, trying to keep back his pressing emotions. “The city... Those elves... they-”

“It’s not the blasted elves that did this,” Freglak said, cursing, as he shook his head in vengeance. “The wretched Jaine and his cohort of priests have waged this war against ourselves as the elves wait in the wings. We’re ruined, Flek... Our cause is lost... Unless-” He looked up to meet Flek’s gaze. “Except that you’ve come now. Why... Why are you here? Are the elves-”

“I fear that we are not here to bring much good tidings,” Reynyagn replied. “Although, to confirm what you may have suspected, it is indeed the Xavier Team that stands before you. We’ve come in search of the Golden Corsha Weapon of the Goblins, believing it to be crucial to

resist the Emperor. We have since seen the city, though, and..." Reynyagn paused. "I cannot leave this city without doing something to help."

"I know nothing of such a weapon," Lord Freglak said, shaking his head. "Likely Jaine, with his wealth of knowledge about the customs of the past, knows what you speak of, but he and I are sworn enemies as of now. Your only chance to find it would be to break past his defenses and either find it among his stash or wrest any possible information from him." He looked up and there was a glimmer in his eyes. "To break past his defenses..." he repeated.

"What are these defenses like?" Monty asked, stepping forward. "As a means of introduction, my name is Monty, a former spy for Governor Astrid in Araelia. I'm not part of the Xavier Team, but I know much about getting past defenses. What is the situation like?"

"You... You'd better sit down," Lord Freglak said slowly. "I will explain to you the current situation, but... Much backstory is needed. And I believe that will mean explaining to you the whole background of the war so that you might better understand our straits. And the dismal situation that we now find ourselves in."

"Your squadron goes out to battle in two hours," High-Priest Jaine, Prophet of the Mothertree, commanded. "Your mission is to be of absolute stealth—to assassinate Lord Freglak while the Elder Dragon provides his distraction atop the fortress. Freglak will find himself flanked by the two sides, and he cannot escape both of them. This battle will end today."

"Yes, sir," the commander replied. "My men will undertake the mission to assassinate the Lord-Protector. Have you discovered any information yet about the ship that landed today?"

"Whoever came out of the ship that landed outside Freglak's palace is likely of no importance to us," Jaine replied. "The Mother-Tree will tell me if they are. They are likely some remaining commanders in Freglak's army that are returning in his desperate attempt to save himself as he realizes that his end is approaching. Pay no heed to them. Freglak will meet his end today."

"So, in other words, basically all our routes of salvation have been exhausted."

"Aye," Freglak said, slumped back against his chair. "It's over. There is no more lingering doubt in the minds of the public as to the power of the Mothertree. It survived my entire barrage of bombs. The Elder-Dragon has turned against us for the last time, we can't breach his defenses, and Major Erklen has deserted. Before you showed up, we were merely awaiting the final strike."

"No escape routes?" Flek asked, raising his eyebrows.

“Bah, the elves have all but surrounded the city,” Freglak spat. “Although they are trying to fool me otherwise, their prancing around minor targets are merely a façade. They’re waiting for us to destroy ourselves and then they’ll crush us. They are still a day’s journey away from the city, but they have this city all but in our hands. There is no escape.”

“Yes, we narrowly slipped past the elven defenses to get here,” Reynyagn replied. “The choices are laid out on the table. What is your choice?”

“Excuse me?”

“Will you sit here and wait for them to deal the killing strike?” Reynyagn asked. “Or shall we let loose one last assault on the enemy, where the Xavier Team will lead your forces to battle in one last effort to break past the priests’ defenses and wrest the information about the Golden Corsha Weapon out of Jaine?”

A gleam sprung up in Freglak’s eyes. “My military is all but abandoned me to the enemy or waits here in fear,” he replied. “The gas for our machines is all but one else. Our defenses are but a broken piece of wood, and our food is running out. But we will fight.” He stood up, clenching his sword pommel in his fist. “Take full control of my army, Reynyagn of the Xavier Team. Command them however you see fit, and I will do all that I can to aid you. We will let loose one final assault upon the priest’s defenses and exploit all their weaknesses that we can. Or I will die doing so.”

There was a roar behind them, and red flames splashed across the windows in the room before a green spiked tail smashed against them, flinging glass everywhere.

“And so the final battle begins,” Number 994 replied. And lightning crackled across his fingertips.

Part CXVII: The Flight of the Elder Dragon

Date: Kapton 22nd, 114 A.U.

“*That* is the Elder Dragon,” Freglak said. Reynyagn stepped forward as he saw the dragon cycling through the sky—the long green body that swooped behind it—the flaring long ears that cycled behind it—the scales that rippled in the sun as it now turned—and the glaring red eyes of destruction and revenge.

“To think that you could have thought to tame such a menace...” Reynyagn whispered. “You can never tame a dragon. Not forever.” The dragon turned, blasting fire as he came down to make his second lunge at the palace.

“We don’t have much time!” Monty exclaimed. “We have to stop him!”

“Then stop him we will,” Reynyagn said, leaping forward as he dashed across the room toward the broken windows, uncoiling the Arglem as the dragon flew toward him. The two met at the windows, the dragon blasting through the shattered glass as Reynyagn swerved to the slide, swinging the Arglem as he was met by a blast of heat.

“Move!” Zarien yelled, leaping to the side as he drew his gun. Number 994 sent a barrage of lighting at the dragon whose tail swept through the room even as Flek, though well-aware of his lost abilities, drew his arjla corsha blades as he leapt for the receding tail of the Elder Dragon. Catching up just in time, Flek grabbed onto a spike as the Elder Dragon took off, smashing some of the supports in the room as it cycled back up into the heavens, Flek and Reynyagn still clinging onto it.

“Your day ends now!” Reynyagn roared from up ahead on the Elder Dragon, whipping the Elder Dragon with the Arglem. The corsha burnt, but failed to penetrate, the dragon’s scales. The Elder Dragon gave a roar, tossing and turning as Flek struggled to hold on, as it dueled with Reynyagn up ahead. Slowly, his blades now sheathed, Flek struggled to climb up the dragon’s scales even as it began to descend for another attack on the palace.

The ceiling cracked and cracks rang out through the walls as Zarien dashed out of the room, the ceiling falling through behind them as they quickly made their exit, fires leaping up behind them, the last gifts of the Elder Dragon. The palace was collapsing around them as they quickly made through the corridors.

“To the left!” Lord Freglak yelled. “The barracks is that way! We need to organize the troops for combat!”

“I can work to repair any broken airships you might have!” Number 994 yelled. “If they have circuiting problems, that is! We need to get as many as possible up there to deal with the Elder Dragon!”

“Where’s Flek?” Astrid suddenly asked, noticing his disappearance.

“He grabbed onto the Elder Dragon as it left!” Zarien said. “Just keep moving! He’ll be able to fend for himself!”

Reynyagn gritted his teeth as the waves of fire blasted through him. Although immune to most fire, the fire of the Elder Dragon was searing-hot, reaching the intensity of the corsha blades, thus making him susceptible to their pain. It took a blade of extreme heat to kill a Sla’ad neglecting old age. But the fire of the Elder Dragon could be enough.

Moving to the side as he gripped the long ear of the Elder Dragon to hold on, Reynyagn whipped the Elder Dragon across the face as it gave a roar, diving low to the ground, as Reynyagn moved to the side, glancing back to see Flek behind him, struggling to climb up to meet him. Too late, as the Elder Dragon rolled, Reynyagn realized its intentions.

Reynyagn hit ground, body colliding with the ground as he was ripped off his hold, slamming into the dirt as the Elder Dragon flew back up in victory, having successfully toppled its first attacker. Reynyagn tasted dirt as he stood up to watch it fly back up into the sky.

The druid commander moved quickly with his men through the decomposing palace, holding their bows with their quiver of corsha arrows swung around their back, each of the arrow-heads dipped in poison. Their spy had placed a tracking device on Lord Freglak so that they could track him to the corridors. And they were closing in on him.

The wind rushed by his face as Flek flung himself forward, grasping the next spike as the Elder Dragon Roared, scorching a hapless goblin clinging to one of the trees. He had to stop this menace. But even when he had the Watcher dwelling within him, Flek hadn’t thought that he would have been able to stop this thing. Much less without his power.

He was now behind where the tips of its long ears ended. Flek looked up as the Elder Dragon began another descent to destroy the palace. He had to stop this thing. Moving forward, he waited as the Elder Dragon neared the palace. And then, releasing his grip on the dragon’s spike, he grabbed the ends of the ears with both ends and pulled—hard.

The Elder Dragon had not been expecting that. Flek was jolted back as the Elder Dragon was suddenly forced upwards, cracking its head on a battlement, causing it to screech in pain. Thinking on the fly, Flek moved his hands toward the right as hard as he could, causing the Elder Dragon to again smash into the palace, breaking through the glass into a hallway, now partially stunned by the sudden collisions.

Flek blinked as he shook his head, gaining focus just in time to see the Xavier Team skidding to a stop before him, before he suddenly realized the huge mistake he made. The Elder Dragon opened its mouth, ready to roast all of its victims with its breath of flame. Lord Freglak and the rest of the team threw themselves to the ground and to the side as, at the other end of the short hall, Flek noticed a group of goblin druids leaping out, shooting corsha arrows from their bows.

The ball of fire emitted from the Elder Dragon's mouth missed its targets as it flew across them toward the goblin druid archers who had obviously not been expecting that. The arrows passed through the flames. And moments after the goblin archers were engulfed in flames, a volley of poisoned corsha arrows struck the Elder Dragon, one zipping into its nostrils while another pierced its eyes.

The Elder Dragon roared, slamming its head across the ceiling, causing plaster to rain down from it, as Flek leapt off, drawing his arjla corsha blades to finish the job. But the deed was already done. The Elder Dragon shook, its eyes glaring vehemently in its death throes, as it wrenched itself out of the hall, taking one last faltering flap with its wings, before its eyes rolled back and fell from the skies.

The Elder Dragon was dead.

Part CXVIII: Storming the Castle

Date: Kapton 22nd, 114 A.U.

“New operatives from the Emperor. The Mothership is here.”

“The *what?*” the lieutenant asked, turning on a heel. “The *Mothership* is here?”

“Aye,” the commander replied. “Apparently, during their newest upgrade, they gave it the cloaking devices that the pesky goblins used to avoid radar.”

The lieutenant blanched. “So... that means—the Emperor—”

“He’s here,” the commander replied. “And he’s given us a new directive. He’s decided it’s high time that we stop skirting their capital city while Jaine and Freglak destroy each other.” The commander laid a finger on the map. “We’re going in.”

A ring of barbed wire encircled the Mother Tree in front of the dirt wall of defenses, poison-coated crossbows set up behind it. A ditch lay between the two, spiked stakes sticking up between it. Above, there were enough hidden bowmen in the trees to take out the planes, wielding their custom-made explosive-tipped arrows.

“One would think with their refusal to use guns, we’d have an easy time at them,” Monty grumbled as he espied out their position.

“You would hope,” Lord Freglak growled. He had finally left the security of his palace. The palace had been mostly destroyed by the Elder Dragon, and every extra goblin was needed for this final assault on Jaigran’s position.

“We can break in,” Reynyagn murmured.

“Aye,” Monty replied. “We’ll use the few grenades that we have to make a gap in their defenses. Zarien and you four goblin gunners—you’re going to get up into this tree and provide the cover that we’ll need.”

“I’ll use my Arglem, and Number 994 can use his lightning to stop their arrows,” Reynyagn replied. “The rest of us will then charge in and take out their defenses as soon as possible.”

“Our greatest threat will be from above, though,” Flek pointed out. “Although the bombs destroyed most all of their foliage, there are still far too many nooks and crannies in the Mothertree. We’re not going to be able to get them out as easily.”

“That’s what our few fighter planes are for,” Lord Freglak reminded him. “Once we begin our attack, I’ll alert them and they’ll provide an ample enough defense and destruction to let us through.”

“And then where exactly do we find Jaine?” Monty asked.

Lord Freglak pointed to a smaller tree next to the Mothertree. “There, in the Tree of the Offspring,” he replied. “That was the priests’ old headquarters, in the tree they claimed was the offspring of the Mothertree. That’s also where we believe Jaine set up his war headquarters.”

“No time to wait, then,” Reynyagn said. “They might not know yet that the Elder Dragon and the goblin assassins are dead. We need to act now, when they’re not expecting a counter-assault.”

“Let’s go, then,” Flek said. And he threw the grenade.

Explosions rattled the priests’ defenses as wire curled, snapping back, dirt defenses blown apart as the defenders braced themselves as the smoke rose, laying their hands on their weapons as they pointed their crossbows into their smoke, waiting for the attack.

The attack came. There was a clap of thunder, and lightning electrified two of the goblins on the crossbows, causing them to clutch their hearts in pain. Gun shots rang, and a few more were killed as a burning light rose from the smoke, preceding a shadowy body who snapped the streak of light around, killing the hapless goblins nearby.

Shots began to ring out from the snipers above even as the roar of the aircraft became apparent. The battle had begun.

Flek’s blood ran cold as two goblin warriors made for him. Although he could have easily defeated them before, without his powers he knew that he was much more vulnerable. But he still had something that they didn’t have. And that was presence.

Feeling the adrenaline of battle building up inside of him, Flek moved forward, raising his eyebrows as he twirled his arjla corsha blades. “So,” he belted out as shots rang out around them. “You would challenge the great goblin warrior!”

The two goblins paused as they looked at him, and then a look of shock played across the face of one of them. “Wait!” he suddenly cried. “You—you’re-”

“Flek,” he replied, still advancing toward them. “And I’ve returned to stop the likes of you from destroying our country.” And ignoring his gut reaction, Flek leapt forward, raising his blades in a battle cry.

One of the goblins instantly gave a cry of fear, springing out of the way as the other only half-heartedly raised his weapon in defense. The goblin blocked once against his attack, but then, freezing up, became too easy of a target as Flek lopped off his head, spinning around to see the other goblin fleeing in terror. Regardless of his lack of power, he still had his reputation. And Flek moved to stand beside Jroldin.

Number 994 shot down the goblin fleeing from Flek before moving for cover, looking up as he saw the battle raging above between the hidden snipers and Lord Freglak’s aircraft. It wasn’t clear yet who the winner was, especially as Number 994 had no idea how many snipers were hidden in the tree. Just then, Reynyagn came up to him.

“Most of the immediate defenses have been routed,” Reynyagn said, trying to catch his breath. “We can’t fight a pitched battle. We have to go find Jaine.”

“Right,” Number 994 agreed, pointing. “That tree there?”

“Aye,” Reynyagn said. “Let’s go.”

It began as a small object in the distance, slowly getting closer and closer as its size became apparent. The noise of the engines began to grow as its white shape flew over the trees. Monty shot down another goblin as he quickly moved closer to the tree, now nearly on top of it. No good going in the front door, which was sure to be guarded. Instead, he’d climb up to the 2nd floor windows. He had just clambered up on the ledge, when, looking back, he saw the object and suddenly realized what it was. The object that had haunted him in his dreams—the object which he had seen so many times at the Remembrance Ceremony.

The object which was now coming to wrack devastation upon the battle.

The Mothership.

Part CXIX: The Enemy of My Enemy

Date: Kapton 22nd, 114 A.U.

Monty leapt in through the window, gun shots ringing out as he quickly shot down the two unsuspecting goblin guards. Moving quickly, Monty threw himself against the door, shutting out a potential attacker, as he instinctively bolted it before stepping back to view his situation. Noticing the wooden door, he sprung to the side as there was a hammering.

“Who is it?” the voice roared. Monty looked around. He was inside what appeared to be an old study, with book cases and a couple recliner chairs. He had to get out fast. He moved toward the door even as the corsha blade protruded through the rock.

Moving instinctively, Monty kicked the door open just as the blade finished slicing through the lock. The surprised goblin guard stumbled back as one shot rang out and he slumped to the floor. He had to move quickly before the Mothership showed up. Running lightly down the hall, Monty grabbed the next goblin guard, quickly using his martial arts training to disarm the surprised goblin before slamming him against the wall.

“Where is High Priest Jaine?”

The tree slowly morphed, moving away from itself, as near the top of the trunk, the tree pressed up an orb of air which met the surface as the high priest slowly stepped out, letting his long robe drift against the tree as he stood, surveying the battle round about them as the goblin snipers took out the last of the enemy airships. They had nearly been exterminated. But they had won the air battle.

Wait. The Mothership approaches. This is the opportunity we have been waiting for. I will again show you my power, and I, the Mothertree, will smite the false mother of the Mothership. Thus saith the Mothertree.

“And so let it be done,” Jaine solemnly pronounced.

Flek moved to the side as the snipers began shooting again. “We can’t get away from them!” he yelled.

“We need to get out of here,” Jroldin muttered.

“Up the tree,” Flek said, moving toward the tree. “We can go around it where they can’t spot us!” Moving quickly, they avoided the gun shots with their corsha weapons as they slipped around the Mothertree.

“I’m going up,” Flek said, gritting his teeth as he leapt up, his circlet glowing all the brighter.

“Do you really think you should?” Jroldin asked as he struggled to catch up to Flek. “I mean—your powers—”

“I’m not going to worry about my powers,” Flek said, pursing his lips. “They might be gone, but I’m not helpless. They’re still only shooting corsha arrows for goodness sake! We can stop them.”

“Very well then,” Jroldin said, complying. “Let’s go.”

“Are you ready?” the Watcher asked as he turned to Jaigran.

“For you to go? Go ahead,” Jaigran said as he looked out across the Great Forest and at the ever closer city from the main control center of the Mothership. “Go get the golden weapon of the goblins. I’m ready.”

“Good,” the Watcher said, moving away. “Have your fun by destroying the city. Don’t let the Xavier Team escape. And if they do... well, you know our plan.”

“I do indeed,” Jaigran said. And the Watcher departed.

Monty moved to the side to avoid the goblin just as a bolt of lightning came from the other end, knocking the goblin out. Monty paused for a moment before giving a yell.

“Hey! It’s me, Monty!” Monty moved out to see Number 994 and Reynyagn coming up to meet him.

“We haven’t found him anywhere,” Reynyagn said quickly. “And there are a group of goblins behind us. You?”

“No such luck,” Monty said, wiping his brow. “The goblins I’ve interrogated say he went to talk to the Mothertree.”

“He must have some sort of secret alcove or something in the base of the Mothertree itself!” Reynyagn exclaimed. “It’s our best bet anyways.”

“Let’s go, then,” Monty said, hearing the running of feet getting louder. “And let’s be quick about it.”

The Mothership reached the outskirts of the city as it hummed. Gears spun and motions were put in place, as commands which had not been processed for a century were given. Jroldin clambered up to the next branch as he watched, horror struck, as he suddenly saw a large blade descend from the bottom of the Mothership: a blade of corsha as long as a house, and thick enough to support itself, slowly beginning to move, ripping a scathe in the forest as the oak trees began to crumble like feathers before the storm.

And Jroldin suddenly realized what the object was that had looked like a blade in the blueprints of the Mothership. And how devastating such a weapon would be once it reached the city.

The power of the Mothership had been revealed.

The elves will play into our hand. They will destroy the remnant of Lord Freglak and then we shall destroy them.

“Like the Elder Dragon?”

Precisely, Jaine. The enemy of our enemies will be used for our purposes. All things must be used, and so we are reaching our critical moment. The moment when we will show them that we have the power to topple their empire.

There was silence before the Mothertree again spoke.

A ship approaches. The crucial moment awaits, Jaine. We must test whether or not you will truly trust me enough to follow our battleplan to victory.

Jaine looked up as he saw the small airship coming towards them. “What do you want?”

The golden arjla weapons of corsha which I have entrusted into your care. You must give it to them.

Jaine froze as the airship began moving past the outermost branches of the tree, noting the elven shapes inside. “What?”

You must trust me, Jaine. The secret to our success relies on this.

Jaine’s eyes darted around as he watched the blade of the Mothership begin to descend upon the homes of the goblins that supported Freglak even as the airship moved to a halt before him and a tall elf stepped out.

Give them the blades.

Jaine watched as the elf advanced toward him even as out of the corner of his eye he noticed Flek and a dwarf trying to scale the tree to get to him. The tall elf walked forward, holding out his hand as Jaine looked up into his towering face. A face that almost looked familiar. A wave of realization blasted Jaine like a splash of cold water.

“No!” Jaine roared in desperation as he slashed at the elf with the golden arjla corsha blades. But the blades merely went through the illusionary figure.

“Too late!” The elf and the Mothertree spake in unison, throttling Jaine’s senses even as he felt the tree engulfing his legs and sending shafts into his body. *“All is revealed, Oh Jaine of the Mothertree, and your own god has turned against you. Die well, and many thanks for your assistance!”*

“No!” Flek gave a cry of dismay as the tall elf grabbed the golden arjla corsha blades from the high priest now engulfed in the Mothertree, only able to watch as the elf made for the escape pod.

“We can’t stop him in time,” Jroldin said. “We have to get down from here. Now.”

“Why the urgency?” Flek asked, momentarily confused.

“You saw what the Mothertree did to Jaine. What if it’s coming for us next?”

Part CXX: End of the Line

Date: Kapton 21st, 114 A.U.

“It’s nice to see you again after fifty years,” the dwarf Nezore replied, leaning back on his chair. “I’ve heard many conflicting reports of you as of late. But I didn’t expect you to show up in my closet.”

“Oh, don’t act so surprised,” Astrid complained. “It’s not like we haven’t done this sort of thing before.”

“No,” Nezore said as he opened a can of beer. “But that was back when I was young—back when I could still fight.” He pursed his lips before taking a swig. “Go ahead and sit down. I suppose you didn’t just come here to catch up on old times?”

“Why not?” Astrid asked with a shrug of her shoulders as she sat down, her grey hair brushing against her shoulders. “It’s not like we didn’t have our share of adventures as part of the old Xavier Team.”

“Yeah, before you called our team illegitimate with your new team,” Nexore said as he raised an eyebrow.

“We had already agreed that our Xavier Team wasn’t the right one...” Astrid murmured. “Had we not?”

“Some people did...” Nezore said and he sighed, tapping his beer can. “But let’s be honest now. You didn’t come to talk about our previous accomplishments.”

“No?”

“Oh, come on, Astrid—I know better than that,” Nezore said, smirking. “You don’t think I’ve just happened to miss all the newspapers proclaiming your betrayal of the cause and your theft of the communicator from Governor Iraina?”

“The headlines aren’t that broad,” Astrid said, rolling her eyes.

“No; but I’ve kept myself aware of everything you’ve done,” Nezore said. “I’m not oblivious to what you did.”

“I wasn’t aware that you kept tabs on me...” Astrid murmured.

“Why wouldn’t I?” Nezore asked pointedly. “We *had* been a team, right?”

“Yes...” Astrid murmured. “But after the Upheaval-”

“You were the one that gave up on us,” Nezore said in a low voice. “And it wasn’t just the Upheaval. Ever since you pursued the government track to become a member of the Council, Jaigran wasn’t the only one to feel left out.”

Astrid averted his gaze, pursing her lips. “Fine,” she said quietly. “So what’s your point?”

“I assume the allegations are true?”

“That I took the communicator? Yes... They’re true.”

“Because you allegedly don’t trust Iraina to lead the Xavier Team?”

“He’d lead them to commit suicide,” Astrid retorted. “I couldn’t risk it.”

“I see.” Nezore paused. “You really believe that?”

Astrid looked at him strangely. “Of—of course I believe that. Why wouldn’t I?”

“I’m sure Jaigran has a noble goal as well,” Nezore mused as he tapped his beer can.

Astrid’s eyes flashed. “Are you comparing me to Jaigran?”

“No—no,” Nezore said, looking up. “Forgive me for suggesting that. But you and I both know that Jaigran wasn’t who he is now. He used to have a heart before he threw his life away. And my point is that we often deceive ourselves to our true intentions.”

“And what do you think *my* true intention is.”

“You’ve been in places of power for over a century,” Nezore replied. “First as part of the Triumvirate, and then as Governor of Araelia. Don’t get me wrong—I don’t necessarily have any problems with your governing. For the most part, I completely agree with all of your decisions as Governor of Araelia. But you have also become accustomed to power, Astrid. I might even go so far as to say that you have a drive for power.”

“Bu-”

“Let me finish,” Nezore said, standing up as he put down his beer cup, getting up on a stool to make up for his shortness that came with being a dwarf. “After the completion of the Xavier Team, all you’ve done is to pursue power. When some of the rest of us were trying to deal with Jaigran and the Council that had decreed that horrible Massacre of the Sla’ad, you chose to change it by becoming part of the Council. When tensions between you and Jaigran were the fiercest for the third seat on the Triumvirate, you did everything you could to stop him. Don’t get me wrong—Jaigran had become a very amoral vengeful elf—but that wasn’t the sole reason for your actions. You took the power and you made sure to use it. And because of that sate for power, you helped to alienate him. And we all know what Jaigran’s alienation caused.”

“I am not to be blamed for the Great Upheaval,” Astrid seethed.

“Of course not,” Nezore replied. “But you affected it. And it hasn’t been different since the Upheaval. You rightly preserved Araelia and took governorship. But then you kept it. You held your love and desire for power above anything else—including establishing a communication with me. That *is* why you stopped communicating with me—isn’t it? Because you were accused of being the friend of the dwarves rather than of your own kind in your third election?” Astrid didn’t reply. “And now of course we get to your new Xavier Team! You did the right thing but completely politicized what was necessary to be done! Tell me, Astrid. Tell me that wasn’t a political ploy!”

Astrid averted his gaze as she pursed her lips. “I…” she said. “I only… I needed to do what was right.”

“But you were unwilling to relinquish your power,” Nezore replied softly, but still firmly. “You did many things right, Astrid, but you knew it. Pride has become your downfall. Your pride and lust for power. And that’s why you are now a refugee of the government.”

Astrid closed her eyes. “I…” she said, her voice breaking as her grey hair covered her face. “I… I should have talked more with you, Nezore.”

“You should have.”

“You always knew what to do, especially on the Xavier Team where you were the leader…” she whispered. “I… I don’t know why I stopped communicating with you-”

“-Yes you do.”

“-but I shouldn’t have,” Astrid finished. “I… I shouldn’t have done that. And now… I’m in a mess.”

“That you are,” Nezore replied, and he looked up at her. “So what are you going to do?”

“What am I going to do?”

“Yes,” Nezore said, staring at her in the eyes. “You can’t hide forever, Astrid. You need to make your decision.”

Oldin picked up the newspaper on his way into work. He didn’t have much time to read with the heat of the investigation. But as the head of the FRI he still had to stay on top of the news. He glanced at the headline, and then stared.

“Ex-Governor Astrid Turns Herself into the Authorities.” Oldin pursed his lips, pondering this for a moment—trying to figure out why exactly she would have chosen to do this.

He would have to ask Iraina the next time they met. Or even better try to get a chance to visit Astrid when the investigation wasn't so hectic, although she'd probably be in prison.

Oldin placed the newspaper on his desk. He would need to read the full story later.

Part CXXI: Unveiling

Date: Kapton 23rd, 114 A.U.

“The days of the goblins have been numbered.” Jaigran walked down the hall as he followed the Watcher. “The Mothership has completely decimated their chief city and thanks to you we now have the golden weapon of the goblins.

“Four now are in our position,” the Watcher replied. “Two belong to the Xavier Team and the third is ready for us to grasp whenever we need it.”

“Shall we put the final step of our plan in motion?” Jaigran asked, turning around as he faced the Watcher. “There will be no use tracking down the Xavier Team.”

“No,” the Watcher agreed. “We will let them come to us. And then we will spring our trap.”

“Good,” Jaigran said, solemnly nodding. “Everything is as it should be then. Order the guards to reveal all to Ranvier, our augger friend. And then stage his escape in a way that causes him to reach the Xavier Team. Victory is at our grasp.”

“Jaine was only able to explain that the Watcher was the Mothertree,” Flek said. “And that the Watcher didn’t have an actual body. He was trying to say something else, but he died first.”

“I see...” Reynyagn said.

“It’s a tragedy,” Lord Freglak replied bitterly. “If not for him... If not for him, we might have won this war...”

“The Emperor is a deceitful elf,” Zarien replied. “And this Watcher—whoever he is—is a master of deception. He nearly took over Flek’s mind. Apparently he was the Mothertree as well. I don’t know who or what he is, but he’s a force to be reckoned with and he’s the reason you lost this battle.”

“Our country is ruined,” Freglak said, shaking his head. “Our forces are completely scattered, our capital city has been razed to the ground, and I have in essence lost my crown. We have been entirely desolated.”

“We cannot give up hope,” Flek said quietly. “Mayhaps you may yet be able to rebuild your country and continue to work against Jaigran once we’ve put you in touch with the other elven rebels.”

“Aye; it is my only hope...” Freglak whispered.

“But for us—we need a plan,” Number 994 said, standing up. “The Emperor has four golden weapons now. Only the golden weapon of the auggers remains unclaimed. What is our plan for finding it?”

“To find where the auggers have hid themselves...” Augger murmured. “A near – impossible task without the radar control of the skies that the elves have.”

“So basically we’re going to hack into the Mothership,” Monty said. “Your tribe of Sla’ad nearly had the plans finished, right, Reynyagn? We just need to get those plans, organize with the elven rebel group, and break into the Mothership.”

“Well isn’t that a near-impossibility,” Astrid murmured. “And all of that just to find the auggers—but wouldn’t Jaigran have found them first if it was that simple?”

“I... I don’t think so,” a new voice said, and they turned to see an augger emerge from the bushes.

“Wha...” Augger began. “Who-”

“I am Ranvier, ambassador of the auggers,” Ranvier said solemnly. “And I think Emperor Jaigran wanted me to meet you.”

“So... let me get this straight,” Monty said. “You were captured by them—they faked an escape—and then you thought you met one of us rebels and told them everything?”

“Yes.”

“And now...?”

“Afterwards, I realized that they had tricked me,” Ranvier replied. “And I’ve begun to piece together their plan in bits and pieces. They need the golden weapons to unleash the Watcher.”

“Unleash him?”

“I don’t completely understand it,” Ranvier admitted. “But the Watcher doesn’t have a body. But if he gains one, from what I overheard, he will gain extreme power. And to unleash the Watcher, they need five of the seven golden corsha weapons.”

A chill ran through Flek’s spine. “And they—they-”

“They have four of them now,” Ranvier said. “And thanks to the information they have from me, they now know where the last one is.”

A cold silence fell upon the group as they realized what exactly what was happening. Finally, someone spoke.

“How did you escape?” Augger asked.

“They tried to repeat the past,” Ranvier said. “Stage another escape, but an augger can’t be fooled twice. It was a set-up.”

“A set-up so that they can find us,” Monty whispered, instantly standing up.

“They’re nowhere nearby,” Lord Freglak muttered. “I have a radar device right here. We’re fine.”

“Then... then why...?” Monty began.

“They want us to know their plan,” Reynyagn said quietly. “Right? Why else would they have told Ranvier? They want us to know exactly what they’re doing. Or what they want us to think that they’re doing.”

“So what do we do?” Flek asked. “Do we walk right into their trap?”

“You need to go east,” Ranvier replied. “I need to take you to the island of the auggers—to the Noon Stone—and to the third golden weapon. We need to beat him to it.”

“He’s still playing with the strings...” Reynyagn said. “I know that he’s expecting us to try to get the 3rd Golden Weapon. But we have no choice. Even if he’s lying about needing five weapons to unleash the Watcher’s power, we still need to get that golden weapon before he can.”

“So we have to walk into his plan,” Monty muttered.

“Not unless we get there first,” Ranvier said, raising an eyebrow. “After all, would Jaigran have really done all of this if he expected us to beat him? They might have a good guess as to where my homeland is. But I know how to get there. And Jaigran will not be ready for the weapons that we have to launch on them.”

“Like that would make a difference against the Mothership,” Monty pointed out.

“Either way, I believe it’s settled, is it not?” Reynyagn asked. “None of us like this situation, but our course of action seems obvious. The Mothership isn’t the fastest ship—we still have some working ships here that will be able to beat it. And since we know where the last Golden Weapon is, even if Jaigran seemingly wants us to pursue it, we have no other choice. The Golden Weapons are what is needed to save Arquenian. And so it is there that we must go.”

Part CXXII: Parting Ways

Date: Kapton 24th, 114 A.U.

“This is Tzjearjlan of the Sla’ad calling, over... Yes; we are doing well. Progress made? Over... Excellent. We are calling to report that we have finished assembling the plans of the Mothership. Over... Yes, we have compiled them on our computer system into one coherent model. We await instructions of how to relay it to you, over... Sending it to this alternate group, but what of the elves tracking our transmissions? Over... I see. Sounds like a plan. We will send it to them. Over...”

“The Sla’ad have finished compiling the plans of the Mothership,” Reynyagn said. “I’ve worked it out with them and they’ll be sending it to our rebel base. Since the rebel base is able to partially-track the Mothership’s signals, they should be able to receive the plans electronically without them being alerted.”

“Excellent,” Monty replied. “But...”

“But what?”

“What will that do for us?”

“I talked with Tzjearjlan further on this issue,” Reynyagn replied. “According to him, they’ve discovered the source and final engine of the entire Mothership. And apparently all that’s needed to disable the Mothership is to take down that central computer that they’ve found which controls the whole system.”

“I see...” Monty said, pursing his lips. “So...”

“The Mothership is on course toward the isle of the auggers,” Augger replied. “And while my ancestors haven’t dwelt there, after what Ranvier has said, we must try and stop the Mothership from desolating their land and destroying the remnant of my race. In addition to all this, we’ll have to take down the Mothership at some point. And what we can’t allow either is for us to arrive at the island only to be trapped there by the Mothership.”

“So what are you saying?” Monty asked.

“I’m saying that we ought to split our team in half,” Augger said simply. “Half of us will confront Jaigran and the other half will seek to sabotage the Mothership in a espionage mission, assuming that it is possible for such a mission to destroy the central computer.”

A hush fell over the group before anyone spoke. “I will stay out of this internal discussion,” Ranvier said.

“It... It *is* possible, from what Tzjearjlan said, for a small espionage group to take it down,” Reynyagn said slowly. “But... but to split the team over that? I believe that confronting Jaigran is more important.”

“We don’t need a whole team to confront Jaigran; do we?” Zarien asked. “I sincerely doubt that I with my injured leg will do much against him with four golden weapons at his hand. Beside, isn’t this the solution to last night’s discussion? He is expecting us to go after him. He will be completely unprepared for an attack on the Mothership at this time.”

“An unprepared Mothership is still dangerous,” Number 994 responded. “I was a part of it, Zarien. We were never “prepared” or ready for an attack. But we were still vigilant and training enough to disable any force that came against us. The Mothership is never unprepared.”

“But we have insider knowledge,” Zarien pointed out. “We have you, who not only know the system, but can manipulate it. I’ve been in the Mothership most of my life and know a good bit about how to sneak around it without anyone else knowing. And we have a professional spy here as well—doesn’t this sort of stuff appeal to you, Monty?”

“Well...” Monty said, trying to keep himself from smiling, “It... It does appeal to me, I must admit... We still don’t have enough information, though.”

“Right. We’ll need the plans first,” Zarien said.

“I don’t like the notion of you in the middle of the Mothership,” Astrid said quietly. “That Mothership has razed cities and destroyed air fleets! It has a system that routed out Zarien’s rebel group and made him to lose his leg! And you think that a small group of you can go against it?”

“It’s not about safety,” Monty said. “We’ve all thrown aside concerns for safety at the point, Astrid. It’s... It’s about doing what needs to be done. And honestly, I think Augger’s right. Yes, the Mothership may always be prepared. But they aren’t expecting any assault from us like they might be after this. And the fate of the race of the auggers is at stake.”

“We can’t go in without a plan...” Reynyagn murmured. “A bit more time to plan all of this out would do us well.”

“But we don’t *have* time,” Ranvier said. “I know I said I wouldn’t get involved in this discussion, but I need to say this. I don’t know what Jaigran and the Watcher have in mind, but I know this much. We don’t have much time and our opponent’s are enjoying a large advantage. We can push it back for a while, but when will we ever be ready? We currently have an elven rebel group behind us that can detect their airwaves—how long will that remain? They aren’t expecting an attack from us and are threatening a genocide of my race once they discover us.”

“We can work with a split,” Number 994 said quietly. “I had... I had been against it... But Ranvier’s right. We can’t wait. Assuming that Jaigran will be taking a smaller, faster ship to the island to get there first, there will only be him along with a couple of bodyguards. Too many of us might get in the way. And, other than Unyih Garum, the main leaders of the elves will be gone. We must take this opportunity or reap the costs of the genocide.”

“Then I suppose we have no choice,” Reynyagn relented. “We will again split the Xavier Team in one last chance to stop the Emperor or die trying. We must move forward—and quickly.”

Part CXXIII: Final Preparations

Date: Kapton 24th, 114 A.U.

“The hurdle to space is at long last completed,” the Watcher said. “The Mothership has been fully prepared. Once the Golden Weapons are ours, I will be able to fuel the Mothership and the others to break out of Arquenia’s orbit as it goes spinning on course to the sun. We now await the Seven Golden Weapons to arrive in place.”

“Very well,” Emperor Jaigran replied. “Events should be moving swiftly then. Are we ready to take our course, then?”

“I already have our quickest ship prepared,” the Watcher replied. “It will take us directly on course to Quelia, land of the auggers, where we will establish our position and wait for the Xavier Team. The Mothership will follow us.”

“Very well then. Let us go.”

Kapton 27th, 114 A.U.

“Well. It looks like we’re on our own now.” Monty, Number 994, Zarien, and Augger looked at the Mothership which was passing over them, its white body blotting out the rays of the sun.

“Indeed,” Monty said. “The rest of our team will do well against Jaigran. But it’s time for us to accomplish our part of the plan.”

“Have the full plans and guidelines been given?” Zarien asked.

“Our base has given me all the intel they have been able to decipher and send,” Number 994 replied. “For now, I have a general gist of where the central computer is and a general idea of the steps which will need to be taken to get there. For now, we need to get into the ship.”

“And how do you suggest we do that?” Monty asked. “If we go into any of the loading docks, we’ll be doomed.”

“That’s why we won’t be going into one of the loading docks,” Number 994 replied, pointing up at the plumes of fire that descended from the underbelly of the ship. “I’ve been given full instructions. We will go through one of the chinks in their armor there up through the holes that jet out the fire. If you look closely, not all of them are going at once. That’s where we’ll be making our entrance.”

“That will actually lead us into the ship?” Zarien asked skeptically. “Why would they be designed to let people inside the ship control them?”

“Because of the fire orcs,” Number 994 pointed out. “It takes a lot less work for a fire orc to make fire than it takes other machinery. It’s more fuel efficient this way. They create openings so that the fire orcs control the flames. And it’s through those openings that we’re getting in.

Number 994 gritted his teeth as their vehicle moved up quickly, dancing away from the long plumes of fire that moved all around him as he guided the vehicle toward one of the empty holes. Although the fire was continually changing, he had full control of the ship with his electricity abilities and was slowly getting closer and closer to the open one, just big enough to allow the small ship to move through the gigantic blow-torch. Just a little closer... a little closer...

Suddenly, the ship passed through, moving up into the oil-covered hole as the ship moved, on of the wings cracking as it slid against the wall. They were in the middle of a large plain that spanned the underbelly of the Mothership. Rows upon rows of holes covered with oil covered the face of it as red-skinned orcs stood beside, pouring out their flames into the holes which, when passing by the oil and fuel, enlarged the flame to create streaking plumes underneath it, causing the Mothership to rise.

And then the wing of the ship finally broke off. Giving a yell, Number 994 flung open a door, leaping out with the rest of his group as the fire-orcs turned to see what exactly had come up through the holes to visit them. Number 994 moved first.

Leaping forward, Number 994 gave a yell as lightning sparked at his fingertips. Light flashed and a nearby orc fell over, struck, as Augger raised his corsha blade above his head.. Monty ducked for cover as a ball of flame splashed against the already-damaged ship, fire-orcs moving quickly to try to surround them even as his comrades fought them off.

“There’s too many of them!” Zarien cried. “We’re trapped!”

“We don’t have to fight all of them,” Monty muttered, quickly scanning the premises. Fifty yards away, a ladder led up to the surface. “Look!” Monty yelled, pointing. “Get up there and leave the rest of them behind! We can’t fight them off.”

“Then let’s move,” Number 994 said, shooting down a Number 1542 with a bolt of lightning. Augger moved toward the ladder, turning to the side to avoid a line of fire before moving more quickly toward the ladder. Although somewhat-resistant to heat, Augger didn’t know how hot the flames of the orcs were. And he didn’t want to find out.

“Stop!” one of the fire orcs roared. Number 994 looked ahead as he noticed the fire orc moving to intercept them. Battle training began to break in as Number 994’s mind became absorbed with statistics. A Number 502—a high ranking fire orc and likely one of the commanders of this group of fire orcs that fueled the Mothership. With such a high rating, Number 994 knew the truth—he would have no chance to beat this orc in a duel alone. But even with the rest of the Xavier Team...

Number 502 moved forward, calling up flames as suddenly fires leapt up from the crevices around them, forming arches of fire around the Xavier Team as they ran past the holes which led down to the world beneath. And just as Number 994 opened his mouth to give a warning, the fires moved, breaking the arches as they came down upon them to rain their heat upon them. Throwing himself to the ground, Number 994 watched as fire arced around Zarien, Zarien covering his face as he stumbled back. Too late, Number 994 saw Zarien trip backwards. And, covering his face, Zarien fell backwards toward the cavity behind him, even as Number 502 lowered his hand to point at the crevice. And a spark raced around its edge. The flame was coming next.

Part CXXIV: Line of Bombs

Date: Kapton 30th, 114 A.U.

Oldin walked softly through the tunnels, looking around as he tried to figure out where they had all gone. For over 10 days his agents had been looking for the tunnels, looking for any signs of the elven terrorists that were and escaped into the tunnels. Still, however, they could not find them. And Oldin was getting worried.

Oldin paused and looked at his watch. It was 11 o'clock. In two hours, Iraina was planning on giving some important speech that he claimed would speed his new policy concerning the elves. Ever since he'd gotten the communicator from Astrid, he had been itching to use it. Oldin didn't know what Iraina planned to command Xavier team to do. But he knew that Iraina planned on explaining all of that in his speech. And so, Oldin hoped that he would be able to give his investigation done in time, so that should be able to listen to the speech.

Oldin paused as he heard static coming in on his walkie-talkie. Picking it up, he held up his year as he heard the voice coming in.

"Oldin?" It was one of his agents. "Oldin, this is Agent 54 coming in. Do you read me?"

"This is Oldin," Oldin spoke into the walkie-talkie. "What have you found?"

"I have found suspicious items near the third tunnel," Agent 54 replies. "Some scraps of clothing and bullet. It seems like there's more here, though."

"Like what?"

"The wall of the tunnel here—it's unnatural," Agent 54 said. "When you point the flash light in certain way, it's clear that it isn't part of the rest of the tunnel wall."

"Stop there," Oldin said, mind racing. "Stay there—don't move. I'll be with you in a moment. I'm signaling in for backup now."

"This tunnel wall is definitely different," Oldin said, pacing as the three agents hastily began pulling out their kits. Oldin thought for a moment.

"Stop," he finally said. The agents paused. "We don't have time to inspect it."

"But—" Agent 54 began.

"The elven terrorists have evaded us for too long, and you know how all the information we've gotten recently points to an accelerated launch date of whatever their plan is!" Oldin said. "We're running out of time. How thick is it?"

Agent 54 pulled out one of the instruments and placed it against the wall, tapping the wall with a metal rod to produce a note. He looked down at the machine. "About six inches thick," he said. "It's likely a door of some sort."

"I've gotten that far already," Oldin said. "It's a door, and we don't have time to figure out how they get into this place, so we're doing this the old-fashioned way."

"You mean—"

"We blow it up."

The explosion rattled the premises as Oldin lay flat against the wall. As the debris settled, Oldin moved forward, pointing his gun at the hole in the wall of the tunnel as the other three agents helped to encircle it. Inside was dark and empty. Oldin flicked on his flashlight and slowly moved in, scanning the premises for any enemies. There was none.

Inside was a room containing a large computer, a table with papers strewn around it, many filing cabinets, and weapons strewn around in various places. One of the agents instantly fired his gun, snuffing out a security camera. The two other agents moved over to the computer. Oldin made for the table, quickly flipping through papers.

"This place was used recently," one of the agents said as he put his gloves on, opening a filing cabinet. "There's a cup of coffee on top of this cabinet that's still slightly warm. Dusting for fingerprints should give us a whole slew of suspects."

"The calendar on the wall has a countdown to today," another of the agents by the computer quickly said. "It's called 'Launch Date.'"

"Then we're already nearly too late," Oldin snapped as he flipped through the papers. He paused and then slowly pulled out a large sheet of graph paper. On it was depicted a full map of the tunnel systems, along with red 'x's positioned in the tunnels. Oldin's eyes moved over to the map key, and he suddenly froze.

Oldin cursed and looked up. "They've planted explosions all throughout the tunnels," he said. "It's all on this map here. The golden circles around the 'x's mean that they've already planted them. All the 'x's except one are circled, meaning that most, if not already all, of their bombs are prepared for action."

"What good will come of planting explosives?" one of the agents asked, running over.

"Look at this!" Oldin snapped, waving his hand over the paper. "Look at their positions—their paths. The explosives, if powerful enough, will make one huge entry from the outside into Araelia!"

“You don’t mean-”

“And today’s the launch date!” Oldin yelled. “Look here—we’re right in the path of these explosives! They abandoned this place because this whole thing is blowing up here. And I’d wager my position that there’s a whole crap-load of elves out there just waiting to come in.”

“We have to warn the Resistance immediately.”

“My cell phone has no bars!” another agent yelled, cursing. “My walkie-talkie seems broken as well!”

“They’re two steps ahead of us!” Oldin roared. “Take the map—find the explosives and disarm them—and fast! We have no idea when they’re going to get off, but we have to stop them from doing this!”

“And you-”

“I’m going to warn Iraina!” Oldin yelled. “The whole ceremony today has to be called off! We need to get our men on the defenses and alert the dwarves! Today is the Launch Date—and the elves have set up a pathway into our city!”

Part CXXV: One Last Voyage

Date: Kapton 24th, 114 A.U.

“But... are you sure about this?” Ranvier pursed his lips with concern.

“You may have forgiven my ancestors for their crimes against my race, but have the others?” Augger asked. Ranvier’s silence spoke volumes.

“It is better this way,” Augger said. “You know enough about Quelia, the land of the auggers, to guide them there. The Mothership team will need my help, and we cannot throw the risk of the auggers rejecting me into the picture. Stopping Jaigran is too imperative for that. We all must make sacrifices. Maybe after all of this is over, if I’m still alive, I can return to Quelia and make amends for my ancestor’s crimes.”

“I hope so,” Ranvier said quietly. “Keep yourself safe.”

“And you.”

Kapton 27th, 114 A.U.

“We have now left the mainland of Arquenian,” Reynyagn said, watching out the glass windows as the land rushed behind them. “We’re now over the open sea.”

“And it’ll be another two days likely until we arrive in Quelia,” Ranvier replied. “It took me four days in my transport, but your ship is much faster than ours.”

“I don’t feel ready for this,” Astrid murmured, pursing her lips as she laid her hand against the glass. “I... I’m not ready for this all to be over. I’m not ready for the fight.”

“According to the prophesy, your goal is not to fight, but to heal,” Flek said. “In contrast to me, who am supposed to be the warrior but have already lost all of my fighting skills.”

“Peace,” Reynyagn replied. “We already have many factors on our side. Although Jaigran may be expecting us, he couldn’t have brought a large fighting force, and we should have the whole population of Quelia on our side. Whatever ends up happening, we ought to have the numbers on our side.”

“I hope so...” Astrid said, closing her eyes. “I... I just want this all to be over... All these deaths are haunting me. The man I murdered in Araelia. The elves that we’ve killed. All the dead bodies. Death haunts me. I just need it all to be over...”

“Our sentries caught sight of the Xavier Team’s transport ship as it left the mainland,” Emperor Jaigran said as he entered the Watcher’s cabin. “It seems to be a full six hours behind us.”

“Their ship is unlikely to be faster than ours,” the Watcher replied, standing up as light fluttered through his ever-more translucent body. “We’ll make it to Quelia well ahead of them in time to launch the last phase of our plans.”

“You’re positive that we’ll have no substantial trouble with the auggers on Quelia?” Jaigran asked.

“The auggers will not be expecting our presence,” the Watcher replied. “And they will not dare to follow where we are going. Even *if* they end up confronting us on our arrival, we brought enough troops to be able to fend them off while we enter my chambers. We’ll be landing right on top of the building where the entrance to my chambers is located, so it will all go well.”

“Yes—speaking of the troops, though, what exactly are *they* doing after we make our exit?”

“Whatever you want them to do,” the Watcher replied, a smirk playing across his face. “You didn’t bring anyone you legitimately cared about—right? Let them go harass and attack the auggers if they want. They could stay in this ship as well, but once the auggers figured out who they were, they may be dying anyways. All we brought them for was to make sure we had a clear path into my chambers. Once we’re in there, they can just die for all they care. They will be useless once my full form is unleashed.”

Kapton 29th, 114 A.U.

Catan the Silent looked up from his vantage point in the Watchtower of Quelia as he noticed the movement on the horizon. Peering down at his radar, he quickly zoomed into see the scan of the object coming their way. An airship—and one that appeared to be of elven origins.

Outsiders were not to be trusted. Especially those that were of the elves.

Then again, they hadn’t had a better opportunity in a long time to finally show their strength once again to the world and justify what had once been their great name. What better chance to exhibit the power of their kind than by making an example of this elven ship? And Catan the Silent knew what he was going to do.

Moving quickly, Catan the Silent fiddled with levers to open up the secret door that led to his computer that controlled the missile defense system of Quelia that he had put up. Although many other auggers had preferred to leave their defenses weak, Catan the Silent and his ancestors

had slowly put up a complex and efficient defense system over the past centuries that the rest of the auggers were completely oblivious too. Although their muteness and lack of a voice was a liability, it had also left them mostly above suspicion—an opportunity which Catan the Silent had made sure to use.

Putting on his head gear, Catan the Silent zoomed in on the upcoming airship and laid his hand on the lever. Pulling it back, he waited as the missile turrets moved up out of the ground, preparing the long-range missiles to begin their attack on the intruder. It ought to be a short battle—just one quick barrage that left the elven airship completely defenseless.

Catan the Silent waited as he trained the missiles on the upcoming airship, waiting for the perfect opportunity to present itself. It did. And, with a deft nod of his head, Catan fired.

Part CXXVI: Closing In

Date: Kapton 27th, 114 A.U.

Number 994 surged to his feet as he helplessly watched as Zarien fell backwards toward the fire vent even as Number 502 gestured toward it, the fire ready to explode out of the vent to consume Zarien. Number 994 had to move fast. And surging forward, thunder rolled from Number 994's fingertips as lightning moved faster than fire to stop the fire-orc's plan.

As fire shot upward out of the vent, a bolt of lightning struck Zarien from the side, throwing him sideways and out of the way of the blast of fire, even as Zarien was slammed into a poll. Ducking a ball of fire shot from Number 502, Number 994 ran forward, gripping Zarien's hand as Zarien tried to shake his head, groggy from his shock.

"Move!" Number 994 yelled, jerking Zarien out of the way to avoid the next shot from Number 502. "We don't have much time!" Stumbling in his steps, Zarien followed as Number 994 moved to position the pole between him and Number 502 as they raced toward the ladder. There was a tremor at their feet.

There was a crash, and fire vents started exploding around them, shrapnel flying as Number 502 sent power surges into the fire vents ahead of them, blowing them apart. Skidding to a stop, Number 994 watched as Augger safely moved through the mess, unscathed by his heat-resistant scales.

"Move forward!" Number 994 hissed to Zarien. "I'll distract the fire orc."

"But-"

"Move!"

Zarien moved forward, running, as Number 994 turned around to see Number 502 moving toward them, a spark appearing at his finger-tips as he looked ready to send forth his next assault. But this time, Number 994 was prepared. Leaping forward, Number 994 shot out a lightning bolt, forcing Number 502 to move to the side to avoid being electrocuted.

Moving quickly, Number 994 bent down and laid his hand on the inner edge of the fire vent, knowing that he had to do this before Number 502 saw him and set the vent aflame. Sending out a snippet of electricity, Number 994 quickly hotwired the spark plugs in the vent and immediately threw himself to the side as Number 502 sent a wave of flame at him, gripping onto the inner ring of the vent as he swung himself down into it, now dangling within the vent as he sent out his electricity through the spark plugs into the system, quickly analyzing it before shooting out commands even as he vaulted himself out of the vent.

Number 994 landed on the ground as his command went into play and the four vents around Number 502 simultaneously exploded as the wiring between them was electrocuted, creating a sudden web of electricity pulsating through the metal floor that Number 502 was standing on, even as the explosion created a wall of smoke and shrapnel. And Number 994 knew that his work was done.

Sprinting ahead even as the other orcs remained distracted with Augger, Zarien, and Monty—now at the ladder—Number 994 dashed to the ladder while Number 502 remained blinded and stunned by Number 994’s surprise attack. Gripping the rungs, Number 994 climbed up even while shots rang all around.

“We need to move quickly,” Monty said as they quickly ascended past the ceiling of the ground-level into the next level. Exiting the ladder, Augger quickly shut the trap door, locking it to seal it off from any pursuers.

“Where next?” Augger asked.

“The elevators,” Number 994 pointed. “Get in it. Now.” Running to the closest of the many elevators, they waited as the elevator doors opened just as noises from the trapdoor signaled that the fire-orcs were preparing to break through. Piling in, Number 994 quickly opened a hatch and stuck his finger in, closing his eyes as his mind searched the system, before deciding on their destination and punching it in, all the while covering up his digital tracks from any other lightning-orcs.

“All right,” Number 994 said as the doors closed. “I sent us to a portion of the Mothership that isn’t used often. There we can re-group and await further orders.” The elevator rose, and then began to move sideways. And their journey began.

Kapton 29th, 114 A.U.

“We’ve received our final instructions.” It was nearing midnight on the 29th, two days after they had made it into the Mothership. Since then, their initiative had been all but erased as their plans had stagnated, waiting for the elven rebel group to relay instructions and for Number 994 to receive them in a way that evaded the elves’ notice. They had already staged two scenes involving crashing elevators and collapsing passages that made it look like they had been killed, and thus had remained undetected for the past 24 hours.

“What is it?” Monty asked, itching to get back to work.

“They finally came up with the easiest path for us to make it to the central computer system,” Number 994 replied. “It involves us taking the elevators to as close as we can get, and then using the little explosives we have to blow into the weakest part of the defenses around it.”

“I suppose it was too much to hope that they’d leave their central computer relatively unguarded,” Zarien muttered.

“Have they sent the plans?” Monty asked.

“They said it was too large to send under the elves’ radar,” Number 994 replied. “We have to go with blind faith and reliance on their instructions.”

“Blind faith... suppose it’s what we have to work with,” Augger said. “We must rely on the Great One for their victory.”

“Not the Great One—just the instructions that the elven rebels gave,” Zarien interjected. “But no time for a theological debate now. The rest of the Xavier Team is supposed to arrive at Quelia tomorrow. And it’s already an hour until tomorrow begins.”

“Then no point wasting time,” Monty said. “We must set forth, and make one final attack on the Mothership’s system.”

“Let’s go.”

Part CXXVII: Launch Date

Date: Kapton 30th, 114 A.U.

Oldin moved quickly as he skidded down the tunnels, moving quickly toward the opening to get back into Araelia. His communications were still all down, and Oldin knew that the elven terrorists were behind it. No doubt they had sabotaged them, again maintaining their step ahead of him. He had to get to Iraina to warn him about what was going to happen. They had to get enough guards up to defuse the bombs that were even now waiting to rip open a clear path to the surface.

And he had to do it fast.

Moving to the door, Oldin quickly opened and slammed into it, throwing it open as he stumbled out into the wide cavern that made up the center of Araelia. The capitol building flickered like a gem in the dimness of the cavern as Oldin looked toward the great amphitheater, where even now Iraina was planning his great speech announcing his plans for the Xavier Team.

Dashing into the street, Oldin leapt toward a man trying to get into his car. “Official government business!” Oldin yelled, flashing his FRI badge as he drew out his gun. “The fate of Araelia is at stake! I need your car!”

“But-” the man interjected.

“Sorry!” Oldin yelled, flinging the man his business card as he snatched the keys out of the man’s hand. “Come visit my office tomorrow and I’ll pay for the damages!” Shoving the man aside, Oldin leapt into the front seat, slamming the car door shut before putting the keys in and turning it to ignition. The car roared and Oldin slammed down on the gas pedal. And the car roared off down the road.

“Bide your time,” the elven commander said as he glanced down at the mountain. “Everything is nearly ready. We just need to wait for the signal.”

“Aye, aye, commander,” the elven pilot said, only one pilot among the fifty other pilots that were here commanding their ships. “How large of a defense force shall we plan for?”

“A meager one if anything,” the commander replied. “Operation C-Watch has done its work and will silence most all of the possible defenders. Today is a day of victory where we will take the city with minimal bloodshed. And so the promise of the Great Upheaval will again be ours as we capture the last free city of the humans.”

Oldin skidded the car to a stop in front of the back of the amphitheater, quickly checking his clock. The ceremony began in seven minutes. He still had time to alert Iraina before he moved out on stage. Wrenching the door opened, Oldin moved out, running across the side walk toward the guarded door.

“Oldin—Head of the F.R.I.!” Oldin yelled as he ran toward the guards. “Open the door! I must speak to Iraina—now!”

“I... yes, sir,” one of the guards said, opening it up. Racing down the corridors, Oldin could hear the low clamor of the crowd ahead as he came into the prep room where Iraina stood, hair slicked back, shades on, ready for his speech. Outside the door, portions of the crowd could be seen as they gathered around the platform.

“Iraina!” Oldin yelled. “Iraina—for the Great One’s sake, you have to call the ceremony off—now! We’re in imminent danger!”

Iraina slowly turned, taking off his shades as he did as his eyes narrowed. “And why would that be?” His voice was cold.

“The cursed elven terrorists have duped us!” Oldin yelled. “They have a whole line of bombs in the outside tunnels waiting to blow up a route for them to get us! The Launch Date is today! You-”

“Shut up,” Iraina snapped, his lips curling back in a sneer. He cocked his head. “Go ahead.”

“Go ahead wha-” Oldin began, but suddenly, two men grabbed his arms, lifting him up as another confiscated his weapons. “What’s going on?!” Oldin roared.

“Oh—you still don’t know?” Iraina asked, his voice still cold as he began to laugh. “You really came this far without suspicions, Oldin?”

“Suspicions about what?!” Oldin roared even as his numbed mind began to work out what was happening. “You can’t—you wouldn’t-”

“I would of thought that you of all people would have begun to figure out why we were always a step ahead of you,” Iraina hissed. “Of course, it never occurred to you, now did it—that the leader of Araelia was a traitor.”

“But—but—but I trusted you!” Oldin cried out as his world began to crash around him. “You can’t—you didn’t-”

“You didn’t even investigate the election results!” Iraina cried out, laughing. “Did it never occur to the F.R.I. that there might have been election fraud? Did it never struck you as

too remarkable that in a district that Astrid was supposed to have easily won, that the last 10% of votes all came out for me?”

“You...” Oldin said, horror-struck. “You—you meddled with the election!”

“But of course, Jaigran’s plan wasn’t so fragile as to be stopped by democracy,” Iraina snapped. “You really are too slow to learn for being the Head of the F.R.I. And now it’s over. Guards, put a C-Watch on him. He’ll experience the announcement with everyone else.”

“Ex...*experience* the announcement?”

“But of course,” Iraina said, raising his eyebrows. “Or have you not figured out yet what this era is all about?”

“No...” Oldin whispered, his voice slowly raising. “No. No! You can’t do this!”

“I already have,” Iraina laughed. “And thanks to your help in getting the communicator for the Xavier Team, I convinced them to fall into Jaigran’s plan as well, which coincidentally is worked out on this same day. Today Araelia and the Xavier Team falls in one fell-swoop. Thanks for your help.”

“No!” Oldin screamed as the C-Watch was put on him. “You... You can’t.”

“Already done,” Iraina whispered and he moved out to the podium to address the crowd.

“People of Araelia!” Iraina cried out as Oldin could only watch. “Today marks a new day in civilization—a new day for Araelia! Today is the day when the final victor is revealed between the people of Araelia and the elves! And today is the day when the final victor is me!” Iraina grabbed at his ear, and as Oldin watched, pulled off a flab of skin, causing the end of his ear to spring up. But it was only too obvious now. Iraina flung the fake scab of ear down as his pointed ears showed, above the gasps of the crowd.

“And now!” Iraina triumphantly proclaimed, pulling out a case from his pocket. “Now you get to hail the true victors of Araelia!” And with that, flipping open the case, he pushed a button.

Explosions rung out in the background as the portion of the mountain that for so-long had guarded them from the elves was destroyed, even as Oldin felt a prick hit his skin under the C-Watch, even as it all became clear. His thinking became obscured as he glanced weakly at the C-Watch. Of course. All the extra gadgets—the additional electric current—as the volt of electricity ran through Oldin’s body, it became all-too obvious. The elves had created a device that had gained mass popularity with the people. And this device had just electrocuted all 70% of the populace that had bought these devices. And as Oldin’s body was lulled to sleep, one last thought escaped from his mind.

They've won.

Part CXXVIII: The Door of the Void

Date: Kapton 30th, 114 A.U.

“Augger Island approaches,” Ranvier said. “I have sent them a signal to let them know that it is I. We should have a smooth landing.”

“Our destiny approaches then,” Jroldin muttered. “And we walk straight into the trap prepared for us.”

“Iraina was counseling us about this yesterday,” Astrid said. “We may have gotten here before Jaigran and we have the entire island on our side. We have nothing to fear.”

“I’m still not so sure how much I trust Iraina’s advice over ex-Governor Astrid’s...” Jroldin muttered. But he said nothing else as the island drew near.

“I don’t suppose this is normal?” Flek asked. They had just landed and opened the door to exit the ship when they were met by a small army of auggers, waiting at the end of the gangplank.

“I’ll check in with them,” Ranvier said, pushing past him. “Hail fellow Auggers! Your ambassador has returned with half of the legendary Xavier Team to investigate the Noon-Stone!”

“The Xavier Team!” Whispers spun throughout the small army.

“You come at a most inopportune time then,” Grandine, leader of the auggers, said, stepping out from the group. “You will forgive our show of arms, Ranvier. It’s only that this morning we were attacked by a group of elves and did not know whether to believe your message or not.”

“A group of elves?!” Flek cried out, a sinking feeling in his heart.

“It would appear that Catan the Silent isn’t as silent in regards to political affairs as he may seem,” Grandine replied, turning to Ranvier. “He and his ancestors have planted a whole defense system on our island without us knowing. Upon spotting their ship, Catan the Silent let loose a whole barrage of missiles at them as they came near, which he thought would have most certainly destroyed them. The ship, on the other hand, either magically repulsed, or dodged the missiles that were sent at them, made it through Catan’s extensive defense system, and then landed on top of the Council building.” He gestured toward a large circular building with a flat roof in the middle of the city. “Two of the occupants of the ship then proceeded to make his way down into the chamber with the Noon-Stone and disappeared into the domain of the Watcher

while his companions took up nest on the top of the roof to shoot us down. Although the elves are all slain, nine of our kind have fallen today, a most grievous woe.”

An augger swiftly made his way toward Grandine from outside the army. Grandine turned to see him and narrowed his eyes as the augger rapidly made gestures with his hands.

“That’s Catan the Silent,” Ranvier murmured as they slowly moved out of the ship. “He’s mute.”

“This is our ambassador with the legendary Xavier Team,” Grandine snapped as he glared at Catan. “They are not more *threats* for you to depose—or people to turn into threats like you did with the others!” More gestures emerged from Catan.

“You have no proof they were planning on attacking us before you tried to murder them,” Grandine snapped. “But we’ve already been through this discussion. Once the lawgivers set a time for the trial, we will see what defense you really do have against these allegations.”

“If I may intervene,” Ranvier said, stepping forward. “Although I cannot get involved directly with this discussion, being absent from the circumstances that led up to this attack, what did these elves look like?”

“One was short with black wings and a circlet of gold. Some claim to have seen four of the Golden Corsha Weapons on him,” Grandine replied. “The other was tall, and some say the sun shone through him.”

“Then we are already too late,” Ranvier replied. “With due respect, Grandine, these two elves are the leaders of the elven forces. You say they went into the Door of the Void?”

“Yes.”

“Where is our Golden Corsha Weapon?”

Grandine paused as his glance flickered from Jroldin to Reynyagn, both carrying Golden Weapons. “It was... It was in the Council Chamber—the Chamber of the Noon-Beam,” he slowly said.

“Is it still there?”

“And so Jaigran has remained a step ahead of us,” Astrid said bitterly as she stared at the empty rack on the wall of the chamber of the Noon-Beam. “They have all five now.”

“Then they can unleash the Watcher,” Flek whispered. “They have what they need. It’s over.”

“Unleash the Watcher?” Grandine asked. “Do you mean—are they planning on awakening him?”

“Yes, Grandine, but it isn’t what you think,” Ranvier said as he turned toward him. “The elf who seemed translucent? He’s the Watcher—and he’s not on the good side anymore. He’s allied himself with the elves to destroy us.”

Shock was apparent on Grandine’s face. “But... but-”

“We don’t have time,” Reynyagn said as he looked toward Grandine. “Where is the Door of the Void?”

“There—but why?” Grandine asked as he pointed.

“Because we’re going to do the only thing we can do,” Reynyagn said as he turned. “We’re going to follow him.”

“But you can’t!” Ranvier said as he moved after them. “That’s the *domain* of the Watcher! No one has set foot within those doors and lived!”

“Jaigran did, if he went through,” Reynyagn replied as he continued walking. “And as the Xavier Team, we’ll be protected, although I don’t suggest you go with us, Ranvier.”

“I understand,” Ranvier said. “Do what you must do, then. I’ll update Grandine on the situation.”

The Xavier Team quickly walked down to the other end of the room where the two double doors sat. They paused in front of them.

“Well,” Jroldin said. “I guess this is it. We might be walking into immediate death.”

“Everyone else that went into the door may not have immediately been killed,” Reynyagn replied. “And what other hope do we have? If the Watcher is unleashed, we’re all doomed.” He paused, and then turned. “Are you with me?”

“We follow, if only...” Astrid paused as her throat caught. “I... I’m not ready to face death.”

“No one ever is,” Jroldin said quietly.

“No, but—but this is it,” Astrid said. “I... If I die... I die guilty of my murder.”

“Must you die guilty?” Flek asked as he gently laid his hand on Astrid’s shoulder. “I think... I think Monty’s told you what you have to do.” Astrid was silent, breathing deeply. Slowly, one tear trickled out of her eyes before she finally looked up.

“I—I see it!” Astrid suddenly cried, leaping back. “I see it!”

“You see what?”

“I see the circlet—I see the sign of the Priest-King!” Astrid cried out, pointing to his head. “I see it—I believe!”

“I have waited so long for this day,” Reynyagn said, embracing her, as they moved together, carried along by the joy of the conversion.

“I... I’ll be able to do it,” Astrid said. “But come on—we have to go. Jaigran won’t stop just because I’m converted. We need... We need to take it one final step. To follow the lead of the Great One and enter the domain of the Watcher.”

“And so the Xavier Team embarks on its last quest,” Reynyagn said, opening the door. And silently, the four members of the Xavier Team moved past the door into the void and into the domain of the Watcher. And the door slowly shut behind them.

Part CXXIX: The Lair of the Watcher

Date: Kapton 30th, 114 A.U.

“So. Either they lived to fight the Watcher or they died,” Grandine said as the door shut behind the Xavier Team. “Come. We must prepare our defenses.”

“Our defenses against what?” Ranvier asked.

“If the Watcher is awakened and if the Watcher, as you claim, is evil, then we must have a defense against him,” Grandine replied. “We must gather together the auggers to stop him.”

“Very well,” Ranvier said. “I assume you are including Catan the Silent in that group?” Grandine paused.

“With all due respect, leader, no matter what his failings may be, Catan has been the only one among us who has been prepared so far for this attack,” Ranvier said.

“I... Fine. Alert him if you must,” Grandine said. “Tell the guards to let him go. Mayhaps he may atone for his deeds. I only hope that the Xavier Team will stop him in time so that it doesn’t come to that.”

The Xavier Team stood on a roadway that circled through the black void into an central cylinder chamber, which glowed white only for its light to be consumed by the black void. The air spun frigid around them as open eyes blinked.

“Come,” Reynyagn said as he drew out the Arglem. “They are likely in that chamber already. Haste and stealth must be on our side.” Moving quickly, they moved around the roadway as it spiraled down to enter into the cylinder chamber, where the roadway continued to curl around.

Torches immediately flickered up into flame, lighting their way as Reynyagn instinctively stopped, startled by the sudden new light. Writing began lighting up on the walls around them.

“Is that...” Flek said pointing. “Is that what I think it is?”

“The Prophecy of the Warrior,” Jroldin whispered, reading the inscription. “It... It looks like more of Xavier’s prophecies!”

“We don’t have time,” Reynyagn said regretfully. “The Emperor is still ahead of us. We must move on—and fast.” Moving down through the spiral road that cycled down into the chamber, they passed more prophecies and then pictures detailing magnificent events in the

history of Arquenian. Still downward it went until finally it opened up. Reynyagn paused before passing through the archway, and then stepped out. Before him, the ramp continued to spiral down to the bottom of the chamber, but now the inner edge was open, guarded by a railing, allowing him to look into the chamber within. The tall chamber sported runes and images, and in the bottom, a large circular stone sat, seven indented regions cut into it. In the center of the stone swirled a blue spherical void. The chamber was empty. And there were no other exits. Quickly descending down the rest of the stairs, the four moved forward to stand near the center of the room.

“Where... where did they go?” Jroldin asked. “They had to be here—right?”

“It is the domain of the Watcher,” Astrid said softly. “I have a feeling he’s in control here.”

“You would be right about that.” And the Xavier Team whirled around, just in time, as an augger in one of the murals shifted, and his image warped to transform into Emperor Jaigran, who now descended with his black wings as he displayed the Five Golden Corsha Weapons along his belt.

“So this was a trap,” Flek said, narrowing his eyes.

“What else would you expect?” Emperor Jaigran asked. “I see we meet again, Reynyagn. And I also see that you are again surrounded by pitiful fighters who would seek to challenge me—me—the Wielder of Five of the Golden Weapons!”

“I would,” Reynyagn snapped, as he raised the Arglem. “You have left yourself open, Jaigran. You should have used the Five Golden Weapons to awaken the Watcher while you still could.”

“Which I would have done,” Jaigran replied, stepping toward him as his wings unfurled. “*If* five were enough to do it.”

Astrid froze. “What?”

“But of course, my young girl who bears the namesake of her governor,” Jaigran replied, a smile playing across his lips. “All seven are needed to awaken the Watcher. For a moment in this conflict, I was worried that you might escape with the two that you had, but as you see, my worries were unfounded. If I couldn’t beat you to the Golden Weapons, I’d lure them to myself.”

“Then you miscalculated our strength,” Reynyagn said, stepping forward, even as his eyes displayed fear. “The Prophecy of the Xavier Team will prevail against you.”

“You wish.” And saying so, Jaigran leapt into the air. A beat of his wings carried him up as he unfurled his weapons from his belt. First the gauntlets of the orcs. Then the human spear

in one hand and the elven rapier in the other before he descended toward the middle of the group and his hand pointed at Astrid.

Before she could move, a bolt of lightning threw her aside, as Jaigran fell to land where she was even as the others turned on him. Reynyagn whipped the Arglem as Jaigran blocked it with his rapier, stabbing at Jroldin with his spear while Jroldin defended with his battle axe, Flek moving around to try and flank Jaigran.

“You won’t beat me so fast!” Jaigran roared as he stepped back to avoid Flek’s attempted flank. Flek pursed his lips. He knew that he was the weakest member of the party with Astrid now out of the fighting. He gripped his two arjla corsha blades. He wouldn’t be able to deter Jaigran with fear either—Jaigran knew that he had lost all of his power.

Reynyagn suddenly lashed out with the whip, avoiding Jaigran’s block to cut Jaigran hard across the face, creating a jagged line from his left eye to his right cheek. Jaigran gave a shriek of pain, stumbling back as blood poured from his face, his left eye ruined. Flek moved upon him in victory. But the victory was short-lived.

As Jaigran stumbled back, flesh knit together with flesh as the wound began to fade, the ruined eye being miraculously cured as the bleeding of the cut quickly stopped. “You... forgot... about the healing power of the Golden Corsha Weapons,” Jaigran said, slowly, as he gritted his teeth. “You got one strike in. But you won’t get another.”

Moving to the side, Flek raced around toward Jaigran’s backside, causing Jaigran to again have to step back as Reynyagn and Jroldin advanced. If he could keep moving Jaigran backwards he might have a chance of helping the others enough so that they could press him against the wall so that-

Suddenly, Jaigran lurched forward, beating his wings, as he shot a bolt of lightning into Jroldin’s chest, throwing him back. Stunned, Jroldin crashed on the floor, flailing, as Jaigran flew above him, crashing down upon him to rip the axe out of his hand, quickly girding it onto his belt before kicking Jroldin’s body aside. Moving up as Reynyagn came near, Jaigran lashed out with the spear, blocking the strike while moving low to the ground, using his shortness as an advantage as he avoided Reynyagn’s attack to come up with his sword, blasting fire into Reynyagn’s face from his gauntlets while with the sword he struck at the hand that held the Arglem.

Reynyagn gave a cry as blade burned through flesh. The Arglem was flung out of his hands as the sword cleaved all of his fifth, and most of his fourth finger off, dropping down to the ground in pain as Jaigran leapt to the side, sheathing his sword before grabbing the Arglem. Jaigran stood, panting, as he looked around him. And then he nodded his head.

“Now.”

Instantly, the Xavier Team suddenly felt themselves being pulled back, flung to the walls as manacles and chains suddenly appeared around them, chaining them to the wall, as the ghostly figure of the Watcher emerged from the void in the middle of the central stone.

“It’s over,” The Watcher said. “Have you had your fun toying with them, Jaigran?”

“Yes,” Jaigran said confidently. “I have shown them that I can beat them. Now, we will awaken you.”

“As you wish,” the Watcher whispered, and he faded away into the void.

“You... You always had the power to chain us to the wall...” Flek slowly said, realization dawning upon him.

“The Watcher always had the power while you were in his domain,” Jaigran said, setting the Arglem down in one of the depressions on the central stone. The Arglem glowed as stone immediately grew around it to thickly encase it in. “However, I have shown that I have not needed such help to beat you.” Two more weapons were laid down in the depression. “And now, having been thoroughly beaten, you will watch as I fully Awaken the Watcher to his full power.” Two more weapons were laid down as two more remained in his hands.

“No...” Flek said. “You can’t—you can’t do this!”

“Ah, but I already have,” Jaigran said, laying down the orc gauntlets in the 6th cavity. He paused, holding the elven rapier, over the 7th cavity. “And now-”

Suddenly, the darkness moved around them and darkness formed on figure as they could only watch. Jaigran looked up just in time to see the shadowy figure diving for him, whip outstretched.

There was a collision, and Jaigran went flying back, a line of blood forming around his chest as Jaigran stood face-to-face with a Sla’ad.

“You!” Jaigran cried out, bringing up the elven golden rapier to block the next strike. “You—you-”

“I have watched you for months,” the nameless Sla’ad replied, lashing out upon him with his whip as Jaigran narrowly avoided. “Waited for months for the perfect opportunity while you banished the darkness from around here. Until here when you slipped, ignored the darkness, and abandoned all of your golden corsha weapons. And now—you will die.”

“Stop!” Jaigran roared, backing up, fear across his face as he again blocked. “I—I plead—I beg you!” His voice sounded pitiful in his fright. “What do you want—spare my life—I can give you the world!” He let his rapier limply drop as he looked up in fright at the towering Sla’ad.

“I request only your life,” the Sla’ad snapped, bringing up the corsha whip for one final slash. And then the Sla’ad gasped, as he suddenly looked down, the rapier protruding through his chest.

“And you have let your guard slip upon your presumed victory,” Jaigran hissed, driving the blade up further into the Sla’ad’s writhing body. “Your shadows have been banished, for one who would have been an assassin. May the darkness reap its rewards on you.” And stepping back, Jaigran watched as the Sla’ad crumpled on the floor.

“Your last chance of victory is defeated!” Jaigran proclaimed, striding toward the central stone with his last golden weapon. “Your assassin has faltered on the cusp of victory! And now-” He paused next to the stone. “Now, the victory is mine!” And Jaigran laid the last golden weapon in the last depression of the stone as the stone encased it in. The blue spherical void glowered.

And the Watcher was awakened.

Part CXXX: The Heart of the Mothership

Date: Kapton 30th, 114 A.U.

A single explosion rattled the chamber. Smoke slowly cleared as Monty, Zarien, Augger, and Number 994 neared the crater and at the hole blasted into the floor.

“There’s our direct pipeline,” Monty said, grabbing the rope. “Let’s go.” Quickly tying the rope to the nearby door knob, Monty threw the rest of the rope into the hole and then slid down, swinging from side-to-side, before landing on top of a large computer terminal. He waited as the other slid down after him.

Leaping down from the top of the large terminal, Monty landed on the ground and looked around. The large expanse was dim, the blinking lights of the central computer system providing the little light that escaped through the region. Towers and small buildings made up of the many computer systems stood all around them.

“Well,” Monty said, pausing. “I have no idea where in this mess the central computer of the entire central computer system is.”

“And I suspect that I don’t have authorized access,” Number 994 said, laying his hand on one of the computers as a spark ran from his hand into the metal. He paused. “Nope,” he finally said. “I need a password that I don’t have.”

“Looks like we’ll be doing this the old-fashioned way then,” Zarien said, striding forward. “We go through this mess of computers and figure out where the central one is. It should be noticeable, right?”

“The elven rebels said that there were defenses around the central computer,” Augger replied. “It should be a fairly noticeable field then, I guess.”

“Perhaps like that?” Zarien said, pointing, as in the distance, the top of a wavering blue sphere could be seen.

“Let’s investigate,” Number 994 replied.

Moving past a computer tower, Number 994 paused as he looked at the sight. A force orb had been erected around one large cubical computer. A force orb was a high level of electricity magic and needed a constant source to fuel it. Number 994 noticed the circuitry behind the force orb. So the switch to turn it off was inside of the force orb. A minor difficulty. He’d just need to summon enough power to break down the force orb.

“How in the world are we going to get through that thing?” Zarien said, coming up behind him with the rest of the power.

“If I just summon enough power, I think-” Number 994 began.

“I think that your mission would *still* fail,” a deep voice said.

“Who-“ Monty began.

Suddenly, a streak of fire flew down from the top of one of the computer towers. Monty threw himself to the side as it hit beside where he was standing as three figures leapt down from the tower to stand between them and force orb.

“You have made an impressive feat, getting this far,” Unyih Garum said, summoning balls of fire over his hands to light up the faces of his two partners. Number 994 gulped. Number 5, a lightning orc, and Number 11, a fire orc.

“Unfortunately for you, not all allies are allies worth trusting,” Unyih Garum smirked. “Your governor being the case in point.”

“Governor Iraina?” Monty asked. “But-”

“Governor Iraina has been incredibly helpful to our cause,” Unyih Garum rumbled. “I believe that today was the date that was set for him to lead ten battalions of elves to take Araelia. But either way, none of that concerns us. What matters is that we have been prepared for your assault on our central computer system. And your mission to do so has failed.” His words rung in the air.

“Now!” Monty yelled, and dashed to the side as he drew his gun, firing two bullets at the fire orc who ducked, causing the bullets to sizzle upon hitting the force orb. Augger moved forward, brandishing his corsha battle axe, as he blocked Unyih Garum’s lightning strike with the axe, allowing the axe to absorb the damage as Zarien and Number 994 moved for cover.

“Your cause is hopeless against us,” Unyih Garum rumbled, sending out a spurt of fire that nearly roasted Zarien’s leg. “Surrender now, while you still can.”

“Never!” Number 994 yelled, having made it to the top of a computer tower. Focusing his sights in on the force orb, summoning his greatest attack, Number 994 called out his lightning, sending it crashing down upon the force orb.

The force orb flickered, but stayed firm. The lightning rebounded, causing Number 994 to throw himself to the ground just in time to avoid being skewered by his own attack.

“There!” Number 5 yelled, sending crackling lightning around another terminal that Zarien had climbed to the top of. Zarien gave a cry as electricity sizzled around his electronic leg, crumpling on top as the barbs of electricity flowed over him.

Monty moved forward, ignoring the stream of fire that narrowly missed him. “Nice try,” he snapped, shooting at Number 11, now only ten feet away. Number 11 moved to the side, but not quickly enough to avoid the bullet hitting him in the chest. Number 11 fell to the ground, blood spurting out.

“But not good enough,” Unyih Garum yelled. Too late, Monty looked up as lightning hit him hard in the chest, throwing him backwards to crash against another computer system. Number 994 watched in horror, turning around too late to see that Number 5 had flanked him. Too late, Number 994 put up an electric shield in defense as the attack overpowered his defenses, throwing him off of the computer tower to hit the force field and slowly slide down on it even as the electricity in the force field snapped at him.

“Uhhh...” Number 994 blinked, trying to keep consciousness, as he did a head count. Monty and Zarien were both knocked out. Augger was nowhere to be seen, likely knocked out as well.

“And so we come to the end of the road, you and I,” Unyih Garum said, striding forward as Number 11 lay dying beside him. Number 5 came up next to him. Number 994 blinked, seeing something in the shadows while trying to figure out what the figure was gesturing at.

“You... You can’t...” Number 994 gasped, even as he deciphered what the figure was saying to him. And then realization dawned upon him. Rule #1. Of course.

“I can, and I will,” Unyih Garum snapped, pointing a gauntlet at him. “You are a traitor to the cause, Number 994! The others will have their lives spared to be tortured and questioned by the Emperor, if he wills it. But *you* are under my authority. And no orc who willingly betrays me will do anything but die the death of a traitor, struck with the mightiest force I can conjure up to blast your body into oblivion.” Lightning cracked around his gauntlets. “And so you meet the end of the road. Die traitor.”

Rule Number 1: Always use your opponent’s greatest strength against him.

Lightning thundered toward him as Unyih Garum unleashed his powerful attack. Against the force field, Number 994 used his remaining strength to throw himself to the side at the last second, exhausting all possible strength even as the lightning thundered past him to hit the force field. The force field again flickered, for longer this time on account of the more powerful assault, even as the figure in the shadows leapt out of the shadows past the down force field.

Too late Unyih Garum saw what was coming as the force field flickered on again, rebounding the lightning. The lightning rebounded—and struck Unyih Garum with greater force than his previous attack, smiting him in the chest.

Unyih Garum gave a cry of pain, falling back in agony even as Augger, the figure in the shadows now inside the force field, lifted up his corsha axe, putting all his strength behind it even as his arms cycled around, smashing the full weight of the corsha axe into the central computer system.

“No...” Unyih gasped, flailing in death’s rows from his own assault. One strike. Twice. Number 5, shaking away his initial shock, leapt for the force field too late in one desperate attempt to stop Augger. But Augger swung his third strike. The central computer, now struck thrice, faltered, and an explosion rang out. The force field collapsed, causing Number 994 to fall back even as Augger was engulfed in the explosion.

“No...” Number 5 said, panting as he stood next to the fallen Number 994. “No... No! It can’t be!”

“Sorry,” a voice whispered. And a bullet ripped through Number 5’s ribs. “I guess you ought to kill people instead of trying to knock them out,” Monty said, leaning against a computer tower, even as he held the smoking gun. “You never know when they might come back to bite you.”

“All of the computer systems are down—I’m not getting anything to work!” Number 2, the pilot of the Mothership, roared to his co-pilot. “All the engines just shut off! I’m not getting anything to work!”

“Can’t you fix it?” the elven co-pilot yelled back.

“I’m trying!” Number 2 yelled. “Nothing’s working! Where’s the Garum?”

“I don’t *know* where Unyih is!” the elven co-pilot yelled back. “The Mothership’s going down! You have to stop it!”

“Nothing’s working! It’s total sabotage! Where’s Unyih Garum?!”

“We’re falling fast, but we ought to be able to the escape pod in time,” Monty said, panting, as they rounded the corridor. “It’s just around here—right?”

“Yes,” Augger replied, only slightly burnt from the explosion, as he carried Number 994 over his shoulder.

“All I can say is that I never would have imagined your resistance to fire would’ve been so needed,” Zarien said. Number 994 had used the last of his energy to use his electric power to fix Zarien’s mechanical leg before succumbing into the depths of unconsciousness.

“There’s a reason that the Xavier Team called for an augger to the task,” Augger replied. “I have merely accomplished my purpose.

“There’s the escape pods,” Monty said, pointing to the corridor. “No one else is here yet.”

“There are other escape pods other places in the ship. I’m sure the other ones are going to be used,” Zarien said even as he pushed the button to open the door to the escape pod. “Let’s go.”

The white behemoth of the Mothership continued its descent even as all attempts to stop it from crashing were made. Pilots ran around in a frenzy in the cockpit of the ship, choosing to try to salvage the ship rather than use the escape pods and face assured death from what would be a very vehement Emperor. Escape pods from those just trying to save their skins were fired off even as the Mothership came closer to the waves, nearing a lonely desert island even as all hope was lost.

The tip of the ship hit the ground first. Explosions flared throughout the ship as the Mothership hit the island, even as the escape pod with the Xavier Team flew away. There was the noise of an explosion behind them. And then a large mushroom cloud split up into the air as the entirety of the Mothership imploded upon collision.

The Mothership of the Elves was destroyed.

Part CXXXI: Awakening

Date: Kapton 30th, 114 A.U.

Streaks of light flew out from the void as the Seven Golden Corsha Weapons were sealed. Jaigran stepped back in the midst of the dazzling light as he threw his head back, laughing uncontrollably in infamy. Jroldin struggled at his bonds, trying to reach to his pocket as he brought his leg up, fingers clawing at the pocket to get his tools out.

“This is it!” Jaigran roared as the Golden Weapons shone, casting their golden lights into the blue void. “I have won!” There was an eruption as the void pulsed, even as smoke, cinders, and fire began to conglomerate above the void. Jroldin pulled his tools out of his pocket, his kit that he promised his father he would never travel without, as he painstakingly opened it in his chained hands, grabbing the small tube and, shutting the case and letting it fall into his pocket, squeezing the fluid from the tube onto the metal manacles, watching the fluid dissolve the manacle on his right hand.

“The Watcher is awakened!” Jaigran roared as the smoke, cinders, and fire began to slowly form into a giant humanoid form that stretched upwards towards the roof of the chamber. Quickly pulling his hand out, the acid only slightly burning his hand, Jroldin squeezed the liquid onto the other manacle, letting it dissolve the metal before jerking his hand out. He was free. Jroldin grabbed his knife from his belt, his last weapon, and his last hope of stopping Jaigran.

“I awaken the Watcher!” Jaigran roared as the humanoid figure stood, dwarfing all of them in the chamber as the Watcher raised his hand upward, a hand made up of the smoking cinders that formed his smoke-filled black body, red creases appearing between the cracks as he gave a roar of triumph.

“No!” Jroldin yelled, leaping forward toward the Emperor. And, brandishing the knife, he stabbed Jaigran in the back.

There was a sharp intake of breath, and Jaigran stumbled forward, blood spurting from his wound, as he crashed down upon the circular stone full of the Golden Weapons, even as Jroldin drove the knife in harder.

Jaigran rolled over in pain, even as Jroldin drew out the knife, preparing to plunge it into Jaigran’s heart. Jaigran stared up at him in his malevolent gaze. And then he lowered his head.

Suddenly, there was a noise, and a flash of light. Jroldin winced as a piece of glowing golden armor flew past, the armored glove latching onto Jaigran’s hand, even as Jaigran rolled away from him off of the stone.

Pieces of golden armor flew past, the golden weapons disintegrating into armor, even as they latched onto Jaigran, creating his armor as they morphed from corsha into metal, covering

his body in the golden armor even as a helmet latched onto his head. Jaigran lifted out his hand and a golden corsha sword slammed into his hand. His other hand lifted, and a golden shield flung itself on him, using up the rest of the golden material even as Jroldin stared at him in horror.

“Nice try,” Jaigran whispered. And then surging forward, he stabbed Jroldin in the chest.

Jroldin faltered, collapsing even as the Watcher stepped down beside Jaigran, his large form condensing into a burning shadowy figure next to Jaigran, about the size of a normal elf. “Let them perish in my tomb,” he said in a deep gravelly voice. “The chamber will destroy itself in my absence. Let us leave.” And stepping to the void, the Watcher laid his hand on it. And Jaigran and the Watcher vanished in streaks of blue light.

The ground shook as a tower suddenly burst out from the Noon-Stone, smashing up into the roof of the council chamber as blue light erupted out of it, Emperor Jaigran flying out from it to land on the roof even as the Watcher condensed above him, his burning ember body crashing down as he stood, enveloping the top of the roof in shadow as the blue light burst out above him, shining up into the sky out of the top of the new tower.

“Arquenia is lost,” the Watcher roared, stretching out his burning hand over the city. “With your armor, you will be invincible to attacks. We will destroy this last city of the auggers. And then we will aspire to the heavens and leave into space in our ship. The time of our commencement is come. And this city will be our example.”

“We’re done,” Flek whispered. Jroldin lay writhing in blood on the floor. He, Reynyagn, and Astrid were chained to the wall in manacles without a key. “It’s... it’s over. This is defeat.”

“We... we can’t...” Astrid whispered, even as her chest heave. “Not... not after all of this...”

“We have to get out of here,” Reynyagn said, looking up. The ceiling shook, even as cracks began to form in it. “The chamber is self-destructing.” He looked down at Jroldin. “Jroldin!”

“I...” Jroldin gasped, blood dripping from the wound in his chest as he looked up. “I... I’ve failed...”

“You can’t!” Reynyagn said. “Not yet, Jroldin! You need to get us out of here!”

“But... but how...”

“Touch the void!” Reynyagn hissed. “The Watcher used it to teleport. You’re the Priest-King! You can do it!”

“I have to...” Jroldin heaved up off of the floor, blood dripping from his chest as he staggered forward. Throwing himself upon the Noon-Stone, Jroldin gasped, contorting his face in agony, before he stretched out his hand upon the void, feeling the depths within it. He called upon the forces of teleportation in one last gasp of agony.

And nothing happened.

“Fire more! Stop that thing!” Grandine roared. Catan the Silent signaled with his hands before pushing the button. Missile silos on the island turned around, letting loose five missiles, four of which fired at the shadowy being of fire which was the Watcher. Four missiles crashed into the body of the Watcher, causing him to stagger once even as his hand quenched the life of a hapless Augger in his hand. And then the Watcher shook his head, unmoved.

The fifth whistled through the air as Jaigran moved out of the way too late. The missile sailed into him, blowing apart his arm as it exploded, throwing him against a tower. Catan the Silent stabbed the computer keys, bringing up the surveillance camera closer onto Jaigran. Jaigran grimaced, obviously in pain, before relief sprung upon his face. Golden armor streaked up from the ground toward him as flesh and bone knit together.

Catan the Silent watched in horror as Jaigran’s arm, blown apart, came together across the city to re-connect bone and marrow into one solid arm, which golden armor fastened itself again. A smile played across Jaigran’s face. And then he smashed the surveillance camera.

Catan the Silent pushed back, staring at the black computer screen. “I... I can’t stop them,” he stammered. “Their defenses—they’re too good! We’re... we’re done.”

“Do something!” Reynyagn shouted as the cracks resounded throughout the walls. “You’re the Priest-King! Can’t you do it?!”

“It’s... it’s hopeless,” Jroldin gasped as he collapsed, his hand falling off the blue void. “My powers... my powers are over...”

“What do you mean?” Astrid cried out.

“I... I can’t do it...” Jroldin whispered, tears dripping down his face as he lay limply on the stone, his life draining out of him in his blood. “It won’t open to me anymore. We’re... we’re at the end of our rope, guys. I’m... I’m sorry... It’s over.”

Part CXXXII: Consummation

Date: Kapton 30th, 114 A.U.

“Destroy the world and let it burn... Let it burn in the fires of the sun forever...” Emperor Jaigran pointed with his gauntleted hand as lightning rippled out of it, electrifying the hapless augger. “Quench the fires of opposition and destroy them through the gauntlet,” he murmured as the augger arched his back in pain. “Put your enemies under your feet... Destroy your prime adversaries and overcome them...”

He paused, flying down to meet the augger, now flickering between life and the depths of the unknown. “I apologize that this had to happen,” he whispered in a smooth voice. “But where are your protectors now?”

Jroldin lay, breathing softly, on top of the circular stone, a wet line trickling down his face as his hand slowly slipped off the blue void, falling on the cold rock. Astrid’s face was covered with her hands while Reynyagn stared up at the cracking ceiling as the entire chamber bore the weight of the void outside.

“You... We...” Flek tried to say, but he pursed his lips in agony. “No. It can’t end here.”

“We have no other choice,” Jroldin said softly as he turned to look at him, his shirt smeared with blood. “I... I can’t do it, Flek. I can’t do it!”

“Don’t give up,” Flek said, straining. “You gave me hope when I had none, Jroldin! We’ve faced opposition before! We can’t give up now, even when hope seems lost!”

“But... but then...” Jroldin said, shaking his grief-stricken head. “Then we had hope... then we had...” His voice trailed off.

“Then we thought I was overtaken by the Watcher—we thought the Xavier Team would be broken—but it wasn’t!” Flek pleaded. “Even in such a situation, we can still-“

“No...” Jroldin said, interrupting. “Wait... I... No...” He stared at Flek, and his gaze hardened. “No... It couldn’t be...”

“What couldn’t be?”

“Catch,” Jroldin gasped out, tossing a tube to Flek. Flek managed to catch it in his hands, looking at it strangely.

“It... It’s what got me out of the chains...” Jroldin gasped as he doubled over in pain. “Squeeze... squeeze it on the chains...” Flek did so, watching the acid dissolve the chain before jerking his hand free, quickly doing it to the next one.

“Here,” he said, handing it to Reynyagn, as he rushed over to support Jroldin, lifting him up. “We’re not dying like this.” Up ahead, the ceiling caved in, slowly giving way to the black void.

“Not me...” Jroldin gasped, clutching his wound. “I... The void...” He pointed. “Touch the void, Flek.” Out of the corner of his eye, Flek noticed as Reynyagn, now free, ran forward to grab the corsha blade that the dead Sla’ad assassin held.

“Wh-”

“Just do it!” Jroldin yelled hoarsely. “Touch it!” Hesitantly, Flek complied. He felt the cool surface of the blue void with his fingers and felt the energy running under his fingertips. The energy beckoned. And Flek pushed harder, meeting the energy with his fingers even as the void caved in through the ceiling.

Reality caved inwards. And, filled with energy, Flek channeled it outward.

Light shone all around them as Flek rose up, gasping, staggering backward as he felt light-headed. Figures appeared next to him, all lying on the top of the ceiling of the Noon-Chamber, a blue light shining out of the roof next to them from a well of light. Flek suddenly again was weighted with the body of Jroldin, staggering back again as he tried to hold Jroldin up..

“It—it worked!” Astrid cried out as she looked around, from the skies above, to the burning figure of the Watcher in the midst of the city that lay before them. “We—are we—”

“We’re on the top of the Noon-Chamber,” Reynyagn responded. “But how...” A shadow fell across them.

Just in time, Reynyagn leapt up, swinging his sword up to block the attack of Emperor Jaigran, descending from the sky. Jaigran landed on the edge of the roof next to them, his eyes vehement with anger.

“How-” he began. But Reynyagn reacted first, throwing himself forward at the Emperor, crashing into him as he threw the two of them off of the roof, all the while blocking the Emperor’s sword with his own as they fell, pushing away from the Emperor at the last moment as they hit the ground.

Jaigran panted. “Face it, Reynyagn. It all ends here.” Jaigran moved forward, swinging downward even as Reynyagn dodged. “Must I beat you a second time?”

“One should never be too confident in their abilities,” Reynyagn snapped, panting, as he glanced upward toward the top of the building.

“You’re one to talk,” Jaigran snapped, faltering as Reynyagn attacked. Too late, Reynyagn saw the grin on Jaigran’s face. But Reynyagn ignored it as he stabbed between the neck plates.

Jaigran swallowed hard, masking the pain on his face as he stared down at the blade that now extended through his neck. But then his eyes glinted. Moving forward, he kicked Reynyagn hard in the shins before bringing his shield around, bashing Reynyagn on the side of the head as Reynyagn was thrown backwards, stumbling on the ground, the blade now released from the wound.

“Nice try,” Jaigran wheezed as the wound in his neck began to heal, the blood instantly clotting and the skin clinging together. “But not close enough. The Golden Armor is too strong for that.” He looked up toward the quickly advancing Watcher, moving toward them from across the city. “Pick your killer, Reynyagn.” And with that, he moved forward.

Flek shook Jroldin as, below, he could hear the sounds of Reynyagn’s duel with Jaigran. “Wake up, Jroldin,” Flek said, sweat beading down his forehead. “You can’t go yet, Jroldin. Keep fighting!”

“I...” Jroldin managed to say as his eyes slowly opened. He looked around. “Where... where are we?”

“We’re above the Noon-Chamber,” Flek said. “I... I think I teleported us here.” He stared at Jroldin. “But we need to fix you up—now. We have to stop your bleeding. You can’t die, yet. We just need to find a way to leave the city—come back later to stop the Watcher—we-”

“It...” Jroldin said, a smile slowly breaking onto his face, despite the pain, as he laughed. Flek stared at him. “Of course...” Jroldin said. “How did I not realize it...”

“You’re still wounded and nearly dead,” Astrid said, rushing toward him. “I don’t know what you’re talking about, but I still have some of my gear, and-”

“No...” Jroldin said, shaking his head as he weakly pushed Astrid away. “It’s too late—but don’t you see?” He pointed upward at Flek. “It’s... everything’s clear...” Look—the gem on the circlet—” He turned to point at the electric blue light that shone from what appeared to be

a well that had formed from the top of the roof. “The colors match—the prophecies of the Priest-King...”

“You need to be healed...” Astrid said, moving closer as she tried to examine Jroldin’s wound. “You-”

“It’s too late,” Jroldin said, shaking his head as the paleness of his face became evident. “I... I’ve lost too much blood, Astrid. You’re a healer. You know that—right?”

“No...” Astrid said, chest heaving. “You can’t—not yet—not now.”

“But I’ve figured it all out in time...” Jroldin said, a small smile forming across his pale lips.

“Figured out what?” Flek asked.

“That...” Jroldin gasped as he reached his hand slowly upwards, resting his hand on the circlet. “The... The Priest-King... He can’t die...” His gaze met Flek’s as he slowly exhaled. “You... You know, Flek...” Flek stared back at him. “When... when it’s all over... tell my father...” His voice broke one last time. “Tell him that I love him... And that... Tell him I’m finally ready to be called Jacob.” And then his head fell to the side as his arms fell, his arms resting on the ceiling. One last sigh exhaled out of his body. And his eyes rolled upward in his final rest.

“No...” Astrid whispered hoarsely. “No! It can’t... It’s not over...”

Flek shook uncontrollably as he slowly stood up, laying Jroldin’s body down to rest in the wet sand as the water fell back as part of the tide. “I... I know,” he said as he stared at the blue light emitting upward. “He... He’s right.”

“He’s right about what?” Astrid cried out. “He’s dead, Flek! Jroldin’s dead!”

“We—we must grieve,” Flek said, biting his lip. “But we have to do so later. We only have one last chance.”

“One last chance for what?!” Astrid cried.

Flek exhaled sharply. “One last chance to stop the Watcher,” he said, as his eyes shown with an unearthly vigor. “It’s all too obvious now. He figured it out at the last moment to save us all.”

“What are you talking about?!”

“Listen, Astrid,” Flek said as he stumbled forward, laying his hand on her shoulder. “You have to trust me. Do you trust me?”

“I...” Astrid said, biting her lip as her eyes rimmed with tears. “He’s... he’s...”

“I know he’s dead,” Flek said as he tried to hold back his own tears. “But we have to do this, Astrid. We need to do this for Jroldin now, before it’s too late.” He stepped back, straightening up. “We don’t have time. We need to do this now. Are you with me?”

“With you in what? We’re doomed!” Astrid cried out as she looked up at the approaching Watcher, his black face now shielding the sun. “Jroldin dead. Reynyagn fighting a losing battle with Jaigran. And the Watcher coming to finish us off!”

“No,” Flek said, standing up as he stepped toward the blue light. “No. I know what I have to do. The only escape—the only way to stop the Watcher.” He stared downward as Astrid joined him, looking down into a well of blue light that shone out from the depths all the way past them into the heavens.

“What is this?” Astrid asked, nearly shouting, turning toward Flek. “Why—how will this help?”

“I can’t... I can’t explain now,” Flek said. “Astrid...” He turned toward her, laying a hand on her shoulder. “Astrid, I just want to let you know... I just wanted to let you know that I’ll miss you.”

“But...” Astrid said, her face welling up with tears. “I can’t... not you, too...” she whispered, her voice breaking. “Flek... I-” She moved forward, embracing the startled goblin. “I... I’ll trust... I have to...”

“Be strong,” Flek whispered as he slowly turned from her to the well, linking hands with her as he stood at the brink of it, staring down into the depths. His knees trembled and he licked his lips, as Astrid clenched his hand tighter. There was a guttural roar from behind them. Astrid didn’t need to look to know whom it was. And slowly, she released her grip on Flek’s hand.

“Be strong,” she whispered in return, and stepped back. Astrid watched as Flek closed his eyes. And stepping forward, he let himself slip, falling into the well of light as Astrid stepped forward, looking down in agony to watch him to descend into the burning light. He stared up at her as he fell, lifting up one last hand—one last gesture toward Astrid as light burned away at his lower body, consuming his legs—torso—and then he was all consumed in the burning light.

A cry of anguish escaped Astrid’s lips as she stepped back, turning as she saw the Watcher, now in front of her, extending a burning hand toward her. The earth shook as the light wavered. Astrid sank to her knees, removing all worry from her body as peace fell over her, even as the Watcher’s hand moved closer to snuff out her life.

There was a peal of thunder, and the earth snapped. A tremor threw Astrid to the ground as she looked up at the Watcher. The light from the well shone brighter, suddenly turning as she could feel the whole planet moving, throttling backwards. Multiple lights shone out from the well as Astrid shielded her eyes. She heard a roar of anguish and through the squinting light watched as the lights tore at the Watcher, sucking him into its blue-filled light as he lifted one last faltering arm to the heavens. And then he too was sucked in with the light as the earth rumbled.

Light exploded from on high as Emperor Jaigran rose again to his knees upon the uaking earth. Too late, Jaigran looked up, watching in horror as the Watcher gave a roar of anguish, his body melting and blending into the light that sucked him into its swirling vortex as a reed flushed down into a whirlpool.

Jaigran's mouth dropped open, staring upward, even as too late, he grasped what had happened. Reynyagn moved up the ground, surging forward. And even as Jaigran looked back in horror, Reynyagn thrust his blade into the armor of Jaigran's breastplate and stabbed Jaigran in the heart.

Jaigran stared back at him, opening his mouth in a howl, the noise of which was sucked away into the wind. The vortex of light shifted and Jaigran was suddenly lifted up off of his feet, sliding up into the air away from the blade even as blood spurted out of his armor. Jaigran opened his mouth in a voiceless scream as his body and armor dissolved into the light. The light rebounded, pouring back in on itself into the well at the top of the Noon-Chamber, flying into it even as it recovered itself, the well spinning as it sealed itself back into the ground where it had come from even as the earth stopped shaking.

And then there was silence.

Part CXXXIII: Song for the Fallen

Date: Morden 2nd, 115 A.U.

A low dirge played across the silent city, even as embers still lingered from the fires that had once besieged the city. A slow procession moved through the streets, nearly all of them auggers except for the couple faces of those not of their kind. Heads dipped down in silent sorrow, even as feet moved concealing a joy that they had not felt for a long time. The procession slowly moved to the great ship ahead of them as, slowly, members boarded the ship even as many auggers stopped, watching in silence as the crew loaded in. Slowly, the ship's doors sealed shut and it took off in a quiet hum, rising up off of the ground before flying away into the air, leaving the ruins for the survivors to rebuild.

And a promise to return.

Reynyagn gazed out the window of the large front of the ship. Catan the Silent was driving this vehicle, which his ancestors had built long beforehand in the case of an emergency. It would be quick, and well-armored in case they ran into any stray elven ships that hadn't heard of the news of the downfall of their empire.

"It's... it's hard to accept the truth," Astrid said quietly.

Augger slowly nodded. "It is," he said quietly. "Although the last member to the team, I still had developed close relationships with both of them. We always knew that death was lurking in the distance... But I never expected it to take away two team members in one fateful day."

"It was perfectly timed..." Reynyagn murmured.

"What?"

"Oh—sorry," Reynyagn said. "Not their deaths, mind you... But just the whole event. That exactly one hundred fourteen days after the Upheaval, the elves would have been defeated."

"They had planned the timing," Monty replied, pursing his lips. "With everything else that we've learned, it seems like they had planned everything down to the exact day when they would be awakening the Watcher."

"Speaking of things we've learned, has anyone been able to contact Iraina yet?" Zarien asked.

"I've been trying," Astrid said quietly. "No answers, though. Why do you want to talk to him anyways? If what you said is true—"

“I don’t want him for the help,” Zarien said, shaking his head. “Yes, as Unyih Garum told us, Iraina is a traitor. But even traitors can be dangerous, even after Jaigran is killed. I had hoped to try to control him in some way if we got in touch with him.”

“He’s in the middle of Araelia,” Astrid said. “I doubt that he could do much to sabotage the cause there with all of the rest of our military presence there.”

“True enough...” Zarien said. “I only wish...” His voice slowly trailed off into silence.

“Well,” Augger said after a while. “I didn’t think about it much yesterday, with you guys arriving and all from destroying the Mothership, but I guess I need to get used to your new title, Number 6.”

“Yeah...” the orc replied. “I... I don’t know. After being Number 994 for so long... Well, it’s a bit jolting to suddenly be promoted by so many titles. And... well, I dunno. I mean, I’ve already forsaken all other parts of the orcish system...”

“What are you saying?”

“We’ll just say that I’m still thinking about it,” he replied. “We’re going to have to do something about the rigid orc system. Even with the destruction of the elven empire, I’m doubting it will be leaving easy. And since I’m both a member of the Xavier Team, and now one of the most powerful orcs remaining in Arquenia, a lot is going to be hanging on me as we try to figure out what we’re going to do.”

“I see.”

“And what about you?” the orc asked. “You have name problems of your own, do you not?”

“Yes,” Augger said, slowly nodding. “I... I’m not sure yet what I plan on doing. From my short discussion with Grandine yesterday, I believe that I’ll be reinstated on the island and that the sins of my forefathers will be forgiven, but I will have to do something about my name. There is much to consider.”

Date: Morden 25th, 115 A.U.

The ship slowly lowered down into the great tunnel that now led directly into Araelia. Eyes darted around even while hands stood ready at the gun ports as it descended, turning on lights as it went into the dim darkness that surrounded the city.

“I think Iraina was more busy than we thought he was,” Monty said quietly as they moved out of the tunnel to hover over the city. Slowly, the ship came down to a resting point as

the team cautiously got out to look out across the dim city, leaving Catan the Silent behind to maintain and defend the ship, if necessary. It was silent, even as in the distance they could see partially-destroyed buildings and ruin.

“The city’s... it’s desolate...” Astrid whispered.

“There are people watching us from the shadows,” Reynyagn murmured. “I’ll go gain information from them.”

The remaining members of the Xavier Team, along with Monty, slowly walked up the stairs, moving into the door way to arrive in the ransacked room which, although partially-set up, still was a far cry of what the governor’s office used to look like.

Ex-governor Astrid slumped at a chair across the desk from them. Oldin, Head of the F.R.I., sat beside her. They looked up upon seeing them enter.

“Welcome, Xavier Team,” Astrid said, slowly nodding. “You have done well in fulfilling your mission.”

“So you know, then?” Astrid the Healer asked.

“Aye... I do,” Astrid the Governor replied. “We were able to receive the messages you sent us, but Iraina had damaged our device enough so that we weren’t able to send messages back.”

“Speaking of Iraina...” Reynyagn began. “The people we talked to were able to give us some information, but-”

“Iraina is gone,” Astrid the Governor replied. “From what I understand, he began to receive messages from you stating Jaigran’s destruction the first day of this year, but was trying to verify that with external sources before he did anything. I believe that about the time he learned from the elves above him that the Mothership had been destroyed and the empire collapsed, the dwarves in the mountains had just begun to send out small forces against him. He had been planning on confronting them before, but, upon learning that Jaigran had been defeated, packed up and left with the rest of the elves, allowing the dwarves to reclaim the city.”

“And you?”

“I was placed back in charge... for the moment,” Astrid the Governor replied softly. “I do not wish for my position here. But someone needs to do it for the moment. Oldin and I have been working at repairing the damage the elves wrought.” She paused.

“Where is Jroldin?” Oldin suddenly asked, standing up suddenly upon realizing his absence.

“You didn’t tell them in the messages?” Reynyagn asked, glancing toward Zarien.

“Since Iraina didn’t answer, I didn’t think to do so,” Zarien said.

Reynyagn turned back to Oldin and took a deep breath before beginning. “Your son... your son acted valiantly as the Priest-King,” he slowly said. “He provided us with key insights as the Priest-King and was instrumental in telling Flek what to do to destroy Jaigran and the Watcher.” He paused, even as he could see that Oldin had already figured it out. “Your son...” Reynyagn said quietly. “Your son died a hero, Oldin. He kept trying, even when he knew he was dead. And he wanted to let you know...” Reynyagn’s voice caught. “He wanted to let you know that he loved you. And that he was finally ready to be called Jacob.”

Part CXXXIV: The Council of Arquenian

Date: Traje 22nd, 115 A.U.

Trumpets blasted in the distance while the drums were beat, creating a symphony of noises that slowly faded into the background as the doors were shut to the Noon-Chamber, leaving the members of the Council to meet in privacy around the Noon-Stone even as the noises could still be faintly heard in the background.

Representatives from all of the races and countries sat upon the thrones and chairs seated around the Noon-Stone: Lord Freglak of the goblins; Rehi Garum, the new chief of the Imperial Orcs; Governor Astrid of the humans; King Ddederaun of the dwarfs; Tzjearjlan of the sla'ad; Commander Eren and rebel leader Rezja of the elves; Grandine of the auggers; and finally, the remaining members of the Xavier Team, along with Monty.

“Welcome to the first meeting of the Arquenian Council for centuries,” Grandine said solemnly as he stood up. “For years, ever since the great civil war that raged close to eight hundred years ago that broke up the previous council, these seats have sat uninhabited for centuries, the city itself lying waste and dormant before we came, fleeing the augger slayers, to dwell here. And so, for the first time in 832 years, I call this meeting to order.” Satisfied, he sat back down in his seat.

“It is fitting that I should speak first,” Commander Eren of the elves said, standing even as he lifted his head up high in a proud stance. “As the representative and leader of the elves, I have come to tell you that there is no need to pursue further retribution among the elves. Retribution will be given among our own kind, and those who partook of Jaigran’s faults will be duly punished.”

“With all due respect,” Rezja, leader of the elven rebels said, standing. “I would hardly trust a previous commander under the Emperor to be found fitting for the task.”

“Your own kind is not able to solve the pressures alone,” Rehi Garum of the orcs rumbled as he likewise stood. “Your paltry attempts at a court system so far have found us guilty more often than not in the past two months than of your own kind. You are hardly able to declare sovereignty over the matters of your own people.”

“My people are well sovereign enough to-” Commander Eren said, raising his voice.

“Silence,” Reynyagn said, standing up and putting an end to the discussion. “This debate will run its course in the meeting of the council, but the purposes of this council demand an agenda before we get embroiled in heated debate.”

“Thank you, Reynyagn,” Grandine of the auggers said, standing. “According to the brief communications we have enjoyed before this meeting, the following objectives have been given

for this meeting. First, that the Council hear a full report from the Xavier Team detailing the exact fall of Jaigran. Second, that a measure would be given as to what consequences, if any, the orcs and the elves will receive. Third, that requests be heard for any necessary rebuilding that will need to be done under the oversight of the Council. Lastly, that a regular date and session for the Council of Arquenian would be re-instated.”

“Number 994 and I have been appointed to bring to the Council a full report of the actions of the Xavier Team, beginning with our partial-commencement in Araelia, continuing on to the destruction of the Mothership and the demise of Jaigran,” Reynyagn said. “We will present to you our full report, and then receive any questions from the Council concerning any details or rationale that they wish to be presented for our actions. I will henceforth begin with the calling together of the Xavier Team by Governor Astrid...”

Grandine slammed his gavel down upon the stone. “There are henceforth no more inquiries made to the Xavier Team for their actions in this meeting, unless further inquiries arise during the presentation of the further elements of the Council,” he proclaimed after the numerous questions had finally ceased. “We will henceforth move on to the next agenda item: what consequences, if any, the orcs and elves will receive. The board is opened for discussion.”

“As the chief of the Imperial Orcs, I demand that additional oversight be given to the actions of the elves,” Rehi Garum said, immediately standing up. “I will not deny the involvement of my race in the actions of the orcs, nor will I deny my own presence among the Imperial Orcs. However, I am able to go in much detail about what the current court system is that Commander Eren has instituted among the elves, and how they are failing to achieve true justice-”

“The sovereignty of the elves will reign supreme,” Commander Eren snapped, standing up. “In case anyone here would soon forget it, we are still in charge of numerous elven airships. The downfall of our greatest ship destroyed the regime, but even without it, we are not altogether lacking in power, along with the rest of our floating cities. None of us wish war again here, I am sure. And so to avoid war-”

“To avoid war, you would demand that we turn a blind eye to the instatement of a new elven regime,” Rezja snapped. “From what I have seen of your rule, I would agree with Rehi that your measures are far from satisfactory.”

“Commander Eren has unwittingly brought forth a strong point that must be discussed,” Governor Astrid said, slowly standing up. “Although Emperor Jaigran has been defeated, much of his forces still remain, albeit secluded now in the land of the elves. Peace will not be long held while the elves still outnumber all of the other races one hundred to one in the skies.”

“So you plan to wrack your vengeance for the sins of our former leaders on us,” Commander Eren snapped, glowering vehemently. “I will not be held accountable for such sins—furthermore then, I declare that-”

“SILENCE!” A great voice boomed throughout the chamber as all the members of the Council looked around, startled. They looked around, trying to identify the speaker.

“It would appear that the Council has forgotten, or perhaps dismissed, what had been a central part of the previous Council!” the loud voice continued. “As a result, allow me to enter this climactic dispute, as the proper chairman, and the overseer, both of this Council, and of Arqenia.”

The voice dropped off and there was silence as the Council looked around one to another, trying to discover who was speaking. There was a sizzle, and bright light suddenly poured out, as the Council looked in astonishment to see the doors into the domain of the Watcher slowly open, blinding light coming forth before the doors slowly began to close.

Astrid blinked, trying to regain her proper sight, as she squinted through the lingering light to make out the figure that had emerged from the domain of the Watcher. She slowly managed to pick out the features as the remaining light dwindled away. And then she gasped with realization, along with the rest of the Council, as it suddenly became quite obvious who it was.

And lifting his head up to meet them, Flek stepped forward.

Part CXXXV: The Eighth Watcher

Date: Traje 22nd, 115 A.U.

Members of the Council violently stood up out of their seats in shock as Flek stepped toward them from the closed door into the domain of the Watcher. Flying out of her seat, Astrid ran toward him in joy, even as Flek put out his hand to stop her.

“Wait!” he said, trying to stop her from embracing him, but too late. Astrid flew into him, passing through his body, as she tripped, not expecting the lack of resistance, and fell right through Flek to land on the floor behind him. Murmurs began to whisper throughout the Noon Chamber.

“I..” Astrid looked up, dazed, as Flek knelt down beside her, light wavering as it passed through his body.

“Sorry, Astrid,” Flek whispered, putting his hand upon hers, even as it passed through her hand. “You... You may want to sit down again.” Shaken, Astrid slowly returned to her seat as Flek followed her to stand before the Council.

Reynyagn gazed at Flek. “I suppose,” he began. “I suppose that there really is only one rational explanation for this, correct?”

Flek nodded. “You are correct,” he said, turning to look at the rest of the Council. “I, Flek, stand before you as the Eighth Watcher and the traditional and rightful head and chairman of the Council of Arquenian.”

“The Eighth Watcher?!” Astrid stood up in alarm as she stared at him, a touch of dread in her voice.

“The Watchers were not always evil,” Flek said confidently. “Grandine and many of the other auggers in this isle will remember that. The Watchers were tasked with keeping the planet of Arquenian spinning around the sun, to watch over the world and protect it from harm, and to work to guide the seven races to live together in peace. For six generations of Watchers, the beings served Arquenian well before the Seventh Watcher, who had originally been an elf named Erzile, was slowly corrupted. As Grandine proclaimed in the beginning of this meeting, there has been no Arquenian Council on this isle for eight hundred years. That is because the Great Arquenian War occurred eight hundred years ago, where the races fought against each other. The isle was deserted, the seven other sacred places of the Watcher were overthrown and left empty, and knowledge of the Watcher was forgotten by all except for a few auggers who dug within their memories.

“For five hundred years afterward, before the wandering auggers finally migrated here, the Watcher was in isolation, everyone else having forgotten his ways. From the records I found,

he slowly grew cold and bitter, coming to loathe the ones who had forgotten him, the ones he was obligated to protect. And so he finally began to launch a plan to wrack revenge on those who forgot him. From what I found, one hundred forty years ago, he was able to successfully possess an orc, and through the orc learned much about the world. Through the orc whose name is left unknown in Erzile's records, Erzile the Watcher came in touch with Jaigran, and did what he could to guide Jaigran's route down the bent path before Erzile's orc was killed in battle. His work had been done, though. And so, upon possessing an elf last year at Tzel-Maret, Erzile was finally able to make contact with Jaigran, whereupon he disclosed to him his full plan, joining him against the rest of Arquenian. He used his power to keep the world spinning for the opposite purpose, forsaking that power so as to send Arquenian crashing into the sun, which would have happened if they had succeeded."

Grandine nodded. "Your account of previous Watchers, and the name of this Watcher, matches our records and memories."

"But... but what of you, Flek?" Astrid asked. "You—you died—I saw you. How... How did you survive?"

"I... I didn't," Flek said gently. "As you saw, and as your team mates have explained, I fell into the blue light. Rippling pain disintegrated my body. For a while, I thought I was dead before I slowly came to and began the process of discovery. I have learned that it was through the energy contained in my body that the blue light transfused me into the Watcher. Since only one Watcher can live at once, and since the last Watcher had left his domain and vacated his seat, the energy removed the power from the Watcher Erzile, destroying him, as well as dissolving the Golden Weapons, which also destroyed Jaigran."

"For the past two months, I have examined the records and tools that Erzile left behind him in the most-Secret domain of the Watcher, the domain even more sacred than the physical domain that Erzile created for Jaigran to unleash his full power. Through it, I came to realize that I had become the Eighth Watcher, my destiny as the Priest-King."

"What?!" Zarien looked up at Flek in surprise. "But... but you—"

"That's what Jroldin finally figured out and finally managed to tell me before he died," Flek replied. "As the Warrior, I was tempted by Erzile, who had taken semi-possession of my body. By fulfilling his role as the Priest-King by placing the circlet upon my head to free me from his power, Jroldin not only healed me, but he transferred his role and powers over to me. Only the Priest-King had the power to become the next Watcher in such a calamitous event. That was why Jroldin was unable to use the power of the void to teleport us out of the Watcher's domain, and why I was. I became both the Warrior, and the Priest-King."

"The prophesy reveals itself in strange ways..." Reynyagn murmured, and silence reigned upon the chamber.

“The discussion is not supposed to end at my coming,” Flek finally said, striding forward. “Although I only possess an ethereal body that is constrained to the limits of this chamber, there is yet work to be done—specifically concerning the judgment of the elves. As the eighth Watcher, I have looked upon the planet for the past two months, and I have seen the facades that Commander Eren has put up as supposedly legitimate trials.”

“But-” Commander Eren began.

“Silence!” Flek proclaimed. “I have seen you as the Watcher, and so I will proclaim my judgment to be followed by the Council, for that is my duty as the Watcher. You involved yourself too much in the affairs of the elves while they ruled the skies, and because of that, you still believe in your own racial superiority! Because of this, not only will another need to take your place as the ruler of the elves, but members of other races will need to stand and bear witness, helping to move the courts to make just decisions. Am I understood?”

Commander Eren glowered vehemently. “What else am I to expect from a filthy goblin?” he spat.

Flek twitched his lips. “Your racial superiority complex at play,” he stated bluntly. “Is my judgment accepted by the general Council?”

“Some... Some more specific knowledge of how exactly the justice system has been manipulated would be useful,” Governor Astrid replied.

“Then I will begin the relating of the events,” Flek said, pacing. “Concerning the trial of Lieutenant Zeran of the elves...”

Flek watched as, the meeting finally adjourned an hour short of midnight, the Council filed out, resolving to come back to discuss the remaining issues the next day. He waited while the Council filed out, and then slowly exhaled as only he, the Xavier Team, and Monty, were now left.

“Well,” he finally said. “I’m not sure how prepared I am yet for the duties of this job... But I’m ready.”

“So...” Astrid began. “Are you—are you immortal?”

“As long as the world lives, I live as long as I choose,” Flek replied. “Traditionally, every five hundred to seven hundred years or so, the Watcher will begin to tire of his duties and will elect a new person to take His place. Erzile had already been the Watcher for close to five hundred years before the Arquenian Civil War. I suspect that being the Watcher for more than a millennia began to drive him crazy. Releasing the Watcher involves a similar mechanism that Jaigran and Erzile set up. The seven golden weapons are used to activate the Watcher and then

the spirit of the old Watcher leaves, while the new Watcher takes his place, letting the old Watcher finally die to rest in peace.”

“So there will be more Golden Weapons then,” Reynyagn said.

“Yeah... once I make them,” Flek said. “I’m going to try to make them either tomorrow night depending on how late the Council goes, or the day after that, and then give each weapon to the races. Basically, that mechanism is there to make sure that all members of the Council agree with the identity of the new Watcher.”

Reynaygn pursed his lips, slowly nodding. “You... You have a great task ahead of you, Flek.”

“Aye,” Flek said nodding. “I know.”

“And you’re just constrained to appearing in this chamber?” Astrid asked.

“Not *just* this chamber,” Flek replied. “There are seven other places in Arquenian I can appear at, at places where the seven races tended to dwell. The Citadel of Tzel-Maret was one of them—the Mothertree another one. There’s a dwarven temple in the mountains known as the Temple of Light that you might have heard of, Astrid, but I don’t think you would have heard of the other places.”

Astrid pursed her lips. “So... you’re not really back then...”

“Not... not in the way you might want,” Flek said quietly. “I mean, I’ll still be here... But at the same time, I’m not going to ever be fully back.”

Astrid slowly exhaled. “I... I see...”

for the orcs as a whole as he tried to slowly work to reform the system away from its impersonal nature that solely built them up to be a fighting force, to work to give them back their personal identities. Although he technically didn’t have a name, merely known among the orcs as “the orc,” he was still known as Number 994 to his friends.

Raising her head, Sereth walked up toward the table where King Zarien now sat, trying to consolidate the provinces under his kingdom. They exchanged glances as she gave him the transcripts, explaining whom each of them were from. Flek the Watcher had helped them to finally begin to reconcile their differences concerning Cortna, who was slowly healing, but who was doubted to ever fully recover from Jaigran’s brainwashing.

Zarien nodded to her explanation, smiling, before beckoning her to sit down beside him to help him with his task. Slowly nodding, Sereth agreed, smiling, as she sat down as they began to work out both his responses to their emails, and his plans for his kingdom. She bent over his

drawings, etching out some ideas of her own, as the night began to wax long, while they still talked, the conversation slowly drifting away from imperial matters to more personal matters.

It was late that night when Sereth finally began to retire to her quarters. Somewhere within her, an inkling of an idea began to sprung up, a question of whether or not new feelings may or may not have begun to arisen within her. A glimmer of what might be. Of whether or not her feelings were as mutual as she thought they were beginning to become.

Maybe she was just mistaken.

But from where he watched, up far above, beyond, and within Arquenian, the Watcher knew that she was not mistaken. He smiled, as he began to see the beginning of something new, of something the two parties were only beginning to become aware of. And he sat back within his chambers as he watched with anticipation for it to continue into the blossoming of something greater.

Finis.