

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 Arquenian. 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 Arquenian, 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 Arquenian.” 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 Arquenian. 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 they 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 redoctoring. 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 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,” Unyih 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!” Unyih 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 Arquenian! 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.”