

Out for Ylem

The man of clockworks

The clockworks make noise in the lonely, lofty chamber. As he wonders when it will ever be silent around, there is a continuous, endless whirring that fills his ears. It is as though his very head is buzzing along with the contrived machinery, and his patience thins as the minutes go on and on, consuming his time and his will. There is little hope that he will find peace any time soon, however, and he knows it. He wrings his bony fingers together, and sunken in the depths of his plush crimson chair, struggles to remain objective in this pressing time.

That crimson chair has been mute witness to many hours like this, of inner turmoil and unease. The reddish velvet looks worn on the curves of the upholstery, to say the least, and the carved wooden claw foot legs look like they have taken a blow or two, remaining, however, like a stoic, weathered sentinel in the chamber. In this particular office, there is a collection of various clockwork machineries sitting on ornate shelving, some more primitive than others, but all whirring and hissing in action, as if the various displays have a life of their own. These too are spectators to his moments of trouble.

And of course he is impatient and uneasy; there is a restlessness that is only made worse by the lack of a solution to his problems and the urging ticking and turning sounds. But are they in fact his problems, really? Had he not agreed to aide in this impossible task, there would be nothing to concern him. What did he care about faraway lands, and peoples of other kinds and beliefs? They are not of his race, nor do they worship their divine - they might as well all be his enemies. Likely there will be some that will turn on him and his brethren as well. After all, what foolishness of their own is it that they are in possession of, that they would attempt to taint something so precious and vital?

How absurd, he judges; why would they not do it to the very people of Delve, given the chance? Surely they would not hesitate to endanger Albedos also. He thinks of his homeland far beyond the crags, and dreads the idea of such a corruption spreading across his beloved lands. A disaster of unthinkable proportions, surely, and what with what he has heard of the latest news of Sapience, that is calamity enough, and would surely cause panic were these events to replicate in Albedos.

With a simple mandate, the portal could be shut down in a matter of hours, and whatever mishap of the Leylines were to occur would remain confined to the continent of Sapience. Just a signature and a couple wax seals, and all would be settled - how thoroughly simple it seems, to seal the very fate of Sapience. He ruminates on this many thoughts, again, like he had done the night prior before managing but a couple of hours of sleep, but the many attempts to convince himself are anything but fruitful. As much as he tries, he cannot conceive abandoning Sapience to its fate. After all, they are not all at fault, nor is he the one to judge the ones that might be.

The night prior had seen him turn and shift around in bed so long, alone and riddled with thoughts and ideas that would allow him no rest. What a torture was the insomnia, and above all, sleepless nights like this one only reminded him of the woman that he had shared his bed

with for so many decades. Aside from his work, she was everything, and he had never expected her to go, but she had gone out on the world, anxious to see the whole of it when news of faraway lands reached Delve. Such expectation had been built, and she didn't think of it twice.

The gears on the surrounding contraptions screech fleetingly, and he is drawn fully back to reality once more, his heart leaping with the sudden, intrusive racket. It is time to go, he reckons, and indeed, his pocket watch is signaling to his ensuing appointment. It is the usual appointment, the morning one, and he goes about the heavy wooden desk in search of the papers he has prepared. How he will present the real issue to the others is his real concern, but he is sure they are not completely oblivious to the happenings in Sapience.

He lingers in reorganizing the many scribbled papers. How trivial are the notes he had prepared before, like he always did - never would he leave his work to the last minute, and most times, it was done way in advance. Now it seemed like he wasn't at all prepared for what was to come. There were no papers or notes on the matter and why he persists in taking the pile regarding the other more unimportant issues is not something he can explain. Every time, he would be punctual to the meeting, arriving before the rest to set up his various things, but on this occasion, his pocket watch gives him a second, flashing signal about his impending meeting. Surely he will be late, but, at any rate, that will certainly capture the attention of the chamber.

His pocket watch signals a third warning, and this time, the bronzed gadget stirs with a loud 'ting ting' sound. There is no doubt he is late already, with the time the walk that leads to the old edifice takes, but still he lingers. So troubled he is and so comfortable it is to delay the inevitable by remaining in his office. For some reason he dare not face the council with this pressing issue, despite knowing he must, and he takes a turn around the desk, robes dragging slowly across the carpeted ground with the sagging of his shoulders. He feels older than ever, and tired, and heavy.

After several more minutes of aimlessly pacing the room, there is the conviction in him that it is time to go, and so, he heads for the door. Hanging across from the heavy desk but two feet from the door is the portrait he gazes upon every day; like one might pay tribute to a deity, he pauses by the painting every time he exits the office for his meetings, and this day, despite the tardiness and the restlessness, there is no room for exception. This day in particular, in fact, gazing over this portrait is especially significant for him, to encourage himself, perhaps. The lower right corner of the gilded frame is faded; so long he has been laying his hand on it for the brief instants it takes him to surrender his fears to the painting.

Opening the office door reveals another bundle of distress. His assistant is young and fairly inexperienced, and if he is restless, only the Gods know how unraveled the mind of the poor girl must be by now, what with his chief taking impressively long to be ready for the council appointment. Surely the girl has assumed something is beyond wrong, and it is obvious she has been suffering for it, for there is a tangle of hair where she has furiously twisted and pulled the locks. He plants his bony, albeit reassuring hand on the young girl's shoulder, and leads her off

to the meeting, delayed for certain, but mindful enough to speak some soothing words and let About Yon some of the issue to his companion, so that she might not be so shocked, perhaps.

The Issue

Althezar enters the council chambers some time later, clinging still to his assistant's shoulder in a comforting fashion, and his bony, aged hand, both in appearance and demeanor, is a testament to his many years. He is quite late, and everyone present, including himself, is acutely aware of this fact. A great crowd has gathered outside the meeting chambers, adding even further difficulty to his arrival.

He gazes surreptitiously at the many faces that are staring at him, for in but an instant all the gathered have grown silent, and it seems only the young girl at his side dares make a sound by clearing her throat and hastily leaving his side to prepare his seating on the front. This day there has not been enough time to arrange his chair in the usual fashion, so the assistant makes as best as she can manage with a couple cushions and clears the table for her chief's papers.

The meeting chambers are open to the air, or it is undoubted that the ambiance would be heavy, perhaps even hot, and Althezar anticipates some moods to become heated briefly. Tall columns hold a triangular ceiling in place, and the entirety of the limestone structure is decorated with understated brass filigree. Chairs and desks are arranged around a podium and another more prominent, eye-catching desk and seating, an unmovable bench of veined beige marble. That is his place, and, from there, he presides over these meetings periodically, as he has been doing for so many years. In his favor, a soothing breeze blows past, stirring papers, garments and hairs.

Soon his own pile of papers is planted on the table without preamble or ceremony, but Althezar does not take a seat, he only plants the bulky paperweight atop his belongings to prevent them from blowing away in the wind. There is expectation in the chambers, and in the multitude that has arrived to surround the place; it is evident the attendants are aware that something of importance is to be discussed, and some casually brush their own tomes and papers to the side, knowing that whatever matter that was to be discussed according to the agenda will be overwhelmed by anything the old man has to say. They all have heard rumors about the events that the old man is likely to voice, but no one knows for sure what the real issue is.

So packed the meeting chambers look this day to the old man, it seems nobody has risked attendance in this occasion for other activities, like some often do, and like no time before, people of all kinds have come to watch the meeting as spectators outside. Many afternoons he wanders from his home and along the forum toward this very place, and seats in his chair sometimes and in the ones of the attendees other times. He has felt the breeze from many angles through the place, and has gazed over the surrounding, verdant trees from one seat

and another. This is his work, and he knows the place to perfection, empty and full, and thus he attempts to focus on the image of the chamber in all of its glorious moments of emptiness, thinking that this will help him clear his mind and speak coherently.

At last Althezar steps to the side of his desk, and leans his weight on his bony hand, taking hold of the stony paperweight for a firm grip. He is a tall man despite his age, and bears his stature proudly, with his hooded robe falling off his frame like a sheet of azure water. When he raises his hand to push the hood back, his Utari features come to light. His hair, whitened by the years, is caught back in a flawless ponytail that allows his gills to be seen, but more prominent and impressive are the many tattoos he shows off, truly a story about himself etched into his very skin. Though some tattoos are faded more so than others, the more knowledgeable of the council, and specially those of his same race, recognize in them symbols of leadership, courage and countless battles, despite only his face, neck and the good part of his hands being visible.

These markings always steal the attention of some, particularly the most curious, and this day they only lend the man a more mysterious appearance than on other times. He is calm outside as he gazes once more over the council, without dissimulation now, and they know that assessing glance very well, gauging them for support or resistance, perhaps. Inside, however, he has not forgotten his own restlessness, and though nor his posture or his voice falter, he struggles again, but finally finds in himself the wit and strength to explain the issue to the best of his abilities, or so he hopes.

“Cataclysm,” he begins by saying, and immediately the chamber bursts into uproar, the voices of many, and now not only in Albedi but in many other languages of Albedos and Sapience as well, rise in the air and spill way past the confines of the meeting chambers. It seems the word has been chosen to perfection, for it is a hint to some, and confirmation to others about the rumors they have been made aware of. The crowd outside roars, but he hesitates to put an end to the great commotion, unsure of whether he has chosen the worst or the best word to begin his argument, for surely if he is to gather approval, the spirits of the council must be stirred sufficiently, for better or worse.

There will be division amidst the many members, and he has anticipated this for days. It is obvious to him and to the public, and it has been so for years, that some favor the people of Sapience, while others are indifferent, but there are also others who would actively seek to shut the foreigners out from all manner of contact with Albedos and the Free City of Delve. Some are more conservative about these matters, he reckons, and saying that they are wary of foreigners would be a gross understatement, what with past events, but he must sway them somehow.

After minutes of witnessing heated arguments on many fronts, both in the council members and in the varied crowd outside, he raises a hand in a mute request for silence, a gesture that has been effective many times in the past, but now he recognizes the futility of his attempt, and glances over to his assistant. It is then when he realizes that the girl is utterly terrified with the tumult. The girl, Nyatha by name, is also Utari, hardly sporting any tattoos for coming of age recently, but she is industrious, and overcoming her visible fear, she rises from her chair a

few feet to the side, to promptly bang the suspended brass gong that is meant to put the chambers in order.

Nyatha was taken by Althezar as his protégé when she was barely some sixteen or seventeen years, daughter to friends of the old man, that entrusted him with the girl's education both in matters of Delve and in Utari customs. Quick to learn, Althezar found in her a reliable aide and welcomed her gladly to all of his official commitments, expecting that she might learn some day to be as prudent a leader and counselor as he considers himself to be.

To her relief and her chief's own, the crowd of voices quiets down, and the council members turn their attention to the echoing instrument first, and then to the seasoned Utari. It has been long last since the gong had been used, they reckon, and some return to their seats in respectful obedience to the man that more than once advised them personally in unrelated matters. Others continue on their feet, expectant of the pronouncement, but he does not care. With his hand still held up in the air for silence, Althezar continues his exposition, with that first word he has chosen being, actually, the softest of the many that ensue after.

The origin of the issue

Five years earlier, the denizens of Delve cheered for the advances, excited about the good things that were certain to come. Truly it was a wondrous year for science and discovery, with so many things created and perfected for the wellness of all people; some, the ones in possession of the most optimism, considered it the best year of the century. Perhaps soon the Dreikathi might be defeated and the continents, Albedos, and Sapience too, could live in peace.

Delve is a place where Ylem, the energy driving advances forward, and some might say, the world, is actively used, experimented upon and researched, with the unwavering belief that things made with the use of Ylem and, further, using Ylem might one day be the key to defeating the Dreikathi race and end their spread of terror.

The Dreikathi are a very militarized race, and have formed an empire, the Drakkenmont Empire, that is highly effective in spreading destruction and conquering land. The Empire has brought ruin and destruction not only to the continent of Albedos, but has also made an incursion into the territories of the continent of Sapience once in the past, an event that forever marked the land and the people. Since then, collaborations between Sapience and Albedos, with Delve in particular, have been restless, and the Free City of Delve drives research onward, producing dozens of inventions each year, of varying relevance.

The highlight of that year was an extraction probe made of venantium, the mysterious metal only Qeddwyn, the Ankyrean residing in the Island of Delos, knows to work. This artifact, when attuned to a pylon, the core gathering place of all Ylem in a city, would continuously supply it with freshly-gathered energy when placed through a hot spot in the Leylines.

When the more advanced Ylem sensors were invented previously that year, it was discovered that these hot spots were spread out throughout the lands and seas, much like smaller focus points where extractions of the energy normally occur, but larger and more durable in their supply, some lasting even months in their flow of Ylem. And so, a necessity came into being, for the energies in these places far exceeded the capacity of any mortal for extraction, causing an instability so great when confronted with a single refiner that the land would quiver, vortexes of Eld -the mindless, dangerous and chaotic creatures, inhabitants of the Leylines- would pour free in numbers unseen before, and, way more often than not, the adventurous, mortal Ylem hunter would wind up dead, if not severely wounded.

Even when whole groups took to the task, the outcome would be fatal. After much trial and error, experiments, and various strategies later, the idea that mere mortals could not do the deed without some manner of aid was turned into fact. Realizing they must find a way, experts in Delve worked restlessly until they accomplished the task, and the HYPE, short for the Hot Spot Ylem Probe Extractor came into being. The first months encountered a number of glitches that were quickly looked into and remedied, and very soon the Free City of Delve shared with its allies of Sapience this contraption, so they might also benefit from this great influx of precious energy.

Sapience cheered also, but the moods soon became somber as the darker voices began whispering in the shadows ideas of dominance and conquer and, inevitably, war came. Some resisted but, eventually, the people of Sapience found itself waging battles to place their freshly-acquired HYPEs in as many places of the land they could – for whoever controlled the land, controlled the flow of Ylem, and sometimes, this called for bloodshed.

Smaller, defenseless villages were terrorized everywhere, unlucky to be near Ylem hot spots, and alliances formed from night to day, and wavered just as easily in the selfish frenzy for Ylem. Thus the war began, with great networks of HYPEs building up across the continent and slowly creeping off the coasts. The surrounding ratio of these places rapidly became dangerous, and troops would be posted in the most crowded places day and night to protect them.

The demand for the Ylem Probes was high, and scouts combed the land in all directions in search of more Ylem to wrest from the Leylines. Soon it became evident that the number of probes manufactured would never be sufficient to satisfy such high activity and, eventually, some cunning Praexi figured the workings of these artifacts, and began manufacturing forged versions made with materials of lesser quality, materials that hardly compared to the scarcer venantium. Despite the multitude incidents reported about the imitation probes, they fulfilled the purpose for which they were assembled for – at least for some time- and so, many continued to make use of these, creating great risks beyond those of ordinary warfare.

By the second year, it had become easy to acquire the imitation probes, for they were arriving in sufficient quantities from Delve. And rumor had it that some local person or group had

facilitated the export from the port city, and the exchanges would take place in shaded alleys of the island of Delos.

Beyond the origin of the issue

The war over Ylem and control of the Leylines raged on now for over three years, and on top of that, it was a hot summer that made everything slower. They felt sluggish, she and her troops, and realizing it was only a matter of glancing over the camp for but an instant. It is as if the color had been drained from the surroundings, and their dirtied uniforms only looked greyer than they were originally. Even the blood appeared a faded shade of brown instead of crimson, and the eerie atmosphere of the Vintal Glade did not help the matter at all.

She had never liked that part of the forest very much, but it was the farthest they could manage that day, away from the Enorian army, when their worn-down, forged HYPE had come up with a malfunction. The HYPE had been getting hotter than usual the past few days while they were attempting to lace it through a hot spot in the Dolbodi camp, and when the land began quivering, and pebbles and dirt dislodging about it, she knew it was time to go. With Enorian encroaching upon them and the threat of an earthquake or an explosion, she encountered no doubt in ordering the faulty artifact be abandoned.

She knew these forests that they had fled into, for she had lived in the Ithmia trees many years, there in the shadow of the Great Oak. The Vintal Glade felt like but a speck of those extensive woods, but there had been always something more special about it; many dryads had made it their home, and they lurked in the shadows and pranced through the grasses freely. Before these events, at least, they had given it a sense of energy unlike the one found in other parts, but now, it too seemed grey and devoid of color, and no dryads were to be seen in the vicinity.

This comforted her in a way, because she did not feel so at unease amidst these trees now, like she did back then, when she decided the Duiran Council was not the place she would remain in. From then on it was always different to roam the wilds. Although she had not betrayed the woods for another city, it was never the same for her, as if the very lands had recognized a disloyalty and severed their bonds with the woman. Of this she thinks as she sits there in the shadow of an oak tree, removing the caked mud from her boots with the sharpened end of a fallen branch. They had fled, she realizes, the dryads, they are in hiding for sure is what she concludes.

How bad had this war turned out that even the animals and other creatures were taking refuge? Or was that really the cause of the disappearance of these spirits? Were the Ylem probes doing something to the lands beyond the visible? She figures it is all too strange, for the inhabitants of Sapience have been fighting each other for as long as she can remember, and even before, obviously, it says so in the books she has read. She remembers something about the dryads of the Morgun forest going into slumber, but she can't quite place the cause of it in

the memories she keeps of many pages once read. There is a creak in the trees behind her, and she raises her gaze only to notice it is becoming dark, at last snapping out of her thoughts.

She wonders now how she wound up in charge of troops, and Spirean ones, no less. The answer is not too elusive in her mind, but there is a blatant refusal to acknowledge it. She knows herself to not be the most experienced combatant, and she only picked up arms because he asked her to; it was imperative, he told her, and she wouldn't even be going into the Heartwood for it. It was the excuse that the Duiran Council would remain out of the war that made most of his argument when he begged her to help, and put her in possession and charge of a HYPE. It is true that Duiran had tried to remain neutral in it all. They did just fine without the surplus ylem that was being fought over, but it was inevitable that the war would reach them too at the pace it had taken at the beginning of the second year.

She had recently received news of battles being fought, and it was certain that the Duiranites were involved now, and had been for a while. She runs a hand over her forehead, and gazes over the sleeping soldiers, so young and tired they look, and she knows the war has taken from them some of the best years of their youth. She tried to remain neutral also, and being without allegiance helped for some time, perhaps during the first year of the war or thereabouts. But she did have one bond that she could not resist, and whether he used it in his favor or not, she didn't particularly care, for she holds the conviction that he would do the same, should the need arise. She continues to roam the improvised camp as she considers these many things, sleepless, and it is then that the scout she had sent south that morning rushes in, looking pale and perturbed.

The boy collapses at her feet, sobbing uncontrollably and ungracefully, whether from relief or plain despair it is uncertain, for it takes him several minutes to even begin to calm down, and when he does, what he tells her is incoherent at best. So dirty is his uniform, and she gazes down over him with an air of mingled compassion and sheer confusion, but at last her impatience takes over, and she grabs him by the collar to very loudly wrest the information from him. Needless to say, this awakens the sleeping soldiers with various groans and grunts of complaint, and soon, the whole camp is up surrounding the wrecked soldier.

What the boy had seen earlier that day had indeed wrecked him, for although he was young and inexperienced, he had seen the Dreikathi crest in books and remnants of a war long past, and heard the stories his grandfather and his father had told him of hardships past. And there he saw it too; clearly in sight amidst a group of shrouded individuals was the Dreikathi crest. He had been following the developing skirmish between Enorian and a group of Bloodloch at a safe distance, keeping to the trees and higher vantages, and until then, she ascertains, there is nothing out of the ordinary.

But he had seen the mark of the Dreikathi. Impossible, she thinks, maybe the boy was feverish or he had eaten the wrong mushrooms, but the artifact he describes to his captain and its devastating effects are consistent with what she knows about Dreikathi artifacts, if not worse. Disaster, she thinks, when the boy describes the contraption, but what is truly horrific to the woman and all the soldiers that are listening by now, is the way he proceeds to tell her how in

a matter of seconds, the machinery cast forth a wave of energy – of raw, unfettered Ylem, it seemed to the boy – that swept the entire area clean, and all he heard was a multitude of muffled screams vanishing in the brilliant explosion.

And then the boy ran, he ran as fast as he could to the north, through trees and across streams, straight to the camp and to the feet of his captain. His torn clothes speak of somewhat of an overwhelming effort to reach the camp; likely he caught in more than a few stubborn branches and poorly-located shrubbery in his haste to arrive, and his sweaty brow only reminds the woman how hot and heavy is the evening, and then she starts to feel even more sluggish than before, when she was worrying only about the war between the people of Sapience, and not the deathly threat of the Dreikathi with their foreign artifacts and airships.

The woman steps back from the boy to glance at the other soldiers in her command. How young they all are, she reiterates to herself, and she signals to one she is acquainted better with than the rest to help the scout. Luckily she has always been quick to make choices, and in few minutes the camp is unassembled and already marching through the forest toward the north. This time, although she makes haste, she is particularly careful to keep out of sight, struggling along the way with the retelling of the boy. Was it an Ylem probe the contraption he had seen? It couldn't have been, because for the way he described its effects, they hardly sounded like malfunctions common to the other HYPEs. Could this be a new weapon and, moreover, a Dreikathi one?

Up in the North

The next night in Spinesreach, a lone Syssin watches the dry plains from atop the outer gate. He has been assigned to the last shift of the night, before dawn, and paces slowly along the wall, hoping perhaps to grow warm in the harsh climate of the mountains, merely by moving from one end to the other during his watch. He is tired, worn down, for the war has taken a toll on him and the Republic. He passes a guard sleeping against his spear, half slumped over the wall, and, although in times past he would have reproached him severely for it, his own weariness brings out a dash of compassion in him, and he continues to walk past him.

Spinesreach paints an imposing picture there, nestled in the Tarea Mountains, which in the darker hours appear like obsidian outlines against the summer starry night. The wall curves and winds at a length that isn't very extensive, taking advantage instead of the natural seclusion of the rocky valley. The outer city is darkest at this hour, with the lights of the farms and fields shut off when he watches over it, and although he misses the revelry and the ruckus that used to often rise from the Wintersbreeze Inn, for once he is glad there is not even that to disturb the peace of the city.

The night is calm thus far, and the comrade before him reported no incidents upon passing on the shift, offering only a weary salute before withdrawing to the sleeping quarters. So little sleep they have been getting lately, what with three quarters of the army deployed at once

most of the time, leaving barely enough reserves to guard the city, so they must take the extra shifts. Even the Spirean city guards have been called to training duty, anticipating the worst. So many battles have been lost, but still the Chairwoman presses on, because so many other battles have been won. The Senators have weighed their choices, and nobody yields, and nor is any other city willing to surrender the war and by now, all fight for their own.

Alliances have been broken left and right and no attempts have been made to repair them; it is as though long gone are the days of the famed Spirean diplomacy. This thirst for Ylem has driven all into a frenzied race to shadow the others, and the real purpose of the fight eludes the common men and women who are only drafted into the armies and dragged into combat. He considers this at length, and is appalled to remember the last count of losses, both material and, most importantly, of Spirean soldiers. Jaded with the years of war and, at this point, caring little for the outcome and only worried for the arrival of the actual finale of it all, he pulls a cigarette from the case in his pocket.

The merchants of Delve have been reluctant to visit Sapience in the more recent months, so the exotic tobacco and the smoking herbs he often enjoyed before it all broke loose have been scarce. But still that is a vice he cannot abandon; above all things, he enjoys smoking, he reckons it soothes him, and the more intoxicating blends have boosted his mood throughout the conflict. He trusts no one with the location of his stash, and dreads how little of the herbs remains in his leather pouch. He stops at an extreme of the wall to light his rolled cigarette, and resumes the return to the other end.

The sun begins to shine its earlier rays over him and the city of the five Spires, waking him fully from his dazed respite, and as he straightens and stretches fully into alertness, hastily moving up the hill he sees a group of uniformed men and women. Immediately he is roused into action, and stomps his cigarette, only half consumed, off on the ground. No longer does he drag his feet along the stone wall, but rather sprints from one side to another, calling in a deep voice to alert the guards.

Spears and bows are readied, and he narrows his eyes in the bothersome light of the sun, not quite able to recognize any familiar faces or insignias in the mass of dirty grey that comes nearer and nearer. He calls them to stop, once, and twice, loudly, and beneath the guards stir at the gates. It is likely the dwellings nearer to the wall have been awakened too, and more than one humble farmer takes hold of their pitchfork to fight off the possible threat.

"Moryz!" the woman in the lead yells with all the strength she can muster. He knows that name, that man, and the woman's voice is promptly more debilitated and desperate the second time she hollers it at the walls. She is not Spirean herself, that is for sure, because her looks are much more untamed than those of northern ladies and soldiers, but apparently she knows exactly who to call for upon approaching the outer gate in a time of war and distrust. He raises a hand to signal a halt to the impending shower of arrows that point straight to the woman, and calls a nearby spearman to go awaken the man being called for.

There is restlessness in the group, plainly visible in the constant shuffling of feet across the dried dirt of the road. It is strange to him, being certain that he would hold very still with over a dozen arrows and spears being aimed in his direction, and for a moment he fears perhaps that all is a ruse, but why would anyone expose themselves to such danger?. The sun continues to rise in the far horizon, and for the first time he can recognize a Spirean insignia amidst the filthy grey. It takes him but a split second to issue the command to lower all weapons, much to the confusion of some guards, but at last the Captain of the Spirean Guard appears, recently risen and still ruffled in his otherwise impeccable uniform.

“Sertep.” The captain acknowledges him, looking, at the very least, mildly disgruntled to be up with the dawn. Before he can explain anything, however, the other man, somewhat lanky and showing the signs of a life spent in combat, takes notice of the woman and the group several feet below at the gates. He can hardly open his mouth still, and the Captain has disappeared from his side, dashing below for the gates. Scarce minutes elapse before the gates are opened and the diminished troops are allowed inside.

The soldiers collapse there and then inside the lofty gatehouse; they have been traveling for hours on end without rest, and whatever little supplies they had have ran out. Moreover, the road they took was the most secluded, but also one of the most treacherous to traverse. A group of guards secures the gates behind them, and it is ordered that food and water be brought at once. For many, this is the first time in months they have returned home.

Water and food are of little meaning to Eetreya, the dirtied woman that led them there, however, whom is quick to grab Moryz, the guard captain, by one arm and take him aside. The embrace the man brings the woman into is brief, when they are sheltered and in the shadows of a well-concealed recess in the wall, used for weapon storage, because the woman, it seems, has been containing a lot of ire during the journey from the Vintal Glade to the city of Spinesreach, and is quick to swat her lover away.

Their voices are hushed, but they argue and exchange information heatedly, unknowing that an expert Syssin listens in, collecting and taking mental notes of all details of the various battles, the failing Ylem probe, the bleakness of the Vintal Glade and the appearance of the Dreikathi threat. What nonsense, Sertep thinks, this Ylem business is entirely out of control, he considers, but little does he, nor the woman, or the Captain, know what really is happening on the other side of the continent. Unsettled, but certain he must leave Spinesreach for now and learn more of these matters, he returns up onto the wall to retrieve the remainder of his cigarette, and finish his shift, before anyone can discover him eavesdropping.

An informative fight

Moryz and Eetreya have always made up for a good, old-fashioned couple, often caught in the most petty fights over trivial things like the best place to grab some ale, or where to arrange their next encounter. Their relationship has been kept as a rule in private, and only few close friends are in knowledge of it, so while they are traditional, they both know very well how to keep a secret.

This very early morning, the presumably secret fight they stage in the minuscule weapon's storage room can hardly be described as trivial, however, for the issues they heatedly argue are heavy with the theme of war, but also something beyond, something that they know had not come into the light in the three years the war has carried on for. The only illumination that enters the chamber comes from but a slit in the boulders that were used to construct the gatehouse and the walls, and a large spider's web flutters in the wind that filters in company with the brightness, resisting the gusts of the mountain air.

Eetreya is a woman of strong character, and this he cherishes in her; he remembers her in their earlier youth, when she would refuse all of his advances, because he belonged to 'the other side', and still now, how he managed to finally woo her eludes him in full, knowing only that the tanned, freckled blonde had some form of falling out with the Duiran Council that caused her to sever bonds not only with it but with other close associations, friends, and even family, when events took a wrong turn.

Disappointed with what was her life in those years, Eetreya finally admitted and surrendered to the fact that she harbored a rather unwavering affection for the man of arms, despite his origins, and committed to a relationship limited to the shadows, for although others had turned on her, she was still not convinced that she would, perhaps, one day return to her roots in the verdant Heartwood.

While Moryz considers these memories of his, Eetreya spouts uncountable words of censure and blame, laying the guilt on him for begging her to enter the war, when she could have easily remained to herself and made a normal life well off in the woods or the jungle, plenty away from conflict. And while the argument Moryz wields next is valid, in that the Leylines are inescapable, the woman refuses to yield in her rebuttal.

Ylem, and the possibility of power - indeed the Leylines cannot be escaped, because they swathe the world whole. This meshwork of raw power was once unfelt and unheard of in Sapience, dormant perhaps, until peoples of other faraway lands came in search of it. And now the situation has worsened with the new discoveries. Hot spots and Ylem probes have made the issue all the more radical, and while some haven taken to the task of becoming near invisible from other mortal beings, to preserve their safety and survive the harsh years of war, there is truth in that the Leylines are inescapable, especially with very accurate Ylem sensors becoming a common acquisition for many.

Soon the alliances that were forged early in the war are brought up; Bloodloch and Spinesreach, Bloodloch and the undead armies of Ciem, Enorian and the southeastern villages, and later on Duiran and Enorian, none of which endured the years. The woman questions what is at stake. "It's just some damned Ylem!" She claims in the most intense moment of her ramblings, sending a prepared quiver in a shelf flying off and spilling arrows everywhere. And what of the broken alliances? So docile seems Moryz now, patiently gathering each of the arrows to replace them in the quiver as he offers his argument in return. He hasn't got a lot to say about broken alliances, however, and is resigned to the fact that he is following orders from above his station.

She tells him next of the Vintal Glade and how its inhabitants have gone amiss, and left it near lifeless. What good is Ylem, she says, if it will destroy everything in its reach? She remembers he came to the Glade with her once, because she had told him of her unease in that part of the woods, so frightful she was of the dryads once, and the shamanic totems in the darkest depths between the trees, links with the supernal land of Dendara. Still Moryz remains impassive; he has heard rumors of things alike happening in other places and tells her so.

So detached she has been from the world, leading her soldiers and their HYPE from skirmish to skirmish, and at last to their home, that she hasn't really learned of any important news for uncountable days now. Was it time now to return to Durian with all these awful things becoming a scourge to the wilds? It is then she pauses and regards him with a suspicion that he hadn't be victim to in years, and raises the question of the Dreikathi – did he know of it? Did he know of the awful artifacts they bring? Are they really back to endanger everything they know?

She is insistent, and is becoming louder, and so a hand is clapped swiftly over her mouth as he presses her to the darkest corner of the room, forcing a pile of shields into a loud rattle. It is musty there, and for a flashing instant she fears her lover might suffocate her for this information. His grip loosens soon, however, when he urges her, pleading, into silence, and begins whispering in her ear about news he received not two months earlier, about the sighting far in the southwest seas of a Dreikathi airship. Whether they made land or not he is ignorant, or so he reassures her, but not only has he heard more about this, but also about 'something' spreading from the southwest shores and the Aalen forest, scaring animals.

He has been sworn to secrecy about it, he says, and begs her to keep this as such, a secret, for panic, he claims, can be more devastating than a war. No Dreikathi have been sighted, he says, but there are rumors of an airship, and scouts have been sent to corroborate this. But then the information from Eetreya's own scout is revealed, about the artifact of destruction, and the Dreikathi crest. They all know this crest - it is unmistakable-, and the revelation leaves Moryz speechless.

And then for lengthy minutes he attempts to convince Eetreya and himself that there could be errors in the observations of a young scout riddled with fear, that perhaps the use of the crest is a measure to spread fear and sway the outcome of the war to one or another's favor, or maybe even that they could be just remnants salvaged from the old Dreikathi camp in the

Scidve Cove, or something that washed up ashore from the destroyed city of Ashtan, for the matter of the airship is only a rumor. But what he cannot explain is the ravaging effects of the presumed weapon contraption. What mortal in Sapience knows how to use and much less repair

Dreikathi

technology?

Unable to keep his argument beyond it, Moryz is left reeling with what ensues next, when Eetreya announces she's leaving immediately for the north, far into the tundra, and storms away. When he recovers from the shock, but instants later, all he finds outside the storage room is the empty hallway inside the gatehouse, and no sign of the swift, angered Eetreya to be seen.

An airship comes near

Indeed a Dreikathi airship had been sighted, a mammoth of steel far in the horizon from the Aalen forest. These formerly vibrant woods once were consumed as a consequence of this very same foreign threat, for the Dreikathi had come into war and gone, defeated for the time being, but they had left the Aalen forever damaged, raining upon it a foul purple sludge that caused not only destruction, but led to a series of mutations and a sickness that spread out beyond the trees. Behind they left aberrations, a withered forest and many sick Tsol'aa, but also seeds of something worse than expected.

The 'Bloom', the people of Delve called it. For this sludge contained simmering in it spores, carriers of the horrible mutations. These would settle in the lungs and cause disease, and death, but many decades have passed, and so these are matters for other stories.

An audacious Tsol'aa with an unwavering love for his homeland has returned to the Aalen, now that nature has begun to overcome the blight of the Bloom sludge. The landscape of the forest was changed forever, but to him, the hope that the tall redwoods might once rise like giants as before allows him to carry on. When he heard that saplings had broken through the soil that was believed barren, he hesitated nothing to pack up and journey to see it with his own eyes, and now he has become a self-proclaimed ranger of the Aalen, forever vigilant to threats that might risk his beloved woods.

The years of war have changed not one thing in him, nor did the time he spent away from the redwoods, mourning the loss of his home, so he perseveres in his task; and although he is more cautious upon his patrols, and he has come into close contact and danger with battles and Ylem hunters, he knows in his heart he must continue without rest.

It was a breezy night during the end of the spring, as he wandered the sandy shores of the Aalen, that he caught sight of something unusual. All his life these beaches had been a source of joy to him and many other Tso'aa until the catastrophe struck, and with pain he remembers still the events that led to the death of his precious wife. It is while thinking of these things, that far in the midnight backdrop he saw a glint brighter than that of a star, something that

moved, for sure, but not in the manner a bird, a shooting star, or even a dragon might move.

Many times he had seen the red shadow of the dragon Yudhishtira in the brightness of day and the glow of moonlight, for the great beast often wandered the skies around its home in the island of Polyargos, the closest known land beyond the western shore of Sapience. But this unidentified object –or, more likely, creature- moved in an erratic fashion, at best, and it seemed as though it veered back and forth in a zigzag path toward the Aalen, growing ever larger in his field of vision.

Quick and knowing he must protect himself, he immediately ran back to his encampment to put out the fire, else he earned himself some unwanted attention, and slinked into hiding where he could follow the path of the extraneous object. Faithful to his purpose of protecting his weakened homeland, there he remained in the shadows, watching through the night as the unknown thing moved ever nearer, until at last he could identify it without doubt.

There it was, the black giant, a floating hull that soared through the skies as graceful as if in water, easily tearing apart the clouds in its path. Panic began to rise in him - it was hard to believe that they had returned, the Dreikathi-, and rooted with fear he remained watching as the then unmistakable airship approached further, seeming as if it would make land in the Aalen itself. His thoughts whirled, and images of a multitude of sufferings past flashed before his eyes. With his heart racing and his skin breaking into a profuse, cold sweat, he found himself reliving the traumatic images of when the foreign enemies took the life of his beautiful wife.

How striking she was in his memories, a Tsol'aa too young to suffer such a fate. He constantly thought of her, with her glinting blue eyes and jet black mane, her sweet voice and gentle hands. They had been there, witnesses to the sacrifice of Amal, the great Ankyrean beast that decades before flew straight at the airships in a heroic attempt to finish off the Dreikathi invaders. But there had come the Polemarch Andalso and his wylm, to snap Amal's neck with the ease one tears apart a twig.

The image of sand flying everywhere as they rush through the Scidve Cove comes to him next, charging the wall of the encampment head on to fight off the invaders. And then there was blood, and then death.

A feeling of his own impending death overtakes him now, that breezy spring night in the Aalen forest when he saw the airship approach, and the next thing he knows, he has nearly snapped his own neck falling back through the long-withered branches of a deceased oak, prey to the images and sensations of long ago that have returned to haunt him.

This was not the first time it had happened to him, this absolute state of panic. Many times he had broken free of terrible nightmares in the middle of the night, awakening agitated and alone, with nobody at all to comfort him. Luckily the fall beats these feelings of doom from him, and he conceals himself well again, still sweating and breathing with agitation as he watches the airship hover at what, to him, feels like an arm's length.

What ensues he has seen before also; a wyrm circles above the airship as it descends, but in the hours of darkness its rider is but a shadow to him. Cables are lowered from an opening in the blackened hull, and down come perhaps half a dozen of Dreikathi. It's happening again, he thinks, another invasion is underway, and this is the beginning of it. His heart threatens to race again, but he struggles with himself, knowing that he must watch the events in whole, so that he might alert the people of Sapience about this threat.

Lowered to the ground next is a crate that is promptly unpacked to reveal some kind of heavy contraption, and what appears to him as packs of supplies. He questions why only a handful of Dreikathi make shore, when so many came the last time, and even the airship seems smaller than he remembered, but at the same time is thankful they have not chosen his woods to set up an encampment, because surely the damaged Aalen would not survive it. The figures in the shore stir, and he is certain there is an exchange of words when, suddenly, the outline of a large Dreikathi proffers some swift lashings to one of the others.

He can hear the whip crack, and with the sound of leather slicing through air, he can no longer control the tide of emotions and images of that one time, when his beautiful wife died, and all he is able to do now is flee, escaping far from the beach through withered trees, toward the Vashnar Mountains.

On he runs and runs, stumbling as a blinding explosion of light flares in the distance behind him, and he is certain something terrible has befallen his home.

Down Under

There are many places of shadow and darkness in Aetolia - appropriate, in times of the Midnight Age. Vampires and those of the undead inhabit the lands and roam freely, and are as numerous as those alive. In times like these, not only does the bastion of Light and Life exist, the city of Enorian, but also there is a hub for those on the other side of the line. That is the city of Bloodloch, the great city of the Undead, founded by the Consanguine, as vampires are also known.

It is here that, also, the war has had an impact. One might say that those who were once afraid of going out in the darker hours have found a greater fear in the potential losses of war. More than likely there is more than one vampire lurking in the shadows, disappointed that they are no longer someone's worst fear, but, alas, these are the times that pass, and most have managed to soothe their egos. But in truth, this is likely the lesser of impacts the war has had on Bloodloch, for this city of undeath has too experienced material loss and gone through a dwindling in the numbers of their servants and minions, and even some of those higher in the bloodlines have had to take arms in order to secure some battles.

The Overlords and the Keeper, the ruling council of Bloodloch, have discussed time and again

the proper course of action, and many tire of the war, but their thirst of Ylem and dominance over this resource is as insatiable as a vampire's for warm blood, and so they press on, along the rest of Sapience. Perhaps this unquenchable hunger for the resource is what sentient beings felt when they came into knowledge of fire, or gold, or other precious things throughout their existence, but whatever the case, this is a frenzy Sapience has not seen in years too many to count.

The Keeper is a known ruthless predator, and spearheaded the very first battles for Ylem when the war began, bringing bloodshed into her own hands. Truly a sight to regard, some consider her as plenty beautiful as she is lacking in mercy, and many a male and female have fallen prey to her charm and false promises. It is uncertain what so many find captivating in the Mhun brunette of black eyes, for at first sight she is nothing much more than a lanky woman of barely five feet, but she is known to have a way with words, and an accent that is exotic and tempting, and it rolls so easily off her tongue. Rumors are exchanged among partisans about her encounters when she is not out on a hunt or on official business, but none there dare raise any complaints about her. Indeed the Bloodlochian Keeper has a lust worthy of any vampire, not solely for blood, and she has most gracefully kept up her façade through the war, remaining ever beautiful and resolute, and continuing on with her predatory ways.

What very few know is that she, the Keeper, listens closely to the whisperings in her ears. Since youth she had been a devout to Corruption and Chaos both, figures that had been embodied by the goddess Ysmali, wrought from the combined essences of Chakrasul and Khepri. The vampire basked in the concepts of corruption and thrived in instances of chaos, often brought about by her, but above all that, she was a harbinger of despair, having experienced it plenty to the whims of her goddess.

It is no secret that the goddess unraveled when the very essences within her stirred, clashing and bringing, in the end, her demise, but even beyond the death of her goddess, the Keeper was still pious in such beliefs. Not many years passed after the events that finished her goddess when, a fateful night, the vampire met a rather somber individual at a party held by one of the Consanguine noble houses. While their first approach found between them a large number of points of disagreement, it was when the matter of the deceased goddess surfaced that a relationship was forged, to stand unbreakable for many, many years.

It had been that this somber woman had been recluse in studies to become an envoy to the goddess in question before the congregation was disbanded, for obvious reasons, and she had become knowledgeable in all the information that was available at the time. Like the vampire, this woman still also harbored strong beliefs in the tenets of Ysmali, and so she still kept faithful and studious, perhaps believing that one day the essence of the goddess, now dissipated, might find another vessel.

The woman quickly became a confidant and advisor to the one who would one day rule Bloodloch, always whispering in her ear about how to conduct herself, her business, and later on, the business of the city of the undead, always with the claim of being, still, a representative and beacon of the goddess Ysmali that the vampire so cherished.

Since the war began, the self-proclaimed priestess to the extinguished deity had urged the trusting Keeper on, speaking of driving the continent of Sapience into chaos, conquering the other cities and spreading corruption to every confine of the lands. In the early months of the war, and even into the second year, the vampire had followed the advice faithfully with moderate success, for the Ylem network of the Bloodlochians spread wide across the southwest part of the continent, slowly eating into northern territories toward the valley of Scidve and the Birka Mire.

But then the energies had dwindled, the use of Ylem probes had become more common, and the war and its losses had also began to take a toll on Bloodloch. The encouragement continued from the presumed emissary of chaos and corruption, the ideas becoming inconspicuously more violent, more drastic, and overall risky, to many times face losses far greater than the potential benefits. With time, not even the vampire is fully convinced the advice has been the wisest.

What would happen if the Overlords learned of this? Often she asks herself this question, but fooled into believing she is the hand of the dead Ysmali, and believing the other woman to be the voice of the goddess herself, she leads the city deeper into war.

Some Dreikathi tricks

There are very few that can say they have seen the Keeper frightened, perhaps counted on the fingers of one hand. The brunette of black eyes rarely is one to let on any emotion, even to those of her nearest circle, and most often than not, she is one to show herself ironic or sarcastic, rather than let on any form of discomfort, doubt or ire, among other states she considers unworthy or undignified of vampires.

Elise is the result of a rigorous education from a very strict vampire sire, unforgiving to mistakes and intolerant to excuses. Seated in her crowded bureau she remembers the hours on end he would make her stand by his own seat, dissatisfied with her posture, telling her to stand straighter, to square her feet, or to stop slouching so much, or the times he would correct her speech, telling her of vocabulary unfit for a noble consanguine lady. Truly he was a sight to behold, like her, but so tall and handsome, but he had been slumbering in his coffin for so many years now.

That bureau used to be his, she acknowledges as she thinks of the vampire man, not many nights after a Tsol'aa had been witness to the approaching of a Dreikathi airship, and so much paraphernalia is strewn around, classified and arranged in shelves, memories of the times long past. Heavy books by the dozens occupy a spotless case across the desk, the leather spines worn from use but buffed clean by the restless doings of the many servants. A lush chandelier carpet brought from Djeir lines the veined marble flooring, beneath the crystal teardrop arrangement of an excessively heavy candelabrum of gilded branches.

When nobody is near to see it, her bare feet come into contact with the spider silk rug, and overwhelmed by the daily doings of having become the Keeper of Bloodloch, she derives joy in allowing her cold toes to brush against the designs of purple chakra flowers and spidery athurium blooms. Her shoes are of a high heel this particular day, when she is hidden away from the city and the world, attempting to soothe her mood over the recent meeting about the war, so removing them is particularly enjoyable.

The Overlords are starting to doubt her, and that does nothing but irk her, but, in truth, she has serious reservations of her own about following the advice of her long-time counselor. How long must she continue driving this war onward before all resources are exhausted? She doubts that Bloodloch will take the lead and rise above the rest by now, because the battles have been so even and, only temporarily, has her city ever managed to upkeep an Ylem network marginally larger than the ones of the rest, but the men are spread too far and wide.

Beyond the tactics and strategy of the war, moreover, the Ylem probes have been failing left and right, according to reports of scouts and spies, and not only the Bloodlochian HYPEs, but also those in territories controlled by the other cities. What happens when they all fail, she wonders, will that finally end the war? She remembers the days when Ylem extractions would need constant trips to accomplish significant numbers, but things were much simpler then. She attempts to imagine the scenario where all things return to how they were before the nonsense started, before the Ylem sensors and probes, and her mind wanders away, having trouble envisioning such a time.

How she longs for such a time, when there would be no larger trouble that unruly minions and uneducated servants. What a mess, she thinks again, she misses the parties, the elaborate dresses and the boxes of jewelry and other gifts. Before were the years of luxury and comfort, of lovers that would parade by her office, seeking her out, and now she is alone and not only the overlords are untrusting, but everyone else in Bloodloch. Perhaps they think she works for someone else.

"Keeper," says a masculine voice somewhere in the chamber, making her black eyes shift frantically in search of the source of the voice around the chamber. She doesn't know this voice; it is not the inflexion of her sire, or of any of her lovers past, or of anyone she knows. She stares around, the rest of her body paralyzed in the comfort of her chair, clearly an attempt to remain calm, and to be prudent before attempting to do anything, but in her eyes the bewilderment is visible. Who would possibly dare violate the sanctity of her chambers, uninvited, intrusive and, perhaps, even dangerous.

Some time that seems to her like an eternity to her elapses, and she begins to think that, perhaps, she had some form of hallucination, accidentally imagined it or merely confused some noise or a creak in the building for a word. After all, she is weary, perhaps she must return to the repose of her coffin for some time, rest in the lush violet velvet. But then the voice speaks again, even more clearly it seems. This time, the address is also by her name. Not many mortals dare use her name, and this unsettles her wholly.

Some more seconds pass where there is no sound or movement, but to her disbelief, surprise, and blatant panic, a Dreikathi materializes before her, seemingly from thin air. First, the oversized man is but a smirking face, and then a mop of hair appears atop his head, followed by a billowing dark cape. Slowly the limbs come into being, and the Keeper is left regarding, with eyes wide, a whole Dreikathi, there in her chambers, most absolutely out of place.

If her heart could race, it would, and if her breathing could agitate, it might, but she is a vampire, and as such these things are never to happen, so instead she remains in her chair, like a pale, petrified corpse. Someone ignorant might think she has just died in her seat, and is merely experiencing rigor mortis, but it is merely the impression that has taken the words from her, leaving her stumped.

Has the Dreikathi just come out of phase, she wonders, like a Syssin might? Impossible, when would have the Dreikathi learnt these things, the craft and skill of Sapience? The ideas come in a tumult into her head, of the implications such a wild, far-fetched thought brings. Have they been spending time in the continent of Sapience, spying on them, gathering their knowledge? And then she thinks how foolish they all have been, it is likely, she considers, that while they were busy fighting each other, the Dreikathi lurked in the shadows, stealing from them.

If once she thought the war was a disaster, there truly were no proper words to describe the extent of this Dreikathi infiltration that kept on building in her head. What would her sire say about this? He would blame her, for sure, for being blind and not keeping vigilant enough, but she had kept a keen eye on things, of this she was certain, for she had her own Syssin who would roam the immaterial planes in the shadowed corners, collecting information, inside and outside of Bloodloch. So if the Dreikathi had learned the trade of the Syssin, why hadn't they been detected by the masters of it all? Perhaps this was another of their artifacts, unfortunately put to the test in her very office. It eluded her, how someone could break into her chambers with such apparent ease.

Nothing made sense, and as she quickly attempted to place what had just happened, of this apparition intruding into her bureau, the Dreikathi began to turn about the chamber, looking pleased with the lack of noise and resistance encountered.

"Keeper." The Dreikathi speaks to Elise, again, the black-eyed brunette, and in plain Aetolian no less, to her amazement, confirming that she is not hallucinating. "Good evening."

A vortex of thoughts come rushing into her head, and she wonders, feeling positively and completely baffled, why a Dreikathi would know and speak Aetolian, and with such flawless pronunciation. A contrived story line of Dreikathi infiltration builds quickly in her mind again, and although the finer details of the story are blurry at best, it all seems quite plausible to her, what with a Dreikathi in her bureau, that speaks Aetolian, and apparently has just materialized before her from a state of immaterial phase, like your every day Syssin.

The Dreikathi man continues to speak before she can say anything at all, so shocked she is, that the words won't come to her, and the words that the man speaks are completely lost on her. He paces around her office with a perfect military stride, and although the tall man wears a dark cloak, beneath its folds it is evident he wears the impeccable uniform of the Drakkenmont Empire. After all, the crest of the Dreikathi is unmistakable, and she too is rendered speechless for quite some time, the silence only lengthening and thickening as the Dreikathi casually touches various books, apparently skimming the many titles on the shelves, and takes in his hands an object or two, to examine it with nimble, patient fingers.

All in all, the Dreikathi seems quite comfortable to her, from her chair, which appears to steal her into its depths more and more as minutes go by, consuming all her courage. The notion that perhaps she is shrinking from fright overwhelms her, and in an instant of wild, recovered courage, she leaps to her feet, standing, to her relief, tall, whole and upright.

In phase

But indeed that Dreikathi had learned the trade of the Syssin, and had, adding much more to that, materialized before the Keeper, coming out of the state of phase. Some might call this state a limbo in reality, not belonging to the material, neither to the spiritual, but perhaps in between, or a manipulation of matter, or an anomaly in space. Whatever the case, the Dreikathi had been in contact with a Syssin, a master of these skills so coveted by some, and had managed to acquire the knowledge necessary to intrude into Elise's chambers.

The Syssin have a long history in the city of Spinesreach, as guardians of what was once the Ankyrean race that made its home there in the mountains, the citadel of five spires. Modern Syssin are somewhat different, and although they remain protectors of Spinesreach, in part, they have found and gladly taken other roles in politics, trade, espionage and many other things. Some contemporary Syssin, however, have parted ways with Spinesreach altogether and make their homes throughout the lands, serving various other cities or organizations or, in some cases, serving only themselves and their own interests.

This last possibility is the case of the Syssin that is watching the Keeper, and her Dreikathi patron, to put it in a way. This is no daft Syssin, and, by keeping a reliable network of contacts throughout the continent and Delve, she handles an amount of valuable information that would be the envy of any tactician, politician, merchant or even a historian. To say that she is resourceful would likely be a gross understatement, insulting, rather, but few know of this particular girl, because she is effective in keeping to the darkness and most secretive warrens of Sapience. She is young, exceedingly resourceful (at the very least), and cunning, with an instinct like no other, and the right skills to lead those impulses along with just the necessary information into lucrative gain - whether her intentions are the best, or even remotely good, that is open to debate.

How she came into contact with the Dreikathi in the first place is an interesting story, for the girl spent many months in the faraway continent of Albedos, traveling, curious, and hoping perhaps to turn a profit in those foreign territories. Few are privy to what lies beyond the Dramedo Crags, and Mount Helba in Albedos, for they act as natural barriers between the Free City of Delve and the remainder of the continent, which has been struck and rendered too dangerous to travel with freedom by the Drakkenmont Empire. The Golbans of Mount Helba ward the way very well, and not many dare venture past their boundaries in any case, because the Dreikathi have spread desolation to the remainder of the Albedi territories.

The Free City of Delve is a place of many races and customs, an amalgamation of people of many kinds, because when the Dreikathi struck, the people left their homes, fleeing from war, ruin and incurable disease. The port city is a gateway to Albedos, and at the same time, is the last bastion against the Dreikathi and a refuge to any who would be considered a potential victim to the Empire of Drakkenmont. Younger generations of Delve know little beyond their coastal hometown unless they have dared to travel the dangers of the continent, but still there remain many much older that remember with nostalgia their lands.

The girl spent considerable time in the city of Delve, knowing its various peoples and cultures, both those that were imported by some tribe or another, and those that were forged in and by this multicultural place. It took her many months, however, to come into contact with an aide to what she really wished to do, to go beyond the Dramedo Crags to explore unknown lands, and perhaps to make profit of this journey. An avid explorer and unwilling to take no for an answer, at last she met a particular Praexi of scarce morals.

The Praexi are a race of ill reputation among those of the port city, having a lengthy record for theft, espionage, and participation in dubious affairs of many sorts, and, knowing this after learning it in her journey, the Syssin girl sought, and found, one of the Praexi willing to help her. Saying that all members of the Praexi are guilty of such deeds would be an affront to honest, well-doing ones of the race, but allow anyone to search hard enough for something, and they are likely to find it, if they look in the right places, at the right times.

Many things can be found in the markets of Delve, from fish, and fruit, to exotic spices, liquor and smoking herbs, and other goods of more luxurious taste, such as carpets and paintings. Second in numbers only to the goods that are sold in the market are the people that frequent it, both merchants and buyers alike. Truly if Delve is a place rich in entwining cultures, it may be seen in the shops. A market that is well established is a fine and representative sample of any cultured civilization, and the one that is settled in the port city is no exception.

But not only regular merchants and patrons are to be found in the twisting streets of the market; amid stalls and carts and piles of things are also shady characters looking for and offering many other kinds of services. Goods and services legal and outlawed are traded in foreign languages in the streets of Delve, a convergence of folk from distant lands looking for things in common, perhaps to seal a deal later in one of the local taverns or smoking rooms.

This was how the Syssin girl met the Praexi one day, while she was wandering the market in search of amusement. Aimlessly drifting through alleys and narrow streets brought her incidentally to a shoddy-looking bar around the corner of a disheveled stall of used antiques. A bored Praexi was seated in a mangled stool, smoking something quite fragrant and unknown to the girl. Never one to pass an opportunity for new experiences, the girl approached, pretending to be looking at the dusty objects for sale.

Something that turned and whirled amidst what were mostly items suitable for scrap caught her eye, nearly at the end of the pile. Finding it strange that something seemingly functional might take residence in such a place, the girl at last decided to subtly question the shop tender. The Praexi was indeed bored, and found a source of entertainment for himself in conversation with the girl in speaking about tobacco and smoking herbs, and before he knew it, he was explaining to her that there was one of his race that had somehow managed to become a researcher of "them Ylem things", and worked with some officials, while keeping their own workshop on the side for "personal business".

Intrigued and certain that meeting such a particular fellow could prove of use in the future, the girl eventually wrested of the bored Praexi where she could make her acquaintance with the researcher, and was sent off to a bar not too far around the corner, to where she wandered next along a path of uneven cobblestones, beneath the gaze of many other Praexi that lived in the area.

The Praexi are a small race, some might say akin to Imps, winged and with sharp teeth. She felt like a giant there, with her five feet of height, and for the first time in a long time, she felt observed, and wandered what might be the reason for such thorough scrutiny. She considered her height first, for obvious reasons, for she felt awkward as she passed by diminutive doors leading to rather compact-looking dwellings, but then she began to consider other things.

She knew the Praexi had a reputation for shady dealings, and soon she wandered if they might rob her as she wandered the neighborhood. What if the shopkeeper had set her up and a gang of Praexi was waiting for her two houses away? The thief might get stolen from, she thought with a silly smirk. Some Praexi children, much smaller than the adults, dashed past her, obviously engaged in play, and her worries washed away. The Praexi had indeed a reputation, unfounded for many, and for such, they too had a deep distrust for those belonging to other races, and would be reserved and excluding of outsiders. She had heard that some even went as far as living in near lock down in secluded quadrants, where outsiders would rarely go, and apparently, she had come straight into one of such places.

One Caentoi

The Praexi quadrant that the Syssin girl wandered into was indeed a place where outsiders would rarely go, for some wouldn't even fit into the thresholds, so unwelcome they were in the Praexi homes. Leena, the Syssin girl, was not much smaller than people of other races, being a dusky human of about five feet and a half. With her bright red locks and green eyes, she felt like an attraction at a fair amidst the smaller individuals that kept her in their view as she trudged on to the promise of a bar and a Praexi researcher.

So slow the short walk had been to her, for passing dozens of homes, even when they are so small, will give one that illusion, especially if one is being watched, for whatever reason. The homes rose several stories high, the levels many but barely accounting for much height, designed to accommodate the smaller inhabitants, and the neighborhood was bright, despite the shady looks she was getting. She had heard of Praexi living in the slums of city, but this area didn't seem so bad to her.

After walking for some fifteen minutes that seemed to her like an hour, however, the colors shifted into more unwashed grays and the people in the streets became scarcer. She turned where the merchant had indicated her to do at a peaked archway, and found herself in an alley darker than any of the streets she had passed, shaded by canvas canopies and improvised awnings made of reused wood planks.

At the end of the alley was the door the merchant had told her about, a beaten up paneled entryway painted with uneven brown paint, large enough for her to enter, luckily, and moreover, used by some many others than just Praexi. This she stayed watching for some time at a distance, smoking a slender cigarette at the corner, and witnessed a parade of understated individuals head inside the bar. Judging it safe to go inside, for she had heard no fray or other manner of unusual noise, she headed toward the door, pushing it to elicit a squeak that earned her some glances from within.

Inside the place looked like no more than a regular shady bar, the kinds of which she had frequented many times in the past before. Unclean and with a quiet buzzing to it, rising from secretive exchanges and conversations being had, the place bore unwashed walls of an off white, with creaking wooden furnishings and a bar counter on the back, in front of a wall filled with a variety of oddly-shaped bottles, some dustier than others. There, at the bar, a pudgy Caentoi polished a glass with a filthy, frayed rag, not looking very pleased with the activity.

Towering over many at the bar, the Caentoi easily measured seven and a half feet, bearing the looks typical of his race, with the feral semblance to a jackal. A wound had been inflicted on the Caentoi many years prior, and now he bore across his right eye a jagged scar that extended from the forehead to the jaw, leaving the flesh beneath without fur and puckered up, which made him seem as if he were perpetually squinting the eye. The resulting expression only granted the Caentoi the perfect look for the job, because every time he looked at someone, it seemed as though he were glaring in reproach. As a result, the fierce-looking Caentoi kept his

bar tranquil most of the times by avoiding unnecessary scuffles, save for the occasional dispute over drunken games of dice and such minor things.

Having spent some months already in Delve by then, and having met plenty of Caentoi in that time, the girl ventured with her hands in her pockets to the bar, placing herself at a distance from the bartender in a stool. Minutes elapsed before the man trundled toward her, inquiring what she wanted in a rather foul mood as he continued, still, to polish the same glass. Risking being liked or forever hated and perhaps even be kicked out of the bar, she dared use the scarce Caentoi words she had picked up in the port city.

The Caentoi speak a language that is suited well to the way they look, with a rough, guttural and outright animalistic intonation to each of the words. Were one to hear a conversation being had in a hushed fashion, it would probably sound like nothing more than a quiet growling, at least to the ears of an untrained listener. The language is hard to learn for outsiders, something about the muscles of the throat the Caentoi people say, and the resonation accomplished by the jackal-like build, and it is rare to find one who will not have to pause frequently for air, and wind up with a sore throat after the deed.

So how the reckless Leena managed to do it and not completely insult the Caentoi with her butchered up pronunciation was beyond explanation even for her. Perhaps the bartender had found the matter entertaining, because after all, it was an amusing spectacle to see some regular human girl try and growl out asking for something as silly and ordinary as whiskey.

Lucky for Leena, the Caentoi was fairly good-natured in mocking her impasse, and after pouring her some whiskey in the fruitlessly polished glass, remained nearby chatting for quite some time, only breaking away a few paces to refill other drinks. By the time the darkness had grown to its deepest outside the rundown tavern, the Syssin had already gained plenty information from the Caentoi, much more than she would have expected, and had learned quite a few more words in the language.

It was about that time that Leena remembered what she had really come into that place for. Surely it hadn't been for the drink, because there was nothing much outstanding about the whiskey she was sipping, it tasted like an old brew, its aging overly humid by the taste, and it reminded her of the far eastern shores of Sapience. The place itself wasn't the cause either, obviously, for the bar looked more and more untended the more intoxicated she became with the alcohol, and neither she had come for the company or a lesson in the Caentoi language, so at last she blurted out to the jackal-looking bartender about the Praexi she had been told about.

To her surprise, the bartender pointed readily to a table in a corner, where she immediately caught sight of a group of Praexi over some pints exceedingly large to their size, from which they were, however, drinking without looking offset.

A girl that journeyed Albedos

The Praexi are indeed quite a small race, and the one Leena was looking for was not an exception to this particular rule. To her, the group looked all the same, indistinguishable there at the table, and she watched them for some time from the bar, attempting to glean some information from the exchange that to her, from that distance, looked hardly of any significance or consequence.

They were playing some kind of game with cards, and all she could glimpse of it from there by the counter was the various cards flying back and forth between the group of Praexi, changing from one small hand to another at a pace too quickly for her to follow completely. In the middle of the table, she saw as she approached slowly, attempting to make as little noise as possible, the wagers that had been made by the group of players. Some gold and silver coins, a brass pocket watch and, at the very top of the pile of other less valuable-looking things, an Ylem crystal, glinting faintly in the dim light of the dark locale.

The Ylem energy can harden into crystallized forms, and shards of these Ylem crystals are a form of currency used in Delve, but also useful for other things, such as concocting brews and fashioning religious icons that can be imbued with the essence of a deity. Whatever they are used for, Ylem shards are not all that common, and coming into a whole crystal is a decently valuable thing, and would surely be a desirable win in a game of cards or otherwise.

Leena remained in consideration of this for quite some time, her thoughts wandering away in remembrance of things past. It was the first year of the war then, and really it had just recently all burst some months before that night, about a year after the introduction of Ylem sensors and probes.

Back then, Leena had already come to Albedos, when she heard of the first brawl. She had been planning the journey for long, and had already taken care of settling her businesses throughout Sapience, and delegating other matters that could not be forego to some of her circle. Bloodloch had initiated the war, or so she had heard in the news that reached her thanks to travelers visiting Albedos from Sapience, by ambushing an Enorian HYPE group to wrest a hot spot from them near the Great Rock. After that, not much time passed before the number of visitors from Sapience began to dwindle in Delve, and it became obvious to others that the war would rage for long, but she didn't believe these things.

Initially she had thought that perhaps a diplomatic solution might be found, and for some time she didn't care to worry herself about the war. She had seen other wars in the past, and since the fight over land wasn't a novelty she figured this one war, too, would pass eventually. How wrong she was that night when seeing the Praexi play cards, but how was she to know? She had hardly thought of Sapience since arriving to Albedos.

Leena liked the sea, so the port city of Delve, not only because it held so much promise for business and profit, but also because it was on the coast, by the ocean, was indeed a mighty attractive place for her, to the point where she felt almost beckoned by the city. A close friend

told her not to go waste her time in Albedos, for her dealings were thriving in Sapience, but to her the opportunity was too good to pass up. Perhaps she saw in the lands something that others didn't, because often she wondered why not more had come already to make their home in Delve.

She rented a small cottage in a poorer district near the docks, a little house that had been decently kept by an old lady who had now long since decided to go live with one of her daughters instead. The place was small, with a common area of sparse furnishing, a kitchen on the side and a bedroom on the back. The space was sufficient for Leena, however, what with being on her own and, on top of that, having few prized possessions that she cared to take on her travels. In truth, beyond being as astute as she was, she was really quite simple in her living, the result of her upbringing more than likely.

Now, watching the Praexi, she remembered her father and how he had taught her to play cards, and dice, and many other games. Leena had been an only child, and so she had been her father's shadow every time he was working at home, and he was happy to have her near, his precious little girl. While her mother was a perfect picture of femininity, she had always preferred the more entertaining activities he father dallied in, such as working wood and camping away from home. Leena's mother was forgiving, and so she forgave her husband for leading her daughter into more masculine matters.

By the time Leena was eighteen, she had sworn off dresses, much to her mother's dismay, and had refused completely to be set up with any of the boys her mother had bothered to seek out for her. At last frustrated, both daughter and mother recognized they would not ever do any 'girly' things together, as Leena would say, and settled for an amicable relationship worrying about family alone. Leena went on to learn the trade of the Syssin the following year, and from then on spiraled somewhat away from her family, worrying only to write home once in a while, to her father and mother in the village of Arbothia.

She had come quite a long way from the village of Arbothia, and games of cards wasn't something she took part in quite as often nowadays, so when the group of Praexi began to pick up the cards to stash them away, and the pile of bets was taken by the winner, it took her more than just a moment to react, and when she did, she lurched forward to the table of Praexi, effectively startling the whole bunch and other of the bar's patrons. Even the Caentoi bartender threw her a suspicious look, and had she not befriended the rugged-looking man previously, likely there would have been more action taken for the fuss.

In a passing thought she blames the musty whiskey for her outburst, and, composing herself quickly, she begins to explain that she is searching for a particular Praexi man, and retells the whole story of meeting the shop tender, of inquiring about his goods and a certain whirring gadget and of coming to the bar. For the first time in months, the Syssin girl felt awkward and inappropriate, and likely, she thought, she had made the biggest fool of herself and spouted the most incoherent story to the Praexi group about how she got there in the first place.

Meeting a Praexi

But what was the Syssin girl doing now in the Bloodlochian Keeper's office? How did she go from a dark alley bar in Delve to a bureau deep beneath the Vashnar Mountains in Sapience? Many things transpired between the meeting of the Praexi researcher and the Dreikathi man in question, for this happened long before she came back to Sapience, to observe the vampire Keeper known as Elise.

Firstly, it turned out, the Praexi researcher was no man, like she had assured herself. From between the group of card players emerged a significantly smaller figure, and a feminine voice that dared her to call her a man again, this as she pocketed her winnings in a leather bag while flashing a grin of many sharp, triangular teeth. Really, she thought, the Praexi appearance could easily scare a young child that has never seen one, but shaking that idea off, she quickly sobered up and engaged the woman in conversation, offering a drink or food, perhaps, if she desired.

To Leena, the Caentoi seemed as if he might doze off at the bar any time, now, when she and the Praexi researcher decided to, at last, leave the bar. The night was well on course toward dawn then, and the two women had been chatting at a corner table all night long. The bartender had refilled their drinks several times, and his own, too, and now, visibly inebriated, could hardly keep awake to watch over his locale.

Few people remained in the bar by then, hardly a habitual drunkard slumped along the bar counter, and other less shady characters in the remaining tables. Leena's interest had been piqued by the Praexi's work, for the little woman was adept in many things, but what she had dedicated that year to was the business of the Ylem probes and sensors, to procure alternatives, she had said, for reasons of cost and accessibility – why should anyone be deprived of the opportunity to own a HYPE?

On the other hand, Leena had proven to be an interesting enough subject for the Praexi, and, indeed, she had had so much to drink that she had been letting on things that, more often than not, didn't care to share in the least, for fear of compromising any of her affairs. The Praexi was also, like Leena, an ambitious woman, and when ambition meets opportunity, it is likely that great things can be done, to some extent or another.

The Praexi woman had learned that night that Leena was very interested in traveling the continent of Albedos, despite knowing its dangers, and she knew just how to arrange for these sorts of things, provided the right incentive. And so, the short-statured researcher invited Leena the next day to her workshop, so she might see, as she told the Syssin, all the wondrous things she was working on.

Late in the afternoon the next day, when she had recovered from the night of heavy drinking, Leena wandered past the Praexi quadrant she had visited the day prior in another direction, away from the alley of the shoddy bar, twisting around narrow streets and toward a dead end

where a large building stood, looking buffeted by the passage of time. Inside it, the Praexi woman had kept a bustling workshop for years now, and intelligent and adept as she was, she had filled it with dozens of inventions of her own, and imitations and modifications of others that had been released to the public in times past.

The most recent gem of her work was the imitation probe, a forged HYPE of sort that she had made from steel, iron and other materials she had gotten a hold of, because the venantium had proven to be as plenty expensive as it was rare, and even willing to pay, the ore was so scarce, that waiting for the promised deliveries would have put her back by months. The Praexi fluttered around Leena as she explained this many things, hopping around the various work tables and benches with small bursts of flapping from her wings.

And after lengthy hours of showing her around, it was time to strike a deal of some kind, and not only the Praexi thought this, because Leena saw in the many inventions, and specially in the Ylem probes, an opportunity for profit far greater than in any of her other affairs back in Sapience. Now, almost at the end of the first year of the Ylem war in that continent, she had learnt from her sources that the demand for probes was far greater than what the official workshops of Delve could provide and, surely, she told the Praexi, together they could solve that issue, and become quite wealthy in the process.

Leena would arrange for her tradesmen and women to handle the exportation of the unassembled probes, passing them as more menial items, toys and decorations, or whatever they could package them as, and, in exchange, the Praexi would part with a small percentage of the profit, and would compromise to arranging her travel through the continent of Albedos. At last, Leena had found a way to fulfill her desire of traveling the foreign continent, and her imagination drifted thinking of all the marvels she might be able to see then.

So excited she was then, that she wouldn't have suspected that the Praexi had something even more thrilling in stock for her, because as she thought of languages she might learn, peoples she might meet and foods she would taste, the researcher revealed to her the scoop of things, something she hadn't told anyone else about her work.

The Praexi had been experimenting extensively with Ylem probes in the past months. She had unassembled a legitimate HYPE and had realized that some minor modifications could be made here and there in the core structure and, having accomplished that, she had begun to use the probe not as an extraction tool, but also as a means to inject and pump substances through it. Unlaced through a hot spot, the Praexi told Leena, she had witnessed water be shot through the probe, vaporizing to spread to great lengths; and then, she had tried other things, alcohol, oils, and thicker, heavier substances and mixes.

This, the Praexi emphasized, could mean a major breakthrough in the research of Ylem and the Leylines. Likely, she said, if things could be injected into the Leylines, they could have effects greater than ever suspected, for benefits unseen before. This intrigued Leena, and although she never knew much of Ylem and the copious work that had been done surrounding it, this struck her as something worthy of pursuing. And so, it was agreed that the Praexi would

continue her research, utilizing Leena's profit also to invest in such endeavors, and when the Syssin girl returned from her journey through Albedos, hopefully the experiments would have gone further and then the two would make gain from it.

Way beyond the north

Eetreya is known among her closest for having a strong character and an unbreakable determination. She has been called stubborn many times, and likely the adjective suits her very well in many instances, and is probably the adjective that crossed the mind of Moryz when the woman vanished from his side, saying that she would head north, sickened and tired with the war, and seeking refuge from what, to her, seemed like an imminent Dreikathi invasion.

Eetreya is a northern woman, despite not quite looking like one, for her appearance really is as untamed as Sertep judged it to be when she saw her striding up the hills in the Dry plains. The looks are a consequence of decades spent in the wilds, living off the lands and caring little for civilization or etiquette, and much less for any sort of excessive grooming beyond strictly necessary.

Born and raised in Spinesreach, to native Spirean folk, Eetreya grew jaded with the life of the city at a young age and, as she explained once or twice, the whole thing seemed unnatural to her. That is how she would wind up venturing the world at seventeen, searching for that comfortable niche to some, where all is waived save the imperious need to protect the wilds from encroaching city men and women. A noble purpose to some, and outdated to others, but whatever the case, a very tangible reality where the Duiran Council has formed, with groups of these likeminded individual making it their own task to see that the wilds be not be harmed.

Long it was since Eetreya parted ways with the Duiran Council, for something that she referred to as an unsalvageable relationship with it, but living there for so long built most of that strong character of hers, and marked her forever, unable to ever return to life in an old-fashioned city. How she wound up leading soldiers belonging to one of these old-fashioned cities is a topic that is sensitive to her, and has been mentioned before in this story, but now, free of that burden that she could not refuse to bear, at least for some time, she marches north, farther even than Spinesreach, a place that, to some lay people, is the northern limit of the continent, leaving whatever lies beyond as too dangerous or uncomfortable to traverse.

But in truth there is much more to the north than Spinesreach; the land is inhospitable, this is a fact rarely questioned by any, but still there are many tribes there, and people thrive in the north. The tundra extends far into the northern reaches of the continent, a landscape of white, and ice and cold, but populated no less by animals well-adjusted to these harsh conditions. Once upon a time, Eetreya's mother used to tell her, there lived a Spirean girl that one day traveled to the tundra with her father. The girl, her mother told her, had been taken to one of

the tribes, that of the Sinnetok, in a rite of passage of sorts that she was unaware had to be submitted to, and so she became hopelessly lost.

The story her mother had told her continued with the girl lost in the tundra for days, having no food to survive on, until finally she stumbled into a cave and, delirious, began having uncontrollable hallucinations about many things. High up into the sky the girl soared in her unraveled state of mind, nearly famished, and saw the lands wide in their glory. The girl hadn't seen the world and so she was awed, and when she thought herself about to succumb, a miracle occurred. A man stumbled into her refuge, seeking such in the middle of a snow storm, and when the blizzard subsided, he took the girl back to his own village in the ice, the village of Nuunva.

Eventually, her mother used to tell Eetreya about the continuation of the story, the girl and the man had undergone the rites of unity, akin to marriage, and the girl had given birth to a child. This infant was Eetreya's grandmother, she had assured her, and that was the history of her nearest ancestors.

Nonsense, she thought of it sometimes, but still Eetreya felt, and she knew, deep in her heart, that the tundra and Nuunva had always called to her, by causing something in her gut that she could not describe, they told her always to go there, an instinct, to put a name on it. Perhaps the story was just an old tale her mother had made up or perhaps even picked up from her own mother, but no matter the case, she now traversed the tundra on way to Nuunva, bearing in company only her speckled steed.

The Indyuk are a tightly-knit tribe in the tundra, inhabiting the glacial village of Nuunva, and remaining apart from the world for decades on end, and still quite reserved in welcoming strangers to even speak to them. Eetreya hasn't got the slightest clue of what she will find there, if anything of importance, but following her instinct, she has determined she must go there, if at least to investigate. Had these people also been found by the war? Surely they had, she thinks, because after all, the Leylines are inescapable, but she hopes still that they keep apart; and whether she finds something of value there to the times and events that pass is hardly important to her, in a way, for she merely wishes to get away from the war, if temporarily, and spread warning to those whom are presumably her ancestors, about the impending dangers of the world.

Of these many things Eetreya kept on thinking in her journey to Nuunva, when she was ambushed on the icy, natural bridge that, to cartographers, marks the boundary between southern and western tundra.

Ambushed - of course she was going to get ambushed, what was she thinking, going out alone in the middle of the tundra? Or in the middle of anywhere really; these were complicated times, and she hadn't been exactly careful. She should have taken a more secluded path, but she was hasty, she wanted to get there fast. These things she thinks of for a flash of a second, when her side is struck with the blunt end of a hunting spear, knocking her off her horse to roll helplessly down the rough, snowed slope.

She thinks she will die. What was she thinking? This she reiterates to herself again, and again. What a complete fool. The man that assaults her is tall and heavily-garbed, likely someone that has lived in the tundra for long, with furs to keep himself warm and a spear, she glimpses from the ground, that is sharp enough to pierce the thick skins and plating of any of the hardened animals living in the tundra. Had she been hit with the pointed end, it would have gone straight to the other side of her, like a skewer through a piece of meat.

And he comes near now, she is frightened and not in the least prepared for a fight; her horse neighs loud near, agitated, and all she can manage by the time the man is about to reach her is to spring to her feet and push her furry hood back, so she might at the very least get a better look at the attacker. There is a warning issued in a foreign language as he grows nearer, a warning and a threat at the same time, but she knows this language, it is the tongue of the Indyuk, and while she is not a fluent speaker, she knows the words, for it is what her ancestors spoke, or so her mother had told her. Not only had she told her, luckily, but she had taught her too, and it had never come in handier than at that precise point in time and in that place.

The Indyuk and Nuunva

It is hard to say which of the two is more startled, the snow-dusted Eetreya or the spear-wielding Indyuk, for they merely stare at each other at length, both defensive, and as Eetreya's steed breaks the silence with an upset huff, the man lowers his weapon, offering a hushed apology. The blow of the spear is alive in Eetreya's side, and as her posture relaxes, she can feel a reliving of the hit, almost as strong as before.

Reaching for the reins of her horse, and grabbing at her side to ease the pain, she begins to tell the man about her journey to the tundra thus far and about the many dangers she hopefully left behind in the south. She is headed toward Nuunva, she tells him, their village in the ice, and hopes to find refuge there for some time, perhaps until the war is through, for better or worse. She has only been to Nuunva once, when her grandmother took her, being barely a child of six or seven years of age.

She remembers her clearly, as a freckled blonde of green eyes much alike herself, and a Rajamalan of mottled fur, like a rare golden leopard, and in many other forms and races. She was old by the time she was born, but she had transcended her common human form like many others, to become one of the Idreth. The Idreth are mortals who have mastered their own forms, managing, without any divine assistance or essence, to weave their own energy into something more, something greater than just mere mortals.

But her grandmother was not just an Idreth, that much her mother had told Eetreya. The old woman had also been a shape shifter, an ability she had acquired through experimentation with some obscure magic in the island of Asper, an island of ice and shadow far off the coast of the tundra. She had witnessed the shape shifting many times, explosions of light and color and

energy, leaving the Idreth different on every occasion.

Dabbling in the ice and magic and shadow, her grandmother had produced an artifact, a gem imbued with a remnant of her transcendence, forever bonding the energies of the island to her, and allowing her to shift forms at whim, by merely focusing her will into contact with the gem. Her intentions, Eetreya reckons, were seemingly good, for she was never linked to any dubious affairs, and though the gem was forged in a place of shadow and corruption, it was something that, apparently, she managed to keep at bay, for such things can never come without at least a trace of their origin.

Many times her grandmother had told her stories of the tundra, of the Indyuk, and of the island of Asper, being subtle in the details that she let on to the one that was merely an innocent infant then. She had told Eetreya that in their blood was a call to the north, and that not only her, but her own mother and grandfather descended from the Indyuk, and perhaps the bloodline went back even further, but of that she couldn't be sure, for likely the information had been lost to the passage of time.

It had taken her grandmother too long to learn this, she had also said, because her own mother had kept it a secret for some obscure reason, and only long after her death had she discovered the truth in a hidden-away journal in the confines of Spinesreach. But regardless of the secrets, she had felt it too, her grandmother had journeyed many times to the tundra, saying that it soothed her, that it tempered her; and in her later years, when she no longer amused her by shifting into a dashing Rajamalan or a clumsy Troll, she had lived there, making her home in the Alaqsii inlet, near the village of Nuunva.

Since that time she hadn't been back in Nuunva, despite, many times before, having wished to visit the village, and she could think of no worse time to do it now, in the middle of a war consuming Sapience, but she was tired, and couldn't keep further with the pace of battle, at least not without a pause. Thus fearing no shame or retribution, she came now to a place that in her mind was a haven, as much she told the Indyuk man, who listened attentively while he led her down dips and dales in the ice, hoping to keep the both out of plain sight in the walk to the village.

A journey through the ice is a treacherous thing at times, especially when trying hard to keep out of sight. In a landscape that is white and pale blue and plain, devoid of the vegetation and landmarks typical to other places, not only it is easy to be spotted, for camouflage is tricky, but one might also encounter unexpected things around the next turn, or behind what seems like a simple block of ice. In Eetreya's favor, however, the Indyuk knows the land well, and after not many hours, they arrive to the concealed recess that grants passage to the village of Nuunva.

No matter how long it had been since her last visit, what Eetreya sees upon exiting the passage is not what she remembers from her childhood. The ground crunches beneath her weight and what was once slick ice has now cracked and melted, beginning to seep into the dirt to form a thick mud that sticks to anything that comes into contact with it. The icy walls too, look

cracked, and although the Indyuk says nothing on the matter, she anticipates news she would rather not hear.

Indyuk lore says that Nuunva was given to the tribe by the figure of Tonrar. It is said that, once, the Indyuk were awakened to the world, and they had minds and they had spirits, and body, but they lacked a home then to keep safe. The tale says that with a breath Tonrar revealed Nuunva to the Indyuk, a place that he had fashioned himself, raising the cavern of the glacier so that it might bask in sunlight, and smoothing the ice so they might make homes in it, later becoming himself one with the ice.

The Indyuk say that Tonrar is a sort of angry spirit or deity, and although he became one with the ices, he remains there, watching, and one can still hear him rumble in displeasure at times. Lately, the Indyuk man tells Eetreya as they traverse an icy tunnel, Tonrar has been rumbling more frequently, the elder says, and Nuunva is not what it once was. The frozen ice passages that were once smooth and filled with haunting shadows and illusions have begun to melt somewhat down, becoming more jagged and more clear to be seen, no longer possessing that mysterious air they once had, to confound outsiders.

As they head on to the elder's hut, she can see more of the debacle; the Indyuk gestures overhead to the ceiling, and explains that where there was once a smooth vault now there is a new, broken skylight, its edges dripping with minuscule frozen icicles. He elucidates that the weather has been off, in a sense, hotter throughout some days, with steep temperature drops the next few, making the glacier walls and vault shift erratically.

And then, he adds further, there have been the rumblings. Tonrar is upset, that is for certain, he tells her, and the glacier has been threatening to unravel, they think, perhaps because Tonrar is abandoning them to their fate in these times of war. About a month ago, he says, the glacier began vibrating strangely, cracking it finely but profusely. In some passages chunks of the ice have detached or collapsed, and the earth trembles often beneath their feet.

The disrepair of Nuunva

Oriotok, the Indyuk man, tells her that the tremors began also about a month ago. Just few days before the new moon, he says, a scuffle had broken out in the Alaqsii inlet, near the Widow's crack, something about southerners with their shiny Ylem sticks – how the Indyuk referred to the HYPEs that, indeed, had reached some of the most remote places in the continent.

Oriotok is a simple Indyuk man, Eetreya judges, tall and tanned from spending hours on end out on the snow on the hunt. With his sun bleached hair gathered in a waist-length braid, and ice blue eyes, the way he expresses himself and the rough gesture of his calloused hands make Eetreya guess that perhaps he is more than just a hunter, and maybe a warrior of the tribe. She has heard about the Ice Caverns, a construction of tunnels beneath the glacier, also the

work of Tonrar, which house wyrms and other creatures of the more shadowed ice, and suspects Oriotok has made a journey or two there.

She knows that to brave the Ice Caverns one must first prove worthy of the task, both in the hunt and in wit, one of the most well-known Indyuk traditions, which even some outsiders take part in when they are allowed. Whatever the case, the man starts looking more important in Eetreya's eyes; he has been telling her all these things quite eloquently after all. Among these many things he shares with her, there is also the fact that many animals have become scarcer with the passage of the war. The gyrfalcons soar higher than where their spears can reach them, and even the lemmings care to scuttle about with less noise. Not long before, he says, he saw an Orgyuk trundling way further north than one usually finds these animals.

Three days before her arrival, Oriotok says, a group of Indyuk took apart their leather huts, deciding it was time to go, and journeyed out from Nuunva, saying that they would be going even further north, because likely, Tonrar was to come unleash their fury on them all very soon, and they wished no part in being crushed by the collapsing of the glacier. An entire clan it was that left, from the eldest of the family to the youngest toddlers; it was a sad day, Oriotok reckons, and to him, even the ice seemed to mourn the departure.

Eetreya had thought little during her journey from Spinesreach to Nuunva about the impact the war had had on the wilds, but now she remembered more vividly about the Vintal Glade and its missing dryads, and the eerie silence of the Ithmian forests and of the Dry Plains as she journeyed north with the remainder of her soldiers. Thinking of it more thoroughly, indeed the tundra had seem whiter than other times, and less animals had crossed her path as she got closer to the glacier.

Again, she found it all too strange, because animals and other creatures had certainly weathered other wars without much consequence – this she reiterated to herself, like she had thought when at the Vintal Glade. What was happening with these Ylem probes? Surely there was something about them that was beyond a mere extraction, because that happened all the time. Was it the magnitude of the steal? Was the land itself complaining about the mortals robbing it of its energy, or was it something else? She continues to think these many things, not quite listening to some other matters that the Indyuk tells her about, guessing that maybe there are 'things' in the probes and the improved extraction process that is foreign to the Leylines, something intrusive and altering.

At last Oriotok welcomes Eetreya into the village elder's dwelling, warning her that his father is aged and sick, and will likely not see the next new moon. Then the realization strikes her, about the simple looking Indyuk man, and comes to the obvious conclusion that he is the elder's son, and indeed must be wise and well-trained.

The elder's hut is larger than those of the rest of the tribe; it extends taller and wider, and is divided in two sections. On the front there is a receiving area, where a young girl looking to be in her twenties welcomes them inside, not without a questioning glance to her fellow Indyuk. Mugyik hides line the floor entirely, and the girl appears to be cooking some form of soup over

a small stove as Oriotok briefly tells her about the foreigner. On the slanted hide walls Eetreya can see arranged rustic tapestries describing various scenes of Indyuk life, most about hunting in the tundra, and this makes her think fleetingly about her grandmother.

After some exchanges, they head on to the back of the hut, behind thick flaps of hanging red cloth that serve to provide some privacy. There, reclining in an improvised pile of cushions and fur is a very old man. His white hair is gathered in a single lengthy braid that falls on the side of his right shoulder, and he appears to be having an upsetting dream, for he shifts and appears to grab things with one hand, to the point of appearing feverish, sweaty brow and all.

Eetreya regards him with worry, and feels, for the first time in months, something different, something that the war hasn't allowed her to experience in a long time. A sense of compassion fills her, and she is certain the old man will die soon, and the Indyuk man, the young man that ambushed her with a well-placed spear, likely will be charged with a responsibility greater than what the elders of Nuunva have had to face in many decades.

She can see the worry in his face too, and is offset that, instead of going to wake the old man from such a dream, he goes to stoke the fire in the brazier nearby. But the truth is, and this Eetreya does not know, that many tribes, not only the Indyuk, have placed a significant value to dreams, considering them, some, premonitions, warnings, or even metaphorical advice from one's subconscious or from the divine, and it would be tremendously disrespectful of Oriotok to wake his father.

So when she approaches to lightly touch the old man's shoulder hoping to rid him of such an unsettling sleep, there is a swift hand that prevents her from coming near, with a look so stern that it reminded her, indeed, of her grandmother. That look she would give her, when her mischief had gone too far; her gaze could indeed become icy like the winds of the tundra, and for a flashing instant, she gains an insight into the old woman of her childhood that she had not had before, something about how her character had come to be.

Like this they stare at each other for what feels like several minutes, and he takes her aside from the old man's bed, whispering about the significance of dreams to them, the Indyuk. In the middle of such an explanation they are when the old man awakens on his own, calling his son's name and stirring, gesturing for closeness with a wrinkled, feeble hand.

The dream of a dying Indyuk

Beseeking the blessing of Akkyla, the Dreamer of the Indyuk, the Creator in a way, the old man begins to tell of his dream to Oriotok and Eetreya without any introductory preamble, only briefly gazing over the foreigner girl with a sense of tacit recognition. There is calmness in his voice that unsettles the younger man, and as the two seat at the elder's feet in silence, listening, she catches glimpses of the unease in his eyes.

There is snow all around; the plains of the tundra and the mountains far in the horizon are obscured by a blizzard. He is flying in the storm, the old man tells them, and he can see naught but his own form, suspended in flight and clad in his finest faex furs, as if he were presiding a ceremony or celebrating something. The storm rages endlessly and the winds are furious in his ears, as if the skies were berating him, confronting him for something that he has done wrong.

Like this he continues, for what feels like hours on end, floating, flying, unable to see, effectively blinded by the flurry of snowflakes that swirl violently in the storm. He thinks he is hopeless, but he prays to Akkyla and Tonrar and Mupisii no less, he prays to them and to the others, and he prays to the snows and the Mugyik and the Orgyuk; he prays to every being and spirit in the tundra, that they might cease punishing him and his beloved Nuunva.

And at last the storm clears, the sun shines bright over him, rendering him sightless for instants, but then he recovers and he can see. Far below he can see Nuunva, the glacier in the tundra. The beauty of the glacier fills him with joy, and he knows that within his people thrive and are also joyful. Around him gyrfalcons soar, catching the lighter winds with their winging, and their cries are like music, keeping Akkyla, the Creator, soothed in his sleep.

At last he has found repose in his fitful dream, he tells the younger Indyuk, reaching to lay an aged hand over his, but he understand this is only the calm before the greater storm, and he is not wrong; as his dream continues, he sees approaching a great wyrm in the horizon, and it soars past him, sending a gust that sends him tumbling through the air and dizzies him, leaving him stunned for many seconds.

When he recovers, he can see the Alaqsii inlet in its whole extension, he can see the Widow's Crack and the shore, and the many ice floes drifting – and so far they drift, and the waters churn and he knows something has gone wrong. When his attention returns to Nuunva, to the glacier, he can see as the wyrm dives for it in a straight line, crashing headfirst into the vaulted ceiling of the ice village, to fracture it in two. First there is as small fissure, but then, the fissure grows and branches and cracks, and Nuunva, he tells them with dismay in his debilitated voice: Nuunva is forever broken in half.

And then he dips through the air, because he can no longer fly, deafened by the screams of his suffering people below. The Gods have punished him, he is sure, and he can fly never again, and he will crash – and he will die, that is for certain. On he falls and falls, and before he can hit the snowed ground, he sees in the distance an island in shadows, and dark storm clouds float overhead it, and lightning strikes the shores and the trees and the ices of the island.

Before he can make contact with the rapidly approaching snowed ground, he awoke, he tells them, his eyes, milky with age, floating between Eetreya and Oriotok. There is little time, he warns; Tonrar rumbles, He rumbles so very loudly now, the old man says, he has sent a wyrm to destroy Nuunva, because they have been bad, they have done something wrong, the Indyuk. Something has crept into the ices, the old man says, something is lurking around the glacier, and Nuunva must be evacuated, and no longer do they deserve to call it their home.

He tells them to scatter the people, nowhere is safe, he adds, and it is best to not be in the same place. Separated, this one time, they will be better; they might have a chance, each on their own. To Eetreya, it seems as though the old man might succumb to the illness of his age any time, and she dare not guess the years the man has seen, for likely she would underestimate the number. She has seen death like this, so very close, and so sudden, even though the moment has been announcing itself loudly to the winds. She remembers – she has seen and experienced this moment before, and compassion wells in her heart once more, knowing that the younger Indyuk is not ready to part with his father.

There is a creaking sound at that moment, the sound of something displaced readjusting, finding a more snug fit, and then, the ground trembles beneath them. Immediately their ears are reached by a commotion outside, some screams and hurried feet moving through the ice, echoing in the remainder of the vaulted ceiling of the glacier. The old man urges them to go, it is time, he says, and there is conviction in Oriotok's eyes, Tonrar speaks for sure, he is warning them now, perhaps just whispering through the ice, but if there is truth in his father's dream, soon Nuunva will be no more, and likely it is time to scatter, to drift away like the ice floes.

To be cunning like the faex, the old man continues to tell them, he is responsible, he is his son, after all, and he must be smart, perhaps remain near, to not go far – but to go, no matter what. Above all, he must not worry about him, he will go 'downstairs', he says, to meet his last match in the Ice Caverns, he will find the strength like his own father did, and will not dare break tradition, else Tonrar's voice booms sooner.

Oriotok needs no more arguments. He is a born and raised Indyuk, and he is an obedient son, and a hunter and an honorable warrior. With a command in his voice and his demeanor, he tells Eetreya to gather what she can from the tent, following his father's instructions, and to then help outside, the people will be unsettled and disoriented, for sure, but they must leave the glacier at once. Tonrar rumbles louder and louder, he tells her, and there is the utmost urgency to the evacuation.

A close encounter

Months before, a Syssin girl from Arbothia had made a mistake that could never be remedied. Mortals can be foolish at times, that is a known and irrevocable truth, but sometimes, the missteps they might fall into are truly of disproportionate repercussions. Leena is such an astute girl, that it would be unthinkable of her to manage too much of a slip up, but that can never really be predicted, for people act in the most unexpected ways at times, when exposed to the perfect combination of circumstances.

Leena had been traveling for long now through the continent of Albedos, careful in her encounters, like the Praexi researcher had warned her to be. Past the Dramedo Crags, she had come into the vast and harsh Bonro desert. The Praexi researcher, with the aid of the Caentoi bartender, had sent her off in a trip with a caravan of Caentoi merchants, to fulfill her wish of knowing the lands of Albedos, in return for the help she had provided to the Praexi.

Instructed to never give herself away unless in the company of the bartender's trusted Caentoi friend, the girl learned to attire herself not only like one belonging to the desert, but like a reserved, perhaps even mysterious lady, as some judged. The Bonro is a place where the days are exceedingly hot, and the nights are just as contrastingly cold, so the proper clothing becomes just as important as water for survival.

The Caentoi, on the one part, have the advantage that their sleek fur coats keep them insulated from the extreme heat and sand during the day, and serve to warm them during the nights of the Bonro. For Leena, however, the solution to the desert's whimsical weather came in the form of layers. Linens and cotton she was attired with – loose baggy pants, airy tunics, and just as many pieces of overlaying long vests, robes, shawls and, to top it all off, the Caentoi's wife set her up with a variety of scarves, with which she taught her to fashion turbans and veils.

All in all, getting dressed and undressed proved a lengthy task for Leena on a daily basis, but the results proved worthy of the task, for soon she realized the clothing served her well in her journey through the desert. The Bonro desert reminded her somewhat of the Mhojave in Sapience, but there was something overwhelming about the place, for it stretched for far lengthier miles and burned fierier in the sun. And still, the people of Albedos had managed to make a living in the area for several generations, and so she visited not only the town of Hatshero, the closest to the City of Delve past the Helban settlement, but also smaller temporary camps set up by traveling tribes.

The Caentoi, and especially his wife, proved to be welcoming hosts, and when there was no risk of outsiders catching sight of her for too long, she would ride a desert Orych with the both near the front of the caravan. Truly a refined lady by her looks, Leena learned much about the Caentoi from the woman. Silks and jewelry, although understated, weighed down her hands, and she told her about how her husband had amassed considerable wealth throughout his nomadic desert travels, which had been happening long before they had married.

His caravan, with dozens of Orych and Striders, great beasts suited to the desert climate, and other large animals of burden, would move through the desert like a minuscule village, carrying countless goods to his customers, old and new. But the caravan was not only composed of servants and the Caentoi's apprentices and family, for, as the Caentoi explained to Leena one day while riding, the region of Albedos beyond the Free City of Delve and the Dramedo Crags bore the ever present danger of the Dreikathi, and while, he admitted, among his costumers were some of this race, it was a necessary exchange to preserve, he said, the state of affairs, and continue to roam Albedos without resistance. Thus, the caravan also had amidst its numbers some Ursal mercenaries, weathered bear men skillful in scouting and, of course, combat, to safeguard the riches of the wealthy Caentoi.

The Ursal are a race from the northern part of the Albedos continent, rising like bear men that came from the tundra and the sea. Since the Dreikathi laid siege and brought war to the continent, it is said that many of the tribes disbanded, and that but one free outpost remains. Nowadays, some of the scattered Ursal might be found in the southern reaches of the continent as mercenaries, as is the case of the few that the Caentoi keeps in his service.

Leena had observed these Ursal men from afar with contained curiosity, and had often questioned the Caentoi's wife about them while they had tea in the evenings. Surprisingly, Leena had discovered, the boiling hot tea the Caentoi servants prepared, heavily spiced and aromatic, helped her temper in the desert climate, but that is all she had learned the afternoon they had been chatting, for the woman either did not know about the Ursal, or at the very least cared little to reveal what she did to the Syssin girl.

Leena continued to watch the Ursali from afar with a contained curiosity, but whatever dissimulation she attempted, it was beyond her usual skill at subterfuge, for not long passed before one of the men caught her in blatant observation. What was it about these men that fascinated her so? She attempted to come to a conclusion by merely observing harder than before, and while it had become evident to her that the Ursal knew she watched them, it didn't ever seem to her like they were perturbed or upset by the matter.

Nearly after two months of travel, far into the desert, the caravan had reached a small oasis. Many traveling groups took pause there, for the sight of vegetation and water is a rare commodity in such vast sands, and the Caentoi considered this an impassable opportunity like many others. The oasis was a varied place, and Leena saw there people of the likes she had not seen before. Tents were assembled to pass three nights at the site, and Leena was paired with one of the Caentoi's daughters, one she hadn't seen much of during the journey since the port city of Delve.

What Leena had not figured in her many distractions, was that the Ursal, having noticed the attention she was placing upon them, were returning the favor in kind. One in particular, had been witness to her use of her abilities as a Syssin, watching, with obvious awe, as the girl vanished from sight and into a state of phase. This state would allow Leena to roam the towns and camps freely, without fear of being seen and identified as a foreigner, and she would often disappear for hours at a time to explore and take in the nearer sights.

The caravan was scheduled to depart from the oasis on the early evening of the third day, and as travel was programmed for the duration of the night, it was customary for the group to rest for some hours after lunch, before resuming the journey along the established trade route. And so it was that after lunch that day, Leena had fallen prey to the heat and drowsiness induced by the meal, and had retired to her tent to sleep off the heaviness of the afternoon.

Many in the caravan slept, but the Caentoi merchant lingered awake, for before departing, he had agreed to meet a group of customers – Dreikathi clientele. Sleepless, the Caentoi awaited under the shade of a broad cloth parasol, a sunshade broad enough to accommodate a few people, of a bright crimson with gilded tassels. His daughter, a devoted one, waited on his father, refilling his drinking cup every so often.

At last the Dreikathi group had arrived, and they had come with the premise of settling accounts in order with the Caentoi merchant, whom was used to the Drakkenmont Empire's unfair taxation and fees on travel and trade. Being wealthy and not overly greedy, the Caentoi had kept the Dreikathi appeased for many years, reaching agreeable deals with the occasional introduction of appealing bribes in the form of luxury goods that would please the undesirable patrons.

That afternoon, seated beneath his crimson parasol, the Caentoi merchant saw, against the glare of the sun, as one of his Ursal men approached and took aside one of the Dreikathi. Clever enough to realize something amiss, the jackal-like man immediately sent off his daughter to warn Leena, so that she might conceal herself at once.

The escape

Little could the Caentoi have imagined about the exchange that was being had between his Ursal guard and the Dreikathi, for he hadn't the slightest idea about Leena's skills, or the fact that the Ursal had witnessed them being put to use. But keeping as calm as he could, or appearing to be, as he often did when dealing with Dreikathi, whom could easily unnerve others, he pretended to know nothing about the matter, and received the group of clients with the same serene air of cordiality he always used with all his customers.

With relief, he saw the exchange go by pacifically at first, with the usual bargaining on the fee for his passing through the oasis being the first item on the table for discussion. Not wanting to press his luck, the fee was agreed upon quickly, and a keg of fine spirits was thrown in to keep the relations at ease, but unlike other prior occasions, the lawfulness of his inventory was not the next thing in the agenda, and before he could protest, the Dreikathi that had been taken aside by the Ursal returned with a stomping stride, demanding to know where the foreigner was being kept.

Pretending to be confused, the Caentoi told the Dreikathi he hadn't a clue what foreigner they were talking about, for, as far as he knew, all the members of his caravan had been born in Albedos. He blabbered briefly about the pride of his clan and the Caentoi race, and attempted to sway the conversation to some imports he was expecting the next month, but the Dreikathi insisted, saying that the Ursal had said something about a girl possessing some sort of magic.

At a loss about what to do, the Caentoi next attempted to explain that there was a lady from Delve traveling with the caravan, whom most often kept to herself and merely followed with the group. Who she was and what she wanted in the Bonro he had not much of a clue, or so he told the Dreikathi, and after yapping about for as long as he could about when the girl would seat with his wife for tea, he noticed his patrons beginning to grow uneasy. Left with no other choice, for he knew the temper of some of his clientele to be ephemeral, he finally offered the Dreikathi to call for the lady in question, so they might be able to see that she posed no harm.

Meanwhile, the Caentoi's daughter had rushed to where Leena was sleeping as inconspicuously as she could manage, keeping a calm yet steady pace to the tent she had been sharing with the girl, so as to not call to her person any more attention than necessary. Leena awoke to the hushed voice of the Caentoi girl, startled and immediately confronted with a bag of things practically hurled at her face.

What was happening? Leena had been peaceful all along her journey, and suddenly, somebody was out for her, and to what purpose she didn't know. Having grown unused to the racket and the pace of an escape, it took Leena what she would later consider valuable moments to spring into action. Images of break outs past flashed through her mind, reminding her of the danger of a sluggish mind, and at last she found herself fully clad and shod, with her most valuable bag slung across the shoulders, and an opening on the back of the tent ready for her to pass.

Bidding a hurried farewell to the Caentoi girl, she snuck low past the tents, twisting between crates of goods and barrels of salted food and to the other side of the caravan, where Orych and Striders and the other animals had been gathered. Agile on her feet, but unfortunately not a very experienced rider, she struggled for minutes with the reins of a strider, for the Caentoi had devised complicated ties to at least delay the theft of their animals, keeping crouched and luckily out of sight until she managed to release the animal, immediately mounting the beast to leave the oasis.

In her benefit, the sun had begun to set when these events took place, and not a single soul but the Caentoi's daughter had been aware of the releasing of the riding animal and so, Leena got a head start on her escape, galloping quickly but uncertainly away, because for her, these lands were not only foreign but also strange, and direction was never the strongest of her abilities.

The Dreikathi had already begun searching the camp by the time Leena had made her escape, and eventually they came into the tent of the Caentoi's daughter, whom, by then, was pretending to be soundly asleep. With the rattling of her tent, she found herself falsely

awakening to the intrusive presence of a Dreikathi, the man stomping inside and turning things upside down in his impeccable uniform.

Outside, the Caentoi girl could see her father keeping as serene a semblance as she'd ever seen him put on, and acting startled by the intrusion, she grabbed a blanket and stumbled to go stand at her father's side. This had happened before, the two Caentoi thought at that time, for other reasons and with more or less different degrees of disgruntlement by the Dreikathi. They surely seemed upset this time, and they two watched in silence as they tore through the flaps of the tent. Sometimes, the Caentoi man thought, whatever wits the Dreikathi were claimed to have, certainly didn't reflect in their actions and behavior.

When the camp was fully searched, tents upturned, and ignorant servants questioned, it was time for new demands. The Dreikathi wanted to know why and how the girl had gotten away, and to this, the Caentoi had no answer to give them. This was not wholly a lie after all, for the Caentoi had merely issued a warning through his daughter to the girl, and, at last, the Dreikathi took the Ursal informer with them as proof of their authority, leaving with the closest person they could get next to Leena, for surely the Ursal knew things about her beyond what had already been said.

Relieved about the Dreikathi's departure, and about the new lacking of an Ursal mercenary he certainly could trust no more, the Caentoi ordered the caravan to pack up, so they could resume the journey as planned, if with a delay of an hour or two. Always having kept a keen eye over the whole of his possessions, especially when out traveling, the Caentoi noticed that night the lacking of one of his Striders, but said nothing to his wife or daughter, thinking that it might give Leena a chance against her persecutors, if she had any to begin with.

Lost in the Bonro

The sands of the Bonro were full of mirages in Leena's weary eyes. She had ridden for a night and a day, and then another night, and now, in the bright noon sun, she was certain she would not survive. She had ridden far, but to what place she did not know; she was tired and hungry, and the beast that carried her huffed with exhaustion and heat.

The mirages came and went before her, and the tenth time an oasis and water flashed before her eyes, she merely continued to urge her mount onward. Leena was lost, because despite having looked at the many maps, she knew not where the caravan had taken her. She didn't know either what direction the caravan had come from, and when she climbed atop the strider's back, she didn't even pause to consider where she was going – she merely went, panicked with the idea of facing the Dreikathi and knowing she must go far.

What would happen to her if they found her? At the point she was, she hardly cared anymore, for with how dizzy and disoriented she felt, likely she would faint any moment now, and her adventures would end right there and then, in the middle of nowhere, likely leaving her husk to be devoured by vultures or animals of prey. She thought of her parents as the Strider

dragged its hooves through the sand that appeared thicker with every step, spraying golden granules everywhere, and remembered she hadn't written to Arbothia in a long, long time.

It was time to write perhaps, surely she could write still, and she would tell them of her travels, of the few wonders of Albedos she had seen. She would tell them of when she became a Syssin, because she was so young, and had never really told them that story. She would write about her businesses in Sapience, and how successful she had been, because they ought to know what a great daughter they had. She would tell them of the Praexi shop tender, of the Caentoi bartender, of the Praexi researcher and how she helped her to travel Albedos, and of the Caentoi merchant and his wife and daughter that welcomed her.

So much she had to say, and she wished dearly to write to her parents. They were good parents, she judged at that moment, and she feebly felt inside her bag in search of pen and paper, with an imperious need to put what her life had been until then into words, so that they might know and never forget; above all, she feared dying without someone to remember her and her accomplishments. She began to feel hotter than ever then, the turban felt as if her head was being squeezed, and the veil she had thrown so hastily over her face suffocated her. She would die without air, she reckoned, and with a heaving effort, she ripped the silken veil off her face.

Useless, she thought it. What point was there to the veil if she was dying of heat? And what purpose was to the turban, and the linen robe and the cotton vest? She was feeling hotter with every passing second, and, teetering on her saddle, desperately began pulling apart the many layers she had dressed with, leaving behind the trudging steps of the Strider a trail of white clothes. In her pristine tunic and sandy, baggy trousers she was then, and still felt incredibly hot, and suffocated.

In the distance, she saw the fringe of mountains, and thought she saw movement. Was something moving? Was there something or someone approaching her? That was the moment her mount collapsed under its own weight and hers, the heat and the exhaustion and the dehydration too much to bear for it all at once; and then her consciousness faded – she too had reached her limits, and that was it, she was certain now, that was the end.

...

Leena awoke under the care of an old woman, and in the comfort of a bed she hadn't seen the likes of in months, with silken sheets and pillows. How long it had been since her last conscious memory she could not remember, and even still, all she could remember of her last lucid moments was an endless expanse of sand.

Startled, she jumped to her feet as fast as she could muster the energy, and took a turn about the chamber in search of something to tell her where she had managed to wind up. She spoke to the woman, but the woman didn't speak back; the woman looked like an Utari, and monotonously sat by her bed, squeezing what appeared to be a wet rag. Leena felt for her forehead, and realized it was damp. Had she been feverish, perhaps?

The bedchamber she was in looked as if it had been furnished for someone of high standing or rank, for all around she saw silks and rich velvets and jacquards, and modern carvings of thorough detail along the surfaces of the furnishings. But there was something different, for it surely didn't seem like the luxury she had seen in Delve or in any city of Sapience or in the caravan with the Caentoi. There was a different style and theme to all the decoration, something bellicose, of military origin maybe. The lines were straight everywhere, the furnishings, she noticed next, were perfectly squared throughout the room. And the only design that wasn't geometrical and symmetric was that of a dragon, embossed roaring and in detail at the door.

She dashed for the door, but the woman in the chair by the bed didn't move an inch; perhaps she was deaf, or mute, or just didn't care for Leena in the least, beyond what she had been ordered to do, and apparently, she had done it well, for Leena had awoken from her disturbed sleep and was dressed comfortably and felt well. What had happened in the past few days was something she had not a clue of, and all she could remember was the sands of the Bonro, and then flashes of images, hallways, tall figures and water, finally being given fresh water.

And then without even so much as a single forethought, Leena swung the door open; there was nothing stopping her from opening the door, after all, but the dragon carving that had been rendered on it should have been a warning for what came next, for behind it she found a towering Dreikathi standing guard, and couldn't help but yelp in surprise. The Dreikathi showed her what could only be described as a malevolent grin, and taking hold of her arm, dragged her at a quick pace down an empty corridor, until they reached another door, larger, and with several dragons and wyrms carved into its panels in the same decorative fashion she had seen before.

Nearly tripping over her own feet, Leena was dragged inside into a much larger chamber, where another Dreikathi was waiting for her, pacing leisurely about a heavily furnished and decorated bureau. She saw maps and strategic routes on the walls, swords and shields, and, straight ahead behind the desk, the large banner of the Drakkenmont Empire.

Where she was, she did not know at the time, and what would happen to her was just as uncertain. What could the Dreikathi possibly want from her? And why had they bothered to chase her through the desert?

Regardless of these many things she questioned herself about, she was offered great opportunity in the Drakkenmont Empire, or so she thought. And although she questioned the truth about these offerings also, what other choice did she have but cooperate, and turn herself into as much an attractive asset as she could? Never one to pass up a good deal or chance, she told them what she knew, what the Praexi had told her, and of her abilities, of what she, a Syssin, could teach them, the Dreikathi.

Preamble to the corruption

And now, how could Elise say no? The Dreikathi has been proposing an inevitable deal to her, and for her sake and that of Bloodloch, the only solution is to concede to the rule of the Drakkenmont Empire and their emissary.

Bloodloch has been chosen, the Dreikathi tells her, the city has been selected amidst the others of Sapience to be left as an ally in the continent; after all, the Dreikathi will not recognize allies in those they see as lesser races, and they have judged that the vampiric race is, indeed, superior to the rest, comparing the closest to the Dreikathi. They must comply or be destroyed, however, but it will be easy, the Dreikathi assures her, the help Bloodloch will provide to the Empire will be covert, unspoken of, and once all is said and done, only then will it be revealed that the Dreikathi conquered Sapience with the help of their newest ally, the people of Bloodloch.

To agree, the Dreikathi says further, is to safeguard the lives of her people and their future both in Sapience and Albedos; and Bloodloch, he reiterates, will be elevated to the status of an ally, a friend to the Dreikathi, to want for nothing, for as long as the Drakkenmont Empire rules the lands.

It is only then that Leena also materializes before the Keeper, now back in Sapience with a mission. Elise, by now, can be surprised by little, and with a fury building in her, she lunges straight for the Syssin girl, who dodges the whole of the attack just barely. There is a booming voice that orders silence, the voice of the Dreikathi, and although his command is forceful, there is scarcely any motion other than of his mouth, for he remains impassive, planted by the desk across the door of the Keeper's bureau.

What does the Syssin have to gain, in the end? Elise questions this, and decides that, more likely than anything else, keeping her head on her shoulders and entering the empire as an asset rather than leave it as a corpse; after all, this consideration isn't very off, for Leena is a woman of opportunity.

But even with such a conclusion, the women argue, and engage each other in the beginnings of a fist fight, each daring the other, as the Keeper calls Leena all sorts of things, from a crawling maggot, a witless hag, to a shameless traitor. They don't know each other, or at least they hadn't come into contact ever in their lives before, but so taken is the Keeper by the fact that a denizen of Sapience would betray their own kind, that she continues to spout near-incoherent insults at the Syssin. And still, the Dreikathi appears calm, as if he might let the women to their own devices for as long as it might take to solve the issue.

On her end, Leena yells things about survival, and intelligence and resources, none of which Elise can truly understand, and at last the young Syssin girl lets on the one thing that brings the Keeper to a halt. The Keeper has always listened to the whispers in her ears, and Leena, being a very resourceful and astute woman, knew there was someone that counseled the vampire woman and had been doing so for years. And so, the young and clever Leena sought out the

pretend priestess, and recruited her to her side, convincing her that the things she proposed are in line with her beliefs, and those of the Keeper.

And now, Leena tells the Keeper this: that her priestess, the envoy of her dead Ysmali, has kindly agreed to sway her thoughts about the whole business. Hearing her cue from having been eavesdropping outside the bureau, the priestess herself makes an entrance at that moment, and it only seems chaos might break loose right there and then what with three energetic women on the verge of a full-on fight. The disqualifications fly from the Keeper to her trusted counselor, and she demands to know how things got this way, how they wound up potential allies of the Drakkenmont Empire instead of enemies, like they had always been.

The self-proclaimed priestess looks hardly off put by the presence of the Dreikathi, and alike Leena, she attempts to sway and convince her that this is the best for her, Bloodloch, and even her beloved Ysmali, this, the somber advisor says, is a god-sent gift that must not be forsaken, a divine and impassable opportunity.

Elise asks herself again, how she can possibly say no. The deal is inevitable, it can't be turned down, and if she said no, what would happen then? At least, she tells herself, when she has at last settled down into the comforting depths of her chair, nobody must know until the deed is done; at the very least, until that time, no blame will be placed upon her person or Bloodloch.

Elise would be briefed the next day; a commanding Dreikathi, a strategist, by the looks of him, summons her to a meeting that only she, her counselor and the Syssin girl attend. The planning for the intervention of the Drakkenmont Empire in Sapience is revealed partially to the women in the form of maps, charts and scarce illustrations about a contraption, an enhanced kind of Ylem probe, that will be used to steal the Ylem of Sapience.

Leena is privy to details that the other two aren't, but she remains quiet, questioning herself about whether she should say something or not. She has a chance of revealing what she knows, she considers at length, but what would be the use of it? The Dreikathi would merely squish them quicker, and then, she would die, like the man promised her.

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Troops were sent out within a matter of days, and instructions took to the winds with doves and falcons, and across the lands with swift riders, to reorganize the already deployed Bloodlochian army according to the instructions that Elise had received from the Dreikathi. Elise was to send a larger, additional group north and through the western coasts of Sapience, where they would carry a Dreikathi artifact to advance faster.

They were to clear the western coast of all obstacles, so that the Dreikathi might move in stealthily and without hindrance up north. This Dreikathi artifact had been fashioned in the later months; a blasting weapon modified to vaporize charged, heated Ylem into the air in a destructive ratio, and bearing with it other substances that would have other effects on anything living.

Elise would remain in Bloodloch until instructed to go to a meeting point where she would meet with Dreikathi envoys, and would tell her subjects that the artifact had been salvaged from abandoned, buried things in the Scidve cove, of a battle long past. When deployed, the contraption would cause great explosions, and only direct contact with the artifact could protect its users, something about conductivity of energies they had told her, along with the use of thick filter masks to shield from the inhalable substances.

And that was what the young, inexperienced and frightened scout had seen -Eetreya's scout-, merely one of the many places that were desecrated by the Dreikathi artifact en route to the north, to Nuunva, where the real calamity would continue to develop.

The occupation of Nuunva

The airship that had been sighted near the Aalen had not gone far, however; it had remained near the coast, slowly moving north, waiting for the right time, like a thief in a dark alley, waiting for an unsuspecting victim to cross their path. Indeed Dreikathi had been deployed in Sapience, but not only in the Aalen; far north, concealed in the lingering fogs of what was once the Misty Isles, they had been waiting close enough to make land any time now.

Many miles north of that bay extended the icy shores of the tundra, growing ever cooler in the farther reaches. The Dreikathi had found a hot spot off the Alaqsii, and there, they had begun to pollute the land, in preparation for sowing their corruption in the Leylines. With their machineries, they had sunk into the most fragile fractures of the earth, causing it to tremble and break apart. Above all, the invasion had to be silent, and they desired Nuunva, far and isolated, and home to a matriarch of wyrms, beneath, in the Ice Caverns - truly a desirable commodity for such one as the Dreikathi.

The tremors they had been provoking had indeed frightened the villagers, and as the old Indyuk had predicted in his death bed, something lurked in the shadows of the ice, Nuunva had to be evacuated. This was the moment that the Dreikathi were expecting, and when the place was abandoned, and naught remained but the husk of the village elder, the Dreikathi moved in, but stealthy shadows in the night, that darkened the water and the ice floes and the snow, creeping from the near Alaqsii inlet.

What had once been the sacred village of the Indyuk, now was to be claimed by the progeny of dragons, as they so claimed themselves to be. Would Nuunva indeed fracture in two, like in the old man's dream?

The Dreikathi move to occupy Nuunva during the night. Lines of uniformed Dreikathi connect the shore of the Alaqsii to the glacier proper, carrying crates upon crates of things toward the deserted village. Supplies for sure, and in great quantities, are unloaded from the dark airship, under the supervision of a somber, commanding figure circling the area in a great wyrm.

The parts of unassembled structures are carried up the slopes, their great size barely making it through the narrower tunnels in the ice, and barrels upon barrels of substances or objects unknown follow along. The great poles and beams and gears of steel continue to appear from within the airship for long, and it takes more than just a couple hours to complete their transportation into the glacier.

The Dreikathi are methodical, that is certain, and they are ordered into the task without break, and after several hours the many things begin to accumulate beneath the icy vaults of Nuunva. There, in the belly of the glacier, a noisy Dreikathi directs the distribution of the various objects – he sends some crates to a chamber, barrels to a line along a corridor, and the parts, the many steely parts, off into another end of the glacier, in a niche of some strategic importance, it seems.

At last it seems no more will be unloaded from the airship, and the Dreikathi soldiers line up in the shore of the Alaqsi before being ordered to march, by the dozens, toward the glacier. A mass of troops moves en bloc to Nuunva, their perfectly aligned steps sending an echo through the night, like an extraneous buzzing, created by their heavy boots.

Figures previously unseen descend from the airship now, and there she is, there is Leena, struggling with herself to keep composure, not because she is bound, or being manhandled, or even being impolitely treated, but because she can't come into the whole realization that she has agreed to help the Dreikathi, that she already has, in truth, and that she will continue to do so.

But so precious is her life, she thinks, and the opportunity to keep her head is truly an important and one she cannot allow to pass. It's difficult times, she says to herself, and she must do what she can to stay alive in times of war and chaos. When all is done, she tells herself, she will write to her parents back in the village of Arbothia, she will tell them everything, and hopes they will understand what she has taken part in, and why.

And next to her is the Keeper, looking so stoic and perfectly attired, as if she were in the middle of a ball room, and not at risk of slipping gracelessly into the ice. Just some three days ago, she found herself in her chambers, tossing into two heavy wooden trunks her clothes, her weapons, her armor, and practically everything of value she possessed. The Dreikathi had told her to prepare for a long journey, and she had, albeit a bit mindlessly, and had gone to the agreed rendezvous place.

She couldn't have said no, she tells herself still now, there in the midst of the icy inlet. She ruminates on what the commanding Dreikathi told her, that it was necessary to agree, or be destroyed, and that agreeing would elevate Bloodloch to the status of an ally to Drakkenmont; moreover, agreeing was safeguarding the future of her city. She continues to convince herself that she has done the right thing, that she has the interest of her people in mind, and above all that, her counselor, the envoy of her goddess, urged her on, assuring her of this being a divinely sent opportunity for triumph.

The two women exchange no words, and although they would have, in a normal situation, questioned each other to the point of exhaustion, now, they both are too distracted and uneasy to even formulate a query. And so, when the Dreikathi in the lead signals, the two begin walking on the ice, shoulder to shoulder, but saying nothing to the other. The Keeper's heels break the surface of the ice with an unpleasant crunch on each step, and Leena's heavy cloak billows behind her in the chilly breeze, and together they walk in the moonlight to Nuunva, accomplices to the plan of the Dreikathi, to the ones that they once proclaimed enemies to the death.

The sowing

During one whole night, the Dreikathi work without rest. Leena and Elise have been sent to slumber, but the remainder of the group is to stay up to assemble the hideous machinery that will be used to breach the Leylines of Sapience and steal all the Ylem, with nobody prepared to oppose them.

Nothing would stop the Drakkenmont Empire now; the plan they have been concocting since learning of the Ylem probes would now be taken to a conclusion, with possibly catastrophic results, and all that is left to be done on their side, is to put the many parts that have traveled from Albedos together, and all will be ready to begin.

The Dreikathi possess a perfect discipline, and the many uniformed recruits are under the command of an imposing figure, that threatens to strike down on mistakes with the swiftness of his whip. And as such, the assemblage of the contraption happens mostly in silence, with precise orders being barked from time to time in the moonlit shadows of the icy Nuunva.

Sleepless upon a utilitarian bedroll, Leena thinks of what she has done, and judges herself guilty of all her self-imposed charges. What would her parents think, she wonders, if they knew? Never had she cared for honor or virtue, but now, all she can call herself is a dishonorable wreck. She could have kept silent about what she knew, and could have refused to teach the Dreikathi the secrets of subterfuge and phase; what was her meek life compared to the whole of Sapience? But the temptation to keep her head, and even further, that of being part of something as monstrously large as the Drakkenmont Empire, was too much for her to turn down.

Across her, an equally sleepless vampire sits in a dark recess. Elise is not accustomed to sleeping at night, and she too is ridden with thoughts of guilt, but her situation is different, or so she repeats to herself - she didn't sell out like the Syssin girl, she is doing it for the sake of her people, and the passion about her goddess; she, she thinks, has nothing to gain from the whole ordeal, but others under her responsibility can benefit greatly.

The women rise early the next day to the rough awakening of an unpleasant host. The commanding Dreikathi announces it is time to begin, to start the machine, and all are to gather in the central cavern of Nuunva to witness the much expected event.

A bright light shines through the broken dome of Nuunva, and there they can see it, an elaborate and heavy steel contraption with gears and levers and switches, and its many poles driven through the ice, drilled deep into the glacier. Alike an Ylem probe it rises, but worse, much larger, noisier and, probably, dangerous and powerful. But its purpose has been reformulated - while it could easily steal the reserves of Ylem from the land, the thing, in fact, was created or, rather, improved for the opposite.

The Praexi researcher had told Leena extensively of her experiments with the Ylem probes, that she had managed to inject substances and essence into the devices and, perhaps, these results could be replicated, to somehow affect the Leylines. And Leena had selfishly shared this with the Dreikathi in hopes of saving herself.

Now, the whirring sound of newly-functioning gears fills the glacier, an unpleasant buzzing and screeching as the machinery begins to warm up. Two Dreikathi manipulate the many switches and levers, flipping here, pulling there and, at last, the pump is ready to go, set to be filled with whatever brewing the invaders have elaborated, to spread their corruption through the Leylines.

A mute gesture with one hand is issued by the commanding Dreikathi, and a steel barrel with ominous markings is brought in. Its content, a foul-looking sludge of a murky grey color, is poured through a funnel, and the machine flares with activity, the thick mix sucked into the interconnected probes with a greedy sound, like an overwhelming, slurping beast of steel. The machine belches a foul smoke in return, clamoring for more, and so the pouring continues, in smaller quantities, like a constant drip supplied to the evil thing.

Leena prays; for the first time in many months Leena prays to all the deities she knows, so that this Dreikathi plan fails, so that the thing explodes then and there, and all is over, so that she can turn back time, or merely disappear, as if she had never existed, but the Ylem sensors on the machine spike wildly, and the Dreikathi men manipulating the contraption look pleased, elated even, and the commanding one in charge is visibly satisfied.

How long will it take for it to spread, Leena wonders; how long until the whole of Sapience is doomed to destruction? And her mind fills with dread, guilt and ideas of escape, but where will she run? She must tell others what is going on, she must tell them to go far, perhaps to Albedos, for likely this is the end for Sapience.

Unexpectedly, the Dreikathi apprehend the two women with force, and the tall Dreikathi that once welcomed Leena to his bureau, promising a bright future in the Drakkenmont Empire, informs them, with no manner of ceremony, that they will be executed, and Sapience destroyed and drained of its Ylem. Simply put, the commanding Dreikathi says, Sapience will

be no more, and the course of events is unstoppable now, because once the poison has taken root in the heart of the Leylines, he says, there will be no turning back.

An absolute blackness fills Leena's vision, and everything she felt before grows tenfold. If before she felt dread, now her heart is a murky sea of despair. Next to her, the Keeper appears stoic, but her thoughts whirl equally. Surely she and the Syssin have condemned Sapience to obliteration, and with their execution, not even a warning will be issued so that, at least, the people might flee, find refuge in Albedos or far out at sea, no one will know, and the two are to blame, the two are just as equally guilty they both think.

But Oriotok is an obedient son, and a proficient warrior, and, plainly put, a courageous man, so he didn't go far, like his father instructed, to remain near, and knowing the ices better than its invaders, he hid in the shadows, and waited too, like the stealthy spy that is bemused by the common thief, and saw what the Dreikathi had begun to do, to corrupt the Leylines, to poison the blood of the lands.

Haste he made to the containment laboratory without so much as a second thought, where he had instructed Eetreya to take the people that would follow her, across what was, now, a deserted tundra of ice and snow. No Mugyik roamed the plains now in pasture, and no Orgyuk were to be seen. He began to think if he could remember the winging and the cry of the gyrfalcon, and his heart swelled with a fury and a hatred for the invaders.

The containment laboratory is an ancient Ankyrean facility, a place of ages past that has sturdily endured the passage of time. When the lands began to tremble with unease, Oriotok was not the only one that remembered about this place. The people of the northern snows and ices knew it well, and to that place they fled, trusting its ancient build to protect them from impending calamity.

So when Oriotok arrived, there were many ears to hear his retelling of what he had witnessed – Trolls from the Stormcaller crags, refugees from Tornos, hunters from of the Sinnetok encampment, and even people from as far south as Spinesreach had come to find safety in the depths of the Ankyrean facility. But how wrong had they been, now they realized, for they had traveled there only to become neighbors to the invaders, right next door - and these were not kind neighbors.

There is a deadly silence in the crowd when Oriotok is done telling them what he has seen, the sowing of the evil in their lands, and he is clear when he tells them that they must choose - they must choose between staying to fight the threat, or they must flee far south where, perhaps, disaster will be delayed to come, and they must spread these news, so that Sapience might prepare, if there is even any resources left to be spared after the lengthy war that has struck the continent in the years past.

Warnings are issued

The Tso'aa ran far toward the Vashnar Mountains, stumbling as a blinding explosion of light flared in the distance behind him, and, at that moment, he was certain something terrible had befallen his home.

And then, he continued to run, far from his homeland, far to the north and the east. A warning had to be issued, and it took him long, but on he kept running, restless, until he reached the Heartwood. He had to warn his friends, and his beloved wife's family, for he had none left of his own. Everyone must be warned, he thought, and his feet carried him as swiftly as he try to manage to fulfill this thought.

His first idea was to head to Bloodloch, the underground city along the mountainous chain of the Vashnars, but then, who would welcome him there? Likely it would mean entrapping himself, being a man of the forests and a known ally of Duiran, perhaps they'd slay him on sight. And heading across there and then the Pash Valley would be dangerous; last he had heard, not one, but as much as half a dozen hot spots had been found between Enorian and Bloodloch - traversing that land would be a hazard.

And so, despite the significantly longer distance, he decided to head straight to the Heartwood. Would they believe him? His doubts grew as he carried on, keeping away from roads and areas of high traffic, for fear of being caught up with the warfare, or even of finding Dreikathi in unexpected places. Perhaps they would think him crazy, because as many said, he had changed after the death of his wife, and some even knew of his haunting nightmares, but his fear of a new invasion and of having to once more face the Dreikathi was greater than his doubt.

Ri'hele arrived to the Ithmia forests in the middle of the night, with his once vibrant green cape torn and his leather boots covered in caked mud. Ri'hele had always been a handsome Tso'aa, but when his wife passed, it seemed as though the years finally began to take their toll on him. After many years, he had become but a shadow of himself, wrinkled and crouching, almost, and slowly doing away with what were once brilliant auburn locks.

Ri'hele ran through the trees of the Ithmia as fast as he could, and before dawn, he had made it to the ruined tower that marks the imaginary boundaries of the Heartwood. Sweaty and panting, he stopped at the foot of the tower.

And then, Ri'hele lost his composure.

The Tso'aa began yelling loud and clear that the Dreikathi came, and in a panic, burst into desperate cries, spouting things that could hardly be made out. The ever-vigilant crowd of the woods slowly emerged from the foliage and the shadows to watch the crazed Tso'aa as he collapsed, fulminated, to the ground, and no longer he could be awakened.

In minutes, the Tsol'aa had become nothing more than a sickened husk, excessively thinned, with his skin mottled with many bruises and his eyes blanked and bloodshot. A druid woman approached it with wariness, because the sight of the corpse frightened her, and the death of the Tsol'aa looked hardly like a natural one to her. She, an experienced healer, was not satisfied with the explanation that the man had expired from his own lunacy; he looked sickened, and warned the others that, perhaps, he had acquired a strange disease, and that perhaps his ramblings were not completely the result of a fever or a delirium.

Despite the Druid's warning, the word spread quickly that a lunatic Tsol'aa had arrived speaking nonsense to the Heartwood, 'something about airships', the people of Duiran said to each other. The man had lost his mind, was the general agreement, but this was how the first rumors of a Dreikathi airship spread, remaining, however, like no more than that, a speculation. The news reached Spinesreach a few days later, as hearsay, and although both Duiran and Spinesreach sent out scouts, the only reports that returned were about the Aalen looking slightly more burnt than before - perhaps there had been a fire.

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The crowd that had gathered in the Ankyrean laboratory stirs now, and an uncontrolled chattering breaks with the last of Oriotok's words. There's a noisy hurriedness to the exchanges, and it quickly becomes evident who will stay to, perhaps, fight off the invaders, and who will go, as away as they can get to protect themselves.

One young Troll girl, perhaps but fifteen years of age, has been staring at Oriotok throughout the whole retelling, seemingly unmoving at the side of an elderly looking man, who looks to be her grandfather. Clinging to a tattered-looking satchel that is slung across her shoulders, she approaches the Indyuk, slowly, wary, and reaches to tug his sleeve, like a child might call the attention of an adult.

So innocent the Troll girl looks to Oriotok when he turns to regard her, and yet he finds in her a courageous temperament, for when she speaks, although her captivating voice bears the meekness of youth, all she means to ask is how she can be of help. The Ankyrean laboratory is in uproar, and some are quick to go, not even stalling to say goodbye, and amidst this chaos the Indyuk's emotions are shaken, and he can't find it in himself to tell the girl to stay, to fight, or even to risk staying so close to danger. The old man accompanying the girl has been looking at the two in silence, like a weathered statue, and when the Indyuk notices this, he can't help but thinking of his father, and reaffirming his conviction that the girl can't stay in the tundra.

There is an insistence, a passion in the young Troll, and Oriotok doubts himself for moments. Who is he to deny a girl he doesn't know? Would someone have stopped him, if the roles were reversed? After struggling with this thought, Oriotok finally urges the Troll girl to go south, to spread the news and, above all that, to seek help anywhere she can, to travel to the city of Delve if she must – maybe there they know what the Dreikathi have been planning and what they are poisoning the Leylines with, or at least they might take a better guess.

The Indyuk and the silent old Troll man are both relieved when the girl is accepting of this idea; certainly it is not the safest of all choices, but it will at least take them far from the tundra, and the girl is glad to find a role for herself in this all. She will travel south, first to Spinesreach, hastily to the Heartwood and later straight to the portal leading to Albedos, to the Free City of Delve. Oriotok begs her to be careful – the Dreikathi might be in the north for now, but the dangers of the war are not over, and if there is more invaders or not, that is impossible to know.

Meanwhile, Eetreya has been sitting in silence in the back of the chamber. With her back pressed to an icy wall and her legs close to her body, she can't help but reenacting in her head the recounting of the Dreikathi invasion so many decades before. She thinks of what they are to do now, how can she, the Indyuk, and the scarce others that will remain be capable of fighting off the Dreikathi?

In such a brief period of time, her world has been turned upside down; she came to the north to find peace, and in doing so has barged straight into danger. She remembers the dying Indyuk's dream, the fracturing of Nuunva, and the wylm and the snow and the shadowy, stormy island, and finds herself at a complete loss – what is she to do?

But now, she thought in an attempt to console herself, the clamor of the news would resound in every recess of Sapience; for moments she feels guilty, perhaps she should have worried of warning everyone personally. The Dreikathi came, they had arrived, they had been *seen*, and, at least, no longer would the reports be called rumors.

Beseeching the Free City

A large group of people had moved from the tundra to the south, like specks of grey and brown across the deserted plains of snowed white. They had made haste, for any time now, the invaders would set foot outside Nuunva, and leaving later would be dangerous, at the very least, if not fatal.

Oriotok and Eetreya explained everything they knew and had seen to the young Troll girl, and bidding her a safe journey and praising her bravery, they prayed that the girl would indeed be faithful to her word, and that after she had made it to the Heartwood, the next leg of her journey would take her directly and safely to the port city of Delve.

They knew that at the very least some five, but perhaps even as many as ten nights would elapse before the girl's journey would come to fruition, and then, if she managed to garner the attention of the people of Delve, many more nights could pass before they agreed to come to the aid of Sapience, in one manner or another. How the people of the Free City could help them was a mystery to the pair, but who else could they turn to for aid?

The Troll girl had been born not fifteen years before yet, there in the tundra, daughter to native folk of the Stormcaller Crag, merchants, as she briefly told Oriotok. That worked well in favor of the girl, because at least she knew the fastest way from the western tundra to the city of Spinesreach, and if the traveling group was cautious, they would be safe.

Pertinent precautions took them to the Spirean back gates in less than three days, and after sufficient time to restock their supplies and find faster means of travel the girl left the city with a representative of the Secretariat, to ride through the night toward the Heartwood.

The news left Spinesreach reeling. Moryz, the first to hear them, remembered immediately of Eetreya telling him that she was heading north, so as to get away from the imminent threat of the Dreikathi. She was wrong in choosing that direction, and likely she would only find death in the ice. A tremendous weight filled the heart of Moryz, thinking that his beloved perhaps might have perished, and he could do nothing for her now, but the Troll girl had a message for him especially, from Eetreya, telling him of what had transpired since her leaving Spinesreach, and insisting on him ensuring everybody be made aware of the dire circumstances. So with a relief only half soothing, Moryz composed many missives that night, which were sent out in all directions, to all cities and villages.

Like a plague, the terrible news spread through the lands from Spinesreach, carried by swift scouts, owls, doves and every other means that could be secured at the time. The message reached the Heartwood before the Troll girl and the Spirean emissary, some day and a half later with the wind on their side, but when they got there, besides confirming the alarming missive, they had other business – that of convincing the Duiran Council of assigning an envoy to accompany them to the city of Delve, so that they might persuade them to come to the aid of Sapience.

The city of Enorian parted with a representative of their own, sending a small group traveling north to the Siroccian Mountains, where they would meet the others to pass the portal to the lands of Albedos, into the city of Delve.

How easy it would be to merely flee through the portal, the young Troll thought when they had at last all gathered, many days after since she had been in the Ankyrean laboratory, and even more after she had been home in the Stormcaller Crag, just north of there. But whatever would happen to them all if they merely surrendered their lands? What would they all become in the free city of Delve? Likely, she thought, they would end up just another handful of forgotten, homeless races in the underbelly of the port city, doomed to live in the shadows of the greatness of others. They could not surrender and abandon their lands so easily, and if they had to go, they had to at least put up a fight, and a good one, the girl continued to think.

Travel through the portal was nearly instantaneous, hardly the blink of an eye, and they had soared through space into an entirely different location, that of the city of Delve, leaving the dangers of Sapience behind. They had not been the only ones to do this, and in Delve, a great mass of foreigners from Sapience made up a crowd that had needed to be contained – so great were its numbers–, there beneath the military quarters of the Free City.

The guards at the other end of the portal had alerted the authorities about an increasing number of people coming through it in the past days, but the matter had been mostly overlooked. Now, though, the numbers were so overwhelming that reinforcements had been called in, and the guards were not letting anyone through without a proper revision and at least a brief questioning.

There was something unusual about such an influx – had at last the war decimated the lands of Spaience? The guards wondered as much, oblivious to the newest events in the foreign continent, and knowing no better, they had kept the committee entrapped within the crowd for hours. Desperation had grown in the girl's mind, and taking advantage of her smaller, not fully-developed size, she weaved through the clamoring crowd nearer to the guards.

There was a multitude of voices then that drowned her own, begging the guardians to let them through, yelling of the misfortune of Sapience, of the looming Dreikathi threat and of destruction. Doing what she had done before, in the calmest fashion she could, and knowingly risking injury, the girl tugged at one of the guards' sleeves, requesting his attention with a mute gesture.

At first, the guard dismissed her, but she persisted, tugging, pulling and nearly displacing the guard's arm with how hard she began to draw the cloth with both hands. After a while, the Troll girl was finally taken aside in the midst of a roaring tumult, having at last annoyed the guard, but being clever, and remembering everything she had been told, she began to spout things about Sapience, the Dreikathi, the corruption, the committee from the cities and, lastly, but before she could be smacked to the ground for the show she was putting, about being there to meet with Althezar – with Althezar and the council.

It was then that the guard settled, calling immediately for the presence of his superior to decide on the course of action about the girl, and when the moods finally simmered, not only with the girl and the guards but with the whole of the crowd, the Seneschal of the Guard then announced that they could take refuge in the Free City, and implored the people to remain calm so that the proceedings might go on more efficiently.

Indeed the journey from the Siroccian Mountains all the way to the far eastern territories of Albedos had been swift, despite the delay of the guards arriving in Delve, but by then, when the committee had come at last to meet with Althezar, all of the lands of Sapience had begun to tremble.

Tremors and ripples

Since the fateful morning when Oriotok had witnessed the inoculation of the Dreikathi's corrupted sludge into their monstrous contraption of twined Ylem probes, Sapience has awakened in the night, and has been rattled during the hours of light by tremors that have been taking place all over the continent.

In the far north, the refugees of the Ankyrean laboratory watched with fright as the structure trembled and resonated with a great, steely noise. Huddled up against one wall, they had no choice but to reassure each other that the place had survived whole for decades on end, and possibly things much worse, or so they thought. At last fed up with the constant fear of the nearby invaders, another group decided that they would go, and grabbing their things, waited for the land to settle, leaving behind scarcely half a dozen people, including Oriotok and Eetreya.

In the north, the land shook with more strength, but the tremors spread with no less frequency toward the south, to the rest of the continent. Nearest to the tundra, in Spinesreach, many had begun collecting their things and packing up the essentials for a trip that they did not know where the end would be found. Farmers had deserted the outer city first, leaving crops and animals behind, and later some of the lesser guard followed. What did it matter to defend a city that perhaps soon would crumble to the ground?

Everywhere the spirits were low. Down the coast, in the village of Tasur'ke, what few inhabitants remained in the abandoned place decided it was, at last, time to leave also. Off the cliffs they could see the waves of the ocean churn and grow in size, and frightened that perhaps the sea might wash them and everything away, they took to travel inland and further south, to the portal leading to Albedos.

In the Heartwood, heated discussions were being had. The Great Oak shook and creaked with every earthquake they experienced, no matter how small, and the people argued against each other on whether it would be right to abandon the great tree that had always been their home. How could they ever live with themselves knowing that they abandoned it? By now, they realized that they had failed to defend the wilds, or so they judged, for everywhere even the animals were fleeing, but was there any use to staying there? Would they accomplish something or merely they would sacrifice their lives for nothing, in the end?

The Druid that had carefully examined Ri'hele's body, the Tsol'aa that had come from the Aalen to warn them, spoke somberly of the possibility of a disease. To her, she reiterated, the Tsol'aa didn't look like he had died of age or common disease, and the marks in his corpse spoke of something graver, perhaps something that would spread like the Aalen Bloom they had been witnesses –and some victims to- so many decades before.

Far, far south in Enorian, the moods were strange. There, in the farthest reaches of the south, the tremors had been softer, some of them hardly felt, but they had received the news no less. Still, ambivalence reigned in some places, and while some had been quick to leave, sensing an

imminent danger, others had lingered, believing that perhaps they would be safer, so far that they, indeed, were.

Along the western coast, on the other side of the continent, the earth shivered with strength also, and the coast was constantly buffeted by wind and waves alike. The Drakts in Scidve, who had been so close to the Dreikathi the last time they had come to the continent, watched the skies for signs of the invaders, loyal to their land and reluctant to leave, and not too far, in the Great Rock, Ophidians and other creatures panicked with the unraveling of the stone, with pebbles and later boulders becoming loose in increasing quantities.

In the Liruma scrubland, the grasses stirred with each of the quakes, and there, planted askew between some squat trees, there had been forgotten an Ylem probe, an innocent looking HYPE meant to wrest Ylem from a hot spot that had been found not fifteen days before. It had, however, no matter how innocent the contraption looked, began getting warmer and warmer, to the point of causing a burn in a Bloodlochian soldier that had been conducting the extraction, and its iron-tipped end had started glowing and flashing.

The soldiers at that point, both the one in charge of the extraction and the others observing and guarding the hot spot, had suspected the thing would malfunction any moment, and had returned toward the south from where they had come in the first place. Not long before instructions had been issued by the Keeper back in Bloodloch, that a reorganizing of the army was to take place so that the great city might be in control of the entire western coast, at the very least until the Birka Mire, and further if possible.

Traveling down south was that these soldiers encountered another Bloodlochian group. They too had received these instructions, and now the respective captains of each squadron exchanged information. One of them had been in the middle of the Aureliana forest, and after a rather intense quake, they had seen all sorts of small animals, rabbits and other rodents, and also birds, fleeing from their burrows and nests, and then not very far north, there had been a bright explosion, probably somewhere in the Ithmian forest, and so they had decided to abandon the probe and return home.

Then, they had crossed paths with a scout from Duiran. She was running fast through the woods, heading south, she had told them in a hurry, clearly not bearing any intention to engage in a fight or be captured. And then the girl had told them the news, she had told them that Dreikathi had made land, that they had come to destroy Sapience. How exquisitely straightforward the girl had been, clearly whatever grudge she had ever held for the Bloodlochians she did not care at the time, obviously worried with the greater enemy of them all, or perhaps she hadn't even recognized them in the least.

The scout had left the soldiers reeling, that was undoubted, and they wondered why they hadn't received the news from Bloodloch. Perhaps it was recent news, the captains argued as they sped the pace toward the south, careful to not come into harm with the tremors that were more often happening. Perhaps they would bring these news to Bloodloch for the first time, they thought.

If only they knew the truth.

A resistance against the Dreikathi

The Troll girl told Althezar everything she knew; everything that Oriotok and Eetreya had told her about Dreikathi airships, artifacts, the corrupted sludge, and the monstrous Ylem contraption of many probes that, instead of stealing from the Leylines, was being used to poison them, to corrupt them, and likely to, in the end, destroy them – them and the continent of Sapience.

The group from Sapience had appeared at his door nearly at midnight, escorted by guards through the forums after giving him notice that a Troll girl bore official documents from the cities of the faraway lands. They could not wait, Nyatha told him; she had seen to reviewing the documents personally, and what little she had read had alarmed her greatly, but not all the information was available in the pages. They were brief notes, but signed and sealed by many city officials, some of which she recognized from previous exchanges, and that she had personally met in the past while accompanying him.

They had retreated to rest at last nearly three hours past midnight, because the group had wanted to give him all the information they possessed, and he had promised them to do everything in his power to achieve a favorable outcome from the meeting next morning, and whatever needed to be done, Althezar told him, he would do it himself if he must.

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“We are a city of foreigners,” Althezar tells the chamber with nearly palpable conviction. He had been late that morning, and the idea bothered him still for some reason, although there were plenty other things more important than such an insignificant mistake.

In the background, he can see the committee from Sapience, anxious, waiting, standing behind the rows of chairs of the meeting council of the Free City of Delve. The Troll girl stirs the most in the background, and it reminds Althezar so of his own assistant, the young Nyatha. The Troll must be but a couple years younger, he reckons, and he recognizes in her some of the same courage and industriousness of the Utari counterpart, and thinks fondly, and highly of the two, if just for a passing moment before resuming his argument.

The Troll girl traveled from the far north of the continent of Sapience, thus she told him, and gathered the representatives from the other cities at the Siroccian Mountains, and later singlehandedly managed to bypass the guards that had been containing the multitudes that had come fleeing from the faraway lands. Now, they had needed guards too to keep the peace in the meeting chambers, for the crowd that had arrived earlier that day from Sapience, and that had been leaking in through the portal the days before, apparently had come to attend

this meeting in whole. Not only them, but also the people of Albedos gathered too, denizens of Delve itself and some other Albedi foreigners that had learnt of the commotion and happened to be visiting, and this was a far greater number of people than Althezar had ever spoken in front of before.

If only he would have known he would come into this multitude, perhaps he wouldn't have left his chambers, despite his brass pocket watch giving him a second and a third warning that he would be late. Likely he would have stayed by the painting, clinging to the faded gilded frame. But alas, he had a responsibility as member of the council; he had a responsibility, because he had pushed the research forward, he had celebrated the Ylem sensors and, later that year, nearly four years before, the great Ylem probes – surely they would bring great riches and powers to both Sapience and the city of Delve and later, perhaps, to all of the people of Albedos, or so he thought at the time.

He felt responsible now, and guilty, for introducing to Sapience the contraption that would doom it to persecution from the Drakkenmont Empire, and perhaps even destruction. He had ensured the devices were safe through overseeing extensive experimentation and trial, but he couldn't have foreseen that one traitorous Praexi would create forged copies for her own profit and gain. And further, he couldn't have predicted that the same Praexi would part with the gem of her secret research, that of introducing substances into the Leylines, to the enemy, or to one that would aid the enemy.

They had found them, the Praexi researcher's journals, where she mentioned how she had accomplished the modification of the probes into pumping devices of an entirely different kind. The life of the Praexi was splashed all over the pages, and there she also had written about the Syssin girl, about Leena, her partner in the underground trade of imitation probes. The Praexi, however, was nowhere to be found, and her blueprints and notes for the various artifacts had disappeared with her.

As he revealed this information to the crowd, he could feel the air truly grow heavy now, the moods becoming more somber and, perhaps only an illusion of his burdened mind, even the skies beyond the chambers turn darker.

Now, Althezar felt an overwhelming need to convince the council to, somehow, provide help to the people of Sapience, but what they were to do he was not certain. Most probably, what he would manage would be to allow free passage of refugees through the portal, but when the Ylem sensors they were monitoring spiked beyond safety they would have to shut the portal for good, else the link between the two lands becomes a danger to Delve and Albedos.

"Hardly can we remember who was ever not a foreigner in these lands," Althezar continues, and it seems his words take a whole eternity to abandon his lips. At the very least, he thinks, he must secure shelter for the refugees that are certain to come, if they are unable to help in other ways. Whatever else he is to do eludes him, and in truth, he is hopeless, and so riddled with guilt that he cannot think very clearly by now.

“We are *all* a resistance against the Dreikathi,” he says solemnly; he has thought of his argument all night, and he figured the best is to appeal to the greater truths about Delve, Albedos and Sapience. They all share a common enemy, that is undisputed, and he must get this point across.

By then, he is sure the crowd has grown even further, or maybe, he considers, he has started shrinking, but he has agreed to help the people of Sapience, convinced not only by the Troll girl and the committee that accompanied her, but also by his own sense of culpability.

The legacy of Dalturia

Bomb crafting is an art that has been introduced into Sapience by the people of Albedos, an ability allowing harnessing the power of many things into explosive vessels, for the advantage or folly of its wielder. Bombs have been used for years in combat and especially in attempts to defeat the Dreikathi, but they too are privy to the knowledge of explosive devices, in their own particular way.

Dalturia was a famed bomb maker of the city of Delve; a Caentoi of burnt looking flesh, due to the constant research of his trade. For many years he experimented with different combinations of ingredients, with varying proportions and kinds to produce, sometimes, bombs that would explode unexpectedly or that would run cold without so much as a spark. Other times, however, he would produce incendiary masterpieces that could be used well in battle and that, once or twice, served the people of Delve well to defend from the threat of the Dreikathi.

As he aged, Dalturia progressively retreated more and more into his workshop, allowing hardly his apprentices to come inside. Why he had done this is uncertain, and he would often say that he was working on his ultimate masterpiece, the perfect bomb that would once and for all bring victory to the Free City.

One fine day, Dalturia disappeared from the face of the lands, leaving no such work of art behind, much to the disappointment of many who had high hopes in the man. Some say that the fumes and the strange ingredients he experimented with later on his life drove him crazy; others say that he made a discovery so powerful, that he considered it must be hidden from all, both the people of Delve and the Dreikathi, and thus, presumably, he traveled to dispose of it where nobody might find it.

Dalturia left apprentices scattered throughout the lands, both from Albedos and Sapience, and not long passed since some of them chose sides; the most amoral ones joined sides with the Dreikathi, and others wandered far into hidden recesses of Albedos, and of Sapience too, to experiment in peace and in hiding. The most daring of his apprentices had made his home in Sapience, where Ylem was more readily available to him, because while he dallied with the most traditional ingredients of a mundane bomb, he also craved the excitement of using more

rare components, and sometimes even outlawed ones.

In the Putoran Hills, south of the Siroccian Mountains near a large, active volcano, the apprentice had become a master of the trade by himself. There he treaded the fine line between life and death with his research, collecting ingredients from faraway places from adventurers just as daring as him. Dragons' hearts, elemental essences, and Ylem shards were counted amidst his favorite repertoire of components, which he would combine, sometimes, with devastating results. One time, rumor has it, he recruited the help of a knight of death, a Carnifex, to fashion a bomb containing nothing less but souls stolen from the Underking himself.

Rumors as strange as this and, sometimes worse, followed and preceded him, some proven true and others left to the imagination of his acquaintances. In truth, if Dalturia had produced an audacious apprentice, this was the man to be pointed at, and with the years he had perfected the techniques of his master and developed new ones of his own.

With the war, Uasiol, a quaint-looking old Kelki of mottled green skin, had gone far from his home in the Putoran Hills, retreating deep into the Vashnar Mountains instead, hoping that the harsh snow of the pass to the Aerie would keep him mostly safe from battle.

Now, three and some years into the war, Uasiol remains deep in the mountains, experimenting still under the gaze of the Atavians who agreed to have him in their Aerie – as long as he uses his abilities to keep outsiders far from the village. The mountain pass one must tread to this place is truly a hazardous and confounding one; adding to it, the explosives that the quaint Kelki planted along the way were effective, in fact, in keeping many of the snooping outsiders away.

After several reports from various soldiers about the increasing hazard of the mountain pass, interest in the area had dwindled despite Ylem sensors hinting to hot spots in the zone, and so the war had taken another course into other easier to travel territories and hot spots. Pleased with himself and mostly undisturbed by his hosts, he continued to experiment and research, dealing with local ingredients for the most part, so as to preserve the diminishing stock of his own select ones.

Not many dare dive into the dangerous depths of this sort of research, what with the risk of exploding things, and so, Uasiol had been found also many years prior by a young man wishing to learn the trade. This young man had traveled far from Albedos, hearing of Uasiol's fame and whimsical experimentation, and had chosen him above the scant other bomb crafters to learn from. Satisfied that someone might seek him out from so afar, Uasiol had, of course, taken the pupil under his tutoring.

Now, this young man resided in the city of Delve, and he and Uasiol had kept in touch via letter for many years, even during the war, since the Kelki had declared his training complete, releasing him into the world to be an independent creator of explosive devices. The young

man had been working long and hard with the teachings of his master, and had made a name for himself in the port city, producing bombs of superior stability and ease of handling.

Now, the news from the latest meeting of the council had reached him, and he knows something might be done, perhaps even with his abilities. He has heard it all at the meeting, because it had been open to the people, as usual, but this one time, large crowds of people had attended to confirm the rumors they had heard about the impending catastrophe in Sapience.

He heard how the Dreikathi had fashioned an enhanced Ylem probe machine, and how with it they had managed to inject things into the Leylines. Horrid ideas fill his mind about the possible extent of the disaster. If this poison were to spread like the disease of the Bloom, but through the Leylines, how would anyone ever escape it? And would it not reach them too, in Albedos, eventually?

If they could figure out how to spread substances into the Leylines themselves, would they not be able to counteract the effects of the Dreikathi sludge? And if he could weave through the crowd toward the front, would they not hear him telling them this?

With all the patience he possessed, the young man squeezed between ladies looking out of place, past huddled up Utari, and in the middle of two very fat Caentoi. Earning himself some unpleasant looks, he nearly tripped over a Praexi and at last made it to the front line of the crowd, where guards were attempting to keep the chamber orderly. With courage and good intentions on his side, he spoke loud, interrupting the meeting and the old Althezar, a man that he admired and esteemed greatly. The heavily-tattooed Utari paused to regard him from his desk with an air of recognition, because they had spoken once or twice before; he was leaning his bony hand on the paperweight and called to silence when he caught something in the young man's words that was worth hearing.

The young man explained; he spoke, louder and louder, for the crowd behind him grew uneasy. People of Albedos and Sapience both had gathered for this meeting, and all wanted to hear, and all wanted a say, but what were they all to do? Some knew this young man, on the other hand, and more than one was willing to hear him, and so the heavy brass gong was struck again. Nyatha, Althezar's assistant, bore desperation in her features that her chief recognized, and once more Althezar found himself raising a hand for silence, begging the crowd to listen to the young man.

If they could learn it, the young man said, how the Dreikathi inject things into the Leylines, they too could do it, they could produce an antidote, a cure to the corruption, and he knew just the man, the elusive Uasiol would concoct something with the rarest ingredients of the land, of this he was certain, and perhaps they would have a chance. But there was a limitation, he says, for to brew something of use and put it in a bomb, they must experiment with the sludge.

And thus, after some debate, it was decided that a sample of the corrupted sludge was necessary.

The request

It has been nearly fifteen days since the Troll girl promised she would travel to Delve, to secure the aid of the people there. They have been enduring the tremors of the land growing more frequent and stronger, and sneaking outside in the night, to monitor the activity of the Dreikathi, if from afar. At last, news has returned from Delve, from Duiran, from Spinesreach – letters too many to be true, but only one that they care for most.

Eetreya sits at the back of the laboratory with a piece of yellowed parchment in her hands. It has become evident by now that she has been reading it over and over again, and when an hour of this has elapsed, Oriotok can no longer contain his anxiety, and confronts her about the contents of the missive.

A sample is needed, Eetreya tells him quite plainly. A sample of the disgusting, corrupted and poisonous liquid of the Dreikathi, and only then, perhaps, more so possibly, they will concoct an antidote to the thing. The woman is shocked, or so Oriotok thinks; he has been watching her and has seen a sort of blankness in her eyes. She and him both know well that wandering into Nuunva to procure some of the poison would be like walking willingly into a death trap, and with what little numbers they have there in the laboratory, it would be impossible to so much as defeat the dozens of Dreikathi stationed at the glacier.

In truth, the letter strikes her as a death sentence, signed and sealed by the people of Delve. Why would they request such an impossible thing to provide their help? Ruthless, Eetreya judges them at first, and bringing a hand to her face in sheer hopelessness, she discards the yellowed note, in a matter of seconds becoming an ungraceful, weeping heap near the Indyuk.

When the Indyuk reads the whole of the scribed text, he too looks hopeless. He remembers all the things he saw in the caverns of Nuunva, in the halls of his occupied home. He saw more Dreikathi than he could count, and boxes, crates and barrels of supplies for more time than he would have ever dreamed of in his present condition, and saw, also, all manner of weapons and armors, that, at that moment, while the invaders had them in abundance, they severely lacked.

But then something dawns on Eetreya, all the pieces of an ethereal puzzle come together, and she remembers the old Indyuk's dream. There was a wyrm soaring for Nuunva, cracking it in two, but there was something else, something in the distance of the horizon of the dream. There was the island of Asper, wreathed in shadows and in the middle of a storm, she was certain that was the island the man had seen. Why had he seen it in his dream if it had no significance? Surely, Eetreya thinks, there is something that must be done in the island, perhaps something or someone of importance can be found there.

And then she remembers her grandmother once more, the freckled blond of green eyes. She could have done it, she thinks, shape shift into the form of a Dreikathi, and she could have easily gone in there, in disguise. But how could Eetreya manage the same? If she could be a shape shifter like her grandmother, she would be able to walk right into Nuunva and steal a sample of the foul thing. If only she could procure her grandmother's artifact, she could at least have a chance of walking into the glacier, but more importantly, of coming out of it alive.

Eetreya puts these two things together, and wonders harder about the artifact. Where had her grandmother put it? Had she hidden it there, in Asper? Her grandmother always spoke of Asper when she ceased shape shifting, and she remembers her saying something reiteratively about all things being laid to rest in the end. Could she possibly use the gem? Could she find it even, and then shape shift – she, Eetreya, a simple girl of Indyuk descent? Could she look like a Dreikathi, perhaps, and break through their numbers?

Her grandmother had been buried there, in the island; so what was she waiting for? She was always quick to take action, and this would be no exception, she would go find it, if it was even there like she had so wildly guessed. Rising to her feet and picking up the scarce remainder of her possessions, she announced to the Indyuk that she would be departing further north to the island of Asper, somewhat in the same fashion that she had spoken to Moryz when informing him that she was leaving Spinesreach to come to the tundra.

She had been wrong when leaving that time, she judges, but had she in the end? She is where she is supposed to be, she reckons, a twist of fate, defending her ancestral home and the continent from a foreign threat, and she possesses the power, or the potential of power, to steal something critical from the invaders. She can't let this pass, it would be a sin, her mother would have said, and she remembers her, for once, very fondly.

This time, however, when Eetreya turns to go in all of her unfettered, storming glory, there is a hand that reaches to grab her arm, and not only that, but also a towering body that moves to block her path. All of it is followed by a masculine voice, a decisive intonation, clear in countering the woman, telling her that she will not go to the island alone.

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The island of Asper lies far off the shore from the tundra; a minuscule, half wrecked ferry departs from a hidden, rank cove accessed through a well-frozen crevice, and, from there, a mindless golem rows off with the Indyuk and the tanned blonde, sailing through ice floes for what seems endless hours. The sky is stormy and the two barely exchange any words, thinking, likely, that visiting the shadowy island is the least of the dangers they'll have to face before a solution is found to the corruption of the Leylines.

Oriotok would not have left Eetreya to come alone, not if he could help it, but he knows that she will have to face the Dreikathi alone if their plan succeeds. If they can find the gem, and she can use it to disguise herself, then she can infiltrate the taken glacier, walk through

Nuunva without hindrance and, just possibly, steal a sample of the wretched sludge, if there is in fact some left, and then come back; she must come back, he thinks, or all will be lost without the sample. He can hardly believe something like the gem exists, but if there is a chance that such a thing will work, they must take it, of that he is certain.

Eetreya had been drawing invisible lines on her hands throughout the trip, likely attempting to remember some path or direction. She hasn't visited the island since her grandmother's passing, and she hopes, she tells him, that she will remember the way correctly. When they disembark, it seems as though she knows exactly where to go, and leads him through frozen beaches and up inclines filled with shadowy specters.

Ice and shadows

A large, ruffled-looking gray hare stares at the pair as they dig with its big, round brown eyes; they have tracked the grave, marked scarcely between some crooked, cold trees, and after wrought moments when Eetreya knew not if she was ready to violate the tomb of her grandmother, they finally resigned to the fact that they must. Looking nothing but distraught, she uses her hands for improvised spades, and not too long elapses before various things appear. Charms of some kind appear first, likely to lead the soul of her grandmother in the afterlife, and gold coins, petrified flowers and a number of other curious-looking things.

It seems as though the tomb has been buried under layers of snow left by the passing years, and the eerie clearing makes them shiver not only with the cold, but with the unease of a constant, invisible presence that haunts them. Near a precipice, the trees look as if they might fall off the cliff and into the frozen seas beneath, and Eetreya can't help but question why her grandmother would have wanted to be buried there. She is frightened, and dreads the idea of finding a long-frozen corpse, or the remains of it, but luckily, and object wound in a leftover flap of leather is unearthed before any bony hands or something much worse is found.

The gem is but a cold stone in Eetreya's hand, unlike she remembered it when it was in possession of her grandmother. Back then, it had a brilliant hue, and reflected all the colors of the rainbow, flashing with light every time the old woman would touch it to become something else. Perhaps it's not even the right gem, and maybe she has just found one of her grandmother's trinkets in her grave. She has desecrated the grave of the woman that loved her so for nothing, and despair fills her.

Oriotok watches in silence at her side, but after several minutes of witnessing her sob with impotence, she urges her to make it work, to hit it, rub it, sing to it, or whatever she must to make the damned artifact work. It is impossible, he says, that its powers would die and he insists, restlessly, again and again, to make it work, to make it flash like she had said it would, and to change, to become anything, even if just altering the color of her hair; they can't have come this far to fail now.

Eetreya is hopeless, and without any manner of grace, civility or composure, she screams at the Indyuk, she berates and yells with all her energy that the gem is useless, powerless, and that whatever magic it had it has died with the end of her grandmother's life, gone with her blood forever, and it's just a stone, good for nothing but a dusty collection on a shelf.

And then, the most unthinkable thing happens, for as Eetreya is caught in the midst of a furious chain of hopelessness, and busy cursing at her luck and the Gods and the world, Oriotok withdraws a blade and, catching her inattentive, lunges at her. And she, unbelieving of what is happening, topples over like a collapsing pillar, hitting the frozen ground with a thud and the sound of crunching snow.

Thoughts flash in Eetreya's mind, and with reason she feels betrayed, frightful and impotent all at the same time. So shocked she is that the Indyuk would attack her, that she merely falls like a lifeless lump. But why wouldn't he, she thinks too, he had ambushed her in the tundra after all. Perhaps he had just always been working for himself, and nobody else, and had ulterior motives that she merely was not aware of. The island quivers beneath them, and it only adds to Eetreya's emotions at that time, deepening the mental wounds of the deed.

A slicing pain ensues, and for instants the ruffled girl can't place its source, it burns her, and the idea that she's come straight into her death crosses her mind. Perhaps she should have stayed in Spinesreach, with Moryz - even if the end was near at the hands of the Dreikathi invaders, at least there she would have had the comfort of his company.

At that moment, Eetreya's pain subsides, her vision clearing, as well as her mind, when Oriotok presses the seemingly useless gem into the bloodied palm of her hand. Indeed, all the Indyuk had done after knocking her down had been barely scratch her flesh, there in her right hand, and now, the blood seeped out to coat the surface of the useless artifact. Not wholly recovered from the impact, however, Eetreya merely stares at Oriotok, she sees him speaking words, but she can't hear them, and then instead of feeling pain in her hand, she feels a heat, a warmth, so pleasant to be exposed to in that place of ice and shadows.

The gem bursts with light and colors, casting reflections throughout the icy clearing, and when the blinding flashes subside, it is Oriotok that finds himself staring in shock at a copy of himself, there, beneath his weight, no longer lies the Eetreya he has tackled down, but another being, identical to the one he remembers last seeing in a reflection of himself in the icy waters of the Alaqsii.

His copycat lies in shock also, the former Eetreya has stilled too, wholly quiet at last. Likely, Oriotok thinks, she can feel it, the change, the shifting of her form. In truth, the power of the gem, of the shadowy artifact, had dwindled with the death of Eetreya's grandmother, indeed it had gone away with her blood; but what Eetreya hadn't realized, is that her grandmother's blood was also hers, and all that the powerless stone needed was a little nudge, so to speak.

With a light that blinds the Indyuk again, leaving his vision riddled with yellowed motes, Eetreya's form shifts again, and Oriotok can not only see it, but feel it also, for where there is

contact between their two bodies, there is a tremor of the flesh and a warmth that leaves Eetreya a different freckled, blond of green eyes, similar, but not herself. Who that is, Oriotok doesn't know, but the vivid memory of her grandmother and the intensity of the remembrance at that point, transforms her body to look like the old woman.

But there is more than that, and amidst flashes of light, Oriotok can witness numberless new forms, shapes and colors. It is, to him, as though feathers meld with flesh and scales and fur so fast that the changes are and, frightened for the first time about the artifact, fearing that perhaps there is something wrong, the Indyuk pleads Eetreya to stop, to settle down. When she does, all he can see in her face is joy, now truly her own visage; for once in many days she has found a speck of hope within the chaos, and she laughs, and then, he, at last, laughs too, and the sounds echo in the dismal, frozen place.

An infiltration in disguise

Eetreya walks into the icy halls of Nuunva with an impressive sense of shamelessness, at night, to diminish the inevitable suspicion, and to camouflage better in the shadows, for likely her disguise would not be perfect; after all, she hasn't been near enough Dreikathi to ever get a good look, and, in truth, she wishes she didn't have to come so near now, or ever in her life. A few steps into the glacier, and she is surprised by the first of many Dreikathi.

This very instant is the fleeting second when her destiny is sealed, and she knows it, for if the invader is to recognize her as anything but another of his kind, likely she is condemned to die a horrible death. Late night it is though, and the Dreikathi looks hardly bothered enough to exchange a mute greeting with his head, and continues down the passage wordlessly, leaving behind a very relieved Eetreya in the uniform that the Indyuk dare come to steal for her.

Never in her wildest dreams she could have imagined she'd ever be among so many of the hideous people of the Drakkenmont Empire pretending to be at ease; saying that she would be infiltrating a campsite of the lot would have made anyone call her outright crazy, or at the very least perturbed, but what choice had she? She knows very well what the people far in the city of Delve need in order to provide their help to the continent of Sapience, and who else might be able to do anything but her, with her newly acquired abilities as a shape shifter.

Oriotok had kept on and on drawing rough maps of the inside of the glacier, attempting to signal important marks along the village of Nuunva so that the disguised blond might know where to go. With a dried out bit of branch he had traced lines here, circles there and, to Eetreya, it had all been a confusing doodling of stirred up snow and dirt, turning, in her head, into something as murky as mud.

Indeed, she would wander into Nuunva with hardly her already scarce memories about the place, but she could do nothing about how confused she had become with the Indyuk's

explanation, because there was too little time to remedy it now. The place wasn't too large, or so she thought, but whatever the case, she must find the thing and bring a sample of it.

She had been practicing, fumbling with her grandmother's gem, the long-unused artifact that she and the Indruk had retrieved from her grave in the shadowy island of Asper. He would tell her when something was off, details about pointed noses, crooked ears or eyes too bright to belong to one of the Dreikathi. Hundreds of attempts later, they had concluded there was no more time, and whatever she managed best would have to do.

She slowly wandered further inside the glacier, wary and frightened, fearing the Dreikathi that might cross her path and discover her, exposing her as merely a human, and not one of the invaders. Through a curving, frozen hallway she approached further to the center of the village, there, where the iced vault of the village had broken now lay innumerable foreign objects under night sky.

A shorter than average Dreikathi appears to be taking notes about the various inventories, and she watches for some time, keeping a prudent distance. The male circles slowly a pile of crates, pushing things around with his foot or feeling for worn-down labels with his hand, and as time passes, Eetreya thinks he'll never finish with his task. There are so many piled up crates, and lined up barrels nearby, that she is certain he could easily continue to do this the whole night.

With what feels to her like a casual stride, she wanders from one end of the cavern to another. What she can't see is that the male taking notes pauses in his duties to regard her disguised form. Hardly is she halfway through the distance, when the Dreikathi speaks to her, quite clearly in fact. Surely she has walked the wrong way, inclined her body just a little too much, or swung her arms a bit too wide. She hasn't witnessed these things before, she tells herself, and now she's going to be discovered over some ridiculous detail about the Dreikathi stride.

At first, she is uncertain whether to respond or turn and merely hasten her pace, but her thinking is hardly quick enough, and within scarce thoughts, the note-taking male has made his way to her side, and has reached to grab her arm.

She thinks the worst, perhaps her disguise has faded, maybe the gem has stopped working, its powers exhausted without another tribute of blood, or simply she makes for a lousy Dreikathi, despite her efforts. The man regards her inquisitively, squinting his dark eyes, saying something that she can't quite understand, because he has a thicker accent, but what she can't comprehend at first becomes clear in the ensuing moments. The Dreikathi's hand has come into contact with her flesh, and there is unusual warmth to it, the man tells her, and her stride is askew, and her posture wrong for a recruit of the Drakkenmont Empire.

Surely there is something wrong, some sickness of these foreign lands, he says further, and before she realizes it, she is being led down one of the icy corridors to a secluded niche where another Dreikathi is lounging on a chair. A healer or a physician of some kind, Eetreya reckons, for around him are assembled numerous flasks and implements she is certain has seen before.

The Dreikathi that has taken her there departs at that moment, without so much as a word, and the other rises begrudgingly from his seat to examine her.

Struck by what is happening by now, Eetreya figures it is best to follow along with this presumable disease, acting as if she were sick – surely, she thinks, that would explain her off stride and strange behavior to the other Dreikathi. After many inquisitive looks and nods and grunts of self approval, the man hands her over a metal and glass flask filled with a yellowish, thick liquid of some kind, and a packet of crushed herbs. After hearing the instructions, she is told she is dismissed and to go rest in the sleeping quarters.

Dubiously, she paces back into the frozen corridor, opposite of where she came from. Through the passage the Dreikathi had taken her to see the healer, or whatever the other man was, she had seen no signs of the huge contraption Oriotok had told her about, nor barrels marked with ominous signs that could contain the thing she was looking for.

She stared at the flask in her hand at length, the liquid inside looked thick and yellowish, almost like honey, but uncapping the vial revealed a pungent smell, so intense that she thinks she might gag right there. What might have happened if she had been made to drink the thing there with the Dreikathi, she wonders, and comes to the conclusions that the outcome would have been unpredictable, for sure, maybe fatal. Making sure nobody is around to see her, she empties the contents of the flask in a dark recess, and replaces the small bottle between the folds of her clothing.

Just as Eetreya is withdrawing her hand from her pocket, she sees the oversized artifact, whirring and pumping things through its ring of many probes. There is a Dreikathi dozing off in his post at guarding or operating the machine, and right behind him she can see a pile of brightly labeled steel casks, and she is sure she has found what she is looking for.

Further in the encampment

Just as soon as she got the sample, she would get out of the glacier. She'd run and jump and roll, and do whatever she must to get out of the taken, run down place. She feared now that the vaulted ice would merely collapse with the next tremor, but then perhaps the Dreikathi might be crushed under the weight of the glacier. Ambivalence fills her, and only for a fleeting instant she wishes for another quake, but then remembers the great numbers of the Drakkenmont Empire.

Grounded once more on the task, she continues to analyze the place. Merely one Dreikathi is stationed by the machinery, in front of what appears to be a control panel of some sort, with switches and levers and other paraphernalia. Could she perhaps turn it off? The idea lingers in her mind, tempting her, but then what would happen? She would be executed as a traitor, the machine started again and then there would be no chance of salvation for Sapience. She had to proceed as planned, she realizes, and take the sample from one of the casks.

How would she take the sample, though? First she needs to figure a way how to steal some of the sludge without getting noticed. It seems as luck is on her side, for the Dreikathi snoozes, but looking over the casks, they are much too large to grab a whole one to go, and likely just as heavy as they look. It seems as though the seconds that pass are endless to Eetreya, each one filled with a multitude conflicting thoughts and ideas about what to do. She realizes how little she had thought the crazed plan out before diving into it.

Why hadn't she or Oriotok thought of how she would take the sample, transport it, or even protect from it? Such haste they made for her to come, and what use would it be if she failed? She has been lurking near the machine for what seems like an eternity and then some, watching the various probes and pumps function. There is a large glass container, spherical in shape, which seems to be the vessel that holds the foul liquid before it is injected into the Leylines, dripping down from it thick blobs.

A soft humming fills the cavern, and there is a faint glow of Ylem and warmth where the many probes run deep into the frozen ground, melting the ice nearest. Likely the Dreikathi was lulled by the sound, and Eetreya is not one to waste her only chance. She glances around one more time, ensuring no one else is around, and moves behind the machinery, but paces away from the dozed off guardian. She searches the steely casks, looking for a way to open them and after some trial and error, manages to shift a spring mechanism about and release the lid from a cask – an empty one.

Cursing her luck, she moves to another cask, this time, she tests its weight with a small push, and skips a number that appear to be also empty. Growing uneasy after one too many seemingly empty barrels, she is finally against one that won't budge, too heavy with its contents. Fumbling, she attempts to make little noise in shifting the opening mechanism, and after some struggling, frees the lid from the container.

Eetreya's eyes water immediately; an acrid fume is freed with the opening of the barrel, and so strong and unpleasant the smell is that she fears the Dreikathi might awake from catching a whiff of it. She holds the lid down, thinking hurriedly about where to put the sample. She is frightened about touching it, but even more scared about the possibility of another Dreikathi making it into the scene.

As a test, she pulls her sleeve down along her arm, and sticks a bunch of the cloth into the murky liquid, allowing it to simmer in the disgusting fluid. Nothing occurs immediately, and she thinks that perhaps it is safe to touch the sludge, but what would she do then, carry a bit of the thing in her hand? Take a rag dampened with the thing to the Ankyrean laboratory? Her desperation grows, and for instants she is certain she will be caught right in the middle of the act.

In a moment of fleeting illumination, divine or otherwise, she remembers her presumed illness, the Dreikathi physician and the yellowed liquid he gave her. She feels her pockets for the flask and observes the object against the night light filtering from the broken dome above.

She has not a single idea what was in it before she emptied the bottle, and questions if it would be wise to mix the leftovers with the sludge, but she can think of nothing else, so before she can pause to think again, she is dipping the flask into the barrel.

Only then does the sludge that had come into contact with her sleeve have an effect on her, and she feels a severe burning in her wrist that makes her curse with some noise and drop the flask straight into the barrel. It takes her an instant to locate the bright red burn on her skin, and another to decide that despite the obvious hazard associated to touching the poisonous liquid, she must fish for the rapidly sinking flask. Cringing with anticipation, she sinks her hand into the barrel, firmly grabbing the filled flask and making as to go.

The cap of the flask has been lost to the depths of the cask, and so she must do with wrapping the top with some ripped cloth. At once the vial is placed amidst the folds of her clothing again and she is slipping down the corridor at a hurried pace, not even bothering to turn back to guess if someone might be watching.

Should she have done more? Should she have sabotaged the probes? Perhaps a simple kick might have offset the whole thing, and she has let that opportunity go. In the moment she hesitates about turning back, a Dreikathi crosses her path, the one from before, the one that grabbed her to go see the healer. He has been patrolling that corridor, apparently, and looks upset to see Eetreya again. Likely this is the end, she thinks, he'll see her hand and realize she has been going to places she shouldn't.

Warningly grabbing for the whip at his hip, the Dreikathi drags her down another corridor, and before she can utter a single peep, she is standing at the entrance to where the sleeping quarters for the soldiers have been arranged, nearby dozens of sleeping Dreikathi. Shoved inside, she merely stands there, paralyzed, and in nearly a bark the man tells her to stay there.

How will she ever get out if she stays the night?

Unexpected help

There are few sons out and about that are as obedient and loyal as the young Indyuk had been. Indeed, Oriotok had stayed near Nuunva all along, even if it meant a risk to himself, because his father had told him to, and even after the old man's death, his words were of importance to him. Now that Eetreya had dared going into the glacier, even if in disguise, he knew he had to linger even closer, should the need arise to cause a distraction or even a fight, if it would help secure the safety of the blonde woman, and the acquisition of the wretched sample.

After Eetreya had slipped through the crevice leading into the icy, occupied village, he had followed inside, keeping a close eye on the woman from the shadows. Only for so long had he done this, however, because with as well as he knew Nuunva, he knew of secret passages and

concealed spaces that he had made certain the Dreikathi hadn't invaded while he had stayed to watch them the first time. Then, when they unloaded all of their supplies, and crates and steely parts, before they had even begun the poisoning of the lands, he had taken to the task of slowly rearranging the Dreikathi's belongings.

Pushing a barrel here or piling a crate there, he had effectively and, more importantly, inconspicuously blocked off spaces vital to his duties as a vigilante of the deserted village. Then, when he saw Eetreya run into the other Dreikathi and be grabbed away the first time, he had been hiding in a confined air bubble, hardly a pocket large enough to fit one person in the ice wall. He had heard the exchange as if faraway voices and had remained unmoving, waiting. From outside, he merely looked like a shadow in the dark passage, and thus, didn't become the object of any sort of observation or suspicion.

Stealthily he moved in closer, weaseling through the spaces nearly like a ghost. So well he knew his village, and at night most of the Dreikathi slumbered, oblivious to anything going on but in their dreams. He had seen three Dreikathi patrolling the halls near him, but he couldn't go further. Beyond the point he had stationed himself, lay a large open cavern and he would have to go across it to get to the machinery. Going across that portion of the village meant being seen, and so, he forced himself to remain there, waiting still. When Eetreya came nearer, he had told himself, he'd go straight into the danger if necessary.

And then he saw the disguised Eetreya come into the Dreikathi a second time. His heart raced, and the blonde was taken away a second time. Would she come back a third time, he wondered; he had heard the reputation of the Dreikathi army, and knew she would not be treated kindly should she fall into fault a third time. Now was the time to act, he realized.

As the Indruk struggled with his thoughts, Eetreya had lied down with resignation atop a utilitarian bedroll. Her hand burned as if the flesh had been flayed away, and in the darkness she could see the forms of the dozens of Dreikathi sleeping. Uneasy, she squirmed around, this way and that, keeping her hand nearly squished beneath the weight of her body in an attempt to ease the pain and remain silent. She might die of the pain, she thought at that point, or the burning poison in the sludge that she had touched might kill her. Whichever came first, it would not end well, and she rose to her feet, ready to venture the patrolled hallway one more time.

Just as she had made it to her feet, a sudden noise startled the sleeping quarters into wakefulness; a sound so deep and roaring, as if coming from within the ice itself. Eetreya remembered about the old man and his dream, and about what Oriotok had told her as well, and wondered if in fact Tonrar, the spirit of the ice, was rumbling now with fury. Dizzy with pain, she could feel the ground trembling beneath her feet, and for a flashing instant she had begun to believe the end was upon everyone in the glacier – perhaps Tonrar rumbled to finish off the invaders.

Not very far, Oriotok had used one of his tricks. He had not come unprepared to face the ice and the Dreikathi, and with a thick, powerful horn, he had begun producing the racket from his

concealed ice pocket. So deafening was the sound in his ears in such a secluded place that he thought he might never hear again, but through the spaces, through the cracks, and through the very ice, the racket had propagated, the sound waves spreading through Nuunva as if about to send it into resonance; then, the ice really might crack.

The icy chamber Eetreya now stood in burst into activity. In what felt like a blur, she saw various Dreikathi spring to their feet and pick up their weapons, seemingly always prepared to jump into action. Unsteady but unwavering in her purpose, now that she had an opportunity to escape, she too grabbed the nearest weapon and jogged outside the sleeping area, following and camouflaging herself amidst a group of recruits.

From one minute to the next, it seemed as though the occupied Nuunva had turned into chaos, and although the higher ranked Dreikathi barked orders from one side of the caverns and halls to the others, the unseen intrusion had caught the invaders by surprise and it would take them some time to regroup into order. In his secluded niche, praying to all his gods, Oriotok blew his horn into breathlessness, again and again, sending resonating echoes through the passageways. Here and there, Dreikathi dashed through the glacier, looking for the source of the unnerving noise.

Eetreya wished she could disappear, become invisible like a Syssin and merely step outside. Attempting to keep her composure and her hand out of sight, and remember Oriotok's doodling of the layout of Nuunva, she too dashed this way and that, hoping to find the way out. The sound of the horn was a horrible punishment in her ears, and between the pain and the noise she became uncertain of whether she'd survive it all.

Suddenly, she remembered the hidden passage Oriotok had doodled from one side of the central cavern, which exited just a few more paces away from the crevice that she so badly needed to reach. And then, just as abruptly, Eetreya disappeared from sight. She had found it, the passage, just at the junction of one of the smaller caverns and three other paths – it merely looked like a large pillar of bluish ice from one side, but so well concealed the entry was behind a pile of crates that nobody saw her go in.

With the rumbling sound of the cavern still ringing in her ears, she paced down the passage, leaning her unharmed arm for support as she trundled on, dragging her feet through the muddied ground. There, the ice had melted like in other parts of the glacier, and as she made it to the other end of the passage, she peeked outside. The sound of boots running past toward the outside briefly ringed in the background of the blowing horn and then, she realized many Dreikathi were going outside to search for the intruders.

Mustering all her strength, she too bolted outside along a group of Dreikathi, blending in easily in the commotion; and then, she kept running through the snowed ground, not even turning to look back like she had done before. This time she wouldn't hesitate, because she couldn't afford it, and after not long, she found herself running away without the company of other recruits. Only then she looked back – time had been a haze, and she could hardly see the outline of the ice cliffs of the glacier in the distance.

A certain bomb artisan

One morning, Uasiol received a very ominous message. It had been long since he had come to the Aerie, looking for peace away from the war. With his explosive concoctions old and new, he had managed to preserve the peace there by, in simple words, bombing anything that moved. Truth is he had prepared some mostly harmless devices and had planted them throughout the snowy mountain pass, in hopes that the warning noise and explosions would keep intruders away.

The Atavians that inhabited the place were thankful, for keeping their home in seclusion, and with such gratitude Uasiol continued his experiments, although somewhat hazardous at times, without many interruptions. Just as the seclusion kept him safe and isolated, it too kept him and the Atavians uninformed for periods of months at a time, and oblivious to the newer happenings of the rest of Sapience. With the beginning of the summer, plenty of the snow and ice of the pass had melted, and so that portion of the Vashnar Mountains was easier to traverse.

Some Atavians would leave in the summer to collect goods from various parts of the continent, supplies and, also, news, and even with the war taking place, the summer journeys had become a necessity throughout the years. Choosing to not take part in these trips down and away from the mountains, it wasn't until the first of the traveling parties returned that Uasiol started hearing stranger and stranger things. To him, the news sounded as though the war had worsened. There had been numerous reports of incidents with the Ylem probes, counting explosions, quakes and, more recently, sickness.

Some crazy Tso'aa had arrived to the Heartwood some time before, speaking nonsense of Dreikathi and airships, but that was just an unconfirmed rumor, one of the returning Atavians told him. Uasiol figured the war had reached its more fervent moments, and perhaps soon things would begin to die down and eventually negotiations for land and peace would begin, leaving the whole Ylem domination business behind for at least some years.

How wrong all were about them being rumors, Uasiol now realized. In his hands he clutched a letter from one of his apprentices of Albedos. He was hardly just a boy when he had come to learn with him, and now he spoke to him through the missive with all the seriousness of a grown man. He began by wishing him well, in his usual politeness, but then he continued detailing everything they knew of the Dreikathi back in the city of Delve; of their airship that had been sighted in the western coast, of the mysterious explosions and quakes, of the occupation of a glacial village far in the north and, at last, and the most somber part of the letter, about how they had come with their machinery to violate the land and the Leylines.

Uasiol felt a shiver down his spine. Right then, perhaps the very Leylines that ran through the depths of the mountains had been contaminated by the invaders, and all would be lost within a matter of days. His apprentice was no daft man, luckily, and, having kept in touch with Uasiol for so many years, thought that perhaps in his experiments his master might find a solution to the impending calamity of the Leylines.

The apprentice mentioned that things might be injected into the Ylem probes, and if they could figure a cleansing combination to put in an explosive device, they could, perhaps, and about this he only made speculations, counter the Dreikathi poison or even cleanse the Leylines completely. A sample was being procured, he further noted in the missive he had sent Uasiol, and as soon as it was in their possession, it would be brought to him, although, he noted, likely it would be safer for him to travel to Albedos directly, where he could surely conduct any experiments he required more quickly and without disturbance.

The council of the Free City of Delve had met, and thus the apprentice recounted the events of that day, about the multitudes of people roaring outside and about the arguments in favor of his person. What choice did Uasiol have then? None, he judged, because by now he had been practically dragged into the matter, and should he not comply, he'd bear the burden of a great forsaken responsibility and an exceedingly selfish omission. If his abilities were being called for, how could he deny them?

It would take him almost a day to pack the entirety of his lab, and much longer to travel with that burden, and so, he decided to merely take his repertoire of ingredients and his compendium of bomb recipes and annotations, trusting that his apprentice would ensure everything else that he required would be provided on his arrival to Albedos.

Uasiol thought at length about what might be done as he traveled down the mountains, away from the charming Aerie to enter a land that had been ravaged by war, and now lay at the beginnings of its demise, should they fail. He didn't even know how long he had to come up with something of use, and how on earth he would manage to build a bomb powerful enough to spread throughout the whole of the Leylines of Sapience. By then, the Dreikathi had been poisoning the lands for some fifteen days and he hadn't a clue how long it would take for the worst of its effects to come to light.

There must be something though, he thought, something swifter than whatever the Dreikathi had been using, something that could burst, expand and annihilate the corrupted motes.

They would need all sorts of things, he thought, elemental ices and ashes, dragon scale dust, phoenix feathers, and some divine essence. He made these notes in his mind, knowing that there would be more to gather later, and knowing that, perhaps, he would even have to find these things himself. He had some leftover ashes and ices, and even some crushed dragon scales, but what could Albedos provide him with? He had been to those lands before, but he had never attempted to make any bombs there, and so, he figured he would have to trust the knowledge of his apprentice instead.

By then, the news of the Dreikathi had spread through the land, and his journey had been made easier by the fact that troops everywhere had begun marching back to their homes. What use was there now, after all, to fight for lands that risked destruction from night to day? Encountering no resistance or immediate danger, Uasiol traveled speedily and at surprising ease, and after about a day and a half, he had made it to the Siroccian Mountains, where he

would cross the portal to the other side, to arrive in Albedos in the blink of an eye. If only everything was as easy as that, he thought as he tightly cinched the saddle bags to his mare's body, fearing that something might be lost in the translocation from one continent to the other.

A long awaited delivery

How long could Oriotok survive in hiding? He had concealed himself there and had intermittently blown his horn for hours, making the very ice tremble with the grave sound to ensure Eetreya's safety, and then he too had moved from the ice pocket he had found refuge in, roaming from one concealed recess to the next. But now, the Dreikathi patrolled the halls of Nuunva with unprecedented zeal, and although no secret passages had been found yet by the invaders, he feared that any moment now, one of the enemies might stumble into an unknown opening and realize that there is more to Nuunva than what the eye easily sees.

Not too far from there, the figure of Eetreya flickers, swathed in flashing lights. Her disguise had begun wavering hours earlier, when she had finally left the Dreikathi behind. Now, nearly at dawn, through the snow, there is a strange glow about her body as the magic dwindles, and her hand, burnt and aching like she has never hurt before, has been tucked deep into the folds of her coat. Dragging her feet through the snow, she winces and bites her lip, panting for breath and thinking she won't make it back to the Ankyrean laboratory.

The few remaining in the forgotten laboratory have been keeping a constant watch from the concealed entrance of the place, and when they see someone approaching, they are uncertain of their identity, and so they stay put, waiting. A blinding flash of light surrounds the strange apparition, and Eetreya's blond hair appears to sprout from her head as she is unable to sustain the Dreikathi disguise further, leaving the dizzy blond crawling to the entrance.

Two refugees rush to take her inside, and after accommodating her within the frozen halls of the wrecked laboratory, it is decided that they must all leave the place. The wounded Eetreya must make it to the port city of Delve where perhaps they might heal her, and so must the sample of the poisonous liquid. Plans have been made, and another group waits beyond the icy bridge for their arrival, so collecting only the strictly necessary, they begin a journey on foot to the bridge, where they hope no unexpected events will hinder their travel. If luck is on their side, they'll make it to Delve before two days.

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A fretting Moryz is having difficulty keeping still, and his horse huffs and neighs uneasily beneath the bridge. The sun has risen high in the sky, and he is worried about Dreikathi finding him or, worse, finding his Eetreya. Hours have elapsed since the agreed meeting time and he has begun thinking that perhaps the infiltration plan has failed. How long they have until the Dreikathi corruption has taken root they are uncertain, and he gazes over his group with

unfettered concern, repeating to them the instructions - Eetreya, he says, or whoever is in possession of the sample, must be taken to the portal at all costs.

It must be after the fifth time he is telling them this when a group, on foot, approaches to cross the bridge. From beneath it they can see perhaps a dozen feet that dash from one end to the other and, hardly minutes after, the few refugees descend down the curving slope.

Eetreya's blonde hair has been swathed in a warm cloak, and the shivering blonde is hoisted upward onto a burly stallion, clinging to the reins with one feeble hand, for her other is incapable of such feat. The plans Moryz had fizzle away with the sight of the sickened Eetreya, and he climbs on the steed with her, barely explaining to the remaining lot that they must go to Delve before immediately galloping off with the blonde, riding through the precarious trails of ice to reach the Tarean range, where they can more easily find an open road to make their journey swifter.

With tireless, sharp intonations he drives the horse onward, practically kicking its flanks with his heels. Huddled against him is a lump of the woman he so much loves, mumbling incoherent things about Indyuk, Nuunva and Drakkenmont, and calling a name, so desperately calling a name that isn't his own, that he is sure the blonde is unable to even recognize him.

On they ride, his horse puffing and huffing in complaint, straining with the effort, and its hooves certainly sore after practically sledding down the craggy slopes of the Tarean mountainsides. There is urgency, not only for Eetreya but for the disgusting sample as well. If they don't make it to Delve, perhaps this sickness will come to all of Sapience, it will ravage the lands, and that will be the end.

There is a relief in him, and likely in the burdened beast as they reach flattened land and they swoop through the tall Mamashi grass to the highway. So close it is now, that Moryz can see it in the distance, but then, he can see something else beyond it, an outline, and a dark one, floating above the trees of the Aureliana forest. An airship, he is certain, for he has seen the hulking things before.

Have they learnt of the theft, perhaps? Moryz' thoughts whirl in his head and he mindlessly steers his horse to change the direction, racing away now so as to conceal himself in the trees of the Ithmian forests instead. And Eetreya, she complains incomprehensibly, and shivers and calls that strange name again, so many times now, that he is certain he has lost his lover for good to the man that, to him, is a mystery.

The sky begins to darken when he has galloped to the opposing fringe of the Ithmian woods, miles south, but still through the branches he can see the airship, hovering in place, or so it seems to him. So near they are to the Siroccian Mountains, hardly just an hour race through the road, and he can't hide further, he must thread open terrain now, or risk taking a longer path that might doom the blonde to her illness before they make it to Albedos.

Against the moonlight the airship moves at last, no longer static, and he dares not look back more than a couple times, but long enough to see cables being lowered from the hull - a clear sign that more Dreikathi are making it to land, for one reason or another. With another cry his horse bursts forward, and he must continue, no matter what.

The brewing of an antidote

The shivering blonde lies by the light of candles, unknowing of where she is or what has happened in the past three days. The last she remembers is riding on a horse with a man, a man that had a voice so familiar, but that she couldn't quite match to a face or a name. There are hushed people nearby, and there is the smell of herbs and the warmth of boiling liquids in the vicinity. So quiet is the place, save for the bubbling of piping hot fluids and the crushing of seeds and stalks in what appears to be a stone mortar in the dim light.

A man goes about the various tables and stands, stirring something here, or pouring a pinch of another thing there, and there is a quiet humming to him that accompanies the other background noises, almost mingling in a song of the simmering concoctions.

She had the antidote to her illness right with her, the man tells her as he carries on about his business. When they freed her from the stolen Dreikathi uniform, a packet of mixed herbs had fallen out from a pocket, a rather standard, if precise combination that the Drakkenmont Empire has instituted as a remedy for practically anything. Being one to always experiment with many strange things, Uasiol had learnt how take care of himself also, else he fall prey to one of his most dangerous ingredients, and he had read something about these Dreikathi things.

Thanks to that little packet, Uasiol carries on in a reserved tone of voice, he figured what to do with the bomb. Right then, scouts were picking out the rarest bloom that was in the mix, which grew in mountain slopes and of which they had the least supply; and with it, plus the addition of some crushed crystallized Ylem, and other lesser ingredients, the explosion would propagate through the Leylines without obstacle. Why he hadn't thought of it before escaped him, he further added, for the easier way to propagate a bomb through the Leylines would be adding something obtained from the very lines, some Ylem, that would surely, and easily diffuse through them.

First though, he explains, the innumerable probes that were abandoned out on the field must be retrieved, for they serve as leaking points, where the entirety of the antidote he has brewed, as has been called by some, could likely dissipate and lose its effect. They must ensure as much as possible of the energy of the bomb is entrapped in the Leylines, and that will only be accomplished by retrieving, or at least deactivating the HYPEs.

Eetreyra glances over to Uasiol from where she lies, feeling impossibly confused about it all, as if the things she had experienced in the past month had been completely erased from her

memories, but the man appears to pay her no mind, too absorbed in what he is doing to become aware of her perplexity. So calm he looks, one might think he is brewing tea and not antidotes, or assembling bouquets, and not bombs.

Slowly Eetreya begins to remember, her mind at last rattled into wakefulness after days of peaceful slumber. With increasing clarity the pieces of a contrived story come together, and for moments she can't exactly believe where she has been, how far she has traveled or what she has done.

Suddenly, she is more aware of her surroundings; she has been accommodated in a travel cot of some kind, an improvised bed of sorts, with warm blankets and dull pillows, but comfortable enough to rest, truly, like she hadn't been in months because of the war. The chamber around is reasonably ample, with many work tables and bookshelves. Beakers, bottles, and other various laboratory implements have been arranged about the available surfaces, and clearly the user of all these things is the man that has been pacing nearby from one bubbling pot to another.

It is as if Uasiol returns to the ground from his unawareness now, perhaps realizing how strange it must be for the woman to awake in an unfamiliar place, and he explains that she had to be kept near for observation. After all, he adds, at last settling down near the foot of the cot in a plain looking stool, she had been in immediate contact with the corrupted sludge of the Dreikathi, and would be the first to experience its effects.

More pieces of the story fall into place for Eetreya, and she remembers about Nuunva and the Dreikathi, and the buzzing contraption violating the lands, and the sludge. Next, she remembers about her burnt hand and the pain she felt. There is a fleeting reliving of the discomfort she experienced, and a passing dizziness, as if she were experiencing it all over again, and quickly she looks to her hand, confirming that, in fact, it has been burnt. The wound, however, looks clean to her, en route to healing, and she can freely move her wrist and wiggle her fingers.

Uasiol informs her that after figuring out the contents of the packet so they might replicate the formula, they made a paste that the Dreikathi often prepare with the liquefied fat of some desert animals, some 'yellow thing' with an awful smell, he specifies further. Her hand will never be wholly the same, he says, but it's the lesser of the many terrible things that could have occurred to her.

She remains quiet still, considering the bomb maker. Uasiol looks well aged to her, tanned, and perhaps even handsome, if only about five feet tall and bearing the many marks of old burns in his hands. She stares at the Kelki without reserve, trying to put all the events in her head together, into something more coherent than had been before.

Where was Oriotok now, she wondered in silence, had he come to Albedos too?

At that time, a young Utari girl enters the chamber, announcing that Althezar has been preparing for long hours, and that soon he will be ready to depart. Nyatha has been helping him get ready, and arranging the last details for the trip that her chief will be taking back through the portal to Sapience. Uasiol can't but nod an agreement, and tell the girl in return that the projectile is ready and has been placed in its case.

The recall

The news about the need for a recall would spread quickly throughout Sapience, and everywhere brave adventurers, both alone and in groups, took to the open grounds to retrieve the many Ylem probes that had been abandoned once the news of invading Dreikathi had been heard, and moreover, that the probes needed to be retrieved or at least deactivated for the weapon that was in brewing would work.

Some people had fled en masse toward the Siroccian Mountains, to make it through the portal to the city of Delve before the chance that it might be shut and they no longer were welcome in the Free City became a reality. Everywhere, homes had been abandoned, small towns left bare to the fate of the quaking lands.

Now, though, that more of the intruders had made it to land, there was an added danger to the malfunctions of the forsaken probes, and it was uncertain where Dreikathi might appear next to wreak havoc. Rumors had it that the Dreikathi had been roaming the western coast like wolf packs on a hunt, but no explorers had personally spoken of such, and many explosions had been sighted and heard nearer to that shore, great blasts of light that had managed to make the earth ripple more violently than before.

The courageous lot was a varied one, hastily assembled from people of all walks of life, and they had taken to the task of unearthing the laced probes from hot spots, risking sometimes explosions and damage and, of course, unpleasant encounters, and after five days, the retrieval of the probes had proven a great success, for many had been taken back to the cities, or even as far as Albedos. Vampires mingled with Syssin, with Druids, and Knights of opposing sides worked side by side to help with the mission they had been assigned and, for once in a long time, deeply rooted differences were overlooked for the greater good.

But what Uasiol and Althezar and the others hadn't realized and couldn't have foreseen because it was unpredictable, was that the leaking, open probes served too to dissipate the corrupting energy of the Dreikathi sludge. Shutting them off, would, in fact, also increase the concentration and potency of the venom within the Leylines, and likely accelerate the effects of the decaying matter. It was a battle against time, all in all, and the bomb would succeed only if the right components and with the right amount of potency had been managed by the bomb maker Uasiol.

Adding to the uncertainty of this all, people everywhere were falling ill. A Rajamalan that had come into direct contact with one of the probes had developed a hacking cough and had spent

many nights shivering and mumbling incoherent things, his fur going off and his eyes becoming dull.

The probes had at last turned into a serious hazard, like men that had been called crazy in their time had said they would, some almost four years earlier at the beginning of the war, but there had been no serious illnesses associated with their manipulation and, luckily, Uasiol and his apprentice had brewed hundreds of flasks with the curative herb mixture of the Dreikathi, foreseeing the spread of an illness of the sort. Unknowingly, the Dreikathi had spread the disease, but they had also been robbed of the remedy for it and, perhaps, the cure for the Leylines.

Likely, the minor illnesses that were being experienced were due to the dosage of the exposure to the poisonous fumes and energies from the probes, insufficient, fortunately, to progress into something major; but as the days advanced, and the leaking probes became less numerous, it seemed as though the toxicity of the air around them intensified, as if the corruption itself were seeking an escape from confinement in the Ylem flows of the Leylines.

The recounting of the first death finished traveling by word by the seventh day, and by then, it had been estimated that no longer was exposure and manipulation safe and thus, the efforts were discontinued at once. Progress had been made, and that would have to be enough for the rest of the ordeal. The many daredevils now were called to flee, to travel far from the hot spots, to Delve if possible, but not all had received the message, and even if they had, there wasn't enough time by then.

Now, the land quivered too with the anticipation of the disaster. Some said that the land had fallen ill also, now that no longer did the poison escape in enough quantity through the Ylem probes, and shivered because of the corruption. Whatever the explanation, the tremors had increased in frequency and strength, and more often ripples would surge through various territories, stirring trees that would collapse and fissuring dried earths that would crack helplessly. Now, time was against them.

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So small it is; so, so absolutely diminutive in size, that it seems near insignificant to him. Althezar is seated in his worn crimson chair once more, strumming his fingers on the curves of the flattened-down armrests. On his desk, but a foot and a half away, sits the minuscule pellet that Uasiol concocted, assuring him and the others that it would cleanse the corruption from the Leylines, if all went well. The pellet of insignificant size has been loaded with essences, Ylem and other ingredients rather infrequent to be used in the art of bomb crafting, resulting from the bomb crafter's experimentation with the foul Dreikathi sludge, and the hints that the inadvertently stolen packet of herbs gave him.

He questions this, dubious, how remotely possible it is for such a small object to ever expand and reach the extent of a whole continent. It is nonsense to him, all of it, how did he ever put

himself in this position? But he felt guilty, that had been exactly how he had done it. He realized that the Ylem sensors and then the probes, the HYPEs, they had originated in the city of Delve. They had celebrated these creations, and then they had naively introduced them into the continent of Sapience, thinking that they would be wise enough to use such instruments for the greater good, and not to war each other to the point of exhaustion.

He thinks of all the things they have told him about the war, about the many years of battle, and about how things deteriorated so quickly with the Ylem probes. Likely the people of Sapience had turned into the perfect victim for the plans of the Drakkenmont Empire. They had exhausted all manner of resource they were in possession of, and now they were merely like a severely wounded animal seeking to die.

If he failed, Delve and Albedos would lose an ally, and perhaps the city would be burdened with too many refugees. He doesn't want this, but he is exhausted at this point, and the task he has assigned himself, of planting the device into the hot spot Ylem network seems like an unsurpassable obstacle. How will he do it, find the courage for such a feat? It is dangerous and uncertain, and he has no preparation whatsoever, but there was no one he could trust with the accursed thing, not during these times, nor would anyone else have volunteered either. He has to do it himself and ensure, whether there is failure or success, that it will be seen through and with precision.

Before the seeding

Although Althezar is well aged, his tattoos are witnesses to the great life he led. Braveness, courage and leadership, they all are etched into his skin in the unique language of the Utari art. He is a living, breathing, walking hero of his people, having faced many dangers before, and now, though, even old, and tired, and restless, and even though he wishes he could remain in his bureau watching his beloved portrait, he must go. He is old, but not worn-down, and he is wary, but he is not a coward either, and whatever must be done, he will find the strength of his youth to do it.

If he succeeds, likely people will remember him forever, and if he fails, he will at least go down with the peace of having done everything that was in his power. He is an Utari, a proud one; and the Dreikathi, he remembers clearly, brought ruin, disease and tragedy to his people, and for that, they are forever his most hated enemy and that, that alone, serves to drive him forward in such pressing times.

The case is so small, the one that contains the bullet, but if Uasiol is correct, that minuscule explosive device will be enough to cleanse the damaged Leylines. They have stored many reserves of the herbal antidote in case something goes wrong, and he will bring with him dozens of the small flasks should he come into contact with the decayed air touched by the corruption of the Dreikathi, and likely, he thinks, he will be directly in its desecrating path. Uasiol instructed him to use it liberally, and whatever secondary effect the herbs have, likely

they will be nothing compared to the potential risks of allowing a disease manufactured by the Dreikathi to fester in his body.

Many offered to travel with Althezar, and he knows exactly where he must head, but he will not have them around him in the final steps of the journey, it is too dangerous, and he has been attired with many artifacts and gadgets to help him survive the inhospitable place where he must lace the probe, but such rare and expensive to make were those artifacts, that they can only afford to send in one person, and that, he assured the rest without even a hair of hesitation, that would be him, and him only, and that, he added, was not up for contention.

Nyatha knocks his door now, and from his weathered, plush crimson velvet chair he bids her enter the bureau. All is ready, the girl announces with a visible somberness. To him, it is clear the girl fears the worst outcome, if not for Sapience and the Leylines and the world, at least for him. She cares deeply for him, this he knows, because she has been like a daughter to him, and at the same time, he thinks, he has been like a father to her. Not long they had met, but soon they had become friends and family, and more.

Althezar tells her to be wary, to safeguard the future of the Free City of Delve, and of Albedos, should something unexpected happen – should something go wrong. If he fails, he tells her, or if there is any sign that points to a failure, she, and only she, has been entrusted with the power to seal the portal that leads from the city of Delve to the continent of Sapience. However kind they wish to be to their friends in Sapience, unfortunately, they cannot risk Albedos also, and the survival of the last bastion of the continent against the Dreikathi for a land that, perhaps, is inevitably doomed.

He will do his best, he assures her with a gentle pat of his aged, bony and tattooed hand, and he is sincere, and she can notice this. She makes a promise also, that she will do all that he has taught her, all that he has instructed and requested of her, and that she will not hesitate, and will be firm, should any protests arise.

A great parade follows Althezar as he exits his home near the forums. He is old, and he is well-known in the city of Delve, and is respected by its denizens, even by his opponents. Now, it seems all have shown up to see him go, to wish him well, and good luck, and a safe journey and, above all else, to bid him success in his dangerous endeavors. It is like a pilgrimage down the streets of Delve, for as the old Utari man walks in company of his trusted assistant Nyatha, the people follow behind him. The people of Delve, and the people of Sapience also, so many refugees have come to give him their strength, their support, even their precious lucky charms, but he cannot taken them, he assures them politely, nearly apologetic, because he must travel swift and there is no time and no energy left to worry about things that aren't strictly essential.

The case he has placed in the pocket by his heart, over the layer of heavy armor that they attired him with. Goggles, a helmet, a shield, a sword, and so many other things, little things, to protect himself, but artifacts of use no less, that the Delve researchers fitted him with, in hopes to prolong his survival, should he come into danger or harm.

The Troll girl that had swayed Althezar's disposition to help Sapience runs in then, clinging to the man's hand and begging him to let her go along, so she can be useful at last. Althezar is kind, and he has seen so much potential in the girl, that he dare not let it be wasted in such an extremely dangerous affair. To Nyatha he entrusts the safety and the future of the Troll, so that one day, she can be no longer a girl, but rather a woman, a strong and important one. He convinces the girl of this, and Nyatha helps keep the Troll girl from the portal with kind words and reassurance that she has done more than enough for this cause.

Through the military training yards the crowd walks behind the Utari, under the gaze of several guards that have respectfully formed two lines to flank the path. Their scimitars they present as Althezar makes his walk through the place, saluting them also with the respect that he always assured the people of Delve that they deserve, for they are the well-trained brawn of the city.

There is a chant in the crowd that sees the man go with scarcely the company of a brave adventurer from Sapience, Moryz they say his name is in hushed whispers. And many feet behind, a group of Utari have begun the intonation of a traditional farewell song of their people, a tune most often sung during burials, but intended to lead the souls of well-loved Utari to the light of paradise.

The heart of the Leylines

In an instant, the chanting vanishes from the ears of Althezar and Moryz, and they have crossed to the other side, far away from Albedos into the continent of Sapience, right in the heart of the Siroccian Mountains and not long from now, they will be putting an end to the threat that the Dreikathi sludge represents to those very lands.

Beneath their feet, the land quivers, and for lengthy minutes they think that the tremor will never pass. No matter what, however, Althezar knows he must make haste before the invaders discover what they are doing and set out to chase them, and so uncertain are things by then, that they could be right there in the mountains with them, and they would have no way of knowing until coming into direct contact with them.

Even while the land shakes beneath him, he begins his march south. Very near there, the Mountains slope into the more gentle Putoran Hills, and beneath those earthy slopes, just in sight of a great volcano, is the lernian Fracture. The Fracture, as it is most often called, is a place that was once the result of experimentation by mages in the Leylines. Long gone are the days where researchers can roam its halls, for it has been uncounted years since the facility collapsed into the flow of the ethereal Leylines.

In this anomaly of the Leylines, the creatures that often live in the Ylem flows, the mindless Eld, are broken and are the only ones to circulate freely, even more deranged than the ones that often break free in other extractions points. Here, the Eld have thrived, for little

opposition they encounter with how very few adventurers dare wander there. Way back then, it was Delve that granted access to the Iernian Fracture through their technology and now, Althezar thinks, it is Delve that dares dive into it to procure the safety of the continent.

There in the Fracture, Althezar is sure, he will be nearer to the Leylines as he can ever get, there in the chaos and the danger and swathed in the crackling energy, he will be able to push his modified probe in the lines and plant the bullet that Uasiol entrusted him with. He will not fail, he tells himself as the hills meander downward, he is not allowed to, and Moryz watches him in silence. The Spirean man is worried about something else, however, as he has been charged with leading the older Utari to the gateway of the Fracture safely and he, too, must not fail. Moryz worries that Dreikathi might come into their path any time now, and he keeps his weapon readied, and hurriedly shifts his stance with any disturbance.

They reach the stake then, one of the few that are spread through the hills. They are not simple stakes, however, but rather mechanized spikes to grant transportation from the calm land above and into the chaos of the Iernian Fracture. Touching it with his bony hand, Althezar is suddenly whirling through space in a vortex of energy, to leave a disconcerted but relieved Moryz behind. He has done what he must and now, he reckons, he is free to go back to safety without any manner of guilt, and if he encounters any trouble on the way, he does not care, for he has accomplished all that he was meant to.

Althezar is deposited instants later within a ring of fractured Ylem pillars. It is like a minuscule, safe haven for one that enters the fracture, for beyond a curtain of fizzling Ylem, he can see great agglomerations of Eld in all sizes, and shapes and flashing, electrified colors. He begins to press the many buttons of the tiny, buzzing contraptions he was attired with, and straps his armor with more force against his body. Now, he thinks, there is no time to waste or hesitate, and if he must dash and run and roll and jump through the halls of the Fracture until finding its core, he will.

Ensuring the bullet case is well placed within his coat, he utters a prayer to his gods and his ancestors, that he might survive this treacherous ordeal.

In an instant and with a cry that for a fleeting second silences the wild creatures of the Fracture, he lurches forth from his secluded safe point, and begins running. Running on he goes, searching the halls for the one tall pillar that, they told him, remained unbroken in the Iernian Fracture. There, they had instructed him again and again, so that the thoughts would practically embed in his conscience, he must lace the Ylem probe, and then push the bullet in.

Then, Uasiol told him, he must pray more, and if he can run back, so he must, but if he is to stay, like the Kelki bomb crafter suspected he might, he must hold the probe with all his might, so that it will not be displaced an inch by the explosion, else it could come lose, and all their efforts could be endangered by the dissipating blast.

Eld swoop at him and with his arms he swats away the cruel attackers. There are sparks and flames and magic, and the air is heavy, so heavy that for moments he finds difficulty breathing.

Bursts of dusty energy obscure his steps in portions of the bumpy hallways, but on he carries, relentless. Electricity and water, and air, and fire; it seems all the elements have come together in that place in an utter chaos and in a struggle to dominate the others.

As he turns around a corner he sees what he dreaded most. A great swam of Eld, so many that they have been drawn together into a single, oversized body, and they make the very fracture tremble with each of its stomping steps. They are an amalgamation of conflicting energy and they are unstable and dangerous, and when the mindless creature catches sight of him, he can do nothing more but run, even faster than before.

He flips the largest switch in the collection of gadgets he has been given, and it activates a strange sort of deflecting, Ylem-powered shield. It distorts the energies that are already about him, and in a moment of reckless, wild courage, he runs straight through the swarming monster, and the volatile shield he has acquired not only shatters with the contact, but it manages also to scatter the components of this terrible beast, allowing him, for mere seconds, to sprint forward and into the last turn he must take.

There he sees it at last, the pillar, standing tall and gloriously brilliant, and the Eld, they are drawn to it, but when they are near it they are like docile, soothed spirits that look like one might caress them with the ease one does a beloved pet. After but an instant of relief, Althezar takes a mighty leap to the pillar and withdraws the retractable injection Ylem probe from his robes, ready to end the Dreikathi corruption. He is certain now that is he has done all he can, and with that peace, he laces the contraption deep into the ethereal pillar of Ylem crystal.

...

A great quake shakes the lands from one end of the continent to the other, north to south, east to west, and it is certain to Althezar he has failed. In attempting to rid the Leylines of the Dreikathi corruption, he has managed to worsen the situation, perhaps now not only Sapience, but also Albedos, is doomed. The sound of churning soil fills his ears now and he can hardly hold himself standing, clinging to the Ylem probe with both hands, else the explosive contraption becomes loose.

There he remains, enduring the earthquake, despairing for what he has done, and the mindless Eld swoop at him from all directions, no longer soothed by the great Ylem pillar. There is no forgiveness, he thinks. He was correct. "Cataclysm."

And indeed he can see the landscape changing around him, all in one sudden blur. He is certain he sees the ground ripple and the hallways widen, and fissures appear on the undulating, crackling ground around him, flaring with the Ylem that is violently freed into dissipating clouds of energy. The earthquake goes on for some five minutes, not long, but in that time, Sapience is forever changed, for some minutes are all it takes for the earth to convulse and reform into something new. He continues to blame himself, begging the forgiveness of his deities, praying, repenting, and suddenly, the movement ceases.

Surely the divine have listened, he thinks, he's forgiven. He has succeeded even, perhaps, the Dreikathi plan has been thwarted, the corruption banished, and all will be fine. He shall make his way immediately back home, to his office, to his painting by the door, to pay tribute like a loyal devout, and then rest in his weathered chair of crimson velvet.

In his mind, the future brightens, they will banish the Dreikathi, there will be peace, but his gut, his instinct, it tells him otherwise. And then, just as suddenly, the probe collapses, venantium and steel shrapnel flying everywhere, blinding and stunning him. In an instant, the pillar has become unstable, breaking the heart of the Iernian Fracture; the modified probe, after all, had not been tested before, so it was likely it would not last but one use, and deep inside he knew this.

The thoughts about it hardly have enough time to flash in his mind as the Leyline he has dived in quivers and wavers further, bursting with flaring Ylem in all directions and high into the ceiling of the great cavern that is the Fracture and like a pillar of blinding light through the Putoran Hills and high in the sky, uncontrollable and inescapable, claiming him whole, like a tribute for the corruption, as if its dying revenge, and rendering him forever lost to the energies of the Leylines.

Drifting apart

Meanwhile throughout the continent of Sapience, the dust that was stirred by the quake begins to settle. Everywhere creatures are ruffled and run astray, disoriented and frightened. Sentient beings have found refuge, some, while other more unfortunate ones shall never rise again to see the catastrophe. In the shores, the waters have washed everything askew, the waves churning violently. It's a disaster of the likes Sapience never saw before.

Only a handful of more sturdy buildings have survived the quake in the island of Delos, and the bureaucrat of the city runs through the streets toward the famed bridge of Delos. Panting he arrives, his heart beating as if it might leap out of his chest, and there he sees the bridge torn in two and the other end way farther than it was before. There is no doubt some land moved, either the island or the continent, or both.

Troops arrive at the scene moments later, looking hardly any less unsettled than the bureaucrat himself. Their Ylem probe, laced through the ruins of what was once Iosyne's temple and although it had been deactivated, had begun flickering moments before the earthquake and had at last gone out, apparently rendered useless, sucked forcefully into the ground before its light had gone out.

This was not an isolated case. Feral calls are made across the lands, the howling of packs of lycanthropes being only the first to break the silence in the aftermath of a full-blown cataclysm. Everywhere people attempt to reunite with their own, some hurt, some confused. To say there is panic would be a severe understatement, and in the broad daylight the extent of the disaster is evident throughout, but what is truly appalling is the breaking apart.

Some saw it, how it happened. Some took flight to witness the catastrophe, sensing danger in the trembling earth, and deep in the heart of the Putoran Hills they saw the fracturing begin, the landscape undulating and teeming with fissures that grew into ditches, hollows and beyond into deep canyons. The winds buffeted those who watched from the skies, which were also stirred by the blast, before a great flare of light rose from the hills, a glimmering pillar of light and Ylem, blinding for instants, to then fill and deepen every fissure, spreading across to the coasts in all direction, in a mirroring image of the very Leylines that the many HYPEs had been used to drain.

The waters rushed in from all directions, filling even the last and smallest of cracks. So many islands appeared where none were before.

...

A great tidal wave breaks into the cliff sides and docks of the Free City of Delve, and they know something has transpired in the far lands of Sapience. Council members, citizens of Delve and many foreign refugees are gathered expectantly in the meeting chamber, wondering if Althezar has succeeded. From the streets runs in a robed scholar, breathless when he tells them that the sensors they had planted in the continent of Sapience had all spiked violently before becoming completely shut off, not detecting a single trace of Ylem.

They fear the worst, and with hardly a mute nod of approval, Nyatha orders the portal be shut.

Epilogue about an Indyuk

Sertep had been following Eetreya from a distance when she announced she was heading north. So much he had learned about the plans, about the Dreikathi and the corruption, and so patiently he had waited for her return and that of the Indyuk from the island of Asper. He had seen in Oriotok the conviction with which he'd follow his father's advice, and when Eetreya departed with a mission to steal a sample of the sludge from the Dreikathi, he knew the Indyuk wouldn't stay far behind - and neither would him.

"You have maybe two minutes," Sertep told Oriotok all of a sudden.

The apparition nearly rendered the Indyuk useless. Who was this person that had just materialized before him? He had heard of Syssin and their abilities to become invisible to the eye, but he'd never been a witness to it; but then even through his initial shock, he had understood clearly what the Syssin had told him.

In his Spirean uniform, Sertep stood like a mirage in the dim, icy hall that Oriotok had hidden in after Eetreya's escape, and explained to him that Syssin can sometimes steal regular mortals into phase with them, and while he had followed Eetreya in an attempt to do the same, so she might escape Nuunva, she had always been surrounded by others, and so it had been impossible - but he could help him.

If they made it close enough to the entrance of the glacier, he too could be taken into phase for a temporary lapse of time, hardly, perhaps, a minute or two, and then, the Syssin told him, he had to run far, as fast as he could, before he was sucked back into reality, into the plane of things tangible.

Seeing it as his only chance, the Indyuk didn't even stop to consider, and leading the Syssin to the entrance through one of the passages, he peered outside, and said he was ready to go. In instants, Sertep had vanished from sight, and after moments, it was as if he was displaced, ripped apart, pulled and forced into another place entirely, his shadow vanishing before his eyes.

"Run."

Those were the most valuable ninety seconds of Oriotok's life.