

The Story of Elysium

"Hear ye one, hear ye all, come and witness a tale a tale I do say!

Oh visitor oh joyous visitor, have I the tale for you, one so exciting you might just crap yourself. Ah but first the introductions; I am Tobex Tatara, mastermind of tricks, ruiner of dimensions, kicker of pinata children, wrecker of your Shiitake Mushrooms.

Ahahahahaha!

Oh but this tale has nothing to do with me, at least not yet, so let me not get too ahead of myself. This tale has to deal with what people call angels, well some people call them that anyway. Others say Dreamscapers, some say ghosts, freelancing space dancers, Celestial beings, or pains in a duck's rump if you're me. What they do? Why that's simple. They are a bunch of spoil sports who ruin every hard working villain's brilliant sandwiches that they call plans; it is so hard to be a hard worker in such an industry, I don't know how I do it. Oh wait, yes I do, I just kill whatever gets in my way like a toothpick to an old piece of food in a person's teeth.

Why are they called Angels? Because they come from a place people call Heaven, which those of us with a brain know as Elysium. Elysium. Perhaps that's a bit much but who cares, not like you can end my career anyway kiddos, ahahahahahaha.

Elysium is a realm not related to Heaven or Hell. To this day, who knows and who cares if they even exist. Elysium is a realm created closest to the almighty Celestial River

which brings life and power and oh my god this history lesson is unnecessary. Elysium is home to two species, the Celestials and the Angels. I'll focus in on the Celestials for now, since they're the big pains.

These Celestials are super powered beings, viewed as Gods because they think themselves divine, like watching over the whole Universe is their job. Celestials are just super humans who have adapted many powers and abilities by living near The River, or rather living in Elysium. They task themselves with fighting any supernatural occurrences that threaten the universe as a whole, like anything that comes out of the Underworld which I'll get to later, or these Darkling creatures of madness.

Of course they don't handle everything because they are holier than thou, ahahaha. Elysium is divided into Kingdoms and Wilds to maximize competition to produce better Celestial Warriors to fight off big threats. This is encouraged by the Elysium leaders known as the Cardinals, their top dogs who could probably nuke Galaxies away if you listen to those overblown legends. So strong yet they can't handle it all, yet they think they are so superior. But hey, with guys like me running around causing trouble, I don't blame them for being stupid.

Kingdoms are outsourced by the main force of Elysium that answers to the Cardinal, and they are paid heavily for new warriors and for completing tasks of various sorts. Usually this works out well with plenty of trade and results. I won't go into all the

details, these peons can do that later including the explanations for what the leadership is like or what the Angels do and all that noise.

What I will tell you is that there is one Kingdom worth focusing on for now where a lot of activity is ongoing. The Starset Kingdom. Why them in particular? Because they have some interesting people which will lead to interesting results. That and some people I know are involved, of course.

For your entertainment I have to present a spoiled princess who dreams of being a warrior, a snot who wants to make daddy dearest proud, an emo, a nerd, a bigger nerd, an angry nerd woman doctor, another emo, a happy go lucky moron, an egotistical nut job, and some guy who I know nothing about.

How will any of this go? Like a basket of pork chops rolling on a river raft down the Mississippi full of skunk poop across the back of a single donkey named Carl who in turn dresses up as a false Zebra to impress a wee lass named Chuck.

Have I rambled enough? No, never enough.

Do you have enough knowledge to get the backdrop of the story? Eh, not my problem. I'm a narrator of plot, not an author who needs to give a crap about that sort of thing.

Now, shall we have some fun and get to the plot?"

A Behemoth Prologue

At the present, the scenery appeared to be as it would on any given day. Bright open green skies with the outline of pink clouds, some wispier and fluffier than others, some bolder than others, some that were just faint outlines but that didn't matter as they were still there. Plunging far below the sky, a vast sea of open forest waving in the wind, leaves as blue as precious sapphire. Grass, aquamarine in color, drifted far below alongside the silver bark of the trees.

Emerald colored birds flew along the breeze over the forests below, their wings flapping every so often as they simply drifted along, small furry creatures on the run along the branches and ground, large running straight through the many shrubs on their way around.

BANG

All at once a gust of powerful winds swept over the tops and through the cover of the forest, birds flung off course and animals sent flying all to the sound of an explosion. Trees could be heard cracking and tumbling on over, all to the sound of another something completely inhuman. A cry, twisted and distorted with an echo, high pitched like that of an infant though so very vile. Animals that had been flung quickly charged to the South, while from the North came more wails and more crackling tree sounds.

Far from the area of fleeing wildlife, dust and trees flew high into the air, the sounds of stomping and the wails everywhere. Following, a laughter, a twisted laughter that seemed all too joyful in nature. A silhouette became visible in the dust, then an outline, then through the dust flew the object.

Out first came a baby's head the size of a two story house, wailing the twisted wail heard over the course of the last few moments. Through the smoke came its body, a crocodile's scaled body with dozens of legs that were that of a chicken's, super sized. Tentacles flew up from its back, tens of dozens

of them and among them four humongous humanoid arms and hands with claws covered in scales. The tail, long like a serpent and twisting, ending with shark-like fins and a scorpion stinger.

Wings flapped on the mid section of its back, far too small in proportion to give it flight though present nonetheless. The baby's head, now more like a doll in appearance with vast glowing eyes; one cracked and shattered, the other wide and pure red with an orange aura hovering around it. Snakes blew out of the top acting as hair, waving around and hissing, purple liquid flying straight out and over around the head of the massive creature as it wailed yet again, the body slamming down dragging itself across the ground.

“AHHH HA HA HA HA HA, OHHHH HA HA HA HA HAA!! COME AT ME, SHOW ME WHAT YOU FUCKING LOVE BITCH!” came a loud shout, a female's shout.

Yet another wail came from the creature, its tail swinging straight into the trees to its right, the rear of the body curving and stomping. Another blast was heard with trees being sent flying as well as a single figure, humanoid though moving like a blur straight off into another section of the forest clear through trees. As the figure flew, several others could be seen leaping around the side of the creature, quickly hopping along the tree tops.

Another wail, and as it slipped out the creature began to charge away from the figures that now collected themselves.

“Ah hell, that thing sent Senya packing, my oh my,” one mumbled with a sigh following.

“This thing's Satanic Prowess are increasing. Original reports listed this damn thing as no more than a C-rank class entity no bigger than a damn bear, now it's the size of like, several city blocks with the power of probably an SS; heck maybe even Three S.”

“Oh fuck that Garwald, the thing is AT LEAST a fricken Four S as it stands now,” came another reply.

“Sure is giving you Cardinals a run for your money, heh heh.”

“Shut it Seraph, now is not the time!” the one named Garwald spat, “This thing is taking an insane amount of coordination just to pin it down. I just hope the other Priests have evacuated the towns up ahead already, otherwise we’re looking at some serious problems.”

Another figure dropped down among the group, a woman, quick to speak, “Valdimir, Seraph, Krakoff, go meet up with Steven and Ulric. If this thing can’t be contained we’re going to need an evac of everything within a hundred kilometers minimum. We might also need to call in more of the other Cardinals and Priests for this. The threat level is officially being classified as Four-S with a potential of Five.”

“Holy mother of- Five S!? That’s- how the flip is this thing so strong?” Garwald grumbled.

“It’s been feeding off of the spirits of civilians on countless planets. From what HQ has gathered it has also been attaching people to itself that can use the Celestial River, using them as a straw. If left unchecked this thing poses a threat to the entire mortal universe thus the Four S. But if it could somehow transcend that, well I’m sure you can see the problem,” the newcomer replied.

“Ms. Victoria, perhaps we should focus on getting that creature into the canyon to the West of here,” another spoke.

“Right. You three Priests meet up with the rest, try to help contain the field. Garwald take its left, Gabriel its right. Rain, I want you forcing it from behind. Meanwhile I’ll lead that son of a bitch straight forward.”

“Ember, er, Ms. Victoria. How are you so sure that it will just follow like that?” Garwald murmured.

“It might be a powerful Demon Beast but it is still only an ignorant beast. It’ll follow me for my powerful energy and with you guys guiding it, it should be easier to force it along.”

“Negative on that plan Ember, that will never work,” came a voice.

The voice’s origin was from no direction, rather it simply echoed around the group. At once Ember glanced up, followed by the others as three of their own darted off, “Come again Chromoss? What won’t work?”

“This is the Demon Beast known as Behemoth the Destroyer,” the voice replied again.

“Behemoth?”

A dark room, lit by multiple monitors and nothing more. Papers scattered everywhere, toms laid open on many tables, staffs hung on the walls. Truly it looked like a run down, crowded, messy office room in the middle of the night. In the middle of this mess stood a man looking at the pages of one such book, his blue hair and glasses shining as he looked over the pages with amber eyes unfolding each and every word written.

Behind him approached another wrapped in a black cowl with a black top hat. His hair long and a lighter blue, eyes a mix of red and gold also looking over everything. At random he spoke to the air, the same voice that was communicating with Ember, “Correct luv. Based on the description I can confirm it is Behemoth.”

“What can you tell me about it Chromoss?” came Ember’s voice, much like Chromoss’s was to her group, from nowhere other than right around the two standing.

Chromoss picked up a book and stepped beside the second figure, “Well, Raxka is here with me pouring through everything as we speak. According to the texts, Behemoth was developed by an Arch-Demon to be used as a weapon to break out of the Underworld and enslave the humans, and then from there to any realm he chose. At first everything went to his plans, Behemoth fed on countless souls and grew in size, as well as strength. We were vastly unaware to the rising threat at that time due to the

Buzzwasp incident plaguing Elysium. Really it would have all gone his way, the problem is that Behemoth was too chaotic to be controlled and devoured its creator eventually. That spike of Arch-Demon spiritual essence drove it nuts, it apparently went wild.”

“Alright, you’ve told us its past, get to the point,” came the voice of Garwald.

“Getting to that,” Chromoss muttered moving his left hand across a page, “Well eventually a Cardinal of the time and his Priest squadron stumbled onto it during a routine patrol. It devoured eight of the ten priests and grew ever stronger. At that point after literally tearing it apart, they decided it was best to just seal the damn thing. To do that though they needed a Tetragram Helgen sealing spell of the highest level, something about restricting all of its spiritual essence. In short, they could not kill it, they were only able to damage it so that it could be sealed. Back then it was supposedly the size of a mid sized house, though upon being sealed it shrunk to the size of a small house cat. That was with just about twelve thousand souls trapped within it. The size we’re talking now, I’d say that thing must have the power of at least a hundred thousand souls inside it.”

“So how the hell do we stop it?”

Ember stood atop a tree looking up yet, quickly glancing to the North as the Behemoth began to rampage away. In no time flat Chromoss responded yet again, “Well, I would say you need to stop it from moving first. I’ve already dispatched Haku with the appropriate spell to seal it, you just need to immobilize it.”

“How the hell do we do that genius?” Garwald spat.

“How should I know, I’m just a nerd that doesn’t usually fight. Cut off its damn head if you have to, fight it, break it, smash it to pieces. I’ll get back to you if I find something more.”

“Dammit, we’re on our own for this,” Rain muttered.

“Ahahahahaha! Destroy? Smash? Break and fight?! Now we’re talking!” came the excited yell of someone thought to have gone.

Slamming down atop a tree by those dressed in red gathered was the figure launched away from before, Senya. At once Senya launched up and over towards the creature charging away, a single sword in the air, “Going somewhere!?” she spat swinging the blade down, unleashing a cutting wave of red energy straight forward.

What started small quickly swelled into a massive cleaving slash, splicing through a single tree to then mowing down multiple in a row going forward. The strike slammed into the tail of Behemoth, causing it to wail again as it came to a screeching halt. The tail swing up and down, crashing down right atop Senya and slamming into the ground with a tremendous thud.

The impact toppled trees and flung many away from the impact itself. Dust blew violently and twisted, slamming the group dressed in red. Ember stood motionless as the air hit her, Rain doing the same while Gabriel blocked his face with one arm and Garwald with both arms.

“Senya!” Garwald shouted out, a lot of surprise in his voice.

“Calm down Garwald, you’re new to the team I get it but still you worry too much,” Rain replied, speaking boldly.

“Indeed, look ahead,” Ember finished.

Garwald’s arms lowered slowly, his eyes widening at the sight. A huge impact zone devoid of trees lay around the tail’s swat; what was thought to be a clear impact with the ground was then revealed to be several feet off the ground. The tail, so massive, was held up in place by a sole figure. Senya. Senya stood beneath the tail with both arms up, her legs bent ever so slightly quivering as she appeared to push up to force the tail into the air, her grunts heard as slowly she stepped forward one pace.

“GOTCHA!” Senya’s yell could be heard, at which point a blinding flash of light occurred right where she stood.

A light flew up and cleaved straight through the tail, the scorpion stinger flying straight off with green liquid launching itself everywhere, casually washing right into Senya. The stinger flew off, crashing into the trees further away while Behemoth simply screamed in pure rage. Up the tail went and down it flew again, this time sweeping into Senya’s side. Contact was made, made with the side of the blade, though more than strong enough it sent Senya off with a huff.

Her form was seen slamming through the trees again which collapsed down right in the path she had followed. Ember at that moment nodded, “Go!” and with that command, the four in red launched up into the air.

Path of the Owls

“FUCK!” came the shout of a deep voiced male.

KABAM!!!

Immediately following the yell there came a blast, the crackle of heavy objects raining down upon the ground itself. Birds flapping off, a tree crackling over and crumbling into multiple pieces. Ground ruptured with rock flying off in a variety of directions as a cloud of smoke and ash flew up in a roar. Legs stuck up from the epicenter, visible through the shifting of the smoke and ash though only for a moment before being drowned again. Landing a fair pace off was a set of feet, feet attached to a young girl who looked ahead with a simple grin.

Dead trees and ruined buildings lay scattered around either standing or fallen around this girl, the ground mostly rocky though with some green present further away. Above drifted puffy clouds on a bright blue sky. A slight wind danced around though nothing too noteworthy as it barely touched the smoke in front of the girl, yet enough to make her long golden locks flop with some reflecting into her stunning purple eyes. The young teen stood at the ready, twin blades in hand held at the ready with a red aura orb dancing around right behind her.

Rock tumbled and blew away with the smoke, a figure dropping down atop where the legs had been sticking out, a tall man breathing heavily. His face, drenched in skull paint which upon closer inspection appeared to go on throughout his entire body. Blood dripped from his right shoulder practically waterfalling onto the ground, “Brat, damn you! That hurt! It hurt like a son of a bitch, god! You can’t even imagine how painful it is to have a damn nail bomb go off inside your god damn shoulder!”

“I don’t know why you’re complaining Soreis, you’re healing just fine by the look of it.”

Through his chest plunged a blade, straight out through the center. Blood sprayed from the man's mouth as he stumbled forward, yelling in rage, "Fuckin- bitches!"

Another figure landed behind him quickly, slamming down sending a small dust cloud up. From behind a large pole was visible attached to the blade in the man's back. A scythe. Slowly his shirt fell apart with half flopping onto the ground as the other half stayed on by the sleeve. Standing firm his head cocked back with his teeth gritted, blood coating them, "Dammit!" he then barked.

"Nice shot sis!"

"Thanks sis!" the new comer said.

Several flashing lights came down and quickly slammed into the skull paint man, the lights exploding on contact. The scythe flew back out of the man, quickly flying back into the hands of the second arrival. Her red eyes looked up, a hand brushing the blue hair out of her face to see a third person. Down came an older man this time, though not all that much older with long brown hair flapping in the wind along with a black cloak.

His purple eyes looked from the first girl to the second, "Illiya, Soren, where are Flare and Spirit!?"

Illiya, the first girl, responded first, "Tending to Soreis's friend in the bunker a few clicks back."

"Rick, what happened to Kakaroth?" Soren replied.

"I sent him on ahead to the bunker. If those two are still fighting Soreis's comrades then Kakaroth should be able to lend a hand. So what's the status on this guy?"

The smoke from the chain of blasts cleared, revealing the man standing and slowly moving forward towards Illiya with a wide grin and vengeful eyes. His hands formed into fists, twin rods in hand that ended in jagged break offs. Few signs remained of the wounds he had been dealt from before.

“The guy is definitely an immortal. His regeneration is a definite ten. His Power Rating is a definite Dragon. His Danger Rating, definitely S Class, maybe even Two S based on his cult,” Illiya replied.

“So this guy lives up to the reports. No wonder the people of this planet couldn’t kill him if he’s all that,” Rick muttered.

Drips of paint came from the man’s body, black paint to be exact, though as it touched the ground it quickly became dark red. Lines flashed orange along his body, lines that became inscriptions and cursed seals of which faded away immediately as the *paint* reappeared.

“Soreis the Unholy Soul Stealer, speaker of Demigrah’s Will. I will say this once again, by name of the joint operations of the Elysium Cardinal Program Revelations and of the Elysium Kingdom of Starset, I sentence you to arrest for your crimes!”

Soreis simply tilted his head back at the comment, looking right up to Rick, “Pftew.”

Blood was spit from his mouth off to the side as his mouth opened, “You ignorant hoe bags think you can just lock me down? I am a servant to the great Lord Demigrah mother fuckers! If you think I’m going to just surrender and go down that easily then you have another thing coming.”

“This guy is absurd,” Rick chuckled hovering downwards.

“You ignorant godless dicks should just let me go at this point, clearly you can’t capture me and clearly I’m in a hurry to complete the ritual!”

“Soreis, if you think we’re just going to let you out of here then you’re sorely mistaken,” Illiya replied looking him dead on.

Her expression oozed with confidence, at least for a moment. All at once there was a rumbling of the ground and then a blast, her expression changing at the rumble itself. To the West a blast flew

out, trees sent tumbling down right at the entire group of fighters. Soren and Illiya both screeched, leaping backwards as Rick shot upwards, leaving Soreis to then be buried under the rubble as he gave one more laugh.

“What in the name of Elysium was that?!” Rick yelled out.

Lying on the ground was a man of spiked red hair and golden eyes, considerably tall and to some extent buff. His wardrobe, blackened with soot, “Hoohooohoo HOOOOOMAN what a rush!”

“Flare you idiot!” came a shout further from the blast radius, “You messed up the trap again!”

“Aiye not my b, your b for making such a stupid trap Spirit.”

“You blew up the Power Drive and created a blast, you probably killed half of the cultists!”

“Like, your point? Obviously Fallen Spirits that needed to be condemned anyway.”

“Dammit Flare!”

“Dammit to you both!” came the yell of Illiya as the second individual, Spirit, came into view.

Both of them looked quickly to Illiya as the dust cleared away, watching as she came near. As she went towards them, Rick began to descend over the area glancing around quickly in mid-hover. Soren also began to look around, quick to sigh.

“Soren, Rick, can you sense his spirit?”

“No Illiya, he- he got away in the confusion underground,” Soren said with a sigh.

“Dammit!” Rick spat as another individual hovered towards him quickly, “Kakaroth, with me and call in reinforcements. Soren, you and Illiya clean this up while we go after him.”

Rick quickly shot a look to Flare and Spirit, the two of whom began to yell at each other, “And Illiya, take care of your damn mess. Part of becoming a Priest is controlling your partners so they don’t screw the pooch like this.”

With that Rick and Kakaroff turned and shot off, heading East through the air leaving both Illiya and Soren standing casually. Flare slowly began to stand with a cough, “Ah, dude, that was radical. I can’t wait for the next fight.”

“You jerk... there won’t be a next fight!” Illiya spat quickly turning to the male with an approach, “Your incompetence screwed the capture of a dangerous criminal! Now he’s managed to break off and go on his way. It’s a wonder why you’re stuck going after simple assignments like taking care of bandits. You haven’t a future if all you’re going to do is screw around!”

“Eeesh, lighten up a bit guuurl, I didn’t do no wrong.”

“You both fucked this up!”

“Ok one, don’t lump me with Flare. I had a perfect plan and used a trapping device, he went ahead and acted the fool and ruptured the condensed battery,” Spirit grumbled.

“You said you’d keep an eye on the jerk. I’m not your Captain, I’m your partner. Yeah we should look out for each other but we should have faith in one another. My faith in him was rocky that entire time, you reassured me, then pissed in the wind of this entire operation. So pardon me if I’m a little bit angry but this took months of coordination and investigation.”

“Yeah well maybe the damn fools should’ve only dispatched Priests,” Flare chuckled.

“Hey, you don’t get to laugh,” Soren growled, “The Cardinal Program is stressed with all the latest activity from the Underworld. They rely on Kingdoms like us to cover the gaps.”

“Coulda sent Knights then,” Flare muttered.

“You guys have been on board for a decade. You should’ve had the experience. Your experience plus that of two Priests plus us, I can’t blame Spirit but I can certainly look at you Flare for jeopardizing the mission. Your attitude is crap!”

“Aye, you got a clear problem with me Sin so why not go on. You and Illiya both be a bunch of stuck ups wantin’ to make daddy dearest happy.”

“Ok one, that’s Illiya’s goal. Two, at least she has a goal. You just want to party.”

“I’ve had it! I’m talking to Illiago when we get back. I want you off this team!” Illiya spat.

“Good, I don’t need this crud anyway. I’m a superstar fam.”

“I hate this guy!”

Path of the Lioness

The murmur and chatter of tens of dozens of people, the shuffling of feet and clatter of glass. Violins playing softly, then energetically. Clanking armor and flapping robes, scrolls and pens whittling across the pages. Slight laughter, slight yelling, slight crying. All of it, all with some echo though very little within a grand hall.

This hall, decorated brilliantly with many a tapestry and flag, coats of arms hanging upon many pillars and walls. A long stretch of tables in eight columns from front to back of the room. Streamers, hanging from the top. To the West side of the room a ninth table lined with a fountain, finger food spread, larger platters of assorted meats and sides.

The walls, decorated in golds and whites with dashes of blue. Lanterns attached to the walls and hung from chains on the ceiling. Bouquets attached to the sides of the various pillars and all else, white and blue flowers primarily with some reds and yellows. Round tables remained scattered throughout the room around the main lengthy row, all lined with glassware, plates, and cutlery. Candelabra sat aflame in the middle of each round table with several along the length of the long ones.

People stood in knight armor around the walls of the hall, twenty up and down long ways with several at the front of the room and back of the room. Between all of them, a mass crowd of people dressed in fine garments. People in dresses and suits, people in military uniform with multiple medals, servers, even more knights mingling through the crowd. To the East, many dressed in party attire with violins which they were playing. Many wandered, many stood, some dining and others simply chatting; a few even appeared to dance to the violins being played.

To the far wall from the vast doorway sat several in thrones with a fair few others standing nearby. Two massive thrones stood with two individuals in each, a man and a woman dressed heavily in rather fashionable garments, each with crowns on their heads. Around them were smaller thrones with

other individuals dressed somewhat differently, with one in a cleric robe and another in basic combat armor with hanging fabric. These individuals also bore crowns, smaller though significant regardless. Around them stood others in military uniform with multiple medals and some in ceremonial robes of their own.

The majority simply stared off into the grand hall, watching as people mingled and enjoyed themselves. The youngest of those in the thrones turned his head left to look at the individual next to him, “Indra, how much longer do we have to sit here?”

“It won’t be long now sweetie,” came a reply though not from the man next to the boy, rather from further up stream.

The Queen had her head turned, now facing the young boy from her large throne, “We can begin just as soon as your sister arrives.”

“Speaking of which, where even is Dawn?” came the voice of another from the other side of the queen.

Her head turned just as everyone else did, gazing at a young man a fair bit older than the first, “She should be here by now right? Rollo isn’t the only one getting tired, I can tell.”

“Well Raikor, I would like to think she should be coming. She said she had some last minute studies to attend to,” came the comment of a blue haired girl next to the young man.

“Lani, studies or improper training?” Raikor mumbled.

“Hahaha! She’s just like your mother, eh dear?” commented a man sitting in the large throne next to the queen.

“Zeke, please. Dawn is nothing like my mother.”

“Queen Solaris,” came the voice of a man in front of the group.

A man in black robes with silver lining stepped forward, arms behind his back, standing tall as he spoke, "I'm afraid we can't wait much longer for the Princess. We'll need to proceed soon."

"Ugh, very well Illiago. We will begin the ceremony shortly."

"By your command, my queen," the man said with a slight bow, proceeding to turn and walk down several steps to the main floor.

Raikor's head turned yet again to the queen, "That wise?"

"Well in these times, probably not. But we simply need everyone together on this. Celina, I may need you to go out and find Dawn if this keeps up."

BANG!

At once the room began to quake with the floor shaking, the sound of a blast coming from outside the East wall. All at once the glass panes of the wall shattered as a figure flew straight in and crashed. Fast and swift the figure tumbled across the ground and slammed into Illiago, stopping just before the Queen as Illiago fell backwards and crashed to the floor. Shouts and screams could be heard echoing around the room as the guards all stood at the ready.

"Ah, there she is," Raikor murmured.

"Ugh," Solaris sighed.

The individual, now identified as Dawn, stood with a cough. Soot fell from her outfit which was torn and ragged, "Dangit! I was so close that time!"

"So close to what?" Zeke questioned.

It was at that point that Dawn turned her head, a touch of red visible around her cheeks as she looked at her family who simply returned a somewhat annoyed look. Solaris and Raikor were most certainly annoyed, Lani confused, Celina shocked, Zeke and Indra and Rollo laughing.

“Oh uh, h-hey guys uh, you know just practicing some self-defense again,” Dawn chuckled.

“Uh huh, that’s why there was an explosion right?” Raikor grumbled.

“Self-defense? More like practicing your magic again,” Lani said with a sigh of her own.

“Yeah well, maybe magic will help with my self-defense in the future eh?”

“Dawn,” Solaris sighed, “You were practicing your fighting again. I’ve told you before, there’s absolutely no need to train to fight.”

“But-”

“Dawn, please. Self-defense comes with the title of monarch but not fighting.”

“Raikor is a general and Lani is a Lancer. Explain that!”

“It is the duty of the future king to fight in the event of war. And Lani only Lances because that is her hobby. You want to fight so you can adventure; that’s not what a princess does. Young heirs do not need to train in anything other than politics and hosting. Now young lady, you’ve created quite the uproar. Go and get yourself cleaned up and get seated. I’ll have a talk with you later.”

Dawn glanced around quickly, noting that everyone in the room was now looking at her. With a groan, she looked to the queen and bowed. “I will be a fighter mother, you can’t stop me from being what I want to be.”

With a turn towards the window she had come through she jumped heading straight out.

“Ugh, through the window again. Lovely. Illiago, have the servants clean this mess up,” Solaris muttered standing, “I’m going to go and have a talk with my daughter. Everyone, please continue the celebration. We’ll begin the ceremony in another hour.”

Illiago slowly stood up with both arms back and his hand on his back, groaning in discomfort, “Y-yes your majesty. Ugh, that kid I swear-”

“Now dear, maybe we should humor her.”

“What do you mean dear husband?”

“Maybe we should show her what soldier life is truly like. That’ll knock this phase out of her system.”

“If you think so. I’ll have a talk with Xerneas and see if he can educate her on the matter. Where is he anyway?”

“Why, meeting some guests at the border as I recall.”

“Guests?”

“I know it’s strange. Whoever it was sent word to him but not me, haha.”

“I wonder... could it be that? No- no that wouldn’t be. Alright then. I will return. Try to keep the festivities bright if you would Zeke.”

“Gotcha hun, will do.”

“Zeke-”

“Er, um yes, yes dear. I understand.”

“Alright then, I’m off now.”

Path of the Wild

A chain of explosions could be heard as dust sprayed across a wide area of land, a literal storm shower's worth of dust slamming through the trees and blocking out the sky entirely. Trees crackled, some breaking off and others ripped straight from the ground. A ghastly demonic wail hit the air in the dust.

Five figures launched themselves through the trees, all leaping down into a single trench joining multiple others as a massive cloud of dust stormed through right above with sharp winds. Two huddled around a man lying on his gut, one of the individuals placing their hands upon the man's back. A soft pink aura appeared and began to coat the man's back, "The damage isn't serious. A simple charm spell should be able to clear this straight up. Christa, you and Mifune should keep going."

"Haha, this big bastard is sure making things rough!" a young man laughed.

"Shut it Mifune! Carla, are you certain?" another woman asked.

"Yes, I am sure. The other medics can fan out and recover the injured. We'll bring them all here while you two go find Cardinal Gabriel."

"Alright. Mifune, get yourself ready."

"Yeah yeah, I know I know, sheesh. No need to worry Christa, I'll cover your butt while we head out there."

"Incoming!" came a yell as another blast of pressurized air hit, dust flying up as a dense cloud with trees sent crashing away.

"Damn that thing is sure taking hits."

"Watch out!" came the yell of a woman.

The trench rumbled all at once as something slammed down straight inside of it. Dust flew forcing everyone to block their faces with their arms, all but Mifune who kept his eye on what came flying down.

“Holy crap, Cardinal Senya!” Mifune laughed.

Senya slowly stood having just shot down into the trench through the air, her lips curved for a moment. At once a laugh was let out of her, “OH MAN that bastard hits hard. This is a damn good warm up, I love it!”

“Hey Cardinal Senya, what’s up!?” Mifune barked.

Senya turned her head, locking her brown eyes with Mifune’s bright blues, “Ho damn, is that you Mifune? Shit you’ve grown another inch, I love it!”

“Ah ya noticed, heck yeah! I’ve gotten loads stronger too. I think I might be able to catch up to you soon enough ya know.”

“Oh really?! I can’t wait to see the improvements you’ve made!”

“Wanna go right now?”

SMACK!!

Mifune flew back and crashed straight into the wall of the trench, leaving Senya a touch stunned. Christa’s hand hovered right where Mifune had stood with the back of her hand smoking slightly. Her head turned back with a bark from her mouth, “Mifune focus on the mission! This is no time to test your body out against Cardinal Senya. There’s a battle going on right next door!!”

“Cardinal Senya!” came a voice.

All at once several figures shot down into the trench, most dressed in red approaching. Christa looked with eyes wide, “C-Cardinal Ember!” she stammered.

“Ah, Christa. I wish I could talk but now isn’t the time. Senya, Chromoss’s strategy isn’t working like we had hoped. Behemoth is growing stronger every second, it’s nearly impossible to lock it down for Haku’s spell,” Ember spoke.

With Ember approached Garwald, Gabriel, Rain, and several Priests. Garwald collapsed to the right without a word, though a definite moan. Christa quickly approached with both hands on his side, a pink aura quickly covering both her hands and Garwald’s side, “With all due respect Cardinal Ember, I have a message.”

“A message? Speak it.”

“Cardinal Victoria says that they are no longer able to telepathically communicate with anyone here. The creature’s powers are blocking out communications it would seem and the radius at which it’s doing this is quickly expanding. She also wants anyone not directly with the Elysium Task Force to pull out. Also, she wants us to inform you that they are considering evacuating the planet and using the Heaven Core Flash.”

“No, not yet. If we use that we risk destroying the planet entirely. The situation is getting out of hand though it is not yet that severe. Christa, thank you for the update. I had no idea that they were no longer able to reach us. Please, heal Garwald and be on your way; have someone patch up Senya a little bit too. Rain, Gabriel, we need to continue to try and restrict the beast.”

With nods the three would flicker and vanish, Senya laughing, “The hell am I getting healed for? I feel GREAT!”

Senya launched up, dust blowing out from beneath her feet with an explosive force. Christa watched as they shot up and then quickly returned her attention to Garwald, “Your wounds are a little more severe than I thought sir, I can feel your body’s insides-”

“Yeah, damn thing got a shot at my. I’m not a tank like Senya so I’m not all that surprised the hit messed me up.”

“Christa, stand ready!” came Mifune’s shout.

Her head turned, eyes widening a touch, “This sensation-”

Shadows pooled on the ground in front of Mifune, shadows that slowly began to creep into the air itself taking on various forms. It wasn’t long until they had become humanoid, beings in long black trench coats with hoods up. All of them bore white masks with their eyes not even showing.

“An ambush?”

“Dammit,” Garwald growled, “Behemoth’s activity attracted other demons.”

“Enemies!” Mifune spat, an act that made multiple standing around them turn and take fighting stances.

A final shadow rose up taking humanoid form, feet slamming down, “We will take the old man, out of our way.”

“Old? Old! I’m not that old! I’m only four thousand you jackasses!”

Mifune quickly launched himself forward with a yell of excitement, to which the many in coats shot forward with daggers raised.

“Mifune!”

“I’ve got this Christa, just heal the Cardinal you healer girl!”

“Healer girl? Healer girl!?”

“Uh oh-” Garwald muttered, glancing up suddenly, “Above us!”

Coming straight down at the two were three more people with daggers, closing in fast. Mifune quickly came to a halt and turned back to look, “Christa!”

SLAM!!

BANG!!

Liquid could be heard hitting the ground as something much like a gunshot could be heard. Mifune dropped quickly as three large figures flew by him and crashed head on into the guys now behind him, making many of the attackers fly off from the impact. Mifune’s expression became one of shock, his eyes big and his jaw hanging, “Oh shit!”

Christa stood in place with her hand smoking, “Don’t call me a HEALER GIRL!! I am a warrior!!!”

“Note to self, avoid Christa,” Mifune murmured with a gulp.

“Now go and take those guys out while I fix up Garwald, meat head!”

“Y-yes ma’am!”

“Sheesh, this new generation is just full of it,” Garwald chuckled, “Oh it hurts to laugh.”

Path of the Cubs

“Step this way now, come along, single file! Single file!” barked the voice of a man.

A variety of feet shuffled with the sound of steps echoing off the walls. Shuffling feet and light chatter, a hall full of several dozen children on the move behind two teens. The children walked fully attentive with their heads moving around observing everything, while ahead of them the two teens moved very differently.

One walked with arms behind their back and head forward, his mouth moving as his glasses slid down his face ever so slightly. A firm walk, a commanding walk, well dressed and mannered. Beside him walked another, one a tad more clumsily thrown together with hair sticking out everywhere, arms behind his head, casually throwing his feet out as he walked with a bland expression. The two glared at each other as they moved ahead.

“A-Advisor Illiago, Sir!”

“Good, I’m glad I found you two.”

“Eh, what is it old man?”

“Silas!”

“Ugh, your speech is as offsetting as your appearance Silas. Fine, I’m glad I just found you at the very least Enzo.”

“What do you need sir?”

“I have to attend to Her Majesty’s Celebration of Arms and organize the spectacle. Originally I was supposed to, ahem... direct some cadets around the barracks and educate them on the Union’s

Military. As I can not do that now, I figured a brainiac such as you would enjoy some extracurricular activity like this.”

“Y-you want me to? Sir I am honored!”

“I knew you would be,” Illiago replied while casually muttering under his breath, “Nerdling.”

A pause.

“Right then, I’m off. Oh and Mr. Deveron, take Mr. Carolus with you. He could use the, heh heh, refresher on how to be a knight.”

“Oh keep talking Illiago. We’ll see who the funny one is once I become a General.”

“A street rat like you becoming a General? Ha! You are certainly still humorous youngling. The cadets will be here in an hour. Good luck to the both of you,” Illiago concluded walking away.

Silas looked away from Enzo, his eyes scrunching as Enzo continued, “And over here cadets, this is the mess hall where all future knights will of course dine and exchange stories of their choosings. You might make many a friend here, maybe even talk strategy. Meals are served every two hours as per rotation of active duty and guard assignments, of which you can only get three through regulation and the rest out of your credit. Meals are typically served with bread, usually whole wheat, a protein of some variety, dairy, of course juice. Most meals consist of... oh and then up ahead is where you will be sleeping one day. The sheets are made of all natural material cotton and real Latex. The thread count is of course-”

“Enzo for the love of Asura just stop being so consistent about this,” Silas muttered.

Enzo paused mid-sentence with a glare right at Silas, to which Silas simply exchanged a glance, “What? I’m just saying. I don’t think many of them care about the specifics of all this rubbish.”

“Forgive Silas cadets, he’s a sad sad individual that doesn’t grasp the concept of orders or anything of the sort.”

“I’m not a sad individual Enzo, I just don’t have the time for the mundane garbage that guys like you and Illiago spit out. I have a sense of duty, not a sense of being all knowing.”

“There is nothing wrong with a little knowledge you know Silas.”

“Oh, let’s see then. Cadets, is Sir Deveron over here boring you? Be honest.”

In unison, the many dozens of children spoke out, “Yes!”

Enzo turned his head around to see them, then to Silas to deliver a quick scowl as Silas continued, “I don’t mean to embarrass you mate but come on, they’re here to see what being a Knight is all about. Not to become miniature know-it-alls like you. Even Illiago doesn’t like you when you’re like this.”

“What? Advisor Illiago likes me you jerk. That’s why he gave me this important task, to educate the youth.”

“While walking away I heard him mutter that you were an idiot. He gave you this job because he didn’t want to and knew you would love it to massage your ego.”

“You’re just jealous. I don’t get why you don’t like him at all either.”

“Because the guy is a shrew that just uses people. He’s a bit of a coward too.”

“Silas!”

At once everyone behind the two began to break out into laughter.

“What, I’m just being honest,” Silas concluded.

“Fine since you seem to know what’s what you show them around, jerk!”

“Leave it to you to be offended by that. Illiago put you in command, you do it. I’m just a Lowly Ranger after all when compared to you advisory type people.”

The hall rumbled at once, the glass to their right overlooking the training field shattering. Screams could be heard as Enzo fell over in shock, leaving Silas to simply block the shards with an arm while continuing to look. Below a blast had gone off and from it a figure flew off skidding across the ground, “Dangit!” came the yell of a girl.

“Oh gosh, she’s at it again?”

“Guh, who what huh?”

“Princess Dawn. She’s been consistently working on her magic for the last few months. Finally got to manifest something just last week except it keeps blowing up in her face.”

“Shouldn’t she not be doing this silly stuff though? She’s a princess, she should be-”

“Are you questioning royalty?”

“Er, no no not one bit.”

“Thought so. From what I hear, Dawn actually wants to be a fighter and become a knight. Alright, here’s the game plan. Cadets, how about we go and have a little fun of our own?”

“Silas, what are you-”

“Ah come on it’ll be a blast. We have a mission tomorrow Enzo, why not warm up a little bit and show the cadets how Rangers do battle?”

“Silas I’m not much of a fighter.”

“Nonsense, you’ll be just fine Enzo. All rangers need to have the ability to fight pretty well, not just knowledge. Even Illiago knows how to fight. Flex your muscles a bit man.”

“F-fine. Just don’t get me yelled at for this.”

“Nonsense, this is part of the job my friend!”

Path of the Stars

Crickets could be heard along the subtle swooshing of grass, hooting owls and coyotes howling into the night mere moments later. The night sky, a dark orange in color and the trees a vague purple. Three headed owls sat upon the branches of the trees with red coyotes pressing forward below along the orange grass. Moving alongside the coyote, a shadow though not a shadow of anything in particular.

A simple blob of darkness moving through the grass, over it, under it. Nothing hovered above or around to cast such a thing. Several leaves fell to the ground, a branch creaking from one tree. At once several branches began to creak as a storm of leaves fell to the ground. Above, multiple figures in trench coats masked stood looking around.

“South Wing Secure,” one of them spoke.

At once they all launched off through the trees sending more scattering, a slight rain of them dancing down around the shadow. Some stopped atop the shadow, sitting in the air a meter or so above it. Light began to reflect around the shadow and slowly grant form, a humanoid male crouching visible now drenched in a silver glow that then faded. The individual sat there looking up in the direction the masked beings had gone.

With a nod that sent leaves scattering off his head, he raised an arm and pressed a hand to his ear, “Rogues are in the area, step lightly.”

Two forms appeared behind the individual also crouched down, having flickered into existence it seemed with a silver glow of their own. No shadows from them, only from the first. One a female, the other a male. The woman raised her head and nodded, “Your stealth technique is brilliant Silver.”

“Thank you Tari. Silver to HQ, did you copy that?” the first individual questioned.

There was a slight static audible now to the three before the response, “Copy that Silver. Numbers?”

“I counted twelve. They were dressed and masked like the ones Cardinal Garwald reported. What should we do?”

“Nothing for now. Your squad is to investigate the Lunagen sightings, not the vandals. If we confirm that they are involved in this we will dispatch a capture team to extract intel. For now, focus on the Lunagen.”

“Copy that.”

The first, Silver, moved his arm down and his hand away from his ear. A sigh left him as he then glanced back, “Tari, Torunei, You got all that right?”

“Yeah,” the second male replied, “The Lunagen were reported at the valley up ahead though right?”

“Yeah.”

With a nod the second male, Torunei, placed his arm out with his pointer and middle finger to the ground. With a slow brush over and a hum he nodded again, “Animals all around, twenty-two of those masked guys actually. No disturbances of the ground within ten kilometers.”

“It always amazes me how he can feel that far out with just two fingers,” Silver murmured.

“It’s an acquired trait in my clan. Anyway, there is sign of old disturbance to the South. I can feel the rocks tumbling.”

“Hey, remember what the village head said now guys,” Tari spoke in a soft voice.

The three stood before several individuals within a wooden house. Several older people in rags and several dressed as warriors in leather before them. One had stepped forward, "These quakes have been happening every night for the last eight months."

"And your actions from the start until now?" Tari questioned.

"For the first month or so we didn't think much of it. Our village isn't too far off from a fault line after all. It wasn't until it became a consistent pattern, let's see- oh, about probably by about the twelfth week, that we investigated it."

"Consistent?"

"Well yeah. For the first many weeks it was just random though during the tenth and eleventh weeks we began to notice it happening around the same hours for the same interval of time. By about week eighteen we began looking around for the source. The twenty-first week is when we found the valley."

"Valley eh?"

"Yes. Ever since our people have gone missing with signs of battle left where they go missing. We started curfewing alongside other villages until the thirtieth week when a whole village went missing and sunk into the ground. The few who managed to escape told everyone about weird mud creatures that came at them."

"So why haven't you all bothered to move on or anything of the sort?"

"Some folk are just stubborn I suppose. Some villages picked up and left while the rest of us tried to hunt whatever was doing this. We just haven't left because we don't know where else to go."

Silver turned with a slight sigh, "We'll look into it but we highly recommend getting ready to evacuate. Forty or so weeks of this and you still haven't just moved. I can't help but question that."

"I be telling you, it isn't easy. This is our home, we want to defend it until we can't anymore."

“You’d think the mortals would be more inclined to save their lives,” Silver murmured as the moon that had been hidden now began to fully illuminate the area from behind the clouds.

“Some have their values. It isn’t for us to judge.”

“Eh you have a point Tari.”

The trio had now begun to move with only their shadows cast, now invisible once more. Slowly the trees were thinning out more and more with the grass even beginning to disappear. Their shadows were becoming more and more visible at this point despite having no bodies, the darkness moving in a returning moonlight. A branch to the right snapped, snapped by a coyote moving in the opposite direction. Brush very dense lay ahead, brush that they then passed straight through.

In mere moments the trio had become visible as they stepped out, the ground dipping with fallen trees on either side of them. Tari and Silver slowly moved forward as Torunei bent down placing his fingers to the ground brushing over. The steps of the two echoed growing more and more distant.

“This is the place alright,” Tari murmured.

“I’m not seeing anything.”

“And I’m not feeling anything.”

“Silver to HQ, come in,” Silver murmured with his hand to his ear again.

“Denis here, what’s going on Mr. Dragonheart?”

“We’re at the area we were told about just before the valley. We’re not seeing anything, mostly just rocks and what appears to be small bits of scrap metal lying around.”

“Scrap metal?”

“Yeah uh, white plates of some sort.”

“Since when does a technologically dead society have scrap metal plates lying around?”

“Could be something left over from those other guys. Look, either way I just want to stress the point that we don’t have time to comb the entire valley. You told us we needed to report back to Starset Academy by tomorrow morning by order of King Zeke and Queen Solaris. You’ll have to dispatch a Knight Squadron to the area until we can get back here.”

“Right, right attendance is mandatory. It’s unfortunate because, despite being only rangers, your small team is pretty dang impressive. I can’t wait to see what it’s like when you become a full squadron Sil-”

“Denis.”

“Oh, right sorry. Yeah uh, come on back and I’ll dispatch a group of Knights to comb the area for you.”

“Understood,” Silver finished moving his hand away again.

“Silver, Torunei, have a look at this,” Tari called.

“What is it?” Torunei questioned as both approached.

“This scrap metal, the plates. They look brand new don’t they in the moonlight? The way they’re curved, it just has me wondering is all.”

“Well don’t stress about it Tari, we’re to report back for that gathering tomorrow. The next squad will probably wrap this up when they find the Lunagen.”

“Right then... head back we shall I guess.”

“Don’t worry, we’ll have another assignment and have something to do in no time.”

The Behemoth Strikes

Inhuman shrieks flooded the air, the sound of a distorted baby's cry. Smashing trees and shattering rock, thunder crackling with a barrage of explosions. Absurd laughter could be heard following another explosion, then more laughter and cries of the beast.

Five in red jumped around the massive thing, four leaping away while one charged swinging an ax forward and a scythe. Many tentacles flopped cut clean off along with many a leg, one arm ripped off. With but a shriek the tentacles spewed their blood, new parts blasting right out and into place. Old joints fell with new legs quickly blowing out of the skin and into place, all of the wounds replacing themselves with old limbs simply falling off or being ripped apart from the inside.

"Eh!?" Senya spat, "This is so broken. I keep hacking away and it keeps on finding its form again. Cheap! Coward, fight me like a real warrior you giant baby thing!"

Its head turned, its mouth open with a shriek. All at once dark red aura began to pool around the mouth from the outside around the head and from in the mouth. In seconds the aura congested to form a sphere, one that exploded and fired out a massive dark red beam of energy straight into Senya.

"Fyuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuck!" she yelled as the attack hit and blew her away.

"Its regeneration isn't a solid ten, more like an eight or a nine. Usually these things have a limit. So what do we do, continue to hack it apart and hope it has that limit?" Garwald growled.

"Our forces are spread too thin to contain it. Too many of our Priests are now injured thanks to this thing," Ember replied.

"Because we didn't come in with enough of them."

"We're short handed Garwald, make do with what you have," Gabriel growled back.

At once the creature's head turned with more aura collecting, its face turning towards the remaining four. Ember's eyes lit up quickly, "Move!"

With a grunt and a howl the creature unleashed its attack straight at the group. All of them splintered off with Ember and Rain heading right while Garwald and Gabriel went to the left. At their speeds they moved as blurs, evading just barely as the blast came straight through the area with a swelling force of destruction. All skidded to a halt, their eyes locked with the beast's.

"This thing is getting feistier as time goes on. We need to act now. Chromoss!"

"Yes?" came the response telepathically.

"Haku's down and we still can't beat this thing. Options, give us options!"

"I'm sorry Ember but I have nothing to offer. The creature's abilities far exceed my prior calculations. Honestly I'm surprised that it hasn't dropped yet, regardless of its ranking."

"So is there anything we can do to stop it?"

"Well, not you but for who should be showing up, yes."

"What do you mean?"

"Ember!" came the shout of Rain.

Ember turned her head, eyes growing wide. The creature had raised itself, its head into the air with tentacles and arms weaving around a singular point as another aura sphere began to appear with the same energy now turned into a copper-like color. Ember stumbled back, "Whatever it is Chromoss it had best be good. This thing is charging up a heck of an attack! Crap, I'll have to let you go Chromoss."

She jumped forward quickly, landing alongside the other three Cardinals who had now come together. The three stared out at the beast as its power climbed.

“That attack is enough to reduce everything around here to ash. Ember, this is over our heads. Everything we throw at it is just nothing. That thing has restricted our powers too much with its vile energy, we have to-”

“Hold on one moment, something is approaching!”

The beast’s eyes turned round, facing its flank as a single figure slowly approached. All heads turned staring in awe, the sight of a figure of black and white approaching. Black and white hair, a black and white suit, black and white gloves and shoes, all alternating as the appearance moved from location to location; the pants inverse of the shirt, the gloves inverse of the shirt. A scythe with a chain held in hand with the chain attached to this individual’s body, a bright blue chain almost see-through.

Blue fire propelled beneath this individual’s shoes and even from his back as black-like manifold wings stuck out.

“Is that-” Gabriel began.

“No way, he came here personally?” Ember followed.

“My my, hello hello,” the individual spoke out loud, directed right towards the beast.

The beast growled, wailing slightly in response as its eyes then became bloodshot. Trees around it collapsed, those that stood withering away and becoming black prunes near immediately. The grass dried away into not but ash as the ground crumbled, a red vapor leaving all around it. The individual looked around, purple eyes zooming towards the vapors and then back to the creature, “I see, so that’s why five of my Cardinals together are unable to detain you. You have the unnatural ability to vaporize and corrupt spiritual forces. They who could reduce a continent to ash, heh. I see I see.”

“Lord Asura, be careful!” Garwald spat out.

“My my you are certainly an unpleasant beast. Sorry fella’ but you’re going to have to die now,” Asura chuckled.

The beast’s neck crack, an event that left Asura’s head to slightly rise. All at once the head spun around, its shriek heard and then the powerful roar after as blood red aura coated the beast perfectly. Asura’s eyes narrowed ever so slightly as the sphere formed by the creature spun with the head, slowly lowering to the Cardinal Lord.

“No way, if he takes a hit like that-” Garwald choked.

“That attack’s enough to punch a hole clean into the planet’s mantel and maybe beyond-” Ember stammered.

“Lord Asura!” Rain shouted.

The sphere cracked, splintered, and then shatter with the roar of the beast, firing itself off as a beam of energy heading straight towards Asura. Cracks of the attack’s power splintered out through the air like ripples on the water, spiraling as it drew ever nearer. Asura smirked looking at it, his scythe slowly rising.

SLICE!

Down the scythe flew, right at the beam. No contact made, nothing fired, just a simple swing. Nothing at all seemed to have changed...

Crack.

With a loud grinding sound that then became a hypersonic noise, the beam split itself in half and parted way, flying right by around either side of Asura. His eyes closed as he then smiled as the beam turned into flames that then exploded behind him with much of the power leaving. The wind

became fierce for many moments following, and as it did so the creature remained still before Asura. All at once a crack appeared, one straight down the middle of its head.

Garwald's jaw hung, Ember's eyes going wide as did Rain's, Gabriel's head lurching forward. Slowly that crack spread and split, the entire body slowly splitting apart with blood and aura raging out in moments. The whole body, split clean down the middle by just a single strike. Down it fell with its blood flowing out like a tidal wave, crashing to the ground as a corpse with the light leaving the beast's eyes.

"No way!" Senya spat approaching the other four, "Old man Asura just went and spoiled the fun!"

"Holy mother of-"

The thud of the creature's body crashing to the ground was big, the ground all around rumbling sending fragments and splinters of land rising up in all directions around the body that flew out a quarter kilometer in radius.

"Simple beast," Asura chuckled.

His scythe was swung again and then lowered as he let out a sigh, his head slowly turning off to the side to view the five. In the blink of an eye he vanished only to then appear right before them. They stared, only staring, their jaws still hanging somewhat.

"Well? How was that? Not bad for a several thousand year hiatus from any action if I do say so myself."

"S-sir," Rain began.

"That was, after all we did-" Garwald chimed in.

"To just make us look like useless pups, heh heh. That's about normal," Gabriel chuckled.

“Don’t sell yourselves short. That creature had the ability to diminish your abilities by well over half due to exposure. If I had gone forward with raw strength alone, I would not have been able to win so easily. As a mass of pure hatred, it was exceptionally vulnerable to my own powers.”

“I thank you sir though it doesn’t change the fact that we were still spread thin,” Ember mumbled, “I think it’s about time we start looking into the kingdoms that support us.”

“Oh? Now why would you say that Ember?”

“The Program is stressed right now. It’s time, time for us to find new Priests to back us up on assignments like this. We need to contact the Kingdoms and begin looking for new blood.”

“Mmm, I couldn’t agree more actually. Our forces are very thin at this point with all the latest attacks. Alright then, let’s make it official. The Baflare Exams are coming back baby!”

“Y-yes sir!”

“Heh heh, what fun!”

“Brilliant.”

“Understood.”

Ember simply nodded, “So be it milord.”

The 1st Gathering

A bell rang out on the walls of many hallways, the ringing echoing loudly with the boom of thunder. Once, twice, thrice, then following the fourth the ringing began to lessen. Before long the ringing would be drown out by the sound of steps echoing in the halls. Many bodies, many feet, all shuffling along. That was the situation in majority of the halls of the Barracks as well as in the nearby fortress.

Outside however it was a different tale.

Out in the courtyard several hundred individuals stood at attention, most in uniform though a fair few in casual attire. Most looked ahead to a simple wooden podium, while all else were scattered in talk and observation of other events around them. In particular there were five clustered together talking among themselves.

“So Tari, how are things with Torunei and Silver?”

“They aren’t terrible Illiya. We’re ready to ace the exam this year.”

“Oh really? Glad to hear things have improved.”

“How are things with you and finding a team?”

“I uh, well that is to say-”

“Haha, I thought so. Still can’t find people you like to work with. Christa, how is your partnership coming along?”

“Ugh, that damn Mifune is such a pain. He thinks he’s the center of attention, a total showoff. I hate it! You know he didn’t learn to stop calling me Healer Girl until just yesterday when I hurled him through a wall but I know damn well he won’t stop. It pisses me off!”

“I mean, you are a healer though right?”

“Not the way he means it. Mifune has the attitude everyone has, that healers are these inferior nobodies that can’t help themselves in a fight, women especially. I mean, what era are we in?!”

“Why not dump him with that Corolus guy. Or Carolus? Curlolis? I can’t remember, whoops,” Tari laughed.

“Silas? Ugh, don’t even get me started. Our proctor says we actually, and that’s him and Mifune and myself, plus I guess Silas’s partner Emzoni? Whatever, he says we’re all going to make a good squad in the future. Enzo I just want to punch out for his asshole remarks quoting history for why healers aren’t fighters. Sometimes I wish I could just join your team Tari but of course your proctor says as a team of three you’re totally efficient.”

“Could always be like Illiya and not need a team.”

“Pft, I have a team, sort of.”

“Your sister and brother don’t count. Rick is a full fledged Priest and Soren is a wandering hand.”

“She prefers the term nomad. Not sure how she can do that at age fourteen but whatever. Life goals are life goals I suppose. Besides, I’m fine as a team of one. I go where they need me. Eventually I’ll become a Priest, I’m sure of it.”

“If ever they bring the exams here that is,” Silver mumbled, “By the by, speaking of the three idiots, where are they?”

“Idi- oh. Yeah good question.”

“I think I saw Mifune yelling at Silas earlier about something, then Enzo ran off to try and stop him?” Torunei replied.

“Sounds about right,” came the response of Tari, “Well hopefully they aren’t gone for too long. Supposedly this announcement is huge?”

“Uh, yeah, just look up there,” Silver said pointing.

Knights began to march in around the podium, followed then by none other than Prince Raikor and Princess Lani. Stepping onto the podium, the king and queen themselves.

Two blades slammed against each other, sparks flying. Scuffling feet, rocks spraying, loud grunts from two guys. Skidding, more shuffling rocks, then a pause.

“Come on guys, we’re going to be late!” Enzo cried out.

“You just let us worry about that Enzo,” came the reply of Mifune.

“Heh heh, yeah. Mifune challenged me, I can’t just back down. Isn’t there a rule about that?” Silas chuckled.

“This won’t take much longer, not the way Silas is fighting.”

“Whoa now aren’t you getting carried away Mifune. I haven’t even begun to fight,” Silas chuckled as his left hand moved inside his coat.

Mifune’s head turned and cocked itself as Enzo took a step back, all in one instance to which Silas pulled out a small notebook. The pages flipped open, many an inscription written upon the paper. Towards the middle of the book he stopped while stabbing his sword into the ground, holding his right hand forth while reading.

“Whoa guys we’ve got a badass over here!” Mifune laughed.

“Mock me while you can. I’ll show you and later that coward Illiago why to never mock me. I’ll give you a good showing of what I can do.”

The two stood at odds, each staring down the other at the ready.

“INCOMING!”

A shout from the West, a girl’s shout. All at once brush flew off into the air as a solid mass flew straight at Mifune.

“What the fyuu- FAFAFAAAA-” he began, cut off with a gag as the object flew straight into his gut.

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAYEAYAYAAFLAKAAA-” he wailed flying off crashing through a brick wall as the object crashed into a bunch of brush next to the wall.

“Whoa ho ho, wipe out,” Silas chuckled.

“Dude, he could be hurt!” Enzo spat.

“What, Mifune? Nah. He’s been hit harder in the grapes by Christa before for his sexist jokes. He’s fine.”

“Sexist jokes?”

“Yeah. He apparently likes pissing Christa off. I don’t know why but eh... to each their own.”

“AM I the only one around here that’s actually intelligent?!”

“Enzo, hush.”

“Cheese of the Sun, what the hell hit me!” Mifune barked slowly pushing himself out of the rubble.

The brush alongside the hole moved as slowly a woman stood covered in ash, dressed rather casual. She looked around with her hair flopping, a slight magic dust around her, “Dammit, it blew up again.”

“Uh, who the what are you?” Mifune grumbled.

“Hello there,” Silas chuckled.

“Oh uh, hey there,” the girl coughed, “Sorry sorry, I was practicing a spell and it totally didn’t just blow up. I was uh, practicing with someone and they countered pretty hard.”

Silas and Enzo looked to each other, the silence interrupted seconds later by the laugh of Mifune, “HAHA! Where is this guy who countered you? I’ll totally jump in for the heck of it!”

“They left.”

“Oh, then I’ll totally fight you!”

“Wait what-?!”

“You hit me, you declared war. I have a right to fight you now don’t I?” Mifune chuckled taking stance.

“Y-you actually want to fight me?”

“Yeah why not. Silas, Enzo, you want in on this?”

“Hey now, three on one might be overboard Mifune. Tone it back a step.”

“Heck, whatever Silas. This should be fun. Come on then girl, give it your best shot!”

“Well, alright. If you insist.”

“-and so that brings us to the discussion of pushing for this class’s exams to come early. You will be broken down into teams of no more than four and assigned a mission relatively higher than what we allow rangers to handle. Knight level assignments. These will determine if you are truly ready for what is to come. Once we have determined who is and who is not ready, we will begin the exams.

Know that as per usual, only a handful of you will actually move on to the position of a knight. Of the hundreds of you, only several dozen will even be granted the opportunity. From there, we will finalize our selection with the exams.”

“A question your majesty,” came a call from the crowd, “What are the failing points of the first part of this test?”

“Simple. If any of your squad members are killed or if you are unable to complete the mission within expectations.”

Chatter kicked up immediately at the response, many heads shifting and turning.

“Your proctors have already been handed the assignments. For some of you, it might be a mission you are currently working on. For others, it will be completely different. Exercise caution with these upcoming missions for they will most certainly be life and death important. Please, be on guard and do your-”

Solaris was immediately cut off by the sound of an explosion, then yelling. All heads turned to the North, all watching as three individuals flew up into the air. Three men coated in ash being thrown clear through yelling as they went crashing down into a building.

“Ya-hoo! I got ‘em. I win!” came the shout of a woman.

“Holy cow, that was Mifune and Silas just now wasn’t it?” one individual called out.

“No way, who the heck sent those two jokers flying?” replied another.

“Don’t know but congrats to them!”

Solaris let out a sigh, a hand to her head as Raikor let out a chuckle. Zeke held back a laugh of his own, his expression scrunched.

“Oh Dawn, always causing trouble,” Lani murmured.

“Well I have to give her credit. She certainly reminds me of your mother when she was younger,” Zeke laughed.

Christa’s face began to turn red, stress marks popping up all along her forehead as Tari simply laughed. The red turned boiling as she growled, “And I have to work with idiots like those three? We have to pass a mission together? Ugh. I’m doomed.”

“Well you might be right about that one Christa, haha,” Illiya laughed.

Dancing Sands

Sharp winds would blow across a desert land, carrying forth a destructive storm of sands. A sharp harsh sky of trio suns, a murderous reflection of yellow tons. Few creatures on the move, so very few in view to bask in the love of such a world. The desert world of Toyen 11, a world known as one of death and yet one of life. On the desert plain walked the four: one of anger and annoyance, one of collect and knowledge, one of determination and excitement, and finally one of simple desire and destruction.

Their steps echoed in the sands, lost as the winds covered over. Shrouded in cloaks and hoods they moved on, not a pace taken back.

“Team Dolphin.”

“We’re called Team Dolphin now, really?!”

“Yes Christa. Now. You four have an assignment. Recently Elysium High Command sent out another batch of missions. This one is a highly rated one for knights. It’s been reported on Planet Toyen 11 that mummies have recently begun to walk the sands at night. They’ve apparently been acting under order of a curse and could threaten to spread to all dimensions. The mummies are said to be immortal and are able to create a legion of zombified civilian slaves.”

“Sounds peachy,” Silas chuckled.

“Don’t worry sir, we’ll get this done and be back in no time!” Enzo concluded.

“Ugh, this sucks!” Christa barked.

“Hey healer girl, you said you’d take any mission,” Mifune laughed.

“Mifune, I swear to Asura!”

“So Enzo, where are we heading to anyway?”

“Well Silas, first we’re heading to a village named Crakhowl. It’s one of the oldest villages that has a library of events. Supposedly they might know what’s going on and how to stop it.”

“So why haven’t they stopped it themselves yet?” Silas questioned as behind them Christa began to shake Mifune by the throat.

“They can’t decipher the text.”

“And we can how?”

“Beats me.”

“Terrific. This is going to be a long mission.”

The sands stretched forward, blowing and covering their path, seeming eternal and unchanging. The further they went, the more lost it seemed they were to become as their steps quickly filled back in with the rushing flow of sand.

Beyond into the core of the desert, through the scorching sands and the burning winds, through and through over the dunes of endless sand there stood an oasis. A lake. A lake as blue as any other, crystal smooth water with rocky shores. Curved like a crescent, taking up half a square kilometer with ease with its folds.

Gently the waves of this water crashed against the shore lined with rock. Just beyond, rich grass and climbing palm trees, cool cool shade ever present. Many stone huts and buildings lay scatter in row around the palms, fields present beneath their cast shade. Stone paths carved in, paths from building to building around the lake to which people walked upon.

Alligators lay plentiful, birds crowded where they could, and wild life itself scampering around the people. The individuals, wrapped in bandage scarves and long flowing robes that covered much of their bodies. The robes though flopped with just the slightest of breezes, weightless it seemed.

The group approached from the dunes, slowly walking forward into the shade of the palm trees. Forward along the stone path they walked, their heads turning around observing. Children ran around stripped almost nude minus some minimal fabric. The elderly were dressed lightly as well though not quite as exposed, keeping many of their wrinkles hidden.

As they entered, several sets of eyes turned their way. Christa's own began to launch themselves, darting glances left and right.

"Ignore it," Enzo murmured, "They're not accustomed to outsiders most likely, especially with how we're dressed."

"Pft, we're not that weird," Christa began.

"HEYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYY!" Mifune barked, "Where are those dang mummies at!? We're here to destroy those sonsa-"

"Quiet!" Christa spat slamming her arm around Mifune's throat.

“Guhcke-”

A grunting could be heard off to the side, a pained one followed by some shuffling. Step by step their heads turned to witness an older man approaching with a cane. One arm behind his back, slowly stumbling forward with the cane balancing him. A few inches per second. His hunched back slowly bent ever so, allowing his half closed eyes to meet with the four.

“You are the Bounty Hunters?”

“Bounty Hunters? No we’re-” Mifune began

“We prefer the term mercenary but uh, yeah we are,” Christa chuckled as she choked Mifune.

“Idiot,” Enzo hissed, “They can’t know what we are!”

“Guh, right, sorry.”

“Yes sir,” Silas said, “We’re here about the mummies. We were wondering if you could update us on the situation, and maybe explain why this could be happening.”

“Why certainly. Eh, please, come with me,” he murmured slowly turning around.

Almost at once his pace more than tripled, moving far faster than before. With a nod Enzo led the group after the elder man, all heading towards a building. A wooden door opened, to which they all walked in as it then was shut. The room was relatively bare with a wooden desk and a bunch of bookshelves, a few men and women standing around in armor with children also present beside them. The elder stood across on the other side of the table as the four entered, having moved far quicker than before.

“I apologize for our off putting statures. Truth of the matter is that we’ve not had a lot of visitors as of late that are actually still living,” the elder spoke.

“We’ve heard the stories. Before we can do anything, we need to know how and where it all began, what the possible source is, all of that.”

The elder looked to two of the men, both of which returned the look nodding, “Very well. Oh but introductions first right? That’s customary I suppose, forgive the rudeness. I am Mirlo, the leader of Crakhowl’s Tribe.”

“I’m Silas. This is Enzo, Christa, and Mifune. We’re peace keepers more than anything else so we’re eager to help the people of Crakhowl with this disturbance.”

“This disturbance effects more than just our humble Oasis Town. You see, thousands upon thousands of years ago, our people were an enslaved people. We served the Great Kings of the Sands. Kings of the Sand were known quite well for being vicious rulers, forcing their subjects to die constructing pyramids and temples and other such buildings. For generations people died serving their leaders.”

“Seems like a common thing across most worlds with deserts,” Mifune mumbled.

“Eh, so we’ve heard. Well it’s said that the last King of the Sands placed a curse on the desert after his followers turned on him. To what extent, we’re still learning. Supposedly he swore that in a thousand years he would return to smite the descendants of his followers, to destroy them for betraying him. Well, a few months ago we hit that marker. Nothing happened, not until just the last few weeks with these mummies popping up at night. They were originally spotted about a half-day’s journey to the nearest oasis.”

“And, that’s all you can tell us?” Christa mumbled.

“Unfortunately yes. They only appear at night and any attempt to cut them down has been less than successful. Other than that, we’re at a standstill. We don’t even know the full story of the last king.”

“No need to worry elder, we’ll get to the bottom of this,” Mifune laughed.

“We should start our research at the oasis,” Christa commented, looking to Enzo.

“Agreed. One of us should stay here though to help with the-”

“Enzo, you’re a noodle. You stay back,” Mifune chuckled.

“What? But you might-”

“We’ve got this, right Silas?”

“Oh yeah, definitely.”

“No, we should all go together. We need all of our brains on this one. Thank you elder. Come on guys,” Christa said turning around.

Silas sighed, silently following after. Behind came Enzo and a laughing Mifune. The elder sighed as well, shaking his head as the team of four exited the building, “May the stars give you strength travelers, you’re going to need it.”

Slowly a boy approached the old man, looking to him with a shaking expression, “We should have told them, everything,” he commented holding out a rather old tome.