

The Oasis

Onward through the winding sands the four trudged. Sand upon sand all around them, for hours on end it was nothing but. Their shaking steps outlined only to be quickly covered away by incoming waves of sand from the wind. While the sharpness had declined, the breeze remained as the suns began to fall from the sky.

An endless array of nothingness, not much except for the four themselves and the shifting waves of sand. A change occurred as one of them dropped to their knees, falling forward to just barely be caught by the hand of another.

“Easy Enzo,” Mifune laughed.

“Ugh, easy for you to say. Where the heck is this dang oasis? We’ve been out here for hours!”

“I don’t know man, gotta be here somewhere,” Silas coughed.

“Enzo,” Christa barked.

“What is it?”

“What do you think is the deal with these mummies then?”

“Ugh, how should I know? Curses are a strange thing. If there is such a curse, there should be a sort of core that houses it that we can destroy to undo it.”

“Curse Core?”

“Typically with things like this there’s a sort of origin point, like a casket or a left over relic. Although I haven’t heard of any time delay curses like this.”

“So we just smash it and the mummies drop? That’s lame, I want to fight them!” Mifune yelled aloud.

“Mifune, shut it. We’re here,” Christa muttered.

Over the next dune it became quite visible, a giant patch of green with water beneath many palm trees. Significantly smaller than the oasis that was Crakhowl, yet far more natural. No wild life, just sand, plants, water, and more sand.

“Oh finally! Come on Silas!” Mifune laughed launching himself forward dropping Enzo into the sand.

“Wait up!” Silas yelled back taking charge right after.

“Pftf, guys, help?” Enzo gagged.

The suns continued to vanish beyond the horizon as Christa moved forward dragging Enzo who laid upon his back. Right at the grass’s edge, Christa released him to continue onward. As he flopped the sound of splashing could be heard. Mifune had begun swimming and Silas was simply laying under the trees with his arms behind his head, breathing in and out peacefully.

“Come on guys, sheesh,” Christa muttered, hands on her hips.

“Heyyyyy sorry hea- Christa,” Mifune chuckled swimming backwards, “I’m just investigating the water is all.”

“Uh huh. Well get to looking, this is where the mummies were first spotted supposedly. If we find a trace of them, we could potentially find a trace back to the cursed relic calling them out.”

“Ah come on though Christa, can’t we just relax for a little bit? I mean really, we’ve been walking for like, ever.”

Christa’s head shook, her feet on the move. Through the grass, around the trees, she moved slow with her head turning, “Well just saying it would sure be helpful if you guys could lend a hand either way.”

“Christa, let it go, that’s just your healer crap talking again,” Mifune laughed.

Her movement stopped, her image still for seconds until, “Mifune-”

“Oh cra-”

“You’re dead bro!” she spat turning around with a sharp stomp blasting herself forward over the water.

Mifune’s eyes flew wide open as all at once he let out a yell, turning round paddling immediately away from Christa as she dove into the water. Quickly she began to paddle right after him as he continued to scream, “You’re dead Mifune you jackass!”

Silas simply chuckled from the shore, standing now leaning against a palm tree. His head turned as did his body, looking down with a sigh, “Right then, Christa did have the right idea I suppose. Enzo, have you found anything?”

Slowly Enzo was picking himself up off the ground with a cough, “Does it look like it?!”

“Sorry sorry, just was wondering. You’re the smart observant one out of the four of us, that much I know.”

“Use your damn sensory ability!”

“What, the Pesquisa? Out here in the open?”

“Yeah, open it!”

“Pft, fine. Just make sure nothing comes at me while I do that,” Silas grumbled pulling out a tome.

Looking down at the pages, the tome slammed shut with his eyes closing.

His eyes opened again, though in this case everything was full of color. Individuals stood black and white with faint outlines representing them until the color reached them. A lot of green and a lot of blue, plenty of swirling white and vapor of red. His head moved around, “Alright then, Celestial Realm. Should be able to see stuff I want to in here... and uh, nothing looks abnormal.”

His steps echoed like dripping water, despite walking upon sand. With the tome not present, he moved his hands to his pockets and proceeded forward with his head turning. All was still, Enzo’s outline as well as the outlines of Christa attempting to *drown* Mifune. To the right, then to the left, looking at the ground and then the sky.

“This’ll take me like, a bajillion hours to walk through. Might as well get to it.”

“Hey, what’s up with Silas?!” came the bark of Christa, the splashing of water heard backing her voice.

Enzo stood alongside Silas, his eyes closed with the book still in hand. His head turned, looking to Christa as she let Mifune up to breathe. Following, he gave but a slight shrug, “He used his Pesquisa technique. Right now he’s walking through the Celestial River’s reflection of this space to try and find disturbances. And if there are any, he’s going to track them. So for now until he exits the mode, we need to keep an eye on his body.”

“Like, I thought meditating into the River happened instantaneously?” Mifune mumbled before coughing up water.

“First of all, it isn’t the actual Celestial River he has meditated into, rather the Celestial Realm which is the River’s copy of reality. Energy users make it instantaneously to draw in energy. The Pesquisa is a technique that lets him project an astral form into the realm to search for disturbances.

There is a slight time difference between the real world and Celestial Realm when done like this. So in short, he's defenseless."

"How does that work? Time flows quicker there doesn't it?"

"Yes Christa, it does, though he won't be paying attention to his actual body. If he finds the trail his form might wander after it to pinpoint the source of the curse."

"But wouldn't it take just a few hours in there otherwise which is, what, a second out here?"

"Hey, I'm not the mage here. I don't know everything about it."

"Ha! Ol' brainiac doesn't know everything. Knew it!"

"Shut up Mifune!" Christa barked, dunking him back under quickly.

"Ugh. Do hurry back quickly Silas. I can't take this abuse much longer," Enzo mumbled.

The Night

The crimson crest of the setting suns began to set in, efficiently as the group of three stood around their meditative comrade. The winds now began to dive under with the waves of sand ceasing. The air, slowly becoming still alongside the plants it had rushed into prior. Around the four, the air was still stiff though gradually drawing thin as their tensions eased.

“Ugh, finally. How can anyone live on a world with multiple stars?” Mifune grumbled.

“Quite easily. Multiple stars at approximate distance from themselves and planets can actually-”

“Can it Enzo,” Mifune growled.

“How much longer is Silas going to be in there? I know time is a heck of a ton faster in there and it’s been hours out here.”

“It’s possible that he’s combing more than just this oasis in there. The Pesquisa lets one wander far from their physical bodies, at least a hundred kilometers.”

“Still, how long does it take a person to do this crap-”

“It takes what it takes. If you have a problem with that then, well, I don’t know,” Christa barked.

“Right right, all good.” Mifune sighed.

Quickly, ever so quickly, the suns dropped more leaving only a hue of their color until, darkness began to take place. Stars from far away now became visible as the glow of the warming hearts swiftly died out. Little by little, it quickly became far far darker until truly, minutes gone by, the glowing suns were no more.

Enzo quickly looked around, “Well, sunset. It should be easier to get back now. The winds have also died down.”

“Can we move Silas as he is now?” Christa questioned.

“We should be able to. Astral Projection is different from Spirit Walking.”

“Alright then, thank you Enzo. Mifune, grab Silas.”

“Wha-why!?”

“Because I said so. You’re the tough guy, so get to it.”

“Ugh, fiiiiine!”

“Wait wait, hold on, everybody shut up for a second,” Enzo mumbled.

“Why, what is it?”

“SHH!!”

Silence.

Mifune looked to Christa as she looked to him, both turning glances back towards Enzo who had crouched down to the ground with a hand on the ground, “I’m not quite as good at this as Silver, but I could swear I just felt a shift.”

All at once sand began to rupture around the three, pulling away from them. A mighty deeply human roar could be heard on the horizon, one that seemed declarative. Enzo looked up in shock as the others stumbled around.

“Don’t need to feel for that shift!” Christa spat.

The sand right at the front of the group split, an arm launching out. Enzo’s eyes widened as another breached, then another and another. Dozens had begun to rip themselves free from the sand, all

wrapped in bandages and very much decayed. No blood, no exposed color, just dried skin. Slowly the arms swung forward and plunged their hands into the sand, pushing away. Next the sands sunk away further as entire bodies came out.

Many wrapped in decayed cloth, many with exposed faces. The faces were caked in old rotted flesh, hardly any color to it as they began to moan, the darkness that was their eye sockets sinking in. Drool, old drool, leaked from their rotted out teeth. Their moans filled the night air as slowly more and more of them began to pull themselves out.

“Mummies!” Mifune spat.

“No shit,” Christa grumbled looking around.

Bandages drooped from their bodies, their exposed decayed fingers visible, their sunk in faces with large portions of simple dried flesh missing. Slowly they began to march once all the way out, their arms forward with shuffling feet towards the trio, a trio that stood before Silas defensively now.

“Shit, shit!” Christa spat, “That is so gross!”

“Well oh wise leader, what now?!” Mifune spat towards Enzo.

“I uh, I uh, I- I don’t know. I wasn’t expecting all this!”

Dozens upon dozens moved towards the group, their moans filling their minds with every step. Mifune leaned forward, a grin forming, “No undead mothers are going to get me! I’ll show you how we’ll deal with this, we’re going to tear them apart. Let’s go, hiyah!”

Mifune lunged forward towards the group of mummies. Enzo’s head turned, his arm and hand extending, “Mifune, wait!”

“Wait nothing, bags of bone can’t keep me down!” Mifune laughed.

Quickly from a sheathe on his back he pulled a sword, “Ya-hooooo!”

With a strong leap he shot up above the moaning mummies and flew straight down, “Eat steel!”

His blade flew through one vertically, then swung wide in an arc slash cutting through the torsos of the closest ones around. Forward he stepped with another howl, swinging away right into the torsos of the mummies hacking them to pieces. Their limbs and torsos split in half, collapsing to the sand as they continued to moan. Mifune didn’t stop, he didn’t look, he just kept on moving with swats through them all.

“Mifune!” Enzo began, his arm lowering with the turn of his head as Christa stepped forward.

“Sorry Enzo, protect Silas. I want in on this,” she grumbled taking charge herself.

Quickly she dove in, her hands slamming into the heads of some. With a quick drop forward she slammed them down into the sands, blades sliding from her sleeves into both hands as she tossed off into the air. Their heads flew straight off with twin swings, just as Christa began her somersault ahead. One by one she went for the necks and limbs, slashing wild and punching the rest sending holes through them or smashing their skulls to dust.

The two, Enzo and Christa, charged straight into the horde all as Enzo shouted on, “You guys don’t understand, stop!”

“Eh understand this!” Mifune spat still cutting down multiple at a time.

Bodies fell over in pieces, the moaning mummies wiggling. Slowly, so very slowly, the nightmare of their curse came to be. Heads slowly began to move towards the torsos, the legs rolling and being swept towards their bodies, arms hovering in the air and launching back. Bit by bit, all of the mummies were pulling themselves back together, groaning as they did so. Mifune and Christa continued to attack forward, not bothering to look back at what was happening behind them as those they had cut down were now rising again.

“Christa, Mifune!” Enzo yelled, stumbling back as several mummies approached him as well.

Mifune turned his head just enough, his eyes bugging out, “Holy shit, Christa!” he barked.

Christa too turned around, her expression filling with dread, “Oh no-”

Flipping around the two went on the defensive as the mummies all closed in on them, their weapons flying all around as they stood back to back. Mifune swung wide with his weapon and Christa swung violently with hers. Enzo flipped backwards, dodging as two mummies swung at him, skidding to a stop beside Silas.

“Dammit, this isn’t going to work! There’s, there’s no way. Even if they’re weak to magic, Silas is the only one who can-”

“OOOOUWAAAHAHAHAHAHA!” came the roar from earlier, this time sounding as if it were right next to the group.

The mummies all at once stopped, the trio looking around temporarily at the mummies as they ceased up. Quickly they looked out to the direction of the roar. There on the dunes stood another with the moon placed center behind. Wrapped in bandages and a blue tunic coated with gold and gems, eyes visible with whites and a glowing red. Black hair jagged, looking as if it were in patches.

“That must be Onaka,” Enzo growled.

“OooooOOOOoooOOOOOooooOOOooooOOOOoooo, YoU wHo WoUID iNtRuDe On My LaNd, BEGONE!! THiS iS yOuR fIrSt AnD lAsT wArNiNg!”

All at once a whirl of wind and sand kicked up around the individual, a storm from nowhere turning into a sand tornado. It spun and twirled, throwing sand and wind everywhere. The sands quickly slammed into the mummies and the trio, all vision blocked.

“I-I can’t see!” Mifune yelled out through the roar of the wind and sand.

Just as he had spoke, silence came as the sand flew by and flopped upon the ground. The mummies gone. All was still, all as it was just before without a single trace of anything.

History of the Sands

“Seriously Silas, seriously! Why did you fudge it up so bad!”

“I told you Mifune, I ran into trouble getting back to my body!”

“Uh huh, a likely story you lazy friggen-”

“Enough!”

Silas and Mifune turned their heads, looking to Enzo who stood with a scrunched face. Christa stood near, her back leaning against a book shelf with two books in hand. Rows and rows of books and shelving stood around the group, tables present as well. Many books sat upon the table, many in the hands of those who stood, some in the hands of those who had begun to peer around the corner. All looked to Enzo whose face was now red.

It had been the morning hours as they moved, Silas carried upon the back of Mifune, Christa behind, and Enzo at the lead.

“-well Enzo that curse sure as heck seemed real, how the living hell are we to fight that?” came the bark of Mifune.

“How should I know? If you two hadn’t charged in recklessly-”

“And so what if I did, what did you do other than try to distract us!”

“It’s not my fault that it went that way.”

“Really this is Silas’s fault for passing out before the fight, we should-”

“We should get back to town and go over to their library. We can research what comes next there,” Christa growled, “And if you disagree, go fight them yourself Mifune. We can’t baby you you muscle headed jerk.”

“Hmph!”

“Christa’s right. If we want to beat the mummies and their curse, we need to study it. We need to know what happened. I have a feeling that there is something we’re not being told also. When we get back, we need to find out or we’ll never accomplish the mission.”

Enzo’s foot slammed down, his eyes drifting, “This isn’t Silas’s fault nor is it anyone else’s fault in truth. If anything we were uncoordinated in the event of an ambush and fell apart. Now if we don’t stop this, we’ll never find anything.”

Christa let out a sigh, twin thuds heard followed by footsteps. Her hands, empty now, swayed at her side as her eyes moved along the shelves, “If you guys are quite done, we have a job to do. Not sure why we’re searching a library if they’re hiding the truth though.”

“Why would they be if they’re trying to decipher old texts to aid us?”

“A likely story isn’t it Silas?” Christa murmured.

“Conspiracy theory much?”

“Come on. What sort of society knows only a piece of the information about something that threatens them? They’re hiding something they’re too scared to admit to. I’ve seen it many a time before in my history texts about the mortal worlds.”

“Give me a a moment,” Silas murmured taking a seat in a chair, his eyes slowly shutting.

The other three gathered around, watching him momentarily. Silence filled the small area, the three standing in wait looking around the room to notice a few glancing eyes. Mifune place his hand to his face with head shaking after, “This is going to be another several hour thing isn’t it?”

“Be quiet Mifune,” Christa growled.

“Pull that book shelf over Mifune, I think we’ll find something of interest there,” Silas murmured, his eyes slowly opening.

Mifune’s head turned, “Which one?”

“The one with the blue books on the top shelf.”

“Oh ho? Gotcha,” he chuckled stepping across the room.

The few civilians gathered in the library watched with eyes growing big just as Mifune stopped in front of the shelf. The sound of metal on wood chopping through filled the room, the crackle of boards and the collapse of a pile of books. Creaking wood and a final bang. The book shelf fell, split in two with books washing the floor. Behind, an opening lit by a single torch; inside the room, a massive figure.

A stone wall stood surrounded by wood walls and the opening, a stone wall that looked carved from something with many an inscription present on it. Mifune chuckled, “Well, guess destroying that hunk of junk was justified.”

“As I thought,” Christa muttered, “Though really? A hidden room in a library. How cliché.”

Silas glanced around as all at once the people began to leave, quietly. His attention turned at once, “Enzo.”

“On it. These don’t look too hard to decipher,” he murmured holding up a book approaching the room now.

His head moved, his eyes taking in the sum of the wall before him.

“Ahem. The story of Toyen is one of monarchy and despair. Dating back tens of thousands of years it is known that we the free were the enslaved. Subject to the Kings and Queens of the Sands, we became known for war with other tribes and enslaving them just as we were. Though the ages many a harsh lord had been born to supersede the previous lord through the assassination of their former, though none were ever the harsher as King Tatsumaki. Tatsumaki the Wicked Tongue was noted as the cruelest in the history of Toyen 11 for having fed not only his father but his entire ancestry to the reptiles, banishing their friends and families of friends to walk the sands in endless banishment.”

“What a devious little-” Christa growled.

“Tatsumaki worked his own to the death, sacrificing their lives for the sake of a fruitless empire. His experiments on the masses turned into mass slaughters in the name of Black Magic, on his quest to gain the eternal elixir to rule forever. After sacrificing more than a hundred thousand of his own, his time came when his own child took the throne and his life. Tatsumaki died to the alligators after being knocked into the pit of death following the sacrifice of more and more civilians for his games. The next king’s name, Onaka.”

“Onaka? Why does that sound familiar?” Silas murmured.

“Oh my... this is why, we studied him at the academy. Prince Onaka, later King Onaka, was a fairer ruler. In the shadow of his father he had often attempted to fix many of the wrongdoings of his ancestors. In time it became known that King Tatsumaki had intended to sacrifice Onaka to further his evolution, which is when Onaka plotted the downfall of Tatsumaki. As king, Onaka returned many of the riches and wealth of the land to the people. Tragedy- oh my.”

“What is it?”

“Er... tragedy struck when former followers of King Tatsumaki instilled an insurrection of the people using their fear of the next ruler. Onaka’s pregnant lover was fed alive to the game alligators who he had fed upon his father... while he was- while he was mummified alive.”

“Whoa, mummified alive? You mean-”

“They took out his organs and shoved a hot poker into his brain, yes.”

“Dude that’s messed up!!”

“At the brink of death, Onaka vowed vengeance. He spoke that in a thousand years he would return to walk the sands, to do to the descendants of the traitors what they did to him. He would unleash a plague like no other that would raise the dead, and turn the living into the undead.”

“So, suffice to say,” Christa began, “What we’re facing could be Onaka’s revenge.”

“It might just be that, yes. It also mentions that Onaka will not rest until he claims the lives of ten thousand souls.”

“So that’s why they never told us. Hey, they were planning to offer US up weren’t they?!”

“That might be the case. It’s said that Onaka, his army, his family, and his riches were buried at the Blue Moon Oasis a half day’s journey from here. That same oasis where we were attacked.”

“Then we have to get back there and destroy his soul once and for all,” Mifune chuckled.

“Hold on, something about this bothers me,” Christa began again.

“What’s that?” Enzo replied.

“One thing I don’t get. If Onaka knew a spell to make himself rise up, then why hasn’t his father returned?”

“What?”

“The light hearted son of a Black Magic practicing psycho path manages to rise up, manages to know a spell that his father did not?”

“Maybe he studied some of his father’s texts, who knows.”

“Eh, you might be right. It just sounds strange. So, what do we do now Enzo?”

“Ask Silas.”

“Me?”

“You’re the one with superficial powers. You can probably recite something to banish Onaka’s soul, right?”

“I suppose, yeah?”

“Then it’s settled. We need to go to the oasis and put an end to this once and for all.”

“Agreed.”

“Oh heck yeah!” Mifune barked.

The squad turned, quick to run out; just as they did however, slowly a shadow cast at the nearby window. A humanoid outline, ragged with visible red eyes that now narrowed, a disjointed visible jaw. A slight bit of drool dripped, a low groan audible coming from the figure as its blue tunic flapped.

Mystery of the Sands

Night had fallen yet again for the group of four as they marched through the sands. No wind, no heat, no flowing sands period, it was only the vast empty ocean of sand. Slowly they moved ahead step by step together, Mifune with his arms crossed behind his head and Christa with her bold walk, Enzo and Silas somewhat casually on the move.

“So remind me why we’re going out for this crypt in the middle of the night?”

“To attract the mummies, obviously Mifune.”

“Yeah but Christa, what’s the point? We can’t kill the damn things. They just heal like a bunch of sissies.”

“Because,” Enzo chimed in, “We have Silas and his magic to back us up.”

“And you’re sure that’ll be enough?”

“Listen to you Mifune,” Silas chuckled, “So worried about a fight?”

“Hey, I’m confident when I know my enemy will die. When you hack something into a million pieces and they just conglomerate back together, it’s just not worth it.”

“You mean conglomerate. Also I get it but would Cardinal Senya?”

“Jerk.”

“Besides, there’s something I want to check,” Christa murmured.

“We’re here,” Enzo stated as the group closed in now on the oasis.

Right at the edge, over the dune, they came to a halt. Their heads moved around, sharp and quick. Enzo stepped forward, “They are most notably here at night, that never slipped me by when the locals talked back there.”

“Heh, you’d think for a bunch of revenge seeking rag dolls they’d wander further. So far it seems like they’re just staying near the crypt so I don’t get the big deal,” Mifune huffed.

“So true,” Christa mumbled, “Only near the crypt.”

The sand shifted just a touch, a little pooling away up ahead. All stood at edge immediately, waiting. All at once an arm shot out of the sand, a hand slamming down. The same that had happened before happened now with the mummies ripping themselves from the ground, moaning and slumping forward.

“These mummies act like the zombies we have yet to see,” Mifune chuckled as more and more popped out.

“Maybe the zombies were mummified, who knows. Silas?”

“Gotcha Christa, ahem,” he murmured pulling out his tome, “Magasa, Inferni!”

Waving his right hand in the air a sphere of fire quickly conjured itself. With the thrust of his hand forward the fire shot out directed right at a mummy, blasting right into it. With a roar the mummy blew apart, though as seen prior the sands slowly began to pool as the limbs came back together quickly. In mere seconds it now stood again.

Silas raised an eye, “Oh?”

“Oh? Oh! That’s all you have?!” Mifune barked.

“Calm yourself. You forget,” Silas murmured stepping ahead, “I tend to size my enemy up before going all butcher on them. Incelus Bekeheilios!”

The book hovered into the air from his hand, both arms flinging across one another outstretched, right to the left and left to the right. Flames, gold in color, began to emerge, “Astronosis, Carteliosis!”

The arms flung out as his head dropped with eyes on the ground, the golden flames launching themselves turning into a tidal wave of gold fire. The flames slammed into the mummies, their roar heard echoing as they stumbled. Silas looked up with a grin, “My anti-curse charm, enjoy!”

Slowly the mummies moved further ahead, their steps in the sand not yet ceasing. His eyes drew bigger, his mouth hanging a bit. Christa and Mifune both jumped back with shock flooding their faces. Mifune turned quickly, “Anti-curse huh? What do you call that?!”

“Not a curse, magic?”

You guys do your own thing, I’ve got this!” Mifune spat as he charged ahead.

“Mifune, wait!” Enzo yelled out.

It was no use as Mifune slammed right into the mummies. As he swung his sword it was quickly caught by three of the mummies, only minor damage to them as they held it firm, “Wha- gah!”

“Mifune!”

All at once multiple mummies slammed atop him, the sands rising up swallowing him and the mummies. Christa and Enzo stepped forward, witnessing as the sands sunk back down with Mifune and the mummies both.

“Retaka Galamaru!”

With the snap of a finger, the gold turned quickly to silver and then copper. All at once the flames combusted themselves with black flames and blew. Roars could be heard as sand flew, the explosions of each mummy being that of blocks of C4 going off in the sands buried. The sand washed at the feet of the four, ceasing itself.

“The hell was that?!”

“Simple, I blew them up Enzo.”

“How did that work and them dicing them didn’t?!”

“Magic is magic, heh heh. Though in all seriousness, that was a low level spell. I wasn’t sure if it was going to work, but it did.”

“Retaka Galamaru. That’s one of Cardinal Ember Victoria’s favorite spells. It takes the sum of mindless dark magic inside an entity and causes it to combust and explode out of the individual,” Enzo stammered.

“Yeah, a really great spell for low level threats like mindless mummies. I kinda figured that would work.”

“What about Mifune?” Christa murmured.

With a glance down Silas slowly bent his knees getting near the ground, his right hand placed upon the sand. His eyes closed as he moved the hand around. Enzo looked to him with an eyebrow raised. Christa nodded, “What I thought, right?”

“Yeah. There are traces of magic in the sand Christa.”

“Magic in the sand? What does that have to do with anything?”

“Well Enzo, what it means is that our little game of mummies and mice is about up.”

A violent whirl of sand flew all at once, the storm of wind coming out of nowhere. An ungodly howl reached them all. All at once, rising up was a sand tornado which lasted only a few seconds. It, like the sand in the air, blew away to only reveal the mummy of blue standing, he of the blue tunic. All eyes shifted, turning to face the creature with Silas and Christa standing ready.

“BLEAHAUGHERO. So YoU wOuLd ReTuRn HeRe MoRtAlS, yOu HaVe DeFiEd My WaRnInG!!!” it roared.

“Onaka I presume?” Silas called out.

“I aM; nOw BeCaUsE oF yOuR iGnOrAnCe, YoUr FrIeNd Is DeAd!”

“Pft, friend? You really think too highly of him dry jaw,” Christa chuckled.

“WhAt?”

“Now Mifune!”

The sands right in front of the mummy blew apart, a blade flying forward.

CLANG!!

“GAH!” came the echoed roar.

A slight dripping could be heard, red blood rolling down the shoulder of the mummy and dripping onto its foot as it stumbled back. In front of it stood Mifune with his sword, a little bit of blood on it.

“Finally I got to hit something!” Mifune yelled.

“What is the meaning of this-?!” the mummy barked.

“Quite easy really,” Mifune chuckled, “Tell him Christa!”

“Do you know who you’re even dealing with?” Christa yelled at the mummy, “Too many parts of the story don’t add up as is the case with most crimes. Mummies that somehow come back together, mummies in the sand nonetheless. The story of Onaka’s revenge, how he would smite hundreds of people upon his return? You haven’t left the site where the tomb is said to be at all to our knowledge! Plus you let us go, probably to scare us off. You’re not Onaka’s ghost, you’re just a man using the legend to scare people off so you can get the treasure right?! ”

“The blood, the magic in the sand, the fact that the mummies didn’t act like mummies,” Silas chuckled.

“Bah!” the mummy spat, “You think yourselves so clever. A couple of slack jawed idiots. You think you can just come in here and ruin MY operation like this?! You destroy my sand clones, attack me with a fricken sword to see if I bleed. You take pity on the descendants of murderers who hid a wealth of treasure while there are some people out here struggling to scrape anything together to live? Bah I say, BAH!!!”

Mifune raised his blade, holding it to the mummy’s throat, “It’s over mummy man.”

“Heh heh heh, you think so? I think not.”

“Once the people find out that you’re just a nobody misusing the legend, they’ll rebel lickity split,” Mifune laughed.

“Unless the secret dies here with you now,” the man chuckled, “I let you go the last time because I didn’t want to draw actual blood. A few sand clones zombified by fake mummies, my presence, I thought for sure that would have done it but NO! Your severed heads delivered back to Crakhowl should give me enough time to find the treasure and be on my way off this world!”

“You may try,” Enzo replied with a sharp yell.

All at once a wall of sand flew up, blasting beneath Mifune’s sword sending it and him tumbling back. With a leap, Mifune returned straight back to the others, watching as sand began to rise up all around the man. Humanoid forms began to form from some of it as the rest simply washed around in the air, the man’s hands flying out, “I’ll grind your bones into dust and fulfill my job. You will not rest, you will not scream, you will only die!”

The Sand Man

Sand launched itself straight at the group. Mifune's blade shot up and launched down. The sands began to part as, with both hands upon it, the blade slammed down straight into the sand unleashing a tremendous cutting force. Enough pressure launched itself in that one blow to reach all the way near the foe. The man simply took a slight step back, his eyes not falling from the group as he did so.

"That one has some impressive strength for a little rat," the man chuckled out loud.

Mifune's face scrunched, the blade flying to one hand alone as he took charge at the man, "I'll show you!"

"Mifune, wait!"

With a single leap Mifune shot up, his blade raised and ready to fly down to split the man in two, "I'll reap you!"

Thud.

Mifune's eyes drifted down to witness sand, sand upon his ankle that had grabbed him. Like a serpent it swung. Mifune flew off with the sand as it flew up and especially as it flew down, throwing him off towards the oasis.

CRACK!

He flew clear into a pile of rock next to the shores of the oasis, moaning as his blade flew off right next to him.

"Mifune!" Silas shouted.

"Hahahaha! That's one down!"

“Grr- Christa, tend to that knucklehead. Enzo you back me up.”

“Gotcha,” Christa replied tearing off as Enzo took stance ready.

Sand drifted around the man as he casually crossed his arms, hands resting upon those arms,

“Well well, what next?”

“I’m going,” Silas stated launching forward at the man as Christa arrived by Mifune’s side.

“Shit, he hit his head pretty damn hard the idiot. Enzo won’t be able to do anything and I can’t leave Mifune’s side. Silas, it’s up to you,” she murmured.

Silas shot high with a sword in one hand and a tome in the other, “Arrow Sparrow!”

From the book flew five flames in the shape of sparrows with wings flapping. The man stepped back as they came in, his sand whirling up like a dome quickly blocking the attack before flying right at Silas.

“Dammit-” Silas growled as the sands washed him aside.

With a solid thud he landed within the sand, slow to pick himself up. All at once the sands beneath him parted with multiple hands and arms reaching out latching onto him, “Dammit!”

The sands flew again, the man flying forward atop a wave of sand towards Enzo and the oasis. Enzo stood his ground, fists up. The man simply laughed and carried on past, dismay spreading across Enzo’s face.

“Crud, Christa!” Silas yelled, “He’s going for you!”

“I can ignore the small fries. Aim for the healer and the rest will immediately fold!”

His sand crossed into the greenery of the oasis, flooding right around ready to strike. Mifune’s eyes drifted open slightly, glancing to Christa, “I, I’m sorry, urk-”

“Don’t be, you just handed us the win Mifune,” Christa murmured looking left as the man came forth.

She quickly stood, a loud grunt leaving her as she flung her right side and fell to the sand beneath her face first nearly. The man’s laugh was cut off as all at once he yelled in pain. The sand crashed, seizing up just before Christa’s head. A thud was heard with the falling of more sand.

Silas quickly shot up as the sand and arms around him collapsed. His head darted around, his feet shifting quickly. Both Silas and Enzo shot towards the oasis, Christa slowly standing with a huff. Right in front of her the man laid upon his back, a little blood flowing down his head and his shut eyes. A moan left him as his head slumped over.

CLANG!

Right beside him a sword dropped, a sword with blood on the butt of the handle. Christa simply smiled, “Way too easy for all our training.”

“Wha-” Silas began.

“Quite obvious Silas. They always go for the healer, don’t they?” Christa chuckled.

“Oh, OH!”

“I totally knew Mifune would charge in like an idiot and get launched. As the healer trying to help him, I was an open target. Totally works every time.”

“Not, funny!” Mifune barked.

All simply let out laughter, a slow rising gold warmth washing over them. Their heads turned, watching as one sun gradually began to rise up.

“Still, this feels kinda anticlimactic,” Enzo replied.

“Well hey, we’re not Priests or anything. What did you honestly expect?”

“Fair enough I guess. Though when that day comes, things are totally going to get wild I bet!”

Handcuffs clacked, slapped onto the wrists of the mummy man. His head curled back just as symbols began to glow on the surface of the cuffs.

“Power restriction. Perfect for low level criminals like you Sand Man,” Christa chuckled.

“Bah, you little turds are going to pay for this. Have you any idea how hard it is living the life of a rogue? It’s not like I hurt anyone either!”

“I mean he does have a point,” Silas said with a shrug.

“Technically arresting common criminals is outside of our jurisdiction,” Enzo added.

“Ah come on, the man tried to kill us. Well, sorta I think?”

“Christa, I hate to say it but nerdiac there has a point. We’re only tasked with supernatural afflictions, not guys in costumes. Local authorities should be able to handle it. Plus, they also thought they could’ve just sacrificed us, the Crakhowl people and all.”

“This man is a criminal, are you serious right now?” Christa growled.

“Christa, Enzo and Mifune are unfortunately right. We’re not tasked with taking out criminals like him,” Silas muttered pressing a button on the cuffs, the locks disengaging immediately.

The man looked back, his eyes widened a little.

“Silas, what are you doing?!”

“Christa, we completed our mission. That’s all that counts. Alright mummy man, get out of here before we change our mind.”

“What the hell are you people-” he growled turning around, casually backing away.

“Celestial Warriors from Elysium. We work for the people you call Gods,” Silas replied.

“G-Gods? Wha-”

“So if you don’t want us coming back to smite you, just do what you came to do. No more scaring people unless you have to.”

“A-are you serious? What?! Y-you claim to be angels but you won’t actually do anything to help me? To help the others!”

“Our code of law says we can only act on supernatural threats. We can’t interfere otherwise.”

“You... if you’re being truthful then, then, then it doesn’t matter does it? Having faith is just a load if you don’t actually do anything for people, for those of us who need the aid!”

Not a word was said as the man backed away quicker, turning to dash off, “I always knew the Gods were a load of crap, no wonder mortality is a hellhole like it is here!”

“Hey!” Christa spat, stopped short as Silas raised a hand.

“Let it go Christa. Regrettable as it is, it isn’t our job to apprehend him or listen. As far as our bosses know, our mission is complete.”

“Tch. I know I signed on to prove I wasn’t just a weak healer but... but I also didn’t think we’d be letting scum go that has hurt people, just because it isn’t our job.”

Tail of the Mole

“No movement,” came the voice of Silver.

“I can not sense them either,” was the response in the voice of Tari.

“As we feared then, both teams have disappeared,” concluded Torunei.

The sky, clouded gray and ready to rain. The terrain, rocky and torn apart with loose gravel all around. The three moved lightly stepping over many of the holes found in the rocky terrain. Rocks tumbled from higher up, cracking upon the ground leaving scuffs where they’d land.

Tari took head of the group while Silver crouched with both hands now flat to the ground. Slowly his palms moved and brushed lighter against the surface. Without word he rose with his head shaking.

“Someone or something took out two squads of knights. That doesn’t just happen,” Torunei mumbled.

“Whatever it was must have been right near us the last time we were here though. Last communications with the squads was three hours after we left,” Tari murmured.

“So it was something in the area? How did we miss the presence of Lunagen though!”

“I’m not so sure we’re dealing with Lunagen, Silver,” Torunei murmured.

“Hmm?”

“Lunagen are clunky and clumsy, not the sort of creatures that would pull off stealth strikes and leave no bodies or blood. Whatever it was is pretty resourceful at the very least.”

“Reminds me of my dad’s mother in law,” Tari chuckled.

“Really?”

“Hey, I refuse to call her grandma.”

“You’d think dead people would have a little more charm to them,” Silver mumbled.

“Are we truly dead though? Some of us were born, others of us died in life and just got Elysium as another chance. What truly are we?” Torunei replied

“Wait so what if someone born here dies? Do we just die die or do we just get reborn?”

“That IS the question.”

“No guys the question is where did the knight squads go,” Silver concluded.

“And why are there trenches everywhere? Lunagen don’t trench.”

“To add, Tari, why are there several more of those metal plates lying around?”

“Not sure but you know what I’m thinking?” Tari murmured, “I’m thinking this isn’t the work of Lunagen.”

“What makes you say that?”

“That,” Tari swiftly replied with a point.

All at once the ground shattered to their West, rumbles of a quake ripping through to them. Out of the ground shot a massive entity, one of brown and black primarily with white. A metallic roar ripped through the air, stubby paws with long claws, a mole-like creature with a white underbelly. Down it slammed with reflective black eyes, though not usual eyes, more like giant black glass plates. It’s mouth opened, bolts exposed as the roar hit again.

“Kah-!” Torunei gagged in shock, all as Silver and Tari stared with naked expressions, “A giant fricken robo mole? Knights died to a giant robotic rodent, are you serious?!”

The beast let out another roar as its front slammed flat, the paws pushing against the ground as it casually began to pull itself towards them. Tari made a half turn of her body with eyes locked to it, Silver stared on blank almost bored, and Torunei with an utterly shocked expression. It stopped many meters away, the reflectiveness of the eyes disappearing to reveal a man's face temporarily just as smoke popped out the back of the head.

"Are you serious right now?!" Tari called out.

"BRAAAAAGHKWAFLALALA," came the metallic response, a high pitched shriek of a speaker heard, "PATHETIC MORTALS, I THE MOLE KING HAVE COME FOR YOUR-"

"Its mouth didn't even- hey, operator dude, did you kill our knights?!" Torunei barked flailing his arms mockingly.

Silver and Tari both chuckled to themselves as the mic once more squealed, a response coming from the mole as its mouth began to finally move, "YOU MORTALS DARE TO INTRUDE UPON OUR LAND! YOU WILL ALL BE-"

"Yeah we know you're a guy in a giant robot man, cut the act!" Torunei barked yet again.

"I WILL- wait wha, what? How the bloody hell could you tell?!"

"GEE I WONDER!"

"YOU SMART ALEX BRAT!"

"ALEC, NOT ALEX!"

"GAH!!!! I WILL EAT YOU!!!"

"Tari," Silver muttered.

"Oh, right, that thing I do."

“Your machine looks like that crap my goat took last night!” Torunei continued.

“HOW DARE YOU, MY MOTHER DESIGNED THIS!!”

“Well it shows!”

“BOY I AM GOING TO SLAP YOU SO HARD UPSIDE THE HEAD!”

Tari’s body shifted, a blur of movement as she slammed her hands down with eyes locked to the claws of the giant machine, “Frost Art~”

Once more the ground rumbled, the ground in front of Tari quickly turning blue. A rippling wave of white and blue shot forward, shards of near see-through substance blasting out almost like diamond. Quickly it spread, the spikes becoming taller and taller as they zoomed under Torunei. A white powder flopped itself all around the mole, the ground rumbling until it broke through. Spikes upon spikes of ice launched themselves, slamming straight through the hands and body like diamond through paper.

“NOOOOOOOO!!!!” the voice yelled as a massive pike of ice slammed clear through the torso of the massive robotic mole.

Sparks flew along with smoke, flames blasting clear out of the thing. Light left, the eyes darkening with the speakers coming to a shrieking halt. All at once a blast was heard, the core of the device ruptured. The ice and body blew apart, the head flopping down and rolling off to the right with the glass breaking. Out of one of the eye sockets the man flopped, half out and half in green in the face.

“Guh-” he groaned as flames shot up from the remaining torso of the mole, the parts raining down everywhere.

“Wow, good shot Tari.”

“Uh, thanks Torunei. That was just, kinda sad in all honesty.”

“Actually that was just too easy,” Silver mumbled.

“Yeah, I know. Silver, feel around in case more trouble is on the way. Torunei... have a little fun. I’m going to feel around myself.”

“Gotcha Tari. Guess I’ll go have my fun, heh heh,” Torunei chuckled stomping off towards the man.

“I know what you’re thinking Tari, and I think you’re right. A giant mole robot that you took down in two shakes of a dog’s tail killing knight squads? A clumsy, idiotic thing like that just, no, it doesn’t seem right.”

“Guys in robots aren’t under our jurisdiction either. The knights could have easily fled.”

A slithering could be heard, a slithering that caught Tari’s immediate attention. Her head cast glancing shots, left then right, a turn back only to see nothing, nothing but the plants. Silver continued, “Let’s be real Tari, yeah the knights should have been able to take that down if it was the mole guy that got them but clearly we both think there’s more to this. Something happened to the knights, something terrible that we damn well know the result of. Whatever did that to them is still out there.”

Again the slithering, again the creaking, both looking around this time only to see nothing. Torunei at point arrived near the struggling man, his blood leaking from his nose, “Oh man, oh man, that hurts, that hurts!”

“Hello there,” Torunei chuckled.

“Gah! You-” the man barked.

“So you think you’re real cool killing our guys off eh?”

“What are you even talking about?!”

“Our knights, our soldiers. We lost contact with them and now we’re assuming that they’ve been killed. We try to look around and here you come, a dude in a giant suspicious mole robot thing!”

“No- no I didn’t man, I swear! I’m just a miner that-”

“Causing earth quakes as you mine to drive people off? Impersonating the super natural? Yeah real funny.”

“No you’ve got it all wrong. I swear I didn’t do anything!”

“You’ve got a lot of explaining to do so why don’t you just-”

Yet again the ground began to rumble, cracks forming off to the North. All eyes turned, all watching as another giant mole blast its way out in a huff, its shriek heard as it emerged.

“KAH, another one?!” Torunei spat.

It turned its head, facing Torunei and the man, shrieking. Tari and Silver took stance ready, though at once their expressions and stances became slack and coarse. The ground shattered with rock flying, dozens upon dozens of massive vines blasting out of the ground slithering like snakes, all around the second mole robot. Quickly they arched and slammed themselves, blasting straight through the metal ripping all out as they dug in. The mole struggled, shrieking out with the cry of a man as the speakers became distorted.

Quickly it dropped, sinking down back into the land as the vines began to pull. Torunei shot up defensively as the others grew tense, hearing the scream over the speaker through the rumbling until both ceased many seconds later.

“What the heck was that?!” Torunei barked.

“Th-th-thas the thing, that’s the thing there!”

An Uncertain Situation

The ground rumbled again, cracks spreading from the point where the mole was, cracks fast approaching the first mole. Torunei turned throwing his arms out, hands grasping the man, “Come on old man, we need to move!”

“Tari!” Silver barked.

“I’m on it! Frost Art- Pillar Dance!” she shouted with her palms slamming down.

The ground dripped beneath her hands, doughnuting itself in with a small crater with edges raised. Forward the ground split, icicles blasting free from the ground moving towards the approaching other cracks, “Grr, be in time!”

“Dammit!” Silver spat taking charge forward.

Electricity quite visible in a brilliant yellow circulated around, his arms pulling themselves back as the distance of perhaps forty meters was quickly closed, only around half the distance towards the cracks. Up he shot with a single leap, launching himself well over ten meters into the air, his right arm fully extended in a heartbeat with his pointer finger extended. The crackle of thunder was heard as all that golden yellow left Silver’s body and shot forth at the cracks.

From gold, to silver, it traveled in the blink of an eye and crashed against the ground. A hole was left straight in the ground as if a laser had pierced it, just beside the traveling cracks.

KAPOW!!!

All at once a high pitched monstrous shriek hit the wind, the ground ceasing to crack though only for a split second as it then blew apart. Cracks splintered around an epicenter four meters away from the entry point into the ground, smoke and flames launching out of those cracks at first followed by only smoke after.

Silver landed upon both feet, hoisting himself up just as Tari's attack stopped beside him. Eyes locked forward looking straight at the blast's location, "Silver bang you son of a-"

"Silver!" Tari cried out, the ground rumbling all at once again.

This time it was Silver who would stumble, several steps taken back until becoming stable again. He, Tari, Torunei, even the man, all of them looked to the epicenter of that blast. The cracks, that which had stopped, began to grumble and grind. Plate of earth to plate of earth, chunks being blown out.

"Something's coming up!" Torunei shouted.

"I can tell!" Silver replied.

It gave way, dozens upon dozens of green vines blasting out at varying thicknesses, many thicker than a fully grown tree, some smaller than the branches. Up they shot all around the epicenter as the rumbling spread out to tumble even Tari. A hazy roar followed, roaring once and then louder the second time. The ground right at the epicenter at once ripped itself apart with more vines flying up, vines quickly turning black as they ascended.

Upwards of thirty meters, if not taller, up they flew spilling off to the sides collapsing. Silver at once launched back, narrowly dodging as the end of one slammed down next to his position, "Whoa!"

"Gah, what the living crap is that!" came the yell of Torunei from his position as he stood there, simply watching.

"Vines!" Tari called as she and Silver launched themselves into the air.

With a flip Silver landed several paces away with Tari landing elegantly right behind. Both walked forward, all still with heads turned to face the vines.

"This planet is weird," Tari murmured.

“You can say that again. Vines just up and attacking folks like that? Eh... not cool.”

Tari stumbled forward two paces, her eyes flashing. With the sharp turn of her head and a stance change much like a boxer’s she barked, “Incoming, again!”

“Tch, what now?” Silver grumbled following her turn towards the South.

Torunei looked up, his eyes squinting, “I don’t see anything.”

Lightning crackled and struck right before them, purple in coloration. The ground blew apart revealing next a humanoid form as the light faded.

“Soren!” Tari called, her stance dropping.

“Soren?” Torunei murmured.

“Illiya’s little sister?” Silver questioned.

“I thought I sensed something. The Star Squad,” came a slight giggle followed by footsteps, “Hey Tari, Silver, Torunei. What brings you all to this planet?”

“A mission. Something believed to be supernatural was having an adverse effect on this world. We believed it to be Lunagen until some things started to unfold.”

“Ah, and I take it that you can’t do anything now considering the giant mole robot and a clearly injured mortal, right?”

“Well... not necessarily. Something killed Starset Knights, and then a second mole thing appeared and got attacked by some weird vines. We’re not positive but we still think this is the work of something not necessarily mortal.”

“Why’s that Tari?”

“Vines like that haven’t been documented on this planet. Plus there were some guys that attacked the Cardinals on that one world.”

“Logical.”

“So what are you doing here Soren?” Silver mumbled.

“Taking samples of the planet’s Spirit Energy for Bishop Maxwell. He sensed a disturbance in this quadrant and wasn’t sure which world it was; but, I guess now I can take a guess.”

“Soren, you need to go and report back to Maxwell. Meanwhile, I’d say we need to phone home to Starset about what’s going on.”

“Yeah, I could do that and you guys could do that, or I could just help out and we find out what those weeds are.”

“Soren, I-”

“The Kingdoms receive missions from my bosses when we feel like handing out simple tasks. We can also modify them.”

“You’re not a Bishop though or even a Priest,” Torunei coughed stepping forward.

“Pardon me kids but what’s this crazy talk,” the man beside Torunei barked, “Cardinals? Bishops? Kingdoms?!”

“Might as well tell him since he’ll be hauled in for questioning,” Silver mumbled.

Silver turned to face the man, nodding to Torunei after. Torunei stepped forward with a nod of his own in return while sweeping around to look at the man, “We are representatives of Elysium. Elysium lies alongside the Celestial River, mother to life and power. It is also home to both us Celestials and the Angels, who look to serve and protect mortals from the supernatural powers of the rogue realm known as The Underworld.”

“It is the job of the Holy Kingdoms to carry out assignments given to us by the Celestial Kingdom. As said, usually it’s just us taking on Supernatural threats. The Underworld in particular is what people often call Hell, full of monsters and Demons; though no damned souls who died. Typically the assignments given to us are simple investigative tasks while the Celestial Kingdom handles the heavier missions. If they get a hammered with assignments, they pass the harder ones off to the Kingdoms,” Tari followed.

“Our leaders are the Twenty Cardinals, leaders of the Cardinal Program known as Project Safeguard. They are in charge of running Elysium and handling the mortal worlds in time of crisis. They are wickedly powerful, especially when compared to the people who elect them to their positions. They elect Bishops to watch over quadrants of the mortal worlds, then send their Priests or rather their warriors to fulfill the various tasks they can handle first and foremost,” Torunei stated, jumping back in.

“So in short, we are what you might call Gods and Angels that are fighting the powers of Satan,” Silver concluded, “A bit bold and a spit on certain religions but we’re kinda like that. Not really sure if Heaven or Hell exist though in that same sense.”

“That’s uh, wha-whoa,” the man mumbled, “I have absolutely no idea what you guys are saying. Like, Cardinals and Priests? What about the Gods and Angels? And what the heck are you guys?”

“Celestials, we are Celestials. And again, can’t really say much about Gods or the afterlife. Angels are just another species, like us I suppose. Angels kinda do their own thing right now,” Tari replied.

“Only Supernatural? So... so you guys don’t-” the man stuttered.

Tari shook her head, her eyes shut as she did, “Afraid not. I already know what you’re going to ask and the answer is no. We just fight evil. We’re considered godly but we won’t interfere in normal

life or stop wars or any of that. We are not permitted to do anything of the sort other than carry out the missions they assign, which only involve the Supernatural.”

“And you, you expect me to just believe your story?” the man growled.

Silver shrugged his shoulders, “Hmph. This is going about as I expected.”

“Listen sir, believe us or not that isn’t the point,” Soren began stepping forward, “Right now there’s a problem with your world and that’s why we’re here. So if you know anything, you should just spill it. Otherwise my friends here will take you back to our world for interrogation. That or just flat out hand you over to proper authorities and blame you for what’s going on in which case you might be executed.”

“You wanna actually help? Fine. I know exactly where we need to go. I wasn’t going to say much but if it gets you off my back one way or another, fine. The problem is that plant, and I can take you to where it came from IF, and only IF, you let me go.”

“Take us to the source and we might just consider not dumping you in the vacuum of space, scum,” Silver growled.

“Then we have a deal.”

“We will assist you until we isolate what we’re up against. If it is beyond us, we’re pulling out immediately,” Silver concluded.

Down the Mole Hole

Their steps echoed with the dripping of small rock, such very little light actually visible except for that of their auras. At the head marched Torunei, his comrades and the man walking behind. Torunei's body had a glow dancing around, a brilliant red glow with a mix of blue and green in it. Tari moved at the middle, her hands clasped together with palms pressed flat, her eyes shut. Silver moved at the rear with twin swords in hand, electricity surging around the tips sparsely.

“-and so we came to this world with the intent to harvest the precious Qualcominum, thinking we could sell it at a high price to the Valumites a Galaxy over. The deal was good until Valum got driven off. So, we thought it'd be nifty to just collect and do a mass selling, maybe buy up a planet. We were on track until a few months ago when these damn vines started doing their crap.”

“Typical scum,” Silver mumbled from behind.

“You try living on a world near death! Our star is about to expand enough to kill us. To save our people, we need that money, we need ships and a new world. Your Gods sure as shit don't help us so we do what we can.”

“At times I wish we could help more, so much more.”

“You know it isn't our place Silver. Time and time again we've been told that the mortals need to face their self-caused or natural problems themselves. Guess I can't say I blame Thad here for thinking the way he does.”

“You mentioned you knew where they came from Thad, where and how?” Soren chimed in.

“Oh uh yeah yeah, of course. While mining we stumbled upon a cavern a year back, one with a downed freighter called The Shooting Star Observatory. We thought we could salvage it and add it to our fleet. We looked into it, come to find it belonged to the guys we had been selling Qualcominum to.

Guess it crashed there a good decade earlier or something like that. We phoned home about it for feedback and, well, we were given the green light.”

“So odds are that those guys we saw were looking for it,” Torunei mumbled back.

“Very likely,” Tari replied, “So what happened?”

“There was a quake. It rained the cavern’s ceiling down on us. Big ol’ chunk of rock breached one of the pods on the side of the freighter, one probably the size of ten of our moles. Next thing we knew, vines were flying out and snaring us one by one. Some of us got ourselves out of there, most perished.”

“And you didn’t think to report it?”

“No Miss Tari, no. That would have exposed our operation and we needed the money. Whatever it was left and we resumed business as usual, even as we began using Mole Units one at a time. We went from several dozen down to about ten, with only a handful of us left. Still though, we are in full need. We carry on through it all.”

“Commendable,” Silver replied, “Though still kind of unwise.”

“How did you people, oh sorry, how did your Cardinal Program learn about what was going on?”

“Bishops, as we explained, are assigned to different quadrants, typically no more than twenty percent of inhabited planets in a galaxy if they are near enough to each other. A disturbance was felt and they assigned it to us,” Torunei spoke, “Our squad was first on scene until we got called back right away. Two squads of our knights were sent in to follow up and, well, considering why we jumped you-”

“Heard nuffin from ‘em eh? Sorry but the dead are even more dead.”

“We gathered that, clearly,” Tari muttered.

“The Bishop sent me here to take samples from the planet actually,” Soren continued, “I sensed the commotion and came running just in case. I’m not much of a fighter, not yet but I can still help”

“I thought you said Priests were good fighters?” the man, Thad, questioned.

“Oh they are but I’m just a Priest-in-training. I’m probably a little below these guys in terms of actual combat ability.”

“So let me get this straight, alright? You guys are all less than a knight. And it was not one, but two knight squads that got obliterated? Where’s that logic!”

“I can’t speak for Soren but we’re sort of the top of our class. Actually the exams to become a knight are coming up. Knight is just a rank and an estimate, not all knights are the same.”

“Truth be told Mister Thad, these three are closer to being Priests than they are simply knights in my opinion, heh heh,” Soren giggled.

“Oh gosh Soren, we’re not that good,” Torunei laughed.

“I wouldn’t be so sure Torunei. I know what some of the other classmates are like. Some like you have potential to be Priests, others could become knights, and then there are some that uh... well-”

“Don’t even get me started,” Tari mumbled, “I know exactly who and what you’re going to say.”

“Haha!”

Gravel crumbled from the ceiling off to the left side behind them, a steady stream dripping down. Silver’s expression at once changed, from open and soft to closed and hard. His head cocked slightly, eyes angling towards the gravel as it streamed down. Shifting, they moved back towards the front of the group. Tari’s smile faded, her eyes remaining shut as Silver spoke, “Tari.”

“I know.”

Tari shifted her heels, body flipping around. Silver turned in accordance with swords raised and electricity surging. Soren stopped in place, a hand quickly moving up to the shoulder of Thad and latching on. Torunei’s arms threw themselves out, his aura swelling out lighting up much of the tunnel just as it began to shake.

Rocks burst from the walls, vines launching themselves out with deafening roar. Swirling, twisting, wrapping, striking. The vines shot forth at the five in rapid succession with an already impressive four dozen on scene and more constantly blasting out. Many slammed down, splitting the ground with their strikes and others launching clear through ripping up the ground on the quick approach towards the group.

“Holy-” Tari began.

“-crap,” Torunei concluded.

SLICE!!!

SLASH!!!

CRASH!!!

Silver landed upon one knee and one foot, his swords raised high. In mere blinks of the eye he had gone from his position fourteen meters up passed the vines. Many split, purple liquid splattering the walls and all around Silver. Many a vine dropped with a loud thud.

Some the thickness of an old oak, others as thin as a typical tree branch. Shrieks filled the tunnel audible through the rock walls. Slowly they slopped, that which was still attached slowly pulling out back through the walls leaving just the holes. Silver’s legs stretched as he stood back up with eyes locked to the fleeing vines. In no time at all they had gone.

“Nice job Silver,” Tari called out.

“I... I felt its power when I cut into it, and after. Not a single dip even without all those, just what-. We’re leaving,” Silver mumbled.

“I’m sorry, I’m a little far back here but what did you say Silver?!” Torunei called out.

“I said we’re pulling out!” he yelled back.

“Why?!”

“My ability, remember? I know as four fighters we’re perhaps better than those knights that came before but when I cut into that thing, I could sense its power. I don’t know what it was but its power was massive.”

As he concluded speaking his swords could be heard being sheathed at his sides, “That thing. Once I cut into it, it felt like... like it had enough power to wipe out perhaps over a hundred knights. We were right on the first observation, we need to pull back.”

“Are you kidding me?! Ya’ll just got us to come down here and now after ya go and lop off a bunch of vines ya wanna turn back? Lame!” Thad yelled out.

“You’re not exactly wrong Thad but I got a horrible feeling once I cut into it that I can’t shake.”

“Silver’s right,” Tari murmured, “It was faint but I could feel its spirit and its power. It’s massive. To top it off I don’t even think the main body was around us just then. Whatever it was was far off.”

“You’re serious now?” Soren questioned, “Whatever it is is seriously that bad?”

“I believe so, yes,” Silver replied now approaching the group.

“Alright. I’ll report in to Bishop Maxwell when on the surface. Maybe we can round up some Priests to investigate.”

“Warn them of the danger if you do,” Silver mumbled stepping into the full light of Torunei’s aura, “Because whatever that thing is, it isn’t natural in the slightest.”

“Still to just abandon so suddenly-”

“I wouldn’t quite call it an abandonment, more of a chance to regroup and fire back at full force.”

The Observer

Steps echoed through the halls, the patter of feet upon the tiles. Forward she strode, her hair flowing with her gliding through the crowds. Her eyes darting around, the purple in them as bright as the brightest of Amethyst. The flap of her long black coat, airing the halls as she moved.

A sword at her side in full sheathe, a variety of somewhat visible washed away in the sea of black. Around her those in leather stepped aside, many nodding and carrying on with their day. At the edge of the hall she stopped with a quarter turn, facing a group, “Nalak’s Squad, right?”

Four individuals trenched in black turned, all giving nods with one stepping to the forefront, “Yes, that is correct. How can we help you Illiya?”

“I have orders from Illiigo and a Mission for you to handle. Briefing Room C if you need more info but on Planet Yanpapi, there appears to be a report of ghosts haunting an old castle. Illiigo felt the need to assign this mission to you, stating that you would do well.”

“Pft, of course he’d give us an exorcism mission. Oh well, come on gang,” the lead said walking from the direction Illiya had come from.

She turned a slight bit watching them go, a sigh leaving her with the swift turn back to continue ahead, “My oh my, what they could do if not for Illiigo giving such assignments. Oh well, it can’t be helped.”

Her steps echoed with the chatter of voices ceasing behind, down a barren corridor where nothing stood, not even light at the fullest. The lights came on, flickering only to then die off for a split second. Despite this she carried on. The steps echoed, one two one two one two... three four five three four five.

‘Hmm?’ she thought to herself, stopping with her back turning.

Her eyes peered back, not a thing in place despite the footsteps that echoed over her own. Back around she turned, continuing on her way to a set of doors. Cast open by twin hands they parted, the light of Elysium pouring over as she stepped forward into a massive garden full of life. Trees, flowers, grass, bushes, all in green with a rainbow of coloration washing over the entire area. Few people stood outside as she swam through the light into the garden. Behind the doors clanged shut, her eyes fully lit now by the emergence into such a scene.

Warmth.

Warmth from the light baked over her, a feeling akin to that of a hug by one another cherishes deeply; for that is the magic of the Elysium light. Her arms spread, her hands flexed, breathing in a huge breath of the fresh air, “Ahhh... I love Elysium in its Summer. Hmm?”

Her eyes drifted towards one of the trees, squinting. There a figure sat in one of the branches, the back of someone visible with their hair flowing. On the ground way in front of this person slumbered several individuals. The feet of the one in the tree kicked forward and back, hands at their side.

“You up there!” Illiya shouted.

“Huh? Wha-WHA!!”

THUD!!!

Illiya ran over quick, the person on their back, “Oh gosh, I wasn’t expecting you to just fall over. You should know better than to watch people sleeping though cade- oh crap.”

“Ugh, that hurt,” the person mumbled sitting up.

Their hair, blonde and lengthy down their back. Their eyes, very emerald green and reflective of the light. Slight soot rested upon her face, especially around a tiara with the symbol of Starset engraved into it.

“Oh crap, I just spooked a princess. Oh man, dammit. Not good.”

The individual fully sat up now with her own arms outstretched, “Oh man, that was- hmm?”

She bent backwards allowing for her head to flop back, viewing Illiya upside down. All at once she sprung up with the soot and dirt flying off of her, “Oh gosh, a ranger! Oh please, please don’t report me. I wasn’t doing anything!”

“I uh, don’t- what?” Illiya mumbled.

“Like, please don’t tell my family or anyone that I’m here. I don’t want to get into trouble again.”

“I mean- why would I?”

“Beeeeeeeeee-cause they don’t want me hanging out around here cuz it’s a bad influence I guess or whatever.”

“Really? Huh, that’s a new one to me. Wait a minute, aren’t you-”

“Hmm?”

“Oh gosh, you’re the one that blew up Silas and Mifune during that last gathering, you’re Princess Dawn!”

“Shhh- keep your voice down. I don’t want anyone to know I’m here.”

“Oh, right, sorry.”

“Yeah though, you’re right.”

“So why are you watching people sleep?”

“Wha, oh I didn’t mean to I just- ugh, I just wanted to observe what you guys do on a daily basis.”

“Why?”

“Cuz my parents won’t let me. I just really really really want to know what it’s like to be a knight I guess, or even a ranger. The adventure, the people you could meet, heh. But all my parents care about is grooming me to be some stupid figure head. It’s not like I’m going to be the next queen or anything either. I’m only third in line should anything happen or should my folks retire.”

“I mean, that’s still wicked cool though right?”

“No, it’s boring. I have to learn politics and learn the duties of a princess. I can’t fight, I can’t learn cool magic. It sucks.”

“Well why not, huh?”

Before the two approached another set of individuals, two cloaked in black, one dressed in a gray armor heavily built, an ax on his back. He strode forward, his dark blond hair flowing in the wind, “Ah, Ranger Illiya,” the individual spoke.

“G-General Hrodulf, sir. A pleasure to see you again,” Illiya quickly stammered out with a bow.

“It has been quite some time, hasn’t it? Mmm, ah, Lady Dawn. A pleasure to see you as well. When last I saw you, you were barely passed my knees,” he spoke in a soft voice, a voice soft like honey.

“Heh heh, yeah I’ve uh, I’ve grown quite a bit.”

“And from what I hear you still have a knack for getting into trouble.”

“What, me? Nah haha, I don’t know where you’d hear such a thing, really I don’t. Eh, heh heh.”

“Heh, right right. Well at any rate, I have a task for you Illiya.”

“A request? Oh sure sure!”

“I need you to drop something off in the Avalon District. I know a delivery isn’t stellar but it seems you have a friend to entertain now, right?”

“Uh, sure, sure I guess. Yeah, I can do that.”

“Excellent,” Hrodulf murmured holding up a package handed to him by one of the cloaked individuals, “Doctor Greshin. He’s a researcher for the kingdom that is researching a toxin seen on a few worlds.”

“Thank you General, I’ll be sure that this gets to him.”

“Sounds like a plan. I’ll leave you to it then, Illiya.”

As Hrodulf walked by with his two escorts, Dawn turned quickly to Illiya, “Wait so does this mean that I-”

“Get to come with me? Seems that way, Princess.”

“Awesome! I’ve never seen the city on my own, well, sort of my own. This’ll be exciting!”

“Heh. If you say so.”

To Become A Knight

The streets stood abuzz with activity, people on the move from fruit stand to buildings. In the streets many clapped, many dancing, some even singing. Their arms linked, chained in fact, they skipped and hauled out. Through the middle of the commotion the two walked, Dawn and Illiya. Dawn's head shot left to right, skipping every so little bit right behind Illiya.

"Oh my gosh! Illiya, what's going on?! I've never seen streets so lively!"

"Heh heh, really? Well I suppose you wouldn't if you haven't really left the center of the city. You see, the further out you get the less orderly things get. Just like with mortals, the wealthy enjoy their comfort and the poor enjoy the freedom that they do have. Not all worlds are like that but to the decent few, yeah."

"So, they just dance all the time?"

"Nah. They're probably celebrating the recent contract with the Celestial Kingdom. It's sort of a big deal you know. Kind of hilarious really."

"Hmm? What is?"

"People die to be given another chance, yet for them nothing really changes. We're spirits through and through yet we require nourishment and even wealth to go places."

"Heh, well yeah. It gives the afterlife some meaning. No one here is really poor or whatever though, we're able to help everyone!"

"That's the bonus I suppose, yeah."

"So Illiya, why did you become a knight?"

“Well like I said earlier, I’m just a ranger. I guess my goal though is to live up to my father’s legacy.”

“Your father?”

“Yeah, Cardinal Rain Murasame.”

“Whaaa-?! Your dad is a Cardinal?!” Dawn screeched shooting up in front of Illiya, quickly slamming her hands onto Illiya’s shoulders.

“Heh, yeah?”

“What?! That’s so cool!”

“Heh, says the princess of a kingdom.”

“Gosh, being a princess isn’t THAT neat. So, why the need to live up to something?”

“The Murasame name is known as a legacy of people who perform tremendously, and I don’t want to let the name down. My brother actually is just a few years older than me and he’s already a Priest. Then there’s my sister who is working alongside the Bishops.”

“Holy cow,” came the response, both continuing to walk at that point.

“Yeah, heh heh. You know, I can respect wanting to be different but following something doesn’t always hurt you know.”

“Pft. You have all the freedom so long as you get to be what you want. As a princess I have no right to take my own path, I absolutely HAVE to be what they want me to be. It sucks.”

“Freedom. Heh, such an interesting word, isn’t it? Freedom is not something anyone just has, not until they pay their dues and the price for it. Everyone gets certain levels of it that others do not. I’d say while not free free, you still have some level of freedom. So why are you so set on wanting to become a knight?”

“Because it’s so exciting! My eldest brother and sister, they get to train and do everything since they’re the closest to being heirs of the throne. They have more responsibility and yet more freedom to do what they want, even take missions. The rest of us though, we just have to uphold the political image.”

“You’d think being a Celestial Being it would be different, unlike with being a mortal princess.”

“Not at all. It sucks. I just, I just want to see things you know? You guys have it easy since you get to go on missions all the time.”

“I suppose that is a benefit, yeah, so long as the Celestial Kingdom continues their contract with Starset.”

“Pft, you’re a Cardinal’s kid, you have more rights even if they shut the contract down. Uh, by the way, what are the contracts?” Dawn said stopping in place, her expression moderately puzzled.

“W-wait, are you serious?” Illiya followed, stopping to quickly zoom back around.

“Look, all they’re teaching me right now is political garbage about other kingdoms, like how to do barter trade or keep good negotiation rights. Not that any of that matters in Elysium, we’re all friendly to one another since the Cardinals just punish anyone jerkish.”

“Well uh... you see, the Cardinal Program. Typically they have their Priests handle most missions that are serious but in times like these when things are a little too busy, they contract some of the best kingdoms to carry on lesser missions that cadets or rangers can do, even missions for knights. In exchange for that we get more resources up front compared to non-contracted kingdoms.”

“Silly how that works.”

“Eh, I guess. But still, it can be kinda fun. Or at least when you’re not teamed up with a bunch of jack wagons,” Illiya grumbled.

“Oh gosh, like those guys I sent flying?”

“Eh, they’re tolerable. I’m talking arrogant people who can’t work together.”

“Oh, I see.”

“Although, there’s more to being a fighter than just having fun and dealing with people, a lot more?”

“Oh? Tell me.”

“Honor, pride, a sense of right and wrong. To protect people from the demons that threaten everyone.”

“Oooooo.”

“Even here in Elysium there are threats lurking at every corner, demons and bad souls that manage to slip through that still seek what they think is there own.”

“Pft, what? Souls can’t just slip into Elysium! Er, can they?”

“Happens more than you would think. Just the other day they accidentally let some guy in that killed four-hundred and thirty, uh. Oh gosh what was it, eight? Yeah, lot of people. They let him in by mistake. People die so fast it’s at times hard to track everyone. Not to mention, just because you’re born here, doesn’t mean you’re full of virtue. Even here in Starset’s Capital, there are thugs who are full of ambition. Mostly just street punks and bandits but sinners nonetheless.”

“I, I don’t get how we could allow such people to just wander a place as holy as Elysium.”

“Elysium isn’t the pearly gates Dawn. Even if it were, there are probably some in Heaven who slip through just as easily. *The endless mystery of the water’s drift, ripples formed by the Goddess’s cry. Through Sin and Virtue, the endless dance begins to blossom, flowing on in the abyss of life. Balanced, two forces in unison, the chaos and order call for the morrow be it barren or fertile. Torn asunder is*

the world where her voice is unreached. Only as one can her gift be felt, only as one can her truth be found. That is The Goddess's Song, her chosen gift to those that yet live."

"Whoa, what-"

"The Goddess's Gift. It can be interpreted many ways. To me, I see it as yin and yang. Without sin, there can be no virtue. Without virtue, there can be no sin. Through their balance, we have life. This is why the Cardinals hold their own and do not step too far, why even in Elysium we must quest like those in life as mortals."

"Whoa... that's, that's deep actually."

"Most poetry is. Perhaps another time I'll tell you more of my favorites. Anyways, let's cut through the Shintaris District real quick. We'll get back quicker and maybe have time to stop for some tea if you'd like. There's this really good shop there that has the best sweets."

"Sounds great, I'm in!"