Tempest



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*By Dragon Soul and The Storyteller*

Prologue

With a heave, a large knight boasting inhuman strength swung his bulky sword around in a circle before allowing its blade to contact the wooden wall of a structure. Almost as quick as lightning, the entire household collapsed from the impact as if it were constructed of rotten wood and brittle foundation. Fire from a neighboring house soon ignited dust that wafted from the rubble to rage from one place to another whilst its sinuous arms stretched outward, hungrily groping for more fuel. In the midst of this fiery beast, the knight slowly scanned his environment so tacitly that the multitudes of crackling and faint screams provided the only sounds around him. He then began walking at a snail’s pace, seemingly encumbered by his massive weapon as he dragged it and the rest of his body through a small opening in between flames.

Alone to his thoughts, the knight followed blood-curdling cries in the likeness of an oppressed human longing for the sight of a companion besides himself. Other burning structures stood before him, acting as obstacles between the knight and his destination. But soon, a few mighty swings later, they fell to join their dying brothers whose very innards became food for the copious inferno to feast upon. Ignoring the chaos around him, the knight resumed his narrow path toward an area of town that had been blanketed by a tempestuous storm cell colored a deep purple hue and sparkled with tendrils of lightning.

By the time he arrived at the first home that had yet to succumb to a blazing end, two dark objects in the resemblance of disheveled cloaks came slithering across the ground to curiously float behind his back. A moment later, a distraught couple sprinted out of a crumbling house, estranged from their only sanctity by the works of other strange creatures who viciously struck everything they detected. Both the man and his wife accidentally ran into the burly knight, his burly mass causing them to fall over backward. Not a moment later, this knight’s following marauders swiftly darted around him to terrorize their newly found victims.

“No! Help us!” the husband cried out as he desperately tried to push away his attackers. Abruptly, the knight rolled his shoulders, slowly glancing up to quietly observe the malignant beasts and their prey. Unbeknownst to the creatures, the knight lifted up his sword, his metal armor screeching sharply like a bird fending off attackers. He brought his weapon about to the side before expertly spinning on his heel to slash his targets in half at waist-level.

Screaming in agony, the cloaked beings wisped away into nothingness to reveal the husband and wife, scratched and bleeding but otherwise alive. They glanced at each other before they looked up at their savior. Unable to see his face, the woman, one of her cat ears cut at the base, cautiously stood up to place a hand on his arm.

“Thank you, sir knight.” The knight did not respond, and three seconds passed until another band of creatures suddenly pulled the woman and her man away from the knight. Soldat nonchalantly brought his blade to rest upon his shoulder as he resumed his lonely trek.

A small child weaved about a mob of hurried persons, avoiding the occasional sale pitch and the spurious bargains that merchants threw along his way. Dodging an offer of rotten fish, he slipped between two horses and made it into an open area in the market. The little boy sprinted to a large building and scaled a thick wooden beam to its roof. When he reached the top and settled into the straw material, he relaxed to let his skin absorb the noontime sun’s heat. He gripped the brown leather satchel at his side and slowed his coarse breathing to a tranquil rhythm.

“Oy, ye lil' runt! Git off-ah mah ruf!”

The boy yawned and sat up, looking over the ledge to spot a ragged old lady on the ground who launched a barrage of curses at him. Ignoring her rant, he stood up to scan the area. It was a small town overshadowed by enormous stone walls of an imposing castle. The enormous structure remained the only peaceful feature as people in the markets scurried past each other like a colony of ants. Determining their path hung patches of colorful rags whose colors told the boy which items they sold: red for wood-work, green for crops, dark blue for blacksmithing, brown for fish, and black for livestock and other farm-related goods. All these indicators made a giant quilt that lay across a quarter of the town, surrounded by a warm tan tone of the surrounding houses and huts. Staring at this vast cloth work made the boy drowsy, so he turned his attention to his satchel.

After checking the letter and glancing back up at the impossibly large structure, he gave a nod of assurance to himself before jumping down into a hayloft and climbing out to run through town once more. The old woman lashed out as he sprinted, ripping the back of his collar that caused several buttons to fly out from his already torn shirt.

“Oh no ye don't. Ye ruined mah ruf, and ye will fix-it.”

Defiantly glaring at her, the boy shook his head, but that gesture only enraged the old woman further.

“Ye will fix-it or I will beat ye ‘til yer black as my sister’s overcooked ass!”

The boy brought his hand to his waist, gripping a handle that protruded from a sheath in his belt. He then gave a few more tugs at the wrinkled hand holding his shirt fast, but the stubborn woman refused to let go.

“Ye aren't go-an’ nowhere. Tell me yer name!”

The boy rotated his body slightly away before slashing at her hand with a dagger. As the woman jerked back her hand, blood sprayed outward to speckle both persons with tiny droplets.

“ARGH! Ye wee lil' fuckin’ bastard!”

The boy rapidly returned his blade to its sheath and opened his mouth, revealing a shriveled pink stub where a tongue was supposed to be. Then he closed his jaw and whipped around to dart toward the high stone walls. Behind him, the scream of the old woman resembled a sharp shrill, calling for two guards who chased after him. Unfortunately for the chasers, the boy slipped into a sea of people, navigating through the massive crowd until he leaped out of one side which faced a sturdy metal gate guarded by two soldiers with thin rapiers sheathed at their thighs and morning stars secured at their other. One armored knight stood between the two, her armor intricately detailed with elegant designs that drew attention from her breast plate and up to her stern expression. Her only weapon was a decorated sword that hung from her belt, its elongated length matching that of the knight’s blonde tail and its sheathe and hilt heavily embroidered with elaborate designs to indicate the cat warrior’s rank. Her tail swayed calmly through a hole on her purple, metal skirt whilst a black hood covered the back of her head and morphed into a long cloak which stretched down to her calves. Glistening brown eyes on her face studied the immense crowd as she spun around until the cat woman noticed the small boy approaching her. Lady Ellie stepped forth and knelt on one knee to look at him in the eyes.

“Hello Mathias, what bring you?”

Mathias blinked confidently as he presented a letter to Ellie, tracing his finger across the words “For Her Majesty” before returning it to his satchel. Ellie stood up and rustled his hair, her polished gauntlet clinking with the movement. She then took him by the hand and approached one side of the metal blockade.

“Open the gates.”

With rhythmic clicks, the gears slowly rotated as the gate rose. Ellie took the mute through the battlements into a meadow with an ocean of flowers in full bloom, stretching their petals to display a brilliant variety of hues and shades. Little honey bees hovered around the petals to retrieve their delicious nectar before returning to a buzzing hive in a large tree that grew in the middle of the field. Ellie pulled Mathias away from a rose bush he curiously approached and the two followed the stone path. They approached large wooden doors, and, in reaction to Ellie’s presence, knights on both sides grabbed the handles to slowly pull back the monolithic giants. Ellie nodded to them before continuing to a grand chamber that boasted high walls and a marble floor terminating at a flight of steps, upon which two cushioned thrones rested. One of these thrones remained unoccupied while the other held a well built man that kept shifting around in his chair. He pressed his hands against the back of the head of a woman pleasuring his shaft.

“Milady, you... ergghh... have guests.”

The blonde woman between the man’s legs continued to suck at his phallus - the tip of his penis prodded her uvula while her tongue wrapped itself around its girth. Fingers in her hair stiffened and forced her head forward as his seed filled her mouth. At the same time, the woman relaxed her jaw and allowed the fluid to seep into her throat. The man sank into the throne as his partner licked his tip clean. Afterward, she wiped her sticky fingers on her pink dress before lifting it up around her breasts and smoothing out her hair around her two cat ears. She then pulled her panties up before rising to her feet.

“You are most excellent for a farm hand.”

He pulled up his pants as well and stood up from the throne, saying with a grin, “I'm surprised I caught the eye of the queen.”

Za smiled back and placed a petite gold crown back on her head. “No one is below my standards. You may leave - I have business to attend to.”

Two steel clad soldiers escorted the farmer out as Ellie climbed the stairs leading to the throne, Mathias running past her straight to Za as she took her place on her own throne. The mute boy hopped over the last few steps to expertly land at Za's feet with a low bow.

“Good afternoon, Mathias. What brings you here?”

The boy unbuttoned his satchel and drew out folded, crinkled paper. Za took the letter and peeled away the cracked red seal before opening the folds. Her eyes moved along each line, reading a message that made her feline ears slowly stiffen and her eye brows arch in frustration. Her pointed nails poked holes in the paper before she shredded it angrily.

“I take it the sender is not on your good side?” Ellie inquired with one raised eyebrow. Za snorted rudely and snapped her fingers. Mathias quickly pulled out fresh paper, a quill, and an ink jar from his satchel. He licked the tip of the feather and dipped it into the ink jar before pressing it on the sheet. Za cleared her throat and smoothed out the hems of her dress before saying, “Dear King of Falcourt, you – as well as I – know that we are in disagreement. Any military aid you ask of me will be denied for what occurs on your land is of no concern to my own. Indeed, the threat you describe so eloquently is fitting for a child’s bed tale and as transparent as a pane of glass. Because of your sins involving my father, your meek plea could be nothing more than another one of your greedy plots for conquest. Bother me no more and I promise not to aid your enemies in a raid... Or worse.”

Mathias put the words to paper as fast as Za could voice her letter, folding the paper and sealing it when he finished. Za reached into her bosom to retrieve a gold coin, flicking it to Mathias. He snatched the coin from the air and swiftly dashed down the steps to the door, leaving the knights just enough time to open the doors for his body to squeeze through. Ellie's ears flicked back as the doors slammed shut once more before she turned to face Za.

“Such an efficient letter courier, you must find a more suiting position for the boy. What were the contents of the message?”

“The king of Falcourt believes he can kill my father and then ask me to help him defend his town in a ‘time of dire need.’ I shall do no such thing.”

“What is the emergency, my queen?”

“A demon with no defined form or body; an obvious lie to cause us to move our forces away from the borders.”

“Excellent thinking, milady.”

Za's expression lost its anger and filled with friendly humor, “You need not speak to me that way, Captain Ellie.”

“I am only being formal, Queen Za.”

The queen grinned before her ear rotated towards the sudden sound of an opening door. A small girl skipped in, wearing a long green lace dress with a gold crown between her cat ears. A bright green bow held the base of a ponytail, and a layer of thin veil hung from her waist from which her brown tail peeked out in the back. The newcomer merrily skipped towards the captain and queen. Two knights trailed behind her, following Zu up the steps and standing at her side as she took her place on the vacant throne. Ellie smiled widely at the young girl who hummed several verse from her studies.

“Hello, princess, how are you on this fine day?”

Zu's smile grew wider, “Today is good, Matrease taught me a song!”

Ellie smiled at Zu then looked up at one of the knights beside her throne. “What tune is that?”

One knight brushed away her long brunette hair while her cheeks flushed red. “A tune my father taught me when I was little. He called it ‘Let the Angels Come And Let the Demons Perish.’”

As Zu hummed the simple and wordless tune, Matrease whispered to Ellie, “The words, until she is older, she should not know.”

Ellie glared at the woman with disapproval and shook her head, “Do not sing her the tune anymore.”

A small bunny hunched over a step on a dirt path, its teeth nibbling away at a blade of grass as dark clouds formed in the sky. Distant thunder grew louder, causing the bunny to sit up and raise its ears. Three horses came dashing down the path, so the bunny dove to the side and started to hop away. In the brush, the small creature’s heart beat heavily in anticipation whilst its eyes darted to an approaching dust cloud. The thundering hooves drew closer until horses shot past at full speed. The fragile creature stopped and breathed slowly. By the time it calmed down, the sharp steel of a spear tore out its brain from its soft head.

Three riders in black armor continued racing to their destination, the nostrils of their horses flaring wildly as their hooves pounded the dirt path. One rider turned on his horse with a bow loaded. Once the archer fell in a more comfortable position, he took aim at a large pack of man-sized airborne horrors trailing in pursuit. He released his arrow and took down another winged black creature, but before he could reload, a volley of spears homed in on him. Several impaled his horse, sending the tired beast sprawling on the ground. The middle rider dared to look back as the horrors swarmed his comrade, a single blood curdling scream audible from the center. Loading his own bow with a triplet of arrows, he sent them flying into the nightmarish beasts, killing three and scattering several to reveal the shredded metal and gnawed bones of what once was a man. He hesitated for a moment before turning his attention back to the trail and spurred his horse. More horrors jumped from a tree, and the last rider drew his sword and slashed at the scrawny hands that grasped at his remaining partner. When the creatures let go, the rider fell back onto his horse with a chunk of flesh and a shoulder plate missing from his left shoulder. He nodded to his fellow rider and spurred his horse forth. The beasts picked up speed as an outpost came into view along with a break in the cloud cover. The horrors pulled back and retreated to dark shadows, regrettably allowing the riders to continue peacefully past the outpost and gallop to a tall castle in the distance.

Za sat in a tall chair at one end of an elongated wooden table with Zu at her side. Whilst the wood bore ornate designs of artisans past, the rest of the dining chamber remained mundane and empty of decorations. A single large window to the side revealed scenery of the town afar, bordered by thin purple veils for curtains. The vacant space in the room exhaled a nonchalant sigh at the substance laid out on the white-lilac table cloth. Salads with few ingredients and a three roasted hens sat between the queen and her daughter. Next to each cat lady’s platter was a glass of wine aged a mere 10 years. Za began to eat, but Zu gazed at her food, starting to frown.

“Matrease say princesses eat fancy food and fine wine at dinner time.”

Za chewed and swallowed before answering Zu's remark: “Well, other princesses who do not care how much they waste at their peoples’ expense are careless. We do not eat extravagantly because I do not wish to starve my people, and you have been born in a life in which you need not work as hard. You must learn abstinence to respect those who do for you.”

“What that mean?”

“It means being conscious of your people’s status and not taking advantage of their labor.” Ellie's voice was strong with a tinge of anxiety, “Milady, I must speak with you right away. It is in the interest of Falcourt.”

Za sighed and stood up. As Zu finally ate the food set out for her, Za accompanied Ellie to a corner of the large dining hall.

“What is the matter?” Za whispered.

“Two knights have just come in from Falcourt. One is badly wounded, and the other demanded royal audience, specifically yours.”

“I will see to it immediately. Have you tended to the injured?”

Ellie lowered her brows, “I am a soldier, not a medic. I do not heal those I do not wish good health upon.”

“If they are as injured as you say, then they will not present much of a threat. Heal the knight; I shall speak with the other.”

Ellie sighed reluctantly and bowed slightly, “Yes, milady.”

Za walked off toward a corridor with Ellie close behind to the throne room where two men in dark armor waited at the base of the steps. Ellie drew a handkerchief from a pocket in her armor and dabbed it over her tongue; with it, she rubbed the gashes in the shoulder of the injured knight whilst Za addressed the other.

“You have come to my domain after my clear declination of your plea. What is wanted from your incorrigible king?”

The knight Za confronted grabbed onto his helmet. He rotated his helm and released the latches holding it in place.

“The king wants nothing...” The knight carefully started whilst pulling off his helmet to reveal yellow irises that stared intently at Za. His cat ears twitched in his oily black hair. “The king wants nothing for he was murdered yesterday morning by the terrors that killed my men.”

Za's jaw twitched nervously, but she held her composure. “Prince Tubén, I am deeply sorry. I was unaware... What befell your home?”

Sixten shook his head in effete. “A pink, ghost-like creature arrived from the mountains. We believed it a curious mystery until it began to... Transform people.”

“Transform?”

“The ghost used a wand to turn our townsmen into monsters that killed and feasted upon anything they saw. We fought back with what we had, but the ghost spawned dark winged creatures we named Horrors. Unfortunately, we were not strong enough to combat the beings, so we retreated to our castle. I and a band of 20 others came to seek help, but as you can see, only two of us made it. We are low on men, water, and food. Orphans, children, elderly - all are falling ill and many chose to decide their own fate. We desperately need help. Queen Za of Kattrike...” Sixten kneeled down on one knee before looking up at Za with pleading eyes, “Will you help us?”

Cackling madly in a jubilation she shared with only herself, the pink-hued ghoul darted to a frightened man’s side. To heighten his fear, Lollo swirled around him quickly, causing the man to tremble and hyperventilate uncontrollably.

“Afraid?” came a ghastly voice trailing along with a gentle breeze that brushed against his left cheek. It echoed and reverberated inside the man’s skull until he could take no more.

“Please! I beg of ye, stop!”

“No one…” Lollo started to say whilst enlarging her frame until she towered over him like a low thundercloud, “Tells me what to do!”

With that last word, a bright yellow bolt struck the man cleanly on the top of his head. Unnaturally, it did not wisp away, whipping and crackling around like a rope tied on both ends as brutal gusts swirled around. Whilst one end of this electric-like lightning fixed itself upon the man’s head, the other end emanated from a small golden cat-head figurine sitting atop a black wand-shaped stick. Lollo continued her demonic laughter, waving her wand to and fro while peering into his mind.

“What is *your* fear?” she wondered as she sifted through the man’s countless thoughts, including the nightmares he currently imagined as he found himself physically bound by Lollo’s ghostly form.

“Ooh, what is this? Seems like fun! Would you like to see what I see?”

“No, please no! My life I beg of ye to spare for but a day! I have two children; please, if you’ve any heart, let me see them one last time!”

“Oh, but they *are* here!” Lollo exclaimed, flashing her wand. Suddenly, the bodies of the man’s children faded into view. They slowly opened their eyes to look at their father.

“Father?” one of them spoke with a confused and slightly frightened voice, “Where is this place? Who is the pink lady yonder above ye?”

“I’m scared…” the other shook while hugging herself.

“What is this?!” the man demanded, “What are you doing?!”

“You wanted to see thy children,” Lollo calmly explained, though she enunciated “thy” with a slither-like tone, “Now, it is my turn!”

“What?!” In the blink of an eye, the young children exploded, sending pieces of their carcasses flying in every direction, including fleshy ribbons that hit the father.

“NO!!!”

“Hahahahahah!!!” With another wave of her wand, the bolt disappeared and Lollo started to fade away, though her cackling remained for another minute even after her form was gone.

“Sirius! Are you alright?!” someone shouted whilst running towards him.

“No! Get away from me!”

“Sirius, it is I, Mary!”

“Mary is dead! My children are dead! Everybody is dead! Do not play tricks with me, you vile witch!” Sirius, with eyes half closed and tears blurring his vision, managed to punch Mary squarely in the face. She stumbled backwards, crying.

“Sirius, have you gone mad?! Children, come forth and show your father that your vitality runs as strong as the river by our home!” Two children walked up to Mary, resembling the forms whom Sirius witnessed exploded. They cowered next to his spouse as they watched the rage build in their father’s expression.

“Illusions! Die you wretched imposters!” A sword suddenly appeared in his hand, but he gave it not a thought as he rushed toward his family with a battle cry. A few minutes later, Mary and her two children became freshly cut meat lying all over a section of the path that they attempted to escape through. Sirius’ mind kept burning, however, and his pupils expanded whilst swirling until his eyes became deep black orbs that saw nothing yet sensed fear. With an inhuman roar, Sirius, covered from head to toe in blood, sprinted toward the nearest town to join the ranks of those who had fallen under a similar fate; other Horrors.

“This is too easy!” Lollo laughed from a cliff over-looking the ruined town, “Hm, where to next?”

She glanced at a towering castle that sat to the east, but she shook her head as she knew that the refugees within the aging walls would soon fall victims to her minions. Scanning the horizon, it was then that Lollo spotted a speck barely noticeable to the far southwest. Crossing her arms, Lollo widened her pupils, and, suddenly, she could zoom into the unnatural blotch ruining the horizon’s perfect line. It grew until she could see that it was another castle, similar in structure but dissimilar in population. She saw each individual person going about their day, some of them joking and laughing amongst themselves. This made Lollo twitch, and she extended her arms. An instant later, seven shrouds faded into view before her, slightly whirling around in the air until the frames of their bodies solidified. When they did, all seven persons kneeled before her and bowed, making no sound aside from the faint crackling of the dark aura surrounding each of them.

“I want you to search that kingdom to the southwest,” Lollo ordered, “Give them a bit of a taste, so they will be ripe with fear when I arrive.” A smile formed on her lips as she licked them. The seven forms nodded at the same time before exploding into a vast cloud of smoke quickly traveling towards Za’s kingdom.

After dipping his face in a bucket of warm water, Sixten took a fresh towel from his maidservant and pressed its soft fabric against his face. Sighing in relief, he almost reluctantly wiped off the remaining grime on his skin. The maidservant studied him indirectly by looking at the mirror in front of him, admiring Sixten’s laudable looks.

“What think ye of Queen Za?” he abruptly asked.

“Uh… Uh…”

“Do not be afraid; be honest. If that blasted creature were to attack this kingdom, would her majesty be able to handle it?”

“Of course, my prince! Our beloved queen may not seem like much, but she is a formidable commander.”

“And Princess Zu? What of her? If Queen Za were to die – pray that should never happen – would the young girl be able to take care of an entire nation?”

“Oh, I don’t know about that, my prince. Some say she is not right in the head.” Sixten immediately stood up, sending the maid into a wave of fear.

“I didn’t mean it, my prince! Please forgive my unclean lips; sometimes, I cannot keep them shut!” She trembled, but when the cat prince turned around with a small smile on his face, the servant relaxed a bit.

“Then, perchance, should anything unfortunate happen to her majesty, someone more capable should take the throne.”

“May I ask what mean you, my prince?” the girl inquired, genuinely confused.

“It is nothing for you to ponder about, but I thank you for helping me.”

“Anything, my prince! I am glad to help!”

“Please, tell me more about Princess Zu,” Sixten gestured for the maid to continue whilst he unbuckled his belt.

“Uh… My prince, if it is too improper for me to be here, I will leave to bring you new clothing.”

“Nonsense, you have already brought them.”

“Oh… Forgive my forgetfulness...”

“I do not mind if you peek. Tell no one about this, though.”

“Uh…” Before she could formulate a polite response, Sixten removed his chest plate and his wrist guards before taking off a leather vest and a thin tunic he wore underneath. With his bare chest exposed, the maidservant blushed but kept her attention pointed at his body in case he would become infuriated otherwise.

“What is your name, girl?”

“I-I’m Sera Wilton of the east side of the town of Walloworth.”

“Ms. Wilton, please help me change my clothing. I am awfully exhausted after that arduous journey from my father’s kingdom to your Majesty’s.”

“Y-yes, my prince.” While Sera worked, she began talking, informing Sixten everything she knew about the young princess whilst he remained silent, soaking in knowledge he might yet use.

Another scream echoed through the halls, so Mathias readied his blade and slid a circular board over the barrel he had hidden himself in. The floor vibrated slightly as the screams came to an abrupt end. As Mathias felt around the confined space of his barrel, his fingers grazed something round. He then pulled a small blade from his belt and poked at the object. The dagger dug into the cork and pushed it outward with a faint *pop*, creating a small space that was large enough for the mute to peek through. He watched a pool of blood seep out from under a door opposite the hallway from him. Mathias forced down a lump in his throat when a claw rammed through the door and ripped it from the frame, also causing him to pull the cork back and reseal the hole. He silently sheathed his dagger and waited for the heavy trudging across the floor to pass. When the room became quiet, he pushed open the barrel lid and hopped out. The corridor he found himself in was spotless, apart from the the fresh liquid spilled by the odious creatures. He crept along and opened a nearby closet before digging through the linen inside and pushing several blankets out of the way until he reached the back wall. He ran his fingers along the side of the timber until he felt a special deformity; he grinned before ramming his dagger into the spot to crack open the hidden compartment.

After retrieving the black sack stored inside, he bolted toward the end of the hall and up a staircase to an attic. He stepped over limbs scattered across the floor and leaped over the black scorch they surrounded, stopping upon reaching the bed occupying a lonely corner of the room. He reached under the straw mattress and pulled out two heavy wool shoes. Afterward, he replaced the ragged slippers on his feet and pushed the bed aside in order to remove several loose boards from the slanted wall, revealing an escape route used many times before.

Mathias squeezed through the space and, on the roof of the building, clutched his satchel and his sack whilst jumping down into a hay cart. Several shrills screeched from the blackened skies over Falcourt, and when Mathias peered out into the corpse littered street, he noticed a woman fleeing from a covered wagon with a baby in her arms. A flying Shadow slammed into the ground before her and unleashed an ear-deafening scream. The woman cried out in terror and covered her child as she ran the other way. A wall, only a few feet from Mathias, gave way in a thundering crash as an overly large, bear-like creature charged through. It boasted a muscular figure as wide as a wagon and skin as black as the blood in its mouth. Infuriated yellow eyes narrowed as it charged at the woman, ramming her off her feet and propelling the baby upwards to be snatched by a flying Shadow. The woman begged for her child even as the bear-like creature pressed its claws into her thighs, causing her bones to snap like twigs and dug into her legs to the point where they spewed a massive amount of blood onto the street as her legs were dismembered. The creature sat back on its rear and watched the legless woman tremble and screech in pain. Mathias heard a deep laugh before the beast rammed its paw into her skull, splattering brain matter across the cobblestones.

Whilst Mathias clenched a fist and pressed it against his lips to suppress his gag, he glanced up at the winged horror on the roof top. It finished licking its fingers clean of blood before taking flight again. Once Mathias steeled his nerves and held onto his cargo with a tight grip, he sprang from the wagon. He fled towards the castle, but the bear creature took notice and charged towards him. Mathias only took a second to glance at the oncoming death before he dove to the ground. The beast passed over him, but Mathias grabbed its stubby tail. The creature roared as Mathias pulled himself up onto its back; he climbed up to the back of its neck and reached into his recently acquired sack. He drew out a picture and dangled it in front of the creature’s eyes. As the beast snarled and charged faster, Mathias steered his new mount towards the castle wall, ignoring the gore and bodies scattered about.

The beast maintained an enraged charge until the castle wall was only a block away. The small boy on board prepared himself, jumping to safety moments before the thundering crash of skull meeting stone. He rolled forward and hopped to his feet, ripped away a steel grating from a hole in the street and leaped in. The stench of sewage flooded his nose, and his eyes watered as he landed in the green putrid river. Mathias lifted his bags above his head and trudged through the chest-high rancid nightmare, crouching over in the cramped space despite his compact size. He finally reached a ladder and climbed up to the exit above, greeted by a sword sitting uneasily near his face.

“Hold it right there lad. Identify yourself.”

Mathias looked up at the steel clad warrior before him and opened his mouth to reveal his inability to respond.

“You must be the courier from Kattrike. People spoke of your efficiency, and without exaggeration, too. If you're looking for the king, he's dead. The prince and twenty of our finest knights departed this morning for your kingdom.”

Mathias shook his head sadly, pulling himself up out of the sewer and into a long stone corridor. At one far end, past crowded groups of malnourished people, lights shone through a grated gate leading outside. Distant Shadows steadily screamed as they clawed and gnawed at the iron barrier. Mathias placed his satchel down in front of the knight, retrieving his paper and writing utensils before writing out, “I need a horse, spotted monsters headed to Kattrike.”

The knight read the note and sheathed his sword. “We can donate a horse, though you will be alone on your trip. We must remain here and keep our people safe until we receive aid.”

Cold sensations washed over Mathias, but he nodded and followed the knight to a stable through the long hallways of the battered castle. They passed several families and dozens of people. Some begged for food and others water; some didn't speak at all whilst others rambled on with senseless words or heart-wrenching tales. Mathias steeled himself and progressed with the knight to a stable, where a lone horse grazed amongst bloodied grass.

“Pardon the mess, our food supply is running short and our bellies grow hungry.”

Mathias looked up at the knight, miming eating motions whilst pointing at the horse. The knight released a shameful sigh and deflective shrug, “Food is low, it's a shame such elegant beasts had to suffer such a fate.”

Mathias shuddered as the images of the meal flashed his imagination. He approached the horse and mounted it, turning to the knight before he pulled back an imaginary draw string.

“You want a bow? Are you not small to wield such a thing?”

Mathias shook his head before shaping out a small bow in the air.

“I apologize, but we have no bow crafted that small. You will have to use whatever you carry.”

Mathias placed one hand over the other and tapped his knuckles with his free fingers, devising a new strategy. An idea dawned on him; he motioned bringing food to his mouth and chewing.

“You want food?”

Mathias acknowledged him with a thumbs up.

“We can spare some, but not much... here, take mine,” he knight brought a small pouch from the back of his waist, Mathias accepted it and looked inside. Finding only dried bread, he hopped off of the horse and dipped the stale pieces in the blood on the ground. He dropped the bloodied treats in the bag, mounted the horse and grasped the reigns. He pulled one side of the reigns and the horse trotted towards the large gate. Locks disengaged and the doors spread. The small boy spurred the horse and lashed the reigns, and they took off into the streets. Shadows immediately screeched as they dove from the skies. Mathias looked back to watch the gate slam shut. He brought his attention to the streets before him and whipped the reigns of his horse whilst placing his might in a kick to the horse’s side. He heard a wretched screech, a moment’s warning before he ducked. Mathias hugged his horse as a claw trimmed strands of hair on the back of his neck. The boy reacted by pulling his dagger from his belt and striking back, landing his blade directly into the eye of his attacker. The Shadow cried out in pain before crashing to the ground. He returned his blade to its sheath and dodged the howling black wolves emerging from the buildings. His horse galloped and jumped over all obstacles along the street, from building ruins to crated goods and from broken barrels to disemboweled bodies. He checked back on his pursuers, noticing the majority climbing in altitude whilst another closed in to claim the boy’s life. He reached down into his bag of bread, throwing the bloodied stale crumb at the Shadow. The nightmare caught the bread, about to toss it aside when a familiar stench reached its nose. The Shadow hit the street, skidding and bouncing until coming to a stop. It sniffed the bread hungrily, and then shoved it into its mouth.

Mathias’ horse rounded another corner, the main gate close at hand. He whipped the reigns one last time as the horse leaped over the slaughtered soldiers that lay across the path, and the messenger continued to the grounds outside of the town. Cries echoed in the skies as the Shadows dove in for another pass.

A large, heavy sword scraped the ground, a green orb dimly glowing in the spot where blade merged with hilt. The weary knight wore armour as black as shadows, comprised of an enigma of metals that released a smoky, black trail underneath a long dark cloak that draped over his back and came short of his calves to rise up into a hood, a hood which was pulled over his head, masking his facial features. Only the glowing green orbs that resembled sightless eyes appeared past the obscure veil. Faint groans wheezed between the subtle clinks of his heavy footsteps, a contrast to the absence of sound in his throat and the lurking silence in his breath. Each of his footsteps left a pool of black fog that lingered before dissipating. He stepped through a side brush onto a dirt path, turning his head towards the sound of thundering hooves. A horse came storming down the trail with a small boy on top who threw bits of bread at horrors flying low from behind, distracting them with the bloody treats. A demonic grumble coursed through metal armor as Soldat brought his blade to bear, and the horse whinnied as he sliced it apart, throwing the boy off. Mathias flew over the knight’s head and slammed onto the dirt. As if in response to Soldat lifting his huge blade and resting it over his shoulder, the Shadows stopped to land at his feet with their heads bowed low. Soldat snarled before he swung his blade to part each head from their shoulders. He raised his oversized weapon with one hand and watched the viscous black fluid crawl down the metal. He dropped the tip to the ground and slowly dragged the sword along as he approached Mathias. The small boy swiftly bounced back to his feet and ran. Soldat continued to follow, blade dragging along the ground as his eyes burned brighter.

“Halt!”

The command brought him to an immediate stop. Lollo emerged from the ground. Her pink form and devilishly yellow eyes came face to face with his ghastly features. If she noticed Mathias, she did not give indication.

“You are not to go there, not until you finish the last one.”

The horrifying vibration that echoed from his throat shook the ground. Lollo grinned. “Be a good boy, and finish your chores.”

She tapped his forehead with her wand, causing both of them to explode into pink dust, which quickly faded away. A moment later, their bodies reformed at the gate of Falcourt, one that now barred any traveler from ruined buildings and spattered gore decorating the once gallivant streets. Lollo floated backwards, lengthening the distance between herself and Soldat, “Finish here, and *then* move on.”

The ghost then vanished in a puff of pink powder. Soldat raised his blade, gripping it with both hands as he brought it down with a mighty blow into the street. The impact of the blade against the cobblestones sent a concussive wave that parted the street for several blocks, collapsing a home and ripping open the sewers. He pointed at the ground before roaring with a thunderous sound. Every horrific beast and creature within earshot began to rush into the dark tunnels below. Moments later came the horrid screams from inside the castle walls. Soldat drug his sword along as he came to a nearby home, where his acute, yet impossible hearing detected a heartbeat. He brought his blade up drove it into the wall, and the orb within his blade grew brighter. Soldat roared once more as the jewel became a sun to blind him and pulsed with a burst of energy that tore the house in two, causing the upper half to disappear in a flash of green light. Soldat brought his weapon over his shoulder as he stepped into the ruins, vision unimpaired. A frail man and his wife protectively wrapped their arms around a small girl, whose tears were streaming down her face, “Pweez sir, doan hewt me. I’m a good giwl.”

“Don't hurt my daughter!” the father begged. The demon stood before them, apathetic. He raised his massive sword. With a quick swipe, he removed the heads from both adults. A red geyser spewed from their necks as the corpses fell over. The demon stared at eye-to-eye with the little girl, stone cold fear locking her in place, unable to move and unable to scream. The demon gripped his sword, but he did not strike. Instead, he turned, ready to walk away.

“You have not completed your task! Finish!” Lollo emerged from underneath the little girl, plucking her from the ground and dangling her helplessly in front of her pet. “Finish her now.”

The demon voiced confusion in the sound that erupted from his hood. The girl begged, but Lollo shoved a ghostly hand into her throat, gripping her vocal chords violently to still them, giving the girl a sensation of being choked without actually being constricted of air. “Hush, little one. Soldat, finish her.”

The demon obeyed, lifting his sword. Soon, the head of the little girl joined those of her parents.

Bellowing in a deep, raspy tone, Sirius lifted his blade in reaction to the sound of rustling. His nose slightly stretched, increasing its already tenth-meter length as the horror struggled to find its prey’s scent. But silence persisted, almost laughing at Sirius for readying himself for a nonexistent enemy, so he rested the tip of the blade against the ground once more and lowered his head. Then another rustle in some branches alerted the Horror, so he quickly leaped to the side and lunged into a tree. A frightened bird flew out, attempting to escape until the Horror’s sword snatched its life at the next second. When Sirius jumped back down, he snorted like a wild boar in disappointment.

Suddenly, a small dagger bolted from another tree and struck Sirius in the back of his neck. Roaring, the horror sprinted towards the responsible tree and attacked its trunk, trying to chop it down.

“Whoa, whoa!” someone yelled from above. A short girl wearing disheveled clothing and carrying a worn-out but heavily weighted pouch dropped from a branch to land upon the Horror’s shoulders.

“Die, you demon!”

“Hey!” As Sirius began swinging his sword wildly, Sofi Wyon pulled out a second dagger and continuously stabbed his head. The Horror yelled more ferociously before it dropped to the ground, Sofi jumping at the last second and tumbling away to the side.

“Oof!” She stood up and brushed away dust from her clothes, grimacing when she saw how much blood stained her ragged clothing.

“Man, you were still mostly human…” she sighed sadly while cautiously approaching Sirius’s corpse. Its arm twitched, shocking Sofi, so she quickly grabbed his sword and chopped off his head. Trying to avoiding thinking about the Horror’s blood, which appeared red intermixed with a thick black fluid, the girl threw the sword to the side and began rummaging through Sirius’s pockets.

“Hahah!” she exclaimed when she pulled out a small leather pouch. Inside were a few gold coins along with many silver ones.

“This will definitely help me once I make it to Falcourt.” Turning her head to the southeast, Sofi gasped when she saw a vast dark cloud looming over the town with columns of smoke rising from the castle.

“It’s too late. They thought it was rain… Like we did,” the girl whispered to herself, “Is there any place these nightmares have not reached?”

Looking around again, Sofi spotted a distant mountain range to the north. After taking a deep breath and placing the dead horror’s coins in her own pouch, she began trekking towards the range.

“Maybe they have not gone over the mountains, yet.”

While her personal maidservant brushed her elegant brown hair, Zu gaily hummed to herself, studying the enviable features of her face through a mirror. Her ornate mirror was adorned with a glass border covered in flower-like designs to make it appear as if an entire bouquet were blooming around the cat princess’ reflection. From time to time, Zu would gently touch a different section of her face, thinking back on the many compliments Za’s guests have given about how she looked. Abruptly, someone knocked on the door, disturbing her tranquility.

“Who dares disturb her highness?” Matrease called.

“It is I, Prince Sixten.”

“Ah, prince. Forgive my rude question,” the knight apologized while opening the oak door.

“I will forgive ye for it is perhaps my suddenness that may have startled thee.” Strutting into bedchamber, the cat prince blinked at the superfluous amount of bright pink colouration and designs decorating walls and ceiling.

“How is her highness today?” Sixten asked while bowing. Zu stood up, so the servant stopped brushing whilst backing away. When the cat girl turned around, she had a wide smile on her face, delighted that she received a guest after what seemed like many months.

“I am happy!” she answered as she curtsied, almost tripping when she dipped too low. When they both stood up, Sixten observed the young princess, watching for any indication that she may have more intelligence than Sera had informed him of.

“Would my dear princess like to attend a horse-riding lesson with me?”

“Yes!”

“Has Queen Za authorized this outing?” Matrease inquired.

“Nay, but surely her anger will not erupt if I teach Princess Zu how to ride a horse.”

“Very well, then.”

Offering his hand, Sixten winked at Zu, though the cat girl did not notice it as she placed her hand in his. The four, including Matrease and another guard, exited Zu’s room and left the castle in the direction of its stables. There, a line of five boys stood at the ready, waiting for their instructor to arrive. As they reached the children, Sixten whispered into Zu’s ear.

“Has your highness ever ridden a horse?”

“Yes, many times!”

“She means none at all, prince,” Matrease interrupted, “Princess Zu will mistaken you for talking about Her Majesty if you do not address her as ‘Princess’ or ‘Zu’.”

“Ah, I thank ye for correcting me.” When the boys noticed the cat persons’ presence, they straightened in a stiff posture, feeling both excitement and anxiety at their proximity. Sixten stopped a few meters in front of them before turning to face the boys with Zu and her guardsmen at her his side.

“Sir Fortner will be taking a break today. I will instruct thee on the techniques of horse-riding for now. I am Prince Sixten Tubén of Falcourt and this is your princess, Zu.” At her name, the cat girl quickly waved hello to the boys, but they did not return the gesture, fearing it would be wrong to break their stance. “Please introduce thyselves.”

“I am Chester Youngblood from the town of Lyding.”

“I am Remus Gorbon of the town of Rustand.”

“I am Philip Keller of the town of Flen.”

“I am Gustav Bronsson from the town of Walloworth.”

“I am Walter Duran of the town of Säter.”

“Pleased to meet you-… Um… All!” the cat girl happily greeted.

“It is an honor to meet you, Princess Zu and Prince Sixten,” the students replied at the same time while bowing. Afterward, a gentleman with a hunchback walked up to the prince.

“Shall I bring the horses forth, my prince?” he inquired with a voice indicating his elderly age.

“Yes, please do.”

Half an hour later, after showing the five boys and Zu how to correctly mount a horse, Prince Sixten had the students put their respective saddles on their designated horses. As each of them set off, the cat boy saddled his own gelding before mounting.

“Do you remember what I just taught these boys, my princess?” he asked while shifting towards the back end of the saddle.

“Yes,” she answered half-heartily, racking her brain of what memories she had of Sixten’s instruction. Nervously, Zu approached the horse, staring at it eye-to-eye as if the animal’s pupils would betray any decision it might make. By the time she got close enough, the cat princess recalled the first thing Sixten had told them and placed a slightly shaky hand on the gelding’s forehead. It snorted but did not move otherwise, so Zu felt encouraged taking the next step. Smiling widely, she stroked along its neck before planting both hands on the horse’s back. The animal neighed, so Sixten patted its neck gently.

“Easy, Itrix. Be careful when you climb up, my princess.” Zu nodded her head in acknowledgement, though she shook in excitement. Placing one foot in a stirrup, she pushed upward with her leg to lift herself as high as she could. The cat prince aided her by taking hold of her waist and pulling her up.

“You’re high enough; now put your leg over the other side, Princess Zu.”

“Okay.” After doing so, however, she suddenly found it difficult for her to feel for the other stirrup.

“Am I doing it wong?” she pondered aloud.

“Ah, my princess is wearing a dress. The clothing, unfortunately, makes it difficult for one to ride a horse. Here, take your foot out of that stirrup, and I will hold you, okay? I promise you will not fall.”

“Pinky swear?” Zu looked back at Sixten in the eye earnestly while holding up her thin finger in front of him.

“I promise,” he laughed in response as he wrapped his own little finger around Zu’s. This seemed to appease her as she took her foot out of the stirrup and relaxed against Sixten, completely entrusting her personal safety with him. Positioning his head above Zu’s left shoulder, the cat prince replaced his feet in the stirrups, securing Zu in an embrace with one arm whilst the other held the reins.

“Take hold of the reins, too, Princess.” As Zu did so, Sixten tapped the sides of the animal with his feet. Itrix raised its head and neighed before trotting forward at a quick pace. Gradually, its pace quickened until the gelding carried the royal cat persons through the field in a full gallop.

As she giggled wildly, the cat princess felt the unfamiliar yet amazing sensation of air that rushed past her cheeks and caused her dress to flutter crazily. Sixten laughed along with Zu whilst they sailed across to catch up with the students, one of whom struggled to control his mare.

“Remus! Do not pull on your reins so hard! Relax!” the cat boy advised.

“Yes, Prince!”

The cat persons and the five boys continued riding their horses for another ten minutes until the sun dipped below the horizon. Cantering, Itrix led Zu and Sixten to the very edge of the field, but when they reached the fence, the gelding suddenly bucked, nearly throwing off his riders.

“Whoa, Itrix! Whoa!” By the time Sixten managed to calm down his horse, Zu was frightened enough to eagerly dismount when Itrix stopped.

“I am sorry, Zu. Please forgive me,” Sixten said when he got off the animal. Zu turned around to face him, but when she was about to speak, her mouth dropped.

“Wh-what is it?” she asked, pointing at the sky behind Sixten. He turned around as well and flinched when he spotted dark clouds swiftly building above the field.

“It is here,” he whispered, frightened, “Quick, we must return to the castle at once!”

Sixten wasted no time getting himself and Zu back up on Itrix before sending the horse into another gallop, this time back to the stables.

Spread across a solid wood table in a small room laid a map. Its detailed drawings of mountain ranges and wide plains stretched across its entire length whilst simple thin lines displayed the few roads connecting the various kingdoms that were few and far between.

“We have no word from the lords, Scörpus, Korpal and Yrey. If our scouts’ information is correct, Falcourt is the fourth to fall from this mysterious evil.” Ellie's hand was free from its steel protection as it dragged a quill’s tip over the four territories she listed. Za remained focused in her chair as her eyes narrowed over the pattern formed by the crossed off nation capitals.

“The evil comes from the mountains, just as Tubén claimed... We must prepare ourselves; I will not let my kingdom fall like the rest! We will stand our ground!” Za had an inspiring tone in her voice, so Ellie and the other knights accompanying her gave encouraged nods.

“I will organize a draft at once. Tubén spoke of flying creatures, so more archers are needed, along with ballista gunners,” Ellie pulled away from the table and walked towards the door. She reached for the brass handle and pulled the door open, allowing a blitzing Sixten to crash into the unsuspecting cat woman. Knights drew their swords, and Za rose from her command chair; her eyes narrowed as her expression filled with anger. Both Ellie and Sixten crashed to the floor, but the knight captain quickly grabbed the Prince by the throat whilst on the ground and forcefully threw him away from her, sending Sixten to a wall. She got up on her feet with swift acrobatics, unsheathing her long sword at the same time. Za approached the gasping cat prince and glared with hostility.

“This room is off limits to you, Prince Sixten. Leave at once or your royal blood shall be my wall’s first decoration.”

Sixten rose from his feet, his armor groaning with rattled joints, but he paused when he noticed the numerous blades hanging mere inches from his neck. His Adam’s apple bobbed before he answered, “They are coming.”

“Who is coming?” Ellie inquired, the tip of her blade almost grazing Sixten's chin. The prince glanced around at expectant faces awaiting a response. He cleared his throat and calmed his nerves.

“The witch’s creatures have arrived on the horizon. We must prepare ourselves if we are to be ready.”

Ellie kept her eyes locked with his, but she could see truth in his expression. She returned her blade to its sheathe as the rest of the troops pulled back their swords. Za lowered her head and raised a fist before pounding it onto the table.

“Captain, get the women and children within the castle confines and have every able-bodied man armed and suited. I want us ready by the morrow. Tresca!”

“Yes milady!” A maid came running up to Za from the dark corner of the room.

“Prepare my effects.”

“Right away.” The maid stepped back from the queen toward the door. As Tresca excused herself, Sixten noticed thin smoke seeping in from the ceiling. It fell innocently, pooling over the floor. The nature of it seemed almost benign, until it swelled up, taking form. It rose until it came together to a shadowy figure behind Za.

“GET DOWN!”

The command alarmed Za and Ellie, and they narrowly dodged as Sixten drew his sword and swung. The tip of the blade sprayed a black fluid over the wall seconds before a body materialized and collapsed to the floor. Za and Ellie stood up straight to examine the shriveled black figure, but it quickly dissipated into black smoke.

“What is this beast?!” Za snapped. Sixten returned his weapon to its sheathe before responding.

“It is a creature meant to inflict horror by strik-... no...” Sixten's voice faded out; he whipped around and took off to the corridors.

“Where are you going?!” Ellie yelled as she raced after him.

“The princess!”

Ellie followed Sixten with great haste. The knights left with Za returned to their queen as a hollow hiss brought each one into state of alarm. They formed a defensive circle around her with swords at the ready. A smoky essence crept in from the door way, and soon a knight was lifted from the ground as his neck snapped. The soldier at his side frantically stabbed his blade into the air in front of the suspended corpse, and black blood sprayed from the air to speckle his armor. Another creature became visible and dropped the body of the knight before it screamed and jerked at the blade in his middle. The knight forced the blade upwards and severed the creatures jaw, sending bits of bone and flesh scattering about the room.

Za wiped away a black speck that landed on her cheek, “Escort me to my room, I want no more deaths. Have Michäel's body moved and stored in the cellars, we can properly bury him later.”

Zu awaited Sixten's return with the young squires from rider training. The young boys discussed and boasted their proficiencies while scrubbing brushes over their horses. Zu phased out of the conversation and replayed the same tune as before over and over in her mind, the only thing to break her trance a dark wisp moving through the air. The squires were too preoccupied with their horses to notice the muffled hiss in the corner. Zu's left ear rotated towards it, followed by her gaze afterward. The hiss seemed to move whilst the squire Gustav dipped down to unbuckle the saddle from his horse. He had just finished removing the clasp before his neck compressed, followed by him clawing at his own throat. Zu's ears perked as she rushed towards him.

“You okay?!”

Gustav only gave a small wheeze, and black fluid poured over his lips before he collapsed on the ground, choking and gasping. The stable doors flew open, and Sixten burst through the doorway with Ellie hot on his heels. The squires stood at attention for the exception of Gustav, who kept struggling against some invisible foe with a scared Zu at his side.

“What is wrong with him!?” Sixten demanded.

“He not bweathing!” Zu answered in a panic. Sixten ran to him and saw the black fluid pour from his lips.

“Zu, look away!”

Ellie's reaction was instantaneous. She grasped onto Zu and pulled her head to her chest plate. Zu heard a sword swing, followed by a thud and several gasps. Sixten sheathed his sword and inspected the headless corpse before him, “Squires, arm yourselves and keep your eyes peeled for any black smoke. If thee spot any anomaly of the like, strike without hesitation!”

“What became of Gustav?” inquired Remus. Sixten paused as a black wisp caught his eye, but Ellie was the first to cast Zu aside and swing her sword. Murky fluid sprayed to the ceiling as a creature took form. It stood hunch backed and draped in a leather robe. The ghastly complexion of its face featured narrow eyes and long, vicious teeth coming from its lip-less mouth. Fog wrapped the lower half of its body below where the knees should be. But this creature gave a wheezing breath from collapsing lungs. From a swift diagonal cut, the whole of its torso fell apart in two halves.

“What is this beast?” Ellie demanded in a threatening tone. Sixten knelt down toward the creature and checked its neck for signs of life. Then he pulled knife from his belt and drove it into its skull.

“We call them Shadows; they were the first fiends to strike. Waves of devastation they create before striking against the highest royal member.” Sixten could barely hold his tears in check as he stood up. He raised his boot high, and crushed the head of the creature under his heel. Zu screamed at the sight of its blood and brain spilling out of crumbled skull bones, burying herself in Ellie’s breast plate. The veteran captain could only recognize the anger in the cat prince’s expression as a lust for vengeance over a lost loved one.

Za latched up the last of the buckle along the leggings of her plate armor. The strong alloy that made up her armor was forged with care and precision to press firmly against her chest and portray her bodily curves. Her hair was braided in order to not interfere with the movement of her arm plating. She extended her hand to the side, and a sword was placed within its grasp. Za slid the blade into the hilt on her side before departing from her bedroom into the corridors of her castle. Giggling children ran past her, followed by their mothers. A soldier in leather armor approached Za and stood at the attention. A long bow was slung over his shoulder and a quiver rested on his back.

“Sergeant Corsov reporting, milady.”

“Sergeant, what is the status of our civilian population and troop deployment?”

“The majority of civilians are accounted for, and we began to assign citizens to their own quarters. All food stocks were brought down to the lower cellars.”

“And what of our military?”

“51 knights, 230 foot soldiers, 110 archers and 14 ballistae are prepared with many more on the way.”

“And our guests from Falcourt?”

“The Prince has been given a squad of troops for his own use, but the knight that came with him is unaccounted for.”

“Find that knight, and keep me informed as the provisioning progresses. You are dismissed.”

The sergeant nodded and took off, so Za headed for the throne room. Her presence caused joyful greetings and lustful stares, though the queen ignored all of them to remain focused on her task. She pushed open the oak doors leading to the throne room but was immediately struck by the sheer amount of people occupying the area. Many families were awaiting a royal speech and more waiting to be assigned quarters. Zu seemed to be absent-minded in her throne atop the steps whilst Ellie and Matrease whispered to her without receiving response or reaction. Crowds parted way before the queen as she proudly walked through them. She climbed the steps to approach the throne occupied by the princess.

“What troubles Zu?” she asked the knight calmly. Ellie glanced up as she drew her lower lips back and nibbled whilst formulating an answer.

“An assassin was slain before her eyes – no, an abomination. It was something she should not have seen.”

“An assassin?” Za tried to keep her voice down, but her hysteria rose. Matrease kept whispering to the despondent cat princess as Ellie rose to face Za.

“A foul creature called a Shadow, as the prince calls, like what he slew in the war room. It tried to kill a squire before the prince put down both of them.”

“Are there any more?”

“It is not clear at the moment, but Prince Tubén is informing the troops about the threat posed by these Shadows and how to detect them. ‘Just look for suspicious smoky wisps and strike at them,’ he says; a Shadow seems to be as mortal as we are.”

A small boy knelt before a bucket as he allowed himself to spew bile from his stomach. A gentle hand patted his back and coaxed him to a calm disposition.

“There, there, Mithro. You'll be okay. Just a tummy sickness.”

The boy spewed more fluids from his mouth in response, traces of a black fluid within the bile. His mother continued to provide comfort to him within the small confines of their home. Mithro coughed before he spat out the black remnants of the nauseating taste.

“Momma, I not feel right.”

“It's just the illness, you will be fine.”

“I not sure, I feel cold. Something is moving in me,” His voice became weak as the nails on his fingers started to lengthen. Wing-like bones pressed up under his skin as his shoulder blades parted way. His chin unnaturally sunk low to the ground as the low growl enveloped in his throat.

“Mithro? Are you okay?” questioned the mother as her eyes widened.

The boy turned to the woman, his eyes turning to a solid black as boney wings sprouted from his back. His mother fell backwards as he unleashed an ear shattering screech. He leapt on top of the woman, who started to scream. Digging a claw in her throat through her mouth, he dripped black saliva onto her tongue before spreading his wings to take flight. He smashed through the ceiling and sped into the sky, only for a thick javelin to pierce his small body and carry it out of the city walls.

Sixten stood by a ballista as a crew reloaded, releasing his lungs of the depressed air within in relief before signaling for his platoon to follow. The squad followed Sixten towards the home the horror emerged from. He kicked in the front door to find a screaming woman.

“HE WAS MY SON! My little baby boy!” The broken screams turned to sobs. Sixten approached her and knelt at her side, attempting to offer some form of consolation.

“He turned into a Horror, we had no other choice. Children change extremely fast whilst adults require more time. Was there anything he did after his turning?”

When the woman screamed again, Sixten could see the black stain on her tongue. He sighed and drew his sword.

“I'm sorry, ma'am. It is too late for you, as well.”

Her screams abruptly ended once the blade pierced her heart. Sixten rose from the body and wiped his blade clean on her apron before he turned to the trembling troops accompanying him. Sixten returned his blade to its sheath and left the home. As the squad returned to the castle, one green soldier angrily asked, “What was the purpose of ending her life, Prince?”

Sixten did not lessen his pace, but kept a calm attitude. “The fluid of the creatures is harmless unless it is ingested. Many good men I have lost to that horrible taint. I was forced to slay them by my own hand. Whatever we are facing, it is beyond supernatural. It turns children against parents, vice versa, and every man against each other.”

When the squad finally arrived at the front gates of the castle, Za and an entourage of armored warriors were waiting for him. The queen approached Sixten and immediately planted a firm grasp upon his throat.

“You will tell me right now where your mate is, or I will gut you myself.”

“What mean you?” Sixten gasped.

“Do not play games with me; the knight you brought with you is missing. You dictate his actions and you will tell me where he is.”

“He is in the infirmary!” Sixten gasped again, his lips becoming a shade of blue.

“He is not! Do NOT lie! Tell me where he is, NOW!”

“I do… Not… Know...”

Frustrated, Za released Sixten, and he collapsed, taking in as much air as he could before the cat woman brought her blade over to his neck.

“You have to the count of five to tell me, or I will let your head roll down the streets.”

“I know not where he is.”

“One.”

“I don't know, Your Excellency.”

“Two.”

“I DO NOT KNOW!”

“Three.”

“I BEG OF YE, I DO NOT KNOW!”

“Four.” Za raised her sword, ready to end his life. A scream halted her strike. An armoured demon jumped from a window high up in the castle. It impacted the ground before rising from the shallow crater. Za recognized the seal on its chest; it matched the one Sixten bore himself.

“He is a Horror!” Sixten yelled. The former man before them screeched and rushed at Za, its own sword held high. Za brought her blade down to her side, and when the demon drew close, her timing was impeccable. She drove her sword through a gap in his armor plates, sending the tip of the blade upwards and sticking out of the back of the creature’s neck. Za then pulled her sword back to allow the body to fall.

“Do you believe me now?” Sixten said, barely recovering.

“You are lucky, Prince Tubén. If you ever step out of line, I myself will take your soul and will feed it to the demons, or Horrors as you prefer.”

With no town in sight by the next daybreak, Sofi broke her fast near a river she had been traversing along. She ate what was left of a loaf of bread she managed to take from a bakery and flushed it down her throat with a few gulps of cold river water. Afterward, the cat girl checked the level of water left in her canteen before refilling it at the river’s edge. When Sofi became satisfied that she held enough supplies to last her another couple days, the disheveled cat girl laid down on the soft ground.

In this respite from the recent adversity, she yawned whilst looking up at the clouds, silently cursing them for having a much more peaceful time than she did. Then, Sofi turned her head to see smoke emanating from what once was Sayer, her hometown. Its towers of billowing ashes bore a deep shade of black and reached up toward the sky as if raising an enormous but invisible object. A tear emerged at the rim of her left eye when she thought about the friends she left behind to their impending doom.

“Stop it!” she suddenly ordered herself, “They got bitten anyway; there was nothing I could do.”

After making a stubborn *Hmph!* sound, Sofi slowly stood up. Grabbing her things, the determined cat girl turned with her back facing the smoke before resuming her journey to the northern mountains.

A few hours later, the cat girl reached an impasse. In front of her laid the remnants of a travel band. Three wagons stood still, cluing as to what happened only with the blood covering them. Another wagon lay to the side, toppled over with a single arm sticking out of its front. As Sofi’s attention moved downward, she spotted several pools of blood and numerous pieces of flesh resting everywhere. There also laid several weapons, all of them speckled with blood but a couple broken into two or more portions. Gulping, she crept toward the fallen wagon whilst picking up the cleanest-looking sword. Once the cat girl stood a meter from it, she crouched down and took a peek.

What she saw shocked her and at the same time made her gag uncontrollably. Proportional to the putrid stench, there rested over a dozen bodies. All of them had been gored, stripped to the bone, or cut to pieces. The way all the unfortunate souls were placed inside seemed to indicate that they were being stored as fodder, and the thought of some inhumane beast somewhere out there that feasted upon human flesh made the hair on Sofi’s tail stand up.

Reluctantly, the cat girl decided to take a look at the other wagons, and, whilst she approached their entrances, Sofi cautiously brought her blade to her front, ready to strike. A breath escaped her once Sofi saw that the other wagons were in the same state as the downed one, stuffed with the remains of over thirty persons. It both relieved and saddened the cat girl, for although there awaited no carnivorous beast, a copious amount of persons had been killed, including fathers, mothers and children.

“Whole families, I bet…” she added aloud in a murmur.

Abruptly, one of the body parts shifted. Sofi immediately stiffened in reaction, waiting for a few moments before relaxing though she took a reasonable step back. Sword still ready at her front, the cat girl observed the corpse-filled wagon for any other signs of movement.

Then, it moved again. A bloodied but whole hand connected to an exposed radius and ulna bent its fingers to gradually form a fist. Afterward, it opened up again before pressing its palm against the gory mass. Sofi’s mouth gaped, and she watch in frozen horror as an impossible being rose out of the pile. For a few seconds, the object appeared to be a ravaged, nude human body, missing the flesh from its head, arm, and part of its chest. Steam rolled upward around the creature to show that whatever this mysterious thing was, it could generate heat. After those few seconds, the creature rose enough to the point where its third and fourth limbs stretched out of the bloody collection, the flesh where it connected with the rest of the body seeming as if they were grafted to the frame. With a guttural tone, it hissed a snake-like sound as the vacant pits where eyeballs once occupied appeared to stare through Sofi’s own pupils into her very soul.

The cat girl’s teeth chattered violently as she finally managed to regain control of her legs to painstakingly retreat back to where she came from.

“W-what in Lord’s name are y-y-you?” she stuttered, though her grip on her sword tightened.

The creature continued climbing out of its burrow until it could step out of the wagon. The rest of its body looked disorganized with various torsos attached in an unruly fashion below its main one whilst random limbs stuck out all over its bottom, but all of them remained operative as the arms kept groping for an invisible target as its legs continuously kicked at the air. Its main four legs, however, were composed of necks from hip to ankle where it then connected to miniature hills of jaws fixed fast upon one another to form the creature’s feet. Still hissing, it began to walk towards Sofi, each step releasing fluid-like sound made of hundreds of sections of skin slapping one another.

“Th-there’s no way anyone on this god-forsaken planet will able to l-live after this is all over…If it ever e-ends,” Sofi muttered under her breath, frustrated to find herself unable to sprint away. The thing seemed to sense her incapability for all of its arms eventually pointed toward the cat girl, eager to feel new flesh. When the full potency of its scent hit her nostrils, it acted as a smelling salt, enabling Sofi to scream and throw the sword at the beast. At the same time, the cat girl turned around and ran away as fast as she could. One side of the blade struck the creature cleanly on its chest, so it let out an enraged hissed that represented the best roar it could make. With a surprisingly deft movement, it kicked one of its legs to send a lone jawbone flying to its target with a bone-shattering speed.

Almost at the last second, Sofi jumped to her right over a pile of bushes. She kept screaming as she raced to a nearby tree and climbed up its trunk. Once she reached the highest branch, the cat girl quieted down, so she could focus on locating the creature once more. It lumbered on through the bushes she had leapt over, letting out angry hisses each time a body part ripped off of its frame as tree branches brushed against it.

When the creature reached the tree where Sofi hid in, black-as-night mist rushed to the beast from the river. It circled around the eclectic creature to stop it before gathering itself at its front. There, the mist expanded and solidified until it became a cloak with its hood covering an invisible head. This did not stay so in the next dozen seconds when the Shadow’s body faded into view, though it was difficult for the cat girl to register its dark skin against its cloak. It made a pausing gesture before the Shadow pointed back toward the wagons. Obediently, the undead beast slowly turned around and trekked back to its wagon where it peacefully climbed back into its steaming nest.

Meanwhile, the Shadow looked around itself, checking for any movement. Once Sofi realized what it was doing, she held her breath whilst it glanced up at the tree branches. It waited for a few moments before fading away into a small mist once again. At that, the cat girl let out a quiet sigh of relief. The mist gradually faded away, and as it finally disappeared, the cat girl turned her head to look at the distant mountains, wondering if she had chosen correctly.

Distracted with her thoughts, the cat girl did not notice the same black mist creeping up the tree to where she sat. It managed to float up to her chest when Sofi turned her head back and spotted the being. Releasing another high-pitch scream, she swiftly pulled out a dagger and stabbed the Shadow at the same moments it began darting into her mouth.

An irritating sound of metal dragging against stone marked the only sign of life on the barren road. The heavy blade seemed impervious to scratches as the armoured demon with a featureless face maintained a steady pace toward distant mountains. The jewel in his sword would soon require charging as it spent nearly all of its manna. Soldat never stopped walking, so his blade never stopped dragging. His green apparitions upon his face scanned the roads ahead, detecting movement. His glowing eyes narrowed; and the object, the boy, grew visible. Whilst the small child walked along slowly, Soldat recognized the face and brought his blade around to rest upon his shoulders.

Mathias shuffled along the gravel road, and he could see Kattrike still many miles off. He suddenly collapsed to the ground, starved and dehydrated. He crawled to the side of the road to lay upon the soft grass, his eye lids becoming heavy as he drifted into a light sleep. But old habits stuck with him, so when he heard footsteps, the boy immediately opened his eyes. Unfortunately, the faceless predator already began to swing his blade. Mathias rolled to the side as the blade blew apart a crater beside him. Adrenaline coursed through his veins to renew his strength. Immediately, he ran for the nearby trees, but the demon simply raised its blade over its shoulder and kept walking in his direction. Mathias never stopped running until he heard a scream ahead of him. In reaction, he pulled the dagger from his satchel, righted his new bag over his shoulder, and readied himself to face whatever it was. He emerged from a bush and saw a girl in a pink cloak and a winged Shadow on top of her, its snaking tongue pushing for her mouth. Mathias rushed forward and planted his dagger in the Shadow’s neck. The strike caused the beast to drop dead, but girl in the cloak grabbed Mathias by the collar and picked him above the ground. Her cloak molted into her skin as her legs became a wisp. She rose into the air and switched her grip to the small boy’s throat.

“How dare you kill my minion, it was part of my trap! You stupid child.”

A tree was sliced in half below; Soldat stepped over the stump and gazed up at Mathias. He raised his sword high to point at the boy in a posture begging for him to be dropped upon the tip.

“Not now, Soldat!” Lollo roared, “Go home and recharge your blade!”

Once the demon roared and turned north, Lollo turned her attention back to the boy.

“What should I do with you? Winged Shadow? Bear back? A regular Shadow? Dark wolf? No... What I sense in you... I can taste its power... Your...” Lollo trailed off, her satanic smile growing ever wider.

“I should do something special for you... And I know a fate fit for your suffering.”

Lollo waved her wand, and the two vanished with a puff of pink powder. The boy’s satchel and bag still rested on the spot he once stood on.

The feline knight captain stood on a stand towering above a quarter of ten thousand men split into five different companies, one of which was cavalry. They awaited her next command whilst their superior officers climbed up the stone steps to meet with their commander.

Looking over her division, Ellie snorted disapprovingly at the lack of discipline some of her troops started to show. It only aggravated her further when the cornet of the army began to fidget with the flag he held.

“Is this all we could gather?” she impatiently asked her lieutenants and sergeants.

“It is all we could muster, Captain,” one lieutenant answered, “aside from the men assigned to sentry positions, these were all the men either within castle confines or survivors of the epidemic down below.”

Ellie continued to show her disapproval until a burst of fluffy pink powder appeared in the air only meters away. Lollo appeared, dangling a small squirming child from one hand. Her voice boomed loud and clear.

“Puny humans of this pitiful shelter! I am Death! Destruction! Torment! Your souls belong to me! Your families and every one of your children will suffer! Watch my minions strike down your homes, desecrate your alters, and rip your fragile bodies to shreds! All of this shall begin... With him!” Mathias abruptly appeared, dangling from Lollo’s side high in the air as he squirmed in futile attempt to free himself, but the effort proved useless. The pink ghost waved her wand and disappeared to leave Mathias floating midair, supported by nothing but the pink ghost’s calamitous witchcraft. Lollo's villainous laughter coursed through his mind as he was instantly immolated in pink flames. His body morphed into a hideous cadaver as its clothing burned off like fur of an inflamed animal, its skin melted to drip off like candle wax. Its flesh seared until it became ash, and its bones turned to brittle charcoal. Throughout all the pain and torment Mathias experienced, he gritted his teeth and clenched his fists, refusing to show his pain.

Ellie barked orders to her troops as her trusted courier burned right before her eyes. She could only watch as his body turned to ash, but something remained. A red organ hovered in the air, and then it moved towards Ellie. The mysterious force let go and the red object landed at her feet. When the captain crouched down to pick up the organ, she gasped in realization of what it was. What she held was Mathias’ small heart, and it was still beating.

An entourage of knights patrolled the corridors of the castle. The leading steel clad warrior had a scroll in hand, checking off a list of names for conscription. The troops carried on to the next door, and three sharp knocks later, a woman answered.

“Good day, fair knights. May I ask what brings you to my door?”

“Is thy husband home?” the head soldier asked.

“My husband was conscripted not long after this day broke. You have no business here.”

The lead knight glanced back at his followers; none showed trust for the woman.

“If thy husband is conscripted, a quick search will not be fretted. Do step aside, madam.”

The knights pushed past the woman and strutted into the bedroom. A hasty search uncovered a quivering man cowering in the closet. The largest of the knights pulled him from the closet and shoved him to the other so that he grabbed the hider’s arms quickly. The woman stepped forward only for a blade to stop just inches from her neck.

“Stay back, madam.”

The lead knight stood above the man, arms crossed. He placed a hand on the hilt of his sword.

“The penalty for refusal to fight is long imprisonment.”

“I'm sorry, sirs, but I am a simple shop keeper. I’m useless in war.”

“Then keep the workshops of arms construction. Every able bodied man must do his part, especially men whose families have been granted quarters inside the castle!”

The leader waved his hand, so his two companions impolitely hauled the man toward the front door to escort him away. Afterward, he checked off another name on his scroll whilst ignoring a stream of curses from the distraught wife. He then left the room to join his entourage. Finally catching up with his men in the throne room a dozen minutes later, he spotted Za perched upon her throne listening to survival accounts from new refugees.

The queen glanced up to see her troops unceremoniously forcing a man through the room, “I’ll have to instruct those men on proper manners later...” she whispered to herself.

She brought attention back to the refugees kneeling before her, each one detailing a new tale more gruesome than those prior. The queen's new court clerk meticulously wrote, albeit sluggishly from the nausea he experienced. Suddenly, the entire room fell to a silence as the main doors opened. Ellie emerged to march forth through silent crowds with a simple box under her arm. She did not look to either side of her whilst she pressed on to the steps leading to the throne. Za rose to greet her friend.

“Captain Ellie, what is the matter?”

Once Ellie reached the top, the cat knight knelt before her queen. “Milady, forgive the interruption, but I bring unfortunate news of Mathias.”

“He is late, what news bring you?”

Ellie forced away a tear that escaped her eye. “He is dead.”

Za's expression faded as her lips parted in shock. She fell back into her throne. “How did young Mathias perish?” she questioned, gazing at the floor with a lost expression.

Ellie rose to her feet, swallowing the lump caught in her throat. “He was burned in front of the entire army by the evil we face, but that is not all.”

The knight captain presented her box to Za, who in turn opened it to view the contents. She gasped when she saw the dismembered heart defiantly beating away though blood no longer coursed through its chambers.

“What sorcery is this?!” This supernatural sight caused Za to gag, barely able to keep from vomiting.

“The witch’s magic is at work here.”

Za reluctantly observed the beating heart, its rhythmic pumps that neither slowed nor accelerated so peacefully that Za could almost feel it.

“What of our men?”

“The majority went into a frenzy upon the sight of his incineration. The officers are sorting them out and reorganizing them.”

Za finally took her eyes away and stared off to the side.

“Bury what's left and give him some form of a funeral. When you finish, return to the troops. There I shall await you.”

The queen rose from her throne and descended the steps. She pushed through the crowd of refugees, some of whom had yet to relay their terrible accounts. Ellie was about to close the lid over Mathias's heart when a burst of pink powder abruptly flung the box from her hands.

“I'll have that back!” Lollo snapped.

“Fiend!” Ellie screeched as she drew her blade. She managed a slash at Lollo’s neck, but it swung through as if it were smoke. The pink ghost bellowed with laughter and held up the heart like a trophy.

“You fool.” She turned her head to Ellie with an evil simper upon her lips. “The boy is still alive.”

Another blast of pink fluff sent Ellie somersaulting backwards down the throne steps. She hit the bottom and sprawled over the floor. Ellie’s concussion quickly cleared, allowing her to ready her blade.

“Come back and face me!”

Lollo's chortling reverberated through the crowd of horrified people surrounding the knight captain. One woman rose above the rest, and her body bloated. Ellie could hear the dire screams as the woman exploded. Black slime erupted from the body parts and coated the room’s occupants. Ellie blocked the slime from reaching her face, though other people were not so lucky. Through the screams and panicking crowd, the cat woman managed to yell over everyone, “Men, to me!”

A dozen knights soon answered her call to arms. They barged into the room and confusedly scanned the black fluid splattered about the faces and the walls. Ellie faced her line of troops.

“I want everyone checked for black fluids on their lips! You know what to do with anyone who ingests the bile, accident or not!”

The veteran soldiers saluted as their captain made a beeline for her quarters. They began to line up the room’s quivering occupants, checking everyone’s tongue for trace of the foreign taint. The crowd gasped as a head was parted from neck. The body was quickly removed as a knight sheathed his sword.

“This one death will save many others!”

After hiding for another half an hour, Sofi cautiously went back to the river’s edge, kneeling down and rinsing her mouth with the river water. Sweat poured down her face as her hands shook from her unremitting anxiety. She glanced to her left at one point but was unable to spot the bloody caravan through the thick brush and trees. When she finished cleansing her mouth from the rest of the vile tasting bile, the cat girl looked at her own reflection on the water’s surface. Relief flooded her expression as she recognized her dirt stained face and disheveled hair soaked with dust. Then she held her mouth agape and looked closer at her reflection. After studying the inside of her throat as far as she could see, Sofi felt further comfort when she did not see any of the cursèd substance.

“Phew, I’m going to be fine,” the cat girl spoke to herself. A moment later, she turned her attention to the south where four distinct billows of smoke decorated the sky. Disheartened by the indications, Sofi turned once more to look at the mountains to the north.

“Is it really worth it?” she asked herself, “What if there’s nothing there? No one’s ever ventured *beyond* the mountains.”

Abruptly, a miniature spark shone on the face of one of these crag towers. It rose several hundred meters into the air before dividing into seven smaller divisions, each one traveling toward the south. Enraptured by this phenomena, Sofi watched as they rushed through the air high above her and passed her location to reach the columns of smoke. Once four of the sparkles reached their destination, they dropped to the ground at lightning speed. The other three, however, continued travelling south.

Not knowing what to think, she rose up to her feet, made sure her pack was secure and started off toward the mountains once again. The cat girl resumed observing the mountains faces, hoping to distinguish a single feature from which the spark originated. Minutes later, she managed to make out a small aperture resting upon one of the taller mountains. It seemed to be an opening to a cave, but before Sofi could recognize what it was completely, it vanished without a trace as if it never existed in the first place. Curious, the cat girl scratched the back of her head while she entered the forest, planning to take a slightly different route to the mountains.

A famished ox shuffled drearily down a dirt path with the weighted burden of a loaded wagon on its back. Guiding its reins, a sturdily built man who stood over two meters in height marched on. His grizzly beard draped over much of his ragged linen shirt. A copious amount of tears ran along the sides of his leather pants whilst cracks thinned the soles of his raw hide boots. Nine persons on the cart, four of whom were children, huddled together in blankets. As they snacked on smoked strips of squirrel jerky, each person savored each bite slowly, knowing that this infinitesimal meal must last them until the next. Without warning, the ox abruptly collapsed, weakly trying to get back up on trembling legs and, at the same time, bellowing a low painful whine. Its guider released the reins before reluctantly kneeling at its side.

“Accept my apologies, my friend. May the Lord forgive me for the act I am about to commih’.”

After unbuckling and un-strapping the load from the ox, the burly man pulled out a small dagger. He slowly pushed the animal’s head to expose its neck. Closing his eyes and praying, he quickly slit its throat, leaving a long gash that spilled blood at an enormous rate.

“Quickly! The blood is fresh and will keep us alive. Use it whils’ the chance is here! I’ll prepare the meat lae’er.”

“We have hidden ourselves in this forsaken forest for two moons and three days. When will we arrive at Sayer? Or return to Richtmach?” asked a woman in the cart who climbed down the transport with the other travelers.

“I told you Mathsy, Rih’mach is gone! Those monsters decima’ed it!” snapped a man as he gripped her arm. She stopped, staring into his cold brown eyes with her own glassy blue irises. She jerked her arm free of his grasp, blinking away the tears forming at her eyes.

“You have no proof! Some might still be alive!” she cried.

The driver took hold of her shirt, lifting her slightly as he brought his face down to level with hers, “Woman, thoo much thime has passed! There is no one lef’. We go south, Sayer, or Tuhn - Maybe Kath’rike. We can-nawh hide ourselves and s’arve in this forest any longer.” He released her coat before returning to the ox.

“What if the other towns gone too?” a small boy asked. The unstable women placed a hand on the cart to support herself, gathering her wits, her lips pursing as fresh streams trailed down her face. She suddenly drew a hand back, harshly slapping to the boy across his face.

“Never speak again, you pox-infected runt! If it were not for you, my husband would still be alive! When we find others, we will trade you for supplies!”

The woman lost what nerve she still held onto, fainting on the path as the boy rubbed his reddening cheek and joined the others. A meter away, the cart driver sighed pitifully for the woman whilst the children made a circle of stones with dry tinder in the centre. Three of the passengers gathered by the fallen ox, assisting the burly man with preparing the dead beast. Two men pierced the ox’s throat with rusty dull stakes, holding a couple beat up pans beneath to collect the fresh blood spilling out of the puncture.

Above the sounds of people grumbling to themselves, the cutting of flesh, the stone setting, and the splashing ox blood in the pans, the cart driver heard an abrupt noise, an acerbic one of metal being drug over stone, so he drew his attention to the origin of the sound, spotting a knight draped in a dark cloak that covered his black armor, treading heavily on the dirt path in their direction.

“A knight! Thank the Lord, we are saved!” cried the driver. He jumped off of the cart to sprint toward the steel clad tower, tripping a few times on the way, “Sir! Sir!”

The knight immediately stopped, swinging his massive blade up to lay it on his shoulder. As the man came closer, glowing green globules on the face of the knight shrunk slightly in size. Once the cart driver took another step, Soldat swung his blade around, using all of his power to force the blade down. Blood sprayed as Soldat’s sword drew a line along the body of the smaller man. The rest of the refugees panicked at the sight, all of them darting the other way. Soldat calmly raised his blade again, the green gem in his guard of his sword shining before an eruption of black flame burst down from the air in front of the runaways. The fire surrounded the group in an encompassing well of burning darkness with a single opening that led to Soldat. This darkling mist contracted closer and closer. Quickly, the parents placed themselves in front of their children, bracing themselves for the crackling flames sprouting from the mist. The same man who killed the ox faced the faceless being, walking with shaky legs until he was ten paces away.

“Thake me ins’ead! Leh the others go!”

Soldat seemed to blink with the inflamed orbs as if he were contemplating what to do. Then he readied himself, placing one foot forward and bringing his sword to his front in a battle stance.

“No weapons! Figh’ me like a man!”

Soldat did not react.

“Put down tha’ sword and figh’ me with your fis’s!”

Perplexed, Soldat hesitated for a moment. Then, a thin stream of the black smoke which immured everyone detached from the main body to drift around Soldat’s neck. This seemed to prompt the knight as he lifted his great sword and rested it on his back. Clicking noises reverberated from his armor as the dark plating of his armor shifted to lock the blade in place. Soldat brought his hand back to his front to observe it, puzzled by the sudden freedom. Whilst the burly man continued watching, ready to fight at a moment’s notice, Soldat brought his attention back toward his opponent, crouching slightly and bearing his fists in front, mimicking the pose of the other man. To the others who cowered a few meters away, Soldat and the large man appeared equal to height and mass. Their only difference was the armour Soldat wore compared to the rags the wary human had on. The two stepped toward each other, gradually closing the gap between them, both watching and waiting for the other to make his move.

Soldat moved first, lurching forward with one foot whilst extending his right elbow back and, once his foot quickly stomped the ground, swiftly pierced the air with his armoured fist. The other man merely smirked, adroitly stepping back at the last moment before grabbing Soldat’s shoulder. He twirled around with the burly man forcefully pulling Soldat further forward. Soldat tried to recover by taking another step. This time his stomp shattered the earth, causing the ground around the combatants to quiver in pain, evident by the body of the ox that leaped a couple centimetres into the air. The knight lifted his other foot as he turned around to swing a fist around only to be met with the other man’s. It hit Soldat squarely below his neck, and he lost his balance. Wisps of black smoke escaped the hood Soldat’s head hid under whilst the rest of his body fell on the ground. His armour groaned as if it were his voice.

“Geddup you!” Soldat’s opponent snarled. Fluid, dark red blood dripped from the cuts on his knuckles, but he kept his fist closed. The armour on Soldat groaned wearily again as the knight slowly sat up, seeming to strain under the burdensome weight. By the time the knight stood up, the other man already stood a small half-metre away. He immediately grabbed Soldat’s chest plate and pulled the knight toward him, screaming with rage as the burly man threw another punch at Soldat, this time between the glowing eyes that hid beneath the hood. But when his knuckles entered Soldat’s hood, the burly man felt no resistance. He drew his hand back in shock, accidentally knocking the hood back at the same time. Black smoke exploded into the air, leaving behind a shadowy apparatus that vaguely resembled the shape of a human head. The only distinguishable features on Soldat’s weightless head were the two orbs that glowed eerily, staring at the other man eye-to-eye.

“What in the devil are ye?” he gasped, letting go of Soldat.

The knight started to make a gesture, but the same smoky wisp circling his neck floated to his side, growing in size until the Shadow took on his full form. It gnashed its blackened teeth as it growled at the knight.

“Do not listen until the Mistress is here. You are to eradicate the petulance. Destroy them all, but save the young ones to use them for power.”

The Shadow faded back into the smoke enclosure whilst the burly man took a few steps back toward the others. Sweat poured down his face as he watched Soldat in fear.

“You are no man... You are one of the demon spawns!”

Soldat’s roar shook the ground as he charged. He grabbed hold of the man’s beard and drove his heavily armoured fist into his jaw line. Releasing the beard, Soldat struck a second time across the man’s cheekbone to spin him around. All of the children watched helplessly as the black gauntlet pierced through the man’s chest and soared upward. The hand grabbed hold of the beard once more, ripping the head down, snapping the spine and wrenching the torso to force the head into the hole made by the fist. The heavy corpse of the man was booted forth and slammed into the ground. Soldat brought his sword back from over his shoulder as he neared the defensive line of adults guarding the children. Through a magical conduction of the supernatural gifts, an emerald glow grew within the translucent green gem of Soldat’s blade. Then a detonation of lighted energy blasted a defending trio of adults who had put themselves directly in the demon’s path. In the split second that the blast occurred, the flesh peeled off from the bones of the carcasses. Their skeletons were bare, white as though they had been scrubbed clean. The posing skeletons smashed to the side as Soldat stepped forward with a mighty swing of his blade. His weapon sliced through the belly of another adult, spraying the contents of his stomach over the ground before Soldat manipulated the momentum of his sword, bringing it around to hack away his victim’s head. The last two victims screamed to the petrified children. Through the gore and slaughter, nothing broke through their young, petrified minds. Soldat slid his weapon over his back, then pierced the backs of the adults with both hands. He took hold of their spines, stroking his thumbs over the bone before ripping them free of the bodies. The demon dropped the back bones onto the fallen corpses as he walked to his final prize.

He grabbed onto the first child by the neck, raising her above his head as he brought his blade out again. The aura in the hilt began to glow. Blood drained from the girl’s face along with all traces of colour. From the orifices of her face came a stream of white wisps that wound together and threaded into the brightening gem of Soldat’s sword. As the white stream thinned out, the girl’s eyes sunk into her head with her body thrashing about. Her limbs went through spasms as black hairs erupted from her skin and a green glow replaced her ocular organs. Every bone in her face underwent a rapid transformation, her mouth and nose stretching forth into a canine form. The odd angles that her legs bent were the last of her noticeable features before her entire body was consumed in a black smoke. The trail of spirit ceased from the cloud, and Soldat released his grasp. What hit the ground was no longer human; it did not bear the features that divided human from beast. What now growled at Soldat’s feet held more relation to a lycanthrope. Soldat booted the beast several meters away before redirecting his attention to the petrified children. He took hold a second child and brought the glowing gem of his blade to his face, allowing the process to begin once again.

Four demonic wolves growled at each other as they fought for the remaining flesh of their former guardians. Soldat stood with his blade over his shoulder as he waited for his master. First came a banter echoing through his thoughts before her pink form emerged from the earth. “My wonderful pet, you have done well in your services. Are you exhausted?”

Soldat responded by raising his blade. Even with the fresh feast of spirit, the gem in his blade could glow dimly in a weak display of power. Lollo smiled as she patted the top of his hood.

“Do not worry my pet, for we are returning home where I have a present for you.”

“Her majesty must let us in!” a man cried as he again tried to tackle the guardsman. The soldier’s robust armor, however, easily withstood the impact, and the armoured personal forcibly pushed the wailing man back toward his wife and children.

“Sorry, no person is allowed within castle grounds for the next few days. Lady Za is prepping her army at the moment. Go back to your home and secure the most sound room of your house. It is the best anyone can do for now.”

“Have you no pity for us peasants?” he demanded angrily, “A ghost town of Kattrike she will rule from whence the end draws near.”

“What is your name, sir?”

“I am Garold Raspit. At least allow my wife and children to go in. I beg of ye, I will stay out here and face the devil’s beasts by myself if I know that my family is safe.”

“Garold, no!” his wife interjected as she took hold of his arm.

“Go back to your household, Goodman Garold. It is in your best interest.”

“Bah! Her Highness cares nothing for her followers. Let her and her rotten family burn in hell!” Infuriated beyond his capacity, Garold stormed off away from the castle gate, followed by his family to join the ranks of other bloodlines unable to take shelter in the only safe haven available.

Screams filled the air as the first wave of Shadows struck Kattrike, frightening everyone. Undeterred by the bloodcurdling cries of anguish, Garold and his family reached their home to enter the fragile wooden house. Their children did not speak for they feared their own imaginations of what lay beyond the next few rows of houses that caused incomprehensible terror. With a quick gesture, their mother motioned for them to enter their parents’ bedroom whilst the father built a pile of furniture at the front door. As the rest of his family situated themselves in the surrogate safe house, Garold boarded up the windows, using his anger to fuel a two hour exertion of security placement. Afterward, he grabbed a long sword he had hung on a wall before retreating to the same room his terrified family rested in.

The sound of an army of heavy foot pounding and multitudes of screams indicated that a parade of unfortunate victims raced past Garold’s home, all of whom attempting to escape the impending doom falling upon them. As they passed by, hordes upon hordes of mindless marauders flooded into the town by both land and air. When Garold dared to take a short peek out of the room’s only window, it appeared as if a large tsunami of viscous black fluid flowed through in between homes whilst torrential rain covered the skies. In the meantime, his wife quickly did her best to cover their children’s ears and eyes. Unfortunately, once the screaming began, the cries of anguish and demented delight took on a volume too large to block.

“O-our Father...” Garold started with a slight stutter, joined a second later by the rest of his family, though soon they could hardly hear themselves speak. The convergence of their voices, on the other hand, gave them a new-found strength, readying the Raspit family for whichever adversity may come their way, “Which art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done in Earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive them that trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory, for ever and ever.”

At the moment the nightmare-befallen family spoke the word, “Amen,” a band of horrors crashed in through one of the walls straight to Garold, his wife, and their three children. With a scream, it took only a moment for Garold Raspit to jump up and strike at the beasts. He managed to slash one down, but the others swiftly moved in behind him and attacked the rest of his family. By the time he turned around, a Shadow swooped in through the same hole to ram itself through the man. As his vision faded away, Raspit saw his family’s bodies being mutilated, giving him an evanescent strength to let out a final scream in agony.

Sixten stood in the center of a body-riddled street among a pool of human corpses, most of them inhuman. He stood breathing heavily as volleys of arrows filled the sky, some lodging themselves into the hearts of flying horrors. Troops fought alongside knights as dark monsters continuously spawned from what used to be peaceful homes. Suddenly, an entire wall of one home came crashing down to reveal a large bear-shaped creature that charged through the rubble. Only a split second after turning his attention toward it, Sixten ordered, “SHOOT THAT BEAST!”

A large javelin flew through the air from a ballista, the heavy projectile shooting over Sixten and his troops. The bear stood on hind legs and roared at a volume loud enough to rattle the prince’s armor before the javelin drove itself through its throat, taking the head with it. At the same time, a fresh platoon came charging from behind Sixten whose attention now turned to a dark-furred wolf howling on top of a roof. He watched a surge of supernatural canines erupt from nearby homes.

Their lime-green eyes gleamed eerily in the shadows that cloaked them underneath immense clouds in order to distract victims’ attentions with a strange, heartless gaze. Meanwhile sharpened obsidian-like claws readied themselves by stretching outward from their paws. Whenever lightning struck, the flash revealed large beak-shaped bones protruding out of their shoulders, fresh blood decorating the bases as if the extensions were forced out of their bodies. As they swiftly leaped from roof to roof, a few of the soldiers would spot their hind quarters brandishing unusual dark horns whilst larger weapons of the same manner extended from their backs, one pointed and curved object for each vertebra.

One such beast pounced upon one soldier. Desperate, he attempted to stab the canine with his scimitar whilst grasping at coarse fur clothing its neck. Snarling at the man for his feeble counter-attack, it snapped its jaws quickly closer and closer to his own unprotected neck with toxic saliva dripping thickly from its longest fangs onto the victim’s helm. At one point, the soldier managed to place his free palm onto the wolf’s cheek, pushing it away as his other hand adroitly maneuvered his sword to point at a spot below the creature’s chest.

“For Kattrike!!!” he cried whilst driving the blade deep into the beast until its tip protruded out of its back. The canine howled for a final time before slumping over, plunging the soldier’s weapon deeper until the hilt hit skin.

He slowly but gratefully crawled out from beneath the wolf, pulling his scimitar out afterward. As he turned around, however, another beast swiftly struck him down, darting from the shadows so quickly that it seemed as if it were black mist shooting through the air.

Outnumbered but undeterred, footmen hacked and slashed away at this new influx of beasts. Sixten and his men soon pressed forward to join the troops, but shrill cries brought everyone’s focus up toward dozens of horrors diving in from the black clouds and throwing a volley of improvised spears. One footman was thrown backwards as a heavy wooden shaft penetrated his torso. Another man, this time a knight, pirouetted as a wooden spear impacted his armor. He slammed into the ground but quickly jumped back to his feet only to be carried off by a hungry swarm of the winged Shadows.

“Fall back!” Sixten commanded as his men were cut down by Lollo’s indefatigable army, “Fall back to the market! Now!”

The dozen or so men remaining turned around and began to run. Meanwhile, Sixten and a handful of knights stood their ground, slashing away at wave after wave of unrelenting wolves and swooping Shadows. The prince brought his blade down to split one Shadow into two halves. At the same time, he spotted another barrage of projectiles as they filled the skies, uncontrollably cheering when he noticed that these were inflamed. The burning arrows tore through packs of Shadows or landed to set various homes in flames. Thankful for the distraction, Sixten and his men turned and ran as the ballistae fired flaming javelins into buildings.

Sliced into two, a Shadow fell from its cloak, so Ellie kicked the pieces aside. She then returned to her arduous task of guiding lines of civilians through the castle gates. Knights and medics rushed to check the wounded and the maimed for any trace of the taint, reluctantly ending several lives with swift decapitations. A large yellow glow rising into the air and dancing about with each of its fiery tentacles brought Ellie’s attention to the northwestern district. Dozens of homes burned while suffocated flying Shadows fell from the sky to splatter onto the cobblestone streets. Burning arrows originated from the town market, which was armed with a legion of archers. They continuously fired at aerial targets whilst the ballistae took out creatures upon the land. War sounds and gory sculptures flooded throughout streets and alleyways around the marketplace. Ellie turned to the sound of a horn as two lines of civilians parted for four battalions of troops marching in from the castle to reinforce the front lines. Once they passed through, the gap quickly closed up with a river of panicking civilians, all of whom desperate to escape this bloody onslaught.

“Captain!”

Ellie checked to see who addressed her and saw Sixten weaving his way through the crowd. At one point, he gently lifted a little girl, who ran into him, over to his side, so he could meet up with the cat woman.

“Prince Tubén! What report have ye?”

“The residential district is gone. Old town and high town are falling. The princess is to be immediately evacuated whilst we still control the front gates!”

“That plan is already in motion,” someone answered with a surprisingly calm tone.

Both Ellie and Sixten turned to face Za accompanied by her royal guard, approaching from the castle doors. Sixten knelt before her, “Milady, I request thy permission to accompany the princess on her escape.”

Za automatically gripped her blade’s handle. “Why have you made such a request?”

“Only to ensure her safety, milady. Too many royal families have had their lineage cut, but I shall not allow either of our names to be lost with them.”

Za scowled at the cat prince, but she looked over at her knight captain for any suggestion. Ellie silently nodded, so the cat queen loosened her hold on her weapon. “If I learn that Zu is harmed in any form and that this is a cowardly excuse for an escapade, I will hunt you down myself and rip out your heart as an offering to those monsters. Am I understood?”

Sixten rose with an air of confidence about him. “Yes, milady.”

And with that, Za gave him a stern nod coupled with wary eyes. “Captain Ellie, escort this man to my daughter. I shall take over from here.”

In turn, Ellie lightly grabbed a hold of Sixten’s collar but gruffly pushed him into the line of civilians headed into the castle. They joined the line and pressed on toward the castle. A few minutes later of passing through various huddled groups in the throne room, the armored cat persons continued on to the crowded corridors. They eventually arrived at a heavily guarded set of double doors, several lanterns and torches positioned on either side to help the guard quartet spot any hint of danger. Ellie made a hand gesture, so the knights stepped aside before they unlatched the doors and swung the gate open. Sixten readily stepped into this new corridor, but Ellie cautiously stayed behind as the doors were closed, remaining dubious about the cat prince.

“Do not give me something to regret, Tubén. Pardon, *Prince* Tubén,” she warned before the doors shut.

“I shalt not let ye down,” he replied as the doors sealed. He turned and continued down the hall, coming to a circular stairwell. He descended the winding steps until he entered a very large underground chamber. He was immediately struck by the smell of horse manure.

“Sixten!”

The prince was greeted by Zu, wearing armor that was painted to camouflage into a forest setting. Sixten noticed the lack of weaponry at her side, but the empowering presence of several armed and armored warriors maintained a level of hostility.

“It is I, Princess.”

“And do explain why you are here!” Matrease cut in with hands positioned on the handles of the dual short swords on her back.

“I am to accompany her on the journey ahead, by order of her highness,” Sixten replied stiffly, “May I ask what the plan is?”

Matrease released her blades. “Sera! Prepare another horse, we have a new rider. Follow me, Prince.”

Sixten followed Matrease across the chamber, keeping away from the hostile men who guarded the princess. He caught up with the female knight as she neared a large gate. “This is how we get the princess to safety.”

“Where does this gate lead to?” Sixten asked, examining the iron bolstered door.

“This is an old counter-attack constructed by her majesty’s grandfather. It passes the front gate via underground passage to a grove two hundred meters outside the city walls. Once we reach a great distance between us and Kattrike, we will head north and cut across your kingdom’s farmlands.”

“Because the main road will stray too close to Falcourt.” Sixten’s tone saddened when he spoke the name of his obliterated home.

“Exactly, we will cross the farmlands until we reach Russlya, and from there we head to the market gathering for supplies, then east to Mossmoch.”

Sixten’s ears perked in his state of anxiety. “Why would Lord Ripcap offer us asylum?” he questioned, concern audible in his tone.

“The lord’s son, Prince Mitch, has had relations with her majesty. He owes many favors and is related to the princess.”

Sixten glanced back at the fatuous princess attempting to mount a horse. He brought his attention back to Matrease. “Are you claiming that Ripcap’s son is the princess’...”

“Father, yes. Until your own poisoned Lord Kat, Lord Ripcap was very close with the late king. And in turn, their children became close.”

“Matrease, you are no more than two years older than the princess. How have you gathered this information?”

“I have been at the princess’s side since I became a woman, and I learned many things. We are set to leave at sundown. Be ready for it is a three-day ride to the market gathering.”

Half a week later, Sofi Wyon looked up at the mountains in awe but at the same time in distraught that a recent avalanche blocked her only escape. She looked around once more for a detour or bypass that a person of her size could squeeze through. Unfortunately, her search led to no findings for, aside from climbing, there lay no path except for the one she traveled upon after following the river. Disheartened by her futile journey, the cat girl turned her head to look toward the west where uncharted land lay. Sighing under her breath, Sofi started off in the north-west direction, planning to find her way around the vast mountain range.

The cat girl did not get very far before her ears picked up a strange tone of something being drug upon gravel. Looking behind her, Sofi spotted Soldat a few meters away. He dragged his overly sized weapon across the path but gave no indication as to whether or not he had seen her. Frozen stiff with fright, she anxiously observed the blood covered knight for the next dozen minutes. Afterward, her heart calmed down, and she could move her limbs again. As she took a step away, however, Soldat immediately halted and turned toward Sofi with two circles of inflamed green auras upon his face pointed at her. It then raised its sword to point it at the cat girl. From the abrupt lack of sound, Sofi glanced back to check Soldat’s position only to find him taking a few steps to her.

“Aaaaaaahhhhhh!” the cat girl screamed in reaction as she started to sprint. A second later, Lollo’s embodiment appeared before Sofi in the shape of a solid human body, so she would bump into the surprised ghost. Sofi immediately recognized her from a declaration of calamity in Sayer so long ago.

“And what are you doing here?” Lollo questioned with a frown.

“I-I was just p-p-passing by... I-I didn’t m-mean to intrude.”

“Ah, that is alright. Perhaps you are a tad... tired. Would you like my friend and me to give you something to eat? Maybe a drink?”

“N-n-n-no, lady. I do not wish to burden ye. I be on m-m-my w-way.” Sensing the mounting fear in Sofi, Lollo swiftly gave her a shove with one hand. The push sparked with pink-colored electricity-like lines as the cat girl was sent flying to Soldat. In turn, Soldat grabbed hold of Sofi’s waist with his free hand, arched back, and threw her skyward. Whilst the cat girl traveled through the air toward a small opening upon one of the many mountain faces, she screamed with all her might and flailed about wildly, desperate to grab hold of something solid.

A few seconds later, Sofi Wyon felt her body decelerate as she neared the entrance way. Gradually, she stopped moving only to float toward the cave opening. Gasping, the cat girl continued flinging around crazily to grasp at everything. Once her frame entered the opening, she felt as if she were released from someone’s hold. Her body hit the ground face down with enough force to nearly crack the cat girl’s skull as her head was whipped downward with her body.

Groaning, she reluctantly picked herself up to sit crisscross. Sofi rubbed her temple whilst studying her surroundings. Fear still coursed through her veins, rendering her immobile with constant, fearful wonder of what would happen to her next.

“...Where am I?” she whispered to herself after a minute had passed. When Sofi walked outside, she looked down the cliff. Seeing that it would be impossible for her to climb down, the distraught girl went back inside to cautiously trek deeper into this cave Lollo and Soldat had sent her to.

A formation of ten horses trotted into silent mud streets. A creaky old sign hanging from a dusty post read, “Welcome to Russlya.” The only greeting for the riders was a ragged crow that scowled at them from a broken rooftop. Sixten spurred his horse to pass the knight up front. Dismounting in front of a stone building, Sixten’s steel boots splashed in the soggy muck. He pulled his metal boot, which resisted movement from the sludge, to make his way up the town hall steps only to find the rigid birch doors locked.

“It quiet here,” Zu commented, her voice echoing through the deserted town. Sera, wearing only a linen long skirt with a black cotton shirt, moved her horse alongside the princess. Matrease pulled her reins to one side to motivate her mount to rotate in place as she scanned the town. Every home in sight rested solemnly, though their vacancy only added to the feeling of desertion as dry winds somberly sighed throughout the streets.

“Where has everybody gone?” one knight questioned. Meanwhile, Sixten took a step back from the door of the town hall before he put his entire mass behind a heavy kick. The rivets on the door gave way, allowing the weathered gate to topple over to send mounds of dust scattering into the air.

“God help us.”

A spray of rotted organs burst from a body as it was ripped in two by what appeared to be many arms mended to the remnants of two torsos. Standing twelve metres high was a behemoth of adhered corpses that placed the freshly severed legs underneath its mammoth body. Black sinew bonded the limbs to its base as the legs endured spasms before synchronizing their motion with the other dozen sets of legs. The torso of the ripped body, arms included, merged with the hand that tore it. Skin stitched itself together, and red flesh underneath turned black as it began to bind. There came a steaming *hiss* as the arms became one with the hand. The additional fingers started to twitch, and then whole arms started to bend. The monster flexed its hand to stretch out the new digits, exercising them with care. The pieces in its body: corpses, arms, chests and legs, shifted to separate slightly. Through the gaps in the flesh came a murky sap to fill the gap and ensure its rotting mass stayed whole. Four human faces, protruding from spaces between the corpse pieces that made up its chest, opened their eyes as the beast turned around. Sixten could see no sort of “head” atop the torso, only the gazes from its chest coming to focus on him. Slowly, he pulled his sword for its sheath as he stepped forward in the doorway. The monster stumbled around on its legs in order to ready a charge at the prince. Mouths below its eyes snarled, salivating black drool over the ground. But as it snarled, more of the ink-like sap secreted from the seams where body parts conjoined. Sixten’s stomach churned, the tip of his nose cringed at the sickening fetor of rot, threatening to reintroduce him to his morning meal. The tip of Sixten’s blade touched the metal plating over his forearm, the grind of metal casting a tiny spark that disappeared quickly. His gaze never broke away from the monster, just as the monster’s never did from him.

“Prince, retreat from that beast.”

Sixten glanced back over his shoulder at Matrease. “These bodies have been rotting for days. The air is volatile.”

The female guardian gestured to the other troops before diving from her horse, taking Zu to the ground with her. Knights took Sera with them as they rode away from the hall. Sixten struck his armour again; there was a spark, one single spark. A rich mixture of gas and air ignited, though not with a detonation, but rather a fierce burn. A wall of flame burst through the doorway, throwing Sixten from the hall’s steps to the mucky street. He crashed into the sludge and slid backwards until he stopped beside Zu and Matrease. The town hall burned in a hellish inferno around the crying monster within. Sixten picked himself off the ground and offered a hand to Zu. “There was no need for cover; the air was too thick to detonate, Princess.”

Zu accepted Sixten’s hand, allowing him to grace her to her feet. The prince then offered his hand to Matrease. She sneered before knocking away his offer.

“I need no help,” she growled as she stood up. Zu placed a foot in the saddle of her horse, and Sixten grabbed her by the hips to help her board the steed. The two royalties exchange sweet smiles before Matrease cut in between them.

“Do not dare, Prince.”

“I assure you, Matrease, my intentions are pure. I have no-” Sixten was interrupted by a mighty crash through stone walls of the burning building as a raging monster smashed through. In swift reaction, Matrease slapped Zu’s horse, sending the beast stampeding away from the horror towards what appeared to be the town stable. The knights armed their bows to fire into the burning creature’s eyes. The beast stumbled with its hands flailing and striking at non-existent enemies. Blinded by arrows, fire and fury, the monster crashed its fist into a building, then snarled in the direction of the group. The knights spurred their horses and cleared way as the beast almost managed to charge through them and rammed into a store, bringing the entire building to crumbling ruins. But soon, it regained its footing, pulling a bloodied timber out from its torso. Sixten rushed to the blind beast with sword raised high. Hearing the oncoming footsteps, the monster swung its hand in anticipation. The prince ducked under the enormous claw, driving his blade into its wrist as it passed by. The patchwork of flesh lifted the same hand to dangle Sixten who kept a firm grip on his sword’s hilt. It shook its hand wildly, trying to fling the prince away. A moment later, his sword lost its grip and slid free of the creature’s wrist just as it swung upward, propelling the cat prince into the air. Twisting and expertly maneuvering his body mid-flight, Sixten landed on the beast, blade’s tip already aiming at his target. He then jumped off whilst thrusting his weapon at its chest. Quickly, the cold steel ripped down the middle of the undead horror, slowing him to an abrupt halt halfway through the cut. Thinking quickly, he pressed one of his sabatons against the body of the creature and pushed. The massive girth of the monster shuddered before it split in half and collapsed into the muddy street. Sixten’s heavy breaths calmed as he stood up to sheath his sword.

Meanwhile, Sera guided Zu and her horse back to the party as Matrease climbed aboard her own mount.

“Very impressive, Prince.”

“I thank you, Matrease. Let us continue to our destination before more Horrors or Shadows choose to make an unwanted appearance.”

Sixten trudged through the muddy street over to the blazing town hall. His aging horse trotted out from behind a building to approach its rider. The cat prince placed one steel boot in a stirrup and hauled himself up onto his mount. He gently prodded the horse on the side with his heel and pulled the reigns to one side to turn it around, heading back to the others.

At dusk, the sun gave the lake to the west a stubborn, dull red complexion that gradually faded away as the horizon covered the last of the light. A knight with his bow loaded led the line of armoured riders. Zu nonchalantly gazed out into the peaceful sunset as Matrease and Sera kept a steady pace by her side. Sixten followed from behind the leading knight, wielding his own uniquely crafted oak bow. As the sun dipped below the lake’s surface, Zu’s camouflaged armour seemed to shift in color. The shades and undertones of forest khaki faded to a veil of passive black. Small lanterns, hanging upon curved posts, started to line the path. Before long, town lights came into view. The escort of troops let out relieved sighs, but Matrease remained unmoved. She rode up to the head of the column as they reached the heavy iron gates of the market gathering. Above the gate, atop a stone wall were two armed ballistae in addition to a formation of archers. Matrease looked back at the princess. “Milady, please wear your cloak until our departure.”

Sera reached into a satchel on the side of her horse to pull out a cloak to pass over to Zu. The cat girl brought the garment over her shoulders, moving her hands into the sleeves before bringing the hood over her head. Sixten placed his helm over his head and latched it in place as the gates parted way. A hairless man in colorful clothing came walking through the gap before they resealed. He approached Matrease’s horse and gave a low bow along with his greeting: “I welcome ye to Tuhn, home of the grand market gathering. I am Rischell, may I ask ye to state yer business?”

Matrease embellished her most subtle facial expression and tone of voice. “We are armed warriors looking to spend some coin. May we pass?”

Rischell examined the company of armoured troops before him; he fixed the collar of his shirt and smiled politely. “Of course, the cavalry is always welcome, though I ask for you to bring forth yer weapons; we shall have no wild antics within our walls.”

“Of course. Men, you all heard him. Weapons up front.”

Once Matrease and her company unhooked their swords and removed their bows, the gate opened. Rischell led the new arrivals through the gates and pointed one hand to a waiting cart, “You may store yer equipment in there. The guard house is where it shall be kept till ye depart.”

Matrease and company rode past Rischell, depositing their weapons in the wagon as they rode past it. Once the last rider entered the gates, the mighty doors closed. Two guardsmen guided the new arrivals to a stable to hitch their horses.

An hour later, with horses safely stored away and an entire home rented for the night, Matrease set up watch. Two knights lay in wait by the front door of a small, one room home. Sixten sat alone in a corner, sorting through his pack as Sera tended to Zu’s aesthetics. Soft creaks sounded from some hinges as Matrease once again opened the window shutters to check outside.

“What disturbs you, Lady Matrease?” a knight questioned. Matrease’s hand explored the empty sheath on her back.

“I feel as if curious eyes are on us. This is a town of shady dealers, back stabbers, and crooked overlords. We must stay on guard.”

“With the lack of Lord Yrey to keep order, they would have only become worse,” Sixten noted. Matrease nodded in agreement. Outside of the window and across the street, a person darted in between crates. Matrease made a quick gesture, so the knights responded by taking positions along the walls, all within an arm’s reach of the princess. Sera tucked Zu under one arm while pressing her cloak over her shoulders. The knights brought combinations of short daggers and ragged knives from the plates of their armour.

“Prince, have you a weapon?” a knight whispered. Sixten shook his head. The knight tossed a sheathed blade in his direction. Sixten caught the blade and checked it, a dagger 18 centimetres long. He gave a nod of thanks before answering Matrease’s summoning motion. He crept over to her: “What is your plan?”

Matrease checked out the window. “It could be nothing, but I am not one for taking risks. You and I will go out there to ensure that there is no threat.”

Sixten slid his sheathed dagger between the plates of his armour, then followed Matrease out the door. A storefront occupied the opposite side of the street with a line of homes at its back. Stacks of crates piled up in front of the stores, each one placed as if casually dropped into place. Matrease’s hands once again reached for the non-existent blades on her back out of habit as she circled around the crates. Sixten scanned his surroundings; he barely noticed the crackling noise of a loading bow. He raised his arm in a split second to deflect the arrow headed for his skull. A thug dropped down on Matrease from the roof top above her, taking her to the ground whilst trying to pull out his knife. Matrease planted her plated palm on his face before grabbing hold of it. She wrenched the head upward and sideways, snapping the spine as if it were a brittle wooden rod. The knight shoved the body off of her, spotting Sixten as he charged toward the shadow where the arrow came from. He tackled the archer, driving his dagger into what he hoped to be a skull. When the corpse did not react, he turned to assist Matrease, who now dealt with two new arrivals. Sixten rushed forward, only to trip over something. A force pulled him high in the air and a snare entrapped his ankle to dangle him like a puppet. He made a move for the knot, but the tips of his gauntlet barely grazed stray fibres stretching from the knot.

“Oy, man in the armour!”

Sixten looked at the speaker, and blood sprayed from his mouth as a heavy club met his jaw.

Matrease found herself facing off against three men: one wielding a bloodied board, others armed with short swords. The female knight sneered as three of her knights emerged from their safe house, surrounding the thugs as Matrease barked, “Give me back my weapons!”

The thugs hunched closer together, back-to-back against one another to defend themselves from the closing knights. There was a sharp whistle from an alleyway. Ten more men rushed in from the alleys: two had bows, but all held swords. Matrease made slow hand signals to her knights before commanding, “Now!”

The knights threw knives at the thugs they encircled, killing the three of them before rushing forth to recollect their weapons. Two arrows bounced harmlessly off of Matrease’s breast plate as she claimed her short swords. She spun the blades dexterously around her hands, gripping them with the blades pointing downward as she broke into an all-out sprint. She charged a trio of armed thugs, parrying their wild slashes whilst impaling their temples with the barbed tips on her blades. Her fluid movements resembled that of a graceful dance across the ground with extreme precision and timing, only complemented by the constant flow of crimson pigments spraying away in smooth arcs from her foes’ bodies.

Meanwhile, her knights had taken up heavier arms, combating the oncoming threats as they revealed themselves from gaps between abandoned buildings. The three knights fought their own battles, each occupied by three attackers to fend off at once. The clashes of steel rang out as the knights slowly gained the upper hand, spilling the life blood of the thugs whilst pushing back the others. Suddenly, a growing light brought Matrease’s focus up to the street. Dozens of men, substantially armed and heavily armoured, came marching forth in unison. Torch bearers hurriedly lit the street for the troops. The seals painted on the armor of the knights gave Matrease cause for alarm. She finished the man at her feet before sheathing her blades.

“Men to me, post-haste!”

The knights heeded Matrease’s call, stowing their blades as they returned to her. The uniform treads of armored boots preceded an approaching column of two dozen steel-clad troops with crossbows slung over their shoulders. They swiftly drew their weapon and loaded iron alloyed bolts. The men, who had assaulted Matrease’s group, made an attempt to retreat. None survived the onslaught from the oncoming warriors. As all the others were massacred, by both sword and bow at the warriors’ hands, one frail archer had turned to flee, dashing across the street to leap onto a beam in order to climb to the rooftops. A bolt lodged in the back of his knee, splitting the joint as he fell to the ground. One guardsman approached him, deaf to the dying man’s pleads for mercy. The guards finished the last of the marauders, and then came to immure Matrease and her men, crossbows primed. Two men cut Sixten down from his snare, his armor clanging when he hit the ground. Matrease gave a sharp, distinctive whistle, bringing the last of her men out from the safe house. Surrounded by her entourage, a cloaked Zu and Sera made their way to Matrease’s side through the line of guards. Two of the silent knights motioned for Matrease and company to follow as they drug Sixten away by the feet. The feminine warrior led her followers in a single file line behind the troops that burdened themselves with hauling the prince. Sixten, who started to moan and shift around, glanced down at his feet.

“What is the meaning of this?!” he snapped. He kicked away the hands gripping his feet, spinning around and jumping to his feet. An overpowering sense of dizziness brought him to his knees as the guards turned to catch him before he fell. Matrease bent forward as she gripped his shoulder.

“We are in the presence of the Tuhn Elite, Prince. If ye wish to live to see the dawning light, mind your tongue. Ye suffered a blow to the head, you need aid.”

Sixten could not argue as his vision weakened. One Elite pulled the prince over his shoulders completely. “Sir Knight, are ye burdened by the prince?” Sera questioned.

The Elite continued walking with Sixten over his shoulders, replying only with a slow shake of the helm. As they progressed through the night time streets, the guard seemed to lose its qualms with Matrease’s group. One by one, they slung their crossbows and sheathed their swords. They finally approached a large wall, behind it a mansion of grand scale with poor decor. Dark windows housed crumbling shutters whilst the front door hosted a variety of vines that extended their green tendrils to the roof. The lack of maintenance in the structure spoke a tale of abandonment and neglect. Abruptly, Zu pulled her hood down, commenting aloud, “Here we stay?”

Some immediately took notice of the young royalty, but others gripped their weapons in anticipation of an ambush. Sera and Matrease both leapt for Zu, bringing her hood up and over her head.

“Milady,” Sera began, “people here are not nice; you mustn’t remove your coverings!”

“I’m sorry,” Zu whispered. An Elite made a series of hand signals to his comrades, pointing to a silhouette on a rooftop. A guardsman pulled his crossbow, firing a bolt at his target, but the person ducked before disappearing over the roofs. The guards circled Matrease’s group and hurried them to the side of the building, one opening a cellar entrance before pointing down. Matrease, her six knights, Zu, Sera and the two dozen guardsmen with Sixten filed into the basement. As they entered, the first detail noticed was the sheer size of the chasm. Twenty five metres it spanned across the circular room with a three metre height. Doors followed the entire circumference of the room, each accompanied by a torch on its side. The Tuhn Elite spread out through the room, placing weapons on the tables before removing their helms. An elderly-looking man opened a door on the far side of the room, his hunched body supported by a thin wooden cane under one of his arms. He made his way to Matrease as two of the Elite laid Sixten on a table, bringing forth bandages, rags, and water pales. As they tended to the prince, the elder cleared his throat.

“You all have come a long way. Why has not one, but two royal members come to the cesspool of Tuhn?” questioned the elder.

“We are *en route* to Mossmoch. We had stayed the night to rest and to resupply when they attacked. Why has the Tuhn Elite come to our aid?”

The elder scoffed, “‘Tuhn Elite’, *hmmph*, we are no more than blades for hire.”

Matrease stood confused. “Thy warriors have policed Tuhn for years, why do ye speak such censure?”

The elder tapped his stick on the ground three times, and a soldier immediately brought a chair to him as well as to Matrease whilst others escorted Zu and Sera to a private room. Matrease’s knights were taken to a long table to sort themselves out. As Matrease took her seat, the elder did the same. The aging man took long, deep breaths before answering her question: “We have chosen this town to base ourselves because of the anarchy found here. We have demonstrated our power with this town, and we are paid to keep it safe for the people who choose to do business here. However, with the loss of Lord Yrey, our revenue has ceased along with our interest for this town’s safety. This brings my curiosity to the royalties you have brought...”

Matrease received an uneasy feeling from the man’s tone, his stare too focused and his expression too sly. “What is it that you seek?”

When the elder clapped his hands, an Elite stood at his side. “The royal often travel with enough wealth to accommodate their every need, is this correct?”

“Perhaps,” Matrease responded.

“And the queen of Kattrike or the king of Falcourt would wish the most secure safety of their heirs?”

Annoyed, Matrease answered, “Yes.”

The old man grinned devilishly. The warrior at his side took hold of his blade. “Then,” the old man began. His warrior drew his blade, and Matrease found herself trying to jump from her chair to take hold of her own blades and defend herself. Strong hands in gauntlets caught hold of her, stopping her attempt. The warrior in front of her spun his weapon around to present the hilt to Matrease. “I would like to offer the services of the Guard, to protect the young prince and princess.”

They released Matrease, so she jerked her arms away aggressively before examining the blade in front of her. She chose to take hold of the elder’s gaze with her own. “The king of Falcourt is slain, and Kattrike is under siege. Your men will journey unpaid until the crisis ends.”

The elder grew silent as if looking for signs of fib within Matrease. “What are the reports of Falcourt? And Kattrike?”

“Falcourt has been destroyed. Everyone, save for the prince and handfuls of refugees, have been slaughtered. Kattrike has become a bloody war zone. Mossmoch is the best chance for reinforcements.”

Several men around the room paused to listen: some clenched fists, others silently signed messages to their comrades. An Elite behind Matrease gestured to the elder, who proceeded to check about the room. He watched his men communicating, then nodded before facing Matrease. “My men are concerned for Kattrike. Many of them come from that city; a few have descended from the unique feline bloodlines as well. This is a favor for Her Majesty.”

“May I ask a question, elder?” Matrease interjected, puzzled at the remark.

“You may.”

“Why do your men not speak? And what favor do you offer?”

The elder sighed, “Their tongues are cut out upon knighting. A mark of shame for those who abandon us or a show of commitment for those who stay. What we shall do is rally the other Vanguard in Tuhn. We set out at dawn. Of our one hundred and fifty men, twenty shall accompany the royalties to Mossmoch. The rest, myself included, shall turn south for Kattrike. Many of us were born there; we shall defend our birth home.”

Matrease examined the blade in her hands, running her fingers over the scratches and worn metal along the edge. She turned the blade over, examining the hilt. The seal of Kattrike was stamped into the handle. “That is very noble and will be much appreciated. Our kingdom welcomes your aid, but I warn you, the foes we face are not of this world.”

“Creatures black as night, as evil as the devil himself. Shadows that circle the skies, wolves from hell, bears from the burning embers of a cursed firestorm and cursed Horrors that roam the land. I have heard of this wicked power, though not of its reach. If this evil falls upon our home, we shall strike back upon it with the power of the Great One.”

Soaring columns of flame swallowed the blackened sky, bellowing up from the spreading inferno of Kattrike’s former old town. Collapsed buildings and makeshift fortifications walled off the once vibrant market place. Now it has become a haven in hell, their port in the storm. Held up within the confines of the rubble and barricades, an uneasy sense of calm settled within the soldiers as four dozen archers patrolled the top of the improvised ramparts. Arrows remained taut on the drawstrings as the archers scanned the skies, waiting for any beast to take flight. Below the archers in a uniform pattern that spread evenly across the market hung the burning flames of torches or lanterns. Every square metre glowed eerily from the illumination, revealing shadowy silhouettes of the men patrolling. Through the heavy night air, nervous tensions slowly built around everyone as each man watched for the sinister sign of any Horror.

In the middle of the market and among the broken stalls and crates, Za’s fatigued forces came to rest and to rehabilitate. Squadrons were scattered about the square, none wanting to speak. Of the few sounds that echoed through the air, whet stones grinding metal screeched and steady snores emanated from the exhausted. Heads rose as two figures combed through the crowds. The queen herself strolled tall in the front. She walked through the gathered clusters of her troops, consolidating the weak and praising the wounded. Ellie followed in her footsteps, tending to the wounds of those who were found free of the taint. After treating multitudes of soldiers, she finally came to a young man lying against a barrel. Leather armour strapped to his body, he weakly held a cracked bow that lay across his lap. His complexion was flushed with a sickly green color, and deep gouges in his left hand oozed with black fluid. Ellie came to him, hand locked to the hilt of her sword. The young archer wrote his final words on paper before folding it neatly over his lap.

His fading-brown eyes lifted to see Ellie before he held out his letter. “Please, Captain, gi-\*cough\* this to my brother in the castle. Le-\*cough\* him know I tri-eth my best. I have not thurned into one of those bastards. I am going out like my \*cough\* father in Sayer.”

“Was Sayer your birth place?” Ellie asked, accepting the letter.

“No, Captain. My family comes from Ystad; we went to Sayer after the cholera outbreak... Tell my broth-\*cough\* that I will wartch over him. Till then, I \*cough\* \*cough\* have some blood to spill.”

Ellie slipped the letter into a pocket in her girdle as the archer struggled to his feet. He removed his armour and dropped his bow before picking up a sword. Covered in only his tunic and trousers and armed only with a sword on his hip, he began a slow walk with an awkward gait to the eastern wall. Soon, his legs broke to a furious tremble before buckling under his body. The archer dropped to his knees, head thrown forth as black bile erupted from his mouth. One knight quickly pulled his blade as he approached the tainted Ystadese victim, ready to end his life. The archer raised his hands defensively, yelling something unintelligible before scrambling to his feet. The knight drew his blade back, watching in disbelief as the man sprinted to the wall and climbed over.

Ellie closed her eyes and turned away from the scene as she started toward a church opposite of her on the market grounds. Passing through the large chapel doors, she found an entire congregation of soldiers knelt before a lone preacher at the front. She made sure to make as little sound as possible as she crept over to a ladder. Climbing several stories, Ellie found herself atop the bell tower. At one hundred and seventy five metres high, she looked out over the decimated city, spotting the archer stumbling down the street at least three kilometres away. She saw something creeping in the dark corners around the archer. One four legged figure emerged, snarling. Soon another joined it, followed by an entire pack. Even from her distance, Ellie could see a large collection of fog building around the Ystadese man. A dozen Shadows came to form around him, cackling, teasing. The archer drew his sword, and faintly his voice shrilled, “Come youse bastards! \*cough\* I will tathe you all on!”

Wolves howled before rushing forth, teeth ready to dig into his flesh. Even though he was handicapped, the Ystadese man fought valiantly. His blade moved with consecutive slashes in quick flourishes. He sliced through half of the pack before something came charging from the shadows. Clad in silver armour, it rushed forth, slicing all Shadows in its path, hacking clean through the wolves. The Ystidese man spread his arms, as if to embrace the knight. The two ran for each other as if old friends until the knight swung his blade, the archer sliced in two. The newcomer continually smashed his blade into the archer until bloody paste splattered itself on his armour like an explosion. Then the knight stood boldly over the bodies and unleashed a demonic roar. Ellie stood in shock, yelping when a hand grabbed her shoulder.

“Demons, or knights that do not change into Horrors. They merely fuse with the disease and turn into a mindless beast.”

Za released Ellie’s shoulder to draw back the string of a long bow. She pressed a finger along the shaft of her arrow. Za carefully aimed, staring intently at the beast for a few moments longer before releasing her arrow. Across the market, sailing over rooftops, the arrow punctured through the demon’s shoulder plate. The projectile shattered the rusted metal, thick dark red blood spurting through the gaping wound.

Za scowled at the demon. “Damn that creature, he is too far.”

The bow groaned with the strain as a second arrow was drawn, whereas the demon wandered off to inspect what had disturbed his moment. He picked up the arrow, sniffing it before changing his focus to the tower. Za smiled as she carefully aimed toward slightly above her target.

“I have you now.”

She released the arrow. The arrow zipped through the air whilst falling forward, homing onto its target. Again, the arrow came smashing against the cobblestones near the demon’s feet.

“Curses!” Za snapped. She glanced down to a roof top to see a ballista rotating on its mount as three men loaded a javelin into it. One soldier raised his arm, dropping it a second later with the command, “Fire!”

As the rope lost tension, the javelin flew from the mechanism, its aim true. The heavy shot pinned the large mass of the demon against a building. A second later, the wall collapsed over the steel clad corpse.

“He was too far.” Ellie remarked, glancing over at her companion.

“I will not hesitate to try again if another monster appears, but alas, let us head back inside. The cavalry is readying a large counterattack, and we will ride with them.” Za turned around and started down the ladder. Ellie looked out over the embers of the city before following.

“We will ride with thunder, striking like lightning, milady, silver streaks smiting the dark shadows looming over our lands.”

Once they reached the bottom of the ladder, the two silently walked toward the door. Outside, Za continued, “Strike we will. I pray only that my daughter is safe out there.”

“We sent the most elite of our army with her, Za. Your daughter is safe.”

The two cat women ascended a narrow pathway leading to the castle walls whose stone structure wheezed with dust from old age. The massive metal gate rose to greet Za and Ellie as they proceeded to the main guarded doors of the castle. A quintet of royal guards opened the doors that lead to the throne room where hundreds had gathered. The queen and knight captain slipped through the crowd to the corridors thereafter. Navigating halls filled with patrolmen, they came to the gate in which Ellie had seen to Sixten a week before. The guards opened the door, permitting the two women to pass through to a subterranean stable below. As they made the final steps into the stable, the fetid smell of fresh manure struck them with like a searing hammer on an anvil. Ellie dabbed her watery eyes with a handkerchief as they approached the half-thousand troops tending to their horses. A knight, armour adorned with ribbons and markings, stepped forth toward the queen. His heels clanged as he switched postures, his hand coming to a strong salute.

“Milady, five-hundred and thirty men ready to strike.”

Za nodded while addressing him, “Commander Bis. We are riding out tonight to position ourselves outside the east gate. When the church bell rings, a barrage of stones will be fired to destroy what blocks the entrance. Once our path is clear, flood the city. If it isn’t mounted, kill it.”

Commander Bis dropped his salute to bow slightly. “Yes, milady. I shall send the orders, though may I present a query?”

“You may,” Za responded.

“How many demons crawl east of town compared to our numbers? It was the first district to fall, and it has yet to burn.”

“I have no answer, Commander, but I know we will be outnumbered. There will be spotters directing ballista and catapult fire from the church tower. Tell your men that if they doubt their strength to sound a horn to summon artillery.” Za parted ways with the commander, Ellie following as she maneuvered through the crowd of awaiting cavalry. She came to the far end of the subterranean stable to a quartet of reserved horse stalls, two of which were empty. The two remaining horses, bodies built with toned muscles, were protected in metal plates and mail. Za mounted her horse as did Ellie before they trotted out to the main gates of the stable. Meanwhile, whispers spread about the room, a moving tide that swashed over the men that aligned themselves before the queen. The knights held various weaponry that ranged from pikes and halberds to swords of a variety of sizes as they readied for their departure. The queen gazed at the patient men of her troops and their worn helms, the burden of their lives weighing down on her shoulders. She cleared her throat, however, and ignored the heavy burden as she spoke with a strong voice.

“Men! Listen well! Our final judgment arrives this very nigh! I ask not for your sacrifice, but for your courage and strength. Ride with me, comrades and former rivals alike, as we smite these cursèd demons from our homes! Those cowardly turn if you wish, but all who fear not death, embrace your rage and cast aside your fears. Keep your weapons at the ready, hold them strong, do not relent in their use. If you have any thoughts of retreat, abandon those now for when the gates behind me open, it will be for the last time. There will be no retreat, no respite, and no surrender! Know this! Fighting now means a chance at salvation for our children and our children’s children! Tonight, we all fight to the death! Tonight, we become legends to those who look back to this day, a day of infamy yet filled with brave warriors who brought an end to this Armageddon. Tonight, we are a divine force, slaughtering every wretched monster that moves! Tonight, we scorch the sky with our proudly scintillating armor and blacken the earth with the remains of our common foe! Tonight!” Za paused shortly for a quick breath, “We take back our land!”

The massive gathering erupted in cheers, applause, and sharp sounds of weapons clanging against armour. Za put on a stern expression and spun her horse around.

“Open the gates!” she commanded.

The heavy doors of the stable creaked open to reveal a long tunnel with a small, sparkling source of light. With Za in the front, the army marched forth.

On the verge of regurgitating from a large mass of blood swirling around in his throat, Garold forced himself to swallow the viscous liquid for fear of alerting the greedy beasts that were busy dismembering his family’s bodies. An overpowering stench of death drifted about to spread to every single nook and crevice it could find, including Raspit’s nostrils, which made them flare whilst his eyes watered from some unknown substance accompanying the foul odor. He then shifted his chin toward his chest, unable to continue viewing this heart-wrenching scene, but that only drove his attention toward a menacing hole at his stomach. Intestines, both large and small were strewn all over his obdurate corpse with tell-tale signs of having been chewed upon. Steam rose from his fatal wound, assisting in throwing Garold’s own gore-filled scent everywhere in his home. Blood speckled his clothing and skin, remaining moist due to the humid environment the marauders had brought along with them, and each time the man dared to shift his failing limbs, faint cracking coupled with sounds of blood sloshing about prevented any plan he engaged in next.

Intensified at his neck, pain shooting throughout his body created a temporary impetus, coercing his head to stretch back out and point his eyes in the direction of his former wife and two children. Shock immediately bolted around within his mind as he noticed something strange occurring with their marred cadavers.

Like a string of puppets performing on stage, their carcasses dangled in mid-air to shake and tremble as if a puppeteer high above and hidden behind the chaotic storm were mocking Garold’s mental constitution with jest-ful cavorting of what used to be his loved ones. After a dizzying dance that seemed to be consisted of ten-folds of parts each lasting a decade long, their bodies converged together in a tight embrace like a gesture of goodbyes. Once they joined, however, they quickly flew apart as if there were an invisible explosion at their centre. This soundless force caused the three persons’ torsos to split open and stretch the ribs to the side in likeness of outstretched wings, exposing tenebrous hearts refusing to halt their own beating.

A second later, all six of their arms collected at Garold’s wife of an antecedent time. They began to plunge their joints into various points where the corpse’s ribs protruded whilst two heads, both of his children, hovered to conjoin on the neck of the transforming cadaver. One of the children’s own body then attached itself on its back, flapping its ribs to support this new model. Afterward, a sound resembling that of slime creeping across a surface echoed as blood coated every square centimeter of the figure’s expanse, forming a new rose red skin that gleamed each time lightning struck.

Screeching with both heads, the nascent creature flexed its multiple arms in practise and rolled its heads around with bone-snapping noises before it shot up through the ceiling, already broiling with an unnatural rage united with a deep hunger. The second child’s body then reconnected itself with the last head, the mother’s, though the seams between neck and cranium settled into a thick scar due to mismatch of size. It flapped its small wings profusely, but it screamed with the voice of Garold’s wife, shaking its head around violently in unknown pain.

Garold’s eyes widened further when skin and flesh dripped off this creature’s temple, trickling bits and pieces of sludge-like drops until only bone remained. Unfortunately, its eyes stayed, and they began to twitch, each one looking in different directions as the last of macerated flesh fell from its bone. Meanwhile, blood dripping from its chest foreshadowed the path from which its heart and lungs would descend. Blood vessels dangled after its organs ripped themselves out, slowly twisting around each other into seven separate braids. Once finished, they curled and reached outward in a horizontal direction accordingly with the creature’s chest as a single point poked one centimetre out from the centre. Afterward, the jaw dislocated to plummet down and join the rest of the discarded parts whilst its new point opened in likeness of a beak to continue its acrid screeching.

With his vision failing, Garold felt around him using his only working hand. Its palm brushed against shreds of skin and other various bodily tissues, disgusting Garold as he felt their gelatinous texture. He maintained a steady movement, however, until his hand finally landed upon the hilt of the sword he had dropped earlier.

As Raspit’s calloused skim made contact with arid leather, his heart profusely pumped what blood he had left to his brain and to his arm to help him realize what situation he lay in. Because of these creatures that sprouted from Lollo’s nefarious powers, Garold now found himself in a hopeless position, failing to protect his family and helplessly lying on the floor, partially immobile. He felt weak, inferior in this bedlam like an unseen fruit fallen off a tree to rot away without purpose.

A sick feeling within him bloomed into a stony flower with petals covered in minuscule thorns as if the sensation itself were physically manifesting itself, attempting to hold back Garold and silently whispering in his ear to stop. It told him in an alluring but soundless voice to leave what is done and to rest as he unconsciously contained want of. Then a blanket of heat strangely coiled itself around Garold to take the exact shape of his body, further goading him to sleep.

Just as Garold contemplated sleeping, he noticed the beast again. Its eyes wildly spun around in their sockets whilst its frame slowly drifted from one direction to another, indicating indecisiveness similar to a characteristic belonging to Raspit’s former lover. Fraught with rage, Garold’s body squeezed the last of its adrenaline out of its glands to allow the man to swing his arm around. He yelled as he threw his blade at the creature, who began to fly away. In a split second, the beast darted to the side, barely dodging the weapon as the blade flew in an arc to stick itself back into the floor below. Giving a squeal this time, the creature swiftly moved to hover above Garold’s deteriorating body and observed his ebbing spirit. Its eyes stared directly into his, almost as if it were curious as to what he would do next. Panting heavily, Raspit gradually lifted his head to spit at the being.

“May He utilize the gavel of justice and serve the punishment from the heavens to all of ye who bow to Satan.” In a final act of defiance, Garold Raspit put what strength he could muster into one last punch.

A red glow broke over the horizon, the ambivalent gift from the sun to a scintillating Kattrike, but, as the light washed over the land, a royal cavalry came to formation. Before the troops, beyond a tree line and past a hedge grove, a gate stubbornly stood before the path to eastern Kattrike, barring any passage. With her commander on her left and her knight captain on her right, the queen proudly stood tall at the helm of her troops. Za held her sword to her side, its tip tapping the calves of her armour each time a strong breeze blew through the castle grounds. A harsh scowl furled over her eyes as she frowned at the tainted half of the city.

“Commander Bis, sound the horn.”

Acknowledging the order, the royal commander gave an obedient nod as he answered, “Yes, ma'am.”

Swaying from the man's neck was the horn of a ram. Curved around itself like a marine shell, the horn boasted delicate carvings along its surface, symbols that indicated this instrument signified Kattrike, and once the wielder blew into the horn, it let loose a powerful deep bellow that carried itself for kilometres around. In immediate answer, three massive boulders simultaneously launched from the ground toward the city’s gates. They arced fluidly, and six tonnes of heavy weight crashed through the metre thick wall before breaking up into multiple projectiles. Debris flew everywhere, ranging from splintered oak boards to gnarled shards of iron, all spreading away from a wide crater. Before the cloud of dust cleared, the queen and her cavalry pulled out their swords from their sheathes, eyes darting from side to side in anticipation.

At this moment, Za nervously glanced back to her commanding officers whilst bringing her sword up, pointing toward the sky. Her eyes locked onto theirs with an unspoken message of doubt, but her men looked back with an air of confidence and faith. Ellie herself raised her sword before giving her friend a stern nod. Moments later, the rest of the officers did the same.

Without a single word, Queen Za brought her long sword down, and the entire army charged forth, shouting a battle cry that echoed through the wind and the flying dust. A flood of steel and iron inundated the city streets.

The thundering quake of five hundred galloping horses acted as a hammer that smashed open Pandora’s Box. The deathly silence was now broken by both Za’s forces and the shrills of thousands of unnatural beasts taking to the skies. Their sudden cries summoned forth more and more vile creatures from the many buildings, quickly bolstering their mass to a size that easily engulfed the invaders. The horrors on the ground stomped on the ground rhythmically, creating a miniature earthquake as the beings in the air clustered together to blanket the whole city in a dark shadow.

At the fortified ruins of the market atop the tower of a crumbling church, massive bells swung. In unification, all the archers released their bowstrings, sending a solid wall of arrows into the sky. Whistling through the air at breath-taking speed, the arrows saturated the sky before the Shadows like a giant block of sharpened hail flying upward. It did not matter how well the creatures maneuvered for the tight cluster of steel tips on javelin-like projectiles provided no leeway for escape. Their dissolving corpses rained upon the large army whilst the few survivors quickly darted away, some daring to scrape the ceiling of the sky and others swooping low to the ground.

At the helm of the charge galloped the commanding knight who held a javelin with a spearhead connected at the bottom end. He led the cavalry down a particular street where he bent low from his horse, gripping his saddle to keep his balance as he swung at the Shadows that skimmed across the ground. They darted left and right, up and down, twisting, turning and dissipating, but the ambushed Shadows found no respite in this ruthless onslaught. Those that desperately ascended found themselves back inside the massive barrage of arrows whilst the few that tempted fate on the ground barely avoided the slice of a blade or the sharpened point of a spear time and time again. As her men gradually divided the odious sea of black, Queen Za’s army shouted their battle cries jovially amidst the caterwauls of the Horrors.

Further down the road lay a convergence of two main roads that were the city’s arteries of trade. At the intersection itself, a black fog rapidly concentrated until it formed an opaque solid wall. There were several ripples in the fog as Horrors squeezed amongst each other, and it continued to grow as the retreating Shadows came to join the fog, their forms turning to nothing but ripples that added to the size of the wall. Without warning, the wall once thought to be a stationary form began to revolve. Like a hurricane of volcanic ash a solid black smoke, the mass spun and expanded. Horrors once taking refuge within the clouds came down to join the new vortex spreading throughout the streets to meet the oncoming cavalry.

The tide of steel met with the swirling mass of black fog to unleash a tsunami of screams both human and demonic. From the other side of the fog emerged several horses, though the stallions’ flesh was dwindled down to bare bones that collapsed onto the street. Joining the stripped horses fell human skeletons and brittle armor, clanging on the hard stone path. However, without warning, the maelstrom collapsed. The fog reeled into the street, thousand Horrors and Shadows vanishing with it. When the dust cleared, not a trace of the monsters remained other than an open crevice torn open in the street.

The rhythmic hoof tromps of the charging cavalry did not pull back Za’s mind from its deep thought. Her wandering mind matched her inability to pull her eyes away from the skies above, her irises focused on a single sliver of orange substance that slipped through the dark. The queen’s attention finally drew away as a new light struck her face. Ripples of this light cast across the city as the sun peeked up from the horizon. Za remained fixed in curiosity as the sky once filled with Shadows began to clear. Flocks of the creatures swooped in low along the ground, their screams now attracting the feline queen’s attention. She took hold of the saddle as she leaned off her horse, slashing her blade at the Shadows passing under her mount. Soon, many of her knights mimicked the action to kill the beings that tried to flee.

A duo of Horrors, sprayed in crisp red blood, shrieked as they charged at the queen’s horse. Blade ready, Za swung as the first came into her each. The second, however, tore a large chuck of flesh off of the horse’s left leg. The stallion whinnied in pain as it bucked, throwing off Za to a pile of crates to the side. Groaning, she slowly picked herself up rubbing her back. Gritting her teeth, she removed herself from the wreckage, stumbling across the alley. As her vision cleared, she searched for her weapon which had flown away from the fall. A glint of light caught her eye through the charging body of soldiers. Impaled on the cobblestones lay a blood spattered Horror, a blade driven through its head. One knight broke off from the formation to pull the rapier out of the corpse. He managed to pass through the cavalry again in order to hand the weapon to Za.

“Milady, what happened?”

“I was dismounted by a monster, Sir Knight. Let us get underway.”

The knight led his horse across the street before a scream alerted him. In less than a second, a Horror, one of the two who struck at the queen, tore into his horse. The beast was pushed to the side, taking the knight with it. Excitedly, the Horror stuffed its mouth with blood-strewn flesh. Its focus changed as the queen rushed forth, dagger drawn. It jumped high as the queen drew close, beating its wings once before perching on a roof. The Horror smiled at the queen, staring intently into her eyes. Its eyes were not fully black, but rather muddy brown. Something inside its throat contorted violently before the Horror opened its mouth. At first, Za heard a distant gurgle followed by a scream that did not sound as if it came from this creature. The queen felt her heart beating wildly in reaction as she recognized the voice.

It was the scream of Zu.

“Matrease! You’re huwt! Don’t be huwt! I need you!” Za heard.

The horror’s impersonation was flawless from the high pitch tone Zu’s own voice peaked at in distress to the distinct accent native to Kattrike’s people. Za hesitated, unsure of whether to believe this cry to be true. But the Horror giggled as its voice dropped an octave, becoming more focused but less calm. Panic filled the creature’s tone as it projected the voice of Sera. Just as it had done with the voice of the princess, the Horror spoke with perfect imitation of the maid: “Princess, run to Sixten! Go! AAAAHH!”

Za snarled, her hands closing into fists, trembling with anger. The metal that made up her gauntlets screeched sharply as blood lust clouded her mind and her pupils widened greatly. Want of vengeance pushed away reason as it crawled into her thoughts.

By now, her pupils grew to the point where Za’s eyes resembled a demon’s, but once she gripped her weapon tightly, a new voice came from the Horror, one that laughed in an echoing chortle, one that belonged to Lollo.

“Your fight for survival is most entertaining. You pathetic mortals strive for life so desperately, but it all is in vain. Look at your men, *Queen Za*; look at how easily I can manipulate their fears, bringing them under my command. One by one they fall, giving their lives for a lost cause. You cannot save them, not your people, not your friends, not yourself, not even your precious daughter. You are all pawns on a chess board with you as queen and Sixten as the worthless king piece, the one trying to protect himself with *your* knights, bishops and rooks. Your efforts are all for naught, for my many pawns have torn down almost all of your pieces. Prepare yourself for the fall of your king piece. Checkmate, you weak mortal.”

The Horror took flight when Za threw her rapier at it, receiving a glancing scratch to its belly. It ascended through the clouds above until it could not bear the searing sunlight anymore, so it dove back down, flying unsteadily and screeching horribly before disappearing out of sight. Za's legs trembled weakly, her muscles turned to gelatin. The enervated cat woman fell to the ground on her knees, her head hung low as fresh tears dropped from her reddened eyes. Her weeping drew her focus away from a shifting body under the toppled horse. The knight squirmed and crawled his way out from underneath. With all the strength he could muster, he pulled himself to the queen’s side. Streams of blood seeped out through a thin crack on his calf plate onto his dragging foot, leaving a crimson trail across the street as he approached the queen. Wherever his skin was exposed, bruises covered it whilst his face and hands adorned gashes and various other wounds.

“Milady, are you hurt? Were you infected?”

Za shook her head slowly but spoke with a grave voice, “Sir Knight, hand me my weapon.”

“Yes, milady.” The knight slowly stood up with shaky legs whilst he presented Za his own blade, unnerved by her demeanor. She firmly grasped the handle before using the sword to prop herself up. The feline queen’s masquerade of courage drained from her face as a blank scowl took its place, but she offered her shoulder. The knight reluctantly leaned against his queen for support. Feebly, they limped down the street silently. A wisp abruptly formed around Za’s feet. She quickly looked down for a short second before slashing at it with her sword. The Shadow immediately materialized, screaming in agony as it clawed at the deep gouge torn along its back. Za knelt down, mercilessly driving her hand through the back of creature and into the chest cavity. Even with a gauntlet covering her hand, she could feel the convulsing organ pumping black fluid throughout the being’s body. The queen gripped the cold blue heart and ran her fingers along the shifting surface to feel the frigid tissue, icy like an iron shield left on the frigorific mountain peaks, before ripping it out and leaving her sword behind. The Shadow lay on the ground, veins strewn from its chest, its limbs uselessly flopping around in hopeless desperation, its jaw open with its black tongue tasting the dusty ground, bile spilled from its throat and wounds. Za and the knight pressed on after the feline woman picked up her sword again, stepping over the scattered and mutilated corpses of both Lollo's demonic creations and her fallen knights. The knight temporarily glanced back at the Horror’s body, noticing that the cold heart on the ground still beat.

Driven by her dwindling strength, Matrease pulled her bloodied short swords from the body of a young man. He looked less than a year older than her, and he drew his final breaths as Matrease struggled for her own. She adjusted her belt, leaning forward in pain whilst returning her blades to their sheathes. The lukewarm rays of the rising sun shone on her breast plate as she rose to her feet, using the door handle behind her as a brace. Before her lay the body of several masked men, one sliced in two. Down the road from her and through the great town gates rode the Vanguard in full retreat, followed by the men who once manned the gates. Cheering atop the gates were hundreds of the masked men who waved shivs, clubs, poorly forged swords and other various weapons in celebration. In the distant crowd, Matrease could make out the figures of Zu and Sixten surrounded by an entourage.

A weak smile of relief crossed Matrease's face, but a spatter of blood erupted from her mouth when she coughed. A thick crimson flow of claret poured out of her side plates along her midsection, draining the color from her face. However, she managed to stumble toward a body surrounded by three of the Vanguard and a half-dozen of the assailants. Using what remained of her strength, she pushed off the body of the Vanguard to uncover a woman who was dressed in simple attire. Lodged in her spine were two arrows while a third protruded from the base of her skull. After pulling the arrows out, Matrease caringly rolled Sera over, hesitantly staring into her blank eyes, small particles of dirt and drops of blood masking her light brown irises.

“Look! There is one left!” someone spoke.

“And it be a *woman*!” another exclaimed, placing a mocking tone on “woman.”

A series of rowdy howls followed suit. Soon, someone abruptly jerked Matrease back, making her crash onto the dirty street, so she had a clear sight of the three men in masquerade.

“Look at her, eh?”

“A real beauty.”

“Too bad some idiot cut her. Look't the blood.”

“Dat doan' mean nutin', we can still grab her now whilst she breaths.”

At the end of his suggestion, the speaker’s companions burst into laughter. With neither will nor strength, Matrease succumbed to them as they fought to undo the latches in her armour. Her eyelids bobbed, coming open before closing again. She forced her eyes open once again, her heart kicking to overdrive as she spotted the the snaking trails of smoke entwining her ankles and those of the men.

Rikard fidgeted with the latch at the female knight's leggings as a sharp tap jabbed into his shoulder. He grumbled before snapping, “Sod off, this is my end.”

Once again he was tapped on the shoulder. “I said SOD OFF!” He turned around, dagger drawn before his face dripped drool from the fangs of a Shadow. Its bony claw latched onto his throat, choking him as his feet rose off the ground. With a sharp movement, the beast snapped his neck and dropped the body. It then morphed into a shadowy form as the other two ran away in fear. Still a wisp, the Shadow took hold of their collars and drug them back to Matrease. The sharp points of its fingers dug into their skulls as its horrid face came to materialize and confront Matrease.

It snarled, but slowly smiled as it spoke. “The mistress congratulates you on your survival in her game. Now she offers... A gift.... In return for a favor of course.”

Too weak to attack, Matrease glared at the Shadow. In her waning strength, she snapped, “Be damned, ye monster. I’d rather burn in the depths of hell than deal with your kind.”

The Shadow growled as it leaned closer. “Even if it meant saving the little princess?”

Matrease sparked up, her eyes opening to their greatest extent. “What?!”

The Shadow released one of the whining men, presenting two green gems held between its fingers before Matrease, each one glowing with an emerald sheen. “Become her Mistress' servant, an extension of her reach, and she will grant one promise, that no harm should come to the princess by the hands of her Mistress' servants.”

Matrease glared into the empty black eyes of the Shadow before her, coughing again a crimson spray. As her vision faded, her mind teetered with debate of her options.

“On her word? An unbroken word of thy master?”

“On the souls of all living creaturessss and on the esssssence of her own unmatched power,” the Shadow hissed. Matrease shifted her attention to the dead body of Sera, still at her feet. Her motionless corpse lay still and cold, mutilated so much that Matrease barely recognized her face aside from her innocent eyes. A memory flashed into Matrease’s mind. Trying to protect Zu, Sera pushed the princess to Sixten, who quickly pulled her away whilst a band of Horrors descended upon Sera. Matrease remembered how they dug their obsidian black claws into Sera’s flesh, how the disgusting squirts of blood exited her young body with a rush and how her scream ringed in Matrease’s ears. Now, the Shadow’s empty sockets burned with a red flame filling their small transparent forms. The Shadow again offered the gems, bringing them closer to Matrease to observe.

“This offer will not last, hesitate longer and these crystals will destroy us both in an explosion which will most certainly take others with us. Grab one in each of your hands if you accept her offer. Accept it and the mistress promises to to protect the princess, daughter of the queen of Kattrike, from all dangers by the Mistress herself and her minions.”

Matrease snarled as she held a stare with the Shadow, but its intense yet calm stare forced Matrease to look away.

“And if her word is broken?”

“Then the contract ends, and her Mistress shall control you no more.”

Matrease looked down at the gems, the fire seemingly compressing itself within the emerald. A ghostly whisper surrounded both Matrease and the Shadow, air whistling into the orbs. Just as they radiated searing light, Matrease covered both gems with her gauntlets, wrapping her fingers tightly around them. She hesitated but finally spoke with a shaky voice.

“...You win. I accept.”

As soon as she finished speaking, the orbs shattered. Filaments of manna slithered out from within the steel gauntlets to hover above Matrease. Slowly, the filaments released a black fog that enwrapped Matrease whilst she stepped back in shock. The fog grew into a viscous liquid that picked her body up, swirling around her violently. The Shadow cackled, leaping into the fog. Its skin and flesh melted as it touched the fog, gradually mixing with the vile liquid. The men watching from a distance suddenly stiffened. They choked and gasped, holding their throats desperately whilst their jaws were forced open. Trails of white gas crept out of their mouths to snake its way toward the black fog. Once the last of the men’s souls were extracted, their bodies fell like abandoned dolls.

Matrease’s eyes widened in pain, the whole of her body searing in hellish temperatures and tortured by the sensation of skin being torn off although the skin itself smelted away to blend with the surrounding fluid. Afterward, her muscles contracted until the doomed knight heard her very bones crunch under pressure. The smell of putrid acid entered her nose, and she realized that some of the vile bile around her seeped in between strands of muscles, slowly digesting her flesh bit by bit. By the time the liquid penetrated her insides, Matrease blacked out, finally passing away before the contents of her skull were encased in a film of horrifyingly rancid ectoplasm.

From the smoke emerged a black gauntlet wielding a darkened short sword with a glowing green gem where blade met hilt. Darkling plates clinked as the rest of the being stepped forth. It blinked wearily with bloodshot eyes, looking down at its breastplate and the insignia of Kattrike still on it.

Amongst the cheering men atop Tuhn's main gate stood one man, horrified of what he witnessed from the walls. The knight walked toward them, whipping its free hand as if it were shaking off a fly. Smoke whistled from the air, replaced by a second short sword a moment later. Its armour of the former guardian glistened brightly, repaired and re-coloured to match the deep black tone of the being’s skin. Fueled with a newfound blood lust, the dark knight sprinted to the wall before leaping unnaturally high. Everyone from Kattrike’s finest to the valiant Vanguards flinched in shock, a precious moment only one man took to run away in fear.

When the being walked away from the structure, the walls bled and dark clouds rolled in to smother the corpse-infested grounds.

The demon once called Matrease sheathed her swords before turning her attention to a shadowy wisp trailing along the ground in a snake-like fashion. It solidified into a Shadow when it reached her feet, growing to an imposing metre above the knight’s head. Something sparked within the being’s skull then, as if a drowsy bear awoke from a winter slumber. The demon blinked at the Shadow, then blinked again, and abruptly, Matrease could see through her new eyes. She gave an involuntary growl that sounded more of a snarl of a hungry wolf. Hesitantly, Matrease brought her hands up to her face. Whilst the Shadow waited patiently, staring at the charcoal hands whose dark aura visibly danced on the skin, Matrease gasped for she saw only clean white bones. Suddenly, the knight’s head snapped back up to look at the Shadow, a movement that indicated her new body was not under her complete control.

“Mistress hopes that you appreciate your new form. Unlike your old body’s mortal counterpart, this one will prove to be quite... Deathly. Do not forget that you are no longer Matrease of Kattrike, guardian to *former* Princess Zu. Your new master, our beloved master, has christened you with a new name, Riddaren. Remember it well for should you fail to answer Mistress’ calls, you will suffer painful consequencesss....”

The Shadow hissed, purposely spraying its viscous saliva all over Riddaren’s armor. She felt a slight pain in her chest, so Riddaren forced her eyes down. She immediately shut them once she saw the symbol of Kattrike distort and contort with ivy stitch work. When the knight opened her eyes again, she felt a sudden release on her body and noticed the Shadow gone. However, a final whisper drifted into her ear.

“Enjoy your final day of freedom, Matreasss...”

“No... I refuse to betray Princess Zu!” Matrease shouted to the empty space in front of her, “I know you can hear me you wretched wench who calls herself witch! We will never surrender! Your reign will end before it ever begins!”

The knight’s ear perked up at the sound of a neigh. A horse, aged and scarred, staggered toward her. Its mane was encrusted with blood and a lame leg forced the stallion to limp meekly. Though torn, a banner of the late Vanguard laid proudly on its back, decorating a ragged saddle. Riddaren walked to it, but she paused as she extended a hand.

“I’ll probably scare it away. After all, I’m not human anymore.”

Contrary to her expectations, the horse continued trotting toward her slowly. It sniffed Matrease for a moment before nudging against her cheek with its nose impatiently. A smile grew on the knight’s face, and she laughed freely, complying with her new friend by affectionately rubbing the side of its neck.

“You and me, we have been through many battles. I’ve lost my friends, and you’ve lost your riders and your caretakers. This apocalypse is no different, huh?” The stallion snorted in response but rubbed its snout against her cheek again, this time gentler as if it were thanking her.

“We risked our lives so many times and would do so again an infinite number of times for what is ours. Alas, your life is much simpler than mine and much happier, too, because you know what you are fighting for in the end. For me, I devote my life to Zu’s safety so that she may rule with fewer worries. But now that Kattrike and every other kingdom as far as the eye can see are gone, what is there to rule? A ruined land filled with rotting corpses? A desecrated lake whose veins cry with blood? Or the crumbling buildings we used to live in but are now nothing but artifacts of a nightmare? Perchance the black skies that might never reveal a hint of sun again? What matter does it that Zu should live? Or that anyone lives? That the two of us continue fighting?”

Riddaren sighed whilst fidgeting with the dry blood on the horse’s mane. It snorted again, turning to the side. With a small smile on her lips, Matrease scratched its back. She managed to smile wider when she saw the stallion’s ears twitch in relief.

“Maybe... Maybe we are all fighting for the same thing, both man and beast. What we say we fight for: our land, our freedom, our families; are all just justifications to what we really fight for because the real reason sounds so absurd and meaningless. We fight for life itself, so that it may continue this endless cycle of birth and death until the end of time. We refuse to die because we want to strengthen life with every second of our existence before it is inevitable. We strive for our children to strive for their children and so on and so on to keep this idea of ‘life’ alive. All of us agree to life, like signing a contract, to fulfill what life requires of us and not what we require of life. You animals understand this better than us because we lost long ago the sight of what is truly important. Wealth is not important, and neither is the freedom to live. What is important is to keep fighting, to continue playing this repetitive game life set up for us, in order to fuel life for the next decade.... I have unwittingly given up my freedom for the only cause I have left. Soon, this body of mine will leave and I with it. My old friend, I am no expert, but I can tell your body will soon give in as well. Will you shed your freedom to fight with me?”

Her companion swatted at the air with its tail, but slowly moved its head around to look at Riddaren. The two stared silently at each other for another minute, the only sound from the knight’s gauntlets scratching the stallion’s hide and from the swoosh of its tail. When the horse pulled its head away, Riddaren pulled her hand back to draw the short sword with a green gem.

“Okay... I am not sure how this works, so I’m sorry if I hurt you.”

Uncertain about how to wield the sword, Riddaren pointed it at the tired animal whilst concentrating on transformation. She imagined a dark cloud swirling around the body, and the green gem on her hilt lit up in reaction. Encouraged, the knight concentrated harder, closing her eyes when she felt a strange energy pulse through her body. It bounced up to her forehead before returning back down. Redirecting itself through Riddaren’s arms, the pulse traveled along the sword handle before pausing at the gem. The gem grew brighter and slivers of a dark substance escaped its surface. Afterward, the pulse burst from the gem in the form of a viscous black liquid that curved back to cover the blade. The horse whinnied as the fluid shot from the blade to its body. It struggled to escape the grasp of the cloud, but soon it was engulfed in darkness, experiencing what Matrease had felt.

Riddaren lowered her sword but did not open her eyes until she felt the same pulse of energy reenter her body. She gasped at the sight of the stallion, no longer a horse but a likeness to demons she had fought. Covered in a black film, her companion’s flesh shrunk as it hardened to a stone-like quality. Its joints and spines jutted through the skin with a sickly yellow tone, and the bristles of its tail were replaced with vines armed in thorns. Its mane disappeared and whenever the beast snorted, its breath came out as a purple cloud that took a moment to dissipate. Riddaren looked at its new dark blue eyes, but they stared back at her blankly, waiting for an order. The knight frowned, but sheathed her sword and climbed up onto an obsidian saddle decorated with carvings of euthanasia. Suddenly, her ride gave a familiar snort, and the knight smiled again.

Riddaren placed her boot in the stirrups and took hold of the reigns. With a yell, she kicked against the stallion’s side and the two rode off on a path Zu’s party took.

“Surely, Soldat, had you not over-exerted yourself following commands of those who deserved to die in the first place, your energy would not have dipped so much,” Lollo casually spoke with the knight as both she and he ominously floated into the cave entrance. However, Soldat did not answer with words, only responding by the clanking noise of the bulk of his armor and sword. Meanwhile, Lollo drifted off ahead of him, gliding through the air effortlessly due to her legless being.

“Oh, but don’t worry my pet. I have gathered the perfect thing to revitalize your strength,” Holding up a child’s beating heart in her hand, she cackled as she continued speaking, “The heart of a young human, vigorously pumping the will to live throughout the rest of its body, fueling the human mind, and in turn, the human spirit and its very life force. Constitution, or mental resilience, intellect, ardor, and even the parts of spirit which they call bravery... Bravado and stupidity if you ask me. All of these wonderful features bound together within each *mortal* human with just the right amount of each ingredient to concoct individual souls. This boy held much courage, I can taste it in the air - it is that palpable. Oh, please be a deary and lay your sword on the ground. It would take more time than I would want to endure traveling back to my deepest lair, and I already feel a pull of zest to return to oversee my flawless game of which I will certainly win. I shall replenish your depleted energy here.”

Obediently, Soldat moved to Lollo’s front before kneeling. He then took his sword, raised it above his temple with its tip pointing at the ground, and drove it down with enough force to sink its blade halfway down. Afterward, the quiet knight withdrew his hands, though reluctantly. As they retreated from his sword’s hilt, aberrant bolts of electricity crackled from his gauntlet to the weapon’s shoulder, coupled with a black aura spreading from the current to enwrap Soldat’s frame.

In exchange, the knight’s armor began to dissolve, liquefying before streaming along lines coursing throughout his nude body. The cloak and hood on his back withered away into black fog before becoming one with his own smoky form. Molten metal of what was once his armor glowed from red to yellow and from that to white as the heat it radiated intensified. Soon, the self-deliquescing armor gathered at Soldat’s right palm before it emulated the path of the electricity and melded with his sword’s metal.

The knight remained kneeling whilst his weapon’s guard began to glow, radiating lukewarm heat as its centre slowly opened up. A small gem, indigo in hue but faded to a powerless ocean blue, drifted out of the guard toward Lollo, whose fist stretched its finger outward to reveal Mathias’ vim-ful heart, seemingly writhing in her palm with each beat.

Sofi Wyon watched in disgust from behind a large boulder resting no more than three metres away from Lollo and Soldat. A glob of fluid threatened to climb up her throat and expel itself out in the form of vomit, but, fearful of what horrors Lollo could force upon her, the wary cat girl forced the rancid liquid back down. Whilst the separated heart started to float upward, something in Lollo’s other hand caught Sofi’s attention. There, she held a black wand, capped with a golden figurine of a cat’s head. Excited by this, Sofi managed to discern slivers of a mysterious substance escaping the wooden object like string being unwrapped from a loom. They gathered at Mathias’ heart, guiding it through the air and gently pulling it toward the exposed jewel.

Suddenly, Lollo’s head twitched, and she gradually turned her head in Sofi’s direction. The cat girl panicked, quickly ducking as she cupped her mouth with both hands. A rock she perched on shifted a few centimetres, instantly engulfing Sofi with fear, but propitiously, it did not produce an audible sound. However, the cat ghost continued staring in her general direction, observing the quivering cat girl’s only protection, a pile of boulders lying dry and cracked in abandonment.

Silence only grew to the point where every sound became amplified. Sofi heard her own heart beating rapidly against her ribcage whilst Lollo’s fingers twitched at each breath of cool wind entering the cave. Soon, though, Lollo shook her head at herself before turning her head away.

At the very moment she curled the fingers on her open hand, Mathias’ beating remains began to drift ever so closer toward the glimmering stone. Zoo’s own cardiac organ started to pump blood profusely, fueling a superfluous amount of blood to her head for the cat girl’s racing thoughts. Then, she dared another peek at Lollo, fixating her eyes on the wand. Mentally, Zoo marked the object as her paramount target, knowing from what she had seen that separating wand from cat ghost would at least temporarily halt her destructive madness.

In a burst of speed, she shot out from her concealment to launch herself at Lollo. Zoo gave a primal scream as she reached for the cat ghost’s wand. Swiftly gliding through the air, her body resembled a linear projectile with the cat girl’s palm able to make contact with one of Lollo’s hands.

“You defiant little brat!” Lollo cried out whilst she struggled to keep a grip on her wand. Aggravated, she extended her arm, instantaneously sending sparks from the tip of her wand to Zoo’s own. The cat girl screeched in pain as the sparks seared her skin. At the same time, her body pulled itself away from Lollo to quickly accelerate in the same direction the cat ghost pointed.

Still shrieking, Zoo flailed her limbs about in desperation of grabbing onto something solid. In the midst of her forced flight, her right hand slapped something soft and moist. She turned her head as fast as she could to barely catch sight of Mathias’ heart rebounding off of her palm and flying away in a different direction.

Soldat remained still, continuing to kneel to the side next to his weapon. Not a single muscle moved even as the former Mathias’ stubborn organ slammed into his chest. Instead of bouncing off of Soldat, however, the heart slightly sunk into his flesh with a silent splash-like noise whilst Zoo flew over Soldat and his sword to land a few dozen meters deep inside the cave. Lollo gazed at the taciturn knight with both curiosity and anxiety.

For a few seconds, nothing happened, but when Lollo started to float toward Soldat, her arm involuntarily rose to point the tip of her wand at Mathias’ heart.

“What? What is this?” she mumbled before a thin diaphanous beam erupted from her wand’s golden cat head figurine to cover the distance between her and the knight. Like an impetus, the beam caused Mathias’ heart to slowly sink deeper into Soldat’s chest until it no longer left any muscle exposed on his skin. Once it finished entering Soldat, Lollo regained control of her arm, so she immediately pulled it back, the beam dissippating in the same instant.

“What is happening?” Lollo asked with a panicky voice. As if it were answering, her wand’s figurine opened its mouth to spill out a string of visible words slithering toward the knight.

“Si quando procella de tumulta putus nanciscunt terra de ordo purus, eventus extrarius est initientis ut crere praesentia potens ut est vocantis perfectus,” vocalized an unseen voice whilst Soldat’s body lost its aura.

Slowly, his being dissolved away to be replaced by a scintillating brilliance for a split second before it suddenly shifted to a deep darkness opaque to even the brightest of lights. For the next dozen moments, it switched back and forth from radiance to obscurity as if it were unable to decide what to settle into.

Frightened, Lollo backed up until she reached the mouth of her cave, forcing herself to cautiously observe this phenomena. She watched as the metamorphosing being rose up in the air, revealing its spherical shape yet indistinguishable features barely visible to the naked eye. The cat ghost, on the other hand, gasped at what she managed to discern once she aided her sight with supernatural means.

“I must destroy it. Whatever the outcome, it will most certainly not be my ally.” As Lollo raised her wand, she slightly wondered in her mind whether her only defense would still obey her.

Zoo groggily picked her head up, though reluctantly, to glance at the direction she flew from. Soon, however, her pupils burned at intermittent flashing from the entrance. The blinding effulgence would fill the entire cave with light each time it came, illuminating everything for a brief second until darkness took its turn. To compensate for the loss of her vision, the cat girl’s ears twitched in her concentration on hearing what words Lollo might speak. Her effort to satisfy her evanescent curiosity back-fired when an abrupt screech wildly echoed throughout the tunnel. It stung her ears to the point where Zoo curled up into a fetal position, clamping down her eyelids as hard as she could whilst forcibly pressing her palms on her ears.

Just as quickly as it came, the noise left, finally giving the cat girl a moment of peace. But whilst she became deaf to whatever words Lollo began to shout, a soft voice whispered in her mind.

“...Thank you...” It sounded neither like male or female nor young or old, but it did give Zoo an enveloping respite. Unable to comprehend what had occurred after her failed attack, she wearily gave in to the sleep that implored to embrace her.

Gloom hung over the princess as she rode her horse down what seemed an endless road. Around her marched the finest warriors of both Kattrike and Tuhn, battered and wary of every snap of a twig. At her side rode the prince of Falcourt, Sixten. Even with this armed entourage and her successful evade from capture, Zu continued looking down at the cobblestone path with the heavy weight of two persons on her mind. The feline princess removed one hand from Sixten’s side to rub at the horse’s side, but she frowned in confusion when she could not feel its skin through her gauntlets.

“Princess, look ahead.”

Like a sunrise, Zu peeked over Sixten’s shoulder to see a grand castle looming over the horizon. Two full settlements could fit inside the vast castle grounds, so its enormous girth was protected by walls three metres thick that rose up to the main tower’s 15th floor. The weary party spotted guards patrolling atop the walls, but the armored troops did not notice Zu and the others from the great distance between the two groups. Despite the destruction on many towns, Mossmoch’s gates remained open and inviting as it had for over 300 years.

As Sixten lead everyone inside the massive archway, they trod down a path bordering two rice fields, each acre worked by ten workers and their scythes. Suddenly, the party stepped into the shadow of the enormous main tower. It stood proudly twice as tall as Kattrike’s, adorned with a flag Zu dimly recognized.

“Mossmoch,” she whispered, “Papa’s home.”

One knight sprinted to her side to accompany her group, and he nodded in pride at her remark. “Ah, yes, you must be Princess Zu; we all have heard the rumors. This is indeed the home of the *late* Lord Ripcap, I am afraid, and the home of the soon-to-be king Prince Mitch, heir to the sturdiest fortress in the land. May he take pity and show kinship for the queen of Kattrike and her fallen subjects.”

“Might he so do, Sir Knight. Might he take pity on all victims of this bloody massacre and organize his forces to purge the taint from our lands.” Sixten glanced over his shoulder, staving off a sensation of curiosity. His body chilled, and his skin prickled. He scanned the long road left in their wake.

“What troubles you, sir?” the same knight questioned.

Sixten continued to glare at the road behind just outside of the gates, scanning the trees on either side of the path.

“Ryder, Daleth!”

“Yes, Prince Túben!”

“Check the trees there. I cannot say for sure, but I feel a presence spying on us.”

Both soldiers got off of their horses and drew their swords. They walked back to the trees Sixten pointed to, carefully examining around the trunk and the branches above. One knight looked back at Sixten to shake his head.

“I see nothing, Prince, but if we in fact are being watched, then we would best make haste inside the tower to safety now.”

Daleth quickly walked back to climb back onto his horse, followed a second later by Ryder. Sixten glanced back at the path again, but shook his head and spurred his horse.

A gathering of black fog built on the path a half mile from the entourage. The smoke solidified into a demonic horse shrouded in an onyx cloud and draped in black matte armour. The rider appeared with the mount, her armor glistening under the sun despite the black fog drifting about. A Shadow spawned from its own wisps at her side.

“You would not wish to anger her mistress with reckless action. Tread carefully.”

Riddaren turn to the shadow, barking to it, “I care not for the mistress. My will is still my own. You will not get in my, or else.”

The Shadow snarled, “Why must all you fleshlings resist so? Her mistress will put thou in line, right and proper. Others could not resist long, thy will stands with no chance.”

Riddaren’s eyes burned in fury. Her body broke down to fog, running off the horse until she reformed. The Shadow could not turn in time to dodge the gauntlet that grappled its throat. Riddaren squeezed its wind pipe as she lifted the Shadow high above her head.

“Just how many servants does her mistress possess?”

“Now? Or in the time past?” it choked with a rebellious smirk.

“Now,” Riddaren hissed in the Shadow’s mind.

“Her mistress possesses merely one. Formerly Riese Burnen.”

Riddaren’s flaming eyes flared angrily. “Riese Burnen? The champion explorer?”

“He made a deal with the mistress, and now his family lives in safety in far off lands. But here he serves, though upon his induction, he consumed a bear back for strength. You consumed a Shadow, for stealth.”

Riddaren released the Shadow, but it continued grinning at her whilst rubbing its throat. It gave a fleeting cackle as it drifted down, vaporizing into thread-like wisps.

“Flee quick before I spill thy blood.”

Once completely a cloud, the Shadow darted up past Riddaren’s ear.

“I will enjoy controlling your mind once the mistressss... completes the final ritualsssss....”

Riddaren glared at the fleeing fog in brazen defiance. “I shall split thy head from those boneless shoulders before I allow thee anything.” With a kick, the duo broke into smoke, trails of fog following the phantom gallops as they raced toward the distant Mossmoch.

“It is time, my friend...” Riddaren whispered.

Epilogue

Like an endless polemic, wave after wave of Horrors flooded through the streets, barricading those on the ground from the blue sky in a dark ambush, and raced around everywhere, seeking their next potential victim. Za and her forces tirelessly fought, however, refusing to surrender until the very last Horror fell to the ground. Civilians, soldiers, royalties and whole guilds all shared a peaceful moment at the instant the last monster fell in a deafening screech, taking advantage of the respite from war to look up calmly at the bright blue sky. Nobody spoke for the earth itself did the murmuring for them with soft breezes of relieving wind, darting pervasively to reclaim their rightful space. Dust and smoke intertwined, spiraling upwards and blown away by the same gales like a vast sail. Fires continued to crackle and burn former buildings whilst numerous craters pocketed the landscape, but no one noticed as they took in this moment of bittersweet victory.

After their arduous battle against what seemed to be Death itself, people no longer shed another tear for their fallen comrades whose bodies lay strewn everywhere in the thousands. Even the monstrous stitch works of flesh and bone had fallen, most of them defeated only because the magic that kept them intact seemed to have been stripped away all in one instant. Unfortunately, the weighty stench of rancorous death and putrid rot still hung in the air as clearly as it did since the first wave of nightmares first attacked. But not one person budged, as the survivors let their shoulders fall and exhaled a steady and unanimous breath of relief. Each person glanced at the rising sun, taking this unprecedented chance to memorize its image forever and the wondrous, dull dawn decorating the land beneath it.

There within the confines of Russlya stood the people of Hamlich and Maestroth along with strays from Prince Sixten’s land of Tantegel. Their eyes all glanced toward the fading night sky, their hearts all beating slower and slower until they reached a relaxed state, their bodies all experiencing the same satisfying strain of a difficult decade-long war’s worth of work, their minds all seeming to sync in perfect harmony to think the thoughts they all wanted to voice aloud if not for fear of breaking this tranquil post-bellum period.

Even the usually restless Princess Zu stood still within the safety of Ystad, mesmerized with everyone else by this silent aura of completion. Unbeknownst to herself, her hand had slipped in the cat prince’s, but even he did not notice the contact. They stood perfectly still together like a couple observing their first sunrise together, though both were more enraptured by the earth’s beautifully natural appearance rather than any amorous human emotions.

Captain Ellie sat on her armoured horse, also caught in this moment with her helmet off and sword sheathed. Her neutral facial expression did not betray any signs of how she felt, but her trained personality was not needed for this break in adversity. In this overwhelmingly effete state, she did not know what to do nor did she care. Her attention remained glued to the mountain range laying to the north and the invigorating sun rising behind them with all of its warm, comfortable radiance.

From amongst her people, Queen Za stood in the middle of a crowd, not towering above them to selfishly view all of brilliance for herself but rather blending in with the rest of her people as a common and tiny human being who stood in a large field outside a founded town to admire what she, along with everyone else, had taken advantage of to this day. Small whispers of cool wind blew through the crowd, seemingly heading toward Za alone to wave her hair in a graceful manner that only complemented what she and every person currently felt.

The scenery’s simplistic yet transcendental beauty showered upon the straggly survivors like rain graciously dripping onto bone dry grass, this potent and rich medicine washing away the exhausted state from those scarred, the peaceful and profound silence driving away the echoing screams, the revitalizing and nostalgic scent of fresh air whisking away the bilious stench of decay, the cool and welcome embrace of wind dashing away the feeling of needles pricking their skin as the world greeted the survivors once more.

For a few precious moments, this absolute peace hung in the air until a sudden explosion in the distance broke the silence. Everyone flinched as something large followed the smoke and dust wafting out of the mountains. It darted through the sky, speeding up at first but slowing down the next second. As they continued looking, this new arrival flashed bright white light like an extremely bright beacon comparable only to the sun, its erratic flight pattern resembling that of a firefly darting around. The survivors continued watching this strange brilliance, minds racing away when they noticed the colors of the sky warping around the new object. Also a likeness to an unsure child, the object continued flying pervasively while a series of thunderous booms emanated, its volume loud enough to hurt the ears of the dumbfounded audience.

Soon, after the object gradually drifted upward into the clouds, one of the mountains in the range suddenly exploded, its peak encased in a curtain of dust whilst it slowly slid off its perch. Some of observers gasped as they watched a third of a mountain slip away and fall onto the neighboring behemoths. However, this abrupt cataclysm did not distract everyone from a curious sight in the sky. Accompanied with a loud *crack* and whistling winds, the air collapsed together at a single point in an implosion. Not a moment later when the watchers felt their own clothing being tugged at did the compact point immediately release its contents in an angry outburst, spreading a sphere-shaped ripple throughout the sky. This sonic boom quickly expanded a hundred-fold its size before bristling with a strong gust the trees below and the people watching, a force that passed through everyone with a punch-like feeling.

“Captain!” Za called whilst she bent her knees and covered her face with an arm to resist the boom.

“Yes, milady?!” Ellie replied, stomping her way toward the queen.

“Gather everyone! I fear the worst has yet to come!”

Ellie nodded in agreement before instantaneously making a sharp turnaround with her back facing the gust. As she began reforming a small army, Za and many others dared a peek up at the sky. There in a deep red tone to indicate her profound rage, Lollo screamed battle cries whilst swinging her wand left and right, casting a variety of projectiles to shoot up in the direction of the mysterious object. After a final curse, she spread her arms out, her body beginning to tremble. Visible strands of multiple colors slithered out of her wand, gliding through the air like a collection of continuously growing serpentines. They all headed toward the injured mountain range, moving at a speed incomprehensible to the naked eye.

A minute later, a massive earthquake suddenly took over the land, violently shaking it with enough force to cause caverns to crack open everywhere. Za quickly glanced around her and the others’ feet, fearing that a canyon might form beneath them as well. When the cat woman looked back up, she witnessed the great mountains of the north rising upward at a snail’s pace. The natural structures let out audible groans as their suddenly free mass stubbornly pulled at the mountains. This did not stop the mountains from moving, the entire range picking up speed with each second that passed. Once the mountains rose nearly half a mile off of the ground, Lollo screamed again as if she were bearing a massive weight on her arms and torso. One by one, the mountains abruptly shot up like an overweight arrow fired out of a crossbow with deathly speed and accuracy.

It took a moment for Za to realize that her jaw had dropped in ineffable shock, but she did not bother to close her mouth; instead, she pondered in her confused mind what Lollo was trying to do and what she would do next. As if in response, the aggravated ghost slowly spun around, sensing the beating vitals of the survivors. Her steaming red skin gradually grew a deeper tone whilst the flaming inferno within Lollo roared in rage. Za flinched when Lollo’s eyes seemed to lock onto hers.

Suddenly, the sky grew dark. Clouds gathered above like a rallying army. Thunder boomed as lightning flashed. The earth grumbled voluptuously along with the rhythm of Lollo’s enraged screams. She shouted in an alien language, chanting and frantically whipping her wand around. Sparks jumped across through the air and massive bolts of electricity shot out pervasively. Their large size caused the air to sear whilst the bolts gave the illusion of dripping hot plasma.

The lightning expanded in size as Lollo snapped her wand around like an angry conductor. Powerful gusts swirled around her before whipping around each other to form increasingly grand twisters. A kilometre away from where the survivors timidly stood, the very land cracked and shattered. Hefty boulders rose up and collided amongst each other to create rough golems. To the far south, a hurricane brewed. Despite the chaos, not one person missed the tons and tons of water drifting upward from the country’s natural lake. It swished and swashed in the air, wriggling like an impatient beast. A moment later, the disrupted water began splitting into smaller and smaller pieces, each one shaped into a unique creature that could sail through the air and swim through land. Mangled bodies of those fallen quickly collected in many giant spheres. There, they became monsters of their own. Even the dust itself - disturbed by the strong gales - transformed into new warriors. As Za glanced over at the mountain range again, struggling to see through curtains of rain, she observed the remaining mountains shifting. They rocked back and forth, groaning along with the trembling earth. With a great effort, the great behemoths that once marked the horizon joined together into a creature weighing billions of megagrams of force. This onslaught of arrivals was complemented with the appearance of new Shadows. These, unlike the previous ones, were of immense proportions with far more complex weaponry. They screeched with a pitch that stung any unprotected ear.

Sixten kept an arm tightly wrapped around Zu as he held onto the hilt of his sword, driving the blade into the ground. Its blade stayed firmly, but as the land beneath their feet shook, the prince and princess could see the blade slowly losing hold.

“Princess! Kneel!” the cat prince shouted in Zu’s ear whilst his decorated cape slapped him across the face. Both dropped to their knees, struggling not to get swept away. The cat princess hugged Sixten so hard that he felt her armor painfully squeeze against his torso. They both dared a glance up to see Riddaren riding with the wind toward them. Both feline royalties immediately shut their eyes, hoping for a miracle.

In the meantime, Lollo chanted one last phrase and pointed her wand directly below her. The earthquake intensified, and the earth groaned louder. A shock wave then exploded from the tip of Lollo’s cat head-adorned wand, expanding faster than the human eye could blink. Everything in the shock wave’s path was blown back a few meters, including all the survivors hanging on for dear life. This wave continued to expand indefinitely, travelling in all directions and unimpeded even by the ground as it stretched through layer after layer of earth.

Then the ground below Lollo began to rise. It grew swiftly, soon reaching a height that put the old mountain range to shame. Once it finished, however, its top erupted violently. A huge avalanche of superheated rock and colossal boulders came crashing down on all sides of the new volcano. An enormous volume of magma spewed out, creating a lethal, scorching rain. At the very top of this monolith, Lollo panted angrily, watching her gargantuan creations stumble toward their targets.

Captain Ellie stomped her foot on the ground forcibly when Za came flying past her. Gritting her teeth, the cat woman grabbed the queen’s arm and pulled her forward. She spent a large effort, but Ellie kept her friend from being blown away. Za had closed her eyes though she still breathed calmly, waiting for her turn to die.

“Za! Wake up! Wake up! Open your eyes, please!” Ellie commanded, all to no avail. Since Za refused to respond, Ellie gently laid her armoured body over Za’s, shielding her from all incoming wind. Whilst doing that, she looked up, watching for any lava that might fall upon them. Instead, she spotted the same mysterious object flashing again, its light penetrating the vast clouds and heavy showers of toxic rain. Its sound carried along through all the pounding booms blasting from the storms and other adversities.

The orb returned, the fusion of Mathias and Soldat easily floating through all the fearsome gusts, tornadoes, and flying Shadows. Ellie watched with squinted eyes as it accelerated downward. Meanwhile, Lollo glared at it, growing more and more enraged by the second, further infuriated when the object slammed into the ground amidst her apocalyptic armada.

