



Sword Quest

Of

Enigmatic Souls

alextheriot

Vol 1: *Takanova*

Chapter 0 – A Boy At War

Chapter 1 – Takanova

Chapter 2 – Heir

Chapter 3 – Night Games

Chapter 4 – Stranger in the Night

Chapter 5 – Foreboding Daze

Chapter 6 – Reasonable Suspicion

Chapter 7 – Red Ruby

A Boy At War

-SNAP- The cracking sound of some twenty trebuchets being fired from the beach resounded through the village, shaking every window as the released boulders made for the village and bordering wall with a ferocity that had even the strongest of warriors fleeing their post.

As the boulders fell, synonymous to the rain that had been pouring all morning, houses collapsed, bodies were flung from buildings along with shattered brick and mortar, and the range of fire grew ever closer to the school center the village's families took shelter in.

Everyone had been told to flee to the lower chambers of the school center, marked as the safe zone for times of bombardment. One boy, alone in the dim school halls, gazed out the window closest to the battlefield with eyes full of melancholic interest in the proceeding battle.

The scrawny boy, no older than eleven, stared on as several boulders smashed into the finely constructed stone wall bordering Takanova Island, which kept the village at least

somewhat safe from the coastline where the battles often took place. The boulders hit several weak spots in the wall, and a section of it collapsed into the village.

As a result, a group of infantry soldiers poured into the village, where they were met by unorganized soldiers, guards, and armed villagers. A messy skirmish ensued, in which the invading infantrymen eventually won out. One man attempted to flee the scene the moment their defeat was confirmed. However, it was quickly made clear he would not be allowed to run far. A group of six caught up to him, and cornered the bloodied and heavily bandaged man in front of the school center.

The lone soldier turned to face the group, shaking slightly in the cold rain as he readied two short swords.

Through the window the young boy watched as the six men pounced, thrusting swords at the cornered man from all angles. The man mustered all of his energy into defending and countering, spinning while swinging the short swords with a desperate precision. He managed to push the group back a bit, cutting several of the attackers. However, he paid a price each time he landed a blow, as the attackers would take advantage of brief openings to execute a short stab.

Before long, the fight became one sided, as the man's wounds slowly piled up. Backed up against the wall of the school center, he lowered his swords, taking deep breaths.

He'd managed to injure all the attackers, though he couldn't get a killing blow off as outnumbered as he was.

The attackers slowly closed in, winding up for the finishing blow. When they struck, the man kicked off the wall in a low, forward dive, managing to duck between most of the blows.

As blood spurted from his back, he leapt up, quickly swinging his short swords across the neck and torso of two of the attackers.

The two dropped before him. However, his wide swings left him open, at an angle in midair he couldn't defend against. Two of the remaining attackers struck, going to one knee to execute a long side swing.

The swords sliced through the man's ribcage on either side, flooring him. His swords fell from his hands as he lay crippled and bloodstained, left only with the strength to look up at his four attackers with defeated eyes as they raised their swords high.

Within the school center's empty first floor, the sound of rapid footsteps echoed.

The nearest door burst open.

Outside, the rain muffled the sound of the double doors swinging open.

Two attackers who stood in what was now the rear of the scuffle did not expect to be knocked aside by the heavy wooden doors.

As the two front-most men whose swords had almost begun their downward arc into the man's skull, turned in surprise, the boy streaked by them and dropped to his knees, holding his arms out to shield the collapsed man.

"LET HIM GO! YOU'VE ALREADY WON, HAVEN'T YOU?!"

“Huhh?”

“Hahaha, what the hell is this kid doing?”

“This is war kid. Fight to kill. Take no prisoners!”

Right then, a new voice sounded through the crushing rain.

“You bunch of brainless shits, how many times were you briefed on this?”

The rigid voice came from a horsed man approaching from several meters away.

“G-general...Persia?”

“Taking prisoners like this man is EXACTLY what you’re supposed to do!”

“O-oh..yeah..I forgot about tha-”

“Who gives a shit?! Why do we have to take orders from you Red Wolves? If we hold back because of your agenda, we won’t survive out here!”

“What we’re doing is going to end the war so you don’t have to die out here, morons.”

The horsed man was now close enough that he did not have to yell, which didn’t seem to suit him anyway. His red-gold uniform, completed with a red general’s cap, was a daunting sight, the rain bouncing off his armor in a way that accentuated his broad build.

“Nobody asked you to stop the war, shithead, this is how some of us make it through!”

The men continued to argue like this.

The boy now froze in fear, understanding the possibility of being taken hostage or being killed here. He hadn't thought about bursting onto the scene at all. It was simply a knee-jerk reaction to seeing the man's struggle end, his face wearing a sense of hopeless defeat. He didn't understand it, but he knew he couldn't stand by and do nothing.

However, it was still going to end in despair.

At least, that's what he'd thought.

Beneath him, the boy heard knuckles cracking.

Slowly glimpsing downward, his eyes widened.

The wounded young man was grasping his swords so hard it seemed he might break them.

When he looked in his eyes, defeat was the last thing he saw in them.

Instead, he saw a mad vigor to fight, to live.

After all, he had never given up.

The sight left him in frozen awe, until the man turned his eyes up toward the boy.

The moment the two made eye contact, he knew what he had to do.

Being eleven years old, there wasn't much the boy's small frame could offer in this situation.

Therefore, he did the only thing he could do.

Gripping the man's arms tightly, the boy let out a shrill roar as he put all his strength into pulling them toward him.

The man simultaneously kicked off his feet, and used the boy's slight push to leap forward.

Passing the two nearest men in a glide, the man gave a rounded swing on both sides.

As he dropped to a knee behind them, blood spurted in a straight line down the two men's neck and back.

The two fell without another word, landing on either side of the frantic boy.

However, the lone man was now propped on one knee, shaking furiously as he barely maintained his position.

The boy eyed the threats on either side of them, two last infantrymen on one, a horsed general on another.

The horse slowly clopped over to the boy, who wore fear on his face like a hunted animal as he took several slow steps backward.

"And this is exactly why you were briefed on such situations. It's their own fault they let their guard down."

The large, intimidating man scoffed at the two fallen soldiers, before looking at the frozen boy.

His countenance bore something heavy, like the ever-present gray clouds in the sky.

"Now, what to do with this spunky kid here. I really don't want to kill a kid, so I guess I'll say he shows qualities of an heir as well, huh.."

He seemed to be talking to himself, disregarding the other four people present, especially his own men.

The boy, now realizing what was going to happen, cowered before the horsed man.

“Don’t worry, kid. Thanks to you and this guy, we bought enough time.”

The muttered words came from the man now just behind the boy, still sitting up on one knee.

His gaze remained pointed in the opposite direction, but the boy could feel the fire in his eyes from his mumbled words alone.

“So don’t you dare give up on yourself.”

The boy suddenly grit his teeth and stood tall, back to back with the man.

The horsed man saw this and gave a short laugh, a look of slight pity on his face.

“That’s the spirit, boy. Those are the eyes I wanna se-”

The impending sound of hooves beating the grass resounded nearby, turning the heads of everyone present. The rain had gotten even heavier, creating a dense layer of mist, so that nobody could see nor hear which direction the sound was coming from.

And then it happened.

The boy saw something like a specter.

A dark figure, with a large frame and long flowing hair, moved like a blur through the scene, before disappearing into the mist.

Following it, a horse dashed upon them, traveling along the wall of the school center.

As it streaked by the group, its rider brandished a long broad sword, and seared into the two infantrymen with minimal effort.

As the bodies of the infantrymen slumped onto the wall like slabs of meat falling from a fire, the horse then stopped on a dime, kicking up the earth before charging in the direction of the horsed general.

The general, a small grin on his face, gripped his long sword with certainty, awaiting the clash.

As the horses met each other, and iron struck iron with enough force to send sparks flying, the boy realized what this person was.

Clad in thick green robes with exquisite armor plating, a finely welded silver helmet, and a sleek green cape flowing behind him, the man's large build matched that of his abnormally sized horse.

The boy had heard all about them before, but as he was not old enough to be allowed in town, he'd never seen one.

Teutonic Knight!

The Knight clashed with the enemy general, exchanging one fierce blow after another.

He'd never seen anything like this. It was a display of power he never knew was even possible. As the Knight's long, flowing blonde hair shook with each blow, he wondered how the horses could withstand the force of the strikes the two traded with ease.

Finally, his attention was pulled away from the spectacle by the sound of a body splashing into the mud.

Jumping to, he found the battered Teuton soldier having finally collapsed, losing all signs of consciousness.

Frantic to administer some form of first aid, the boy ripped the top of his own robes off and wrapped them around the man's torso. He then dug his hands into the wrapping, putting pressure on each of the man's most lethal wounds.

Eyes darting around and hands shaking, he wondered if he was doing this correctly. He had no idea or preparation on how to behave in this situation, aside from a very brief first aid session in class. As the two horsed men continued trading blows, neither giving the other an inch, the boy looked around him.

The situation finally began to feel real to him.

The battered, flaming buildings.

The seven bodies on the ground.

The blood painted thickly into the grass, the rain beating down upon it to form a light red mist around him.

The stench of death in the air.

The boy vomited violently, turning to avoid the soldier he was tending to.

Tears involuntarily streaked down his face

Just as he hoped for some form of reprieve from the situation, the Knight finally gained the upper hand in the duel.

Their blades locked fiercely, the Knight managed to break loose, pushing the general's sword across his body.

Never losing his grip, the Knight lunged across the general's left side, his horse reacting swiftly to the flow of the battle.

From his left side, he gave a short sideways sword sweep, his grip wide on the sword's long hilt.

The general had seen this coming and tried to move his horse in the opposite direction to avoid the strike, but he was just late.

Or rather, he was just on time to avoid his mouth being opened up all the way to his neck.

The blade sliced into his cheek, cutting deeply through his ear before completing its arc.

Grasping at his face, the man groaned furiously in pain. Spitting blood onto his own horse violently, the general pulled the reins and turned to flee back toward the wall, where the main battle was taking place.

Understanding its victory, the Knight's horse reared up while the Knight gave a chilling war cry, thrusting his broad sword in the air.

It was a glorious sight, befitting of the Teutonic Knights the boy had always heard about.

And, just as the boy became lost in the moment, a voice brought him back to reality.

"Cedric, what are you doing out here?"

Ahh..

"You were told to stay put in the shelter, Cedric."

It was him.

Father...

"How many times have I told you that you mustn't be a burden to others?"

It was the emotionless voice of his father, who was not his real father.

A man who, despite his large build, great work ethic and technical ability, was for some reason excused from fighting in the war.

His father, Gadric Cintog stood thoroughly drenched, some distance away from the door.

But...till now...where...

He was getting lightheaded, fast.

"Come back inside, Cedric."

His father's cold voice, along with the horrible stench around him, finally overcame him.

Just as he felt his body falling slowly over, the knight appeared before him, taking hold of the wounded man.

“Rest easy, young man. You’ve done more than enough.”

As his consciousness began to fade out, the boy’s heavy heart felt just a bit lighter.

...this is ...a... knight?

Takanova

Waking with a start, Cedric slowly realized he was dreaming. The same dream he’d had since that day. A memory of the day he first truly experienced war, and death.

Following that day, and because of that experience, he’d come down with a disease that nearly cost him his life. He sat up, clutching his head as vivid images of that hell ran through his mind without permission- that of a bucket stained with bloody fingerprints, surrounded by cloths dyed in spots of scarlet.

Despite that hell, it was the scene itself that so clearly replayed in his dreams. Even six years later, he still couldn't shake the memory from his subconscious, even though he'd worked avidly to keep himself from thinking of it. When he woke from such a dream, he would always hope for something monumental to happen in his life, something that would overwrite that memory. He wasn't sure exactly what, but he thirsted for something new and special.

Rising from bed, the slim yet well-built teenager glanced at the only decoration in his small, empty room- a single green glove plated with thin armor, that he'd hung on a nail in the wall. He'd assumed the Teutonic Knight had placed the glove in his hands while he was unconscious that day. Even now, he still recalled the feeling of awe he had when woke up, clasping the glove in both hands.

A knight...

What does it mean to be...

"Cedric, why are you taking so long? The crops come first before anything else in the morning, you know this." His father called to him in a low, monotone voice, bringing him back to reality.

That's right...

Always the same...

Father...never changes.

He quickly headed out to put his shoes on, while attempting to mat down the perpetually stuck up hair on the left side of his head.

Striking into the fields with the usual rusted hoe, Cedric bore a melancholy that contrasted the vigor he put into his work. Of course, even if he hadn't slept at all, his body would always wake up in time to get the fields plowed by sunrise. On top of that, he would never dare let out a yawn in front of his father, who had always made a point to coach him on his etiquette. He'd always wondered why he needed to practice such extreme etiquette, as they were not nobles like his best friend Mel-who was far from having good manners, but not near as bad as Quentle, a fellow orphan who lived in the Market Town slums in a house full of rowdy blacksmiths.

He never received much in the way of explanation from his father, and it wasn't like he taught him etiquette of High Town where the nobles lived. What he was taught was the most basic of manners, with an emphasis on respectful modesty.

"You shouldn't make a commotion of yourself."

"Never reach your arms out too far."

"Just do as you're expected to. That is your duty as a Teuton."

"Be a respectful man, and that will be enough to repay me for taking you in."

"You only need not be a burden to anyone, including me."

"Hahhhhhh..."

Making sure his father wasn't nearby, Cedric let out a big sigh as he wiped his brow. Recalling the biting words that always kept him in what felt like a very small room, Cedric upped the pace of his work.

In the last six years, his work ethic had grown to something tremendous, as he took his sense of duty seriously—due mostly to his father's words and general attitude toward him. However, the event that triggered this profound sense of duty just happened to be what was weighing particularly on his mind this morning.

Thanks to the dream he'd had, he couldn't shake the nagging reminder of his bout of sickness at the age of eleven. It was an experience he tried tirelessly to forget. His father would give him the necessary treatment, and left him alone after that. He remembered watching him leave the room without a word, wanting more than anything for him to just stay and comfort him.

Up until that point, the naïve boy had deeply admired his father for taking him in. After that incident, that admiration turned into a distant feeling of respect, which grew a desire deep within himself to earn his respect in turn.

He didn't quite understand this yearning, but he knew that it was what brought on the sense of duty he'd always held dear. He knew that his father took him as an orphan when he didn't have to, giving him a proper home and parental figure. This caused him to fear acting outside of his responsibilities, even if he sometimes desired something new.

That sense of responsibility, and a bit of a sense of guilt kept him working towards becoming a respected Teuton, and someday a respected soldier. Even though his father was not much of a father to him, the respect and admiration he had for him was enough to keep him from acting out of place.

That is, until he had reached preparation schooling, the path every young boy took to becoming either a soldier, a scholar, or a worker.

He could only assume it to be due to the longer schooling hours, and effectively, less free time. He'd always wake up early to help his father with the crops and other daily work. After that, he'd attend his historic and cultural classes until mid-afternoon. Then came training. Archery, sword art, and physicality sessions. By the time they were done, sunset would be upon them, and he would return to the village for the evening.

Though, being spry young seventeen-year-old boys, Cedric, Quentle, and Mel grew bored of the daily routine. To add some fun to their constant preparation training, they would sneak out at night, slip past the guards, and hold severe games that tested their physical capabilities. His father had likely become aware of this, but as expected he took the hands-off approach and stayed uninvolved, probably just so long as nothing bad would come of it.

This bugged Cedric more than anything, but there was nothing he could do about it. Being a rebellious teenager had no room for growth within the small room that his dutifulness kept him in.

Instead of actively rebelling, he blew off steam by going out at night. This made his small room feel a little bit more comfortable at least, though it remained without color or ornament.

Even then, he sometimes got brave enough to slightly pester his father, out of a mixture of curiosity and frustration.

"Say, Father, is it true the older you get the harder it is to wake up from your sleep?"

Cedric inquired with a half smirk, trotting behind his father on the way back to Village Town.

“That’s nonsense, Cedric. Don’t humor things that are clearly nonsense.”

“B-but ya know, sometimes I have to wake yo-”

“Do I need to explain what nonsense means for you to understand, Cedric?”

“Ah-o-okay..”

Most of their exchanges went like this, though this was one of the livelier ones he’d get every now and then. He couldn’t help but appreciate such a simple thing.

After returning home to eat and clean up, Cedric threw on his white dress shirt and brown corduroy pants, and draped his emerald green, robe-like vest over his neck sloppily.

“Good day, Father,” Cedric sounded out in a flat tone, slipping on his thin black shoes made from pig-skin.

“Make sure to be properly dressed by the time you get in town.”

“You have a fine day as well, Father!”

Before the silent grouch could shoot an annoyed look his way from the dining table, Cedric filed out of the door, shutting it behind him and breaking out into a light run toward Castle Town.

Before long he passed by the primary schooling center he’d gone to as a child, stirring up a bitter nostalgia.

When his glance fell upon the double doors he'd once burst through into the pouring rain, he automatically averted his eyes. He looked out beyond the repaired wall, to the sky-or, to where the sky should have been.

Instead of a blue sky filled with white clouds and a bright sun, Cedric's world was covered by a vast wall of gray fog-long referred to as the Mist Dome. The sky had been this way all along, ever since several years before he was born.

Nobody seemed to know why it was this way, but those who were old enough to remember the blue sky that disappeared twenty years prior, described it as a very free and colorful sight.

To Cedric, this gray world was the norm. There was no other sky for him to dream about, so this one was good enough.

However, Cedric looked at the dome with excitement today, as Master Gambell's long history session would supposedly touch on 'The Day Left in Gray', something rarely discussed.

Staring at the mysterious dome as he ran, the boy thought keenly about his aspirations, looking forward to learning new things that could help him in his search for something more.

"Now everyone, please quietly take your seats," Master Gambell rang out politely.

The middle-aged, bespectacled man patiently rested his elbow on his wooden podium, smoothing out his thick, neatly groomed beard. Meanwhile, the all boy class was anything but quiet, shuffling their stools around to their desks in a clamor.

“Say, Cedric, I’ll bet you’re excited for today’s session, eh?”

This scrappy looking short haired boy taking a seat next to him was none other than Quentle, one of Cedric’s best friends. He was a rather frivolous boy who often spoke carelessly, and paid no mind to things like personal space or being sensitive to one’s personal hang ups. Knowing this, Cedric figured he was being insulted somehow, but he wasn’t sure exactly how.

“Well, isn’t everyone excited? This is a rather intriguing topic to learn about, isn’t it?” The proper sounding boy in front of them turned his head to chime in.

“Ah, shut up, Mel. Go on, rich boys should face the front like good rich boys.”

“Repeating rich boys like that just makes you sound like you don’t have anything intelligent to say..”

“Ahh, this is why I hate you rich boy-”

“See? Rich boy, rich boy, rich boy, it’s all you ever-”

“Oy, wait a sec, Quentle, why are you asking me, in particular?” Cedric inquired impatiently.

“Huh? Of course I would, you warhead!”

Cedric had, at one point, made a single comment regarding his interest in becoming a Teutonic Knight-General in the army, and Quentle, being who he was, had decided it was going to be a running joke to spite him.

Of course, neither Cedric or Mel understood what he was getting at, and therefore stared at him with narrowed eyes.

“Eh? Wait, did you two not know the main topic today isn’t about the dome?”

“Huh?” Cedric and Mel sounded off in unison.

“Hahh, you were both nodding off at the end of the last class, weren’t you?”

“.....”

They both averted their eyes, holding back smirks

“Gahh, what a waste of a good upbringing. You two are useless.”

“Ah, excuse me there, sir. I’ll have you know I never actually fall asleep in class; I doze off with a completely straight face.” Cedric replied in an exaggerated voice. He had indeed perfected this technique. He couldn’t do something so disrespectful to his teacher, after all.

“Yep, I was completely out.”

“Get a grip, rich boy!” Quentle and Cedric sounded off in unison.

“...hmp. Anyway, aren’t you a diligent one, Quentle the ruffian?”

“Ohh, that’s right, paying attention all the way through, what a good-natured boy!”

Cedric joined Mel, plastering a smug smirk on his face in Quentle’s direction.

“Geh! S-shutup! And don’t call me a ruffian, rich boy!”

“Alright class, that’s quite enough. Time to settle in now, if you would. Ah, Quentle, do shut your mouth.”

“What the hell Gambell?! Why just me?!” As the class snickered, Master Gambell opened his notebook and began.

“Well then, today we’ll be discussing two major topics. First, the Mist Dome we live under and its history, and second, the story of the very first Teutonic Heir to the Sword, also known as the first Teutonic Knight.”

Cedric’s attention shot toward Gambell in an instant.

This would be a session that he wouldn’t dream of dozing off in.

“Well then, I’d like to start with the Mist Dome that formed over these Islands of Molovar, twenty years ago. So...let’s just get this out of the way now-what kind of rumors have all of you heard about the Mist Dome’s sudden appearance?”

“The Gods came to trap us here and harvest us!”

“All the rain clouds in the world came here and froze so that we’d get hungry and desperate and kill each other for food!” Two carefree boys blurted out excitedly from a table away, bringing a cringe to Gambell’s face.

“Ah..hahh. Kaolo, Farum, the way you say it sounds stupid, but the second theory isn’t completely moronic. The lack of rain clouds within the dome could be explained by the dome absorbing the water vapor. This leads us to why we very rarely see rain, which

is why farming families such as yourselves must work so hard to prepare the fields for the next rain. However, can anyone explain how-”

“There is a cloud, that’s why we get rain.” Quentle cut in with a blunt tone.

“Ohh, how surprising, what more do you know about this, Quentle?”

“I heard it at the shipyard. There’s fisherman that have seen a huge silver cloud.

When it appeared, the normally still ocean became wavy, and there’s actually wind, which created a storm so strong that they barely made it back in one piece.”

“Mm, indeed, you seem to be quite well informed, for a ruffian.”

“Oy, Gambell!”

The teacher ignored this, and continued.

“Here on Takanova we have never officially seen the cloud pass over, but we have witness testimony that it has come somewhat near our island many times, hence the rainfall three or four times a year. You won’t hear anything ground-breaking from me regarding its appearance or what it means as I know nothing more than what you’ve likely already heard, just like the Mist Dome itself.

“However, there are certain theories that can be useful in attaining a greater understanding of what the Dome means for us, both our state, and our country of islands. Therefore, allow me to share with you my own theory. To begin, we must venture back to the beginning of Takanova’s story.”

The class began to grow restless. Cedric gulped, silently waiting. He'd been diligently listening in wait for this part, not because of his sense of duty, but due to his vague ambition.

"So, going back some ten generations ago, we Teutons were still in the process of discovering this vast, beautiful side of the island. At the same time on the other side of the island the neighboring Shlanks were beginning to explore beyond the marshes and into the vast mountainous region.

"While the Teutons eagerly scoured the area's resources, quickly building villages and a castle, the Shlanks journeyed through the treacherous mountains, developing their weaponry and battle strength due to the swarms of Giant Ant Beasts. After one of our sentry forces returned with news of the Shlanks, the first king decided to build a dojo and begin combat training to prepare for a possible fight.

After several weeks of training, five men began to grow much stronger than the rest, and continued to compete vigorously with each other. Once the men felt comfortable with their strength, they were each given a group of men to lead in training. These men formed the original Four Generals."

"But Master, didn't you say it was five men?"

"Indeed, Cedric," Gambell nodded with closed eyes, but did not explain.

"Eventually, the king felt confident in his army's capability to defend the people, and decided to send a group of around fifty normal citizens to meet the inbound Shlanks.

"Bringing a bounty of good food and resources, the group met the Shlanks not far into the mountains where they had apparently long since set up camp.

“To their delight, the Shlanks welcomed their hospitality, and even returned their good intentions. For several weeks, the group indulged in merrymaking, and eventually began to explore the mountains farther north together. By this time, some two-hundred Teutons had joined the camp of around five-hundred Shlanks.

“Due to the difference in numbers, the king had sent one of his five generals, along with his men, to blend in with the group. General Garik acted as the hidden leader of the group, sending reports back to the castle through his men. Despite taking his job seriously, Garik enjoyed himself more than he ever had, and got along particularly well with one of the Shlanks, a strong warrior named Velagoras. The two drank together often, held knife throwing games and wrestling tournaments, and hunted together. It was the effort of these two that tamed the dragon-like beasts known as tragoons, initiating their loyal attitude toward us that apparently still holds today. Garik’s men had never seen him so happy before, and even described Velagoras to the king as his first friend.

“And then, one day, around a month into the successful meeting, Garik was ordered to return to the castle immediately.

“He made haste, riding the tragoon he and Velagoras had first tamed. Upon arrival at the castle’s courtyard, Garik was greeted by a large group of important Teuton officials and elders, as well as the other four generals and their men-all surrounding the king and three ghost like figures.”

The class collectively gasped, looking around at each other with interest. Cedric stayed quiet, but also knew what Gambell was referring to.

“Yes, that is correct. The god-like Sages that we revere, who gave us our collective “Teuton Will”, had come to meet the king, and presented to him a large square relic. It was a fantastic, green emerald, and Garik was immediately drawn to it.

“This Green Relic is a symbol of the Will of your people, which is to cherish and protect your land. Take this gift, and use it according to your One Will.”

Cedric felt his chest tighten at the Sages’ words. The class continued to listen intently, seemingly unaffected by them.

“Those were the only words the Sages left with the king before departing. In a clamor, the officials argued into the night on what should be done with the Green Relic and how to go about enacting their Will-something they seemed to accept very naturally.

“Having lost interest, Garik returned to the campsite in the mountains late that night. When he asked around, he found Velagoras was not there. It seemed he had been called back to the Shlank home front, just as he had.

“He waited over a week, but Velagoras did not return. All his men had apparently gone with him, and most of the mixed group had recently left in separate expeditions, so there was only about a hundred left at the camp.

“Eventually, Garik was once again summoned to the castle. This time, he was led directly into the king’s chambers.

“The King, surrounded by his closest officials, held something, covered with expensive cloth, out to Garik. What Garik had been given was a long, extravagantly green sword, with sleek emeralds encrusted in its fine hilt.

“What King Nova had decided the night of the meeting with the Sages, was to call upon the town’s most skilled blacksmiths, and from a shard of the Green Relic, forge a sword.

“The king called the sword ‘The Great Green Emerald’, and entrusted it to Garik-naming him Takanova’s first Heir to the Sword, and the first Teutonic Knight. The following morning, a grand ceremony was held in the courtyard to establish his status of Heir, as well as the status of the other four new knights as the Four Generals. He was then bestowed with sleek green robes, and a thick green cape.

“Hoping to share his news with Velagoras, Garik returned to the campsite.

“However, what he found there, was....

.....tragedy.”

The class murmured quietly. Cedric and Quentle looked at each other in shock.

“The campsite had been completely ransacked. The hundred or so people...

....had all been murdered.”

The mood in the class sunk immediately, along with the heads and shoulders of most of the boys.

“If you are all this shocked, imagine what it was like for Garik to see this. Both Teuton and Shlank alike, woman and children of all ages, and nearly all of his own men, dead. Killed in cold blood.”

The class went completely silent, some holding their heads in grief.

“I know this is a lot to take in. After all, there is a reason we wait to tell this story to children until they have all reached the age of seventeen. Do try to bear with it.”

Cedric tried to remain collected, but his memories were resurfacing and joining with this new knowledge in a gruesome way. His fists were shaking, and tears began to well up in his eyes. He glanced over at Quentle, to see tears already silently falling down his cheeks, a violent expression on his face.

He didn't know why something that happened so long ago would make them so very angry. However, he had to listen through to the end.

“So, upon seeing this horrid spectacle, Garik raced on tragoon-back toward the northern mountains, where the expedition groups had set out. Convinced that an army had invaded from another island, he sent the only one of his men who he'd happened to have with him, back to town to warn the king. He didn't care that he was alone and didn't know the enemy he faced. He wanted only to save the rest of the camp.

After a day's travel across the rugged terrain, he finally found a small campsite. However, he was unfortunately too late once more. In his rage, he followed the scent of blood further up into the mountains...eventually running into the perpetrators.

“Velagoras...”

“Correct, Quentle.”

Cedric had come to the same conclusion, but was too busy trying to control his emotions. Quentle, however, did not try to hide his, his nails digging into the wooden desk.

“Well, it wasn’t Velagoras he ran into, but a group of his men he recognized instantly. The same men he’d drank and wrestled with, slaughtering both Teuton and Shlank people before his eyes.

“His rage overflowed, and he drew the Green Emerald and eliminated all but one of the men. The lone man, in a crazed voice, revealed everything.

“Velagoras had been summoned back home for the exact same reason he had. According to the man, the Sages had also visited their leaders, and presented them a large red relic. The words given to them:

“This Red Relic is a symbol of the Will of your people, which is to cherish and protect your bloodline. Take this gift, and use it according to your One Will.”

A chair on the other side of Kaolo and Farum shifted, it’s owner, Berd, perking his head up, clinging to Gambell’s words.

“The Shlanks, upon receiving the relic, had the same idea as the Teutons. A sword was forged-the Red Ruby-and, as you might’ve guessed, the Heir chosen to wield it was none other than Velagoras.”

“But Master, that still doesn’t explain...”

“Yes, Berd, do be patient. You see, it seems behind the scenes the Shlanks decided that their newly precious bloodline was in danger of being tainted. That is, because of...”

“The campsite!” Farum burst out, to which Berd slumped down at the realization of what he meant.

“Correct, Farum. After more than a month of living together, these kinds of things do happen.”

“So just like that they moved to eliminate each member of the campsite?!”

Quentle moved their table this time, simply from slamming his fists on it.

“Yes, Quentle, that is correct. Do try to control your anger, this is an unchangeable story. Anyway, once Garik found out the truth, he raced across the mountains in search of Velagoras. His aim was to kill every last Shlank warrior, and protect every member of the campsite that still lived. For several days, he rode the tragoon, stopping assaults from Velagoras’ men and gathering members of the campsite into a single, hidden cave where he left them with several fierce tragoons and equipped them with weapons.

“After sending an able-bodied man on horseback to report the truth to the castle and request help, Garik set his sights further north, where there were at least three-hundred and fifty members of the campsite unaccounted for, broken off into seven groups. Since they were the first groups to have set out nearly a month prior, he knew they would take some time to reach. The first day, he reached a group, defeated some thirty Shlank warriors, armed the campsite members, and directed them to the cave along with his tragoon. The second day, the tragoon came back to him just as he had found another camp and defended it from more than fifty warriors.

“He repeated this process for seven long days. The number of Shlank warriors grew with each day, to the point where it was clear these were not just Velagoras’ men, but soldiers sent from the Shlank homefront for this sole purpose of eliminating the campsite members. He and the tragoon worked tirelessly to protect the people of the campsite, and on the seventh day, he faced an all-out army.

“During the fight, in which he relied heavily on the magnificent power of the Green Emerald, the two men he’d sent to report to the castle came to him on horseback, with urgent news:

“The Teuton officials had heard the whole story, and had decided not to take any action. They thought that, if this was all true, then Velagoras would ultimately make a move on Teuton soil. For that, they needed to be prepared, to fortify their own walls, and therefore had decided to leave the mountains to Garik, their strongest Knight.”

At this, Cedric’s eyes widened.

“Upon telling him this, the two men attempted to fight but could not handle the chaotic one-sided battle like he could, and were killed defending the final camp.

”On the verge of despair, Garik roared his heart out, and continued to fight the endless fight alone. It’s said that at that time, he ascended beyond that of a man, and became a War God.

“Eventually, he stood victorious, submerged in blood along with the tragoon. The campsite members, the largest group yet at around seventy people, cheered loudly for him from atop a cliff safe from the battlefield. All they could do was fire a limited number of arrows to assist, but they had emerged victorious together.”

A collective sigh of relief seemed to sweep through the room.

“He had finally accounted for the last group, and with the help of the tragoon led them back to the cave where the others were waiting safely. Upon arrival, both Garik and his tragoon could no longer stay conscious.

“When Garik awoke, he was on the tragoon’s back, entering the newly developing Castle Town, along with more than three hundred campsite members.

“As they arrived, there was a clear panic spreading throughout Castle Town. Garik rushed inside the castle doors, where another bloodbath lay before him.

“This time, it was only about twenty or so officials and guards, but what shook him down to his core was what he saw crushed into the stone ground-

-tragoon footprints.

“An official hurriedly explained what had happened:

“A man on a tragoon, wielding a long red sword, had burst into the castle lobby just an hour prior, and began killing everyone in sight.

“After a few minutes the Four Generals burst onto the scene, and drove the man out of the castle. Along with their personal armies, the generals chased the man past an outlying village that, unbeknownst to the busy officials until it was too late, had been burnt to a crisp just before the attack on the castle. Their chase had apparently led them into the forest in front of the Volcano of Disasters, and there had been no news since.

“Wasting no time, Garik and the tragoon dashed out for the forest. Upon entering, there seemed to be a body for every tree in the forest.

“Eventually he came into the center of the forest, where there was a wide clearing. In the clearing, the bodies of three of the generals lay in separate corners.

“In the middle, the man known as Velagoras wiped his red blade clean as the fourth general, who had always been kind to Garik, dropped to the ground.”

No one in the class moved a muscle, each hanging intently onto Gambell's words.

"When Velagoras looked upon Garik, he seemed to have no care in the world. It is unknown whether any words were exchanged between the two, possibly because Garik himself refused to recount their meeting in detail. The two merely clashed swords in the middle, their tragoons destroying the ground under foot as they darted around the clearing continuously exchanging blows. In a sea of red and green light, Velegoras eventually fell from his tragoon.

"Suffering a fatal wound, he crashed into the earth, his sword sinking deep into the ground.

"Garik jumped from his tragoon and, without mercy, delivered the final blow to his only friend."

At this, the class relaxed a bit, repositioning their chairs and postures.

"With the fight over, Garik returned to the Castle Town, where he demanded the wounded, worn down people of the campsite be taken care of.

"Once some time passed and we were able to rebuild and re-establish an army, the people of the campsite led widespread expeditions throughout the mountains for the purpose of expanding and defining our borders. Since they knew the mountains, it took little time to figure out where the borders needed to be drawn.

"This is how the Wall of Takanova came into existence, connecting the two clifftops near the marshes on the other side of the mountains. After that, we gradually worked on

the stone wall bordering our side of Takanova, minus the mountainous north and south ends.

“And that, boys, is the story of Garik, the first Sword Heir. The story that began our Will to protect our land, our conflict with the Shlanks that had been unending up until this long Wolverine War, as well as many other traditions. It is said that Garik lived out the rest of his life at the Wall, protecting the mountains that the campsite members ultimately resided in, from the endless Shlank attacks, until the day he died.”

“So..Garik was basically the one who initiated the Wall as a stronghold military base for us?”

“That is correct Kaolo, the Wall of Takanova embodies everything Garik lived for. And now, the Prince, along with three of the Four Generals, has taken the reins of the Wall’s army to keep the silently-watching Shlanks in check. Of course, threatening them with the power of the Green Emerald, even though it has since been sealed away due to its overwhelming power, which is a topic for another day.”

Gambell seemed to be done with the story, causing a small clamor in the class.

“Ah man, I could’ve used the abridged version of that..”

“Shut up, just because rich boys like you probably already know the story doesn’t mean we do!” Mel turned and shrugged at Quentle, a smug look plastered on his face again.

“What about the red sword?”

“Oh, interested, Quentle?” Master Gambell inquired sarcastically.

“The sword remains sealed where Velagoras left it at the time of his death, in the ground in the middle of the forest that *you* aren’t allowed to go near. Now it’s even surrounded by a small lake, thanks to the tragoons taking chunks out of the earth.”

“That sounds really cool...”

“Let me reiterate, Quentle, that none of you are allowed in the forest. Especially you.”

“Hahh?”

“But to move on, that actually brings me to my follow up discussion, concerning one of the traditions I mentioned: the procession for the succeeding Sword Heir.”

Cedric’s attention shot toward Gambell once more. This time, Mel’s did as well.

“Haha, well because, what coincidence is it that I’d have all three of the prospective Heirs in this class!”

The class’ stares rotated between Cedric, Mel, and Quentle. The three of them looked at each other, exchanging awkward smirks.

“So, my three oh-so-qualified candidates, I’d like to hear your opinions on the relationship between the community and the Heir, something that was established long ago and has been mostly prevalent ever since. Do you think the Teuton governing system handled the issue at hand the right way?”

“I’m not answering because it feels like you’re mocking us.”

“Speak for yourself, ruffian fraud.”

“Don’t just tack insults on to ruffian like it’s clever, jackass!”

“Anyways, isn’t it obvious, Master?” Mel ignored Quentle’s banter with an arrogant brushing motion over his back.

“Oh?”

“Yeah, it’s only right that the Heir fought alone in that case. He was trusted with the sword and the mountain group, while the Teutons at home had a duty to fortify their own walls. It’s the basic formality of our Will, is it not?”

“What? Are you stupid? Wasn’t the moral of the story basically that we need to fight together as one?”

At last, Cedric couldn’t stay silent. He’d held his tongue out of respect through the entire story, but he’d finally lost it.

Mel turned back, a look of genuine shock on his face. Quentle just looked at him dumbly.

“I mean, how is it right that Garik had to fight completely alone against hundreds of enemies? The king and his officials outright abandoned him along with hundreds of their own people! Couldn’t you realize the entire reason the Heir was established was probably so that they could have an easy scapegoat?! It’s like they knew something like that was going to happen and hoped both parties would just wipe each other out! Then they’d glorify him as a hero and throw the next Heir out to the wolves when the time came! There’s no relationship between community and Heir at all there! That isn’t right at all! What’s the point of our Will to protect our land if we don’t protect our own people?!”

The class stared in silent shock at the fuming Cedric. Even Master Gambell looked dumbfounded.

“...uhh, ya know, I know what ya mean Cedric,” Quentle broke the silence with an awkward entry, “I mean, what you’re saying feels right for sure...but I think the king and his officials saw that perspective and were forced to look past it. I mean, they were right after all, weren’t they? If they’d sent the Four Generals into the mountains, Velagoras would have taken the castle, and killed the king. They had to fortify at home, so I think it was a strategic move that involved trusting Garik to take care of the mountains.” Cedric shot his angry glance at Quentle, who wore a surprisingly honest look.

“I mean, you can’t deny that they made the most logical choice for the sake of the homeland, can you?” Mel spat out very sharply.

“.....”

Everyone stared on at Cedric, waiting.

“No...I can’t. Of course, we weren’t there so we can’t know the full details.... but...but the crux of the story is that the incident established the standard for how the community and Heirs interact. What kind of partnership exists with one side foisting all of their problems on the other, just because they’re capable of more than most?”

“Well you could also look at it this way-the people showed their trust in Garik to protect the community from the outside. It was only natural for him to shoulder the burden alone, since the community showed their support for him by relying on him.”

“That’s not right, Quentle. From that story, there wasn’t any support. They didn’t give him any support before the incident, and refused him support during the incident. They never even properly communicated with him, nor did they seek his opinion on the

issue! Can't you think about this from Garik's perspective? Do you think he agreed with all of this?"

"Well, we can't know that either. But... I think the problem is that you're *only* seeing this from Garik's perspective, Cedric.."

Cedric swallowed any words that had been on the way out. Quentle's biting rebuttal stifled him, and forced him to look down, flustered.

"Well, what an interesting discussion, indeed," Gambell said, returning to his polite smile.

"I think we should all calm down and consider that there is no *right* answer here. This is something the community still debates today, which is why I like to hold discussions on it in my class. So, I'd like to hear from the rest of you-what do you all think about their answers?"

Farum's answer was along the lines of Mel's, taking the bare facts as the center of the issue. Berd's answer was similar, though he seemed to assume there would logically have been some sort of undocumented contract from the beginning.

Kaolo's response was the only vocal one that leaned toward Cedric's view. His reasoning wore the same tone as Quentle's, saying it felt right but maybe wasn't realistic to expect anything more. However, in the end, he ended up agreeing with Cedric that the dynamic between community and Heir just wasn't right.

Only several other classmates spoke up, but none had much more to say other than "Yeah, I think Mel is right, there are some tough decisions that just have to be made". In the end, there was only two other boys, aside from Kaolo, that agreed with Cedric.

Suddenly, the castle bell resounded loudly.

“Well alright, it looks like we’ve run out of time, and my theory of the dome will have to wait for tomorrow.”

Geraint and Jorge, the two bulkiest boys in the class, gave Cedric a reassuring nod as they filed out of the classroom. Cedric gave a short wave, silently thanking them for their support as he began gathering his things to go to cultural class.

Some of the class had stuck behind, awkwardly eyeing the three boys as if anticipating some sort of tension. However-

“Alright now ya scum, let’s go learn about some farming and marketing! Gotta get you louses ready for the working life, since I’ll be the one out protecting the peace of the dome, hehe.”

Quentle was the same as ever. Thanks to him, Cedric no longer had to worry about how to face Mel.

Instead, the two looked at each other and began snorting with laughter, breaking any possible tension to the surprise of their classmates.

Having been together for years, this was natural for them.

Heir

After cultural class came lunchtime, which meant a much-needed hour of free time.

This was where the boys would split into different groups, going to eat in various places.

Some of the noble students would go all the way into High Town for an expensive meal at a tavern and to try and mingle with the female students, and others would travel the ten minutes into Market Town to buy a cheap meal from one of the many food vendor stands.

Here, Cedric split off from the group, as Mel, Quentle, Farum, Berd, and Kaolo would head for the Market Town stands, while Cedric returned home.

In a hurry, he whipped up a large pot of rice and threw it, along with a bunch of potatoes and onions into a large basket. Wrapping it with a piece of cloth, he headed back out in a light run into Castle Town.

It wasn't because he didn't have money, of course. His father did give him a small, obligatory wage to pay for meals and such. Cedric simply saved that money for other purposes.

Passing the school and the well-developed shopping district, he arrived at the castle. Every day, the sight left him in awe. The tall stone walls, carefully crafted into windowed watch towers, were a thing of beauty, matched by the well-groomed grass and trees on every side of the castle walls. Something about the castle's surroundings always calmed Cedric, partly why he came by every day.

Walking briskly through the castle's outer yard, Cedric avoided the various stationed guards with ease. Arriving at the back corner of the castle, he hopped over a stone ledge on the right of the pathway leading to the castle's back courtyard, and snuck down its hilly side.

Upon reaching the side of the small gate leading into the courtyard, Cedric withdrew a silver coin from his pocket. Flicking it in the air in the direction of the guard stationed at the gate, he continued in a crouch.

Behind him, the guard, without turning his head or body an inch, caught the coin in his left hand. Letting his arm drop in a mechanical motion, he then gave a discreet thumb up with his right hand.

With a smirk, Cedric continued to the point where the guard wouldn't see him if he hadn't already known about him, and jumped back onto the path.

He'd arrived at the entrance to the courtyard, a beautiful grassy paradise lush with various greenhouses and trees. Despite his rank not being high enough to be allowed in, he felt he didn't have to worry about being spotted at this point. The only ones who usually visited the back courtyard in the middle of the day were a group of ten low level soldiers whom he knew well. While checking the heat and smell of his pot of food, he waltzed right on through the fascinating greenery to the middle of the courtyard, a large opening decorated by a manmade pond with mesmerizing fountains at four of its edges. At the circular pond's center lay the courtyard's greatest feature- a magnificently crafted white stone sculpture of none other than the first Sword Heir, holding up the Great Green Emerald in a victorious pose.

Cedric stared into the bold looking face of Garik, which was partially covered by his parted mid length hair. Water splashed onto the sculpture's stone feet, coming in an arch from the fountains. As the water splashed, small drops of water bounced onto the face and arms of the fake Garik. Normally, Cedric would gaze admirably at this site. Today, something unexpected flashed before his eyes as he looked on.

For a moment, the sprinkling water appeared scarlet red, as if blood was slowly splattering all over the stone Garik's body.

This is what it must have been like...

Shaking his head free of the illusion, Cedric trotted over to the fountain's stone ledge, where the group of around ten soldiers casually lounged about.

"Hoy, Cedo, You made it!"

"Hey there, Captain Ralin."

"Ah, Cedric. Welcome back."

"I'm back! Good afternoon, Captain Galgi"

-Their usual greeting, something they'd picked up over the years.

"Haha, I told you to quit calling us Captain, Cedo! It's embarrassing, we're only captains of our five man Go."

This was the harsh truth, after all. The two were named the leaders of their respective Go, a five-man squad of infantryman that stuck together tightly on the battlefield for the sake of keeping formations in order.

"Even then, you're still captains, so I should be respectful as a student!" Cedric replied cheerfully.

Galgi chuckled, shaking his head.

"Anyway, let's dig in. Hey Beidin, Peter, Roz, Jean, Filipe, Esca, Brita, Simon, potatoes and onions sound good?"

"Uohhh~!" the men that fought alongside Galgi and Ralin cheered, opening the big basket and dividing the plentiful portions evenly.

Cedric sat down on the fountain's ledge, and began to eat his own portion of food.

The men sat around leisurely, breaking off into idle chatter amongst themselves, while Galgi and Ralin sat down next to Cedric, grinning.

“Seriously, Cedo, the food from your place is always the best!” The tall and burly Ralin spoke with his mouth full, his wild hair bouncing to and fro.

“Well at the least, it isn’t any surprise that Gadric Cintog has been the castle’s personal vegetable dealer for years,” the smaller but well-built Galgi said in his usual matter-of-fact tone, a way of speaking that had always interested Cedric. He’d always thought it sounded like he would say everything in earnest, which matched his serious demeanor, including his neatly combed hair-always to the right side.

“Yeah, Cedo’s dad is pretty great! Too bad Cedo won’t be taking the family business over, what with being the next Sword Heir and all!”

“Ha? No, that isn’t-”

“Don’t worry, me and Galg will take over for ya when the time comes! We’re only eight years older, so we’ll be around for a while!”

Galgi chuckled with his mouth full of water, waving his hand in disagreement.

“Hah, come on, it isn’t like it’s anywhere close to being decided yet.”

“It may as well be as far as we’re concerned, Cedric,” Galgi warmly put as he patted his chest while he coughed.

Cedric smirked, shaking his head while Galgi continued with an even more serious look.

“Always remember, the Galgi and Ralin squads will always have your back.”

“UuohHH!!” The men all cheered, raising their glasses.

Cedric looked away, his smirk turning into a genuine smile.

“So, uh...anything new happening with the Wolverines?”

“Ah, not really. It’s just one night-time bombardment after another,” Galgi replied, sighing.

“Yeah, and we’re a part of the oh-so-special infantry that gets to battle it out on the beach, in between all the cannon fire,” the bulky Roz added.

“Haha, but lately we’ve been rackin’ up a lot of points!” Ralin hollered merrily.

“That northern beach is a popular target, but the Wolverines need to learn to wake up real early to get one over on us.”

“But Captain, you have a harder time waking up then anyone I’ve ever-”

“We’re a brick wall defense force I tell ya! And today we got us some food from Cedric’s farm in our bellies, so we’re gonna be even more unbeatable than usual.”

“UOhhhhH!!”

“You’ll never learn how dangerous it is to say things like that out loud, will you Ral?” Galgi put with a smirk.

“HA. The only flag we’ll see tonight is a burnt Wolverine flag ...Or a white flag!”

“Uh, Captain, a white flag could be ours too, when you put it like-”

“Brick wall squad, uohhhhH!”

“U-uohhhhHHH!”

"So, Cedric, how'd morning session go?" Galgi asked, shaking his head at Ralin.

"Ehh.."

Cedric explained the intense discussion of the Heir's story.

"Haha, sounds just like you and Mel!" Ralin blurted out.

"Hmm, Quentle on the other hand..."

"Huh? What about Quentle?" Cedric had barely caught Galgi's murmur.

"Ah, just...I'd have expected him to agree with you, as passionate as he is."

"Quentle is a weird kiddo, isn't he Cedo?"

"Hahh..I guess I was a bit surprised by it, too. I mean, you two are pretty alike, after all," Galgi scratched his head in curiosity as he said this.

"We are? I don't really see it though," Cedric answered with furrowed brows.

"Yeah, I've always thought it was odd that you and Quentle were such good friends, since you're alike in a lot of ways! Usually people with similar attitudes and goals are enemies, not best friends."

"Yeah, and you even look like you could be brothers, or cousins," Ralin added.

"Haha, I never really thought about all that, I guess."

"But ya know, I wonder if you'll be able to stay friends once you become the Heir, Cedo."

"Even though it could be him just as easily as it could be me..." Cedric said as he wore a slightly embarrassed smirk.

“Well then hurry and go pull the Red Sword before that sneak gets to it!
Blacksmiths have the special power of wielding things normal people can’t.”

The three of them laughed as they ate, carrying on like this until Cedric had to return to the schooling center.

After attending a rigorous physical training class with Master Feng, who was a fanatic when it came to intense obstacle courses, Cedric made his way into the darkest, most unvisited corner of the building- where his daily personal training class took place.

“Come on in, young Cedric, you don’t have to knock every time, you know?”

Cedric opened the old worn down door slowly, fearing as usual that it might break if he wasn’t careful.

“I’ll presume you’re warmed up?”

“Ah-yes, Master Valblin.”

The old man, whose monstrous frame and tacky robes never seemed to match his long grey hair and beard like that of an official, swung a wooden sword repetitively at the air without looking Cedric’s way.

“Were you adequately pushed to your limits today?”

“Yes sir, Master Feng took much care in throwing ice water on me anytime I’d look to be slacking even a little, so I was able to beat even Geraint and Jorge this time,” Cedric answered with a stone face and thumb up.

“Ohhohoho, what a splendid subordinate young Feng has turned out to be, despite his inexperience as a teacher. It’s thanks to him you’ve gotten to be so scrappy and wildly aggressive.”

“But sir, isn’t Master Feng already in his thirtie-”

“Ohohhh?”

“Yes, sir, a mere baby such as myself hopes to someday be like the young Master Feng.”

“Hmmm, I’m going to have fun knocking that cheeky tone out of your mouth, hoho.”

“But sir, I believe my tone is as respectful as ev-”

“Shut up and grab your weapon already, will ya?”

Not wasting anymore time, Cedric took his vest off and retrieved a wood sword off the rack on the wall, and took a few practice swings.

Stepping out into the middle of the spacious training room where they did battle daily, Cedric waved the sword out in front of himself, his demeanor completely changed.

“Ohoho? A scarier face than usual, eh? I’m afraid your scary face won’t make up for your lack of power, hoho.”

Ignoring his taunt, Cedric shot in on Valblin’s left with a low stance and firm, angled grip on the wood sword. His deliberate lunge looked sure to score an undercutting strike.

A second before contact, the old man twisted away, delivering a deflecting swing with one hand.

Still twisting, the old man shifted his momentum to his right foot and swung his left leg high as Cedric staggered from the counter.

Cedric barely saw the incoming blow, and could only watch as Valblin's foot struck the middle of his back.

"Gah!"

Flying forward, Cedric managed a sloppy front roll to keep from face planting.

Valblin was deceptively quick despite his overwhelming size and strength, and exceptionally skilled at masking his attacks like this. The man had a very refined, technical precision to go along with his power. He was simply too good at straight counters and overpowered offensive blows, so coming at him head on was out of the question.

Due to this, Cedric's strategy never changed: dart at the old man from the side, striking at wild angles in search of a blind spot.

He had to work ten times harder than he would against Mel or Quentle to land a strike that merely equaled the output of Valblin's. Most of those strikes would fail to give him any sort of advantageous position, and even when they did the old man would effortlessly knock his sword away at the last second.

Still, he would press on, with the thought that if he got inside his range of comfort, he could land at least a sidelong blow.

His persistent attacks continued, yielding no result yet again. He began to tire, body throbbing from Valblin's stinging counter attacks. Sensing that the session would end soon, whether by time constraint or his body giving out, Cedric went on one last wild attack.

Feinting to his left, he streaked by the old man's left side once more, leaving space enough to steer clear of any counters. Executing a diagonal slash that slightly deflected Valblin's sword downward, Cedric continued his flight around the back of the man.

Knowing the old man's superiority in a standup fight, Cedric then tried something insane. He'd somehow gotten the inch he needed to execute his idea , as Valblin seemed to react a bit late to his circling move by swiveling about with his sword at low guard.

Cedric had been working exceptionally hard at doing one thing: slowly backing the old man into the corner of the room.

Instead of turning around to attempt a futile back stab, Cedric continued toward the wall, and leapt up with all his strength.

Kicking sideways off the right wall, and then making to kick off the left like a distorted stair step, he contorted his body to look down at Valblin, his sword gripped and ready.

As he kicked off the left, however, his left foot slightly slipped, decreasing his outward momentum.

He looked with bared teeth down at the old man, thinking he might still be able to land a glancing blow across his right shoulder.

"Hoho?"

Of course, his expectations betrayed him. The old man simply couldn't be caught off guard that easily.

Sidestepping the sword, Valblin reached his left arm out, and grasped onto Cedric's wrist.

"Ah--"

With no time to think, he was pulled out of the air, and thrown directly into the skyward elbow Valblin had just raised.

His stomach felt like it was going to burst, and all the air seemed to escape from his body all at once.

"Kughhh!"

He immediately dropped to the floor like a sack of potatoes, where he curled up, gasping for air.

"Ohhohoh, well now, that ought to teach you not to ever do something so stupid again, eh?"

"Kuuuuuughhhhhh, Uuuuughhhhhhhh, Kuuckkckkkkkhhh?"

The blow had left him in a pitiful pile. Once he'd finally found some air to take in, he started dry heaving so hard the blood vessels in his face popped one after another.

"You understand, do you? That trying something flashy like that on a real battlefield is the quickest and easiest way to get yourself killed?"

"Hgeeeeeessgshhhh ShiiiihhhhhRrrHhhh--"

"Hoh! Good, now never present yourself so desperately before me again! This isn't the way your father taught you."

With that, Valblin hung his sword up, dumped the large basin of water he always prepared over Cedric's head, and made for the door, shutting it with a very low, indistinct sigh while his eyes remained forward.

After some time, Cedric finally recovered, and drug himself to the wall where he slumped over.

"Hahhh, hahhh, that old bastard...I swear... I'm gonna kick his ass...so hard...one day...seriously... He doesn't even realize... I resort to stunts like that because... attacking him is... impossible."

Getting up and kicking the water basin across the room, he trudged out of the dojo grumpily.

Out in the hallway, he carefully slunk along as he neared the main school hall. His current mission: make it to the apothecary's room upstairs without being seen by anyone. Especially Mel or Quentle. They were likely at the end of their personal sessions as well, so it wouldn't be a stretch for one of them to pop up.

This was somewhat of a daily routine as well. Cedric would get cuts, lesions, and bruises on his arms and face every day, so regular stops to get treated and receive a tub of medicinal cream became necessary.

Therefore, he climbed several flights of stairs, dripping water all the way, until he reached his destination.

As he opened the door, he heard a loud crash in the stairwell below. Not wanting any part of whatever happened, he hurriedly shut the door and approached the apothecary, who was fast asleep at her desk.

“Umm.. Miss Tess, could I trouble you for a bit?”

Cedric only whispered, but the young bespectacled woman unstuck her face from the page of a book, and looked up with a lively expression.

“Ah, Cedric, what a surprise to see you here today!” The fair skinned twenty-something girl flashed her wonderful smile.

Even if it was usually a sarcastic smile, it was something that made him appreciate his daily beating, if only a little.

“Please don’t mock me, Miss Tess, it makes my wounds hurt worse.”

“Oh, come on, they’re battle scars to be proud of though! Not everybody gets to train with the esteemed eccentric Headmaster!”

“Yes, that seems to be the case. However, I’m starting to question his training strategy, and it’s making sense that I’m his first pupil since Master Feng.”

“Huh? His first?” Tess blinked at him, confused.

“I mean... that’s just what I’ve heard?”

“Hmmm, I guess a non-candidate with lesser expectations is easier to talk about,” She said quietly, looking off to the side.

“Huh?”

“Ah, nothing... anyway, I’ve got potion ready for you here. Let me go and get Selmy from the courtyard to make the cream!”

“Ahh, okay-”

Just as Tess went to open the door, it burst open.

“Tess, it’s an emergency! This idiot fell down the stairs and his nose is pouring blood!”

Mel stood in the doorway, Quentle draped lazily over his shoulder grasping his nose, as Tess stared in shock.

“Noctor, is it bad? I won’t die, will I?”

“Hahhh, no Quentle, you’ll be fine, as usual.”

“I know what you’re thinking, Tess, but this time the idiot didn’t fall on purpose. There were small puddles of water all over the stairwell. You’d have to be an idiot not to see it, but unfortunately for Quentle here...”

“Hoy Mul, if I didn’t slib you would hab..”

“Doubt it...but really, who would leave all that water across the stair well like that?”

-drip-

-drip-

Cedric, who had just gotten done comfortably resting his hands on the back of his head and propping his feet up, quickly looked away while whistling as the three shot their glances at him.

“The culprit is completely unaffected!” Tess and Mel shouted together, while Quentle crumbled.

"I just started sweating a lot since I got here. It's real foggy out today, and the window's open, so the humidity--"

"The sky's always like that!"

"Ehh, well, Tess is gorgeous, so I was nervous?"

"H-mph, you'll have to do better than that to flatter me, brat."

"Ahh Cedrig, why are you trying to gill be? Is it battlefield bragtice? I didn't know you were that zeriouz."

"Why would I use slippery stairs to booby trap a real enemy? Ah-that actually looks pretty bad, sorry Quentle. I didn't think anyone stupid enough to slip would be left in the building."

"No real remorse seems to be felt from the culprit."

"Indeed, maybe I shouldn't treat either of them today..."

"I don't eben care about the baghanded comments, so blease just treat be at leazt."

"Mm, okay then, I needed to go see Selmy either way, so I suppose I'll prepare medicine for both of you."

With that, Tess left the room, leaving the boys alone.

Quentle slumped over a stack of books, holding his nose back, and quickly seemed to doze off.

"It doesn't seem like you have any injuries Mel, so why are you waiting?"

“Me? Well, I just wanted to stick around to see if we’ll plan on going to the ruins tonight?”

“Ohh..I don’t see why not?”

“Ha, as anxious as ever, I see. Even with both of you this beat up? Are you sure you can handle me at full strength? It’ll be boring for me to go easy on you, you know?”

“Gah shut up, you’re annoying. We’ll both be fine, and I’ll win just like I usually do.”

“Six out of ten matches, I’d say.”

“Yeah, matches where I’m by myself against you two. You two rarely win when you’re the lonely man, right?”

“Yeah, yeah...hmm, ‘lonely man’, huh...maybe we should start calling it ‘lonely heir’ from now on.”

Cedric ignored his taunt, not wanting to get into that topic.

“Say, Cedric...how do you think we determine who the Heir is?”

Cedric’s ears perked up at this.

“I’ve never gotten a straight answer from an adult on it, and I’m sure it’s the same for you. Is it simply determined by our combat ability and capacity to grow? You would be the obvious answer in that case, for now at least, but should it really be that simple?”

Mel paused, as if waiting for an answer, but Cedric silently waited for him to continue.

“Or is it up to the people, the ever-evolving Group Will? I hate to say it but, the ruffian probably takes it in that case. His fiery attitude and relation with the commoners

outweighs both of us put together. Even without Quentle, your popularity with the elders and priests ever since you recovered from the war sickness is a big factor, along with the fact that Valblin is training you. And I've also heard from Selmy that you're quite popular with some of the soldiers. You both beat me, who's only backing is the noble class, which unfortunately holds little influence over the people these days."

"Yeah..." Cedric replied with a brow raised.

"Or...Is it all in how strong our Will is? Then, is there someone to read that? The elders or priests? That would favor you, wouldn't it? Unless they had the dignity to remain unbiased, maybe...that's probably the only real chance I have, then."

"Oh?"

"Mm. My Will as a Teuton is undoubtedly the strongest here. I don't care about the past, the future, other states, or the dome itself, none of it matters. We have a duty to protect and cherish this land right now, and whatever needs to be done to keep that duty, I'm certain I will do."

Cedric could only let out a breath of air as he frowned.

They both remained silent for a moment.

"Yeah, I'd say you're pretty strong in that regard. I don't really know about myself, but Quentle might not be far behind you, though."

"You don't know about yourself?"

"...Uhh, yeah, I mean, of course my desire is to become a respected Teuton and to be able to protect the people, but I feel like I can't exactly make that desire into a solidified

Will the way you can, at least not yet. And I certainly don't have the resolve to say that I'll do anything necessary to uphold the Group Will. I can't explain it, but that somehow makes me feel really weighed down... and kind of scared for the people, and our future."

"Hmph..what an enigma you are." Mel turned away haughtily, looking no longer interested.

"Wha-

The door burst open once more, cutting off their conversation. Finally, Tess returned with a much smaller girl, whose extravagant chestnut hair reached all the way to her hips. She wore a radiant smile on her face, one that beat even Tess' charismatic smirk.

"Hello there, Cedric and Mel! And-oh, he's asleep." Selmy whispered the last part, slapping her hands to her cheeks.

The cute, slender girl was several years older than the boys and therefore out of school, but looked to be their age or slightly younger. Cedric knew her fairly well, as they would often run into each other in the courtyard while she was working.

"I missed the potatoes today, since Tess kept me up here," Selmy whined with an overdone frown.

"Ahh, I'll let you know the day before next time, so no worries!"

"Hmm? Potatoes? Selmy, should the daughter of the esteemed Cillavier household really be taking potatoes from a commoner?"

"Ah! But Meeeeel, you know how good their vegetables are, riight?"

“And hey, you haven’t forgotten that the castle itself gets its vegetables directly from my house, have you?” Cedric quipped with a frown.

“That’s neither here nor there,” Mel scoffed with his signature brush off motion.

“The son hasn’t been officially made apprentice yet, now has he?”

“Ah-damn..”

“Hmmp, so then, is it really acceptable to be accepting something so potentially hazardous?”

Mel proceeded to flick Selmy’s forehead, with a smirk that showed he was clearly enjoying himself.

“Oouch...come ooon Meeelll, that’s not fair!”

“On the other hand, it is important for Selmy to experience different tastes and textures, as the court herbalist,” Tess casually put as she knelt next to the unconscious Quentle.

“Ah! That’s right! Nice save, Tess! Oh, and that’s especially the case with vegetables!”

Her radiant smile returned like it had never gone anywhere to begin with.

“Whatever. Anyway, you going to treat these idiots?”

“Oh! Yes, let’s start!”

Selmy noticed Tess had already started treating Quentle, and began frantically searching through her bag.

“Hahh, well then..” As Mel began opening the door, Selmy stopped what she was doing.

“Ah, Mel, wait! Are you...will you be home tonight in time for midnight tea?”

“Pppptttttt!!!!”

Unable to control himself, Cedric spat out the potion he’d received from Tess.

As he continued laughing so hard he couldn’t verbally make fun of Mel, Selmy looked back and forth between the two, puckering her lips confusedly.

“Hahhh. I’ll meet you at your place. Don’t go out until I get there, okay?”

“Huh? But that late, my place is...”

“Do not leave without me, Selmy.”

Cedric’s brow raised as he watched him walk boldly out the door like some sort of official.

As he looked back at Selmy, her troubled look quickly flipped back into her usual radiance.

What was that all about?

After getting the necessary treatment, Quentle finally woke up.

“Ah? Ah! Lady Selmy! How does my fair lady do today?”

“Hehe, she does better than you, it seems!”

“Ohh not to worry, some ill-thought booby trap shall not put a damper on my day, for you are always there to brighten it! Like the loveliest sunflower!”

“Huhuu, oh stop it!”

“Yes, do.”

Cedric and Tess both whacked Quentle across the top of his head.

“Why is it you’re only like this when Mel isn’t around?” Cedric asked, annoyed.

“Well my friend, that’s because Lord Mel is quite protective of his lovely childhood friend.”

“Hehe, he sure is!”

“My condolences, Selmy.”

“You said it, Cedric..”

“Huh? But I’m thankful for him being that way! I couldn’t have grown up properly without him there!”

“Ohh? Might you say, then, that Lord Mel is something of a brother to you, Lady Selmy?”

“Quentle, your nose started bleeding again.”

“Oh! Thanks, Cedric! Ah-beg your pardon, ladies.”

“Hehehe, he is kind of like a brother, I guess! Buuut, I think I really see him more like my best friend, and maybe, my own personal knight!”

“Quentle, your brain and heart are bleeding now.”

“How did you know, Cedriiiiic?” Quentle whined, reeling.

“Huuuh? Quentle? Are you okay? Is your head dizzy?”

“Mm, his brain is undergoing some shock at the moment, so he might have some dizziness. Well, better to go rest it off at your own home!”

Tess began pushing Quentle and Cedric toward the door.

“Ah! My deepest thanks for the treatment, Lady Selmy and Lady Tess!”

“Geh, don’t address me that way.”

“The fairest of days to you both, oh wonderful ladies,” Cedric followed exaggeratedly.

“Ugh, get out if you’re going to say it sarcastically, Cedric.”

“Ohh noooo-”

-slam-

As Cedric and Quentle descended through the stairwell, Quentle quickly returned to his usual self.

“Hoo boy, Selmy was as cute as ever today, don’t ya think?”

“Yeah, normally so, I suppose.”

“Hmm, you just don’t get her appeal. You’re probably more into the type that demeans you, like Tess.”

“No..I mean, Tess is gorgeous, but I’m not really *into* any *types*. And isn’t she just mature, rather than demeaning?”

“Ah, you’re such a bore. And screw maturity, I’ll be this way all my life, and so will Selmy! So even when rich boy ends up marrying her, I’ll still be her fan!”

“Rich boy might have something to say about that, though.”

“Eh, we’ll just fight it out, then! Ooh! Speaking of, we fighting tonight?”

You make it sound like we’re fighting in the actual war...but yeah, it seems we’ll go as usual. I might be a little late though, I need a nap after today.”

“Oh come on, what are you a kid? We can’t fight properly without all three of us there!”

“Oy, didn’t you just wake up from a nap yourself?”

“Ah, that’s because of your silly booby trap though! You won’t be able to get one over on me like that on the real battlefield, ya wannabe assassin!”

As he said this, he began skipping down the stairs, turning his body to stick his tongue out at Cedric while posing a rather crude hand gesture.

“Uhh, hey..”

“Hu-Oh, Uwaaaaaa!”

He’d tried to point in warning, but Quentle still slipped in a lingering spot of water and tumbled violently the rest of the way down the stairs.

Smirking contentedly, Cedric helped him up, and ended up dragging him back to his slum in Market Town.

It was getting dark out, and the setting sun's diluted colors peeked just inside the dome's western wall. Most of the town's vendors were shutting down for the day, and the remaining occupants of the cobblestone street consisted of citizens returning to their homes in the slums.

Passing through all the vendor stands and shops, they took a back alley till they arrived at a series of hole-in-the-wall brick shacks. These were the slums of Market Town. Though slums they were, Cedric thought they weren't all that bad. The living was indeed cheap, which allowed its inhabitants financial and professional freedom. However, the conditions of living were not particularly of concern, as the people were all in some way involved in the market economy, which allowed them access to the minimum medicines the university had to offer.

Though, it remained a fact that this was the Teuton people's lowest standard of living, and therefore its inhabitants were the most likely to fall to disease, even if it didn't happen often.

As much was evident when the boys passed several shacks that carried a somber silence and fewer lit torches, one person tending to another seemingly unconscious bedridden citizen.

The sight delivered a morose expression to Cedric's face, his troubling memories rising to the surface like hot nausea.

As the two got farther into the alley, the shacks grew livelier, and rough looking men from various shacks began shouting casual greetings at Quentle, occasionally including

Cedric. However, as he did not know any of them, his responses were limited to shy bows or waves, a conditioned behavior.

Finally, they arrived at Quentle's shack, a particularly colorful landing decorated with wall art and various hangings, including a circular knife throwing board and hooked shelves full of accessories ranging from sheaths and utility belts, to high grade chain mail vests and plating.

The shack's owner, a large coarse looking thirty-something man, was in the middle of a sale when the two staggered into the shack. The other three inhabitants were too busy drinking ale and taking turns throwing knives at the hanging board to notice them enter.

"Ah, thank you as always Dagan, the service you do for us commoners here is so wonderful, I sincerely hope we can repay you someday."

"Oh git on, us ruffians gotta stick t'gether! If anything, I overcharge villagers and nobles at the shop all day, so this is only right, gehahaha-ehhe!"

Despite letting a rough cough out in the middle of his laugh, Dagan took another deep puff from his long pipe.

"It's more import'nt fer us to stay safe, aft'r all, there bein' no guards out 'ere at night!"

"Yes, you are most correct. These streets have been especially frequented by those bandits recently, so it's scarier than ever. It's the last thing we need at a time like this, with the Wolverines cutting off our trade routes and fishing activities more every day. Those despicable people have no shred of Teuton Will in them..though I suppose it's this long war itself that is driving people to commit such acts.. "

“Well those damned bandits be’er ‘ope they don’t come ‘cross my guys, ‘cause at’ll be the end of’m! So keep yer eye out an lemme know if ya see anyth’n funny!”

After shaking hands with Dagan, the man left, and the haggard shopkeeper turned to see Cedric standing next to Quentle, who had collapsed onto a table.

“Hoyy, Quentle’s home! An Cedr’c too?! What a treat, boys!”

“haha, hey there, Dagan. How is everyone?”

“We’re all hang’n tough, ain’t we boys?”

The three young men, all in their mid-twenties, gave Cedric casual greetings before returning their focus to their game.

“Hey Elem, Thom, Graham, who’s winning today?”

“Thom’s getting some lucky throws in so far, but I’m on my way to catching him.”

“Oy Graham, we all know those ten pointers weren’t lucky throws as much as my dagger totals today weren’t lucky sales.”

“hahaha he’s got us both there, Graham. So, what’s up with our boy Quentle today, Cedric?”

The oldest of the group, Elem, swept his long, half-tied hair back to give Quentle a concerned look.

“Hmm, well, today was actually not entirely his fault. It was about half his, half mine, so I decided to pay my debt by bringing him back,” Cedric replied with a grimace.

“Hahh? Just where are you pulling those numbers from, Cedric? It was at least ninety percent your fault!”

“Oh, you were conscious?”

Quentle turned his head, still planked on top of the table, and frowned at Cedric’s smirk.

“Hoyoyy Quentle, getcher ass steady, boy!”

With one hand, Dagan lifted Quentle off the table by his collar, and tossed him onto a sofa while he whined in protest.

“Ahh, Master please, I’ve had a long-”

“What a ‘andful the brat is, eh Cedr’c?”

“Quite so, Dagan sir. Though, I really was partially-”

“Gehahahah! You boys’r just like these three when they grew up!”

“Huh? No way, Master, none of us were as dumb as Quentle.” The dirt-matted Graham disputed.

“Yeah...” The raggedy-haired Thom nodded in agreement.

“Not even close...” Elem followed, turning his attention back to the game.

“Alright, you guys suck, I’m going to my room. Cedric, I’ll get you back tonight! Don’t be late!” Quentle pointed at Cedric as he drudged through a rather worn, but colorful, tapestry, wearing some sort of half-grin, half-frown.

Cedric gave him a facetious nod in return, and turned to face Dagan once more.

“Hey, Dagan, has the crime around here really been that bad lately?”

“Mmm, it ‘as. I s’pose it’s been a while since you last been by, huh?”

“Yeah..so what’s this about bandits?”

“Ah, there’s other good fer nothin’s round ‘ere than just ‘em, but this’n bandit group been makin’ a name fer ‘emselves, lately.”

“The Blonde Bandits.”

“Blonde...Bandits..” Cedric repeated Elem’s words as he turned back toward him.

“Sounds cute, doesn’t it? Especially strange considering the nobility are primarily blonde headed. But these thugs have been kidnapping people for ransom for over a month now. From what I’ve heard, they investigate their targets so thoroughly they know their schedule to the tee, picking them up whenever and wherever is most convenient for them to disappear with the victim. Then a day or two later, the victim’s family gets a letter threatening them for ransom, always signed ‘The Blonde Bandits’. They choose a safe place for exchange, execute, rinse and repeat.”

“...wow. I never would have imagined something like that...”

“The worst part is that other criminal groups have begun popping up, copying the Blonde Bandits and using their name. Problem is, they’re sloppy with their jobs, and people have died because of it. The castle is very aware of the problem, but they’ve tried hard to keep it hushed up, since public opinion on the government would go south if everyone knew the amount of intra-city guards are dwindling due to the Wolverines’ constant night assaults that are forcing us to spread sentry forces across the entire border wall. The tensions caused by this is limiting our commerce and causing these criminals to rise up the way they are.”

“...What the hell? So, we’re being stretched all over the island with the night assaults, and stretched from within trying to protect citizens from our own people? What the hell is that...Ralin and Galgi said it was bad, but I didn’t realize the night attacks were causing so much trouble...”

“Indeed. From what we’ve heard from a client connected to the army, each and every night assault is flawlessly executed, with top tier siege equipment to boot. We’re having to send troops running from battlefield to battlefield, in large numbers. It seems like the Wolverines finally decided to stop dragging this thing out and brought out their big guns.”

“Their big guns, huh..”

“Mm. It seems likely their commander in chief himself is involved, as well as his top generals. These attacks seem to be very calculated, so it makes sense.”

“I see...I wonder if we have the power to withstand their best...”

“Geha! Don’t seem ‘at way right now,” Dagan lamented, shaking his head. “‘xactly why this state needs one thing and one thing only- fer one o’ you two brats to go grab ‘at red sword and b’come the Heir! Or ‘ell, if I’d my pick it’d be both o’ ya! Jus’ not ‘at spoilt rich brat!”

“The red sword?”

“Oh, Gambell ain’t tol’ ya ‘at part yet, ‘uh? Long story short, either one o’ ya might be able to pull the red sword an’ use it as the Heir, some’n bout it bein’ a Takanova relic ‘at we can use since it’s been ‘ere on our side so long.”

“...ohh. Ralin mentioned that too, but I didn't really take it seriously. So that's why Quentle was so excited about the forest earlier. I just assumed since Gambell said it was sealed that that was it. And after that story, I never would have thought of a Teuton using that sword anyway...” Cedric muttered, looking down.

“Eh? Yeah...-Gehem! - nothin' on you, Cedric, but I think 'at's some'n 'at makes our Quentle more suited, be'n 'onest.”

Cedric's eyes burst wide with shock, though his gaze remained downward.

“But, like I said, it could be either o' ya brats... might jus' come down to who gets to it first, gehahahaha!”

Cedric stayed fixed and silent for a moment, before finally composing himself and looking up with a grimace.

“Hah, well, lucky for me I know a few ways to slow Quentle down!”

After their conversation ended, Cedric decided to take advantage of being here before heading out, and bought several things: A utility belt with several sheaths strapped to it, one of Thom's finely made daggers, and a very thin chainmail vest. Buying combat accessories had become a hobby of his, so when going through Market Town at night while equipped, he'd always dawdle around in the hopes that some trouble would come his way, for the sake of testing his skills.

Upon leaving the sketchier part of town, Cedric decided to take it easy and do some last-minute shopping, finally catching a street vendor in the middle of packing up.

Satisfied with his haul of meats and fruits, he made his way back to the village. It was getting dark out, but he wasn't concerned with being in a part of town he considered to be potentially dangerous, so he carelessly maneuvered the winding Market Town roads.

Passing by a dark alleyway that would generally not catch his attention, he noticed three figures standing within the old beaten brick.

One of them, with the build of a tall boy around his age, leaned against the wall, a grey hood covering the top half of his clean-shaven face. He could just see light colored curls seeping out from the hood, matching the brown and gray robes draped loosely around him, winding diagonally down to his feet.

The man's appearance made him come across lax, but his mien was intimidating enough to make Cedric stop walking momentarily, as if he'd actually been standing in his way rather than to his side. It almost felt as if he'd walked into some thick fog that kept him from moving further.

"Huuuh, what's this? A little deer fallen into the lion's den? How fun~"

Speechless, Cedric redirected his glance toward the other two silhouettes, two much smaller hooded figures leaning against the opposite wall, too deep into the shadows to even make out much of an appearance, though they were clearly slender enough to be female. The two stood menacingly still, not even bothering to uncross their arms.

"Umm, hello? Buddy? What's a good natured little student like you doing out this late?"

Sensing that any further hesitation he showed would bring him danger, Cedric put on a loose, smug face.

“It’s only just gotten dark recently, if anything I’d say it’s far too early to be so obviously evil seeming in an alleyway...”

“Aaha-ha! How interesting, huh girls? You see, deer boy, it’s exactly that frame of mind that brings us to scout out the carefree Market Town night-goers who would never expect to be eaten up~”

“Geh...deer boy... really...”

“And look how beat up you are! Aren’t you aware, these days there are vultures eyeing this area for little wounded animals, waiting hastily for a nice meal?”

“That so? Well, it’s a good thing my *little* school teaches me how to hunt weak things like a bird that waits till its prey is injured.”

“Aaaha-ha-ha! You’re a seriously interesting little rabbit, aren’t you?”

“How did I suddenly change species so drastically?”

“Mm interesting indeed, I think we might be able to get along. What’ya think girls? Think we can add one more to the gang?”

“Uh, if it’s okay for me to have a say here, then you should know, I’m gonna pass for now.”

“Ahhh? Really? I thought for sure you’d fit right in with us..maybe another time?”

“Yeah, not likely.”

“Hmmm, I’ll take that as a solid maybe. Looking forward to it, partner~”

Frustrated, Cedric finally walked away without replying. He began walking briskly, gripping his new knife while staying wary of any sudden movement behind him.

After some time, nothing came, so he let his tensed arms relax.

Could that have been...

Coming to a fork in the road, Cedric wearily thought about which route to take before remembering the left-hand route was a quicker way home, though it required turning down a steep alley before coming back out to the shopping center buildings.

Not thinking anything of it, Cedric started down the curved path, when it happened.

Just as he turned the corner, he saw it.

Something was in front of him, just meters away.

It wasn't a person, nor was it standing on solid ground.

The figure, appearing as a gray and black shadow, swiveled around like a flickering flame, blending meticulously with the darkness. What floated before him was certainly not human, even if it had the general appearance of one. Its large frame, its distorted arms and legs, its neck and shoulder line, its flowing hair-

When Cedric noticed its wavy hair, flowing gently out from a blurred, shadowy face, he understood he had seen this thing before.

That.... specter...from then....

He did not hesitate for more than a second.

In that split second, something told him he could not hesitate, nor could he be near this thing for another second if he wanted to live.

His legs sprang into action almost like gears, and he took off running in the opposite direction. Not daring to look back, he sprinted down the right-hand path, accelerating with every step.

He thought the villainous man in the alleyway would laugh if he saw him, thinking he was running away from him, but that didn't matter. As prideful as he might be, whatever that specter was shook him to his core, and his body and mind instinctively knew to flee.

He sprinted on, until he had passed through Castle Town, finally entering the village before he slowed down to catch his breath.

He realized he had, in his shaking hands, held onto everything he'd just bought.

What in the world..is that thing?

What in the world..is happening on this island?

He returned home, where he was forced to put those thoughts aside while he helped his father prepare dinner in silence.

Then, after eating (also in silence), he attempted to take a nap. However, with what he'd just witnessed, there was no way he could fall asleep. Despite that, he eventually found himself quite relaxed due to exhaustion.

"You should fix that sleeping schedule of yours. It's a bother for those living with you to tiptoe around your abnormal routine."

His father said this as he walked by his open door.

Cedric's eyes widened once he comprehended what he'd said, realizing he hadn't thought about that. He would often take naps after evening sessions before going out for several hours of the night. However, he would always return in time to get a few hours of real sleep in, before routinely waking up before dawn.

Even though I've been diligent in waking up for years...sleeping a bit early creates a burden?

So...I guess I either stop going out...or I stay awake until I go out...then I get hardly any sleep, but that's better than being a bu-

-Wait...tip toe around me? Why would he even do that for me? What does that even mean?

Thinking about this kept him occupied until it was time to head out for the ruins.

Naturally, he'd decided to keep this routine, and sacrifice sleep going forward.

He crept quietly out the door and through the village, and proceeded to sneak through Castle Town, strategically avoiding the patterned patrol of the sparsely stationed guards.

He could avoid this trouble by taking the streets of Market Town around the outside of Castle Town and into the outskirts leading to the ruins, but doing this had become part of the nightly game for him, continuously improving on his elusiveness. On top of that, he had a certain other reason for not wanting to go back into Market Town.

Well...I'm sure Quentle will be fine though...

Silently praying for his clumsy friend, he continued sneaking by the buildings of Castle Town.

In the middle of a forest, a small lake reflected the distorted moonlight into a thin mist. On the tiny slab of land laying at the center of the lake, a lanky boy with blond hair struggled with all his might, attempting to pull a sword up from where it lodged deep into the earth. The boy's hands were as red as the blade of the sword that shined a bright scarlet in the moonlight, as he threw every bit of his strength into his attempt to thrust the hilt of the sword skyward.

Finally, he gave up, and fell back into the small patch of grass the slab of land had to offer, breathing deep, frustrated breaths with a face wrought in anguish.

"DammmmmITT..."

pant

pant

"Cedric...."

pant

"Quentle...."

pant

“...I must beat...both of you...soon...”

“...for all our sakes....

“....if not...I’ll have...no other choice...”

In the silent, shadowed backstreets of Market Town, a dark-haired boy scurried past a certain alleyway, whistling as he went without a care. From within the alleyway, a hooded figure stood up, and stepped out into the road, turning toward the passerby.

A thin mist emerged from the figure like steam, surrounding him. As he looked up, showing his youthful face full of freckles, sharp green eyes, and dirty blonde locks, a cunning smile slowly formed.

“And, found the second~”

Several miles out to sea, a fleet of warships rowed swiftly toward Takanova Island. Its flagship, a large warship adorned with red and gold flags and exquisite golden archways, traveled at its center. Within the inner compartments of the ship, two men engaged in hand to hand sparring in a dark room. Their hands opened flat, they struck each other's forearms at varying angles, trying to open the other's defenses and land a body strike.

At first, the two seemed to be even in their skill, their build even close to the same. However, not long into the match did one man gain the upper hand, luring his opponent into overextending, and proceeding to twist his body, grabbing the man's wrist and slinging him over his torso and into the fine wood floor.

Having half-jumped to allow for the throw, the man untwisted his body and landed with perfect balance.

"Pursia, it seems your sense of balance remains your weak point, even now."

The man, shrouded in darkness, bore a voice as stern and daunting as his stature.

"Yes, General..."

"After all these years, even though it's what cost you defeat at the hands of a sapling Teutonic Knight."

"This is so... General."

The man sat up, gripping his shoulder. What little bit of torchlight there was in the room flickered over his face, revealing a ghastly scar across his jawbone, just above a bitter grimace.

“You should know...night battles are won and lost by the general’s sense of balance. His ability to perceive the flow of battle when his sight is at its most vulnerable, and knack for adjusting to the enemy’s tactics with a calculated defense and his own plan to take advantage of the enemy’s vulnerabilities, are what make a general dangerous at night.”

The man had turned his back to his downed opponent, basking himself even further in shadow.

“Yes, sir. I understand, and you will see this applied to this very battle. This will be the night, the first time since six years ago...”

“Yes, I have faith you’ll see to it, while I play the decoy. We only need the siege to be successful enough to get one Wolf in, but if you have the chance to do further damage, take it. Either way, our contact will be ready to receive the Wolf, and then...

“...the Red Sword will finally be in our hands.”

“Indeed it will, General Shuant.”

On the northwestern shores of Takanova Island, a garrison unit of five hundred men rested carelessly after setting up their siege defense equipment.

“Ah, all that hard work and we don’t even know if we’ll get hit tonight!”

“Well, we’ve had our number called every night in the last week, so I wouldn’t be all that surprised to see it happen again.”

“Guess that’s true! But it doesn’t matter, because the brick wall squad is here!”

“UuwoooHHH!!!”

“Oy you dunderheads, keep it down will ya? I’m trying to listen to the sea’s voice!”

“Ahh, sorry Commander, just trying to stay energized, ehe.”

The tall, scraggly man walked by their small campfire, ignoring Ralin.

As he looked out to sea, his eyes slowly grew wide.

“Ah? Commander? Something wrong?”

“You can’t hear it?”

“Hear what?”

“Something.... big...is headed this way.”

Night Games

Cedric's shoes softly crunched through the desert sand as he entered the old ruined village. The weathered homes of old were like thrown out picture frames, having regressed to flaccid plywood through so many years without occupation. He wondered how it was they even stood upright at this point, many of their vital pieces having rotted away.

"Why is it we haven't torn the whole thing down and rebuilt it? Makes no sense."

"I suppose it serves as a bit of a memorial," Quentle answered, having just met with him on the outskirts of town, much to his relief.

“Still...if anything I’d say it’s a disservice to the dead. They could at least clean it up.”

The two passed through the eerie ruins in the dead of night, not having to stay quiet. The ruins were like a world separated from town, where the only other noise was the rhythmic cry of cicadas, along with the occasional howl of a wolf from the direction of the forest.

“Hmmm...I guess you could say it serves as a reminder to the people not to let their land come to this?”

“I guess that makes sense,” Cedric grumbled, not completely satisfied. Before long, the boys reached the center of the ruins, a mostly open dirt land that used to be the village’s town center.

The only obstacles were six small pavilions, three on each side of a larger pavilion. Only the larger pavilion still had its shingles attached, and was decorated with several worn down oak tables.

On the centermost table, a luxuriously dressed blond boy laid lazily, drenched in water.

“Uh, Mel? Why are you wet?”

“You making fun of me for earlier? Wanna fight, rich boy?”

“Hahhh. I got here early and did a bit of warming up, so I doused myself. That a problem?”

Mel's eyes remained closed as he pointed toward an empty basin some feet away. He seemed to be attempting to brush them off with his usual smug air, but Cedric noticed a hint of frustration in his voice that he apparently couldn't mask.

"Well, you aren't too tired to fight now, are you?" Cedric badgered back at him.

"Of course, not, Cedric. I wouldn't still be here if that was the case," Mel retorted, sitting up with a grunt.

"Hehe, then let's do this!" Quentle shouted excitedly.

Wait. Did he notice it too?

Ah, whatever.

"Let's do this!"

"Hurry up and get in the wall! The commander wants all infantry Go at a siege station!"

"Everyone file in! We'll be sitting ducks if we start the battle out here!"

"How is there that many galleons?! There's at least thirty of them!"

"And a gold studded war galley toward the front! What the hell is this?!"

"Hey, calm down and file in orderly, soldiers! Like you've done this before!"

“Simmer down, pansies! We’ll get a piece of ‘em once we’ve settled into defense!”

Ralin and Galgi roared out in the middle of a frantic crowd of over a hundred soldiers, all trying to climb the wall’s ladders at the same time. Large ballista arrows began soaring from the wall toward the sea, further panicking the hurried infantrymen.

They managed to get most of the unprepared infantrymen up the ladders in time, but some twenty or thirty hadn’t made it before the first projectile slung with a snap toward the wall.

Mel’s arrow missed the mark by a meter or so, as Cedric dashed for the second pavilion to take cover. As the arrow struck dirt, the small tomato that served as its tip burst, splattering its juices along with scattered dirt around Cedric’s feet.

As serious as the boys took their night battles, they couldn’t simply fire real arrows at each other. Though, the tomato-tipped projectiles still caused significant pain, and therefore head shots had become forbidden.

Even then, Mel’s accuracy was second to none at school, so it was in Cedric’s best interest to avoid any kind of hit. A torso shot would be his ‘death’ and end the round in his loss, while any arm or leg hits would force him to abandon use of said limb. Of course, the shots were painful enough that the boys wouldn’t have to voluntarily disable the hit limb in an act, especially when Mel was on the firing end.

Cedric knew this, and made every precaution to avoid a hit. Before him awaited Quentle, blocking the opening into the main pavilion where he needed to pass through on the way to claiming the flag hidden behind one of the opposite pavilions. Going into a brawl with Quentle with a disabled limb was not a good idea, and had around a ninety-nine percent failure rate. This was their best shot at beating him, so the two staked their entire strategy around getting Mel a clean shot on him.

In an attempt to catch the two off-guard, Cedric streaked past the third pavilion, making a direct run for the worn down awning Quentle was guarding.

He did manage to throw Mel off, but Quentle was not one to be caught sleeping.

The shortest of the group by almost a foot, Quentle made up for his disadvantage by using a long spear, its wooden tip wrapped thoroughly to soften blows. In addition, he relied on a strong center of gravity due to his slight stalkiness. Due to this, he took Cedric's attack head on.

Coming in at a sprint, Cedric swung the wooden sword he'd 'borrowed' from Valblin's dojo with precision, attacking Quentle's left shoulder.

Quentle responded swiftly, widening his grip and receiving the blow with certainty. Pushing the sword away, he then gave a short swipe of the spear, forcing Cedric to jump back.

Not withdrawing for long, Cedric leapt back toward the scrappy defender, raising his sword high before whipping it around for a low sweep.

Quentle, however, played the smart, patient defender. He waited for the sword to make its arc, meeting the blow with the spear's right side instead of attempting his own. Then, once more, he delivered a swift counterstrike with the longer left end of the spear.

Cedric, ready for this, decided to leap out of the action, darting out to Quentle's right side.

Quentle seemed content to play the steadfast defender to give Mel a clean shot. It was essentially a stall tactic. In that case, Cedric thought, he just needed to outmaneuver him and leave him behind.

However, this also factored into the opponents' plan.

An arrow flew from beyond the outside run of huts, making a beeline for Cedric's face.

Wha!-

The oversized ballista arrow shattered as it slammed thunderously into the stone wall, sending a thousand pieces of sharp flint in every direction with the explosion.

Those still climbing the ladder found themselves skewered, bombarded, and falling to the earth in a bloody downpour.

Galgi and Ralin held firmly onto large shields as several pieces seeped in, grazing their arms and legs. Their two squads had just made it in over the wall in time to ready shields in defense. Knowing their comrades wouldn't make it up the ladder in time, it was all they could afford to protect their own squads.

"ALL INFANTRY! ONE SIEGE STATION PER GO!" The commander's voice could be heard some ways down the wall.

Ralin and Galgi's respective Go flew into action, swarming onto the nearest H-shaped heavy ballista structures. While two men took over shield duties for each Go, the other three began loading the heavy arrows into mesh straps, and placing pin locks into the netting to hold the arrow taut.

Both arrows loaded, Ralin positioned himself behind them, and began pulling on both arrows by the chain leading from their rear. Galgi had broken off, and was peering out at the sea from between the two middle-most shields.

"Got anything, Galg?" Ralin yelled calmly despite the overall state of panic of the ten men.

"Nothing yet. If I heard right, golden arches...they shouldn't be too hard to- ah!"

"Got 'em??"

"TWO CLIKS UP, AND THREE RIGHT!!"

"Aye-OH!"

Ralin pulled the chains as far back as he could, both arms straining to stretch the mesh netting as far as it would go, adjusting his angle as he growled roughly to match his energy exertion. Every other Go had at least two soldiers fire their single arrow, while Ralin manned both squad's at once.

"READY!"

"EVERYONE CLEAR ON 3! 2! 1! FIIIIIRE!"

All nine men turned away from the ballista as Ralin released the chained arrows with a roar.

The heavy arrows screamed over the shields before disappearing into the beach's darkness. Ralin dropped to his knees, panting while staring intently at Galgi's back. The men all sat in silence for a moment, not moving an inch as they waited. The sounds of artillery battle could be heard in cluster, yet the only way to tell if their shot had landed was to wait for Galgi's call.

"h....."

His left fist began to raise up with vigor.

"HIIIIIT!!!"

"UUUUOHHHHH!!!"

"How good a shot, Galg?"

"Right on the front deck, but it doesn't look like we did much damage-wait, what is that?"

"What is it, Galg??"

“There’s no way they’re...were they...waiting for someone to aim at- E-
EVERYONE GET DOWN NOW!!!”

The arrow whistled by as Cedric bent his neck back just enough to keep the tomato from grazing his nose.

“Oi Mel, what’re you playing at?!”

“It slipped.”

Cedric refrained from engaging further, attempting instead to locate the building the sarcastic retort had come from.

“Don’t forget what’s right in front of you, Wardric!”

Just remembering his primary foe, Cedric leapt back once more, barely avoiding the spear as it struck the ground violently, scattering about clumps of dirt.

Face to face, Cedric engaged aggressively, taking precise shots at his friend. As usual, Quentle’s skill with the spear was enviable, as he deflected Cedric’s point blank strikes with crafty angles and footwork.

Having stalled Cedric’s attack once more, Quentle had allowed Mel to fire off another arrow, this time breezing just by the back of the frustrated boy.

This time, however, Cedric had been waiting, keeping his focus split between Quentle and the buildings Mel snuck through.

He'd pinpointed his location this time, and made it evident by suddenly darting sideways toward the building Mel was hidden in.

Quentle reacted, realizing they were in danger now. He burst out, attempting to cut him off. However, his jaw dropped once he noticed Cedric's true intentions.

Having led Quentle out far enough, he planted his left foot, and shot back in the opposite direction, making to circle around Quentle's now open left side.

Quentle tried to react, but this time Cedric had a step on him, which was all he needed. With a swift yet loaded deflection of the spear, Cedric had Quentle knocked off his usual center of gravity, and delivered two precise strikes to his right arm and leg.

The spear dropped to the ground, Quentle falling reluctantly after it, his right leg and arm now incapacitated. Cedric had already rounded the corner and entered the main pavilion in a sprint.

Cedric now parried Mel's arrows with ease, as he'd been forced to exit the building in order to get a proper shot off. In quick succession he fired, and equally quick did Cedric deflect one arrow after another, tomato juice splattering harmlessly through the air.

Cedric cleared the main pavilion, and focused on his target. Of the three shed-like pavilions in front of him, one held the key to his victory. Making a break for the one in the middle, he glanced back to his left to see Mel's next arrow coming in surprisingly off the mark above him.

This bothered him, and once he realized the reason behind it, he turned his head further round, only to see the tip of a spear soaring at his neck from a meter away.

The wall's railing imploded in a blaze of fire and rubble, as the flaming boulder that had just landed broke into pieces and bounced wildly across the wall's surface.

Ralin, having been knocked over by the blast, jumped to, only to see a portion of the wall blown away in the front, and Galgi hanging onto two unconscious shield holders as he slipped further down the sloped ledge of the broken wall. Wondering how Galgi had the presence of mind to grab a hold of them during the blast, he leapt forward.

However, he was already too late.

"GALGI! BRITA! ESCA!!"

Ralin grasped at the air, hunched over the wall's edge.

"I've got them, Ral!"

As he fell, he threw these words back to Ralin, tightly holding the unconscious men in each of his arms.

"PROTECT YOURSELF TOO, YOU IDIOT!", he bellowed down, watching as the three made the ten-meter fall, bouncing down the pile of Teuton soldiers that hadn't made it up the wall.

Looking around frantically, Ralin quickly accounted for the rest of their men, all either unconscious or barely stirring and nursing minor injuries.

"Tch! Looks like I'm on my own..."

Without any hesitation, Ralin dove off the wall's edge. After rolling off the bodies of his allies, sustaining several wounds from the flint impaled bodies, he sprang to his feet.

"Galg! Where are ya?"

"R-Ral?"

Jumping to, Ralin scurried to the spot his friend had landed. He'd let go of the still unconscious Esca and Brita, and was pulling shards of flint out of his torso and legs with a grimace.

"Why'd you come down after us, you fool!"

"Oh, shut up, what else could I do? How are they?"

"They seem to be alright, for now. But, Ral....look."

Ralin turned his glance toward the shoreline, and his face broke open with shock. Some twenty catapults were being wheeled toward the wall by ten infantry soldiers each, and even more infantrymen were pouring forth from the front most ships behind them.

"ALRIGHT INFANTRY GO SQUADS, NOW IS THE TIME!" The voice of the commander roared from overhead.

"THEY'VE SENT THEIR GROUND TROOPS OUT, SO THE ARTILLERY FIRE WILL DECREASE IN VOLUME! BALLISTA STATIONS, CONTINUE FOCUSING FIRE ON THE FRONT SHIPS! ALL INFANTRY GO, OFF YOUR STATIONS AND ONTO THE BEACH AT ONCE! MAN A V-SHIELD AND PUSH THEM BACK INTO THE SEA, DAMMIT!"

“Commander Giro doesn’t miss a beat, hehe.”

“Ha, it’s just too bad we get to face the front lines like this, without a ch-”

Galgi stopped short, as his comrade had disappeared from in front of him.

Ralin had taken off as soon as he’d finished his sentence, darting toward the nearest V-shield. The large slabs of stone, ironed down to a V-shape, were lined with five handles, for the amount of men it took to carry one efficiently.

Ralin, however, did not have five able men, nor the time to wait for any. His entire squad playing the role of sitting ducks behind him, he was the only one able to stand between the them and the impending assault.

With a roar, Ralin lifted the V-shield by two of its innermost handles, and began charging slowly across the beach with it. He could not see anything but the slab, as it provided more than sufficient cover, but charged onward nonetheless.

Gritting his teeth and ignoring the blood gushing forth from his hands, he charged. The first boulder struck the V right down the middle, splitting perfectly and limiting the impact on Ralin’s body.

A second boulder struck the left flank of the V, throwing Ralin’s momentum to the right with crushing impact. The slab’s inside walls slammed against his head and chest, yet he retained his grip on the handles, and managed to maintain balance. A third boulder smashed into the right flank, crushing him once more. Yet he continued his charge.

A fourth boulder struck the top of the slab, this time throwing his momentum back in a direction he couldn’t change with sheer willpower. Feeling his back bending

backwards, about to snap, he thought that this would be as far as he would be able to go in keeping the assault's attention focused on him. He could hear the numerous boulders being flung at the wall around him, and could only hope that he'd taken enough of their attention to give his men enough time to regroup.

Just as he felt his legs begin to give way, two arms appeared on either side of his head.

The two hands planted themselves firmly onto the slab, pushing it upward and forward. Ralin looked back, to see the face of his best friend, purple in the face as he struggled.

"G-Galg...I?"

"Don't tell me the strongest brick in the brick wall squad *actually* needed help from a smaller man?"

"...h-heh...not that I really needed it..."

"Let's go, Ral. Together."

"Uoh!"

The two continued on, quicker than before. They were almost immediately joined by Esca and Brita, who were wounded yet looked lively as ever. They each took a handle from either side of the slab, which allowed the heavily bleeding Galgi to step back.

Coming out to the left side of the slab, Galgi peered around its side at the Wolverines' side of battle.

“Ralin, two clicks left!”

The slab changed direction slightly, and the next boulder streaked in, hitting the point of the V and breaking off in pieces to its sides. Galgi, who had retreated back into the slab’s cover before the strike, stepped back out and gave Ralin further directions. With this, they continued forward without taking detrimental hits.

“I guess it’s true that the smaller men are more likely to be geniuses, haha! How the hell can you see so well in this?”

“Couldn’t tell ya, Ral...It’s just something that came with practice, not that you’d- oh!”

An enemy infantryman had appeared from the side, attempting to disrupt the shield carriers. Galgi tossed a knife at him before he could swing his sword, and followed up with a quick strike of his own short sword.

The Wolverine soldier fell, but was immediately followed up by two more. Galgi grit his teeth and cut down the men with vigor, despite his wounds.

The group had now gone into the middle of the quickly developing battlefield, shields and war cries resounding around them. Two more soldiers appeared on Galgi’s left side, and as he drew more knives from his uniform’s utility belt, five more men emerged from the slab’s right edge, rearing back short swords.

Galgi could only watch desperately, as-

“Captaaaain!”

-six Teutons bolted into the scene, cutting the approaching enemies off just in time and spearing them against the inside of the shield.

“You guys!” Ralin, Galgi, Esca, and Brita all rang out in surprise.

“Sorry we’re late, Captains!”

“Hehe, knew we could count on ya louts! Now we’re in business, eh Galg?”

“You bet your ass we are! Let’s go, Ralin and Galgi squads! Let’s bury some Wolverines underneath this beach!”

“UOOOHHHHH!!”

With five men to handle the shield and five to protect its underside, the two Go caught some steam, running through some thirty Wolverines, Galgi scouting out the incoming boulder strikes. Around them, five or six V-shields were beginning to make some headway into the beach as well. Their confidence growing with every step, Galgi finally stepped out to survey the battlefield.

This is..

Two hundred?

Three hundred?

No, beyond the front lines, there’s at least a thousand coming out of the water!

Our advance has allowed the ballista to take out quite a few of the catapults...

But, even if we have four hundred infantrymen left alive...

Even with the hundred that are following right on our trail...this is..

We are...completely outnumbered!

We’re just charging to our deaths!

Ah?

Is that...the flagship! They were hiding it with smoke!

It's come this close! If we can clear a path and signal back...

Ah? What's that it's loading on the ballista?

An...anchor?

And it's being aimed....!

"RALIN! MEN!! BRACE FOR IMPACT!!!"

The strike came without warning. The large, three-pronged iron projectile met the stone slab with a destructive force that shot dirt, dust, smoke, and rubble around like a tornado.

Galgi flew into the ground a meter back, but managed to stand back up. He couldn't see anything around him due to the smoke, which seemed to be multiplying unnaturally, separate from the projectile's impact.

Ears ringing, Galgi stumbled desperately in the direction of the comrade's he could no longer see. However, before he could reach where they should have been, a rapid clapping noise came from just in front of him.

Before he could gather himself to react, the shadow of a horse came upon him, heading on a sudden collision course.

The wooden spear whizzed just over Cedric's head, and smacked loudly against the middle pavilion. Cedric remained unperturbed by this, and lunged forward before skidding around the corner of the middle pavilion.

Quentle's twenty-meter desperation throw had told him the pavilion he was heading toward was the right choice. Sure enough, he threw his arm to the top of the pavilion, and snatched the small green flag pinned to it.

After waiting a moment to allow Mel's last ditch arrow to fall harmlessly behind him, Cedric stuck the flag out beyond the pavilion, waving it in a showing manner.

"So, you two want to explain the attempts to take my head off?"

Having regrouped at the center of the main pavilion, Cedric stood menacingly before the seated boys, crossed arms and furrowed brow.

"Slipped."

They both muttered this, looking away.

"Really? Okay, well since it's so hard to aim, don't be upset if I 'slip' a few times myself."

The two boys silently gulped, both too frustrated by their loss to argue.

"Well then, I'm ready for round two. Mel, you're looking fairly lonely, why don't you give it a go first?"

"Tch.."

“And don’t forget, anything that looks like collusion will result in the guilty teammate being up next by default.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know the rules, Wardric. Let’s go already.”

—

Second round: Cedric(archer) shoots Mel(attacker) in the chest.

Third round: Cedric(defender) disables Mel(attacker) with blows to both legs.

Fourth round: Cedric(archer) shoots Mel(attacker) in both legs with consecutive shots.

Fifth round: Cedric(defender) disables Quentle(attacker) with a stab to the gut.

Sixth round: Cedric(archer) shoots Quentle(attacker) in the gut.

Seventh round: Cedric(archer) shoots Quentle(attacker) in the gut.

Eighth round: Cedric(defender) holds Quentle(attacker) still while Mel(archer) shoots him in the gut.

Ninth round: Quentle(attacker) collapses in combat with Cedric(defender).

—

Cedric’s technical precision, along with his anger driven focus, proved to be too much for the other two. It was simply night and day’s difference from battling the impossible Valblin, and his persistent training seemed to be coming together thanks to the differing experiences.

“How the hell did this turn into a game against me half way through?”

The boys collapsed on the table in the pavilion, thoroughly exhausted.

“Well, a spear would have hurt a lot more than an arrow, if you hadn’t thought about that.”

“Yeah, yeah, my bad.”

“Right...well, I’m done for the night, myself,” Cedric groaned.

“Me too, it’s unfair when you get like that,” Mel sneered.

“Hmph, same...not that I wouldn’t win if we started again!”

“Hahh. You two are ridiculous, you know?”

“So, Cedric, if you’re not interested in Tess, who ya got? There’s gotta be someone.”

Chomping loudly into an apple, Quentle began the conversation with his usual no-limit attitude.

“Nope.”

“No, no, I’m not letting you off the hook, Wardric!”

“I have nothing to say. Besides, why am I being targeted? What about you two?”

“Ah come on, there’s nothing to say there, that’s a fight for another day!”

“Well then I’ll give you an answer another day, too.”

“Oh, come on! I won’t be satisfied until you give me a name! Or if you want I’ll start *subtly* throwing you at Tess?”

“Hoh, you know he’ll do it, too.”

Cedric frowned at the chuckling Mel. Since his odd mood seemed to lighten up with the conversation, he figured he might as well take one for the team. He also knew it would be a pain to deal with if Quentle really put his mind into his threat. With an exaggerated sigh, he sat up.

“I don’t have a name to give you, but there’s only been one girl that’s ever stuck in my mind.”

“Oooh? Go on, go on, go on.”

“Hahh. I was only about eight at the time, so I don’t remember that well. I used to wait in the courtyard while my father did business in the castle, and this girl, she was probably our age, had long blonde hair, and.... She knew about all the flowers and plants, and would lead me through all the greenhouses every day and just rave on about all of them. I didn’t have much of a childhood, so that was pretty memorable for me, I guess.”

“Whoa. Sounds super cheesy. I like it.”

“Hmm...Blonde, huh? Could very well be noble, maybe even royal-ha, as if..”

“Wait a minute! Light hair...plants...girl...courtyard...noble...Guys! Isn’t that-

“It’s not Selmy.” Cedric and Mel both cut him off.

“Oh...so, what happened??”

“Uh, nothing really. Eventually she stopped showing up when the war got worse, and then they stopped allowing kids in the city, much less the castle.”

“Ahh, what a boring ending!”

“Mhm..”

“This is why I told you I had nothing to say...”

“Hm! Well, I’ll make it one of my missions as Sword Heir to find her and reunite you two perfectly, plants and all!”

Quentle jumped to his feet, sticking his chest toward the dull gray sky.

As he did so, the nearby forest seemed to shudder, a low noise reverberating far in the distance.

“Ah...did I do that?”

“No, you idiot. It’s a battle... we should get back...”

Cedric frowned at the forest, and then at Mel, whose earlier gloominess had returned.

As the boys prepared to leave, Cedric’s thoughts permeated with concern for his friends.

Galgi...Ralin...hang in there.

The horse ran into Galgi at full force, throwing him into an awkward spin. Somehow, he managed to get a hand on the horse's saddle, and just barely hung on to it. Around him were some fifty more horses racing toward the wall, shaded by the ever-multiplying smoke. If he let go, he would be crushed underfoot by the stampede of the strong cavalry unit.

Desperate, he attempted to reel himself into the horse. The rider, aware of his unwelcome passenger, attempted to cut the piece of saddle Galgi was holding onto, but received a small knife in the top of his hand in response.

Wrenching the horse's reins over in a fit of pain, the man removed the knife, and before Galgi could throw another, leapt up from the horse.

The horse's momentum threw Galgi upward, into a position to strike the man had he remained seated. Instead, Galgi caught a glimpse of a silvery rope of some sort, and lost sight of the man after landing a glancing blow on his right hip. His momentum took the knife into the horse's back, which caused it to flail wildly before throwing itself, along with Galgi, violently into the earth.

Miraculously without serious injury, Galgi used the horse's thrashing body as cover as the cavalry sped around them. He could see some of the riders more closely as they stomped just inches away from him, and noticed that their golden armor and uniform seemed to be wrapped in a crossing red sash, the same kind that his knife had just gotten a piece of.

Grasping the red sash as the riders passed, Galgi rolled away from the horse, having taken several hooves to the head and back, and regained his composure. The

cavalry then fell under heavy archer fire up ahead. Thanks to that, he felt safe returning to his comrades.

Running in a desperate stagger across the beach and through five or six enemy infantrymen, he eventually made it back to the shield-which was now in several pieces.

“RALIN!”

Spotting his best friend first, he pulled a slab of broken rock off him, to reveal a body that could only be described as one large, bloodied abrasion.

“RAL! HANG IN THERE! RALIN!”

“ehe...”

A small cough emitted from the burly man, who then drearily opened his eyes.

“Ral...”

“heh...heya Galg. Between a rock and a hard place, aren’t we?”

“Haha... shut up, you fool.”

As a tearful Galgi began tending to Ralin’s worst wounds, Beidin, Peter, and Roz all crawled up to them, nursing moderate wounds.

“Captain...protected us all. He lifted the shield up when you called out, and pointed it upward at the last moment.”

“The initial impact was scattered on either side, so we didn’t take on too much of it. But the tail of that thing, it came in through the middle and destroyed the shield.”

“Captain Ralin took the brunt of it...for our sake.”

“That so, is it...who’s the genius now, Ral...”

“Yep, really used my head on that one...”

“Stop talking, fool. Men-ah, you’re all okay, thank goodness. Everyone form a perimeter while Simon and Jean continue treating Ral. I’m taking Filipe to scout the battlefield. We shouldn’t have to worry about being targeted in this smoke, so just stay defensive for now.”

“But Captain...you don’t look that much better. Shouldn’t-

“I’m fine, Esca. I’m the Captain, let me worry about myself.”

The men all nodded, and Galgi took off with Filipe, the quickest of them, in stride.

Beyond the smoke, they found-

-more despair.

The infantrymen who had been charging earlier numbered few, enemy units tearing through the last of them with ease. One enemy unit continued their advance, in the direction of Galgi and Filipe.

“Ahh..this is bad, Captain. Do we go back and make a stand with the guys?”

A pained grimace froze on Galgi’s face. Deep in thought, he raced through their limited options, failing to come up with anything that would get them out of this alive.

His usual neatly combed hair was disheveled, his face half covered in dirt and blood. His flimsy armor was chipped all over and essentially useless at this point, and his legs verged on giving out.

Regardless, he took a sure step forward, his eyes focused ahead.

At that moment, another bout of pandemonium came from the eastern shores.

It was another stampede of a cavalry, but its number was exponentially larger.

The Wolverine infantrymen had less than half a minute to prepare. The galleys were also unable to adjust in time, their focus having shifted solely to the wall.

The cavalry charged directly into the mouth of the enemy, searing through the infantrymen like jelly. Their armor was thicker, and their weapons sturdier. The man in the lead, covered in wrappings and minimal armor, minced through the soldiers with a curved broad blade as if they were simply tall grass in his way.

The unit, numbering around three thousand, swarmed the beach, taking out the now disorganized Wolverine infantrymen in a complete rout. From the middle of the pack, fire arrows began whistling toward the galleys on the shoreline.

The wall now clear to fire without distraction, ballista arrows began soaring into the ships, doing significant damage.

It took less than three minutes for the galleys to retreat, rallying to cover their flagship, which had taken moderate damage.

“haha..ha...”

Galgi dropped to his knees, letting his blades fall to the earth.

“Captain...this is wonderful!”

“Filipe..go let the guys know...we’ve been saved by 3,000 Man Commander Al.”

“That’s...Al the Bleeder?!”

“That’s right...the poor villager who became the third highest ranking commander stationed on this side of the mountains. He’s an old friend of ours.”

As Filipe ran back to the others, the scattered Teuton army roared in victory.

“We made it...through the night.”

Unable to cheer along, Galgi raised a weak fist, chuckling as he fell to the ground, unconscious.

Stranger in the Night

The boys trudged lazily into High Town from a creek overshadowed by the edge of the forest, the only place they could sneak in that wasn't fenced off. As they traversed the fantastic green hills and brick roads that looked neat and orderly even in the dead of night, Cedric admired the numerous large villas that housed the Teuton elites.

"Oy, pick up the pace, you two, we've got to get Melly back in time for midnight tea!"

"Cedric, why did you have to tell this ingrate about that? Loose lips sink ships, you know?"

"Not sure what kind of ship I'm sinking, but that was way too funny to pass up and you know it."

"It's a good thing, Mel! We're happy for you, here!"

"I somehow doubt *you're* happy about anything here, Quentle. Besides, there's nothing to be happy about, anyway. Get your minds out of the creek."

“We were just in the creek, though...”

“Well then, do gladly return to the creek, and be one with it for all eternity.”

“That’s horrible! If Selmy heard you-”

“Heard him what?”

“Hiiiiie!”

Cedric and Quentle grasped each other’s arms in an exasperated gasp. The small girl’s appearance, laying comfortably on the other side of the hill they’d just climbed, scared them half to death. Mel, meanwhile, showed no reaction, but instead continued silently toward the smiling girl.

“Geez, Lady Selmy, you shouldn’t ambush us like that! Since when is it normal for herbalists to practice the art of war in a peaceful uppity village?”

“Seriously woman, that’s bad for our hearts, especially when we’re beat from training all day,” Cedric tacked on with a sigh.

“Hehe, I just wanted to surprise you all a bit, but I’m sorry~.”

“This girl is seriously scary, it’s like she has no presence at all.”

Quentle nodded anxiously at Cedric’s words with wide eyes, before gawking at the frilly yellow night gown the girl wore as she brushed her bare white legs through the smooth grass.

“Heey Cedric, did you say something mean just the-Ow!”

Mel had squatted down, and proceeded to knock on the top of Selmy’s head as if waiting seriously for someone to answer the other side of a door.

“What’s that for, Me-oh, why do you look so scary?” Selmy whined up at him, while Mel’s stern gaze only hardened further to the point Cedric thought he would burn a hole into her forehead.

“Ah, allow me. I do believe Mel here did indeed request that you not leave your residence, if you so happen to recall?”

“But-”

“Thanks so much for the eloquent commentary, Cedric. Now, go home.”

Quentle began chuckling at both of them with a stupid look on his face.

“Quentle too, go home.”

“Ah...well, then, Lady Selmy. As you can see, we noble commoners have successfully returned your esteemed knight to you without incident or bandit, in time for your midnight tea.”

“Band-”

Selmy stopped, flashing a look of shock toward Mel, before quickly recovering to her usual look.

“Thanks, as usual, Quentle!”

Cedric was already walking away, waving shortly with his back to the three.

“Oh, you too Ced-”

“Why aren’t you on your way too, Quentle? Need some incentive?”

Mel's words were cold as ice, causing Quentle to stumble back down the hill before Mel could finish drawing the arrow he was feeling for.

"Boy, Melly's in an especially sour mood tonight, isn't he?" Quentle inquired playfully, walking beside Cedric with his hands on his head.

"So, you did notice, huh?"

"Huh? Of course I did, it was obvious, wasn't it?"

"Yeah, it's oddly suspicious. Especially just now. It was like we saw something we shouldn't have, ya know?"

Quentle looked upward, scratching his head in response. "Yeah, I wonder...what might be going on with those two."

Cedric looked down, biting his lip.

It's like they're in some kind of trouble...

Had Quentle been awake to hear the whole exchange in the apothecary wing earlier, he might be more worried.

It's probably better for him not to know...

"Well, I'm sure it's nothing big, just Mel being weirdly overprotective and cautious."

“Hmmm...” Quentle eyed him quizzically. “Yeah, you’re probably right. Ah, here’s my detour.”

Quentle’s quickest route home to Market Town required cutting down a road that lead to a guard station, which he would daringly sneak through. This left Cedric to circle around the hidden creek and make his way back through Castle Town.

“Well then, see ya in the mornin’, Wardric. Don’t get lost on the way home!”

“Aye aye, idiot,” Cedric shot back with a sarcastic wave.

Traversing the rocky creek with ease, Cedric hopped onto the dirt that symbolized the small, out of place desert. Just as he turned in the direction of Castle Town, he heard rustling in the forest bordering the desert, sending a shiver down his spine.

He looked back to see nothing out of the ordinary, the eerie, bunched up trees as still as ever. Thinking it was probably just a small animal, he turned his back once more.

-Plop

However, a different sound made him freeze in shock. Turning slowly, he saw it.

A man, dressed in gold uniform with a frayed red sash.

Without a doubt, a Wolverine soldier.

He had dropped to the ground in exhaustion, clearly wounded and worn down, yet still dangerous-looking.

Cedric found himself unable to move. Instead, he stared in utter disbelief as the man, bleeding from his side and hand, among other places, dragged himself across the dirt toward the creek. It seemed the man hadn't noticed Cedric, and continued crawling along until he reached the edge of the creek where he began splashing dirty water all over himself, even drinking some. His head wore no helmet, showing his wispy long hair and dark facial hair, along with a gruff looking face.

Cedric, still under a spell of absolute anxiety, finally realized he should do something. However, once he thought about what to do, he was unable to send any orders to his confused limbs, and remained still.

It was simply unthinkable for an enemy to make it inside the walls. It had, in fact, only happened one other time. As the man rolled onto his back, sighing in relief, pictures of that certain scene played in Cedric's head.

The spilled blood. The torn flesh. The defining scent of the battlefield, of death, invaded his head like a sickening nostalgia. Even though it was only one injured enemy soldier laying wide open, this was the first time he would experience actual war since his six-year-old nightmare. All the training in the world could not prepare him to face a situation this real, after so long. As such, the inexperienced boy trembled pitifully before his already downed enemy.

"Ahh, wolves in the forest to protect against Wolverine soldiers, huh? Not even funny-oh...what's this?"

Cedric's hesitation allowed the enemy the moment of realization he needed.

"A boy...say, boy, over there is the place you call 'High Town', right?"

“Ah....eh-”

“Huh? Speak up when an adult is talking to you, boy.” The man showed no traces of one wounded in enemy territory, instead booming with arrogance. Unfortunately, Cedric’s frozen mental state only seemed to fuel the man’s confidence.

“What, thinking about screaming for help? Not going to do any good. Go on, tell me about this High Town place and I’ll give you a quick death.”

The man slowly drew a short sword from within his uniform, and used it to stand himself up with a pained grunt.

As he took a step forward, Cedric’s nerves finally began to wake up, sensing he would soon die if he remained frozen. He hesitantly pulled his wooden sword from his shirt, and attempted to ready his stance as if he was facing Valblin or Quentle.

However, the result was sloppy and uncertain, and he knew it. As the enemy stumbled towards him with a sick grin, he realized he couldn’t do anything like this. He simply wasn’t prepared. Even if Quentle and Mel went at him with everything they had, they did not have what this man had. Even if Valblin made a point not to go easy on him, he did not show what this man was showing.

Something he hadn’t sensed in six years. The most defining trait of that scent of the battlefield currently assaulting him like he was in the middle of a recurring nightmare. However, unlike his dreams, this was the real thing, not to be compared.

Killing intent.

This is...the most important thing for a soldier to have.

The enmity the man came at him with was completely new to him, and froze his senses anew. There was simply no way he could match this output of murderous intent, let alone defend himself with a wooden sword.

I...don't want to die!

The enemy soldier bore down on him with a vicious downward swing, making swift impact-

I DON'T WANT TO DIE!

-with the air.

Cedric had bailed out on defending, and dove desperately out of danger.

Rolling through the dirt, he attempted to gather himself up to run away. However, the man would not allow that. As he stumbled to his feet, the enemy was already on him, forcing him to dive to the left this time.

His body burdened with both fatigue and frozen nerves, Cedric was operating solely on his overflowing adrenaline, and fear for his life. All he could do was dive away from the man's wild swings one after another.

His game of dodging came to an end when the persistent man cut off his escape route, forcing Cedric to hold his wooden blade out to defend against a sidelong strike.

Unsurprisingly, the wood was broken through, and the momentum of the blow sent Cedric rolling once more.

This time, the man launched himself at a completely defenseless Cedric, who'd rolled into a skid before reaching all fours, and looked up to see the man closing in.

With only half of a wooden practice sword left as defense, the wide-eyed boy's mind searched for an answer.

There must be an opening somewhere.

This guy's wounded, yet he's fighting so hard.

It must be...he wants to finish me off before his injuries flare up?

If so...a war of attrition is exactly what I need!

As he thought that, he finally remembered the throwing knife he'd bought just hours ago, resting idly in his back pocket.

Taking an aggressive step of his own, Cedric reared the broken practice sword over his head, threatening to throw it with his left hand. This, naturally, did not phase the approaching enemy, aside from causing him to raise his sword up slightly.

As he shifted in reaction, Cedric reached for the small throwing knife in his pocket, and threw it in a swift side armed motion at the man's lower half.

The enemy noticed the incoming knife, but due to his blade being readied high, he just missed the opportunity to deflect the projectile. Having been thrown just low enough to slide under the man's blade, the knife found its home in his injured hip.

The man stopped in his tracks, doubling over and wrenching the knife out.

"You...little shit! I'll kill you!"

Throwing the knife back at him in anger, the man charged forward once more.

Dodging the wildly thrown knife, Cedric ducked out of the charging man's path by faking to the right and escaping left with ease, holding no intention to engage any further.

The enemy's lower body injury had seemingly flared up due to Cedric effectively kicking dirt into it, causing his charge to lose a noticeable amount of steam.

Seeing this allowed Cedric's nerves to relax, if only a bit. He had recovered himself quite a bit since being completely frozen, but still wasn't as confident in his abilities as he would be fighting against his friends. Therefore, this kind of war of attrition was the best strategy for him.

The enemy soldier charged aggressively time after time, but Cedric was able to evade him. The man now staggered out of his bursts, his breaths growing deeper thanks to Cedric's tactic.

Though, as a result, he ended up tiring himself out as well. This was the ideal strategy for him, but the wear and tear of a long day had completely caught up with him. He was now breathing just as hard as the heavily wounded enemy before him.

This, he thought, must be the difference between a real soldier and a kid idealistically playing at one.

The two stood several meters away, silently catching their breath. The Wolverine soldier had certainly lost much of his earlier gusto, but Cedric was now beyond the point of running on reserves.

"I'll give you some credit, shitty kid...you're not as spineless as you look."

“Good to know you fell completely into my trap,” Cedric fired back with a smirk.

A complete bluff.

“Tch. Just a brat playing knight. Fine then...”

Whether he simply didn’t buy the bluff, or didn’t care, the man stepped forward once more, raising his off hand.

Cedric watched as if hypnotized as something like steam began rising from the enemies bloodied arm, and then-

“Wha-”

This time, the enemy froze. His eyes were wide, looking at some place beside or behind Cedric. Assuming he was trying to distract him, Cedric continued watching the mysterious mist forming around the man’s arm. But then, he felt it.

A cold breeze swept across his right arm, freezing his body once more.

He slowly turned his trembling head to see it.

“Ah-h...”

The shadowy specter from earlier passed by him as if he was a plant on the side of the road, slowly gliding toward the enemy.

This time, he saw its large frame, chiseled face, and majestic long hair clearly, despite being a blur of black and grey. Its daunting figure shook him, and filled him with mixed feelings of unease and security.

Who...are you...?

The specter cut the distance between Cedric and the enemy in half before stopping and floating there like the most disturbing candle flame he'd ever seen, simply staring at the man with the kind of efficiency he assumed would come if curses could be fired like arrows at their enemy.

The man began staggering backwards, losing concentration on whatever he was doing with his arm.

"What the hell...what the hell is this place? Was this whole damn thing a trap, after all?"

The man spouted nonsense as he retreated into the forest. The specter slowly followed him, vanishing into the night and finally allowing Cedric some relief from the situation.

Collapsing to all fours, Cedric gasped for air, feeling sick to his stomach. He couldn't make sense of what just happened, and he didn't want to. For now, he simply wanted to get out of this place.

.....

Having returned to the farm to collect water and bathe, Cedric laid down in the makeshift cot in the farmhouse, and decided to stay there until it was time to work, since he knew he wouldn't be able to sleep either way. A multitude of thoughts whirled around his head like a sandstorm, causing him to roll around restlessly.

What should I do?

A Wolverine soldier made it into town...what if there's more of them?

What if he's able to escape that...thing, and survive?

Was he going to do something in High Town?

Mel...Selmy...

A trap.... he mentioned a trap...what is happening?

Just what is happening on this island? Our home?

I have to tell someone...right?

Someone will have to do something about our security within...

I must...I-I-

-I can't...

Confessing to breaking the strict curfew...

Just what kind of trouble would that cause for everyone?

Mel...Quentle...

Father...

Thoughts like this tortured him, until he reached a point of mental exhaustion and became unable to think about it anymore. Just as he began to doze off, the first glimpse of dome light seeped through the crack of the farmhouse door, signaling the end of the long night.

Foreboding Daze

When Gadric Cintog arrived at the farm, he furrowed his thick brow and squinted his already-narrow eyes at the sight before him. His son, though not by any blood relation, had already done a considerable amount of plowing through the field.

The boy was already drenched in sweat, working intensely with the rusted hoe.

“Oy, what’s going on with you?”

Cedric looked up, having not noticed his father’s appearance at all.

“Ah, good morning father. I just had trouble sleeping, so I thought I’d get a head start this morning.”

“That so...”

Gadric ended the morning pleasantries with that, and began his own workload tending to the crops. As Cedric continued working with even more fervor, he wondered

if his father noticed his currently plummeting state of mind. He looked up to the sky while taking a quick breather, face wrought with unease. The grey sky was always like this, but the atmosphere it gave off today matched his burnt out melancholy.

The sleepless boy was no longer petrified, but at a loss. He knew that things around him were going to change soon, and he didn't know what he should do to navigate those changes. From the talk of the next heir, to the worsening war and his mental defeat, he was beginning to see himself as helpless to impact any change in the upheaval that loomed larger every day.

"Father...do you think we're on the verge of losing the war?" Cedric posed his concern plainly as the two made their way back home.

"What makes you think that? Has your world changed in any way because of the war?"

"Ah...I guess not...no," Cedric half lied.

"Then, do not concern yourself with matters that others have the role of addressing. No matter what happens, we must only continue in our roles. If you are not a soldier, you needn't think of unnecessary things."

"Ah...understood..."

They returned home, and Cedric remained downcast as he bathed and prepared for lessons.

Eating his portion of breakfast in a hurry despite having little appetite, he then stood up and made for the door.

“Is it really your wish...to become the next Sword Heir?”

Cedric’s heart stopped. He turned to look at his father, who was sipping a mug of hot tea at the old worn down table, as if to confirm it was actually him. He had, without exception, never once talked about the Heir competition with him. Cedric assumed he didn’t want him to bring unnecessary attention to them, and thought he maybe even resented him for his name simply being thrown into the ambiguous race. Therefore, it was a complete shock to hear him mention such a thing.

“I...I can’t say that it’s my desire to be the Heir. I think what I want is- no, I know that I want- to be a knight.”

“I see,” Gadric muttered before silently puffing on a wooden pipe.

“Your birth father was the same way.”

Cedric’s heart jumpstarted, only to stop once more. Gadric had said this like it was nothing, but it was the first time he’d ever mentioned either of his parents.

“You...knew them?” Cedric managed to breath out his words, stunned.

“Barely. I only had brief contact with them in the mountains where they lived.”

“Mount-

Another shot of ice-water directly into his heart.

“I’m- an offspring of the mountainfolk?”

His father gave a silent nod.

So, I'm essentially-a descendant of the campsite.

He looked down at the table with wide, shaking eyes that threatened to pour tears out at any moment.

So, then Garik...

Cedric clenched his fists. Part of him wanted to hear more, but knew very well he shouldn't pry further. It was a miracle his father decided to divulge so much information to begin with.

"Anyway, if you're truly shooting for knighthood...I only expect that you make sure it's within your grasp. Reaching out beyond yourself, in whatever you do, will result in failure. Keep your duty at the core of your heart, and do not explore its possibilities carelessly."

"My duty...to the Teutons...?"

"Your duty to yourself."

The inside of his chest thumped like a drum. He wanted to indulge his father further, to ask him what duty he should hold to himself. However, the words wouldn't come out. He was too overwhelmed by the things his father had said.

"...I understand. Well then, Good day, father. I'll see you at dinnertime."

Gadric returned his words with a short nod, and Cedric thought for a second that he looked slightly less stern than usual.

On his way to the schooling center, Cedric looked dazedly at the mist dome. He still felt as though he was lost within a sea of those clouds, unsure of what to do or where to go. However, his heart was still racing from what his father's words had given him. He felt like he now at least had a modest light to illuminate the way ahead. An energy within that would allow him to go forward, into that cloud of uncertainty, with some confidence.

When he arrived at the classroom, it became clear that he wasn't the only one out of sorts. Many of the boys seemed to be in a daze, and seemed less talkative than usual.

This lay most true with Mel. The lanky blonde sat with his arms folded, staring at his desk as if it was telling him some sort of story.

Cedric, not feeling up to pestering him, took his seat in silence. Quentle, on the other hand-

"What's wrong with everyone? You all look like I ate your lunch and stole your girlfriend. Hehe, or the other way a-"

"Shut up you moron, it's early and you're giving me a headache already." Mel spat out, not bothering to look up while holding his head. Quentle pointed at Mel, looking at Cedric with a curious smirk as he sat next to him.

"Hey Quentle, have you not heard?" the approaching Farum asked before sitting comfortably on the side of their table.

"Huh? No, Cedric, you know anything?"

Cedric merely shook his head in response, only half-lying.

“Apparently...” the slow sounding noble whispered much louder than an actual whisper, “the wall was broken through last night.”

Cedric felt his stomach sink, his eyes wide. Mel responded similarly, but with much truer shock.

“Wha-

“Though it seems it was only a small section, and was immediately recovered. We even caused a somewhat quick retreat from what I hear.”

“Say that sooner next time, man!” Quentle burst out over-dramatically.

“A quick retreat, yet they were able to take out a portion of the wall in that amount of time?... big guns, huh...” Cedric whispered the last part, ignoring the stares pointing at the attention-hogging Quentle.

“Yeah, and it seems the casualties were quite high for such a quick battle, as well...” Berd added with a touch to his glasses, suddenly walking up to their desk alongside the lazy-faced Kaolo.

This time, Cedric’s heart sunk as well. He stared fixedly at his desk, attempting to justify to himself why his low-level friends were sure to be okay.

“I heard Commander Al came in to save the small fry infantry garrison of Commander Giro,” Kaolo added with a yawn.

Gi..ro....

Cedric mouthed the name, realizing where he'd heard it before, and began sweating visibly.

"Though, from what I'm hearing it's possible some enemies got through the wall before the retreat happened..."

Cedric was now shaking, his face white and clammy.

"Cedric? You good?" Quentle posed quietly, before the others had a chance to notice.

"Ah...yeah, fine. Didn't sleep much thanks to you guys." He brushed off Quentle's inquisitive glance with ease.

"Speaking of," Mel cut in from nowhere, "I was thinking about having the guys all join us tonight...ya know, just to be safe."

Cedric looked up quizzically, wondering how much attention his aloof friend was paying, and if the timing of his interruption was as calculated as it seemed.

"Ooh, a three on three you're thinking? Spices things up a bit!" Quentle seemed genuinely excited.

"Well, even more would be fine, I think. What about Geraint and Jorge?"

The two muscular boys peeked their heads around from two desks away upon hearing their names.

"You guys in?" Quentle asked in a whisper that rivaled Farum's in volume and subtlety.

Geraint nodded his head with a shrug, and Jorge held a thumb up with a wink.

“Well, that’s that! This is gonna be awesome!”

“Yeah, so we could do the two big guys, Kaolo and Cedric, against me, the ruffian, Berd, and Farum.”

“Huh? Why so specific?” Cedric asked with a frown.

“No reason, really.” Mel didn’t bother to turn around as he answered curtly, returning his head to his arms.

Don’t give me that...

This is based on...yesterday’s class...

Mel’s weird insistence on pushing the issue frustrated Cedric, fouling his mood further. With a half-grunt-half-sigh, he held his head in his hands until he heard Master Gambell’s polite voice.

“Ah. Good morning, boys. Please, have your seats at this time.”

Even this guy was sounding somber. Cedric sat up properly, thinking the end must really be near.

“Well, today, I’d like to begin by touching on some things mentioned yesterday. Namely, that of the Day Left in Grey.”

.....

“Well, to give brief exposition to the topic, I’d like to revisit the history-or at least the history our knowledge holds, of the various wars within Molovar. We first go back before the Dome came to be, where around half of our Takanova’s four hundred years of existence saw war between us and the Shlanks. In that time, there was also war

between the Gleazons of Center Rock and their neighboring Celanocia Island, a war that would prove pivotal in both state's desire to expand westward. In the end, Celanocia gained the upper hand, securing a sea route toward the western Island State of Felaficia and some neighboring stateless islands.

"Meanwhile, the northern Island State of Snarilia served as our country's defense force, fighting off invading fleets from the country of Molusht, while also tending to unneeded squabbles between states over small islands that to this day remain unclaimed. This included the Red Exodus, where many Shlanks defected and sought to claim their own island, fighting small battles with just about every state until they found Shraunts Island, a rich northeastern state inhabited by the Verdeans, a longtime rival of Snarilia.

"Through the fierce fighting strength of the Shlank defects, the Verdeans were forced to retreat to a small unnamed island further south. The inhabitants of the newly claimed Shraunts Island of course went on to call themselves the Black Shlanks, and dedicated themselves to becoming an economic powerhouse rather than wage war, evidenced by the many trends and industrial innovations we've received from them.

"At the same time, Snarilia had become so focused on the fights within that the emissaries of Molusht seized the chance and forced their way in, setting up camp in another unknown island near the Verdeans' new home. This fueled tensions between the Snarilians and Verdeans, eventually sparking a three-way war that ravaged the two unnamed islands.

"That three-way war, marks the end of our records leading up to the Day Left in Grey. The true victor remains unknown, but we know of a clear loser, though we do not

know the means. After the Dome's appearance, the Molusht forces slowly rebuilt themselves while the Snarilians mysteriously shut themselves within their fortress of an Island, rejecting any communication. The only certainty that we know is that, once the dust had settled, the Verdeans...no longer existed."

The boys, having already learned these details, were not any more enthused than they had been before Gambell began speaking. Cedric was no different, taking the opportunity to ponder the strange Shlank defection, which seemed even more odd now that he knew the story of Velagoras and Garik.

"So then, keeping in mind the conflicts of our pre-dome Molovar, let us review the battles that have occurred since the sky became grey.

"As many skirmishes that took place before the Day Left in Grey, the amount of conflict we've seen in the twenty years since has been significantly greater. Even with the powerhouse Snarilia stepping completely away from the national stage, the tensions between states which suddenly became caged in by this strange dome of mist, only grew.

"Surprisingly, the Shlanks backed off their assault at the Wall, and looked elsewhere. The Gleazons, having failed at western expansion, had turned their gaze south, toward islands and seas that would provide southern states a foothold to the northeast. The Shlanks answered the call, possibly seeking these strategic footholds as potential steps in taking revenge upon the Black Shlanks who not only left, but risked dirtying their precious bloodline.

“This allowed us Teutons to strengthen ourselves, and while we were eventually forced to meet the Gleazons at sea in small scale battles as well, a three-year period of rapid development passed, proving vital for what we had in store.

“Meanwhile, in the northwest, the successful Celanocians took only a year to conquer the state of Felaficia, where they would then build a powerful military base and initiate what we know to be the famous Wolverine regime. In the next year, they returned their gaze to the center-most Gleazons, having failed to subjugate the stateless islands close to them. This forced the Gleazons to give up their plans of expansion, and instead focus on maintaining their strong defense in the form a highly elevated plateau-island, which the Wolverines would spend nearly two years toiling away at to no avail.

“The Gleazons’ withdrawal from southeastern seas seemed to allow the Shlanks a free ride to the north. However, upon running into Molusht fleets that had frantically expanded in reaction to suddenly being trapped in enemy territory, the group returned to their side of Takanova. Back home, they wasted no time in continuing the fight with us, which turned into a yearlong clash at the Wall, the most intense fighting we’d seen thus far.

“Of course, we were able to hold them off and secure the Wall, but not without countless lives lost, troops from both home and mountains alike.”

Cedric’s throat lurched at this, as this was the war that he was born into, that made him a war orphan. Now that he had a bit more information on his parents and the people of the mountains, the thought of that year-long Shlank war gave him an empty feeling he couldn’t describe.

“Now, thanks to our development in the years prior, we were able to recover quite quickly. Of course, this was very necessary, as it was time for the states to ally themselves for the first time. The hostile Molusht forces, who now held two islands and faced no resistance from the nearby Snarilia and Shraunts Island, were beginning to build a wide-scale perimeter with their fleets. Their forces seemed to multiply unnaturally, as their threat grew larger and larger by the day, until the Shlanks, Gleazons, Wolverines, and Teutons convened and decided they must work together to take out their mutual enemy, one who had even larger numbers waiting on the outside if the dome were to ever fall.

“And thus, another year-long war took place at sea. The four states who chose to fight brought their finest warships together in a concentrated effort to wipe out the numerous Molusht fleets. Finally, the five-way naval fight was drawn into southeastern seas, where the final scorching battle took place.

It was there, in what we now call the Ghost Seas, where we finally routed the Molusht forces. It was in the same battle, fifteen years ago, that the Wolverines, led by General Shuant, betrayed us and murdered the most recent Sword Heir, Hedric. The Gleazons ignored the sudden betrayal, focusing on chasing down the scattered Molusht ships, while the Shlanks surprisingly kept their heads down and returned home.

“Just like that, we were suddenly thrust into war with the Wolverines without so much as a declaration of war, and we have, of course, been fighting that war till this very day.”

Gambell’s speech trailed off with a low tone that matched the wounded body language of the class.

“Now, onto my theory I’ve been mentioning. You see, I reiterated the history of these wars to emphasize the impact the Dome has had on our country. To get you thinking about the way the different states reacted to being caged in suddenly. Now, I’d like you to also think about the relics given to our ancestors and the Shlanks. The Sages gifted these relics to us with goodwill and guidance in mind, and look at what both states did with them: we turned them into the two most powerful weapons in the world, and used them against each other for our own gain.

“So, you see, it is my thought that the Dome’s appearance was of no natural occurrence, but another chance given to us by the Sages to come together as a nation. This is evidenced by its timing, with the three-way war raging across the northeast, and the leftover mutual threat of the Molusht forces still lingering. The stones were lined up so that we would all come together as one, however, all we did was continue fighting. As a matter of fact, the fighting only worsened. And when we finally were forced to form an alliance to stamp out the obvious threat, the alliance did not even last the duration of its mission. Many blame the Wolverines for being power hungry conquerors, but the truth was that there was never a mutual trust between the four allied states.

“This was likely one reason the Snarilians and Black Shlanks refused to cooperate. We simply never communicated with each other as people, despite the Sages guidance.”

“But, couldn’t it just as easily be the opposite? It seems more likely we were pitted against each other from the beginning, doesn’t it?” Quentle shamelessly spoke up the moment Gambell’s speech paused, sounding as serious as he did in the previous class.

Cedric had the same thought as he did, but after yesterday's outburst, he had decided to hold his tongue no matter what.

"Well, that way of thinking is in no way wrong, Quentle," Gambell answered with a modest smile.

"Huh..." Quentle murmured in shock, his eyebrows contorting like he was trying to make shapes out of them.

"That is the most obvious opposing view, after all. I personally choose to see things a bit more positively, is all. It is my belief that Sages are beings who serve to guide our world, and foster a collective Will among its people."

"That's my problem exactly, though. Our Will is fine and all, but giving the Shlanks a Will like that...seems kind of blatant, doesn't it?" Quentle was now holding nothing back in his interjections. This counter had Cedric genuinely interested in Gambell's response, but the class began to clamor before the stressed teacher could answer.

"Why wouldn't they just come out and tell us if that was the case?"

"How could they not foresee the fighting that would come from suddenly being trapped in here together?"

"The Dome caused the destruction of an entire state!"

"People's greed destroyed an entire state! And don't forget a state was wiped out before the Dome as well!"

The class quickly split into two sides, arguing over human nature and Gambell's theory.

Cedric, along with his friends, remained silent. He had no interest in these things, though he couldn't help but admire Gambell's unwavering belief.

"Alright then, boys. I'm glad I could rouse you from your sleep with my ramblings, but let's end there for today. You see, I wanted you to start thinking about these things as you approach your preparation tests next week. The state of Takanova Island, as well as the direction of our domed country. Whether you end up as a soldier, a researcher, or a common worker, you all have the capability to mold our collective Will, and even our world, in what you do in life."

His last words struck Cedric. As class dismissed and he made his routine trip to and from home to Castle Town, he thought about his father's question. Whether he wanted to be the Heir or not, he knew that he would fight, and what he would fight for.

My duty as a Teuton.

My duty to myself...

I'll fight...to discover that...and mold it.

As he looked up to the Dome, he felt his inner light begin to cut through the sea of cloud, if only by a bit.

Reasonable Suspicion

Cedric made haste in arriving at the castle courtyard, his daily meeting place with Ralin and Galgi. His fears had nearly gotten the best of him on the way there, but he was relieved to find Galgi's modest grin waiting for him, along with nearly the rest of the men.

However, what stopped him in his tracks, was the lack of the loud, burly face of the group.

"H-hey guys...uh.... w-where's Ra-"

"Ah, Ral," Galgi answered gently, "he's.... recovering down at the barracks sickbay. Last night was a rough fight, and Ral took the worst of it out of all of us."

"Is he-will he...be okay?" Cedric sputtered out, gripping his food carrier tightly.

"Ah yes, not to worry Cedric, it's mostly just a load of rather severe flesh wounds. Nothing too serious, and it would take a lot to put ol' Ralin out of commission. I'd bet he'll back out there with us tonight!" Galgi's tone sounded hesitantly cheerful, but it got a chuckle from most of the men.

“Well..that’s good to hear. But, yeah...I heard about last night. Did the wall...?”

“Yes, it did get broken through, unfortunately.”

Cedric sat quietly on the fountain’s edge, listening with fearful intrigue.

“It wasn’t much of a break through, at least not like the one six years ago. We had it re-sealed by the morning, but it’s a weak fix if we’re to be targeted again tonight.”

“Did.... any enemies...?”

“Get in? Well, Commander Giro was quite confident his sentries eliminated the group that made to intrude, but...there’s no way to be sure. They were fast, and efficient.”

Galgi’s words cemented Cedric’s fears. He stared down, his hands shaking as he wondered whether he should bring it up.

“I heard the battle from the ruins...it must have been really tough.”

“Mm. That was the most intense battle any of us had ever seen. To tell you the truth, we’re extremely lucky to be alive. We have Ralin to thank for that, mostly. What’s certain is that the Wolverines have decided to go all out. Not only were there some fifty warships, and one gold-studded flagship likely controlled by a general, but...the potential intruders...it seems they were from the rumored special unit...the Red Wolves.”

Cedric’s eyes darted upward.

That name...

Where have I...

And then, as if in slow motion, Galgi pulled from his matte coat a piece of red sash.

“Th-That sash...”

“I pulled it from one that I couldn’t kill...seems they all-”

Galgi paused at Cedric’s terror.

“Cedric...what is it?”

“I...”

He had to tell them. He knew that, but he couldn’t get the words out. He wanted to believe that the intruder didn’t make it through the night, and that he could go on without burdening anyone with his incident. However, he couldn’t stop feeling as though it was his duty to speak up.

As he battled within his own mind, a new face had wandered into the scene.

“Ah, Al! What’re you doing around here?” Ralin’s genuine surprise sparked Cedric’s interest, causing him to look up at the man who seemed to have stumbled into their party by accident.

“Ohh, Galgi, good to see ya looking better than last night, mate. I was supposed to meet a friend around here, but I don’t know the area around the castle too well,” the man chuckled in a gruff yet energetic voice.

The moment Cedric heard his voice and looked upon the modest size and build of the man whose high grade green military garb was dressed heavily in wound

wrappings around his torso, head, and long arms, he was stricken still, a flood of memories coming over him.

"Taking prisoners like this man is EXACTLY what you're supposed to do!"

"I don't want to kill a kid, so I guess I'll say that he has qualities of an Heir as well."

"....So don't you dare give up on yourself."

Everything about that dreaded day in the pouring rain came back to him all at once, simply upon seeing the man's face.

"You're..."

"Huh? Ah yes, Cedric, this is 3,000-man Commander Al, otherwise known as Al the Bleeder."

Cedric was speechless. Whoever he was now, while bright and daunting, didn't matter. It was who he was in the past that was searing through his heart and stomach like a hot knife.

"That time..."

"That time? Have we met before, kid?"

It was undoubtedly him. He hadn't gotten a good look at his face before, but the fire in his eyes was the same.

So, he became...a commander.

Even though...he almost died a meaningless death.

“Ah, no...pardon my rudeness. It’s a pleasure to meet such a respected military officer, Commander.” Cedric spoke firmly, his head bowed.

“Al, this is Cedric. If you’d believe it, he’s one of the three Heir prospects that everyone’s been talking about. He’s a friend, so we meet here for lunch every day. You won’t tell anyone, will ya?”

“Haha don’t worry ‘bout that. But wow, one of the Heir prospects, huh? Good to meet ya, Cedric! And don’t worry about being polite, you have my respect already, friend!” Al responded cheerfully with squinted eyes, waving one hand at Cedric modestly while scratching his head through wrappings and messy brown hair.

Cedric looked back to him with a smile, before his recollections came back to him like a wave. The things he remembered about that day, along with the recent happenings, forced his hand.

“Um...sorry to bring this up out of the blue, but, I have to tell you all something.”

“Hmm? What is it, Cedric? You’re looking awful serious all the sudden.” Galgi inquired, while Al looked on with mild interest as he carelessly bit into a potato from Cedric’s carrier. Cedric paused, took a deep breath, and looked at both of them sternly.

“The truth is...I encountered a Red Wolf last night. I think he was one of the ones you mentioned, Galgi, because he was wounded, and wore a torn red sash, just like the one you’re holding.”

Galgi and Al, along with the rest of the group, looked on speechlessly. Galgi seemed to be especially frozen in place, as if he couldn't believe the words he was hearing.

"And, I think their goal is... to kidnap the Heir prospects, maybe... He was attempting to sneak into High Town when he saw me, and he said some really odd things...like, that he was setup in a trap or something..."

"Hmm, wait just a second, kid. You said he was sneaking into High Town?" Al was the first to speak up.

"T-that's right. But, I stopped him for a moment...and then, something, something...else, scared him off, and he fled into the forest."

"Cedric...that's...completely insane...It may have only been one man, which I'm sure is why you kept quiet this long, but this is still..."

"Extremely dangerous," Al finished for him, seemingly deep in thought.

"But wait, Cedric, you said...about kidnapping Heir prospects? What gave you that idea?"

"Ah...well, that's..."

He didn't want to get into talk of that day long ago, especially since it seemed Al didn't recognize him. He thought the man may have wanted to forget that day just as much as he did.

"Well, let's not worry about that, Galgi," Al surprisingly cut in. "I'd say his suspicions are warranted, for various reasons.... What's important here is that our fears

from last night were very well-founded. It seems the Red Wolves are making their move as we speak.”

“But just what are they planning...what do you think we should do, Al?”

“My friend will have to wait. For now, the three of us need to enter the castle and speak with Chief Allen.” Al now sounded completely different than he had before, all signs of his careless grin gone.

“The Commander-in-Chief of military affairs...?” Galgi questioned in a near gasp.

“That’s right. That’s just how serious this is...” Al had already begun walking away when he stopped and said this, his tone completely different.

And so, Cedric followed the 3,000-Man Commander and the lowly Go captain inside the castle’s main floor. He had his reservations being here, not only being under the allowed age of attendees, but also in the amount of attention he was bringing, which would surely come back to his father. He was doing everything he was taught not to do at this point. However, he was resolved to see this through, and accept whatever retribution he might incur from it.

As the group walked down a fine green carpet toward a matching green staircase that split into two paths down either way of a torchlit hall, Cedric eyed the portraits hung up on the wall behind a line of chiseled silver pillars. The first was the most expensively made, a painting of a broad-shouldered man with flared blonde hair—none other than Garik.

The portraits that followed, while ranging in size and quality as well as stature of the person featured, all shared one characteristic:

Bright, blond hair.

Down to the last man, whose prominent jawline matched his sleekly parted long mane dauntingly well. As he admired the aura of heroism the man gave off from his constructed eyes, he realized this person was likely Hedric, the last Sword Heir who was betrayed and murdered by the Wolverine Chief-General.

The three took the flight of stairs, Al in the lead, and took the left passageway, bypassing guards who were either too confused or too intimidated by the 3,000-Man Commander to question them. After traveling some ways down the richly decorated hallway, Al stopped and scratched his head.

“You’ve forgotten where it is, haven’t you, Al?” Galgi spoke up with a sigh.

Ignoring him, Al held up a hand, before turning and pacing back the other way. Finally, he stopped and turned down a rather dimly lit corridor headed by two crossing green sword emblems on either side of the larger Teuton insignia, an emerald green shield with a bold black cross on its face.

Eventually, they came to a curved passage that led to a small room with a long table blocking a chamber door. At the table sat a young man not older than twenty-five, frowning through thin spectacles at a stack of documents. Upon noticing his three visitors, he sprang up, revealing a white buttoned shirt resembling Cedric’s, and a pair of suspenders latched to sleek black pants. Clearly frazzled, he attempted to asphyxiate his slick black hair before it experienced full bloom in the worst way.

“Well, hello there, Ango, been a while! You sure are working hard there, aren’t you?” Al rang out with a boisterous laugh that resembled his charismatic air from earlier.

“Al, huh? Yeah, I’m extremely busy sorting through reports for the Chief, as you can imagine...but what business could you have here? And with a rank-and-file soldier and a student, no less...” The now-calmed Ango looked Galgi and Cedric up and down, as if they were a species he was seeing for the first time in years.

“Ah, well, something rather serious actually. We’d like to see Chief Allen, as a matter of fact.”

“Huh? Hahaha-you’re joking, right? You know how bad last night was for us, so you know exactly how swamped the Chief is right now. Of course, you can always write a report, and I might even give it a bit of priority over some of these others, here, like these pointless ones...” Ango trailed off, sitting back down with a relaxed breath and sifting through a chunk of the papers spread out on his table.

“I’m afraid this is far too urgent to write a report, due exactly to the seriousness of last night’s battles.” Al leaned over the table and laid a hand firmly onto the stack of papers Ango was rummaging through.

“Hmm...I guess it would be something odd. Still, I can’t just send you all right through to the Chief, even if you are one of the top commanders on this side of the mountains. At best, I can get the chamberlain or his aide. This is just the reporting ward of the Security Bureau, after all. We’re a subsidiary to the Chief’s ward, and sure it’s kind of on the way, but we still have to follow protocol and have you checked and escorted. Especially with these two with you.”

“Ah, enough rambling already. Ango, I need you to go get the chamberlain. Quickly.”

“Sure, sure. Just, don’t let them dig through any reports please. No offense, guys...” Ango smiled awkwardly, holding his head as he opened the door to the proceeding chamber. Cedric and Galgi exchanged their own awkward smirks as they watched him leave.

It didn’t take long for Ango to return with another younger man, this one wearing green robes that suited his feathered strawberry-blonde hair.

“Yes, what is it? Commander Al, is it?”

“Correct. But, Ango, I’m certain this is not the chamberlain,” Al retorted with a frustrated look.

“The chamberlain is in a meeting right now. I am his direct subordinate, Shae Cillavier. You may address me with your concerns, for now.”

“Cillavier..?” Cedric accidentally mumbled out loud.

“Yes, what of it, boy? Commander, I must say, the company you bring inside castle walls does not reflect particularly well on your behalf.” The man blinked his blue eyes reproachfully at Al.

“And your attitude toward a Commander doesn’t reflect well on yours,” Al stared back at him, his eyes beginning to look menacing. The mood in the room had turned from awkward to tense, quick.

“Government representatives have no duty to kiss up to military commanders, unfortunately. So, state your business before I return to the inner chambers to continue cleaning up your people’s messes.”

Al’s eyes opened slightly before narrowing once more.

“Ah, yes, gladly.” His tone remained low as he was clearly holding back a significant amount of anger.

“Our business involves last night’s battles. I’ll cut right to the chase- this boy encountered a Red Wolf operant within the walls, and this soldier can verify the likeliness of this operant, and maybe more, sneaking through our defenses.”

Al summarized the night’s events, nodding for Cedric and Galgi to pitch in at certain parts. Shae stood cross armed, frowning with a raised brow through the whole thing, while the dumbfounded Ango pretended to work.

“Well, despite everything wrong with this group’s collaboration, I understand your sense of duty to come here directly,” Shae admitted as he rubbed his temples.

“I can assure you, however, that there is no need for concern. This matter has been taken care of already, hence the comment about cleaning up your people’s messes.”

“And you’re absolutely certain it’s been taken care of?” Al retorted, ignoring Shae’s condescending tone this time.

“Yes, as I said, we’ve handled any intruders. The chamberlain has confirmed this. There is no need for any further query, so please take your leave.”

“I don’t think so, pal. You haven’t told me anything to ease my mind about the

possibility of more intruders. I'm not going anywhere until I've at least met with the chamberlain." Al's voice rang out much firmer than before.

"You have no right to make such demands! Are you aware of your position here? Not only mingling with a student, but sharing security information with each other! If you continue to throw your overestimated weight around here, you might end up finding yourself stripped of your rank!"

"And just who will be stripping me of my rank, eh? Will you?"

"Excuse me, gentlemen..." a deep voice interrupted the two before their aggressive faces managed to reach each other over the table.

From the open doorway, a tall older man with finely molded blonde hair stepped in, placing a hand on Shae's shaking shoulder.

"Just what is going on here, Shae?"

"Ah, Master Wendell, these men here-"

"I'm Al. Are you the Chamberlain here?" Al cut Shae off, incurring his wrathful glance.

"Yes, I am. Wendell Eraldin, Chamberlain of the Security Bureau."

"Erald...in?" Cedric spat out unintentionally.

"Huh? Oh, is that...Cedric? What business could you possibly have here? Mel hadn't mentioned you running around with soldiers..."

"Ah, yes sir, every now and then. He hadn't mentioned his father being the Chief of Security, either."

“As it should be. The boy needn’t share such information with commoners,”

Wendell scoffed at the surprised boy as he turned back toward Al. “So, I only heard a bit, but I’m guessing you’re reporting an intruder?”

“Yes, that’s correct, Al responded shortly. “I’d like to speak with Chief Allen, or at least gain some peace of mind. Your man here telling us that all is well, and that is it...the Red Wolves are clearly making their move here, and I’d like to know for certain that there is no need to escalate the matter with the Chief.”

“Very well. I will be as transparent as you need me to be, Commander Al,” Wendell said with a firm look. “The facts are that our sentry unit spotted a deceased Red Wolf in the forest last night. Concerned that there may be more, the unit rallied with more troops and initiated a full search of the areas surrounding the battle zones. In the end, the dead man was the only one that we found. Is this sufficient?”

“Whose troops did they commandeer? Me and my men were back and forth between Giro and Hydrick’s position, and neither of them seemed to have any men requisitioned.” Al inquired with the air of someone interrogating a prisoner.

“It was one of Samuel’s independent units. Sarai, I believe his name was.”

Cedric waited to see if Al would question further, but he seemed to be thinking.

“Um...what did the dead man...look like? I saw the intruder myself, so, to make sure there wasn’t any others-”

“He had a torn red sash, a wounded side and arm, and long dark hair.” Wendell responded, almost too quickly.

Cedric and Galgi looked at each other wide-eyed. It was undoubtedly their man.

“Anything else?” the man asked, tapping his finger on his opposite arm while Shae smirked and Ango awkwardly hid his face in his papers.

“Why is this being kept quiet? Don’t the people deserve to know, in case there is a real concern going forward?” Al pushed further, not satisfied.

“Like I said, we have every reason to believe the situation has been handled. Therefore, there is absolutely no reason to cause the public needless worry. In fact, I would ask that the three of you keep this to yourselves. We are in a period of uncertainty as it is, especially concerning our security within, so it is in our best interest to keep the public contentedly ignorant.”

The three frowned at this, Cedric more so than any, recalling the conversation at Quentle’s place the day before. However, none of them spoke up.

“And need I remind, that your little party here is completely unlawful, and would cause trouble for all three of you in different ways. Especially you, Al. And Cedric, I’m sure I needn’t explain the trouble this would cause your father if it were to be dealt with properly. In return for keeping this matter to yourselves, I will turn my head to your little friendship.” Wendell spoke with a mixture of coldness and liveliness, looking them over one by one.

Cedric bit his lip, his eyes downcast. Al glanced his way, before looking back at Wendell with a bitter grimace.

“Fine.” With that, he turned, and led the group toward the hall, stopping briefly to shoot one last glare at Shae. The cocky noble smirked back at him, while Ango hid his face in awkward panic.

“Well, either those two are seriously insistent on keeping the people out of the loop, and with good intentions, or something else is going on behind the scenes.” The group had walked silently all the way back to the fountain where the rest of the men awaited them, when Al finally spoke up.

“But just what do you think they’re hiding?” Galgi inquired.

“I don’t know. But I know that I don’t trust those two at all. I don’t know much about the Eraldin family, but the Cillaviers...the old man-Shae’s father seems to have a lot of influence, despite being a long-retired military general. The few times I met him, I sensed a strange vibe about him. He seemed more like an official than a soldier, I guess.”

“Hmm...but, Mel’s father, huh? You really didn’t know anything about him, Cedric?”

“No, I really didn’t. But...I know that the two families are friendly with each other. Mel and Selmy, the daughter- you guys know her, those two are practically engaged...” Cedric trailed off, half-wanting to explain the weird exchanges he’d been noticing between the two. However, he couldn’t talk so freely about a friend like that, even in this situation.

“Gah, this whole thing stinks,” Al sighed, standing to his feet. “If either of you find anything else out, come straight to the barracks and ask for me or my Lieutenant,

Jack. If you can't get either of us, look for General Hydrick. Ah- speaking of! Well then, fellas!" Al strode away as energetic as he had been earlier, having spotted someone wandering around the greenhouses a distance away. When he caught up and greeted the man loudly before proceeding toward the exit, Cedric caught a brief glimpse of the man's flowing blonde hair.

"Well, Cedric, you better get going or you'll be late for lessons," Galgi reminded him, standing back up himself.

"Ah, right..."

"Don't worry too much about it for now, okay? Al's a reliable guy, so he'll do whatever he can do. Just go about things like normal, if you can."

"Yeah...good luck tonight, guys."

As Galgi and his men departed, Cedric pondered his words.

If you can, huh...

That's the thing...

How can I...

He needed some sort of answer. For now, though, he didn't want to see Mel. Therefore, he searched the courtyard, but to no avail. And then the school infirmary, where there was still no sign of her. Only Tess was there, sleeping comfortably.

Having opened the door quietly enough to prevent her from stirring, Cedric decided not to enter. Instead, he made his way to Valblin's dojo, noticeably late.

“Ohho? Just waltzing in whenever you like, is it? This Heir business getting to your head? Ohohoho, putting the cart before the horse there, aren’t we?” Valblin chuckled, completely sarcastic.

“Not at all, Master. I was just looking for someone, and lost track of time. I apologize,” Cedric replied seriously, head bowed.

Valblin shrugged him off, and promptly began the lesson. As Cedric fought avidly yet helplessly against the overpowering old man, he forgot about everything that was going on around him. His stress seemed to dissipate, as he found himself oddly at home in the dull, dusty old room.

Thus, his energy level and focus remained consistent, and he was therefore much more proficient with his attacks and defense than ever. Not overextending or going for anything desperate, Cedric maintained his aggressive style, and felt his strength and precision begin to come together anew. Exuding an aura of confidence, he stayed the course, and managed a few very even exchanges with the old man.

“Well, what a sight, it’s like you’re growing before my very eyes! Splendid form and consistency today, young Cedric!”

As a reward, Valblin only dumped a small portion of his big water basin over Cedric’s collapsed body. Though, as exhausted as he was from the genuinely good workout, he would have welcomed even the whole basin.

“But you know, you shouldn’t try to grow too fast. Everyone and everything follows a natural process that shouldn’t be underestimated. Allow yourself to grow properly, or you might find yourself wilting before you ever get the chance to bloom.”

Valblin said this, his back turned and face half showing as he reached for the door handle.

Don't reach out too far, huh...

He sounds like father...

"Master... do you know anything about...everything going on with the war?"

Cedric stopped him, breathing heavily through his words.

"Hoh, I wonder. An old geezer like me wouldn't know much. I have more than I can handle at this schooling center here. For example, did you know my wooden swords have decreased in number lately? Hohoh, I surely wonder where they could have gone! A gnome of some sort?"

"...guh...."

"Ohoho, well, it might suit the gnome better to find a real sword next time. Goodness knows, it's a dangerous world out there for little gnomes." The old man chuckled his way into the hallway, letting the door close behind him.

Cedric dropped his head against the wall, letting the old man's words sink in.

.....

After drying off- a courtesy to Quentle, he found himself back in the apothecary ward.

"Ah, Cedric, good afternoon...err...evening?" Tess yawned, rising from her uncomfortable looking chair while Cedric took a seat on the patient's cot.

"Tess...where's Selmy been at today?"

“Hmm, some greeting there, punk. Selmy took the day off today. I ended up taking it easy today, myself, hehe. I blame her.” She yawned again, stretching her long limbs carelessly, before straightening her white coat over a short black skirt that accentuated her slender figure.

“Ah, it’s just...don’t you think she’s been acting a little off lately?”

“Hmm, that girl is always off, if you haven’t noticed. But...yeah, she is being a little bit more cagy than usual, no doubt.”

“Mel is the same way. I was hoping I could ask her about it, but I guess I can’t waltz into High Town, huh...” Cedric sighed, plopping down onto the cot.

“Well, if you’re really worried, can’t you just check with them tonight?” She asked casually while brewing a pot of tea.

“Yeah, I suppose...I should.”

“Well, obviously. You’ve known each other for years, what’s changed that you can’t all be open with each other anymore? Oh, and don’t say the whole Heir crap either.”

“...If you know, then why ask?”

“Because it’s not a reason. At all.” Tess blinked at him with a tensed face, her firm words chastising him like a big sister’s.

“Uh...yeah, I guess...you’re right. You haven’t, by chance, gone through anything similar, have-”

“Oy Cedric, you hurt?” Quentle shouted into the room after winging the door open recklessly. Cedric and Tess both threw their glances over at the sudden noise, eying Quentle dubiously.

“Nope, I’m fine. You hurt, loudmouth?”

“How rude, Wardric...and after I came to carry you home to return yesterday’s favor!”

Despite the general annoyance he brought, seeing Quentle acting as usual lightened Cedric’s mood instantly.

“I somehow doubt there’s any truth to that, but I’ll absolutely pass. I’ll let you hold my lunch carrier on the way to your place though. I didn’t have time to bring it back home today. I had something I wanted to ask Elem, anyway.” Cedric answered, lifting his head up to make sure Quentle had come alone.

“Sounds fun! Rich boy went home already, grouchy as ever. Mm, the tea smells delicious, Tess! You ever think of quitting the apothecary ward and joining my future Sword Heir naval crew as the official tea brewer?”

“If the price was right.... or so I’d say, but if you’re the one in charge, I’m pretty sure the ship would sink before I ever touched a tea-kettle, let alone getting my first pay.”

“Couldn’t she do both? Why limit her to tea?” Cedric asked facetiously.

“Oy, just who are you trying to dump all these responsibilities onto? You be the apothecary, punk.”

“No thanks. I’ll gladly be the ship cook, though.”

“Ooh sounds good, and Selmy can gather plants from various islands for medicine and such, and make sure we don’t get poisoned and die! And, and, Mel, he can be...uhh... the head crewman!” Quentle rang off ideas so enthusiastically it seemed like he was going to pop.

“Ahaha, I’m sure he’d just love that,” Tess chuckled as the three laughed together.

“Ah, and we can even have your friends, Galgi and Ralin join the crew, reliable soldiers are a must!”

“Ah, I forgot you guys know those two!” Tess remarked with a genuine look of interest.

“I forgot Quentle knew them too, honestly,” Cedric added.

“Wow, how long ago was it when we all got together on the beach?” Tess pondered. “Hmm, it was during the monthlong ceasefire the Wolverines suddenly initiated, which would have been two years ago, about. Come to think of it, that was when I first realized you three knew Selmy, and that Cedric knew Gal and Ral.”

“Yeah that was pretty funny, huh.” Cedric chuckled, reminiscing. “I think my favorite part was shooting Quentle into the ocean from an actual catapult.”

“That was my favorite part, too! Well, that and Selmy in her swimwear, of course!”

“Ah, that must have been when Mel turned all serious and grouchy, having a perverted little guy like you ogling his precious gem in a more vulnerable state than he’d probably ever seen. Though, I seem to remember even him having a good time, that day,” Tess recounted, taking a sip of her steaming tea.

“Yeah, he was a lot easier to understand back then,” Cedric mumbled.

“Well, everything’s simpler when you’re young, isn’t it? I was an adult back then too, but even for me those feel like simpler days.”

“True, things were less tense within the walls at the time, after all...” Cedric mumbled again as he began to space out, drawing Tess’ curious glance.

“Hey! We should all party on the beach together again, after we’ve won the war! Sounds good, doesn’t it?” Quentle threw in excitedly, in contrast to the mood.

“Heh, sounds like fun, we’ll get even more people out next time,” Tess agreed with her charming grin. Cedric gave a short chuckle, hopping up to his feet.

“Alright then, Sir Clumsy-perv, let’s get going.”

Quentle turned around, objecting Cedric’s nickname for him, while Tess motioned for Cedric to wait, pulling something from within her coat.

“Here, this is some of the best stuff I’ve been working on lately. Just in case your games get a little too real.” Tess smirked modestly, placing four vials of different colored liquid into Cedric’s open hand.

“Ah- Thanks, Tess. For this, and for listening,” Cedric replied clearly, giving a weak smile of his own. Tess pushed him to the door in response, showing her trademark grin.

After shutting the door on them, she set her tea down with a sigh.

“The two lovebirds aren’t the only ones acting strangely, ya know...it’s just like Al and Hyd, honestly...”

On the way to Quentle’s home, Cedric confided in him, revealing the events of the last night and day, emphasizing the connection between the Cillavier and Eraldin families, to which Quentle showed the most interest.

Quentle just stared at the cobblestone road in silence as they walked, either deep in thought or too shocked to speak properly.

“I didn’t want to involve Tess, but, I felt like you should absolutely know,” Cedric tacked on, before going silent himself.

After some time, Quentle looked up.

“I’ve decided, Cedric. I don’t know what kind of things their families are planning, but you and me should definitely save those two from whatever trouble they’re in. Even if the families are some sort of traitors, I know those two aren’t. They’re just getting caught up in all the games being played due to everyone’s fear and insecurity about the war. I’m sick of everyone acting anxious, and uncertain of the future, so... I’ll fight however I can to ensure that future. ”

Seeing the firm resolve in Quentle's eyes, Cedric nodded seriously in return, the memories of that day on the beach running fondly through his mind.

"But, honestly, I can't believe you fought off an elite soldier like that! I should have gone with you last night, then we would've brought his head right to Mel's old man!" He added with a change of tone, the two nearing his place. The two of them laughed at the thought as they opened the curtained door to the tent.

"Hoy, Cedric! An' Quentle, yer' right an' prop'r t'day!" Dagan's boisterous voice greeted the boys once they made it to the shack of a home in the back alleys.

"Hey there, Dagan! Good evening, guys!" Cedric politely greeted the four with a friendly wave.

"What brings you here today Cedric? Looks like our boy isn't incapacitated this time," Elem asked with a grin, taking a break from the group's usual knife throwing game.

"Well, to cut to the chase, I actually wanted to ask you about something, Elem," Cedric replied seriously.

"Oh, me? And what's that?"

Cedric looked around, ensuring there were no visitors this time.

"About...everything going on with the bandits, and the battles putting a strain on our inner security. Honestly, I think there might be a connection."

"Oh??" Elem perked up even further, genuinely intrigued.

“Have you heard of the Red Wolves, Elem?” Cedric asked in a low voice. Elem’s brow raised, his jaw sinking downward. A telling reaction.

“Eh..yeah, but...what about them?”

“Do you know what their true motive in the war is?” Cedric pressed on with a straight face, not even blinking.

“Hmm...this is pretty high level stuff, Cedric,” Elem responded, rubbing his chin.

“But if you’re seriously interested...what seems to be the consensus between some of my more well-informed clients, is that the Red Wolves were started by a group of men that originated from the Black Shlanks, which one can assume means-”

“That they were a part of the Red Exodus...” Cedric finished his sentence, eyes wide in surprise.

“Yes, which would make them former Shlanks, who not only betrayed their homeland, but betrayed their group of defects on Shraunts Island, the Black Shlanks. As such, these men would have the blood and Wills of the Shlanks who so hate us.”

“But, if they were a part of the defects, they shouldn’t hold the sentiment of hating us as strongly as the rest, right?” Quentle asked, while Cedric was beginning to realize where Elem was going with this.

“They might not, but they still hold that Group Will deep within them. And what do you think could be a desire that even former Shlanks, without a strong Group Will, could hold even now?”

“The Red Sword,” Cedric muttered, his fears confirmed.

“That is correct. At least, that’s what some think, but all who have talked about this have said not to repeat it, as any talk about it is considered Heir propaganda.”

“They don’t want anybody fighting about what to do with the sword, because it might mean using one of us, right?” Quentle inquired, seeming to catch on. Elem merely nodded in response.

“With regards to that,” Cedric spoke up again, “have you heard about anybody indulging in that kind of propaganda talk?”

Elem hesitated, before speaking quietly. “Are you sure you want to get that far into it? Shouldn’t you just enjoy being students for a little longer?”

“Please, continue,” Cedric and Quentle both responded firmly.

“...well, alright,” Elem sighed before continuing. “One person has told me this: that there is a small circle of influential people, who hold the belief that if we were to give the Red Sword to the Wolverines, specifically the Red Wolves, they would pull away from our beaches, and cease this war.”

Cedric’s heart sank, realizing the possibilities this brought forth.

“But is that really it?” Quentle asked, visibly frustrated. “Do people think that they would happily go home and call off a fifteen-year-long campaign just because they got a powerful weapon?”

“Exactly why the secret circle’s sentiment is treated as propaganda,” Elem replied. “No such claims have been officially made by Wolverine leadership, and since we don’t know what they could possibly plan to use the sword for, the idea of using it as a negotiating tool is extremely dangerous. And as you said, using one of the Heir

candidates in such a manner would not go over well with people like Headmaster Valblin.”

“This secret circle...you haven’t heard any names, have you?” Cedric asked almost desperately.

“Just one, though it’s nothing more than a rumor, I hear. He’s an ex-military man, and his name was Melvin...uhh..what was it, Cira...Civa-

“Cillavier...” Cedric finished for him, his face sinking.

“Ah, that was it. Like I said, this is second or third hand information, but the man who mentioned his name to me is a noble who lives in the same village as Cillavier, and apparently attended a party at his house and overheard some people discussing ‘the General’s plan to expand the circle’.”

“General, huh...” Cedric remarked, remembering Al’s words about the man.

“Yeah, I think I’ve heard of Selmy’s father being a former general...” Quentle followed up with a dejected look.

“Selmy’s father? That’s right, her name was Cillavier! Is that what this is about, Quentle?” Elem inquired hurriedly.

“Ah, yeah, kind of...we just heard some things, and were worried about some friends, is all...” Quentle replied, unable to even force a smile.

“Geh!” Dagan coughed in disgust, having sat quietly through the whole conversation so far.

“Get’n worried ‘bout friends is one mat’r, but ‘ont you dare stop bein’ the lov’ble fool ‘at I raised, an’ get all serious just fer a damn cute lass!”

“Oh, don’t worry, Master! Like I just told Cedric yesterday, I’ll be this way all my life! After all, I’ve always felt something within me nagging at me to live a life happy enough for two of me!” Quentle heartily replied, bringing the mood back to his pace with his excited nonsense.

After the group went back to what they were doing, the two boys sat at a table, facing each other with somber expressions.

“You know what really bothered me about him, today?” Cedric asked. “The way he threw all the guys into the game. It was like...”

“Like he’s expecting something to happen,” Quentle finished.

“Yeah...you think he’s planning to do something tonight?”

“I dunno... but neither of us have ever been in the forest before, which kind of concerns me. You think we should get to the ruins early tonight to scope things out?” Quentle whispered, to which Cedric nodded silently.

“Oy, Master, Cedric will be staying for dinner, so throw an extra treasure treader on the fire!”

“Hal’right, you got it!”

“Uh, treasure treader?” Cedric mumbled confusedly.

“Haha, just wait. We get these guys right from the Volcano of Disasters. It’s called Shoram’s diet, because it’s apparently all the volcano-dwelling cyclops ever eats!”

Cedric awaited with a certain fear of what he’d be eating. However, once he was served and had a taste of the small roasted critter, he understood. The taste was overwhelmingly rich, so much that more than a few bites was difficult to partake in. However, he gladly dug in, clearing his plate with ease while Dagan clapped him on the back.

He hadn’t planned on returning home for the night anyway, as his father would have surely heard about his being inside the castle. Therefore, the free meal in a cozy home was a great turn of events for him, and made him realize he was slightly envious of Quentle’s upbringing and home life. He thought warmly about this as he slowly nodded off at the table.

Red Ruby

When Cedric woke up at the same rum-sodden table, it was already dark out. As he slowly turned his head upward and gazed around the cozy tent, he saw Dagan and the other three lounging in front of a small fire pit, looking half-asleep.

Just as he wondered where Quentle was, he was being tapped on the shoulder. Yawning, he turned around to see the boy wearing a solid black cloak that somewhat hid his spear in his back, and holding another cloak out toward him while mischievously motioning for him to keep quiet. He stood up without questioning him, wrapped the cloak around him, and began to follow him out of the tent.

“You bet’r wathcher selves out ‘ere, dammit,” Dagan grumbled without moving from his wooden chair, freezing the two where they stood.

“Be back later, Master,” Quentle replied with a smirk. “Don’t burn the tent down while I’m out, hehe.”

With that, they departed, and made off through the dimly lit back alleys of Market Town. As they approached the alleyway where he’d had an awkward run in the

night before, Cedric looked around warily, gripping the new knife he'd just bought from Thom.

This time, there were no issues. Even as he begrudgingly led the way down the forked path where he'd first run into the specter, there were no signs of anybody or anything. As such, they were able to sneak their way through Castle Town with ease, and found themselves entering the ruins together for the second straight night.

"Ya know, Quentle," Cedric finally spoke the first words between the two the whole way to this point, "I think I understand now what you mentioned last night."

"Ooh? What's that?"

"The ruins...tonight, seeing them fills me with anger. Even though Garik worked so hard, this happened due to our selfish leaders focusing only on Castle Town."

"Yeah, I guess that's true when you look at it that way..."

"I won't let this kind of thing happen again on our soil. Let's make our move tonight, so that it doesn't."

"Heh, you don't have to tell me. Though, I have no idea what's going to happen tonight, but no matter which one of us it is...let's make sure all of us make it to the beach in time to celebrate a victory."

With the solid sound of their fists thumping together, the two continued briskly into the heart of the ruins.

“Well, he at least didn’t come to get early practice this time, or his ‘early practice’ wasn’t here at all,” Quentle remarked, sitting down at the bench under the empty awning.

“Well for now I guess we’ll just wait. The others are coming too, this time. If he doesn’t get here soon, though...”

“Yeah,” Quentle answered calmly.

And so, they waited, until the five other boys showed up together some ten minutes later.

“Oy ya scoundrels, kept us waiting, ya know?” Quentle greeted the group in his usual style.

“Hey guys,” Cedric added with a smirk. “Didn’t bring Mel with ya, huh?”

“I talked to him in our village after lessons, said he’d probably be a little late,” Farum replied, brandishing a bow and quiver of arrows. “Asked me to bring along his stuff in case we needed to start without him.”

“Ahh... you guys haven’t seen him, have you?” Cedric asked, looking at the other four.

“Not since class, no,” the articulate Berd responded.

“Same, been with Berd all day,” Kaolo added, his hands on his head.

“Uh, we saw Mel heading out from the Cillavier household well after lessons.” Geraint spoke up, looking somewhat out of place.

“Yeah, it looked like he was heading toward the back exit that goes right into the forest,” his brother Jorge added with an interested look.

Cedric glanced quickly in Quentle’s direction, only to see him directing his focus elsewhere.

“Hey, Farum, lemme see that bow,” the frivolous boy plainly requested, grabbing a hold of Mel’s bow before Farum could extend it toward him.

“What is it, Quentle?”

“Look at this, Cedric,” Quentle ushered him over, staring intently at the thin yew curve.

“Huh...is that?”

Quentle peeled a thin sheet of parchment from around the bow’s curve, where it was tightly wrapped and stuck with sap. Cedric looked on as the paper unraveled, and the two read the words inked onto it together in a whisper.

<I have a duty to see to, so I'll be pardoning myself tonight. I think you already have an idea of what's going on, so you know exactly what's at stake. It's time to stop playing games, you two. I'll end this tonight, so do whatever you want... just don't get in my way.>

Cedric and Quentle looked with wide eyes at one another.

“We never should have waited here!” Cedric exclaimed, leaping out from the awning.

"I know! Let's go!" Quentle replied, crushing the parchment in his hand and taking off after him.

"Hey, where the hell are you two going?!" Berd yelled at their backs.

"Sorry guys, game's cancelled tonight! Go home, and please, don't tell anyone about this!" Quentle shouted back as they reached full sprint within the ruined village.

It only took several minutes for the two to race beyond the ruins and into the forest. Neither knowing their way around the off-limits forest, they just continued running in a straight line, forced to slow slightly due to the density of the fir trees.

"Oh, by the way!" Cedric panted as he ran, "The rumor about wolves in the forest is apparently true."

"You tell me that now?"

"Sorry, forgot!"

"Who forgets something like that? All you think about is war, isn't it?"

"Shut up and run, ruffian! Look, you're falling behind!"

"Now you've done it, Wardric! I'm gonna beat you so hard your stupid hair will stop sticking up like a cow licked you every day for a year!"

"Good luck, with that dinky spear! Maybe one day you'll actually be tall enough to use it properly!"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm short, I applaud your creativity. Hey, speaking of wolves, you know this could very easily be a trap, right?"

“Of course, I do. But I also know that that was, without a doubt, Mel’s handwriting! And either way, we already decided tonight would be the night...”

“Yeah, we did!” Quentle’s tone shifted back as he looked ahead with certainty. Seeing this, Cedric followed suit, gritting his teeth and speeding ahead of his friend.

Suddenly, in the distance, a figure appeared in the direction they were headed. As the two drew nearer to the figure, they exchanged a quick glance. Quentle bore a gleam in his eyes that conveyed his strategy flawlessly. Cedric, understanding his intention, slowed down to let him take the lead, and concentrated on observing the person standing in their way.

Now in closer proximity, he had a better view of the man, whose light brown cloak and winding robes made him seem like a part of the forest. Just as he spotted the dirty blonde locks peeking out from his hood, the man raised his left arm in a familiar motion. However, instead of steam rising from his arm, a cold, hollow aura poured throughout the area. Around him, a dense fog emanated, shrouding him further in shadow. However, the rushing Quentle was unperturbed, and thrust his spear at the fog fiercely, aiming for the man’s right side. As a chunk of the fog dissipated, the man slipped out from Quentle’s attack, seemingly relaxed.

This forced him to slip to his left to avoid Quentle’s aggressive attack, in a spot Cedric had been targeting, waiting for Quentle to lead him into his range. He could now see his thin, tall figure and dazzling blonde curls.

“BLONDE BANDIT!!!”

Cedric swung his small knife at the spot the man's momentum was taking him to. It was a strike loaded with nothing but anger for what this mysterious, lax young man had caused inside the walls, even if he didn't understand what the man was doing at this place or how he was involved in all this. As his blade thrust wildly forward, he realized that this kind of unfocused, rage-driven attack was not the kind that Valblin had taught him to execute, nor did it have what he now knew was necessary to truly fight on the battlefield.

Unsurprisingly, the young man twisted his way out of danger, a corner of his mouth curling amidst his freckled face that became clearer when his low, acrobatic dodge caused his hood to suspend itself momentarily.

As Cedric turned to follow his movements, the bandit had already whipped around, and was winding up a strike of his own. Around his reared back right arm, a billow of fog concentrated into a sword-length swirl, before thrashing toward Cedric like a crushing wave as the man threw his arm violently forward.

Instinctively, Cedric lunged forward into a half dive, just avoiding the rush of energy, which spread out wildly over his head and cut down several low-hanging thin tree branches. Quentle, several meters away from the wave's impact, stared in shock.

Cedric quickly turned back to re-posture himself against the mysterious enemy, but only a thick haze remained where he'd just been. As he looked around in a panic, the haze grew, until it had spread nearly completely around them. At that moment, something happened.

Like a gear had been turned with sudden force, the fogged world around them turned into an evanescent void. Cedric felt as though his heart had suddenly beat with

tremendous force, and all that was left for the world to observe was the reverberating tremor of that one pounding beat. He knew everything would be fine once the beat had ended and returned to a normal pace, that the feeling was only allowed to be temporary, but the unease it brought felt like a dream in slow motion.

“Cedric!” Quentle’s voice resonated slowly as if he was underwater.

“Ignore it, keep going!” Cedric bellowed back, his own voice feeling muffled as well.

Gathering themselves, the boys took off in the same direction they’d been going in, now running even harder in order to escape the vast aura of disquiet. They both felt like they were being pursued by something threatening, but also knew that they could be running right into a trap. However, knowing the goal was ahead, they pushed forward, battling the ominous sensation with gnashed teeth and clenched fists.

Eventually, Cedric could make out vague footsteps tapping somewhere around them. Concentrating on the sound, he noticed two sets, one coming from each side of their path. He continued running in a dead sprint, keeping his eyes peeled for an incoming attack from either side.

However, what came was not from either side, but on the ground behind him. He just heard it whipping through the grass, in time to turn and brace for the impact.

Though, all he needed to brace was his left foot, as the incoming rope served only to wrap around his ankle momentarily before slipping off.

Or, that’s what he’d thought would happen. Instead, the rope tightened into a strong coil, like a snake constricting around its prey. He watched in shock as it wrapped

around itself like an animate object, the same mist-like particles rising sparsely from it as before.

Forced to react quickly, Cedric bent himself backward, slashing the knife through the rope just as it began to pull his leg back. Not bothering to watch the cut rope trail behind him, he staggered forward before re-gaining his footing. Just as he had focused his eyes ahead and grazed by a tree branch, another rope came from his right side, snapping precisely around his wrist. He reacted just as quickly as it came, cutting it with a swift movement.

While his focus was on his right side, though, the next attack came. This time, a person came from within the trees, darting at Cedric's left side like an arrow. The petite, hooded person cut through the space between them in a midair crouch, baring a dagger with firm hands beside her head.

With only a meter's length between the blade and his face, Cedric drew from his practice, gripping his knife with both hands, positioning it inverted with his right hand. Throwing his momentum from his right forearm into his left elbow, he met the dagger strongly, enough to skew its path. The blade ran down his forearm to his elbow, opening a long cut. At the same time, the attacker had kicked their right foot off his shoulder, jumping into a front flip before disappearing into the trees above.

Not waiting to engage with this enemy further, Cedric continued running. Checking the distance between Quentle and himself, he noticed his comrade turning his gaze back ahead. He'd gotten well ahead, not slowing in the slightest as the enemy seemed intent to target Cedric. Seeing this, Cedric chuckled through a half-grin.

The next attack came exactly where Cedric expected it. From his right, another petite-bodied attacker soared at him, their trajectory taking them toward his right flank with a dagger sloppily positioned compared to the first one. Holding the knife in the same position as before, Cedric thrust his momentum from his left shoulder into his bleeding right forearm, swiping the inverted knife across his body closely, while turning into the strike.

The dagger clanged out of the attacker's grip, the impact of the blow tossing their hood slightly upward to reveal fierce green eyes amidst a femininely shaped face. The girl's tied up golden hair appeared briefly, the thin wisps of her bangs shuddering as she sailed downward, behind Cedric's twisting body.

She fell violently into the grass, and skidded between a line of trees before disappearing. Not missing a beat, Cedric swiveled back around and pressed on through bated breath.

This time, he looked ahead to see Quentle reaching an end to the long forest. Allowing his face to light up with excitement, he followed him through the last patch of more widely spread trees. The large opening on the other side came into view, and just as Cedric surveyed the round lake and small centric landmass housing a bright red sword, a figure appeared from far above the last few trees in front of them, descending upon the scene doused in scattered moonlight.

The same young man as before, equipped with two ropes stemming from within his sleeves, turned to face them as he glided toward the lake. Not five meters away from a collision, Quentle attempted to curb his momentum while raising his spear.

However, just before the boy could ready his spear appropriately, the man had whipped both ropes at him. As the ropes snapped tightly around Quentle's rising wrists, the man's momentum halted. Before he fell into the water, the man somehow produced more of the strange fog at his left side, and somehow slid diagonally across it as if a gust of wind had pushed him to the side, changing his trajectory. Now with a better angle, the man tugged on his ropes, steering himself into the grass with a handcuffed Quentle as a base.

The energetic boy, however, showed with a gleam in his eye that he wouldn't let himself become incapacitated by the situation. As the man prepared to skid comfortably into the grass a few meters away, Quentle jerked the ropes to his side with a furious roar. The man grimaced in surprise before crashing into the grass, his trajectory now heading closer toward Quentle and directly into a thick tree.

Right before he crashed violently into the tree's trunk, the man managed to launch a short swipe of the same concentrated energy he'd thrown at Cedric. Flying toward Quentle's bent legs like a scattered boomerang, the projectile fog slashed into his shins and knees. The pieces that missed him dashed into the ground, kicking up earth as Quentle buckled with a shout, blood leaping from his gashed legs.

Finally, Cedric bounded into the scene, approaching the downed Quentle, who grasped his bleeding legs with an annoyed look.

"Quentle!!" He cried, several strides away.

"I'M FINE!! JUST GO, DAMMIT!!!"

As Quentle yelled with a pained face, Cedric noticed the mysterious man begin to crawl back up beside the shaking tree.

I just have to trust him...

Quentle, I accept your resolve!

He strode past the injured boy, who was already using his spear to prop himself up on one knee, face contorted in anger.

As he passed by Quentle's turned back, the two boys outstretched their left arms from opposite angles, thumping each other's backs. The impact was brief, but pushed them both forward with certainty.

Cedric focused solely on what was ahead, on the illuminated red sword stuck firmly into the earth. Without hesitation, he dove into the water head first.

Under water, he heard no sound, and thought of nothing except moving forward toward his goal, his saving grace. He had never practiced swimming much, but he felt in that moment like he'd been born to swim through this water. Keeping the presence of mind to stay under water in case of another rope attack, he focused his eyes on the landmass ahead, until finally-

"Guhh!"

-he reached it.

Gasping, he pulled himself onto the tiny patch of land, uprooting handfuls of grass as he lunged forward. Just steps away, he extended an arm toward the red sword, the relic shard from the bloody tale that disgusted him so much. Even if Velagoras'

presence disturbed him deeply, he'd already decided- the original Shlank Heir's sword would be used to save the Teutons.

It's finely encrusted hilt felt cold to the touch, as if the relic had been stuck in the oppressive void he'd just felt in the forest. However, it quickly grew warm as he gripped it with both hands and, in one swift movement, wrenched it up from the earth.

In that moment-

"Hahaha.....hahahahaha-hahaha-ha....hahahahaha-hahahahahahaha...."

A shrill laugh echoed from within the sword's blade, as red light burst from the ground the sword protruded from, along with a roaring sound that shook the entire forest.

The second night's shoreline battlefield was proceeding in similar manner to the previous one. The only large difference was that the infantry Go had been able to establish a solid formation with their V-shields, allowing the front lines to control the middle of the beach for some time. Eventually, the flagship suddenly pulled out and made for the eastern shores, followed by most of the fleet, and all the cavalry on shore. Thus, a drawn-out battle between infantry units had ensued.

“Why do you think the big shots pulled out so suddenly, Galg?” Ralin asked, taking a brief rest against the V-shield.

“Not sure, but I’d guess they plan to surprise Hydrick and Al’s armies,” Galgi answered, tending to a wounded shoulder while peeking out over the shield to observe the battle.

At that moment, a momentous roar echoed from the forest, and Galgi and Ralin looked up from behind their V-shield, apprehension plastered on their faces.

“What.... was that? Don’t tell me...”

“Could it be....Cedo...? Did he do it?!”

To the east, messengers had just arrived with news of the approaching Wolverine army. Al stood atop the wall’s ridge, staring out to sea. Next to him stood a heavily armored man around the same age, whose thin face and sleek long blonde hair contrasted his bulky appearance.

“Do they really think they can catch us off guard just like that? We’ve been waiting for this all night, haha!” Al smirked, turning toward the armored man.

Just then, a bellowing noise came from the forest, and a slight gust of wind blew the man’s thick green cape about as the two men turned their gazes in wonder.

“Hah! Guess the kid took matters into his own hands, after all. Say, Hyd, looks like someone finally brought it back into action. What do you imagine your brother would be thinking? Valblin told me to leave it alone for now, so this has to be a part of the grand plan, huh?”

“I’m sure Hedric would want to watch closely, to see if this person is truly worthy of being the Heir,” Hydrick responded sternly, raising his fine silver helmet over his head. “Watch me closely as well, brother. Even if your Heir disappoints, I shall not.”

The half-open window of the apothecary ward shuddered as the forest roared in the distance. Tess, who had been staring out of it toward the empty castle courtyard with her chin in her hands, stood up with a grimace.

In the streets of Castle Town, two men walked leisurely together. Master Valblin and Master Gambell, upon hearing the rumbling from the forest, stopped in their tracks.

“Well, well, it seems the time has come, Headmaster.”

“Hohh? I wonder which of our brave young lads it is? Though, this is only the opening of the first door. Now we watch to see the first step. Hoh... I wonder, just what kind of resolve will this Heir show us?”

Deep in the trembling forest, not far from the cause of the sound, a group of twenty men donning red and brown uniforms ran, heading full speed for the lake at the center of the forest.

Running ahead of the rest, a broad-shouldered boy with jet black hair grew wide eyed in excitement upon spotting the moonlit lake.

“Ah, this is it! We’ve made it all the way here, and just in time, young Lord Velgo!” A man behind him exclaimed through bated breath. The boy stopped and took big breaths, staring viciously at the boy holding the red sword, engulfed in a bright red light.

“These damned frauds.... Let’s go, men. It’s time to take back what’s ours.”

On the side of the lake closest to the border wall, a tall man led thirty battle-worn men, their red-gold uniforms covered in dirt, near the lake.

“Uh, Lieutenant Suguile, are those...Shlanks?” a soldier asked.

“Pay them no mind for now,” the uninjured man replied in a cold voice.

“Our target is right before our eyes.”

On the other side of the lake, another boy watched closely as the scarlet waves of light swiveled around the boy holding the uprooted sword. Mel’s eyes bore a melancholic resolve as he stared unwaveringly while his friend struggled. Several meters away, a defeated Quentle watched with wide eyes, restrained by the bandit’s ropes.

On the small patch of island, Cedric was on the verge of being swallowed by the vortex of bouncing red light. It was consuming him like the relentless energy of a thousand raging soldiers. Within the light emanating from the sword itself, voices rang loudly.

“Hahaha-hahahahaha.....hahahah-hahahahaha-aha.....”

“.....”

“....rgh...”

A different voice groaned in pain.

“.....gahh-h....”

“Shu.....ant.....”

Then a splashing sound, resulting in a muffled voice.

“You...guh!...who have drawn the sword....”

The submerged voice struggled to speak through what sounded like bloody coughs.

“You must use this sword.... gather the remaining shards...only then can Shuant... be defeated....”

Cedric listened closely, fighting to keep the light from suffocating him.

“Only then...can the Teutons be saved.”

Cedric felt his own light within him burst at these words. Pushing the endlessly encompassing red light off himself for a moment, he turned to see a man climbing onto the small patch of island.

The familiar man, whose soaked and worn down red-gold uniform flapped in the artificial wind, began laughing maniacally.

So Mel's father was lying...

That confirms it, then...

"So it was you!! Hahahaha, I can't believe you were the one! I nearly killed you, and yet you end up giving me the sword yourself! Hahahahahahaha, I didn't even need the damn contact!" The man ranted on, a savagely excited look in his eyes. Without a care, he approached the whirlwind of red light, even though the wind it was throwing about made every attempt to push him back.

The look in his eyes felt daunting to Cedric, even in the situation he was already in. He knew just how relentless this man was, even if injured. Part of him hoped that the red light would obliterate the man before he could reach him, relieving him from having to struggle any more than he already was.

However-

The man stepped into the light without issue, and had begun to lunge wildly at him with his short sword.

Cedric recalled his previous meeting with the man, and the most recent engagements with the bandits. He thought about what he'd lacked in his attacks.

I can't hesitate any longer.

If I'm going to be a knight...

If I'm going to be the Heir...

If I really intend to fight....

I must have the intent...

....to kill!

Battling the suppressing light with gnashed teeth, Cedric took a firm step forward, loaded up strongly from his right hip, and executed a swift dash across the man's right side. Taking advantage of the sword's longer reach, he delivered a precise blow through his ribcage, cutting through him before his short sword could close the distance.

The man, having lost his momentum, was pushed outside of the light, and crumpled near the edge of the island. He turned toward Cedric, mouth open with shock and blood.

"You...what...are you...."

"I'm Cedric Cintog. Just a brat playing knight."

From his left knee, Cedric whipped the slightly bloodied sword around his shoulder. A wave of the red light dissipated, blowing outward like a strong wind. The wind carried the fallen man, sending him skipping across the water like a small rock, before scattering him across a thicket of trees.

This fierce energy...

Whether it's Velagoras' Will, or something else...

It doesn't matter.

If it will help save the Teutons...I'll use it for myself.

His confidence now bolstered, he then stood tall and thrust the sword upward with both hands, roaring as he fought against the light swirling overhead.

"UohHHHHHHH!!!"

This time, he sent the incessantly revolving light skyward, a solid red line bursting toward the Dome's ceiling. Instead of fighting to keep it from suffocating him, he controlled the light with the sword, directing all the energy upward in one crushing blow.

On the western beach battlefield, Galgi and Ralin's squads were fighting fiercely on the far side of the beach where the scattered enemy forces were the most concentrated, when an enemy galleon returned suddenly to the shore from the east.

The group, carrying two V-shields as they fought, were forced to act quickly. They had been holding their own against the infantry soldiers, but now they found themselves caught between infantrymen and a bombarding galleon.

Taking fire, the men closed their V-shields together, while Ralin, escorted by Galgi and Filipe, lugged a wheeled ballista unit back to their V-shields. The men quickly gathered some loose ballista arrows, and returned just in time. The shields closed tightly just as cannon fire struck the shields with crushing ferocity. Galgi was thrown back from his scouting position, along with several others holding the shield. They looked at each other in desperation as several enemy infantrymen began crawling over the shield.

At that moment, a momentous red light streaked into the sky behind them. They looked on as the blaring light quickly reached the dome, and with a thunderous crack, pierced through it.

The light then dispersed, only briefly braking through the dome, and fell in every direction like fireworks. The men looked upon the glowing night's sky in shock, their faces shaded scarlet.

"Cedric...?"

"Is that...seriously Cedo?"

"It...it has to be!"

"Hahaha! If Cedric can do something like that, what the hell are we doing looking like this?"

"You're right, Ral. Let's keep fighting till the end, men!"

"UuoHHHHHHHHHH!!!"

The men rose, reinvigorated, and held the shields up with all their strength. Filipe and Simon climbed the shield's back, engaging with the soldiers attempting to get

in. Galgi took his place over the edge of the shield, and began shouting direction to Ralin, who began slinging ballista arrows with rapid concession.

Eventually, the crossfire erupted into flames, which engulfed the beach battlefield.

The flames from the beach, along with the shower of red light, reached the eyes of those fighting further down the beach, where the battle had grown even more intense than the night before. Al led a unit of cavalry through the nose of the enemy formation with a piercing battle cry upon seeing the spectacle of light.

Two other men steadied their still horses in the middle of the battlefield, glancing shortly at the show of light before returning their red-glowed helmets toward each other. The green-clad Teutonic knight gripped his broad sword with authority, while the red-capped Red Wolf general held his long sword in trembling hands, his mien emanating an unshakable fury.

As the scattered red light fell gloriously from the sky, the two school teachers halted their walk, gazing with mystified expressions.

“Hoho! To be young and energetic!”

“Headmaster...I wonder who it was, to make this happen...”

“Hoh, I have an idea. Just think, Master Gambell, there are people from every state watching this scene with vested interest, wondering where things will go from here. Wolverines, Shlanks, Gleazons, mm, even the Snarilians and Black Shlanks. Indeed, our young lad has gotten the ball rolling with a magnificent start, and declared to the other states that the Teutons are still here, fighting. Everything only begins from here, after all, hoho.”

Cedric finally lowered the glowing red sword to his chest, a few remaining sparks of energy jumping off him like static electricity. As the red light fell throughout the sky, no longer in the lake’s vicinity, he beheld his surroundings briefly, before focusing his eyes on one person.

He was aware of the group of Shlanks standing on the other side of the lake behind him. He was also aware of the group of Red Wolves emerging from the forest to his left. He was even aware of the lone noble girl whose presence nobody else had noticed, hiding behind a tree to the right.

However, the only corner of the lake’s opening he cared about right now was the one directly ahead of him. Quentle still struggled furiously, bound by ropes while the three bandits leaned leisurely on nearby trees. In front of them, at the edge of the grass, stood his lanky, blonde headed friend. His hair shadowed much of his face, but he read

the expression on his face perfectly nonetheless. He wasn't backing down from his ideals, the traitorous beliefs he inherited from his father, which betrayed every fiber of their friendship.

Cedric, as well, would not back down from his ideals, as empty and naïve as he knew they still were. Therefore, he pointed his newly acquired red sword across the moonlit lake at his friend, a look of fierce conviction and anger on his face as he bellowed out.

“MEEEEEEEEEEEEELLLLLLLLLLLL!!”

VOL 1 END

TO BE CONTINUED:

TAKANOVA PT II