





*Sword Quest*

*of*

*Enigmatic Souls*

*Alex Theriot*

*Vol 2*

*Takanova Pt*

*//*

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# Blonde Bandits

The soft pitter-patter of suede shoes along the fine brick road made the only noise in the dead of night. The owner of the shoes stared down at his feet, inattentive to anything except the sound of his footsteps as he walked alone through High Town's back roads, a bow and quiver of arrows slung over his shoulder.

The lanky teenager, sporting a noble air that matched his impressive head of blond hair, paid no heed to the magnificent villas he passed along the road. Thinking how annoying it was that his friends would always take the time to admire the showy homes, complete with over-done stain glass windows that nearly rivaled the castle chapel, he made it a point to avert his eyes from the houses he passed.

Having lived in an even more exquisite home his whole life, he didn't understand what made them so remarkable. It was simply something normal to him and didn't deserve as much attention as his friends gave them.

While they seemed to covet a more luxurious life, his values were much simpler. The things he held dear, and the things he wished for, stemmed from the very core of the Teuton will.

*To cherish one's land.*

*To protect one's place in life.*

*My place, that is, with-*

“Good evening, young master. Out quite late, aren’t we?”

He looked up, frowning in surprise, at a voice he’d never heard before.

Even though there’d been no traces of life a second before, the owner of the voice stood just meters away: A man, nearly as tall as him, and cloaked in something brown and raggedy, yet somehow stylish. His voice and figure made him seem young and lax, but the presence he bore gave him an experienced and intimidating air.

“Who are you?” the frowning boy demanded of him, showing no signs of fear in his unmoving gaze.

“Heh, I’m not important at all. Ya see, you’re the one that’s special, young master Mel Eraldin.”

Mel raised his furrowed brow instinctively, unable to hide his surprise. “And why am I special?”

“Well ya see... you’re the only child of an important noble family, right? You hold the duty of carrying on the Eraldin name, which makes you veeery special indeed!” The man exaggerated his slick, loose way of speaking, even while talking about his family.

“Just what are you getting at...” Mel said in low voice, quivering as he clenched his fists.

“Not only that, but you’re quite obviously being groomed to marry the young Cillavier daughter once you’re of age. Therefore, you have two very esteemed families



who value your life veery highly!” The man stepped closer to him, revealing a devious grin that suited his youthful face.

“Like I said, just what-”

“And when you have such a backing, that backing is likely to pay a very steep price if it means keeping you alive.”

“What?” Mel cried, his demeanor breaking as he took several panicked steps back.

“Heh...”

As Mel attempted to reach for an arrow, the man raised his left arm slowly, drawing his attention.

Yet, the attack came not from the man, but from behind. By the time he felt the stray rope on his neck, he could only grasp at it while it coiled around his throat.

As he struggled, the rope’s momentum pulled him backward, throwing him onto the ground. He tried to tear it away, but his panicked hands had no effect on the strangely sturdy rope. As he began to comprehend the sensation of being strangled, another rope wrapped around his legs like a whip. The rope pulled him in the opposite direction, cutting off his ability to struggle.

The feeling of pressure within seemed to explode, and his vision became static blur. He tried desperately to remember what he was thinking about before he’d been attacked, but his mind and body thrashed about too chaotically to form anything clear. As his consciousness cut out, the only thought his mind could muster was the image of a beach.

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Waking with a start, Mel gradually regained his wits and took stock of his situation. He was in a cramped room that resembled a cell without bars.

The only thing of note, other than the burning pain he felt around his neck and throat, was the girl standing against the door, holding a lantern. The only light in the room, the lantern cast a weak glow over the petite girl. Her exceedingly slim figure, along with her small, expressionless face, gave the impression that she was a few years younger than him.

More notable than that, however, was her shoulder length, golden-blond hair. Her bangs hid a good portion of her face, giving her an air of shyness, which, along with her blonde hair, contrasted her thin brown pants and hooded cloak.

As he attempted to sit up, he discovered his arms and legs had been bound tightly. Grimacing, he slumped back down the wall.

“You...are you people nobles? Yet, you’re criminals?” Mel blurted out, insensitive to his own position.

“Bandits.” The girl spoke softly and curtly, not bothering to look at him.

“Bandits, huh? But you didn’t answer my question-”

“Shh.”

Her short, deadpan response and annoyed look caught him off guard, and he could only stare silently for a moment, pondering how to go about talking to the girl.

*Tch. I don't do well with this type...*

*This is exactly why Selmy is perfect, as much as I hate to admit...*

“Uh...”

“.....”

“If possible, I’d like to speak with your boss. Would that... be too much trouble?”

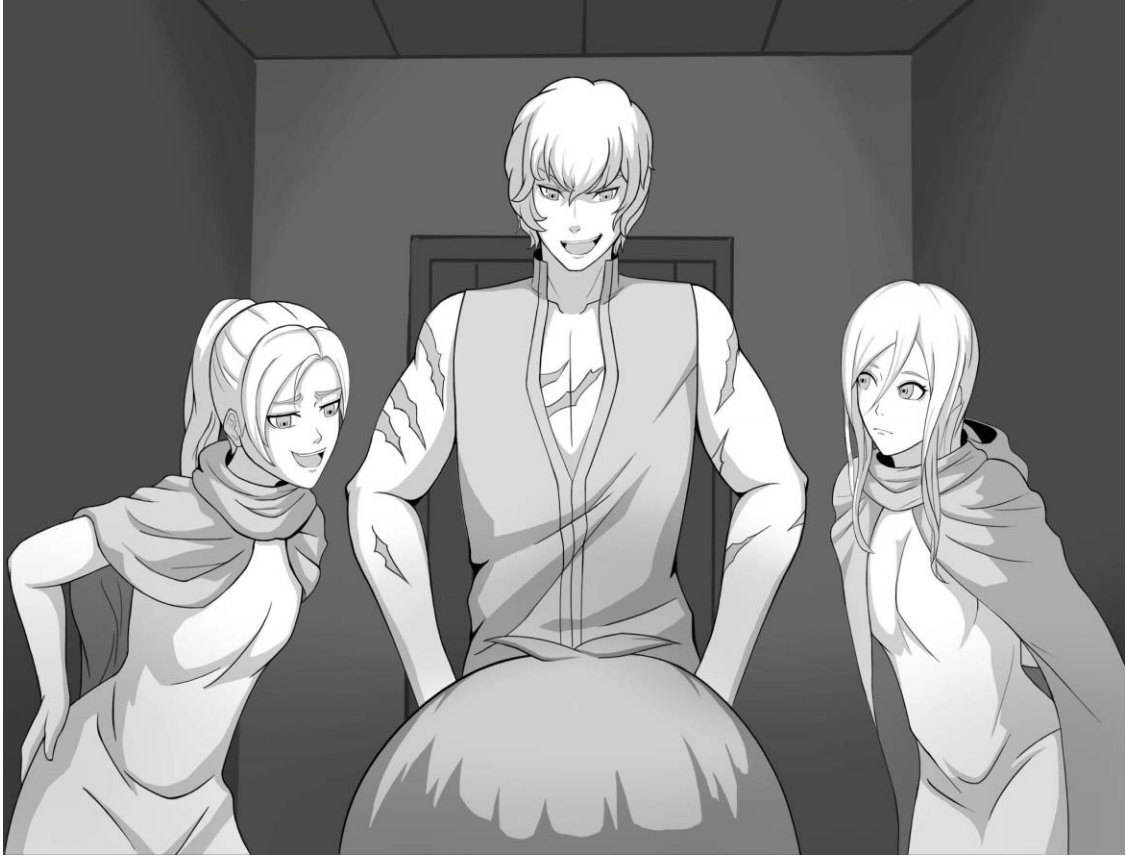
“Hm.”

Mel waited patiently, as the girl seemed to be thinking silently over which option would cause her more trouble. And then, without regarding him at all, she suddenly exited through the door, allowing him to release a heavy sigh.

Shortly after, the door opened, and the man who seemed to be the leader stepped in, followed by the quiet girl and one more- a girl who closely resembled the first. The man had dressed down to an even more raggedy set of robes, revealing moderate scars along his shoulders and chest. Without a cloak, his features were striking- golden locks that were swept out of his sharp green eyes, and a cunning smile beneath freckled cheeks.

The newest girl took her place on his right, opposite the girl who looked to be her sister, if not her twin. Her figure, hair color, and facial features were amazingly similar, the only remarkable differences in that her hair was pulled back, and that she wore a devious smirk the other girl surely wasn’t capable of. Their eyes shared the same shade of green as the man, whose baby face put him no older than twenty.

“Um...could we not talk alone?” Mel asked, conscious of the two girls.



“Ohh no, see, we’re family, the three of us; so, any business should be conducted with all three of us present. You understand, right?” the man said in an overtly polite tone, leaning in as if to challenge him.

“Sure, whatever,” Mel responded, ignoring the attempt at intimidation. “Anyway, who are you people? It’s bothering me, you don’t look like the type to be making off with nobles for money.”

The man smirked modestly, careful not to break eye contact. “Hmm, like I said, I’m no one important. Just a side character, if you will.”

“You’re talking about a play in this kind of situation?”

“Haha, but plays are quite nice, aren’t they? I’m sure you know, as a noble. I myself have a friend who happens to be a Black Shlank from Shraunts Island, and he’s shown me a few reeeally good performances in various places. The guy knows plays well, as expected of a Shraunts native. By the way, you ever wonder why all the interesting new things like that come from Shraunts? Those Black Shlanks sure are impressive, hehe.”

“For a side character, you sure run your mouth about irrelevant things...” Mel muttered as he narrowed his gaze on the man, unable to hide his frustration.

“Oh, hehe, that’s right. You wanted to talk negotiations, I presume? I can’t wait to hear it. You’ve gotten my hopes up, so I hope you’ll give us something good.”

Mel sighed deeply, before straightening his back. “So, let’s get this understood first. You’re planning on demanding ransom money for me, right?”

“Well yes, that much is quite plain to see, isn’t it? We send a letter, do some scary threatening stuff, and meet at a safe place to exchange you for a bunch of gold. Oh, and you’ll be in a potato sack, of course.”

Mel scowled at the jovial look the man wore as he said this, but chose to ignore it to prevent the conversation from remaining at his pace.

“Whatever it is you’re trying to get for me, I’ll do you one better....” He paused to allow himself to fully regain his composure. “...I have a proposition for you.”

“Ohh? Better than half your family fortune?”

“Much better. I’ll give you more work than you’ll ever be able to find on your own.”

The bandit raised his brow, nodding for him to continue.

“I’ll supply you with information on the best potential targets. From how much money their family has, to where you can find them at various times. How’s that sound?”

The three bandits lost their daunting air in an instant, their jaws all dropping in sync. His words drenched in ice cold candor that matched the look in his eyes, Mel knew he’d successfully taken control of the conversation.

“What the...how old are you again, kid? And wait, were you actually planning on being kidnapped today? Even though you’re our first target?” The bandit regained his exaggerated tone but remained stupefied by Mel’s forthcoming onslaught.

Mel scoffed at his banter, glaring at him expectantly. "Both ridiculous questions. Tell me what you think."

"Ah...hmmm? Well, yeah, it's not a bad idea at all, but what makes you think you can get all that information so easily?"

"My father is the chief of security. There probably isn't much I couldn't figure out, so thirty to forty young Teutons shouldn't be much."

"Wow, do you have ice running through your veins or something? I do like it, though! But, then again, what reason would you have for doing that? Wouldn't it be just as easy to pay the ransom and be done with us? Hmm, there's a catch, isn't there? Tell me, what's the catch? Eh?" The bandit fired off over-excitedly, leaning closer to Mel with every word.

"Yes, there is. In return, all I ask is that you bring the targets to the lake at the middle of the forest, preferably drugged and blindfolded."

"And... we're doing *what*, with them?" He asked with a dubious look, taking a step back.

"We'll have them try to pull the red sword from its seal."

"Ohhh..." he replied, his facial features relaxing. "And, if they do it?"

"Then you'll help me deliver the sword to the Wolverine army."

The bandit began scratching his head, face twisted in perplexity.

"I can explain the details of it all later, if you like," Mel continued. "Ideally when I'm not tied up in a dusty old cell of a room."

“Yeah, yeah, never mind that, I’ve more questions,” the bandit cut in despite his request. “Why are you talking about multiple targets? Aren’t you one of the three Heir candidates? Assuming you’re no good, why don’t we just go after the other two?”

“That’s... a last resort,” Mel answered, his gaze drifting away from the bandit. “Besides, as far as I know there isn’t any reason to believe it must be one of us. Everybody’s so damn vague or completely ignorant of how and why the Heir is chosen, and this whole ‘Heir race’ often feels more political than anything, so as far as I’m concerned it could be someone totally different, or perhaps multiple people could pass the test...if the test were to pull the sword.”

“Whew, that was an earful,” the bandit teased, rubbing his head.

“As far as what our strategy would look like,” Mel continued after clearing his throat, doing his best to ignore the man’s whimsical provocations. “I’ll find targets that fit the bill in terms of a strong will, family history, and the like. All you need to worry about is kidnapping and moving the target, I’ll handle the rest.”

“Hmmm. As crazy as it sounds coming from a rich kid who, I must say, should *seriously* be a lot less calm right now...I like it. You’ve got a deal, pal!” The man stooped down even lower, and stuck his hand out while forming a wide, close eyed grin.

“Could you stop mocking me, now?” Mel replied with a close-eyed grimace. “Not that I’d normally shake the hand of a criminal, but I’ll humor you if you’ll just get these damn ropes off me.”



“Oh, what’s that? Somebody at the door? Okaaaay, the three of us’ll be right there!” The man sang out in an over-the-top voice and proceeded to prance out of the room with the girls in tow, one having a harder time fake-prancing than the other.

“Oy, bandits!”

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Later in the night, Mel had finally been freed from his restraints. Reconvening in the main room of what looked to be an old log cabin, the two men sat at an aged wooden table, where Mel explained the details of his father’s inner circle, and their belief. The bandit remained surprisingly quiet through the whole thing, listening with an interested look.

The two girls sat around a small fireplace near the table, half-listening to Mel’s speech. The livelier of the two would occasionally let out a long yawn, to which Mel would shoot an annoyed look.

“Sooo, basically, get it out of here and let the Shlanks and Red Wolves fight over it, eh?” the bandit asked.

“That’s the idea, yes,” Mel answered. “There’s no reason to harbor something like that when it will continue to make us a target.”

“Hmmm, I dunno,” he responded, shifting his chair closer to the table. “You might be right. But, ya know, what if the Red Wolves go back on their word and use it against you? You’d look pretty stupid then, wouldn’t you?”

“I’ll admit there is that possibility,” Mel said, looking down. “Trusting any non-Teutons is dubious, but that’s why the Shlanks are key. We’ll find a way to hurl them

into the fight at the right time. They've counted on our reluctance to use the sword all this time, but if it were to be taken by another state and used as a weapon, they would surely throw all their military might into recovering it. That would get our two greatest enemies of our back, and allow us the time and space we desperately need to rebuild our strength."

"Yeah, you've certainly given this a lot of thought, I see," the man replied with a look of satisfaction, cheeks rested in his hands. "Not that I care one way or another, hehe."

Mel frowned at the man's nonchalant attitude regarding his state. He wanted to ask how it was even possible to have such a deviant will, but he held his tongue.

"Weell, I suppose it's time for you to go for now, pal. Girls, be dears and grab the potato sack, will you?"

"Again, with that?" Mel sneered, crossing his arms.

"Heh, okay, okay," the bandit replied, standing from his chair. "But, you know, we can't go trusting you with knowledge of our hideout just yet, so we'll have to be taking you back to town blindfolded. You understand, right?" He asked, the same close eyed grin plastered to his face.

".... yeah, I get it. Let's just go, then. Ah-" As he stood up, he paused. "Would you mind dropping me off in the desert village ruins, instead of High Town? There's a certain person who sticks annoyingly close to me and is undoubtedly waiting for me. I'd like to avoid letting them see us together. You understand, right?"

"Mm certainly, that would be troublesome for us as well," the bandit answered.

“And, if by chance we still run across her, please do not do anything stupid,” Mel continued, a serious look on his face. “She won’t tell anybody about you if I tell her not to.”

“Ho-ho, the controlling type, eh?” he teased, a precocious grin breaking out on his face. “True, you do come off that way...is she into tha-?”

“Shut up,” Mel cut him off, his composure shaken. “Anyway, it’s unlikely, I just thought I’d cover that just in case.”

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Upon entering the ruins-

“Mel! Are you okay? Who are these people?!”

*Dammit.*

“It’s quite alright, young miss,” the bandit called out, waving his arm. “Just a precautionary measure, nothing to be worried about at all. Boy, you sure weren’t kidding about her, huh?”

“What? What’s he talking about, Mel?” The petite girl looked back and forth confusedly between Mel and the bandit as he removed the blindfold.

“Don’t worry about it, Selmy,” he answered calmly. “They’re new business partners is all. I’ll explain everything later.” Mel sighed as he approached the girl, eyes drawn to the dirt accumulated on her frilly dress and thin boots.

“Well, you’d better get back before your parents begin to worry you’ve been kidnapped or something, hehe.” The relaxed bandit turned and walked away, the girls following, glancing warily at Mel and Selmy.

“One more thing,” Mel said with a glance at the man’s back, disregarding the girl pulling his sleeve.

“Hah?” The bandit slowed his stride, leaning his head back without turning his body.

“Do you not have a name?”

“Hmmm, a name, huh?” The man pondered, raising his left pointer finger. “I’ll tell you once I feel I can truly trust you, as a partner of a bandit. How about that?”

“Whatever,” Mel scoffed, turning his back. “I’d feel pretty tainted the day I’ve gained the trust of a criminal, anyway.”

“Hehe, I’d bet you already feel a bit tainted, though,” the man quipped. “Bye-bye, now, young master, and young miss.” The man waved loosely as he strode away.

Mel frowned at his words as he followed suit.

“Until tomorrow, bandit.”

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After lessons the following day, Mel found himself in his father’s study-, a candlelit chamber in the basement floor of their home. Full of shelves adorned with old books and flasks of red liquid that had always creeped him out, the place had always

been strictly off limits. His father would make very few exceptions, and only when he was in the room himself.

“Father, I’ve got something to discuss with you.” Standing before his ever-composed father as he silently stared down at a stack of papers on his marble table, Mel took a breath. “To tell you the truth, I overheard you and Shae talking the other day.”

“Oh, and just what did you hear, my son?” Wendell Eraldin looked up with slight interest, maintaining his composure without any hints of being upset at his son for eavesdropping.

“You were talking about Shae’s father-about Melvin...having a contact...and that contact getting impatient.” Mel gulped as his father stared at him unflinchingly.

“You were talking about me, weren’t you?”

“Oh? And what makes you think that?” Wendell said, folding his hands.

“Because you’ve taught me well on your beliefs and intentions, father. And...you’ve told me many times that you want me to bring you the red sword someday, that doing so would make me the Heir. I haven’t forgotten those words, even if you stopped saying them six years ago.”

As he said this, he couldn’t escape the image of his eleven-year-old self crying into bloodied hands. A scene that changed his life, and should have had an impact on his father. However, his father’s composure hadn’t waned at all.

“I’ve tried to pull it many times since then. And...even if I can’t, I’m thinking of ways that I can still bring it to you and become the Heir. Therefore, I’ve met up with a man skilled at executing kidnappings, and with him I plan on finding someone who can

pull it, no matter how many people we must use. So, I'd like you to let General Melvin know, so he can make plans with his contact."

Wendell remained quiet, seemingly in thought, for a moment. As Mel began to grow impatient at his father's straight face, he finally spoke up.

"Well, I must say I am surprised. You've grown into a strong young man, Mel."

His father smiled warmly, but he couldn't help but perceive it as distant.

*Not even going to ask how I got involved with someone like that, huh...*

*Let alone scold me.*

"It's possible for something like that to work," Wendell said. "But that's a drastic measure, fitting of a last resort. I will discuss this with Melvin of course, but I'd ask you to be very careful, keeping in mind the people your actions represent. This is a very delicate matter, so if anything were to go wrong--"

"I'll make sure nothing goes wrong," Mel interjected.

"Very well," his father replied, nodding. "It's true that the war is reaching a critical point, and tensions are at an all-time high on both sides. Let me ask you then, if it came to it, would you use those friends of yours? Surely, you aren't forgetting that they are the most likely candidates."

Mel looked down, grimacing. "...I'm...certain I would."

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That night, Mel walked down High Town's road with a sidelong frown.

“Do you insist on coming with me?” he asked, glaring at the girl who tried her best to keep up with his long strides.

“Of course, I do!” she answered. “You’ve gotten yourself into such a mess, how could I not go with you?”

“Ugh, you won’t be of any help though. Honestly, you’re like an overly-attached little sister.”

“Even though I’m older than you!” she replied, sulking. “Hmph...”

“Oy, maybe try to act like you’re older for a change, then,” Mel answered in a strict tone.

“Gosh, don’t be so prickly just because you’re embarrassed,” she said, turning to him with an exaggerated frown. “Besides, you like that side of me, don’t you?”

“Oh, look at that, she admits to her facade. And just who the hell is embarrassed?”

“You just don’t realize you are!” she exclaimed with a pouting face. “Of course, it isn’t cool to bring your girlfriend to your secret criminal meeting, but you just couldn’t refuse me since you actually really want me to be there with you!” Having tried her hardest to keep her voice to a high whisper, Selmy leered at the frowning boy more precociously than he could bare. Forced to hide his reddened cheeks, he resorted to palming her face and squishing it about.

“Who are you calling whose girlfriend? I don’t remember signing off on anything like that.”

“Beelll, zats by vaaaace!” she blubbered about, flailing her arms uselessly. Mel couldn’t help but chuckle at her helpless figure. Pulling his hand back, he continued his stride, gazing forward with a soft smile.

“Heh, looks like you’re a bit more energetic. Now just who was it that couldn’t possibly be of any help?” she said with a smirk, holding her index finger to her cheek.

“Well...I guess that side of you isn’t so bad,” he mumbled, his gaze pointed ahead.

“Ah...” Her façade came down once more, and she was unable to keep her smirk through her reddened cheeks.

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Having met up with the bandits in the desert, the two were briskly blindfolded and escorted to the same hideout. Mel and the male bandit sat at the table, plotting over a map of East Takanova, while the girls sat around the fire, half listening while in their own conversation.

Mel noticed that the girls were getting along, even surprisingly well, he thought. The bandit twins were showing Selmy some technique that seemed to aim at lowering her energy level, which prompted him to look up several times, thinking the girls had left the room. He thought about joining them out of interest, but his focus was on planning with the bandit leader. He had a very short span of time in which to do so, so he refocused himself on the map, thinking he would just ask Selmy about it later.

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Two nights later. The first target.



Mel and Selmy met up with the bandits at the appointed time. The trio lugged a bulky potato sack into the forest's clearing and rolled it into the grass.

"Alright pal, let's do this quick and easy, and on to the next one," the bandit said through a sigh. "This guy was pretty pathetic, so it'd be sad if he was a hit. We set the exchange for an hour from now, just as planned."

"I don't plan on making a scene out of it, so don't worry," Mel grunted as he approached the water and readied the small log-raft they'd hidden the night before. "A simple go at pulling it, and we're done. How dazed on medicine is he?"

"Oh, huhu, let's just say that he was a loud catch, sobbing, pleading, screaming, the whole ball of wax- until we bubbled some opiates into his system. Thank goodness, because the girls were having a preeetty tough time with him."

"He kicked me in the face, and then screamed apologies for the next ten minutes," the livelier of the two girls added.

"Mm, it made me thankful for cooperative victims like you," the quiet one threw in, glancing expressionlessly at Mel as he steadied the raft while the bandits rolled the victim onto it.

"Please don't remember me by that," he mumbled in response. "Alright, let's go, bandit."

The two men settled into the raft and pushed out from the edge, leaving the girls behind. Using small paddles to wade their way to the center, they kept a close eye on the motionless potato sack as they paddled.

“You weren’t lying about the lack of patrol out here, eh?” The bandit noted, glancing around. “Say, Mel-boy, why do you think that is? I mean, if this sword is the most valued artifact in Takanova’s history aside from the green sword that’s been sealed who-knows-where, shouldn’t it be, ya know, guarded?”

“Well, not many know that the red sword can be pulled by a Teuton,” Mel answered. “Most people think it’s a Shlank relic and nothing more, so in theory it’s just sitting there uselessly. Honestly, I believe that myself to some extent. The only reason I can’t pull it must be because my soul is far too green for that filthy red thing.”

The bandit tapped his chin with a finger, thinking. “Hmmm, but what if a Shlank snuck in aiming for it? It’d be Velagoras all over again, wouldn’t it?”

“That would never happen, though. My father knows about every person who travels through the walls, as well as the mountains. For example,” Mel paused, looking the bandit down with a raised brow. “He knew about the three mysterious figures matching certain wanted posters sent from the wall, that entered through the mountains just beyond the volcano several weeks ago.”

“Hohh, not bad! And here I was, thinking we went totally unnoticed here!” The bandit exclaimed in genuine surprised, though he didn’t seem bothered by the news in the slightest, his tone as loose as ever.

“Yeah, you’ll have to tell me what the central wall is like, sometime,” Mel replied shortly. “Anyway, that’s just one of several reasons why there’s no guard. These days, certain people in the castle might want there to be, but we don’t have the resources for it- as I’m sure you’re aware from your sneaking around...”

The man shrugged, sporting a modest grin.

“Another reason, well it’s just my opinion, but I think the whole ‘race’ idea is a farce,” he continued. “There isn’t any concrete way that the heir is decided, and the sword isn’t some trial, just a possibility. It seems to be someone’s preference that they let things play out naturally, the opposite of what we’re trying to do. It pisses me off how vaguely people like Gambell and Valblin talk when it comes to the heir race; I think they must believe in a grand, inevitable scheme that naturally guides one of us to heirship- something in accordance to the Teuton Will. He can teach the ignorant fools that nonsense, and I’ll take matters into my own hands. I’ll retrieve the sword, use it to end the war, and prove myself as the Heir in doing so.”

“My, you have thought a lot about this,” the bandit said. “Anyway, looks like we’re here.”

The two stepped onto the small patch of weathered land, dragging the potato sack behind them. As the bandit opened up the sack and shook it as if the contents were actual potatoes, Mel scowled at the idle red sword before him. The many times he’d tried to unearth it came to mind, causing his lip to quiver.

Turning away from the sword with a flustered look, he looked upon the teenage boy whom he’d marked as the first target. He was a noble who Mel knew well, someone that, despite being older than him, he knew would be an easy target due to his status- a messenger. The bandit had already untied his bound hands and was unraveling a thick wrap around the boy’s eyes and ears. Leaving a few layers, the bandit clapped his hands close to the boy’s ears. The victim jumped at the sound, and proceeded to flounder about like a newborn calf, groaning incomprehensibly.

“Looks like he’s as alert as we need, yeah?” The bandit looked up at Mel with a grin. He approached the boy, and gave the bandit a firm nod, leaving the talking to him.

“Alright friend. We’ll be very quick here and get you home before you know it,” the bandit said calmly. “All you have to do is pull this stick out of the ground for us, okaay?” The boy hesitated before giving a weak nod.

The two dragged him quickly to the sword and lifted him up. Placing his shaking hands over the hilt, they stepped back, bracing his wobbling shoulders.

“Alright, now, with aaallll your might,” the bandit cheered.

Putting all of his focus into his own Teuton will, Mel grasped both of the boy’s shoulders, as if to channel his own will into the boy’s.

The experiment was over as quickly as it started. As expected, it resulted in resounding failure. After several sheepish attempts, the boy began whimpering, and Mel decided to end it there.

While the bandits packed up their victim like he was a piece of baggage, Mel and Selmy lugged the raft into the woods and tossed it into a thicket of bush.

“Well then, we have to go and pick up our day’s pay now, so we’ll see the two of you tomorrow night for a strategy meeting, yeah?” the bandit said through a yawn.

“We’ll be waiting in the ruins,” Mel responded. “I already have the next one in mind.” Brushing off his dirtied hands, He watched as Selmy patted her hands on thick boots that didn’t suit her, before trotting back to meet the retreating bandits. As she exchanged goodbyes with the two girls, Mel let a small chuckle out, before offering a vicious glance to the slightly moonlit sword in the middle of the small lake.

“Meeel, are you coming?” Selmy called out excitedly.

“Yeah, I am...” he replied colder than intended, before changing his tone. “Let’s try out that new technique of yours on the way, yeah?”

“Mm, okay!”

As the two sneaked their way back into the walls of High Town, they stopped at a grassy hill that overlooked most of High Town’s extravagant villas, as well as the distant castle, basked in distorted moonlight. Wiping sweat from their brows, they sat down to catch their breath.

“Is this...the trade off?” Mel panted, holding his head as he sat, elbows on his knees.

“It is...pretty difficult to keep up...” Selmy was in no better shape, leaning her right side lazily into Mel’s bent back as she rubbed her now bare feet.

“Yeah...I don’t think it’s worth the result. I need to be focused on other things, so you can continue practicing on your own, if you feel like it.” His labored voice sounded unusually warm, which prompted Selmy to raise her face, propping it against his sturdy back.

“Mm, I think I’ll do that,” she whispered, hiding a soft smile.

“Say, Selmy.” As if spotting her smile, he broke the brief silence.

“Ah-yes?”

“I’ve put off asking this, but...how are you okay with... what we’re doing? I mean...” he paused to lower his voice, “kidnapping innocent people, forcing them like that, working with criminals...how can you smile through all that?”

Her mouth agape as if confused by the question, Selmy shifted to a slightly more upright position. “Umm...if you’re talking about right and wrong, then what about you, Mel? You’re not a criminal either, you know?”

“I certainly am now, for conspiring with bandits over this whole thing.”

“In that case, so am I for going along with it,” she responded without hesitation.

“But what I’m saying is, you were only dragged into it. You aren’t a conspirer or-”

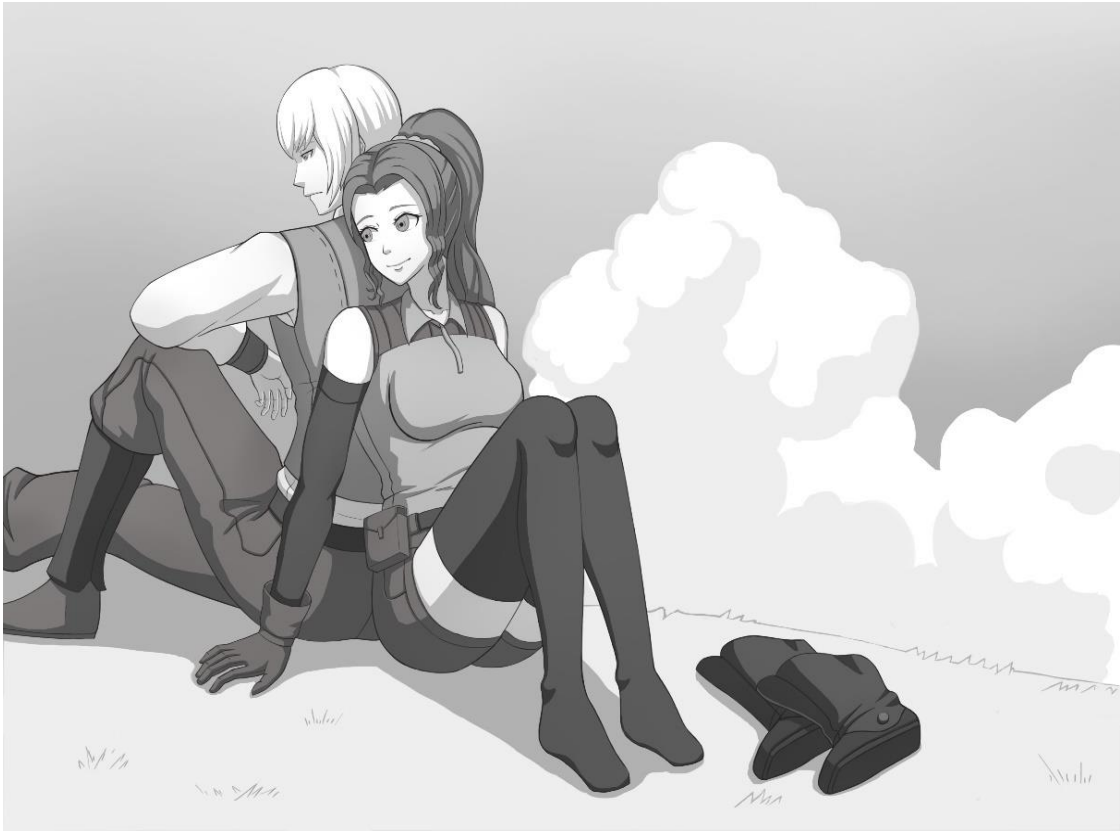
“Well, weren’t you dragged into it, too?” she asked sternly. “If you hadn’t been kidnapped, you wouldn’t have had to come up with this idea. Even if you act so strong about it, you’re still a victim, yourself, you know?” Her tender words cut straight through the back she whispered into, rendering Mel silent.

*This girl...*

*How is it... that she can make me feel like this?*

“Well...I can only do it... because I believe in my father’s ideals.”

*Nobody else...makes me feel safe enough...to talk about these things.*



“Hmph, well then, I can put up with it because I believe in *you*,” she responded firmly, grinning. “Will that answer do?”

“Yeah...for now.” Mel buried his face into his arms, hiding a smile of his own.

\*\*\*

Two nights later. The second victim.

A younger noble found himself sacked up and thrown onto the makeshift raft.

“Well young master, the good news is that our friend from the other night seems to have no recollection of our little late-night rendezvous,” the bandit exclaimed through a wide grin. “The girls did some investigating, and he doesn’t remember a siiiingle thing! So, as you wished, we took care in lowering the dosage tonight!” The bandit’s cheerful voice sent a chill down Mel’s spine, as the two prepared the raft.

“And, the bad news?”

“Weeeeell, it’s just my opinion, buuut I think, probably, this one’s another dud, hehe,” he said, scratching the back of his head.

“Stop throwing my focus off with your negativity,” Mel responded. “If he has the power within him, I’m going to draw it out.”

“If you say soooo~”

However, it was another failure. This time, the victim was more aware, but still didn’t seem to grasp the idea of pulling the sword like his life depended on it. Mel chose to believe it was simply another case of the subject not having the will of an heir, as the bandit had foretold.



Two nights later. The third victim.

This time it was a spunky villager whom Mel had only heard about. The dosage had, as planned, been lowered once more. As a result, the subject seemed to understand his mission, and tried of his own accord to pull the sword.

Yet, another failure.

Four nights later. The fifth victim. And, the fifth failure.

Eight nights later. The ninth victim. Once more, a failure.

The bandit maintained his grin. Selmy stayed positive, and supported Mel with her radiant smile. Even the twins grew friendlier with them. However, Mel only grew more frustrated. By this ninth attempt, his level of coercion of the victim gradually grew, once he felt he'd channeled enough of his own will into them. Even though he stayed quiet just in case this victim retained his memories despite the drugs, he found himself throwing dirt and water on the man, while the bandit verbally spurred him on.

Two nights later. The tenth victim.

Edward Hanon: a well-regarded noble soldier who was quickly moving through the ranks, currently a Lieutenant commanding 1,000 men under General Hydrick.

Mel and Selmy both knew him as a family friend from childhood, and always treated him as an older brother. Therefore, this night's Mel and Selmy bore a solemn demeanor. The bandit, who had been briefed on their relation, was abnormally quiet.

This was a last resort for Mel among potential targets. From what he'd learned through the previous nine, he'd come to realize someone like this was the best he could

hope for. A strong background from a noble family, Edward was also a sworn soldier who had the ambition of becoming a Knight-General, and the skill and knowledge to back it up. But most importantly, he had a certain sense of righteousness when it came to the Teuton's group will. His caring, helpful attitude had aided Mel throughout his childhood, and helped instill in him the will he held dear.

*"What does the Teuton Will mean to you, Mel?"*

His words from long ago reverberated through Mel's memory as he and the bandit rowed toward the small patch of land.

*"How should I answer? I cherish the place I have here, so it's my will to protect it, right?"*

*"Then, don't ever forget about that. Even when you're older and you learn more about Takanova and the world, always make sure to cherish that place you're thinking of."*

*"O-okay..."*

*"And, if that place should ever change, cherish it for what it once was, but even more for what it has become. And do everything in your power to protect it. Can you remember that?"*

*"Yeah! I can! I'll remember that, Ed!"*

*...I'm sorry, Ed. It's because of that will...*

*Because of the place that I cherish...*

*That I must do this to you.*

Understanding his instructions despite his confusion, Edward tried to pull the sword to no avail. With some inciting, he tried harder a second and third time. Mel put more focus into channeling his will than any time before, to no avail, and begrudgingly began his combination coercion with the bandit, ramping up their intensity with each failed attempt.

When Edward still failed despite water being violently thrown in his face, Mel finally snapped. After slapping Edward's drenched face, he grasped his shoulders.

"PULL THIS DAMN THING UP RIGHT NOW, OR WE'LL KILL EACH AND EVERY PERSON YOU LOVE! RALHP, MAIER, SAYA, MEL, SELMY, EVERYONE YOU HOLD DEAR!"

The bandit seemed to forget his job, as he could only stare in genuine shock at the screaming Mel. Selmy looked on with tearful eyes from the other side of the lake, while the twins stared, dumbfounded. Mel continued shouting furiously at the blindfolded man, even grasping his arms and neck as he urged him on.

"Oy, oy, if you're that loud then someone might actually be drawn out here!"

The bandit's words fell on deaf ears, Mel's vision going white with desperate rage. As he began to tug at the sword along with the struggling Edward, his mind went blank before being submerged by memories of a rainy day.

The pounding rain assaulted the eleven-year-old boy, who did his best to keep his shaggy blonde hair out of his face as his planted feet bore deep into the new mud.

*"With all your might, Mel! You can do it!"*

His father's muffled words hardly reached him, yet they conveyed his expectations thoroughly.

Despite the pouring rain, and the battle that was being fought on the eastern end of the island that threatened the lives of many of his friends, his father expected him to thrust the daunting red blade up from its resting place.

Because his father expected it, he expected it of himself, and therefore gave his all, ignoring the cold rain that felt like it was soaking through his thin bones.

Maybe it was because of the battle, he thought, that his father became so desperate now. He realized the weight this battle carried and understood the sense of desperation. Remembering Edward's words to him just days before, he felt the sense of desperation grow within him.

Therefore, he threw every ounce of strength his small frame could expend into his tensed arms, thrusting upward as if his life depended on it.

However-

Regaining himself, Mel opened his eyes. He was laying in the dead grass, just feet away from Edward, who had also collapsed and lost consciousness. The sight of his limp, bloodied hands reminded him where he was.

Too exhausted to move from his back, he brought his palms before his eyes. A drop of blood fell from his trembling hands, cascading like a lone tear down his cheek.

*Ha...it's just like that time.*

*That time too, I failed to take it.*

*I laid just like this, too exhausted to shield my face from the rain.*

*Unable to squeeze my worn hands in the slightest.*

*Too ashamed to show him my face.*

*Ah-that's right, Selmy was watching from the trees, wasn't she?*

*Father stood there... waiting for me to get back up.*

*When I didn't, he took me back home, never showing me his face.*

*Ever since then...*

*It's like he hasn't shown me his face, even once.*

*He completely gave up on me.*

*Well, I am this pathetic, after all.*

*I still can't pull it no matter how strong my will.*

*Maybe I'll never be able to?*

*If I can't do it by tomorrow...*

"MEL! Are you okay?"

He returned from his childhood once more to find Selmy's small figure crouched over him, dripping water onto his head.

"Your hands! I'll wrap them, so stay still!" Fighting tears that fell down onto Mel's cheek along with the dripping water, Selmy retrieved a roll of wound wrap from her soaked brown cloak.

Ignoring her order, he sat up and allowed her his hands. "Rather bold of you to swim over here," he said blankly.

"Shut up!" she cried, her façade nowhere to be found.

"Sorry...that you had to see me like-"

"Shh!" She placed a finger over his mouth, before gently wiping his blood and tears from his cheek. Trying her best to stop the tears that were running down her own quivering cheeks, she gave him a messy smile, her facial features unable to relax through her sobs.

As she continued to wrap his hands despite her anguish, he leaned his forehead into hers with a sigh. "Can you really still put up with this?" he asked in a whisper.

"Of course," she replied softly.

"I couldn't bring it up earlier, but you know that people have died because of copy-cat abductions, right? Even then?"

"Even then."

"Look at what I've done to Edward. Can you really still smile at me?"

"Mhm, because I still believe in you." Her smile lit up before him, as if warming his cold soul. "That won't change, and it's time you understood it."

He could only chuckle lightly in response, his gaze still aimed downward.

"Oy, let's get this show on the road, lovebirds." The bandit spoke in his usual relaxed tone. Mel looked up to see that he'd already stowed the unconscious Edward away and prepared the raft.

“Thanks to you, we need to drug him a bit more to blot out any impression he got out of this, plus we should probably treat his hands before exchanging him...”

“Yeah, you’re right. Anything that could lead someone’s attention here at this crucial time needs to be taken care of.”

“Yep, yep...ah, by the way,” he turned back to face the two.

“The name’s Hastor. Now you can stop looking into it, yeah? I’m no one special, after all, hehe.”

Mel’s eyes widened, and he looked away from the bandit called Hastor.

*Ah, man...*

*Shouldn’t you both be scolding me for doing something like that?*

*At this rate, my character is going to turn to something irredeemable...*

“Hah, didn’t I tell you before? I don’t need the trust of a filthy bandit. Besides, I’m too busy to bother looking into you criminals right now.”

“Ohh, that so, is it?” Hastor responded to Mel’s scoff with his most sarcastic tone, before ushering the two onto the raft.

After cleaning up, the groups prepared to separate.

“Take care of him, please,” Mel requested sincerely.

“Aye aye, pal. Say, will we still plan strategy tomorrow? I’m not sure where you’re looking to go from here, after all.”

“Yeah, tomorrow will be the last, and most important one,” Mel responded.

“Two night’s from now is the deadline my father gave me, after all.”

“Ahh, got it,” Hastor said, stretching his neck. “Though I don’t really care one way or another, hehe.”

\*\*\*

The next day, Mel found himself in the apothecary ward. A certain boy had needed the infirmary, and Mel was forced to escort his brute of a friend.

“Really, how did you manage to slip in a puddle that small?”

“Don’ bake vun of be, ogay? You would hab slibd, too!”

“Whatever, just pipe down, your dumb voice is going to force all the blood in your head to escape.”

“Why so bean to a hurt berson, Bel? Cedric would be nicer, at leasd.”

As the frivolous boy continued to whine, Mel brought him into the infirmary, where the puddle’s culprit was quickly discovered. After Tess left, the three boys sat quietly. The injured idiot fell asleep, while Mel sat in silent thought. The culprit, lounging on the infirmary’s bed despite the injured person in the room, peered at him suspiciously.

*Ahh, there’s that look of his.*

*As if he’s peering deep into my soul.*

*Even though...he doesn’t even have much of a soul of his own.*

*So, it isn’t as though he can understand mine.*

*I really hate that about him...*



*Although... if he wasn't like that...*

*We probably wouldn't be friends.*

Annoyed, he shifted his glance to his sleeping friend.

*And this one...acting so oblivious all the time.*

*Yet, he's the most observant of all of us.*

*I wonder...if he'd actually fake sleeping like this...*

*These two fools are who I'm up against.*

*There's no way I shouldn't be able to take it before them.*

*Well...tonight's my last chance to do it...isn't it?*

\*\*\*

That night, the motley group of bandits and nobles held their final strategy meeting. This time, the girls sat at the table, just as focused on the discussion as the two men were.

"Soo, the idea is to draw them out to the lake and have one of them take it, yeah?" Hastor asked with a smirk.

"Yes, and you can leave getting them out there to me," Mel answered, his bandaged hands clasped in front of his nose.

"You think you'll be able to do it?" Selmy cut in, staring into Mel's eyes.

"Well, I think Cedric is starting to suspect something. If I throw him a little bait tomorrow, he and Quentle should act as we need them to."

“So then, what’s the tactical layout for this one?” The bandit asked, leaning back in his chair. “I have a feeling you’ll say it won’t go like the others, ehe.”

“That’s right, Hastor,” Mel responded, his gaze narrowed. “I’d like us to force one of them to take the sword to defend themselves. Only one of them needs to be captured, so that the other will have a reason to desire the sword immediately. Besides, we won’t have time to do things the way we have been.”

“Ahh, and why is that?” Hastor inquired.

“Well, according to my father, there will likely be Red Wolves in our midst once the night’s battle has reached a certain point.” Mel said this without pause, closing his eyes to the shocked faces around him.

“The enemy...will be in the walls?” Hastor asked, dumbfounded.

“Yes, they will. Forcing whoever pulls the sword to either fight or give the sword up, which is what makes your involvement important.”

“Why us?” The livelier of the twins asked.

“I’ll say this now,” Mel said, baring a haughty air. “You’ll only receive payment for this particular job if the terms are fully met.” He opened his eyes and glared at Hastor, who grinned silently in response.

“Also, the terms will be non-negotiable.”

Hastor raised his brow at Mel, who took a slow breath.

“Equally as important as retrieving the sword and delivering it, you are to assist me in ensuring the survival of the targets.”

Selmy wore a soft smile as he said this, while Hastor chuckled.

“Ho boy, I can’t wait to talk about the pay for this one, huhu.”

“Yes, it will be sufficient,” Mel said. “And I understand this is a demanding job to take, so we’ll wait while you three talk it over. If you decide against it, we’ll break our ties here tonight and that will be it. You have my word that I won’t concern myself with you lot anymore, as long as you stay away from the names on the list I gave you the other night.” His stern expression did not falter as his words trailed off.

“Ahh, so cold toward your partner, Mel-boy! Well then... we’ll go ahead and take your suggestion and discuss this in private.” The last half of Hastor’s response lacked his usual loose tone, leaving Mel with a sense of just how dangerous the man was.

After the bandit trio moved to another room, Mel turned his gaze to Selmy.

“Selmy, it should go without saying, but I’d like you to stay home for this job.”

“H-huh? Ah, I guess I had a feeling,” Selmy brooded, looking down at her enclosed hands with a bitter smile. “I assume there’s no way you’ll budge on that?”

“Right,” he answered unflinchingly. “The danger involved this time is on another level, so I won’t hear any complaints. Especially after you failed to wait for me, tonight. Do you understand?”

After a short pause, Selmy looked up, regarding him with her warmest smile. “Yeah, I understand. But...is there something you aren’t telling me? Why were you so worried about me going out, tonight?”

Mel nodded silently in response. "I was supposed to meet the Red Wolves' contact tonight, at midnight- just before meeting you. I didn't want you to worry and come barging in, so I didn't tell you about it. Unfortunately, I couldn't get rid of the two idiots, and then there you were waiting..."

"Ah-ohh," she replied, shrinking back. "But...what do you think happened to the contact?"

"Well, he should have been waiting for me inside High Town's walls when we left," Mel mumbled, glancing at the door the bandits had gone through. "Who knows what became of him... but I'm worried Cedric might have run into him on his way home...which, as long as Cedric survived, would make baiting him tomorrow even easier. But we can't let the bandits know anything's gone wrong in the plan...it's risky, but I'll just have to let my father send one last communication, since I couldn't convey the plan to them myself."

Selmy nodded hurriedly, remaining silent. The bandits soon returned to the room and stood before them.

"Well?" Mel demanded, his tone as frank as ever.

"Hehe, looks like we have a deal, young master Mel."

\*\*\*

The next night, Mel leaned against a thick tree at the forest's center, where it met the small lake. He thumbed the string of the spare bow he'd brought, quietly waiting. The violent sounds of siege battle beyond the forest failed to reach him as he

stared out into the vacant, moonlit lake, thinking back on his last conversation with Selmy.

*“Do you think Hastor and the girls will really protect them?”*

*“Yeah, I believe they will.”*

*“Then...what about you? Will they protect you?”*

*“I’ll take care of myself. The Red Wolves should know not to attack me anyway, unless something were to go wrong.”*

*“And...if something went wrong?”*

*“Well, it isn’t as if I haven’t planned for that.”*

Selmy had seemed no less tense after he’d explained the involvement of the guys from class, but she hadn’t questioned him further.

*Farum should be arriving at the ruins with my bow any time now.*

*There’s no doubt, they’ll notice the message.*

*They’ll make it here, without fail.*

*Farum, Berd, Kaolo, Geraint, Jorge... how about you?*

*As the remaining top-ranked students of our age...*

*Will you meet my expectations as well?*

\*\*\*

The cloudy night's sky exploded in red light, showering the forest's opening in a mural of moonlight and ruby red glow as the sounds of the battle in the distance seemed to disappear momentarily.

Mel stepped to the edge of the lake, observing the spectacle in silence.

He understood, after watching his friend struggle, just how pointless his previous attempts were. He'd sullied his own hands, ruined the lives of others, and forced his friends into this dangerous situation. Yet his only choice was to look on at the result of his work with steadfast resolve and focus.

While Cedric turned slowly in his direction, his aura doused in that daunting red light, Mel could only look straight ahead, resolving himself once more.

"MEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEELLLLLLLL!!!!!!!"

*Come, Cedric. I'm prepared...are you?*

# Standoff

Cedric threw himself violently into the water and used one last burst of the red light's power to propel himself forward, using the sword as a paddle.

In a flash he emerged at the lake's edge and leapt onto solid ground. Not stopping to take a breath, he tore into the grass in the direction of Mel, who had retreated inward. The remnants of the red light faded away, but the momentum it provided persisted as he lunged toward his friend.

The blond-headed bandit streaked in between them, readying a fine hiltless dagger in defense.

"OUT OF MY WAY, BANDIT!"

Cedric reared the sword to his right before slashing sideways at the smiling man. His fury filled him, but he controlled it with resolute focus.

The bandit, unable to duck away from the attack like before, undercut the sword with swift precision. Squatting down with one leg, he whipped his arms over his head from his right shoulder, deflecting the sword just enough to duck his head below its path. He allowed the momentum of Cedric's blow to spin him graciously around in a one-legged twirl.





Tilting his body, he bounced toward Cedric, who was busy trying to stop the momentum from his deflected attack. Sensing the counter-attack, he gave up on pursuing Mel even though he was right in front of him and executed a frantic backslash to defend himself.

Cedric's deflection barely met the bandit's lunging attack aimed at his legs, and the two kicked up dirt as they re-postured, recognizing each other as immediate threats.

Cedric knew that he couldn't get to Mel without taking a serious blow from the relaxed man. He gnashed his teeth as he mulled over options in his head while the other two bandits moved in front of Mel, leaving him surrounded by enemies.

Fainting a step toward Mel, he darted to his left, where Quentle lay meters away. He slid recklessly into his friend, cutting his bonds while they briefly collided. Quentle grunted painfully before wobbling his way up alongside Cedric.

"You alright?" Cedric asked, shifting his gaze to the bandits.

"Yeah, I held down the fort while you snatched the prize, ya know?" his good friend razzed him in a cheerful, yet labored voice.

"Yeah, I can tell," Cedric chuckled, glancing behind them.

One of the other present parties was advancing on them. The group of Red Wolves, no less than thirty, were clad in the same uniform he'd seen the night prior. His expression tightened with apprehension as his gaze panned across the threats surrounding them.

"Alright, Cedric, it's time to give up." Mel emerged from behind the two smaller bandits baring a firm voice and incurring Cedric's furious glare.

“As you can see, the enemy surrounds us. They’re here for that sword you have, so it’s very simple. You just have to drop it, and-”

“Shut your mouth, Mel! Shut your mouth! This is your way of handling things? You’re a damned coward, you know?!” Cedric roared, thrusting the sword in Mel’s direction.

Mel stepped toward him, looking directly into his eyes. “I don’t need to explain myself to you, Cedric. You need only drop the sword, and we can all go home.”

“Screw that, rich boy! We aren’t going to bend to your petty threats!” Quentle fired back, struggling to snatch his spear from the grass. “We have the sword, now! Let’s use it against these wolf-babies, you idiot! Don’t you understand that we have the power here?”

“No Quentle, you’re the one who doesn’t understand. Neither of you understand anything!” Mel clenched his fists, staring daggers at Quentle. “This plan will end the war without fail, but if you get in the way, we’re all just going to die a meaningless death!”

“I’m not giving away something this powerful just because your dad and his friends are in bed with the enemy!” Cedric shouted, face taut with rage. “You think I’ll trust someone who allows intruders to roam free, even if it means letting his own people die? The man I just killed was outside High Town last night... he would have killed anybody who saw him, including me. Yet, we’re supposed to believe these same people will just leave us alone after fifteen years of war, just because we gave them a god-damned sword?”

“Arguing about this is useless, deer-boy,” the bandit interrupted, smoothly stepping in front of Mel. “You can’t fight against this number of enemies, can you?”

“It doesn’t matter!” Cedric bellowed back. “We aren’t going to give in because of something like that!”

“This is moronic, Cedric... don’t throw both of your lives away for something that you know nothing about!” Mel forced his way back in front of the bandit, waving his arm emphatically.

“If I’m the Heir, then my Teuton Will ought to help me make it through this, wouldn’t you say, Mel?” Cedric replied calmly. “In that case, don’t you think I can take matters into my own hands? Rather than leave things in the hands of your dad and his friends, I’ll rely on my OWN POWER!” He slammed his chest with an open hand, then caught his breath before turning to the panting Quentle.

“Think you can run?” he muttered, eyeing the bandits.

“Sure, if I need to... which direction?” Quentle responded heartily despite his labored breaths.

“Well-”

Suddenly, Cedric’s attention was drawn to the blade of the sword. Across the glowing red surface of the blade, green sparks began to form sharp letters.

<-V-O-L-C-A-N-O->

Cedric narrowed his eyes, recalling the strange voice that had come from the sword.

*Gather the remaining shards, huh...*

*Shards of what, exactly?*

*Is there something in the volcano?*

He glanced around the area toward the uninvited Shlanks, numbering around fifteen, approaching opposite the Red Wolves.

*Well, it might be a safe place to hide.*

*Though, it is called the Volcano of Disasters for a reason...*

*But really, what choice do I have...*

His gaze shifted to his injured friend. Even if he did have an undeniable fighting spirit, Cedric thought they'd be at a disadvantage fighting together.

He tried to calm his racing mind as the two approaching groups grew closer. He had no idea why the Shlanks were there, whereas the Red Wolves were certainly invited by Mel's father and his cohorts. He thought that it didn't make sense, as Elem had mentioned the assumed plan would be to pit the groups against each other only *after* giving the sword over.

*Ah...in that case...*

His eyes grew wide with realization, just as five figures emerged from within the forest, running in a hurry. One by one, they stopped in their tracks upon noticing the ongoing spectacle

"Ah! Cedric, Quentle! Wha-huh? What is this?" Kaolo led the pack of boys, clearly having stumbled onto the scene unawares. Berd, Farum, Geraint, and Jorge's

faces froze at the sight of the armed groups, each realizing the danger they were in one after another, before staring back and forth between Cedric and Mel.

“Guys! What the...” Quentle stammered in disbelief, grimacing as his gashed legs shook.

“You guys...you came after us?” Cedric asked, dumbfounded.

“Ah...well...” Berd stumbled through an attempt to explain despite his panic, but Cedric didn’t have time to wait.

“Mel...you even...schemed this far?” Cedric’s voice quivered with anger. Mel regarded the bewildered boys briefly and silently stared Cedric down, waiting.

“Would he...really go that far, though?” Quentle whispered, earning Cedric’s inquisitive gaze.

Cedric couldn’t fathom that Mel would use the boys as hostages, but he did seem completely unsurprised that they were there. It was clear that he had either planned this directly or was expecting it to happen. Thinking back to his insistence on the boys joining, he was even more convinced.

*But...wait.*

He thought about the part that bothered him the most.

It’s not just that he gathered all eight of the top-ranked students...

*The way he separated the groups...*

*And going as far as bringing Geraint and Jorge...*

*Even though we’d never spent much time with them.*

*And doing so the day after they supported me with the Heir discussion...*

*Also, that bandit...*

*Fighting defensively, going for my legs...*

*Mel...*

*He couldn't be...*

“Haha...you're soft, after all, Mel.” Cedric smirked deviously, to which Mel furrowed his brow in confusion.

“We'll settle this later on, traitor.” With haste he grabbed Quentle's shoulders and threw him in the direction of Kaolo and the others.

“Whoa-oy!” Quentle cried out.

“Take care of Quentle, you guys!” Cedric said with a certain authority. Without waiting for a response, he dashed away from the bandits, and made a beeline for the incoming Shlanks.

Surprised, the red-clad men began an all-out sprint to meet him.

*If this doesn't work, it could get ugly for me.*

*Well, I better treat it like that's what I'm expecting, then!*

As some of the men reared back spears, Cedric raised his new sword, and roared out a war cry. Despite his shaking voice, it propelled him ahead, into the face of the enemy.

The spears soared at him from a short distance away. The eight deadly projectiles wouldn't allow much room to dodge. As he hastily calculated which of them he'd have to receive in order to dodge the most fatal, six of the spears were suddenly snatched out of midair.

Six ropes had whipped by from his left, gripping onto the spears, and throwing them harmlessly into the ground. Cedric managed to duck under the remaining two, retaining his explosive momentum.

He glanced over to find just what he had been hoping for. The bandits were reeling in their ropes, two for each of them.

*Knew it.*

*Even you aren't horrid enough to let your friends die, Mel.*

Full of confidence, Cedric stopped in his tracks, and raced in the opposite direction. The Shlanks continued to pursue him despite his course, which would run directly into the charging Red Wolves- who bared their swords in anticipation.

Cedric gripped his newly acquired sword, the object of everyone's attention that continued coursing unknown power through him. he focused his arms on executing one last strike and swept the sword across the ground, kicking up a storm of dirt and grass in his wake.

Shielding his own eyes from the cloud of debris, he rolled violently to his right. The two groups stampeded by him, clashing together in the dirt cloud. He bounced up and began to run in the direction the Shlanks had come from. He glanced back as he ran, the gazes of several Shlanks meeting his as the dirt cloud began to withdraw.

Right then, he caught sight of something flying over his head. A white clod passed over him and landed in the middle of the chaotic collision of troops.

With a pop, the object burst open, erupting into a sharp white cloud of smoke. The smoke filled the area in seconds, clouding the surroundings.

Cedric didn't even have to think. He took advantage of the confusion while the two groups continued to scuffle chaotically, bursting into a full sprint.

He glanced briefly to where Quentle and Mel should have been. He couldn't make out faces, only outlines of several people taking steps back. He clinched his fist, offering a silent prayer of support for his friends, but did not slow down.

He ran until he'd exited the range of the smoke screen, but did not slow except to glance into the trees in which he'd spotted someone earlier.

The girl, whose body was mostly hidden behind a large tree, looked upon him with desperation. The hood over her head failed to hide her stunning chestnut hair that was far too long to be stowed away like this. He recognized her in an instant, confirming what he'd assumed previously.

With a short smile, Cedric nodded in her direction. Even without the small bit of white powder residing on her hand he'd understood that she was the one who helped him escape. Even though she was surely there to support Mel, he thought that she might have also come to support the soft side of Mel that couldn't allow his friends to come to harm.

*I'll do my best to support that wish of yours, too...Selmy.*



Steeling himself, he ran on through the forest's steep terrain, until he reached his destination: a three-sided bluff no smaller than the castle. It was surrounded by a series of high, forested cliffs that led to the northwestern mountains and northeastern wall, where the sound of battle could be heard. The bluff's sloped sides were covered in mounds of dirt and moss, as was its flat, weathered point. Eyeing the small cave-like opening at its base, he gripped the glowing sword.

"My first time here...it's as creepy as I imagined..."

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The white smoke shrouded over the frantic boys as they sat Quentle down in the grass, the sound of clashing swords echoing from the edge of the lake.

"Oy, what do you say we work together starting from here?" Mel's cold voice emerged as he came into view, prompting the boys to open a path from him to Quentle, who glared at him in silence while bandaging his legs by himself.

"Come on, Quentle. The only way Cedric gets out of this alive is with our cooperation. I'm not sure I can keep the Red Wolves from aiming to kill at this point, and the Shlanks being here is completely unexpected. The only way to buy us and Cedric some time is to speed the plan up, pitting them against each other here and now. We can only do that with all of our numbers here, I think."

As the boys looked confusedly back and forth from Mel to Quentle, the bandits appeared at his side.

"Your goal is still the sword, and none of us are going to go along with that," Quentle answered through grit teeth, trying to remain calm.

“Yes, that’s correct. But whether we get it or not, the fact is that Cedric is in danger. Even with the sword, he can’t defend himself against this many. He isn’t Hedric or Velagoras.” Mel’s tone grew louder and sterner as he took another step toward his friend.

“Yeah, you’re right,” Quentle answered with a bitter grimace. “Well, only thing we’ll agree to will be fighting on Cedric’s side. As long as that remains the priority, I’ll cooperate. Sorry guys, we can’t really explain this, just...if you want to help Cedric out, come with me. I’ll understand if you want to turn back.”

The boys nodded hesitantly, one after another. With a pained chuckle, Quentle stood to his feet. “Alright then...”

“We don’t have much time before the confusion fades and they realize he’s already gone,” Mel hurriedly announced. “We should split up, sending a decoy party and a defense party. He’s headed straight for the volcano, so we should try to reconvene there.”

After a brief explanation, the bandits equipped all the boys with good-sized daggers, and Quentle raced out to the right side of the lake, opposite the side Cedric had escaped to. Alongside him were Geraint, Jorge, and Kaolo. The four ran along the forest’s edge, until they reached the opposite side of the circular lake.

“Should we really just run off into the woods?” Kaolo asked dubiously, trailing the group as they ran up the slanted terrain.

“Hell no,” Quentle responded sharply, already breathing heavily. “We’ll go around the side and climb up the volcano. That way, if he comes out at the top, we can help him there.”

“But if we do manage to lure some enemies out to follow us, won’t we just be leading them to him?” Geraint asked, running smoothly as he set the pace for the group.

“Yeah, so we’ll make a stand if we need to,” Quentle responded confidently.

“A-ah, aren’t you worried at all, Quentle?” Jorge followed, having no trouble keeping up with his brother. “We’re up against real live soldiers, here.”

The three boys collectively gulped, but Quentle gave a scoffing laugh. “Of course, I’m not worried! Those guys have probably been fighting all night, and we’re fresh and ready to go. No matter how it shakes down, we just have each other’s backs and we’ll be fine!”

The boys looked down as Quentle fought to keep his bloodied legs moving as fast as theirs, before releasing apprehensive sighs. Kaolo, still in the back of the group, looked back as the smoke began to clear.

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“Stop fighting! Stop fighting! We need to regroup!”

“Pay attention to your surroundings!”

“The boy took off with the sword already!”

As the fog began to clear, some of the soldiers worked to cease the chaotic scuffle that had developed within the smoke.

“Separate yourselves!”

“Backup, Shlanks! You’re outnumbered here, anyway!”

As the two groups began to separate within the light smoke, the young Shlank pulled his comrades in.

“Did any of you see which way he went?”

“Sir, I think I saw him take off in the direction we came.”

“But, I believe I saw someone heading into the forest in the opposite direction.”

“Tch..” The young man looked around, his wild black hair whipping about.

“I’ll go around the long side, then. The rest of you go back the way we came.”

“What? Young master, I cannot allow that! I will go with you!” The older man cried out.

“Whatever, just try to keep up!”

With that, he took off past the recovering Red Wolves, garnering their frantic looks.

“Eh? Did the kid go that way?”

“I dunno, I didn’t see. Did anyone?”

“I thought he went the other way.”

“Look, the rest of the Shlanks are going the other way, too!”

“Let’s follow them!”

“Wait a moment and calm down, fools,” a stern voice sounded from within the group, ceasing their momentary panic.

“You ten go after the young-looking Shlank. The other twenty, follow the rest of them.”

“Got it!”

The man saw the others off, leaving only him and the remaining six Teutons. The smoke cleared as he approached them.

Mel stepped in front of the trembling Farum and Berd, while the bandits stood on either side of him, gripping their daggers.

“I take it you’re the contact... Eraldin, was it?” The tall man inquired, showing neither caution nor hostility in front of the group of six.

“That’s correct,” Mel responded in a low voice.

“Well, I wouldn’t say the mission has failed quite yet, but if we are somehow unable to recover the target, then you may consider yourself the new target, boy. That kid already killed one of my men, and I lost two in the scuffle just then, so you’d better hope I don’t lose any more.”

“Fine with me,” Mel replied. “Just keep to the agreement that you won’t aim to kill him, or any other Teutons, as your superiors should have told you.”

“Hah, how demanding you are, considering your position,” the man grumbled as he took a step forward slowly. As quickly as he had moved, Hastor was in front of him, smiling.

“Now, now... we should just hurry and capture the brat and get this over with, so that it doesn’t have to get *too* ugly...don’t ya think?”

The man glared at Hastor, whose wide-eyed smile bore a certain menace to it as he looked into his eyes before laughing through his nose.

“Lieutenant Suguile, are you coming?” A Red Wolf shouted from ahead. The man turned and trotted after him, never removing his hand from his sheathed sword.

Mel patted the backs of the shaking Farum and Berd. “Come on, let’s go.”

“O-okay,” Farum answered with a look of hesitance.

“Yeah, let’s...go.” Berd followed, clenching his trembling fists.

“Hastor, you go on ahead, please. If he did go to that place, I’d like you to seal the entrance for me.”

“Roger that, partner,” Hastor responded without a care. The three shot into the forest and disappearing from sight. After Mel equipped the bow and quiver Farum had brought, the three boys began their own run, following behind the group of Red Wolves.

As they passed by the forest on the left side of the lake, Mel looked into a certain patch of trees. When he spotted a small white smudge of powder smeared across the base of one the trees, he looked down and let out a long sigh.

\*\*\*

On a long, torchlit balcony protruding from the castle’s highest tower, three men gazed out into the distant forest and beach, which had erupted in smoke and flame.

“Are you certain it’s okay to leave things to a few boys, Valblin?” A stern looking man with glossy black hair asked the old man, brushing his splendid robes aside as he turned his back to the balcony railing.

“Indeed, this is the way we must let things play out, Chief Allen,” Valblin answered, stroking his long beard as he stayed his eyes on the forest.

“I do trust your judgement, but you have to understand my concern,” Allen responded, following his gaze. “If there truly are enemies within the wall, how terrible would it be if our potential Heir was killed, and we lost the sword as well? We could not hope to recover from that, as I’m sure you’re aware.”

“You’re right, the war will be all but lost if this fails,” Valblin answered, narrowing his gaze. “However, if our Heir fails their very first trial, it is over from that point any way. We do not have the time to wait for another Heir; and while I could wield the sword myself, I’m afraid I would be powerless with it. It is a risk, but the fate of the Teutons lies in his hands now.” The old man spoke with only a small trace of his usual playful self.

“I know it’s a lot to ask of you, Chief, and we appreciate your cooperation,” Gambell added with a polite smile.

“Yes, I know,” Allen said as he looked down with a sigh, before directing his gaze back toward the forest. “Though I’m still having a hard time accepting that Melvin Cillavier’s inner circle actually planned something so treasonous. It’s taking everything I’ve got not to have my men drag him out of his house and throw him into the volcano.”

“Believe me, we understand,” Gambell replied firmly, taking his spectacles off and rubbing his temples. “Though, he should show himself for us by the end of this night if our understanding of him is accurate, and we might even be able to pinpoint his co-conspirators as a package deal.”

“Yes, I can only hope so,” Allen said, turning his head back toward the inside of the castle, shadowing his frustration.

“Hoh, but speaking of volcanos...” Valblin added with an excited look.

“Ah, yes, the start of our Heir’s journey,” Gambell followed with an enthusiastic smile of his own. “The treacherous hell that, despite never erupting in our history, has spelled the end of many brave, curious, and foolish Teutons.”

“The beginning of the tour to collect all the relic shards that man spread out, huh?” Allen mused. “What a place to hide the first one, honestly...”

“Hoho, but I can’t think of any better place than the home of our old cyclops neighbor,” Valblin chuckled.

“Shoram, huh?” Gambell added, narrowing his eyes as he gazed out at the last bits of falling red light. “The menace that made the place his own personal castle and earned it a name like the ‘Volcano of Disasters’.”



# Volcano of Disasters

Amidst the battle raging across the northern shoreline, two horsed men faced each other, prompting both armies to form a circle around them. The spectators continued their scrap, but their attention was focused mostly on the tense stand-off between the two men.

Sand scattered as the horses kicked toward each other, and the men prepared their large blades for collision.

The two men took wide swings at each other, their horses stopping in a sidelong skid. The resulting crack drew the attention of anyone nearby that wasn't already watching, as the two heavy swords met and bounced off of one another with tremendous force.

The Teutonic Knight's green cape shook as he reared back to strike again, and the Wolverine general followed suit, his horse's plated bridle cutting through the dusty air. As they struck blades once more, the crowds began to roar out.

"That's it General Persia, take the Teutonic Knight out and it's our win!"

"Go on, General Hydrick, overwhelm him!"

"You have range on him, General!"

"You're stronger than him, General!"

The horses moved swiftly and precisely, allowing the two men to engage continuously, neither gaining an inch on the other.

Outside of the crowd of spectators, a helmetless man led a swift charge of cavalry through the mouth of the Wolverine soldiers nearest the shore, his curved broad blade splitting through one enemy after another. After trading blows with a spearman and receiving a cut across his cheek, he slowed his horse and retreated to the inner section of the charge. This allowed several of his men to take over the lead, while a white and green-vested messenger horseman flagged him down from behind.

“Commander Al, a report! Thanks to your anti-seige unit, the enemy warships are withdrawing from range, which leaves small amounts of incoming infantryman wading through the water, and the cavalry units already in-”

“What’s Hyd doing up there?” Al barked, looking towards the beach’s epicenter. “It’s too chaotic to really see anything.”

“Sir...it seems the enemy General and General Hydrick have engaged in a duel! The battle is beginning to bunch up around them!”

“Ahh dammit Hyd, this early? No wonder I felt the battle swaying toward the center...” Al murmured to himself.

“Yes sir, it seems one of the enemy’s commanders have begun to lead his troops-”

“I know already! This just became a game of encirclement. Whoever takes over the crowd in the middle will trap the enemy general, if the duel hasn’t already been decided.”

“A battle in which the heads of each encircling unit have to fight against the opposing charge’s following line, as well as the middle pack, in order to gain inside superiority,” a long-haired man chimed in on Al’s right.

“That’s right...see messenger, it isn’t our first stroll on the beach” Al answered, a crooked smile beginning to form on his face. “Ultimately, the only way to win inside superiority is to win the clash with the head of the enemy charge enough times to form a full circle of your own, inside of theirs- one thick enough to swarm the center and take out the enemy’s dueler.”

“Hydrick set up a battle tailor-made for our unit’s talent,” Jack added with a cool smirk.

“Heh, you could say that,” Al replied with a beaming grin, thrusting his blade into the air. “ALL MEN, ON ME! WE MAKE FOR THE CENTER OF BATTLE!”

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Deep in the residential district of Castle Town, a slender woman ran down the quiet road, her black jacket and tights matching the shadow of the cherry trees that lined the road. Once she reached a small log cabin, she stopped and took a few breaths before bounding up a set of stairs and pounding on the door, not bothering to fix her disheveled hair.

“Hahh? What is it?” A muffled voice rang from inside the house. The woman simply beat harder on the door, ignoring the weary-sounding man.

“Okay, okay, I’m coming, gees,” he mumbled, before cracking the door open and slowly poking his face out.

“Get out here, Ango,” the woman loudly whispered, winging the door open and dragging the man out by his collar, his jet-black hair flailing about wildly.

“Ahh, what the hell, Tess?” Ango whined, still struggling to fully open his eyes. “I don’t care if you’re my sister, you can’t just drag a government official out of his bed at night-”

“Get your glasses, I need you to come with me,” Tess demanded plainly, staring daggers at his confused face.

“H-huh? What could possibly be going on this late? Do you know how much sleep I’ve gotten this-”

“Be quiet, it’s not my fault you sleep like such a sloth you couldn’t hear the sounds from the forest,” Tess cut in, stepping inside the house herself.

“What? The forest? What are you doing?”

“Here, now let’s go,” she replied as she returned, forcing a pair of spectacles and a long rapier onto the frazzled man.

“Okay, what in the Prince’s name is going on?” he asked desperately, slipping on his spectacles and following her down the stairs despite his confused state. His wrinkled black pants, suspenders, and white buttoned shirt hung loosely as he struggled to slip a pair of black leather shoes on.

“I’m sure you know something about the current Heir situation,” Tess answered with an icy tone, leading him by the arm down onto the road.

“Uh, well, you know that’s-”

“It seems like things are happening quite differently this time around, not like with Al and Hyd.”

“Ah, so that is why Al was so aggressive...so that means the boy from earlier today, or... is that yesterday, now?”

“My friends are in danger, Ango. I need you come with me, and tell me everything you know.”

“Ah, heavens...I don’t even know anything, Tess,” Ango complained, trying to stifle his voice to a whisper.

“Something’s going on with the Eraldin and Cillavier families- you’re saying you don’t know anything, even being around Shae all day?” Her gaze penetrated Ango with a fierce intensity.

“Hmm, well, I honestly didn’t know anything until a few hours ago, but you know it’s extremely confidential information, righ-”

“Ango,” she said as she killed her stride, raising a brow and bearing vicious eyes at him.

“Ah, okay, okay, I’ll tell you, though it’s nothing more than what I’ve gathered from the report from Al and the kid.”

“That’s better. We have some time till we reach the forest, so tell me in detail.” Tess replied with a lighter voice, picking her pace up once more.

“The forest?” Ango asked, stumbling as he evened her pace, “You really expect me to just go with-”

“.....”

Tess gave a sidelong glare that froze the panicked man’s face in fear.

“O-okay, dammit, I’m coming. You know I haven’t fenced in over a year, though, so don’t expect me to just hop into a lopsided battle to cover for some kids, okay?” Ango’s tone lightened and his face relaxed as he began buttoning his shirt while he jogged.

“Don’t worry, I’ll use you as a distraction, if anything,” she said, looking over with a smirk before quickening her pace even further. “I have some firepower of my own, ya know?” She pulled her jacket open to reveal a shorter rapier, as well as belt lined with vials of liquid.

Ango raised a brow and sighed, speeding up to match her stride. The two sets of footsteps clicked down the river-rock road in the quiet night, just as the final remnants of red light floated down, illuminating the cherry trees on the path toward the forest.

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A low growl resounded from the trees around Cedric, who stood at the base of the time-worn volcano, staring into the pitch-black entrance under a low stone archway.

Upon hearing the growl, he slowly turned his head. His eyes widened as he looked upon a dozen scruffy-looking wolves stepping out from beyond the trees, surrounding him.

*Ha...guess I don't have a choice, then.*

*Whatever is in here...whoever is asking me to do this...*

*We'll just have to see where it takes me, huh...*

Holding the sword out in front of him with a tight grip, he turned to face the wolves and began taking slow steps backward.

The wild animals wore bloodlust on their maws as they paced toward him, several stepping closer than the rest before slightly retreating. Finally, the smallest of them leapt forth. Despite Cedric's surprise, he slashed the sword down strongly, cutting into the wolf's neck.

Sensing a collective attack, he turned and darted into the dark entryway, slashing the sword wildly behind him.

He ran into the cave-like base with no sense of space, merely feeling around the dark with his left arm, hoping not to run into anything. Several wolves met the other end of his blind strikes, while few managed to nip at his legs and arms, drawing blood. As the terrain began to slope uphill, he noticed the remaining wolves slow their advance, growling from a distance. With no time wasted he climbed the rocky ascent and squeezed between two large rocks into a torchlit path.

There was no longer any sign of the wolves. Cedric stood catching his breath and feeling his wounds, before surveying the torchlit path- a narrow walkway lined with large boulders on each side. He could see nothing else, aside from the path that lie ahead.

He walked forth without hesitation, gripping the bright red sword tightly. The path continued for several minutes until an end came into view ahead. Some twenty

meters away, there looked to be a dead end, a rocky wall with no entrance nor slope to climb.

As he drew closer, thinking he might have to turn around, a noise came from the path behind him. The sound of fast-approaching, heavy footsteps.

Instinctively, he jumped off the path behind a large boulder, and peered over it carefully. The owner of the heavy footsteps came into view, heading down the path toward the dead end.

Twice his height, the lanky, red-skinned beast ran with vigor. Before it reached the dead end, Cedric barely caught a glimpse of its bald face and head, which looked largely like a human's, with the exception of its lone eye and a horn jutting out from its forehead. Its barbaric visage matched the dirty loincloth it wore around its waist, as well as its sloppy, gangly running form.

The beast ran directly into the stone wall at the end of the path at a low angle. The impact shook the rock Cedric was hiding behind, almost ejecting him from its cover. As he regained himself and looked the beast's way, he barely caught a glimpse of it.

A section of the stone wall had retreated upward, like a sliding door. As the large creature descended into the path it left, the slab of rock sunk back down into the earth with a thud.

Cedric waited a moment, before coming out from behind the rock and scanning the area. The torchlit passage was completely quiet. He walked up to the stone wall and felt it over carefully. On it were several ridges and slopes that would allow leverage to push upward.



Thinking he ought to wait a bit in case the beast was still close by, he leaned his back against the wall, and glanced at the sword. Its red face that, moments before had the word "VOLCANO" etched onto it, now bore no word or symbol.

After several minutes, he took a deep breath. Turning to face the wall as he exhaled, he crouched down low, placing his hands under two of the ridges in the wall. With a heave, he pushed up on the ridges, until the slab began sliding upward. He continued lifting the slab with great effort, until it was raised above his head.

He stepped carefully to the other side of the wall and began guiding the slab back down slowly. It took much of his energy, but he was able to set it down without letting it slam into the rocky ground the way the beast had.

Taking a breath to recover, he eyed the other side of the wall. A rocky, winding uphill path lay before him, slightly illuminated by narrow red walls with magma slowly seeping down them. He immediately felt a difference in the state of the air in this space, as it was much hotter than the first.

Glancing at the sword in his hand, he took careful steps up the path. Thinking the volcano to be inactive, he hadn't expected to see any magma. Despite reflecting on what danger could lie ahead, he continued up the path slowly.

After some time, he began to think there was no end to the path- when another rocky end came into view. He picked up his pace despite the rising temperature and reached the wall, another rocky barrier. He wasted no time in grasping two ridges and lifting the makeshift door upward.

As he raised the door to his shoulder, he heard the previous door slamming into the ground at the bottom of the path he'd just traveled. He froze, sweat dripping down his wide eyes.

*What...?*

*How did that thing get back down there?*

*Or is it...someone else, following me?*

After weaving his head around the slab of rock, Cedric tried to let it down carefully. This time, however, his panic coupled with the sweat permeating his hands, forced his hold on the rock to slip.

It fell to the ground with a thud, much louder than the one he'd just heard below.

"Hah?" A shrill voice from above rang.

Cedric looked up to see another rocky wall, this one much taller with an opening at its top- where the voice came from. He darted across the small new chamber, which branched out into three passageways. Without hesitation, he dove into the middle passageway.

Rolling to a stop, he crouched low against the wall of the pitch-dark passage. The sounds of the beast climbing down, grunting all the way, reached his ears. He held his hand over his mouth, making sure to keep as still as possible. Having seen the size of the beast, he thought it best to avoid a direct confrontation, regardless of the new weapon and confidence he had gained.

A thud sounded, and Cedric held his breath. He could hear the monster breathing roughly, having reached the bottom.

“What a clever thief, having me chase him in the wrong direction so that he can make his escape,” the beast snorted in a raspy voice. Cedric waited a moment before peering slowly out from his hiding spot.

Just as he did, the beast had thrown the stone slab up and darted back down the slope he’d just come up. The slab crashed back down, prompting Cedric to come out from his hiding spot.

As he did, he tried to calm his racing heart and think. The beast had referred to him as a thief. He wondered just what could be considered something worth stealing in this ancient volcano, and if that was what he sought in coming here.

Relaxing his breathing, he stepped up to the steep rocky wall the beast had come from. Its ridges were convenient for climbing, but the potential fall would be crippling.

Nevertheless, Cedric placed his hands on two ridges after wiping them dry and began climbing. Keeping his breathing under control, he kept a steady pace, and before long he’d made it half the distance up.

He stopped for a brief rest, noticing the moisture returning to his palms. Careful not to look down, he took a deep breath with closed eyes, and continued.

*Just keep going. Keep on going. Almost there. Only a bit longer.*

Suddenly, the stone slab made yet another thud down below.

Cedric nearly fell, his hand slipping momentarily. He knew this was the downside of taking his time, but he hadn't expected someone to appear so quickly.

Still, he took care not to look back, and continued at a slightly brisker pace. Nothing happened as he climbed, until he finally reached the top, rolling over onto solid ground as he gasped for air.

He knew he didn't have time to rest as he peered carefully over the edge down below.

"Wait up, partner, I'm right behind ya."

"Bandit," Cedric muttered, glaring down at the cheerful hooded man as he approached the wall.

With even less hesitation than he had, the bandit leapt up the wall, and began climbing deftly, an excited look in his eyes.

Wanting nothing to do with this man, Cedric rose to his feet and started down the new level's path, another winding, uphill tunnel.

As he jogged, the heat became even more prominent. Trying his best to ignore it, he continued, constantly switching sword hands to wipe his palms dry.

Finally, the tunnel came to an opening, this time without a stone slab. It was fortunate, Cedric thought, as he was unsure if he had the strength to keep lifting the heavy rocks.

Now on a flat, wide path that dropped off on either side, Cedric paced himself, staring in marvel at what lay below him.

The path served as a bridge to another tunnel. Beneath the bridge, a pit of magma bubbled ferociously, releasing waves of heat that washed over the bridge and made Cedric feel like he was wading through boiling water.

He simply had to make it to the opposite tunnel for relief. He knew this, but the fifty or so meters he had to trek across the bridge seemed to never shorten as he wobbled down the path, head in disarray. He simply walked on, his eyes drooping while sweat dripped from his arms and legs.

“Oy, slow down a bit, will ya?” A grumbling voice sounded from behind.

Having completely forgotten about the bandit due to the extreme heat, he turned around, almost falling.

“I don’t do well with heat at all, so let’s just call a truce, buddy,” the man whined as he stumbled along the beginning of the bridge, gasping through every other word. His cool and collected style had fallen apart completely, and he had taken off his hood and began loosening his robes while swaying like a felled tree. His steps were no quicker than Cedric’s, which gave him some confidence in moving forward. However, the heat was beginning to drain him, and he felt at any moment that he’d collapse.

“Seriously, let’s work together. I don’t care about grumpy Mel and that sword anymore, I just want to get out of this heat,” he complained, his magnificent golden hair wet and disheveled.

Cedric began chuckling goofily at the pathetic figure of the bandit, his own mind and focus falling apart.

“Come on, kid, slow down, will ya? At this rate that cyclops is gonna catch up to us and grill us both up for a nice Teuton-kabob. Let’s help each other and get out of here. We’ll settle things after that, yeah?”

Cedric simply continued trudging along, still dumbly laughing at the bandit’s worsening state. His head was so light he couldn’t remember what he was even doing at this place. Blinking several times, he looked through blurred vision at the sword in his hands.

The blood smeared on the blade came into focus, stirring the nausea of his past within him.

“That’s right...I... I just killed someone.”

His hands shook as he fixated on the bloodied sword. The two shades of red seemed to shine a light into the pit of his stomach. The blood’s scarlet bore a sharp reminder of the inescapable reality of war and death, while the ruby red glow evoked the anger and will within him to fight.

“That’s right...I did that to survive...to fight this reality.”

“I did it to fight for my home, for my place as a Teuton.”

He felt his posture straighten, his shoulders rise.

“That’s all I have, and I’m fighting to protect it.”

He took a solid step forward.

“That’s right....to do that, I have to get something, here....”

He instinctively gripped the sword, which gave him a strange sense of comfort and worked to clear his vision. The tunnel was just meters away.

“The cyclops.... that’s right, it’s after me.”

Forgetting about the bandit, he focused on the tunnel ahead. As he neared its entrance, the heat slightly subsided.

Finally reaching the inside of the tunnel, he let himself collapse onto the stone floor. The temperature was still high, but it was a steep difference, which allowed him some relief.

The sound of dragging feet drew closer as he began to clear his head. Rubbing his eyes with his index finger and thumb, he slowly rose to his feet and turned to face the approaching bandit.

“Oy, don’t raise your sword like that, I’m serious about working together, yeesh,” the man panted, a pathetic look on his face.

“Just why the hell should I pass up the chance to kill you right now?” Cedric demanded, recalling his anger.

“Because, buddy, that behemoth is on the way to us right now. Even if I can’t use my ropes in this state, you’ll still need my combat ability to fight that thing.” There was no trace of his usual tone, his composure clearly broken.

“Plus, I’ve got water,” he added, taking a gulp out of a flask before offering it to him with a trembling hand.

Sensing that there was no time to doubt him at this point, Cedric stepped to the side. "Fine then, but you go ahead of me. I'm not showing you my back again." He took the flask and dumped its remaining water down his throat in one go before ushering the worn-down bandit on.

The two trekked up another winding tunnel, exchanging no words, before reaching another open chamber with four branching tunnels.

"Hmm, what say we split up and check the two innermost paths?" The bandit asked, his tone slightly livelier than before.

"Works for me," Cedric replied curtly, making for the path on his right. After a short walk, he came to a dead end, decorated with nothing but a small wooden chest. He bent down and slowly unlatched the chest.

Nothing was inside, but as it opened, something rustled frantically behind it. Cedric held out the red sword, which only provided a faint, red glow, to see several ball-shaped rodents scurrying into a crack in the wall.

Furrowing his brow, he lightly kicked the chest aside, revealing a small pile of golden coins, with several cloth bags mixed among them. The sight felled his jaw, even if it was a small pile. Without thinking, he scooped up two bags full of coins and stuffed them in his pockets before turning back.

"Oy, in here!" The bandit's voice rang from down the path he'd taken. Having returned to the main chamber, Cedric hurried after the bandit, his face alight with excitement as a new feeling of adventure came over him.



“This is definitely that beast’s lair, alright,” the bandit declared as Cedric rounded the corner into a heavily torchlit room. The ceiling of the tunnels was quite high, but Cedric regarded this one with wide eyes, thinking the beast he’d seen earlier could stretch its arms without issue in here. The temperature was also much lower, allowing the two a much-needed reprieve.

“Is that its... bed?” Cedric asked, looking upon a pile of rocks nestled in a corner under some sort of large makeshift cloth blanket.

“I guess even a cyclops in a volcano needs a blanket to sleep with,” the bandit remarked with a grin. “Looks like this guy is a big softie.” His tone had loosened significantly. Though not back to what he sounded like before, Cedric took this increase in energy as a warning sign and kept a watchful eye on the man while surveying the rest of the room.

A long, rusty pitchfork lay on the ground nearby. The room’s only other ornaments were several chests lining the walls.

“So, you’re here for something, right? Whatcha think it is, eh?” The bandit asked, turning toward him with a smirk.

“No idea, but I doubt it’s this thing,” Cedric answered, looking at the pitchfork with a brow raised.

“Well, I’d say we have at least some time to look in these chests,” the bandit replied as he approached the nearest chest, “I did leave some bait to slow the big guy down some, after all, hehe.”

Cedric ignored him and continued studying the room. Suddenly, he noticed some movement from the blade of the sword, and quickly looked.

T-h-r-e-e a-r-e t-h-e k-e-y

Careful not to let the bandit notice, Cedric stifled any reaction and turned the blade toward himself to hide the scorched words.

He searched the room carefully for something that could apply to the message on the blade, pondering what three things could be key.

*Or is it...*

*An actual key?*

*But, to what...*

*There!*

On the wall opposite from where the bandit was rummaging through a chest, were three small holes large enough to fit a finger inside. Cedric looked at it intently but hesitated to inspect it further with the bandit in the room.

*Even if we're cooperating right now...*

*Whatever is in there could change things...*

*But...if that's the three, then what does that make the key...*

*Ohhh.*

He knelt down and looked back upon the pitchfork. Indeed, its three prongs were exactly the right size, it seemed.

“Oy, what are you so deep in thought about, over there?” The bandit asked, turning to face him. “You know, if you found something, it’s pointless to-what the...”

“Huh?” Cedric inquired as the bandit shot a concerned look beyond the entrance of the room.

“Oy, get out the way, kid!”

Cedric finally heard the coming footsteps as the words came out and dove to his right.

Because of his timely dive, he managed to avoid the brunt of the beast’s swinging arm, but it still managed to strike his head hard enough to send him rolling into the wall.

Once Cedric regained himself and sat up, the long, towering beast had already grabbed the pitchfork, and was baring down on the bandit with a fierce look in its eye.

“You...dirty...thieving...humans!” It shouted in a raspy voice that sent a shiver down Cedric’s spine.

“Oh, uh, hello there, friend,” the bandit chuckled with narrow eyes, palming his head awkwardly. “We were just visiting, seems you found us before we could surprise you, hehe.”

“You humans...you think I’m stupid, you think I’m slow and you can just prance around stealing my gold...” The beast took a step closer to the bandit.

“Ohh no, not at all!” The bandit, having been caught red-handed, tried to inch away from the chest. “We wouldn’t do that! Come on, won’t you hear us out?”

“Then tell me, why did this treasure treader fall through the cracks down to the lower level?” The beast demanded furiously, holding one of the ball-shaped rodents Cedric had just seen. “I’d left them a nest of gold with a bit of poison for tomorrow’s breakfast, and absolutely nothing would make them escape their nest so desperately they’d fall through the cracks... unless their nest was disturbed.”

“I’m not sure what that means exactly, but neither of us have any-”

The bandit’s plea was cut short by the sound of coins dropping onto the stone floor, spilling one after another from Cedric’s opened pocket.

“Ah...” the two of them sounded in unison, faces frozen.

“Oh, come on, Cedric, what a thing to do in the guy’s own house!”

The bandit’s words of betrayal served as a guilty verdict for Cedric, as the beast turned and darted toward him, full of rage.

“Cooperation my ass, you bastard!” Cedric cried as he dove out of the raging cyclops’ way. The beast crashed into the wall, sparks flying from the pitchfork’s clash against stone.

Cedric rolled to a stop, baring a vicious look at the bandit.

“Well done, partner, now we can fight this thing on even ground,” the man declared heartily, his tone completely back to normal.

Cedric stared at the bandit, and then at the cyclops, his jaw hanging.

The cyclops had collapsed to the ground after its crash, a rope bound to each of its arms, spreading them widely as it lay dazed on its back.

# Red Wolves' Might

By the time Mel, Farum, and Berd arrived on the scene, chaos had already erupted in the treeless flat surrounding the volcano. In front of them, the scuffle between invading groups had re-kindled, while the two female bandits stood afront the volcano's former entrance.

A cloud of dust rose over the pile of rock, the two girls simply standing guard in front of it. Mel gave them a short nod of recognition and ushered the two boys alongside him- moving to circle around the significantly spread-out skirmish's left side.

The Red Wolves had been attempting to take advantage of their numbers by isolating the Shlanks. However, the red-brown clad Shlanks were holding their ground, using their spears to establish range control. Despite their fewer numbers, they were the ones holding the Red Wolves back, preventing them from approaching the collapsed entrance to the volcano.

"They're maintaining defense using their spears, just like Quentle does," Mel remarked as the boys trotted toward the entrance.

"But why would they?" Farum asked slowly.

"They're pinning their hopes on their leader, who chased after Quentle," Berd answered while holding his spectacles firm.

"That's probably it," Mel followed, glancing upward at the volcano's western side- a rugged and multi-layered slope that could be followed to another entrance near

its peak. Despite the dark, the moonlight was shining strongly through the dome. Therefore, he could tell there was no sign of Quentle and the others yet.

“I’m willing to bet that’s where you’ll take them, Quentle,” he muttered, rounding the corner to where the girls were waiting. As they approached the girls, Mel caught the glance of the Red Wolves’ captain, whom he’d just spoken with in the forest. At the rear of the scuffle, he watched the boys with menacing eyes.

“About time you got here,” the livelier twin jabbed. “Thanks to the Shlanks, we haven’t had to do anything but guard the rubble, though.”

“Seems you bandits have done your part so far,” Mel responded with a nod as he readied an arrow into his bow. The other two boys joined alongside him, baring their daggers hesitantly. “We just have to defend this entrance and bet everything on Hastor. It seems the Shlanks are doing the same, thinking that if they stop the Red Wolves, their leader who chased after Quentle will be the one to come out with the sword.”

“So where does that leave the Red Wolves as far as we’re concerned?” Berd asked with a furrowed brow.

“You catch on quick, Berd,” Mel said. “Their captain over there is long past keeping his patience with us, so I don’t think they’ll keep their promise not to harm Cedric or any of us.”

“But will they wait like the Shlanks, or should we worry about them making a break for this entrance?” Berd asked.

“It’s possible they’ll wait for Cedric to potentially exit at the top, which is perfect for us in the case that Hastor wins out, but I don’t think I can even attempt to negotiate that with them at this point,” Mel responded, glancing at the tall Red Wolf leader.

“Because we sealed the entrance, effectively forcing them to comply with us,” Berd responded with a grimace.”

“Exactly right...I got a little greedy,” Mel said in a low tone. “But that just means we have to defend this entrance, like I said. They won’t complain once they have the sword.”

As he said this, the Shlanks were pushed backward by the unrelenting Red Wolves. The smoke and dust began to clear, revealing several holes in the sloped rubble.

“Higher ground is better,” the quieter of the twins mumbled, hopping gracefully up the rocks to a spot above the original entrance.

“Good idea,” Mel responded with a nod as he led the boys onto different patches of rubble. All three of them stood in front of holes in the pile that would allow passage. The other twin perched herself near her sister, the two of them tying their ropes to the butts of their daggers.

The Red Wolves had taken out one Shlank, allowing them to further outnumber several Shlanks who were already beginning to struggle against their attackers.

“Hey...so...if they do wait and Cedric comes out of the entrance up on the side over there...” Farum nervously said, “will we have to fight them off from pursuing him up the side?”

“Assuming he still wants to fight, yeah,” Mel responded, biting his lip. “It seems you two understand, but the best option for Cedric to live is to give up the sword. If he won’t, we need to take it from him ourselves, because the Red Wolves aren’t going to hold back on him...”

Farum and Berd both nodded before looking down to ensure their footing. Mel stood tall in between them, tapping the head of his readied arrow. His greatest concern lay not with what was happening inside the volcano, but with what was going to happen here- whether or not the Red Wolves would attack them.

It was not long before an answer came.

“Get ready!” Mel barked, his face wound tight. Two Red Wolves had suddenly broken away from the Shlank defense and were running directly toward them. Mel noticed Berd and Farum’s faces tensing up, their hands shaking.

“Remember, all we have to do is defend!” he shouted, fighting his own fear. The two glanced at him, wide eyed, before focusing on the attackers.

“Don’t worry about attacking back, just protect yourselves! The girls will have their shot at them if they engage with us, so it’s okay even if they get inside!”

Sensing the boys’ hesitance, Mel gnashed his teeth before continuing.

“This is nothing to falter to! We are top-ranked students, and these men are worn down from fighting all night. Look, these bandits here are raring to go... are we going to allow them to look down on us as Teutons?”

The boys looked in the girls’ direction, before locking eyes themselves.



“Yeah!”

“We can do this!”

As the two men approached, rearing their short swords back, the two boys lunged out of the way, raising their daggers in defense. The blades clashed, but the men were not disturbed on their path, only distracted. While they lunged toward the gaps in the rocks, the girls flung rope toward them.

Mel watched carefully in the middle, ready to fire on the men if they focused their attacks on the boys. To his surprise, bare ropes snatched ahold of their blades. He'd seen them readying ropes to their daggers but had no idea they were hiding yet more rope.

The men dove into the holes, bypassing them. As a result, they lost their blades. Mel watched carefully, but once they had disappeared inside the entrance, they did not come back out.

“Go on, take their blades, you two,” Mel directed with a nod.

“Oh, yeah,” Farum responded, a bit calmer, as the two boys retrieved the loose blades.

“You both did well,” Mel exclaimed, his release-hand trembling from the excitement of the scene.

“It seems like they were told not to aim to kill,” Berd responded, wiping sweaty hair away from his brow.

“I think so,” Mel answered. “At least, as long as we do the same.” He looked back to the girls. “Good call, you two. I was too unsure to make the decision, but I’m glad you kept from initiating the first fatal blow.”

The girls simply nodded, looking to the skirmish in front of them. Another Red Wolf had broken loose toward them. Just meters away, Mel fired his arrow at the ground in front of the man’s feet, forcing him to stagger wildly. Farum and Berd lunged at him as he reeled, forced to raise his short sword in a sloppy defense.

The girls took advantage of the distraction once more, latching onto the man’s blade with their ropes and sending it twirling across the dirt, just in front of Mel, who’d already prepared another arrow.

The man stumbled before turning back and retreating amidst his allies. Mel, beginning to sense an aura of confidence rising from the group of five, smirked.

“As long as we can keep this up, we’ll be fine,” he remarked.

“Yeah, but I wonder how- ah, there they are!”

Berd had spotted them just before Mel. The group of four emerged from the woods, making their way up the side of the volcano with two Shlanks and some ten Red Wolves in tow. As he realized his close friend was leading the way, Mel’s gaze narrowed, and his smirk spread wider.

“Now let’s see what you’ve got, Quentle.”

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Quentle's bloodied legs quivered as he charged up the dirt-covered volcano's side. He looked back to see his three companions right behind him, and their pursuers closing the distance between them. He turned back, scoping out the volcano itself.

In front him, the slope narrowed and winded slightly, exposing a deep drop-off. The volcano's second entrance, another cave-like tunnel, laid some twenty meters ahead. To the right of that, the slope winded once more to the volcano's tilted peak, a rocky mound that pointed toward the top of the surrounding cliff. A good escape into a separated forest, he thought.

"Alright boys, let's make our stand where the path winds!" he shouted with confidence. "We just have to wreak havoc and make sure nobody gets inside that cave! Geraint and Jorge, stagger behind and try to knock off anybody who gets past me!"

"Got it!" The boys said together, gripping their daggers with shaking hands.

"Kaolo, you're the last line of defense, so take that extra dagger I gave you and throw it at em, and if it comes to it just defend yourself and let 'em through!"

"But Quentle, your strong point is defense," Kaolo responded with an eager tone. "Shouldn't you be in the back? I even have two daggers to lead the attack!"

"Nah, that's fine," Quentle responded with a confident smirk as he skidded to a stop at the start of the winding path. "Should work out okay this way, and I wanna take that young looking Shlank head-on."

"Well, alright then, we'll follow your lead," Kaolo responded with a concerned look, taking his position in the back.

“Here they come, hold your ground!” Quentle cried as the young Shlank tore through the dirt between them, regarding him with fierce eyes that were barely exposed by his wild hair.

“Who the hell are you supposed to be?” He barked, thrusting his spear at Quentle with crisp movement. Quick to react, Quentle deflected the spear’s tip with his own and pushed him back with his grounded defensive stance.

“I’m the one who should have gotten the sword, and you’re about to see why,” he responded with fierce eyes of his own.

“That’s where you’re wrong,” the scruffy boy scoffed with rage, “Since I’m the true heir to that sword, the next SHLANK Heir!”

The boy attacked again in a barrage of strikes, which Quentle successfully defended, only accruing minor scratches on his arms. Their spears locked and the two bore down, trying to overpower one another.

“Oy, you’re gonna get squished by those Red Wolves, Shlank Heir.” Quentle muttered, taunting the boy as the red and gold-clad soldiers grew closer.

“Gramps, do it before they get here!” He responded, not taking his eyes off of Quentle.

The older man behind him then turned his back and threw something at the dirt they’d come up. Just like before, Quentle watched as smoke burst forth, clouding the area just as the Red Wolves approached. The smoke engulfed them and drifted up the slope towards the others.

“Young master, they’re coming!” The old man cried out, baring his spear firmly. The boy broke loose from his clash with Quentle and took to the old man’s side.

“Geraint, Jorge, get ready!” Quentle yelled, positioning himself just behind the two Shlanks as the smoke grew thicker. One by one, the Red Wolves came into view, rushing headlong into the waiting defenders.

The Shlanks took out the first two attacking Red Wolves with ease before clashing with two more. Another two appeared from behind them, making for Quentle. Quentle’s arms faltered at the sight of the tall men, his spear feeling heavier than usual.

The men raised their short swords, only a meter away from the frozen boy.

“DUCK!”

Right then, a dagger soared over Quentle’s head, cutting through the smoke on a path to the rightmost man’s face.

*Kaolo!*

Having noticed just in time, the man deflected the dagger. However, the rushed deflection caused the blade to ricochet directly into the other man’s thigh.

The man shrieked, losing his grip on his blade, while the other looked at him in surprise.

That split-second distraction was all Quentle needed to regain himself. With a wide swing he thumped the distracted man on his forehead with his dull spearhead, knocking him unconscious. While the wounded man worked on pulling the thrown

dagger out of his leg, Quentle stepped into a side-jab, jamming the butt of his spear into the man's neck.

The man collapsed, coughing and still grasping at his leg. Quentle grit his teeth and moved back just as two more men appeared from the smoke in front him. He bore down, focusing on his defensive stance, and the men bounced to either side of him after a brief clash.

Quentle looked back to see Geraint and Jorge step forward, intercepting the two. The men thrust their blades vigorously at the boys, but their large frames and strong posture held up, allowing them to defend and draw the fight out.

Quentle quickly refocused as another Red Wolf approached. Thinking there couldn't be any more than two left, he glanced past the incoming attacker to see the two Shlanks fighting off four men.

*That's definitely got to be all of them...*

*We're almost there!*

He dug in, receiving the last attacker with his feet planted wide and his grip strong. The spear tip met the blade, and the two engaged in several back-and-forth blows. Quentle maintained focus on his defense, keeping the attacker on his toes while waiting for an opportunity to counter. However, his attacker persisted, throwing strong strikes one after another. Wincing as his wounded legs began to wane underneath him with each spear thrust, he glanced around as the smoke began to clear.

Geraint and Jorge looked to be getting overpowered. Jorge proceeded to take a few blunt blows to the head and was being pushed toward the edge of the slope,

prompting Geraint to break loose and run to his aid. Geraint's enemy followed suit, with Kaolo right behind him.

A chaotic three-against-two melee ensued, and Quentle could sense disaster. In front of him, the Shlanks had taken out one of their men, but let another break loose toward him.

Desperate, he left his guard open, goading his enemy into an all-or-nothing attack. By sheer luck, he guessed the blade's trajectory and managed to dodge it by a hair, its edge barely slicing his cheek.

The man's attack left him open, while Quentle's arms were unoccupied and ready to counter. With a powerful sweep, he threw the butt of his spear into the man's temple, sending him staggering to the edge. He tried to stop himself, but the weight of the strike, along with the downhill slope, sent him skidding off the edge.

As he fell, the man outstretched his left arm. Quentle had begun to make for the scuffle his friends were currently losing, so through the dissipating smoke he only saw a glimpse of a thin silver line between the man and the edge of the winding path they were on, as if he'd somehow attached a rope to its surface.

At the very moment he saw it, half of the path itself collapsed inward like a landslide. With it, everyone staggered, falling one by one off the edge into a storm of sinking dirt.

Quentle watched in terror as Geraint, Jorge, and Kaolo all descended into the storm along with the Red Wolves. Having barely caught himself, he was able to plant his

feet just beyond the point where the surface caved in. Wide eyed, he looked to see the Red Wolves in front of him, along with the older Shlank, also falling.

The only one left, holding himself still while watching with a grimace as his ally fell, was the younger Shlank. Quentle, speechless, wanted to jump down and ensure his friends' safety. However, when the self-proclaimed Shlank Heir made eye contact with him, he knew all he could do was give the young man, quivering with rage, all of his attention.

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In a candle-lit room within the castle, three men sat around a table, silently observing a map lined with wooden pieces in various formations. The room's double-doors swung open, interrupting their quiet thinking.

"Chief Allen, a report!" a robed man shouted as he barged in.

"What is it?" Allen asked, his eyes still fixated on the map.

"On the northwestern shores, the battlefield has erupted into a sea of flames. It seems likely Commander Giro and his men are..." He stopped, glancing nervously at Valblin and Gambell.

"Continue," Allen said, stone-faced.

"They are likely lost, sir, having taken out the enemy in the process. No scouts have sighted any warships at the site, so the area should be clear for now."



Valblin and Gambell gave each other a sullen look. Allen's lip quivered as he gnashed his teeth.

"Dispatch a small watch to secure the area. My own men."

"Yes, sir."

"And what of Samuel?" Allen asked, regaining his composure.

"Sir, as you expected, the enemy has thrown their largest army at General Samuel's northeastern shores. We're continuing to divert what troops we can to his headquarters, but--"

"How many? And what general?"

"At least forty thousand Wolverines, to General Samuel's twenty thousand. The commander is Faron, the Wolverine's third highest-ranked general. General Samuel is successfully defending the wall, but Faron's men are slowly chipping away at his defenses."

"Faron at the helm of forty thousand..." Allen muttered, lip curled. "What of Hydrick?"

"Sir, General Hydrick's army of ten thousand, along with Commander Al's three thousand, held the advantage over just ten thousand Wolverines, but..."

"The commander?" Allen asked, eyes narrowed.

"It's uncertain right now, but it seems General Hydrick has engaged in a duel with the enemy commander, and Commander Al has entered into a battle of encirclement around them. It's difficult to tell from the reports, but..."

The man gulped, then continued.

“The Commander seems to be losing the battle of encirclement by a wide margin, and the enemy is beginning to smother General Hydrick’s men.”

Gambell dropped the glass he’d been holding, Valblin bowed his head with a deep sigh, and Allen’s face burst with exasperation.

“Al is...losing a battle of encirclement...?” He spat, fists clenched, trying to control his emotion.

“Yes sir, that is all we know at the moment. The battle lines are completely centered around the duel at this point, so-”

“Continue sending garrison and reserves to Samuel, and go as far east as you need to,” Allen said firmly, his expression having returned to its previous state of focus.

“Yes, sir, but...what of General Hydrick?”

“Leave it be. However, have Ogal come here immediately.”

“Yes, sir!” The man shouted while rushing out, shutting the doors behind him.

After a brief silence, Valblin chuckled. “Why disturb your first officer right now, Allen? Surely you wouldn’t think of something as crazy as calling out your off-duty knights before they change shifts, would you?”

“Valblin, I’m sure you’re well aware why I might,” Allen answered, standing to his feet. “Several things are strange here. The last report spoke of the Wolverines pulling ships out of the smallest northwestern battlefield, and now that the battle has ended in stalemate, they aren’t following up with an invasion unit.”

“Yes, the place closest to the forest and volcano,” Valblin answered, clasping his hands. “It would stand to reason that they might want to keep attention away from there right now, perhaps to allow any Red Wolves already in the walls to escape quietly with the sword.”

“Yes, I agree,” Allen said with a nod. “But if we assume their leaders want to direct our attention away from there, we must assume they’ve brought big enough bait to do so.”

“Wouldn’t the forty-thousand against Samuel’s twenty be big enough?” Gambell replied, standing up and pressing his spectacles. “Two battlefields away, at that?”

“You’re right, it should,” Allen responded. “But they allowed it to be known that Faron is heading that army, and it’s well-known that Faron has never led an army of that size. To add to that, he has faced off against Samuel quite often in the last few months to no avail, so they are well aware of our second-ranked General’s strength. They also know we have the option of sending reinforcements from wall garrisons. This setup is just enough to put pressure on him and keep us from directing reinforcements elsewhere.”

“Which brings us to the middle,” Valblin said slowly, remaining seated.

“Indeed. The middle is always crucial, even with the distance between battlefields. Here they’ve only sent ten-thousand, yet they’ve hidden the identity of their commander. And now, they’re outdoing two of our most promising commanders. Hydrick, for one, has a very keen sense for the overall flow of battle. I don’t believe he would thrust himself into a duel without confidence in the direction of battle around him.... unless...” Allen stopped, stepping away from the table.

“The one in command is Pursia,” Valblin followed.

“Yes, their second highest ranking General would be a reason to put everything on the line, for Hydrick. He’s been living with the mistake of letting him get away six years ago, when Pursia was stupid enough to break into the walls on his own. I’d imagine both of them feel they have a score to settle.”

“But that isn’t it, is it?” Gambell hurriedly asked, slamming his fist onto the table. “It’s Al losing the encirclement, right?”

“You’re absolutely correct,” Allen replied, narrowing his eyes and pursing his lips. “Al, with his elite cavalry unit of 3,000, is not one to lose that kind of brute force battle- in fact he’s never come out of an encirclement battle without crushing his enemy. So, for him to be losing, especially leaving his best friend vulnerable, I can think of no one else...”

“You believe they are so sensitive to timing and information, do you?” Valblin said, finally standing from his seat with a serious look.

“Yes, I do. They know the castle isn’t far from the northern shore, so they probably even considered the time it would take for us to realize it. By the time we send anyone there, they’ll have killed Hydrick and fled to Faron’s army for safety. That must be their goal, at least.” Allen turned his back to the men as he finished his speech.

“Hoho, a heavy weight to place on the young commanders, wouldn’t you say, Chief?” Valblin said, a mix of humor and aggression in his voice.

“Like the Chief said, Master, there isn’t enough time to send anybody,” Gambell cut in, wearing a frustrated look. “They’re my former students too, so I’m also worried. But we need to believe in those two, just as we believe in the boys.”

“You aren’t wrong, Gambell,” Valblin replied softly, crossing his arms. “However, the scale and odds are much different with actual war, and most importantly, the boys have the Heir amongst them. The influence of the Heir’s Will is something I can put more trust in than the wills of two who failed to be the Heir.”

“Master, you know... you put too much stock into the Teuton Will,” Gambell responded, prompting Allen to turn his head back, brow raised. Valblin, however, narrowed his gaze and hung his head.

“You know as well as I do how much those two gave to try and live up to your expectations,” Gambell continued. “The Teuton Will is sacred, yes, especially that of the Heir. But just because they are young, and their Teuton Will was not strong enough for them to be the Heir, does not mean that we should hesitate to have faith in their own will to fight for their people.”

“Mm, you are right, I have seen just how exceptional their will is,” Valblin answered earnestly, before turning his gaze to Allen. “But, Allen, I assume you have something in mind?”

“Yes, I do.” Allen answered with a short nod. “Half of the states touted ‘100 Teutonic Knights are stationed on this side of the mountains, and under my command. Of those fifty, twenty-four are out leading patrols. If we take the twenty-five currently off-duty, along with my three-hundred personal reserves, we might be able to make it in time.”

“But the 100 Knights are last resort forces for the purpose of protecting royalty,” Gambell cut in with an inquisitive stare. “Only the King can approve their deployment in battle.”

“Yes, I’ll have Ogal take care of the King,” Allen replied, gripping the door handle. “But this is an opportunity we cannot pass up.” He paused, before continuing. “Will you two come with me? After all, we have in front of us the opportunity to end the war tonight.”

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In the heart of the battle on the northern shores, Hydrick sensed the pressure closing in on him. His opponent, Pursia, had begun to overwhelm him with his balanced attack- using his long range and unorthodox strikes. His long-sword had successfully struck deep into Hydrick’s armor in several places. Feeling the weight of these blows, Hydrick began breathing heavier breaths, his broad-sword also feeling heavier with every thrust.

Hydrick glanced around as their dueling ground began shrinking more, the battle lines becoming more chaotic. He could tell the pressure was coming from his side of the dueling ground, the soldiers being thrust around in powerful waves the likes he’d never seen before.

*They’re pushing hard toward me...eating through my men...*

*This armor is getting heavier...*

*My vision is starting...to fade...*

*What’s happening out there, Al?*

*This is our chance to win a huge battle against a top ranked...*

*Wait...*

*Al wouldn't lose this kind of battle to just anyone...*

*That means, that on this very battlefield...*

*It can't be.*

*That man...he's made his appearance, finally!*

*In my eight years as a soldier, he's not shown his face on the battlefield once...*

*I finally have the chance I've been waiting for all this time.*

*I have to hold out here.*

*I have to hurry and regain control over the lines, before it's too late!*

*Al, you have to realize it too! This is an unbelievable chance!*

"You seem to be focused elsewhere, Knight," Pursia called out, his voice seething. "I had thought our duel was brought on by mutual respect for each other's skill, but if your will to honor the warrior's code has wavered this easily then I'll just go ahead and kill you quickly."

The man's large figure pulled his attention back in by force, his and his horse's eyes searing into him.

"No," Hydrick replied, his voice echoing within his helmet.

*He's right.*

*Right now, he's the only obstacle in front of me.*

“My will has nothing to do with honoring any code. I’ll show you... that what I fight for is something much more important than that.”

He charged forward, prompting Pursia to follow. Neither man wavered as their blades clashed furiously. As a result, their horses collided, throwing both of them to the earth.

The sound of their powerful clash of iron reverberated through the battle lines, as far out as the two raging heads leading the battle of encirclement.

Al looked up at the piercing sound, just as his main line crossed paths with the enemy’s main line, some thirty meters inward. Until now, the enemy’s leader had hidden himself as he relentlessly gained inner superiority in the encirclement, but at the sound of the clash, he too looked up.

Al’s attention shifted to the man leading the charge, finally revealing himself in an upright position. Aside from the strong vibration from the center of battle, all sound seemed to fade out at that moment.

The man he looked upon wore modest armor and no helmet, revealing curly black hair. On top of that, his build, long arms, and long red spear were unmistakable.

“Jack, come up here with me!” He shouted as their circular path continued.

“What is it, Al?” Jack asked, bringing his horse next to Al’s.

“The next time we take the front position, we’re breaking the encirclement and shooting in the gap between the tail and the head.”

“What? Why now?”



“Because...the head of this snake...is the one and only head of the snake of the entire Wolverine army,” Al answered, his eyes alit.

“W-what...did you...” Jack stuttered, his jaw hanging. Al nodded back at him with a fiery grin, moving ahead in the group.

“RIDERS IN THE LEAD, PRESS THROUGH THE BATTLE LINES AND MAKE FOR THE ENEMY HEAD ON THE NEXT CIRCLE! RIGHT IN FRONT OF US IS THE WOLVERINES' COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF, GENERAL SHUANT HIMSELF!!!”

# Al and Hydrick

Two black-clad siblings raced through the forest, fatigue showing amidst their worried expressions.

“Well, Sis, why do you think they weren’t at the lake?” Ango asked, brow furrowed and hair bouncing around wildly.

“I don’t know, but we’ll just have to keep following the tracks,” Tess answered, intensely eying the path ahead.

“Whatever the case, do you really think those kids are still fighting?”

“There’s no way they aren’t,” she responded. “Like Al and Hyd, those boys have some indomitable wills about them.”

“Al and Hyd, huh...” Ango remarked, his gaze narrowing.

“Yeah,” she answered with a solemn tone. “The boys have had the same look in their eyes lately that those two had nine years ago. Every time I see them, it reminds me of how those two acted back then.”

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A seventeen-year-old Tess stood beside her twin brother, whose messy black hair contrasted her sharp-cut bangs.

The door at the end of the hallway they stood in swung open, and out of it walked a thin, lanky boy with broad shoulders and brilliant long, blond hair.

“Hey, you two waited for me?” he asked with an energetic smile.

“Yeah, but what were you doing in Valblin’s room?” Tess inquired with a dubious look.

“Oh, it’s nothing much,” he answered, walking ahead of them down the hall.

“Just...what would you say if I told you I’m an Heir candidate?”

“What?” Tess asked, her faze frozen with shock. Hydrick answered her with a playful smirk.

“You...you’re actually serious?” Ango demanded, his face contorted.

“He just told me,” he responded with a lighthearted chuckle. “Apparently the chances aren’t that high that it could be any of us, but he says I’ve shown ‘appropriate perseverance’ in my training. That and it seems we’re in need of some positivity with the way the war is going.”

“That Valblin doesn’t hold anything back, does he...” Ango said with a sigh.

“True, but I’d rather him be honest with me,” Hydrick answered, scratching his head modestly. “It’s something I need if I want to succeed.”

“But that...” Tess muttered, stopping in her tracks. “That’s so great, Hyd. I can only imagine how happy Hedric would be to hear that. You really are chasing after him, aren’t you...”? Her soft voice quivered as she turned toward him wearing a sweet smile, tears welling up in her eyes.

“I told you, I always will be,” he replied, giving her a warm smile in return.

“How cute,” Ango blurted out, walking ahead of them. “Anyway, how is it going to be settled? And who are the other candidates?”

“Oh, that,” Hydrick answered, awkwardly turning away from a blushing Tess. “That’s the one thing he’s not talking-”

“The one thing he won’t talk about is how we’ll decide who it is,” a spry voice sounded from around the hall’s upcoming corner.

“I don’t think we’ve met yet, Hydrick. The name’s Al.” The lively boy appeared in front of them, his thin stature and worn-down uniform giving him an unassuming air, despite his charismatic smirk.

“Ah, Al, another of the candidates- it’s a pleasure to meet you,” Hydrick answered sincerely, reaching his hand out. Al extended his own hand, giving a short chuckle as the two clasped hands firmly.

“That is the problem, isn’t it?” Al said, gripping his chin with one hand. “We have a month to prepare, but we don’t even know what kind of exam we’re studying for.”

“Yes, it is a bit unnerving, isn’t it?” Hydrick replied with a light chuckle. “Ah, these twins here are Tess and Ango, by the way.”

“He’d really leave that kind of thing to your imagination?” Tess added open-mouthed, regarding Al as if a proper introduction wasn’t needed.

“He’s a real sadistic old bastard, ain’t he?” Al answered her with a playful grin.

“What do ya say we try and figure it out together, huh Hyd?”

“H-huh, Hyd?” Ango inquired, wearing a puzzled look. “That’s what we call him. How’d you know about that?”

“Huh, I just thought of it actually,” the boy cheerfully responded, scratching his head.

“You-you must be a genius, then!” Ango exclaimed, awkwardly pressing his glasses.

“Don’t worry about him, he’s always like this,” Tess followed, incurring a gasp from her brother.

“Ha-ha, but yes, I would like to train together, if you’re willing,” Hydrick cut in with a grin before shifting his gaze out the window. “All the better if we can confirm what it is that we’re working toward.”

“But, isn’t a bit weird for you two to work together?” Ango asked, crossing his arms and tilting his head. “I mean, you don’t know how you’ll even be competing, right? Wouldn’t it be best to keep to yourselves?”

“It really would, at least for the son of the esteemed Valor family, here,” a new voice answered.

The group turned to see a boy strutting toward them from behind Al. His feathered strawberry-blonde hair and well-kept uniform matched his obnoxious smirk remarkably well, prompting Tess to scoff at his appearance.

“Ah, Shae,” Hydrick regarded him without expression.

“I mean, it’s one thing to hang around children of mere castle attendants,” the arrogant boy continued, “but to work together with a lowly village commoner on something like the Heirship, it’s a bit disgraceful.”

A shadow came over Al’s face briefly upon hearing his words, before he looked him in the eyes with the same energetic grin.

“You must be the Cillavier boy, the final candidate, eh?”

“That’s right,” he answered, purposefully avoiding Al’s gaze. “Of course, it’s a farce of a race, whatever the test may be. You do understand you’re up against two high nobles, right? This one here is the brother of the late Sword Heir himself, and his family is even closely related to royalty. Of course, my father was the highest ranking general at the time Sword Heir Hedric died and retired as such.”

“You...you really think you can compare your father with the hero of the Molusht War?” Tess demanded angrily.

“That hero was killed by his own ally before the war ever ended,” Shae responded, sneering. “Besides, he wasn’t the only hero of that war. Shuant himself could be considered a hero in the story, and my father was just as crucial to our victory as either of them. Not only that, but he drove Shuant’s forces away that day, and brought our ships home safely. Bearing that legacy, I-”

“Who cares?” Al cut in, the corner of his lip curled in confusion. “Am I missing something? I don’t get what any of that has to do with us?”

Tess and Ango snorted with laughter, while Hydrick chuckled through his nose and Shae's face wore a mixture of shock and disgust.

"He's right, Shae," Hydrick followed, taking a step forward. "We are not our fathers, or our brothers. Neither are we our family name, or the legacy behind them. We are simply ourselves, and our legacy is written from where we stand today. That's why, if Al here became the Heir, it would be due to his being the best man for it, not because of any status."

Al smirked, nodding at his words, while Tess and Ango grinned in admiration. Shae, still dumfounded, recovered quickly.

"Whatever you say, Valor. It isn't as if I much care about being the Heir anyway. You two can train together all you want, and I'll be there to laugh in your faces if I win with half as much effort simply because of my family's superior Will."

With that, he sneered as he walked past them down the hallway. The four laughed together, and continued talking until three boys appeared down the hall, calling for Al.

"Oy, Jack, Galgi, Ralin! There ya are!" Al began trotting toward them, before stopping to turn around.

"I look forward to our partnership, Hyd. See you three later!" He exchanged waves with the three and joined his friends with a big grin.

"You got lost, didn't you?"

"No, Jack, I didn't get lost!"

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“And they actually did train together that whole month,” Ango recalled as the two continued their run through the forest.

“Yes,” Tess replied, her gaze narrowed. “You weren’t around much for it with your studies increasing, but those two put themselves through hell at the behest of Valblin. Constant drills, followed by sparring, followed by even more grueling drills. Something within Hyd changed during that month. Probably Al too.”

“But they became good friends through the process, also,” Ango responded.

“They really did. So much so that I got a little jealous, admittedly. But the day they found out what they were fighting for... it was just like how the boys have been the past few days. Once he told them it’d be a single test to try and pull the red sword, and with one day’s notice...they both suddenly avoided making eye contact and went home to prepare on their own.”

“I wonder what it was about drawing the sword that did that to them, though,” Ango inquired.

“I’m not sure. Maybe because it was something so simple, something that would potentially have nothing to do with their training, and more to do with the things Shae talked about. Because of their uncertainty, those two let the pressure cloud their eyes over completely. And there wasn’t anything I could say to them, either. So, when dawn broke the next day, I hid in the trees as the three of them silently rowed toward the small island...”

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The three boys rowed their small raft through the slightly foggy waters leading to the small island where the sword lay. Valblin stood with clasped hands on the perimeter of the lake, watching their tense interaction as they stepped onto the patch of land, never making eye contact with one another.

Tess watched with bated breath as Hydrick stepped forward first, removing his hooded green coat and taking a deep breath. He placed his hands on the fine hilt of the daunting red sword and used his whole body in an attempt to launch it skyward.

By the time his low roar ceased, it had been ten seconds, and the sword hadn't budged. Hydrick slowly removed his hands, his head hanging. He then turned around slowly, finally showing his face.

Tess gasped. Despite his failure, his eyes were wide, and he stared eagerly at his hands as he walked away from the sword. He never turned back to see Shae make his attempt, which ended just as quickly as it started.

Shae Cillavier still wore his careless smirk as he walked back, taking a seat on the small raft.

Al stepped up to the sword, which prompted Hydrick to turn around. With a shrill battle cry, the boy thrust upward, but to no avail. After ten seconds, he fell back onto his butt, panting. When he turned around, Tess' mouth found itself agape once more.

He looked back at Valblin, together with Hydrick, wearing the same wide-eyed stare. Their hands trembled in anticipation, until Valblin gradually raised one finger in the air.

“One more try,” Tess muttered, shocked.

Confirming her guess, Hydrick walked back up to the sword, fists clenched, and tried again. Nothing.

Al followed, and failed once more. The two of them again looked back at Valblin, who merely nodded.

They tried again, each taking longer this time. Another failure. When they looked back, Valblin was sitting calmly in the grass, legs and arms crossed, watching patiently.

Tess watched on as they repeated their failed attempts with desperate cries and marred hands, until the total had reached twenty. Tears began trickling down her cheeks as she watched Hydrick struggle for a twenty-first time, his voice cracking as he craned his neck skyward, mouth trembling in frustration and despair.

She suddenly realized how much he resembled his brother, Hedric. A distant memory of the two of them hiding in the trees, watching Hedric practice vigorously with the same red sword, flowed through her head, prompting the tears to pour out.

*“Wow, Hyd, you were right! Your brother really is amazing!”*

*“That’s right, he’s the strongest in all of the dome!”*

*“He has to be the strongest! Say Hyd, doesn’t he make you want to chase after him with all you’ve got?”*

*“Yeah, he does! I will chase after him, and one day we’ll stand and fight together as equals!”*

*"That would be so great! You have to reach him, and become my hero, Hyd!"*

*"Yeah, I will! I promise!"*

And then came the memory on the beach. Torches illuminated the many solemn faces of Teutons lining the shore as they watched the splendid robes of a Teutonic Knight burn atop a great pedestal. The young girl dashed through the crowd toward the sound of wailing, before finding and embracing the small blond boy as he sobbed.

*"Teeeesss! What do I do now?! He's goooooone!"*

*"Hyd...uwahhh..Hyd!!"*

*"I don't know what I should do, Tess! Please, help me!!"*

*"Hyd...don't stop... promise me you won't ever stop..."*

*"Pleeease!"*

*"Don't ever stop chasing after him, Hyd! Ever!"*

*"O-okay!!"*

"HYDRICK!" Tess suddenly shouted out across the lake, leaping from the tree she was hiding in. His fierce gaze shot in her direction.

"You are not your brother! You only need to be you, so write your legacy from where you stand today! It doesn't matter how you chase after him! You don't have to be the Heir! As long as you chase after him in your own way, YOU'LL ALWAYS BE MY HERO!"

Hydrick smiled and closed his eyes. After a short breath, he opened his eyes, revealing a furious glare which bore down on the sword he grasped. With a momentous roar, he pulled the sword with every fiber of strength he had.

As if he'd broken through some barrier, the sword slid upward several inches, lighting everyone's faces with shock. Valblin even stood with wide eyes.

However, it stopped there, as did Hydrick's strength. His legs crumpled beneath him, and he leaned his arms on the hilt of the sealed sword in silence. After nearly a minute, he finally stood up to his feet, and walked toward the raft, a calm expression on his face.

"Heh, now it's my turn for one last try!" Al wasted no time in waltzing up to the sword and throwing his every effort into pulling it with an even stronger battle cry. Miraculously, it budged several more inches. Valblin nearly teetered over into the water as he watched with anticipation.

However, it too stopped. Al fell back once more, and upon catching his breath, returned to the raft with a weak chuckle.

"Hoho, what a remarkable thing you have caused, young Tess," Valblin exclaimed, stepping toward her with a wide grin.

"Huh?" She asked, still frozen from the shock of the display.

"Never have I seen someone who was not an Heir, manage to move a sealed sword by even the slightest fraction. I did not expect them to succeed despite their efforts, but I never could have imagined they would go this far to try and prove me wrong. And I think they wouldn't have done so if it wasn't for you being here, hoho."



Tess blinked at his response, and once she regained herself, she answered him with a deep scowl before trudging back into the forest and waiting for the two boys.

The two silently walked into the forest together, a glint of contentment shining in their downcast faces. Before they saw her coming, Tess threw herself in between both of them, pulling them tightly together. She didn't say a word, and continued holding them tight, prompting Al to laugh awkwardly.

Hydrick also chuckled through his nose, gripping Al's shoulder affectionately. As he caught the scent of Tess' hair, he recalled their embrace that night on the beach, as well as the promise they made as children. A lone tear trickled down his cheek and fell into his warm smile, as he nestled his head gently into hers.

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Fueled by the strong memories given to him by Al, Tess and his brother Hedric, the knight pushed through Pursia's unrelenting attacks, delivering one crushing blow after another.

Pursia met the attacks with equal force and utilized his blade's longer range to angle out and chip through the knight's armor with precise counters. However, Hydrick pressed on, fighting his way inside the Red Wolf General's range. Loading up and roaring out, he delivered his strongest blow yet, Pursia responding in kind.

The two swords clashed, grinding piercingly against each other. The men struggled to push the other back, their heels digging into the sand, until the tension broke and the swords finally slid apart. In that moment, while their blades seemingly glided away from them, they both reared their right arms back.



Their fists crashed simultaneously into each other's helmet with force enough to send the headwear flying back. The crumpled helmets rolled to a stop while the two men recovered their posture, glaring fiercely into each other's eyes.

"Your head and neck...you aren't near as big as that armor or your strength make you out to be," Pursia groaned in a deep voice, ignoring the sweat dripping down his disheveled brown hair and fiery red eyes.

"That's exactly why strength isn't measured in attributes," Hydrick answered, his sweat-matted long blond hair shaking with his every breath.

"Maybe so, but your elder brother was aided by his great physique. I can tell that you, on the other hand, have not become any stronger than you were six years ago on the day you managed to overpower me."

"I may not have grown in stature..." Hydrick answered, slowly removing his upper body armor and torn cape to reveal his thin, gangly torso and arms. "But as I said before, you do not know the measure of my strength," he continued with higher volume, raising his sword at his enemy.

"Then let's see if one of us will measure higher before we run out of time," Pursia said with a short smile, tossing aside his own upper body armor and raising his sword in turn.

The crowd of soldiers surrounding the duel were being pushed further inward, closer to the fighters. As their blades met, however, the crowd's attention was shifting elsewhere.

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“IT’S HERE! CHARGE INTO THE GAP!!” Al roared at his men, fire in his eyes as he led them into the thick of the chaotic battle lines.

Changing course so suddenly, the horsed men were forced to grind through dense lines of soldiers. Hundreds of blades churned as they fought to cut off the path of the approaching enemy head.

Al felt like he was sifting through mud as the thicket of soldiers swarmed their charge from all sides. However, he continued hacking a path forward using his great curved Dao broadsword.

“Come men, we’ve never met an enemy we couldn’t cut a path into! The goal lies ahead! Glory lies at the head of the enemy charge! DEVOUR THESE MEN AND HAVE YOUR GLORY!”

The sound of the cavalry stampede intensified as the men roared out, tearing through the enemy lines and spreading flesh and blood in their wake.

Al found his goal in sight and made the final adjustment toward it, cutting through three enemies at the same time. The last few lines of soldiers opened up just as the enemy head streaked by.

The curly-headed general looked into Al’s eyes with a blank expression, as if calmly waiting for Al to make his move- unperturbed by the collision course they were on.

With a heave, Al threw his heavy blade directly at the general’s horse. As it found its home in the horse’s chest, the general briskly leapt into the air. Al’s horse crashed into his, creating a chain reaction as the two opposing charges imploded into

one another. The curly-headed man disappeared amidst the chaos as soldier and horse alike scattered into bloody piles.

Al immediately crashed into the ground, flung far from his horse. As bodies rolled in layers above him, he spat dirt out of his mouth and fought his way through the pile and back to his feet, blood trickling from his head and neck.

The area around him looked like the aftermath of an explosion. Dust and dirt spread over hundreds of felled horses as the surviving combatants re-formed into messy skirmishes.

The dust cleared around Al, revealing an approaching figure. The curly-haired general trotted toward him, twirling his long red spear loosely. The spring in his step impelled the notion that he had come out of the devastating collision completely unscathed. As his face came into view, that notion was made clear.

“You must be 3,000 Man Commander Al,” Shuant said with a smirk, his deep voice laced with amusement.

“You made a mistake in coming here, Shuant,” Al responded, voice quivering with anticipation as he stepped forward.

“On the contrary... you weren’t the target tonight, but your spirit does make you a worthy kill,” the tall man replied with an unnervingly calm expression as he cut the distance down to several meters.

His spear rose slowly, almost hypnotically as he approached. Al withdrew his dual blades from his back, eyes brimming with excitement.

*I couldn't have asked for a better chance than this...*

*Everything started with this man...he's behind everything...*

*Hydrick's brother... the war itself...*

*If I kill him here, I'll end it!*

*To do that...I don't care if I have to- what?!*

In that instant, Shuant dashed at him, erasing the distance faster than Al could comprehend. He was only barely able to react to the spear, thrust in a blur straight toward his face. Gritting his teeth in a panicked response, he crossed his blades in defense, just in time to curve the trajectory of the spear. However, his deflection was only enough to prevent a fatal blow, and the spear tip sliced through his eyebrow and temple.

Shuant then swung the opposite edge of the spear in low, cutting cleanly into his abdomen plating and breaking skin before Al could jump back.

The onslaught did not stop there. The man calmly danced around Al, forcing him to parry his incessant spear jabs with all the effort he had. Through continued, intense focus and effort he gained a brief respite, deflecting both ends of the spear with either blade. His body screaming at the chance, he lunged forward aggressively.

Swinging viciously, Al aimed a flurry of strikes at Shuant's torso. His body whirled in and out of strikes, deftly avoiding Al's wild swings while using both spear-ends to deflect before poisoning to counter the second Al showed an opening.

Fatigued by the heavy output of energy along with his wounds, Al was once again just able to see the attack coming. An effortless diagonal strike threaded between

both of his blades and sliced across his forehead and over his right eyelid. He staggered back, wincing as another relentless flurry of jabs came.

This time, Shuant's movements became even harder to predict. He controlled the pace, effortlessly pushing Al into other scuffles and attacking in blind spots created by them. After landing several grazing jabs and blunt blows to Al's head and torso, Shuant eventually shrunk into the crowd. Al shook off the attacks and made chase, his vision blurred by the blood pouring from his head.

*What...is this man...*

*I'm...completely at his mercy...*

*This trance he's putting me in...*

*The way he melts into the battlefield before striking like a praying viper...*

*It's like... he's an actual god of war!*

Like a viper the man emerged from the crowd, tucking his spear horizontally to his chest. Before Al could respond, he darted in, outstretching his arms in one swift motion. The core of the brass spear crashed into his windpipe, knocking him back. Al attempted to throw his left arm out to counter, but his blade was sidestepped, and his arm consequently locked between Shuant's coiled right arm and his spear.

Helpless to react, Al watched as his arm was jerked away from him with a sharp popping sound. Releasing the dislocated arm, Shuant spun to his right, simultaneously deflecting Al's desperate right-handed attack and knocking away his left-handed blade

with either of his spear tips. In the same spinning motion he performed a swift front kick to Al's chest, finally putting the Teuton on his backside.

With only adrenaline left to compel his body to move, Al rolled to his side and crawled to a knee, his left arm dragging limply. Gasping for air, he attempted to wipe the pouring blood away from his eyes.

*I'm...completely outmatched...*

*This was a fool's task...thinking I could beat him...*

*Dammit...dammit...*

*There's no doubt...this man is the strongest under the dome!*

Al gnashed his teeth as he looked up at the intimidating figure, whose dark curly hair hung ominously over his eyes and shadowed his short smirk.

*But still...*

*I won't allow myself to die here.*

*Not after everything...*

He slowly rose to his feet, blood coating his drooped face.

*Not after Valblin gave me the chance to rise out of the village slums and become something...*

He wiped the blood from his face with his right arm, before grasping onto his hanging left arm.

*Not after that brave boy saved me and gave me a second chance at life...*

Exhaling into a muffled cry, he forced his arm back into his shoulder.

*There's no way I'll allow myself to die here, without making something of myself!*

Gripping his lone blade with both hands, he stepped forward, prompting Shuant to advance in response.

*At least, not without taking this piece of shit with me!*

Al lunged forward, raising his blade high as the two men cut the distance between them.

“ALL TEUTONS, ON ME!” Al shouted at the top of his lungs, stopping in his tracks. Shuant stopped as well, his eyes growing wide in surprise for the first time.

“THE ONE AND ONLY GENERAL SHUANT IS RIGHT HERE IN FRONT OF ME!” He continued shouting, face wrought in anguish as the scattered battlefield around them began to stir, shifting its focus in their direction.

“HEAR ME, TEUTONS. THIS MAN’S HEAD HAS EQUAL VALUE TO THE WOLVERINE KING HIMSELF, IF YOU KILL HIM HERE THE WAR IS OVER TONIGHT. FORM UP AND FOLLOW THE SOUND OF MY VOICE!”

Shuant glanced around as the roused battlefield began to turn its attention toward them. Al rushed over and retrieved his lost blade, before charging once more toward the general while he seemed to be contemplating his options.

Al whipped both blades furiously at Shuant, who reacted just in time. Blocking the blades with a horizontal spear hold, he curled his lip at Al.

“You were smart to take the easy way out, commander,” he said, voice tinged with a mixture of satisfaction and frustration. He directed several final strikes at Al, his killing intent stronger than before. This time, though, Al had confidence in knowing the momentum was on his side as his soldiers flocked toward them. With ease he deflected the strikes and stood his ground, a haze of blood falling with each exhalation.

“It seems both of you may live to see another battlefield,” Shuant continued, turning his body toward an incoming Wolverine horseman. “Though I wonder, how many more battlefields will this war, and your people, last? You won’t get another chance to take a head like mine, 3,000 Man Commander Al...not in your lifetime.”

With that, he leapt onto a vacant horse lead by his ally and hastily retreated into the thick of soldiers.

“Al, get on!” The voice of Al’s Lieutenant, Jack, rang from behind. He turned to see Jack leading a vacant horse toward him as well, along with a group of his men.

“Well done, Jack!” Al shouted, climbing the horse as it galloped, and following after Shuant’s group. Teutons and Wolverines alike swarmed in droves toward them, reforming their lines to either make chase or defend the retreating general.

“The battlefield is shifting entirely toward Shuant,” Jack declared, taking the leading position and advancing forward. “We might be able to come out of this victorious by pressuring him to retreat, so we could send a group after him as a diversion while we recover Hydrick. What are your orders?”

“You’re exactly right,” Al answered, pushing the pace. “He knows that too, though, so the only way we’ll make him retreat is by going all out in pursuit. Besides, he

might have something planned to turn this back on us. The man can't be underestimated, so it's got to be every man in full pursuit. We'll have to trust Hyd to look after himself."

Jack nodded hesitantly as Al pushed his horse to full speed, taking lead of the charge. "AL AND HYDRICK ARMIES, EVERYBODY ON ME! WE'LL TAKE SHUANT'S HEAD HERE AND NOW!!!"

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At the heart of the dueling grounds, the two generals traded blow for blow in quick succession, neither giving up any ground to the other.

Suddenly, the battle lines that had been caving in around them began to shift outward, and the cries of the respective armies began to change.

"Wolverines, form on me and make for the retreating general!"

"Teutons, make chase and take out all retreating enemies!"

"Elite units of Pursia, hold your lines until the general is recovered!"

"Re-form around General Hydrick!"

Finally, the two generals ceased their exchange and looked around them. The lines that remained were exploding in chaos, fighting each other in their attempt to rally around their leaders. The difference in numbers became evident as the Teutons were forced to fight their way to their general.

"General Pursia, come with me!" A horsed Red Wolf shouted as he emerged from the chaos with a vacant horse. "We must aid the General!"



“General Hydrick, hold on!” A voice resounded in the distance. Hydrick identified the owner of the voice as his Lieutenant, Kenick, who was busy fighting through a gorge of swarming Wolverines. He glanced back as Pursia mounted his horse, tossing him one last look of disdain before pulling away with his small group. Meeting his gaze, he offered a firm stare of his own.

*We'll settle this when the time comes, Pursia.*

*Like true warriors...as you've desired all this time.*

*These battle lines, though... Well done, Al.*

*You must have realized and forced him to retreat.*

*I wonder, did you fight him?*

*Ha... I can't say I'm not jealous.*

At that moment, a dozen Red Wolves broke into the former dueling ground and sprang toward Hydrick.

*You made the right move throwing everything at him and leaving me. Had you hesitated, we both probably would have died.*

With no allies around him, he met the attackers, taking three out in one monstrous blow. The rest persisted, taking different angles at him and diving at him like wolves. One by one he cut them down, growing wearier with every blow.

*Even if Kenick doesn't make it, I'll be fine...*

He cut down five more, his hands beginning to grow numb from the exchange of blows. Ten more men appeared from his backside, forcing him to up the pace and range of his counter-strikes.

*There's no way I'd fall to something like this!*

He continued taking enemies out, despite yet more swarming him.

*Isn't that right...Tess!*

A ring of bodies surrounded him, blood painting both his blade and the sandy beach he stood on. He threw his hair back, catching his breath. No enemies were left. The battle lines thinned out, any remaining enemies following after the massive retreat and pursuit.

"General, you're okay!" The large, bearded Kenick shouted as he finally broke into the dueling ground. "I'm so sorry it took me so long!"

"It's okay, Kenick," Hydrick responded in a coarse voice. "This was the toughest battlefield we've seen yet. Have we lost all of our horses nearby?"

"I'm afraid we have, sir, along with at least 4,000 men" he declared with a dejected expression. "But I've managed to round up sixteen captains, so about 1,600 men should be re-forming on us very soon. The enemy is almost completely gone over here, after all, but it seems Al took a large chunk of our men with him as well."

"Yes, that's what I'd thought," Hydrick answered as he limped forward, his voice growing weaker with every sentence. "We need to find horses, and then we're taking all our men after Al."

“But, General...those wounds! We need to get you to headquarters and-”

“I’ll be okay, Kenick,” he answered in a firm voice, clutching at his ribs. “I can receive sufficient medical aid while we ride. Now, let’s re-form these men, okay?”

“Y-yes sir, understood.”

“Alright,” Hydrick replied with a smile, shifting his gaze toward the mass exodus of troops. “Wait for me, Al...we’re going to come out of this night alive, and victorious.”

# Shoram

“Hey, the ropes are nice and all, but I’m still not grasping the plan here,” Cedric said with an urgent tone as the beast stood back to its feet.

“We just gotta work together, buddy,” the bandit replied, gritting his teeth as he held the ropes taut.

“In other words, you’ve got no plan,” Cedric remarked, standing to his feet.

“Heh, you’re the Heir, so it shouldn’t a problem, right?” the bandit answered, forcing a smile.

The beast lunged at the bandit, swinging its pitchfork wildly despite the ropes’ control. The bandit hopped out of its path and bounded around to its backside. His ropes pulled the beast’s arms, causing it to teeter as it turned to face him. As it reached for the ropes, the bandit pulled them out wide, preventing it from grasping them.

It lunged forward again, solely focused on the bandit. Cedric took advantage of the opening and shot in, teeth gnashed. The beast, astute despite its rage, kicked its left leg out as he struck. The kick threw him with force into the wall, where he slumped onto the ground.

“Ah!” The beast cried, grasping at its foot, a wound forming where the sword had just clipped it. As it reeled, the bandit leapt toward its head, using the ropes to propel him. Just as the beast noticed and grasped at him, the bandit spun through the small gap between its hands, his dagger slicing through its shoulder.

Cedric watched the graceful maneuver as he crawled to his knees, regaining his senses.

*So that's how this is going to work...*

*Guess it's the only way to cooperate with this guy.*

He jumped to his feet and rushed the beast once more. Its attention drawn away from the bandit who was regaining his footing, the beast swung its pitchfork down at Cedric.

Ready for this, Cedric dove to the side, just avoiding the pitchfork as it slammed into the ground. The beast followed up, sweeping the pitchfork toward Cedric's rolling body. He raised the sword in defense, but the blow never came. The beast's arm instead stopped, restrained by the rope.

Cedric leapt back toward the immobilized arm and struck down on its hand just as it broke the hold, pulling the bandit toward them. The sword sliced into its hand at the same time as the pitchfork slammed into Cedric's body, throwing him across the floor and into the opposite wall.

The airborne bandit used the rope's momentum to swing around the beast's left side as he drew a small knife and threw it with precision into the beast's right shoulder. While he circled around the beast, the rope that had been attached to its right hand now wrapped around its neck.

The bandit landed in a run and completed the circle around the beast's right side, completely immobilizing its right arm in a coiling position around its neck. As the beast cried out and reached with its left hand to pull the knife out, the bandit stopped in

his tracks and thrust the rope to his left. The beast, led by its left arm, was spun to its right.

Its back faced Cedric, who sprung back to his feet and charged forward, ignoring the small punctures across his chest from the pitchfork.

The bandit glimpsed his move and charged in himself, looking to swoop under its left arm as it grasped at the stuck knife. The beast reacted to him just in time, sweeping its left arm out wide. The bandit managed to deflect the beast's pitchfork, the rusty weapon skidding across the floor. However, the impact sent him flying away as well. The ropes loosened as he soared toward the wall and slammed into it much harder than Cedric had previously.

The momentum of the beast's left arm created a wide swing unknowingly aimed at the approaching Cedric.

Just before it reached him, Cedric dropped to his knees in a skid. As the beast's palm opened up on top of him, it noticed his presence. Just as it began rearing its now freed right arm toward him, he thrust the sword upward, mid-skid, and plunged it straight through the middle of the beast's hand before it passed over him.

In one quick motion he pulled the sword back through, and the beast immediately redirected its attacking right hand, grasping the now injured left.

"Ahhggghhggghhhgg!"

Cedric sprang back to his feet and out of the beast's range as it screamed in pain, falling on its back and stamping its feet on the ground like a child.

Cedric took note of the bandit, slumped on the floor unconscious. Meters away from him lay the pitchfork. Cedric hurriedly made his way over and picked it up before turning back to the flailing cyclops.

“You win!” it shrieked, not bothering to look his way. “I don’t care anymore! Take whatever you want and get out!”

“You really are a softy, huh,” Cedric answered with a relieved chuckle.

“Just get out!” it cried, crawling onto its makeshift bed and curling into a ball.

“Well, I’d love to, once I get what I came here for,” Cedric replied, dragging the pitchfork over to where the bandit laid. His head was bleeding from the side, and his left leg looked to be in an awkward position. Cedric shrugged and walked over to three holes in the wall.

“Say, uhh, what was your name?”

“It’s Shoram!” the beast responded spitefully. “You have some nerve coming into my home and attacking me, not even knowing my name!”

“Well technically you did attack me first...but I do apologize for the rude entrance, I guess. Anyway, you wouldn’t happen to know if there’s anything in here, would you?” he said, pointing at the indentions.

“Why don’t you look for yourself!” He answered angrily. “I should have known you were that human’s friend...”

“Huh?” Cedric inquired, but received no answer. Shrugging, he lifted the pitchfork even to the holes, and slowly guided its tips in.

As expected, they fit perfectly. A clicking sound emitted as the pitchfork seemed to lock into the wall. He tried pushing it in further, and then pulling it, but it wouldn't budge.

"Hmm."

Gripping the neck of the pitchfork with both hands and planting a foot against the wall, he gave a powerful heave. A slab of the rocky wall, cut into a square, slid out, and fell with a thud to the ground, the pitchfork still attached.

Letting the pitchfork fall, Cedric looked into the hole the slab had been covering. Inside it lay a short dagger whose blade was red- like that of the sword, and a small black sphere, alongside a piece of old, rolled up parchment blotched with red stains.

Baring a curious expression, he took the three objects out of the hole. Immediately placing the dagger in his utility belt, he observed the other two objects. The black, marble ball fit in his fingers snugly, but bore an abnormal weight for its size. He looked closely at the small slivers of red and green swirling around within the pure black of the glassy sphere.

"What exactly is this supposed to be?" he mumbled, placing the ball in his pocket. Taking a knee, he proceeded to unroll the slightly worn-down parchment on the ground.

Before him, a map unraveled. At the top of it, the title "Dirac" was boldly spelled.

"It's a map of Molovar... of all the islands under the dome," he whispered.



At the southern-most section of the map lay Takanova Island, baring more detail in its geography than any of the other islands. He looked to where the Volcano of Disasters was drawn, a red smidge standing out among the inked illustrations.

Frowning, he set the sword down next to the map, its blade touching the corner of the parchment. At that moment, the sword glowed and the sound of dripping emanating from it. While he looked back and forth in confusion, another small red smidge appeared, seemingly from nothing. The small island it appeared on, at the end of the long Jaded cavern, was labeled "Sea Serpent Cove". Its illustration consisted of a beach and a serpent as large as the cavern's mouth.

Frantic, he turned the map over. Certainly, the smudged blotches of red covered most of the back of the map, but he was sure the spot hadn't been there before he set the sword down.

"Just what the devil is going on here..." he muttered, dumbfounded. "Say, Shoram, you said something about me being some human's friend. Did that human bring these things here, by chance? Can you tell me about him?"

"Agh, I don't know anything about him either, so just get out already," Shoram snarled in response, tossing several small rocks in his direction.

"Gees, fine, ya big baby," Cedric mumbled in return, ducking under the small rocks. "I shouldn't be wasting time here, anyway. Who knows what's going on outside?" He rolled up the map and stuck it underneath his belt before approaching the bandit, who was still sleeping.

“Well, I guess it wouldn’t hurt to take him outside with me, at least. He did help out, like he said he would...” Cedric grumbled through curled lips as he lifted the man’s arms over his shoulders and began dragging him across the rock.

“One more thing, Shoram, can you point me to the closest way out of here?”

The beast shot its long arm up, pointing to the rightmost side of the room.

“Hmm, I guess that means the passage furthest from the one I found the treasure in?”

Shoram nodded his large head, refusing to look up.

“Well then, was good meeting you, I suppose. Maybe we can become friends some day?” He smirked and continued dragging the bandit through the passageway.

“Well, then, let’s get you out of this hot place so you can be dealt with properly...partner.”

# The Boys' Battle

The rage-driven young Shlank bounded up the thin dirt hill, readying his spear as his gaze bore into Quentle. He closed the distance quickly and twirled the spear at him, gripping it from the middle.

Quentle stayed calm, defending the blow while maintaining his stable posture. The Shlank continued attacking, whipping both sides of the spear at him repeatedly. Quentle ducked under several blows, before blocking another. He couldn't counter-strike with the frequency of the attacks, so he decided to step back and force the Shlank to follow him uphill.

"Right, just run away," the Shlank taunted, pursuing him. "Lead me to the sword while you're at it, and then I can kill both of you on my way out of here!"

"Tch..." Quentle grumbled, stopping in his tracks. "You'll never get to see the sword, pal."

"Oh?" the Shlank asked, closing the distance.

"That's right, not with me, the true Heir, right here in front of you!"

Quentle swung his spear's head into the dirt in front of him, scattering it into the path of the attacking Shlank. The Shlank threw his arms out to shield his face from the dirt. Meanwhile, Quentle hopped to his right and stepped into a powerful spear jab directed at the young man's face, but the blow only grazed his cheek. He had seen the attack coming, and craned his neck over just in time, while quickly executing a counter-strike.

The blunt end of the Shlank's spear wacked Quentle on the side of his head, staggering him. As he stepped back, attempting to regain his wits, the twirling attack came once more, pushing him back further.

He blocked most of the strikes, but several managed to graze his arms and neck, one cutting across the side of his head. He continued backpedaling, until he felt the dirt cascading downhill.

*Shit...I'm at the edge!*

Forcing his left leg to a skidding stop, he contorted his body to the right as the Shlank threw all of his momentum into a powerful straight jab.

Thanks to his balance, Quentle dodged the blow, and reared his own spear across his body as the young Shlank's torso followed into Quentle's hip and planted left leg. While the young man tried to curb his momentum from falling over Quentle's hip, Quentle thrust his spear into his exposed back.

Because of the angle the spear did not stick deep, but Quentle used its leverage to push the Shlank over his planted leg, flipping him. The Shlank helplessly left his feet, gliding over the edge and falling below with a frustrated grunt.

Quentle gazed over the edge, taking deep breaths as he watched the Shlank roll to the volcano's base where the others remained, unconscious.

"Heh, looks like I'm a better candidate for the red sword than even a Shlank Heir," he said, glancing over at Mel's group as the combatants began a mad dash toward the canyon-like base, led by the Shlanks.

“I’ll leave that to you, Mel...though your plan is going up in flames. Well...I guess it’s up to me to get Cedric out of here, then.”

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Mel chased after the group of Shlanks who rushed toward the bottom of the slope where their leader had fallen, the Red Wolves in tow. Seeing the others following behind him without a word of hesitation, he thought about how to handle the change of pace.

*Tch...damn Shlanks weren’t much help in the end...*

*The Red Wolves will take advantage of this to go up the slope.*

*Any moment now, Cedric could come out from the top.*

*If they climb up there, looks like there’s only Quentle to get through.*

*What do I do? I can’t cut them off like this...*

*Should I let them have their shot, and trust him to surrender?*

*No, there’s no way he will.*

*Should I just trust Hastor to take it from him?*

At that moment, another small white object soared from the trees to their right into the area. Mel watched with wide eyes as it hit the ground in front of the Red Wolves, and white powder exploded into their midst.

Chaos ensued as the area lost all visibility, and several shadows moved swiftly throughout the thick fog. Mel simply squatted down in a defensive posture, waiting for the fog to clear while several loud cries sounded around him.

The last cry, that of a young woman's, stole all of Mel's attention.

"Selmy!!" He yelled out, running blindly in the direction the cry had come from.

Before he could reach it, he collided with someone running opposite him. The red-clad man tried to take advantage of the entanglement by holding Mel still, thrusting his short blade toward his side. Mel saw the attack but could not react in time.

Therefore, he merely braced himself for impact.

Just as the blade began to sink into his skin, the man was grabbed by his neck and slung backward. The weight behind the throw was so heavy it slammed his head into the dirt, knocking him unconscious.

At that moment, the smoke began to clear, and the twins appeared in front of him, both retrieving ropes from around the man's neck.

"Thanks," Mel said through grit teeth, clutching his wounded side. The girls nodded at him before looking ahead, where several meters away stood the captain of the Red Wolves whom he'd spoken with previously.

Now, the sight of him made Mel's blood boil, and he could no longer keep the same calm he'd possessed earlier. This was due to the person he was holding up by the throat, sword readied by her neck.

"Let her go you scum, or this whole deal is off, and you won't make it out of here alive," Mel demanded, baring a vicious glare at the man. He couldn't bring himself to look in the eyes of the girl that had come to support him, who was coughing through reddened cheeks as she struggled in vain.

“Do you really think you’re in a position to give me orders, boy?” The man named Suguille snarled. “You and these girls, without that other man, serve no threat to me, even if I were alone.”

At that, Mel glanced over the surroundings. Three Red Wolves were approaching from their backside. Behind them, the other Red Wolves along with Berd and Farum were climbing up the steep dirt mound in Quentle’s direction, while the Shlanks tended to their unconscious leader. It seemed the twins had neutralized two of the Red Wolves during the confusion, while Selmy attempted to surprise Suguille but failed.

Mel shared glances with the twins, who immediately understood and moved to face the three men behind him, while he glared desperately at Selmy’s struggling face.

*This is why I told you!*

*Dammit!*

*Why, Selmy... Why did you have to come!*

*How can I worry about Cedric, now? I have to figure this out.*

*Nothing else matters.*

*Three against four, with a hostage...*

*He’s right. There’s no way.*

*The twins are nowhere near Hastor’s level.*

*And he’ll kill Selmy without any hesitation...*

*There really isn’t any choice...*

Taking a deep breath, Mel stepped forward. "We can still achieve a mutual victory here, if you'll please just let her go right now."

"Not a chance, kid," the man responded, tightening his grip around her throat. "You made the move against me with this lass- I'm not giving you another opportunity."

Watching Selmy struggle even harder to breathe, Mel nearly lost his senses and leapt at the man. Somehow, he was able to catch himself, biting his lip so hard he drew blood.

*Well, at least if this all works out, I'll be remembered just as well as an Heir...*

"Fine then, take me instead!" he blurted out without hesitation, dropping his bow and dagger while stepping forward. "You can trust they won't act against you any further if I'm dead."

The twins glanced at him and Selmy through wide eyes but did not speak up. Instead, they looked at each other, biting their lips as they lowered their guard.

Only two paces away, Mel walked with a frozen grimace, avoiding the gaze of Selmy who was furiously protesting his decision, tears streaming down her shaking face.

"I'm sorry, Selmy. It's not your fault. I'm just taking responsibility."

"I'll honor that wish of yours, then," Suguille said with a sneer. Without loosening his grip on Selmy's throat, he raised his blade and struck down-

"No, you won't!!"

-where another blade met it, deflecting it off its path to Mel's neck.



The woman's long black hair flashed as she lunged, barely deflecting the blade in time with her rapier.

"Tess!" Mel remarked, his jaw agape. The slender woman collided with him in the same motion as her diving deflection. She deftly rolled through her dive, wasting no time in making her next move. Springing up, she quickly located the group going up the dirt mound and reared her right arm back.

With a low roar, she heaved a small black object toward the group. A powerful force behind it, the object soared over the heads of the climbing group, and into the topmost edge of the cliff that connected with the forested area above. The group watched in shock as a loud bang resounded and the wall of the cliff exploded into yet another avalanche of dirt.

While the dirt fell relentlessly toward Berd's group, Suguille poised himself to strike, this time turning his blade toward Selmy. Mel, who had fallen back, lunged forward desperately, knowing he was out of reach.

Suddenly, Suguille cocked his head to his right, in the direction Tess had come from. In one movement, he threw Selmy to the side, and was just able to defend against a loaded strike aimed at his neck.

The curly-headed Ango, having gained all Suguille's attention, hopped back before engaging from a different angle. His rapier was much thinner than the man's short sword, but his technical prowess was made clear as he danced around, attacking Suguille at various angles with swift one-handed strikes.

“You bastards just signed your own execution letters,” Suguille hissed, regaining his posture while defending against Ango’s relentless attacks.

“You’re not laying another hand on anyone, scum,” Tess barked as she charged toward him. Reaching into her cloak again, she shouted “Ango!” before slinging a small vial at the feet of the two combatants.

Ango responded to her command, diving to his left just as the vial struck earth and exploded. Though a smaller conflagration of flames than before, the explosion was enough to blow Suguille backward several meters into the dirt.

The man struggled back to his feet in a daze, having avoided serious damage from the blast. Tess and Ango jumped on the opportunity and charged at him from either side.

“Tess, we need him alive!” Mel shouted as he dropped to his knees and hugged Selmy’s crying face.

“I don’t give a damn what you’re trying to accomplish, Mel,” Tess responded firmly, baring her own rapier down on the recovering Suguille. “We’re here to protect our students from these cowardly invaders, and that’s exactly what we’re going to do!”

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Cedric trudged across the volcano’s exit, a small tunnel-like cave, until he reached the rocky surface outside. Dropping the unconscious bandit on the stony threshold, he stepped to where dirt covered rock. To his left, the slope continued in a winding hill toward the peak of the volcano, and just down the slope in front of him-

“Cedric you bastard, you made it!”

-the ever-charismatic voice of Quentle met him.

“Quentle, how...” he uttered in surprise, “You made it all the way here like that?”

“Don’t act surprised,” he cheered, slapping his own bicep with a smirk. “Haven’t I been telling you I’m much more than some ruffian? Listen here, you missed it, but I just took out the guy who’s supposed to be the Shlank Heir!”

“You...did?” he asked, eyes wide with interest.

“Oy, stop acting surprised, I said! I threw him over the edge like a true warrior, some might say I ascended to that of a battle god in that moment!”

“You’re not Garik, you know?” Cedric replied with a chuckle, “But still, that really is impressive. Actually, I just beat up a huge cyclops, myself.”

“You- you did what?” Quentle stammered, losing his haughty aura.

“We can talk about all that later though, what’s the situation like now?” Cedric said, taking up a firm posture.

“Ah, well you can’t see from here, but Mel and the others were trying to hold back the rest of the Red Wolves, though they’re coming this way now. Geraint, Jorge, and Kaolo fell down the canyon as well, but I’m hoping they’re okay.” Quentle’s words trailed into uncertainty at the end as he looked down.

“So, they’ll be coming up here any second now, huh?” Cedric replied, swallowing his worry for his friends.

“Yeah, that’s why we have to get you out of here,” Quentle said with a hurried look, “We can draw them away from here If we go all the way up and jump over to the other side where we can escape into the forest!”

As he spoke, Cedric’s eyes wandered in the direction of the beach, which was now visible just across the cliff and short wooded region. His eyes were drawn by the smoke and flames which seemed to have ravaged the beach. As he looked it over, his heart sunk with realization.

*That must be it...their battlefield.*

*Galgi...Ralin...don't tell me.*

Several large rocks lay between fires, but nothing else was clear enough to make out, aside from a lone ship coming in to the shore- a small transport ship baring a red flag.

As he watched the ship dock in, he noticed two figures moving around the rocks, as if crawling. His heart leapt at the sight, eyes set alight.

*The chances are slim... but even if I have to do this alone...*

“Cedric?” Quentle asked with a puzzled look, “What is it? We need to escape so that we can lead these guys somewhere else we can fight, like the ruins!”

“No, Quentle,” Cedric responded firmly, placing a hand on his shoulder. “I have an even better idea, one that might fix everything.”

“W-w-ha-huh?” Quentle was cut off as Cedric grabbed his arm and led him up the remainder of the winding slope.

“Listen, Quentle,” Cedric said while running. “We’re going to lead them away from here, but I don’t intend on fighting them anywhere near here. I’ll put the target solely on me and end this stupid game that Mel’s and Selmy’s fathers set up.”

“Wait, but how the bloody hell are we going to do that?” Quentle asked through bated breaths as the two boys reached the rocky peak.

“There’s no time to explain,” Cedric responded, studying the distance between the peak and the cliff’s edge just meters away. “Quentle, I’m going to jump over there just like you said.”

“Alright, let’s jump, and then you can tell me, yeah?” Quentle replied, bending over to catch his breath.

“Quentle, have you looked at the state you’re in?” Cedric asked with a serious look, “Those legs can’t handle anymore, and have you even noticed that gash on your head? You need to sit down and treat that before anything else.”

His friend went silent, looking curiously over his bloodied legs before touching the wound on the side of his head. The moment he gazed upon the blood on his hand, he seemed to be stricken by something. The energy he’d boasted earlier disappeared, and he remained silent before offering a defeated smirk.

“Yeah, I guess you’re right.”

“Exaclty,” Cedric responded, “But I need you to help me get across. I screwed up my leg a bit in there, so I’m not sure I can make the jump with just my own power; do you think you can throw me?”

His smirk returning to its usual shape, he puffed up his chest and answered, "Well of course, you're talking to the guy who just threw the Shlank Heir all the way across the volcano!"

"Great," Cedric chuckled in response. "Then let's get to it before you slip on your own blood and fall off the edge."

"Hmph, I'm a much stronger man than the one who fell for your petty tricks, Wardric," he answered, taking a wide stance at the edge. Cedric readied himself at the opposite edge, before shooting himself toward Quentle.

His left foot extending for the leap, Quentle grabbed his right arm and twisted his body with a grunt toward the edge in a pulling motion. Just as Cedric jumped off his left foot, Quentle threw his arm and shoulder, propelling the jump.

As he soared across, Cedric gripped the red sword fitting snugly in his utility belt. With just enough distance to reach, he rolled across the edge of the cliff. His momentum sent him rolling into a tree, but the adrenaline running through him allowed him to leap to his feet.

"Aha, what a throw from the battle god of Takanova!" Quentle shouted from the volcano's peak.

"Seriously," Cedric laughed, "I'm actually impressed, there's no way I would have made that without you."

"Hehe, praise me more later, Wardric! My next orders are to take that sword away from here and be a legendary Heir, while I figure out what to do with our rich idiot of a friend!"

“You got it,” Cedric answered with a confident smile. “Take care of that fool, okay? He might be a brainwashed traitor, but he is still our friend.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Quentle responded haughtily as he began to trot back down the slope.

“Listen,” Cedric spoke up after a brief silence, stopping Quentle’s descent. “When we see each other again, it’ll be once the war is over, and we’ve won.”

“Yeah,” Quentle answered, his gaze pointed ahead. “Don’t forget our promise; we all have to make it to the beach to celebrate, right?”

“That’s right,” Cedric replied, chuckling through his nose. “I’ll see you then.”

Cedric didn’t wait for a response, breaking into a run alongside the forested cliff’s edge.

Quentle watched him round the corner where the cliff sloped down, connecting with the mouth of the canyon. Chuckling, he finally looked away and spotted the burning shoreline.

“Is that where he intends...”

“Huh? Why does my head hurt so bad?”

He clutched the sides of his head as it was suddenly assaulted by a painful nausea. “Haha, this isn’t good. Why am I feeling like this now?”

His body began to sway as his legs wavered and his voice cracked.

“Come on, what is this? My job isn’t close to being done yet; I haven’t done...anything for the Teutons...yet...”

His legs buckled, and he rolled down the slope before coming to a stop near the place Cedric had left the bandit- whose body was not where it lay previously.

“Heh, well look at that, my good fortune brought me to this fellow in the end, at least.”

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Mel hugged Selmy’s frail body, tears welling up. “I told you not to come, you idiot,” he said, voice quivering.

“It’s okay,” she responded, nuzzling her own crying face in his chest. “I had to make sure you were okay, too.”

He shook his head with a thin smile and looked back to see the twins still fighting two Red Wolves, their attacks growing slower with each movement. In front of him, Suguille had drawn another blade and clashed with both Tess and her brother, Ango.

The two kept a frenetic pace, attacking at angles that kept the tall man on his toes; but he stood his ground with a fierce stance and took advantage of his long limbs with crushing counter-strikes that forced the two to dodge and disengage.

“Can you walk?” Mel asked, helping the distressed Selmy to her feet.

“I hurt my ankle when I landed, but I think I’m okay,” she answered in a pitiful voice, grimacing as her struggle to stand was obviously greater than she was letting on.



“Then let’s move over and stay out of the way, okay?” he responded, taking her arm over his shoulder and escorting her to the edge of the trees she’d emerged from while recovering his bow and dagger.

Upon setting her down against a tree trunk, he glanced back to the dirt mound, and his eyes grew wide.

There his friend was, scaling the cliffside just above the dirt mound. Soon he would come around the corner at the point where the cliffside and dirt mound met, where Tess’ blast had made a steep slope out of a completely vertical cliffside.

His heart pounded with anticipation- he knew what he had to do. His only concern was the man named Suguille, as well as Selmy- who could no longer escape on her own. So, he watched on, mind racing with the decision at hand.

Suguille’s vigor proved enough to push the two back several times, but the siblings’ pure skill at the blade began to allow them the edge in the fight. Their technical precision and tricky angles eventually outmaneuvered the man, and they scored several slashing wounds on his sides.

After landing their blows, they bounced out of danger as Suguille fired back with vicious outward swings of both blades. He spent no effort on clutching at his wounds, instead staring down his opponents with indignation verging on obsessive enmity, his teeth grit so hard they seeped with blood.

Upon seeing this, Mel stood up. “They have things under control here, so just stay put until I’m back with the sword, okay?”

“O-okay, please just be careful,” Selmy answered, tears filling her eyes once more.

“Don’t worry about me,” Mel responded firmly before turning and running in the opposite direction. The twins’ opponents attempted to converge on him, but the two girls responded, displaying a great deal of effort to cut them off and hold them back with their small frames. He looked back at them and nodded silently, before heading in full sprint up the avalanched dirt mound, dropping his bow at the base.

“Do you really think this is enough?” Suguille growled at Tess, mouth frothing in anger, “Do you think you all can step foot into a real war, against real soldiers and win with nothing but your will?”

“You’re in no position to be acting tough, pal,” Tess quipped as she glared back at him. “The tables have turned on you people, now.”

“No, no, no.....no, no, no, no, no,” he spat, taking slow steps forward and raising his left arm. “All these kids are going to die, alongside you- you’ll see what happens when you barge in to matters of war!”

Tess and Ango frowned while a thick mist began to rise in a circle around the man. Their vision immediately ahead clouded, they took a defensive stance and stepped back cautiously.

“Tess, be careful!” Selmy shouted; but her warning came too late as a silver light flashed through the mist. Like a spear the man flew through the misty air, cutting the distance between him and Tess in an instant.

“Sis!” Ango cried, diving in between Tess and Suguille. Tess flung the last vial she’d been holding in her fingers, forward. It contacted Ango’s rapier just as he and the airborne Suguille collided.

A low boom resounded as another explosion burst right in the middle of the three combatants. Mel, who was already climbing up the cliffside in a bounding run, looked back in a panic as Tess and Ango were flung violently in different directions and left to lie, lifeless, in the dirt.

*Dammit, Tess...you’ve got to be okay.*

*You must be okay, you’ve got to stay alive... and protect Selmy!*

*I trust you!*

The anguished boy turned his back on the scene and continued climbing desperately up the steep cliffside slope, unable to see the man called Suguille rising to his feet as the smoke began to clear.

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The thoughts that swirled relentlessly around Cedric’s head as he rushed to get a better look at the chaos of unconscious bodies below, attention drawn by the sound of the explosion, were that of his most important days of childhood.

His first day in Master Gambell’s classroom- age thirteen. Most of his twelfth year had been spent bedridden in recovery from the sickness that nearly took his life at eleven; and even at thirteen, he was not able to begin his schooling until several months after the rest of the boys.

Entering the classroom, he immediately felt all eyes upon him. Of course, he understood why; the whispers bouncing around the classroom confirmed his understanding.

“That’s the boy who had the war sickness and somehow survived.”

“The only child that’s ever survived it, right?”

“Yeah, and they announced him as an Heir candidate right after, I heard.”

“Isn’t that kind of weird?”

“Does that mean his Teuton Will is way stronger than a normal person’s, or something?”

The boy could only offer a polite, yet pitiful smile, as his father had instructed.

“This is Cedric, everybody,” Gambell courteously announced, “He’s a bit late in joining us, but I know that you all will offer him your friendship and support nonetheless.”

Cedric looked down to avoid the gazes of the whispering boys, staring at him like he was a caged animal who didn’t belong in a room with humans. He turned his southward posture into a slight bow, having realized his behavior had potentially come across as disrespectful.

“I heard there was something weird about his father too.”

“Yeah, something about being excused from fighting in the war, even though he was a strong warrior who was once considered an Heir candidate.”

“I heard that he was an orphan, and that his current father adopted him.”

“Alright boys, that’s enough of the idle chit-chat,” Gambell cut in with a strict, voluminous tone. “Now, where shall we have Cedric sit?”

For a moment, a silence spread over the room that made Cedric want to run away and never return.

“Here, I’ll move up to this empty seat; he can sit with this talkative fool here.” The cool voice came from a thin, blond-headed boy who was in the middle of packing his things and moving to the table directly ahead.

“Well, how thoughtful of you, Mel,” Gambell said with a grin, gently pushing Cedric’s back toward the vacant seat.

“Not really, I just don’t want to sit with the loudmouth anymore,” the noble boy scoffed in response, taking his seat with an annoyed expression.

“Hmph, never mind the grumpy young lord,” the scrappy looking-boy added with a jovial look, “You’re Cedric, eh? Have a seat! I’m Quentle, and I’m the next Sword Heir!”

Cedric sat down, perplexed, while the murmurs made their rounds throughout the room once more.

“So, you’re a candidate too, huh? I’ve been fighting with Mel-boy this whole time, so it’ll be nice to have some real competition.”

“In your dreams, idiot,” Mel retorted, turning his torso toward them. “You’re about as talented as the chair-seat under my arse.”

“Oh yeah? Well then, guess you won’t mind me and Cedric training together to beat that spoiled noble arse, huh? What do you think, Cedric?”

“Huh?” Cedric stammered, completely unsure how to respond.

“I’m saying we can be friends and help each other out, that way we can both beat the skinny rich kid!”

“I-I don’t know about beating anybody, but that’s okay with me as long as the school and my father are okay with it.”

As the whispers began to spark again, Quentle spoke with a grin. “Doesn’t matter what people think when it comes to being friends, especially the jealous losers in this room that can’t understand why us three weirdos were chosen over them.”

“Don’t lump us in with you,” Mel cut in. “We were obviously chosen for good reason, unlike you. Listen, Cedric, being friends is one thing, but try not to catch this one’s stupidity. It looks like I’ll have to help with that, won’t I?”

“Uh, sure,” Cedric responded with an awkward smile. While the two boys continued arguing, his small smile grew just a bit wider.

The next memory- all his closest friends were gathered on the beach, enjoying a feast. Galgi and Ralin chugged rum with Tess while Selmy frantically retrieved Quentle from the ocean he’d been launched into.

Mel looked on, laughing heartily alongside Cedric as they ate his father’s famous potatoes.

“Say, Cedric, do you think this ceasefire will last long?” he asked, his eyes focused on Selmy in the water.

“I wouldn’t know,” Cedric answered with a curious expression, “but it sure would be nice if the war somehow ended instead of starting back up.”

“Yeah, that would be ideal,” Mel replied, bearing an honest smile. “We were only allowed today to do this, but imagine how great it would be to spend every day out here having fun like this.”

“Yeah, if it’s possible it would be like a dream,” Cedric responded earnestly. “Especially if we’re all able to remain friends like this.”

“Mm, but I wonder how much the Heir situation might change things,” Mel said, his gaze shifting out beyond the horizon.

“It doesn’t have to change anything, does it?” Cedric asked in a low voice.

“I wonder,” Mel replied, his face hidden. “No matter what though, we should make sure we’re able to return here.”

The memories flashed through his mind like lightning as he approached the edge of the cliff. Standing still for a moment, he glanced out toward the beach, before looking over the cliff’s side.

*I wonder what kind of expression you were making when you said that, Mel...*

*And... what about right now...*

The battle below came into view, and he immediately beheld a tall Red Wolf soldier baring down on an incapacitated Tess. His eyes grew wide, but before he could

survey the canyon in search for the one he most wanted to see, a hand grasped onto his ankle and pulled him off the edge.

Blindsided and falling, he shoved the sword into the cliffside at a downward angle- curbing his momentum and stopping the fall. However, the hand that had pulled him down still grasped tightly onto his ankle. As he desperately gripped the sword's hilt with both hands, he looked down, into the determined face of his friend who was clawing at his leg, attempting to pull him down as they both hung from the cliffside.

"Mel...!"

"This is the end of the road, Cedric," the boy spat, tugging viciously at his leg. "It's time for you to end this farce, already."

"You should already know..." Cedric groaned, repositioning his hands, his face beat red. "That's not going to happen!"

"Can't you see what's happening?" Mel pleaded, his aggressive tone turning desperate. "Everyone's getting hurt protecting you and your foolish ideals; if you'd just give that thing up this would all be over; don't you get that?"

"You're exactly right," Cedric responded. "Everyone's fighting to help me, even you and your friends. Now... why would I just waste all that support?"

The two of them looked down upon hearing a cry, that of a charging Ango.

"You won't lay a hand on my sister!" he shouted, jumping in front of the downed Tess despite his bleeding ribs and wobbly legs.

The captain of the Red Wolves, Suguille, pounced on him without mercy, knocking his rapier away with a tremendous swing. He then cut across Ango's turned



back with his other blade and followed up with a kick to his wounded ribs. The blow forced Ango to crumble before the man, who turned his focus back to Tess as she tried to sit herself up.

“I’m greedy, Cedric,” Mel appealed, his face turning purple as tears rolled down his cheeks. “I want everyone to be okay, but that can’t happen at this point unless we give the sword over.”

“No, Mel!” Cedric yelled, “Listen, if we can turn that guy onto me, along with his friends, I can lead them away from here. There’s something I’m supposed to do with this sword, so the last thing I’m going to do is give it up when it might be our saving grace!”

“Cedric, you’re...”

“Yeah, I’m greedy too,” he replied with conviction. “I want to protect everyone, take the enemies with me, and find a way to defeat them away from here. If I can get them to chase after me off the island, Takanova can regroup and rebuild its army...but that can only happen if you help me get out of here right now...!”

“Cedric, that’s...” Mel replied desperately, having climbed up to his knee, “how can I rely on a naïve, ill-advised plan like that? How could you possibly manage something better than what we’ve spent so long planning?”

At his frenzied, uncertain words, their attention was drawn to a horse climbing the far side of the cliff where the forest met the volcano’s base. A large man rode the horse slowly up the cliff’s edge, watching them intently.

“Melvin Cillavier, is it?” Cedric spat, staring daggers at his friend’s widened eyes.

“It’s over now, Cedric,” Mel muttered, a hopeful smile breaking across his face. “I just have to hold you still till he gets over here, and then we can deliver the sword.”

Cedric wore a frustrated grimace as he looked past his crazed friend into the canyon.

“You know, Mel, it’s due to your group’s rotten ideals that you, just like that old traitor, are losing sight of what’s important.

Seeing the burning light Cedric’s eyes bore, Mel slowly followed his gaze back to the battlefield below, where Suguille was preparing to strike down the struggling Tess. Just as he closed in, someone else staggered onto the scene from the trees.

“Tess, no!” Selmy cried desperately, attempting to jump between the man and her friend. Suguille shifted his focus toward her without a moment’s hesitation, and Cedric felt the grip on his leg vanish instantly.

“I’M RIGHT HERE!” Cedric belted out from his perched position, stealing Suguille’s attention away from Selmy.

In that moment, Mel had slid down the cliffside, recovered his bow, and fired off a shot mid-skid- a faster shot than Cedric had ever seen him execute.

Suguille, eyes beaming in recognition of Cedric and the sword, only just noticed the arrow slicing the air in his direction. Abandoning his attack on Selmy, he threw himself in the opposite direction, the arrow just grazing his cheek.

Blood trickling from his right cheek, the man staggered to regain his footing as he glared viciously at Mel. Selmy dove onto Tess, who was still trying to get up,

disoriented. Cedric climbed back up to the top of the cliff, while Mel had already prepared another arrow.

“I told you not to turn your blade on her, Suguille,” Mel snarled at the man, firing the next arrow at his chest.

Deflecting the arrow just before it reached his chest, Suguille shifted all his attention on Mel, and darted toward him. His path took him between the twins, who broke away from their opponents to attempt to flank him.

Suguille recognized their low rush, and with ease struck down on their blades with both of his, pummeling them into the ground where they laid, coughing.

Mel stood his ground, firing another arrow. The shorter distance put his shot at nearly point-blank range. However, the raging man did not flinch, and deflected the arrow with ease.

As he closed the distance, Mel cocked his head over to see Cedric at the top of the cliff with the sword in hand, and yelled out, “fine, I give up...I’ll let you have your way, so get out of here, Sword Heir! Do your job and get these bastards out of here! And you better make it back to the beach with us when we’ve won, got it?”

Cedric stood tall and took one last hard look at his friend’s face, and firmly responded, “Yeah, I will. I promise I’ll make it back, so make sure you and everyone else are waiting for me.” He then turned and, without waiting to see the outcome of the enraged Suguille’s attack, ran in the opposite direction.

The man approaching on horseback from the forest, Melvin Cillavier, hurried his horse in pursuit up the hill. With a fierce glance, Cedric mustered every bit of strength

he had left in executing a strike duplicate to those he had managed earlier, tearing into the earth and sending a flash of red light on a direct path toward the man.

Melvin Cillavier reacted, leaping from his horse onto the ground before it was hit by the light and fell with a whine to the earth. He made no attempt to pursue Cedric further, instead turning his attention down below.

As Cedric ran down the path leading to the shoreline, Suguille closed in on Mel, who stood his ground.

*Even if I move out of the way, he'd still come at me before taking off after Cedric.*

*In that case, I can at least try to slow him down.*

*No matter what happens...*

He tossed his bow aside after firing one last low shot and readied the short dagger that paled in comparison to the blades of Suguille, who bore down, steam rising from his arms once more.

“Mel, you have to make it to the beach, too!” Selmy cried out desperately as she hugged Tess.

*Heh, you don't have to tell me anymore, Selmy.*

*No matter what happens...*

*I'll be here when he gets back.*

Mel gave a low roar as he braced himself for the blow. Suguille swung both blades in the same motion from his left, crushing Mel's defending dagger into his injured

ribcage. The impact sent him rolling across the dirt until he collided with a tree at the forest's edge and lay motionless.

"MEL!" Selmy screamed as she ran limply toward him along with the twins, while Suguille climbed the dirt mound, calling out to his comrades.

"Red Wolves, if you still breath and don't want to become prisoners of war, come with me and take the Red Sword!"

Several men stirred from the pile of dirt, while the two that had been battling the twins followed. He didn't bother looking back to see who came, and scaled the cliffside slope with ease, eclipsing the edge with a face that frothed with focused rage.

# Battle Cry

Chief Allen rode at the front of the cavalry unit of 25 knights and 300 of his own personal soldiers, Valblin by his side. They sped through a deserted battlefield lined with bodies, following the sounds of battle to the eastern shores.

“There is the final battlefield of the night,” Allen said, gazing downhill at an expansive beach where tens of thousands of men clashed under the scattered moonlight of the dome.

“As expected, it seems Al and Hydrick are pushing the retreating enemy into the receiving Faron’s army,” Valblin said, combing his beard with his hand. “Have you spotted Samuel’s headquarters yet?”

“It’s exactly where it should be,” Allen answered, focused on the path ahead.

Valblin flashed a grin, shifting his gaze toward the Faron army’s left side. “Well then, shall we greet the dignified General Shuant?”

On the outskirts of the battlefield, Al and Jack led their forces, combined with Hydrick’s, into the edge of the Faron army.

“Al, Shuant has disappeared amidst Faron’s men,” Jack shouted as he fought through the frontlines.

“It doesn’t matter,” Al responded, cleaving into the lines with his curved blade. “We need to keep this up if we mean to hold Shuant in check. We’re about to be

pincer by Persia behind us, but Hyd should be right behind him to keep the damage to a minimum.”

“What’s wrong with regrouping with Hydrick and going to Samuel’s headquarters?” Jack asked, pressing on.

“Like I said, if we let off for a second, that man will make us pay,” Al responded, gaining momentum inside the enemy’s lines. “He just absorbed reinforcements by fleeing into a fresh army. It’s only a matter of time before that cunning man turns his gaze back toward us.”

As he spoke, the lines they were fighting through began to open up, a stampede of cavalry rumbling toward them from deep within.

“You see?” Al said, pressing on. “Either that Shuant is really hellbent on killing Hyd and me, or he had something else planned all along.”

“Well, putting that ‘something else’ aside, it looks like we are indeed being pincer,” Jack declared, looking back at the pressured lines behind them.

“Hyd will take care of Persia,” Al remarked with a confident, intense grin. “Besides, the ‘something else’ should be right behind them to even things out.”

In the next moment, Al’s pursuing attack caved in on either side, but he and Jack still fought their way forward until the man they sought appeared in the congested battlefield.

“There he is!” Jack exclaimed, pointing his blade in the direction of the red-clad man.

They fought their way toward Shuant, who seemed focused on leading his men in a straight line through Al's group, increasing their speed rather than baring down for the clash.

"Al, something's happening behind us!" Jack cried out.

"Press on!" Al shouted in response, "We'll stop him right here!"

Al allowed some fifty men to take the lead ahead of them as the collision drew near. Shuant's reinvigorated attack unit ran into Al's severely thinned group, splitting them in half with little resistance. Al and Jack attempted to cut into the group once they reached them, but the heavy cavalry adorned in golden armor served as a strong barrier around Shuant.

Al was only able to clash blades with Shuant in passing, but his powerful attack that barely reached the man was nonetheless successful in slowing the streaking group down.

The flood of horses forced Al and his men to scatter to regroup. Instead of retreating, however, Al gazed over to the destination of Shuant's attack.

Beyond the scattered lines he'd led, Hydrick and Persia's groups were tangled up in vie for supremacy of the chaos.

Shuant's focus, however, lie beyond them. Cutting through the chaotic group, he sustained heavy losses, but his core group of fifteen shield-baring cavalrymen remained strong. Hydrick managed to break away from Persia's men and throw himself at Shuant, but he was shaken off as easily as Al had been. As he staggered to the side, Shuant's attack reached an opening in the battlefield. On the other side of the opening,



a large old man appeared, leading a group of green-caped knights into the thick of the battlefield.

Shuant accelerated away from his group, focused solely on the old man, who brandished a large golden glaive that doubled the size of his red spear.

All eyes were on the two as their horses stamped toward each other as if a supernatural force had pulled them. Their faces bore an eerie calm as they struck down, spear and glaive whipping toward each other at wide angles of seemingly effortless swings.

A sharp clang sounded as the tips of the blades met, which caused an inexplicable silence, like the air itself was frozen by the clash. The stifled air then blasted through the battlefield as the blades bounced away from each other, a tempest of dust and wind reverberating from the two men and booming outward throughout the battlefield.

Many men fell from their horses, while Al and Hydrick were just able to steady themselves. Al waved an eerie dust cloud away from his face as he strained to get a better look at the scene.

“So...that’s what Valblin’s mist looks like, huh?” he muttered, gaining Jack’s glance- one full of amazement.

“That’s forbidden, though...” Jack responded, eyeing old man in awe.

“Which is why I never thought I’d see it from the old geezer,” Al responded, eyes squinted in focus. “Though his power doesn’t disappoint, as expected of the former Sword Heir that trained Hedric himself.”

Closer to the duel, Hydrick looked on in awe as the two reared back to strike once more.

“So, you came after all, Master,” he muttered. “Which means... your gamble paid off, Al.”

The still battlefield watched as the two men traded a flurry of blows. Shuant, the calm aggressor, pushed Valblin’s large frame back with several winding spear thrusts, but the old man’s defense remained steadfast and equal in power.

“Oho, it would seem your scheme is going up in flames, eh? General Shuant of the Red Wolves, and Commander-in-Chief of the Wolverine military.” The old man’s bold and boisterous voice filled the air, incurring Shuant’s scornful glance laced with enmity.

“Former Sword Heir Valblin...” Shuant hissed back in a shrill voice, “You and Allen did exactly as I expected you to. Now if you’ll get out of my way...”

“Oho, you won’t be reaching Chief Allen tonight, General,” Valblin chuckled, ceasing the clash to point to the other side of the knights that followed him. Allen was riding away from the back of the battle, leading 100 of his men toward the base of Samuel’s army.

“Hah...so you saw past the ideal bait I presented,” Shuant said with a frustrated grimace as his eyes followed the retreating Allen.

“Ho, luring the Chief out here with the prospect of your own head, only to time an attack of your own by firing a deadly arrow that would seek only the Chief’s head. It was a very bold strategy, but even if the Chief hadn’t saw through it and planned to

break away just in time, it seems my two young protégés were wary of your intentions as well. Had they not provided just enough pressure to chink the armor of your fierce arrowhead, you might have had enough firepower to break through myself and these knights and go after Allen's head."

"So, it seems," Shuant responded with a weak smirk. "Though, you severely underestimate me if you think I couldn't kill you now and break through to take his head, anyway."

"Well, it's possible, of course," Valblin replied, resting his great glaive on his shoulder. "Though you won't get through me easily... and if you do, you'll have to worry about 25 of the 100 Teutonic Knights, along with General Hydrick and Commander Al."

As he said this, Hydrick and Al crept closer to the men, as did the formation of knights.

"I don't take you as the type to take such a risk," Valblin continued. "Through your betrayal and murder of my heir and friend, I learned that while you are bold in your tactics, you are equally calculated."

"What then?" Shuant replied, glancing all around. "Won't you take advantage of your number of skilled men, and try for my head? Why else did you come out here, even if you knew of my trap?"

"Oh, it won't be this old man who takes your head, General Shuant," Valblin responded with a hard gaze. "Nor will it be any of those present tonight. We came here tonight for a different reason."

“But are you sure that’s a good idea?” Shuant asked in a cunning tone. “How much longer can you Teutons last, realistically? Unless you pull the rest of the Four Generals from the Wall, your armies won’t be able to protect this beach for long.”

“Hoho, so eager to fight our very best, aren’t you?” Valblin responded with a chuckle, “But as calculated as you are, you won’t sail around the island to where they are and risk a three-way fight with the Shlanks, will you? Besides, it’s like I said; we’re here tonight to show you just how strong we still are. You’ll see why we won’t assemble the Four Generals for the likes of you; we will prove to you tonight that the Teutons are here to stay.”

“You’re really going to rely on a brand-new Heir, then?” Shuant scoffed, “Is that how desperate you truly are?”

“The Teuton Will is one that shines with brilliant belief, not desperation,” the old man replied in a scrupulous voice. “You will see just how brilliant that belief is when the time has come for us to take the fight to you.”

“Well then, let’s have a taste of that brilliance while we wait for the outcome of our little game behind the scenes, eh?” Shuant hissed, a malevolent excitement glowing within his eyes.

“Ho, what you will witness will be but a precursor to our rise, oh General,” Valblin replied in his usual tone.

The two slowly moved away from each other, and Shuant signaled the reforming of the Wolverine troops into the thick of the Faron army, while Valblin directed the regrouping of Hydrick and Al’s men as they made for Samuel’s main army.

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Cedric crushed the moonlit grass under foot as he followed the narrow path hugged by overhanging trees- his sights set on the beach ahead. His left leg suddenly twinging with pain at the joint of the knee, he stopped briefly to try and stretch the pain away.

*I must keep moving.*

*This Suguille guy is insane; he'll be on me in no time if I linger...*

He glanced back at the sound of steps, and his eyes grew wide. It was not the man named Suguille, but the horse that Melvin Cillavier had been riding. It clopped over to him as if lost, surprisingly void of injury from its fall.

Cedric wasted no time in goading the horse to him and mounting it. The saddle had been knocked off during the fall, but the reins and bridle were in-tact. He gripped them and spurred the horse ahead, through the small path that lay between overhanging trees.

He soon arrived where the wall had been broken through by large rocks. The beach before him bore an ominous air- the fires that ravaged the beach had died down, leaving smoke rising over scattered rock and countless bodies from both armies.

With a gulp, Cedric dismounted the horse and stepped onto the charred beach, stifling the nausea that rose within him at the sight and stench of death.

*If I'm going to be the Heir, I must overcome this.*

*If I want to be a Knight, I must become familiar with this.*

*This... is war.*

Clenching his trembling fists till they held still, he took his first step onto the battlefield. He accepted the air of death surrounded him, and continued on. As the sound of multiple footsteps came into earshot far to the left, he stayed his path ahead.

*I'm pretty sure I saw them behind two big rocks near the center of the battlefield.*

*In that case, the people moving over there are probably the enemy.*

He continued until the two V-shaped rocks he'd seen earlier came into view, smashed together to form a small shelter.

Carefully, he trod over, hand gripping the sword. Taking a deep breath, he whispered, "Galgi, Ralin...is it you?"

A moment of silence passed by before the two faces of his friends poked out from the gap between the rocks, sending a sweet surge of relief through Cedric's chest.

Their faces wore shock like he'd never seen before, but they quickly recovered and ushered him inside the rocks.

He slowly crept in the small gap between the rocks and looked around. The other eight members of Ralin and Galgi's squad lay scattered and unconscious, their wounds wrapped carefully. Ralin and Galgi themselves were bloodied and bruised, seemingly on the verge of collapse. As they slumped down against the rock's inner wall, Cedric eyed their uniforms.

What should have been emerald green and grey, was now red and gold, and wrapped around Galgi's neck was the red sash he'd shown him the previous day.

“Wolverine... uniforms?” Cedric asked, dumbfounded.

“Well, we saw the ship,” Galgi replied in a low voice.

“And we figured we might save ourselves if we dressed up like one of them,” Ralin continued, grimacing as he sniffed the sleeve of his uniform, which was too small for him.

“What were you going to do, then?” Cedric asked. “What if there’s so many of them you can’t catch them off guard?”

“We hadn’t had a chance to think that far ahead, to be honest,” Galgi said, rubbing his temples. “But just what the hell are you doing out here, Cedric?”

“It’s a long story, but for now I just need to leave the island,” he answered without hesitation.

“What?” they both replied, their shock returning.

“More importantly, I need to get this thing off the island,” he said, flashing the sword from his utility belt. Their shock grew into amazement before excitement broke out on their faces.

“You actually did it, eh Cedo?” Ralin said with a chuckle.

“I’m assuming there are Red Wolves on your tail, then?” Galgi followed in a more serious tone.

“That’s right,” Cedric answered, narrowing his gaze. “That’s why I have to get out of here right now. I’m not sure how much longer I can fight, honestly.”

“Same for us,” Galgi muttered, scratching his head in thought. “I think I have a plan, but you’ll really have to trust me to talk our way through it.”

“Got it,” Cedric said with a quick nod. “I’ll follow your lead.”

Moments later, the smoke cleared in front of the two V-shields as three Red Wolves approached, crossbows readied. They stopped when they noticed the two red and gold-clad soldiers rounding the corner of the shields, dragging a motionless green-clad person between them. The three stared at the group in silence for a moment, fixing their aim on them.

“What’s that you have, soldiers?” the raggedy man standing in the middle asked with a strict tone.

“This is the target,” Galgi answered, holding up the left arm of the boy whose head hung low. Ralin followed suit with some hesitation, raising the boy’s right arm much higher than Galgi had before awkwardly lowering it.

“And what is...the target?” the man asked, eyeing Ralin suspiciously.

“The Teuton Heir, as well as the Red Sword,” Galgi answered with haste, partially withdrawing the sword from Cedric’s utility belt.

The man’s eyes grew wide, and his crossbow lowered.

“Who is your captain?” he asked, narrowing his eyes.

“We’re Suguille’s men,” Galgi answered, stepping forward, to which Ralin hastily followed. “Sir, you should know there are pursuers close behind us.”

“Lieutenant Suguille, eh?” the man mumbled, ignoring him.



“Sir, we have to get out of here with the sword before the Teutons get here!”

Galgi shouted, stepping in front of the man.

“So, the rest of your party... it was at least thirty, I think- were wiped out, and you somehow got away with the target- is that right?” the man prodded unflinchingly.

“Yes, Lieutenant Suguille included” Galgi insisted, “the boy put up such a fight that he rendered everyone either dead or unconscious- including himself.”

“That’s right, we just happened to wake up before anyone else,” Ralin added with desperation in his voice. “So, we made off with him like we were instructed, but before we made it here we spotted a pursuit coming down the hill behind us!”

The man regarded their plea in silence, gazing beyond the beach to the cliffy region surrounding the volcano.

“Please, we must deliver the target- for our captain’s sake!” Galgi cried, his voice straining.

“Tch...” the man replied, letting his crossbow hang to his side. “Let’s get on the boat, then. We haven’t time to waste, it seems.”

The three men turned their back to them, and Cedric cracked his eyes open, his heart racing.

The raggedy man led the way to the shoreline, where a small ship was waiting. It was only large enough to be a transport ship, as it contained no armory or cannon. Instead its railed balcony running along its portside gave it a look of a large luxury shack on water. The inside was closed, topped with a sloped roof rather than a deck. Its head

was coated in a thick canopy, covering its captains' room which was exposed by an opening that allowed a ladder to run from inside to the top of the canopy.

The man skipped up a ramp going down from the starboard side of the ship and ushered them inside. Cedric continued to hang his head, playing the part of the unconscious captive. Once his friends had entered the ship, the men raised the ramp, latching it onto the wall of the ship's main room- a small, torchlit square lined with aged shelves full of various trinkets and weapons.

"Oy, big guy," the raggedy man barked at Ralin. "You help Gaz get the ship moving." Ralin hastily nodded and followed the larger of the two silent men into the captain's room.

"And you, clean-cut, watch the kid," he said as he turned toward the sliding bamboo doors on the portside of the ship. "Lex and I will set the flare off to let the General know we're coming to them."

"Got it," Galgi responded in a formal tone, glancing at Cedric curtly.

"Ah, right," he said, stopping and turning back to them. He approached Cedric, walking almost into Galgi's arm and forcing him to release his grip on the boy's arm.

Cedric felt his grip release and did his best to fall limply to his side.

"I'll be the one holding on to this," he said as he wrenched the sword from Cedric's utility belt, and promptly walked away. The other man had opened the sliding door, allowing him to rush out onto the balcony alongside his comrade, who shut the door behind them.

In just seconds, the boat began to move across the silent water, and Galgi and Cedric were left in the main room.

“Cedric,” It’s okay to get up,” Galgi whispered.

“Well then would you mind untying me, clean-cut?” Cedric quipped, rolling over to show Galgi his back. He squatted down and made quick work of the bonds wrapped around his wrists and forearms.

“Well, what now?” Galgi mumbled, folding his arms and tapping his bicep with a finger. “They shut the door and took the sword, so we can’t exactly surprise them with force. Should we wait for Ralin to take out his man, and then attack using our numbers?”

“I don’t know,” Cedric responded, standing to his feet. “If Ralin makes a ruckus they’ll surely hear it from out there. I think our only choice is to attack at the right time.”

“Hmm,” Galgi pondered, “he did mention setting a flare off to alert their leader... should we use that moment, or is it unwise to let them send that communication?”

“No, it should be fine,” Cedric answered. “He did say it was to let the General know that we’re heading to them, which should mean they’ll hold their position and wait for us to get there. Otherwise, they might come looking if they don’t receive communication, right?”

“Yeah, you’re absolutely right,” Galgi replied with a smile. “I guess our intuition to allow our capture rather than to fight, was correct. That’s really quite impressive,

Cedric. It doesn't surprise me that you turned out to be the Heir- you'll make a fine Knight-General someday."

"Ah, save that," Cedric said, chuckling through his nose. "I was playing asleep while you did all the talking, so I had time to think about the things that were being said...that's all."

"Modest as always, I see," Galgi remarked with a grin. "Now then, let's prepare for the moment they set the flare off."

"Right," Cedric replied with a firm nod. The two slinked over to the door and pressed their ears against the soft bamboo. Just as they did, a shouting voice reached their ears.

"Dax, what the bloody hell are you doing? Your orders were to wait for me!"

"Oh no, that must be-" Galgi whispered, eyes wide.

"It's Suguille!" Cedric finished, throwing the slide door open in a panic.

"Cedric!" Galgi cried, following him out to the balcony.

The two men had just lit their flare and were about to watch it fly into the sky when the tall man shouted as he ran down the shoreline, followed by five of his men.

"What the hell?" the raggedy man named Dax exclaimed, dropping the sword to look over the rail. "Suguille, you weren't dead?"

"No, of course not!" He responded in a frenzy. "Now stop the damn ship!"

“Uh, yeah!” Dax responded in a panic. Just as he turned around, however, a boot met his chest with a thud. Cedric’s flying kick landed with enough force to send the man backward over the rail, where he fell with a splash into the water.

The other man attempted to draw his weapon on Cedric, who had fallen on his back after the aerial attack. Just in time, Galgi landed a standing straight-kick to the man’s neck. He wobbled, teetering out of consciousness, and fell over the rail, splashing into the water next to his comrade. Just as he fell, the small explosive fired off from the balcony floor into the sky.

“I should have known!” Suguille shouted, reaching inside his uniform’s jacket.

Cedric stood to his feet, watching as the flare from their ship exploded into a small firework display above them.

“Cedric, I think he has another one!” Galgi cried, pointing at the chasing Suguille. The tall man struck with a knife at a small package in his hand, one that from a distance resembled the explosive they’d just seen.

“Not good, another flare will send them searching for us!” Cedric yelled, snatching the sword from the balcony floor and stepping over the railing.

“Cedric, don’t!” Galgi shouted, pulling him back by his vest just as he began his jump. “There’s two in the water and five on shore, don’t be foolish!”

“There’s no time, Galgi!” Cedric shouted back, fighting to break his grip and leap over the railing. “We’re done for if he sets that off!”

“Then, let me do it....” Galgi responded with calm resolve, pulling him back over the rail where he fell onto his back with a thud. As Cedric fell, his gaze panned over the

fragmented wall, where he noticed movement behind one of the ballista arrows. Galgi, unaware of the activity, focused ahead.

“You’re the Heir, Cedric...you’re the one who needs to escape right now.”

Galgi pulled a knife from his belt, and as he leapt over the rail, threw it with a grunt.

“Galgi, no!” Cedric cried as he lunged over the railing toward his airborne friend.

The knife soared across the water and struck Suguille’s explosive package, knocking it from his hand onto the beach. The man scrambled to his knees, picking it up and frantically striking at it.

Just as a few sparks sprang from the object, a loud snapping sound echoed from the wall. Suguille looked up just in time to dive into the water, along with his five men.

The ballista arrow crashed with a blistering impact into the beach, throwing a storm of sand and flames along the shoreline and into the water. Beyond the flames were billows of smoke, rendering the result of the strike impossible to see- aside from the muffled sound of firework explosion underneath the water’s surface.

Cedric’s legs were wrapped around the rail bars, the railing digging into his stomach as he held onto his friend’s forearm with one hand.

“Cedric!” Galgi cried, shocked at his desperate attempt to reel him in.

“Get up here, Captain,” Cedric answered calmly despite his strained voice and muscles. With a heave he pulled Galgi upward, until he was able to grab the railing and pull himself over.

The two landed on the balcony and doubled over, catching their breath while the smoke cleared just enough to bring the wall back into view.

“The person up there... could it be?” Galgi muttered through deep breaths.

“Uohhh!” a man’s deep voice shouted fiercely over the beach, his voice wavering. Cedric and Galgi both spotted his silhouette, fist raised toward the sky, as he teetered over and fell out of view.

“Commander Giro...” Galgi mumbled, a warm smile forming as he raised his fist in the sky. Cedric smirked as he did the same, and the two bellowed out.

“UohhHHH!”

“UhOOOOHHH!” the burly voice of Ralin rang from behind them, even louder than the two of them combined.

They both turned to see Ralin throw the last of the Red Wolves over the balcony, several meters into the sea as he delivered his war cry.

“Sorry I’m late,” Ralin said through bated breath and a precocious grin. “Looks like we won?”

Cedric and Galgi’s gazes shifted from the thrown man to Ralin. They then turned to each other, wearing blank shock before breaking into hearty laughter.

“Yeah Ral, we won,” Galgi answered with a grin. “Now, let’s keep this ship moving and get Cedric away from these battlefields. Even if there’s no one left right now, it isn’t safe here.”

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On a small cliff just downhill from the beach's wall, Chief Allen stood behind a long wooden table surveying the scattered clay pieces that emulated the battle formations. In front of the table stood a large, heavily armored man with no helmet. He wore the same green robes and silver plating as Hydrick but stood considerably taller. His mid-length brown hair stood like spikes atop his head as he gazed out at the massive battlefield- a beach spanning several miles, nearly every grain of sand lined with soldiers of either army.

"Things look to be going as planned... is that right, General Samuel?" Allen said, careful not to look up from the table as he fixed his long black hair.

"Exactly so," the gruff-looking man responded, crossing his arms.

"On the right side we have your First Lieutenant, Charles, leading roughly 5,000 against Faron's First Lieutenant, Darnew leading 10,000," Allen continued, moving pieces on the right side of the table toward each other.

"On the left, Hydrick leads 4,000 of his own alongside 3,000 of yours under the supervision of your second Lieutenant, Gregory. Against them, Pursia leads some 10,000. And in the middle stands Valblin, Al, and your Third Lieutenant, Roland, at the helm of 12,000 including 25 of the 100 Teutonic Knights and 200 of my personal soldiers, facing Faron's main army of at least 15,000. Al is spearheading the attack, leading 2,000 men each from his and Hydrick's armies, in a ribbon attack."

Allen placed arrow-shaped pieces in the shape of a ribbon, stemming from the middle and spanning all three sections of the battlefield.



“With his aggressive charge, Al cuts into the middle of the enemy army and charges at angle into their right side, before turning back and retreating into Charles’ men. While the remainder of his line of men follow his loop, Al cuts back through the middle and charges at the same angle into the center before moving into the left side and retreating into Hydrick and Gregory’s army.”

“The goal being to straighten out the angle more with every loop around, folding the ribbon toward the middle of Faron’s center army,” Samuel remarked. “Though, the chances of success are low with that kind of attack pattern, since the enemy just needs to break the group up and isolate Al.”

“Which is why Al has been given the power to requisition troops on either side to bolster the attack’s momentum and force either the center army to spread out to support the sides, or the sides to hunker down to protect the center,” Allen continued, moving pieces accordingly. “Which means we either have the opportunity to crush the center army’s throat as they fan out or cripple the sides as they attempt to defend the center.”

“And the way things are going, we’re crushing the center and crippling the sides,” Samuel responded, humming satisfactorily.

“We must simply wait for Hydrick and Charles to put just enough pressure on the sides for Faron to give up on holding his ground in the middle,” Allen said, moving several pieces into an emphatic collision. “At that moment we’ll send Al straight down the center for Faron’s head.”

“Normally I’d want the opportunity to take the bastard’s head myself,” Samuel replied, “but don’t you think he’ll just retreat once he sees how things are going?”

“He might, if Shuant himself wasn’t here,” Allen answered, sliding another piece up from the rear of the enemy formation. “The man calling the shots at their headquarters should provide the haughty Faron enough incentive to face the assault and prove himself. In that regard, it shouldn’t be long before Shuant himself makes a move. How embarrassing it would be, after all, to lose when you have such an advantage in numbers...”

“Well in that case,” Samuel said with a grunt as he stretched his thick neck and arms, “I’ll ride out and prepare to meet Shuant head on. I can’t let the 3,000-Man Commander win the day on my own battlefield.”

“The plan must remain the same, Samuel,” Allen said, finally looking up from the table. “We cannot underestimate Shuant and Pursia. We’ll be lucky to see the night end without the loss of one or more commanders, and luckier so if we take out Faron. The goal is to execute a relentless attack, pressuring them into a hasty retreat and crippling their forces as they do so.”

“You got it, Chief,” Samuel responded with an air of pride as he mounted his horse and rode downhill onto the battlefield.

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At the neck of the Teuton formation, Valblin stood at the front of the 25 knights, alongside their captain- a lanky man with short blond hair, helmet laying in his lap.

“Oho, it seems Samuel himself is coming to meet us,” Valblin declared with his signature chuckle.

“It’s no wonder Roland went charging ahead,” the blond man answered with a grin. “Guess none of them are keen on letting Al steal the show, eh Master?”

“Oh yes, the apple does not fall far from the tree, Master Feng- oh, excuse me, Captain Feng,” Valblin replied sarcastically.

“You’ll have to get over my betrayal of taking on two jobs another time, Master,” Feng replied with an even broader grin. “Anyway, I suppose it’s about time for the night’s festivities to come to a close, isn’t it?”

“Yes, you’re correct,” Valblin answered, stroking his beard. “Al is coming from the right side to make his move up the middle. Despite Roland already charging ahead, Faron is beginning to spread forces out to aid Pursia’s right side and his Lieutenant’s left side.”

“In effect, daring Roland and Al to meet him head on,” Feng said, gazing toward the right where the main army made way for Al’s spearhead attack.

“Mm,” Valblin replied, “Al has single-handedly tipped the scales in our favor with his unstoppable attack; perhaps Faron is thinking that by taking out Al, he’ll take the pressure off the sides and allow Pursia to overtake Hydrick and Gregory.”

“What about Roland?” Feng asked.

“Oho, I suppose Faron is a man of great pride,” Valblin answered. “Samuel’s Third Lieutenant is held in high regard when it comes to brute strength, more so than Gregory or Charles. Faron must feel confident he can weather the attacks of both Al and Roland, or perhaps he’s counting on aid from General Shuant himself.”

“Which is why Samuel is riding out,” Feng replied with a smirk, lifting his helmet from his lap.

“And why we, too, should make our way to the head of battle,” Valblin said, watching as Al’s line of cavalry streaked by.

“All units, forward!” Feng cried out, raising a fist as the two led the way alongside the tail of Al’s group. As the center army proceeded in full charge, a flare soared skyward from the west. It burst into a small fountain of red light, crackling loudly across the beach.

“The symbol of their retreat, perhaps,” Valblin muttered with a serious look.

“Does that mean they’ve taken the sword, and the others didn’t arrive in time?” Feng asked, a look of desperate shock on his face.

“In theory, it would mean that,” Valblin answered in a low tone. “However, if we are choosing to believe in our Heir, perhaps it is a different outcome. Either way, Shuant will be pulling his forces out with haste, so we must capitalize on this opportunity to cripple their forces.”

“ALL FORCES,” Samuel’s boisterous voice rang out from behind, garnering the entire army’s attention.

“CHARGE FORWARD AND DEVOUR THE ENEMY! DO NOT LET A SINGLE WOLVERINE LEAVE OUR BEACH ALIVE!”

“UOOOHHHH!” the Teuton army sang out in unison, moving in on the retreating Wolverines as one powerful mass.

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Master Gambell, riding at the head of twenty-five Teutonic Knights, entered the canyon around the base of the volcano. Surveying the scattered bodies of Red Wolves and Shlanks as well civilians, he sped to where Mel lay in the arms of Selmy.

“Mel!” he shouted, forcing Selmy to look up in surprise. “Is he okay, Selmy?”

“Master Gambell!” Selmy cried as the man dismounted from his horse. “I- I think he’s okay, he’s just unconscious...but please, help Tess!”

Gambell glanced with wide eyes at the crumpled Tess and Ango, and then to the five boys covered in dirt.

“Six men, please tend to them, and the boys over there as well. Everyone else, please secure any enemies that still live.”

As the knights spread out, Gambell knelt down next to Selmy, who continued holding Mel’s head in her lap.

“Mel, please wake up,” Gambell said softly, patting the boy’s chest until his eyes slowly opened.

“Gambell...”

“Mel, what happened to the rest of the Red Wolves and Shlanks?” Gambell asked sternly.

“While he was unconscious, the Shlanks left with their leader,” Selmy answered with haste. “And five of the Red Wolves followed their leader over the cliff.”

“Over the cliff?” Gambell asked, glancing to the location of the landslide.

“They went after Cedric,” Mel mumbled in response.

“Cedric, you say...” Gambell muttered, his eyes narrowed.

“Cedric Cintog is the Heir,” Mel answered firmly. “He has the Red Sword and plans to leave the island with it.”

Gambell’s jaw dropped. At the same time, the sound of fireworks resounded from the beach ahead, the sky shining scarlet.

“Ten of you, please make for the beach immediately!” Gambell barked, prompting a group of the knights to circle around to the forest where the hill began. Their horses raced up the hill through the trees, until something caused them to halt.

“Master Gambell,” one of the knights called from over the sloped cliff. Suddenly, a man fell from the short cliff, seemingly pushed off. The tall man fell to the dirt with a thud, muddying his fine green robes and auburn locks. He simply rolled into a tree and sat up with a defeated look.

“Father!” Selmy cried out in shock, careful not to jostle Mel’s head in her lap.

“General Melvin Cillavier...” Gambell muttered while a knight rushed over to him. The man said nothing, and simply offered his wrists to the knight, who took care in bounding them together.

“Well then, Mel...” Gambell continued after letting out a sigh. Mel turned away from the captured man with closed eyes, while Selmy fought back silent tears as she clasped Mel’s hand.

Resting a hand on Mel’s shoulder, Gambell asked, “Where is Quentle?”

“Quentle should be up there, somewhere,” Mel replied, pointing up the slope toward the volcano’s peak.

“And, is there anyone else?”

Mel and Selmy, at the same time, shook their heads silently.

“Then, stay put here with the knights while I check on Quentle,” Gambell said, rising to his feet. With urgency he climbed his horse and rode up the twice-collapsed slope.

Mel glanced around, noting that the knights were all tending to everyone else.

“Selmy...” he said softly, drawing her face closer and allowing her hair to fall onto his face. “I’m sorry for what’s going to happen to your father after this.”

“He knew what he was doing,” Selmy answered, a tear falling from her cheek and landing on his. “But what about you, and your father...?”

“I don’t know,” he replied, looking away before staying his eyes on her. “But, let’s say we do find a way to avoid being thrown into prison or executed.”

“Uh-huh?” she responded, a weak smile forming.

He gripped her hand with his right, and stroked her chestnut hair with his left, smiling before softly muttering the words, “marry me, Selmy.”

“Ah.... huh?” she blurted out, her face frozen and turning a red that matched the falling flare that shone from the sky through the wisps of her curled chestnut hair.

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Gambell climbed to the top entrance of the volcano, frowning as he discovered no one was there. He then rode to the very peak of the volcano, where he found a trail of blood going down the slope before being stopping near the entrance.

“Quentle... just where have you gone?”

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In the forest just beyond the volcano’s base, three hooded figures snuck away, holding ropes attached to the hands and arms of an unconscious dark-haired boy. They dragged him through the dirt without a care, hurrying away from the volcano.

“We just avoided a bunch of horsed knights, big bro,” the livelier of the twins announced in a loud whisper. “Shouldn’t we just ditch the kid and skip town?”

“Oh, but that would go against our principles,” Hastor answered in his usual loose tone, unable to hide his exhaustion as he lazily lugged the boy along. “The Blonde Bandits are greedy; we can’t run from a failed job without at least securing some payoff, after all.”

“Does this kid even come from money?” She followed with a skeptical look.

“He may live in the slums, but I’m sure he has some sort of family that cares about him,” Hastor answered. “And where there’s love, there’s money, hehe.”

Just then, a lustrous knife soared from the trees to the bandits’ left, cutting through Hastor’s rope before the three could react. While their attention was spent attempting to react and find the source of the thrown knife, a large man stomped into the small clearing, closing the distance to Hastor before he could turn around to defend.



“Ye lot pr’voked the wrong lov’n fam’ly!” The grizzly man roared just as he sent his oversized fist into the unprepared Hastor’s face.

“Buh!” the bandit groaned as he fell violently to the dirt, and out of consciousness once again.

The twins drew their daggers and made for the large man. However, two young men emerged from the trees directly ahead of them with crossbows readied, stopping them in their tracks. A third person stepped out from the trees where the knife had come from, twirling another in his hand.

“Drop your blades, girls, it’s over,” the ponytailed Elem calmly demanded, lowering his crossbow at the sight of the knife-wielding Thom.

“An’ git on ‘way from my son!” the bulky Dagan growled, lunging over to rip the ropes off the boy. The girls stepped aside, dropping their daggers and raising their hands high. The shaggy-haired Thom and dirt-matted Graham took their hands and bound them in their own rope.

“Hoy, Quentle! Getcher ass steady, boy!” Dagan barked, shaking the boy’s shoulders.

“Huh, this again?” Quentle mumbled dazedly, slowly opening his eyes. “Didn’t this just happen yesterd- ah.”

Having finally regained his senses, the bloodied boy sat up with a raised brow.

“Old man? And Elem...and Graham...and Thom!” he exclaimed, slowly looking over each of his foster brothers.

“Di’nt I tell ye to watch yerself?” Dagan said as he gripped Quentle’s shoulders, sniffing.

“Hmm, I thought I did a pretty good about that though,” Quentle said without a care, gazing dumbly at the sky. “I don’t really remember what happened, but I went out like a light!”

Elem approached Dagan’s right side, shooting a concerned look at his adoptive father.

“An ‘at’s why I don’t like ye scarin’ us like ‘at, boy,” he grunted before lifting Quentle to sit over his shoulders.

“Whoa-oh yeah!” he exclaimed, “I kicked the Shlank Heir’s ass! Sent him flying over the volcano!”

Elem looked at him, mouth and eyes wide, to which Quentle responded by pointing at his biceps and winking.

“Gehaha, let’s go back o’er so ye can show us!” Dagan cried with a hearty laugh.

“Gehaha!” Quentle laughed in his best mimic of his adoptive father, “back to the scene of glory we go, men!”

As the group ventured back toward the canyon, several knights appeared and took over the captive bandits, allowing the family to enter the volcano’s base on their own.

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Cedric stood over the balcony rail, gazing anxiously as the rear of the Wolverine fleet flooded inward, toward the beach. Galgi, who stood next to him, gave a sigh of relief.

“It looks like sailing far around the back of their fleet was a good gamble to take,” the weary man said, releasing his grip on the railing. “Especially considering there’s no place to escape to the west.”

“Nothing but more Wolverines; not to mention Shlanks, huh?” Cedric mumbled in response, craning his neck to try and glimpse the distant shoreline, barely illuminated by scattered moonlight and torches of soldiers- moving in mass toward the sea.

“That’s right, sailing around to eastern shores was our only real choice,” Galgi answered, fixing his disheveled hair with his hand. “We just had to hope they wouldn’t see us if we took a long path around their backside. Thankfully, this little transport ship is one of the fastest movers I’ve seen.”

“Probably helps to have a monster like Ralin powering it,” Cedric replied with a chuckle.

“No doubt,” Galgi said, grinning, “he’s in there cranking the power mill so hard, I’d be getting in his way if I tried to help.”

As if he’d heard them, Ralin emitted a longwinded “Uohh!” from the captain’s room, summoning grins to both their worn-out faces.

“I wonder what’s happening with the battle...” Cedric muttered as his grin gradually faded.

“Well, by the looks of the deserted northern beach battlefield, it seems Hydrick and Al’s armies moved over to make one massive battlefield,” Galgi answered, squinting at the shoreline. “What was left of them at least. It’s hard to tell exactly what’s going on, but my guess is all hell is breaking loose... Wolverines trying to retreat, and Samuel and the others swarming on them like madmen.”

“I can only imagine what it’s like for them... to be able to chase their backs after so long,” Cedric replied, staring on with melancholic interest.

Just then, a unified war cry sounded like a wave passing over the beach.

“UUOHHHHHHH!”

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The armor-less and heavily bandaged Hydrick led his assault, alongside Samuel’s second Lieutenant Gregory, into the heart of the enemy’s right defense line led by one of Faron’s Lieutenants.

With ease he cleaved through the men protecting the enemy commander, and in one strike knocked him from his horse, dead. The Teutons around him roared their battle cry as he raised his broad sword, urging them into the brittle defense line that fought to hold the pursuing Teutons back while the bulk of the Wolverines retreated toward their ships.

Gregory, a tall man with wild red hair flowing uninhibited by a helmet, took over the charge as their combined forces caused the defense line to collapse. Hydrick looked over the Wolverine forces as they commenced a full retreat, finally pinpointing the escaping Pursia far ahead and narrowing his eyes before turning toward the middle of

the battlefield. The surge caused by his defeat of the enemy commander and breakdown of the defense line, was spreading like wildfire.

At the center of the battlefield, Al paved the way forward alongside Samuel's Third Lieutenant Roland. The stout man matched Al well, cleaving into the enemy defense line with a long iron club covered in spikes. Just as their momentum seemed unstoppable, however, they were met by heavy cavalry forces adorning a sharp gold-colored armor.

The elite cavalry managed to push the dually-led attack backward, until a battle cry surged from the left like a shockwave to the center of the battlefield. The men at Al's back pushed forward as if possessed, and he and Roland began to fight through the lines of heavy cavalry soldiers.

"Looks like Darnew moved over from their left side to make sure Faron retreats safely!" Al shouted to Roland, who nodded with an excited look.

Just as the two cut their way into the last five lines of heavy cavalry, Darnew came into clear view. Before they closed in on him, however, a presence rumbled from behind with a deafening war cry. Riding the shockwave that had come from the left side, Samuel's towering figure charged through the gap between Al and Roland, nearly knocking them from their horses.

Valblin and Feng rode alongside him at the head of the 25 knights, with some two-thousand heavy cavalry trailing close behind. Samuel himself seared through the five lines of heavy cavalry, obliterating man and horse alike with only a few strokes of his oversized glaive. Before Darnew managed to turn-tail in panic, Samuel's glaive had gone through him, producing an explosion of blood and flesh. Valblin swung his golden

glaive through some dozen heavy cavalrymen while Feng cut even more down with his longsword, leaving none in their wake to attempt a flanking attack on Samuel. The group behind them fanned out, finishing off the collapsing middle defense line and initiating a consuming route of the retreating Wolverines.

The surge of morale took over the entire center army, and their war cry rang loud as they pushed the Wolverines toward the sea. Samuel headed the assault while the other commanders fanned out at different points of the charge. The unstoppable Teuton force swallowed thousands of Wolverines, before the front-lines came into firing range of the war galleys the Wolverines were pouring into. Ballista and cannon-fire erupted on the shoreline, finally halting the relentless massacre- which allowed the remaining Wolverines to fill the many ships.

One man, however, did not let up in his advance. Through smoke and flame his horse raced, and as the barrage of artillery fire ceased and the smoke cleared, his daunting figure came into view near the very end of the shoreline. His green robes were tattered and enflamed, and moderate wounds shone throughout his long torso and arms.

“General!” many of the front-line soldiers cried out, while Hydrick, Al, Valblin, and the others watched in silent amazement as the man raised his glaive and continued toward the water, in the direction of a particularly large ship adorned with a golden archway.

The ship began its departure, firing one last ballista arrow on a direct course to the man. He refused to falter at the sight of the massive projectile and swung his glaive

with a crushing force as steam rose from his arms. The ballista arrow shattered around him upon impact, a dozen of its pieces ricocheting into his arms and legs.

The man showed no sign of distress and pressed forward, raising his glaive once more.

“COME AND FACE ME, SHUANT!” Samuel bellowed out, a seething fire in his eyes. The curly-headed Wolverine Commander-in-Chief stood at the rear of the ship’s deck, watching with crossed arms and menacing eyes.

“OR ELSE REGRET THE DAY YOU RAN LIKE A COWARD FROM THIS BEACH!”

As his roar reverberated across the beach, Samuel heaved his glaive back and threw it like a spear across the water. It traveled some hundred meters before crashing into the wall just behind the unflinching Shuant, missing him by a hair.

The man who stood alone on the shoreline raised a fist in the air. This time, he didn’t have to say anything. The sight of his strong back as he stood firm captivated the Teuton forces and raised their loudest battle cry yet- a cry of victory.

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The resounding cry reached Cedric as their small ship sailed away from the beach, far beyond the retreating Wolverine fleet. Galgi and Ralin stood on either side of him, wide grins plastered on their faces. Cedric cracked a smile himself as he watched the cheering army in the distance.

“What a thing to witness,” he said in a low voice.

“Yeah, the momentum is in our hands, now,” Galgi responded, placing a hand on his shoulder. “And you hold the cards to our victory, Cedric.”

“That’s right- let’s not screw it up, Cedo,” Ralin added with a playful smirk.

“Yeah, I know,” Cedric answered, gritting his teeth behind a fiery smile. “The answer lies with me, now.”



# Departure

“There you are, Quentle!” Master Gambell cried out, jumping from his horse to greet the boy who rode atop Dagan’s broad shoulders.

“Master!” Quentle shouted cheerfully, hopping down despite his bandaged legs and running to meet Gambell.

“Idiot!” Gambell spat, chopping Quentle’s head with his hand.

“Oww,” Quentle whined, holding his head. “I got injured there, Master!”

“Well maybe it will teach you to use that head of yours to avoid getting hurt next time,” Gambell rebuked with crossed arms and a frown.

“You’re drunk if you think that’s going to happen, Gambell,” a girl’s ice-cold voice sounded from behind the school teacher, who turned toward her with a closed-mouth smile.

“Tess!” Quentle exclaimed, staggering toward the heavily bandaged woman being tended to by two knights.

“I’ll let you take it from here, Tess,” Gambell said with a wave as he mounted his horse. I’ll leave a few men here, but we really need to get this traitor over there to the Chief and the Headmaster.”

Quentle watched with a frown as the knights lifted the bound Melvin Cillavier onto a horse on the opposite side of the canyon.

“Funny isn’t it, seeing me more beat up than I’ve ever seen you,” Tess said with a chuckle as she sat with her arms on bent knees, the two of them waving as Gambell departed on horseback with knights in tow. A shaggy-haired man he’d never met before laid next to her, equally bandaged and eyeing him curiously.

“Quentle, this is my twin brother, Ango,” Tess said with a smirk, nodding her head in the direction of her brother.

“Ah, Ango!” Quentle replied. “Good to meet ya!”

“Yeah, greetings and all that,” Ango responded, turning his nose in defiance.

“Quentle, you’re okay!” another voice rang from behind the knights tending to Tess and Ango, stealing Quentle’s attention at once.

“Selm-ah!” he grunted in surprise as the girl embraced him.

“I’m so glad you’re okay,” she whined through choppy sobs.

“Yeah, thanks,” he replied, a cheerful smile breaking involuntarily. “I don’t know why you’re here, but I’m glad you’re okay too. And uh...I’m sorry about your pops. But hey...where’s Mel?”

“Oh,” she said, blushing as she pulled away from him. She pointed several meters past the remaining knights to where the blond boy sat, arms folded over his knees. “He’s over there with the guys.”

All five of the boys who had tagged along sat in a small circle with Mel, nursing minor wounds. Upon seeing Quentle, all but one stood to their feet and swarmed him.

“You guys made it!” Quentle cried, throwing his arms around Geraint and Jorge’s necks.

“Quentle, you crazy bastard,” Kaolo cried in excitement. “Where the hell did you end up?”

“Oh, here and there,” he responded with a smirk, before stepping past the five boys to stand in front of the sedentary Mel. “Oy...” he barked, dropping his playful tone.

The boys all went quiet, eyeing the two awkwardly. Mel offered a sidelong scowl at Quentle, while Selmy shuddered.

“Did you see Cedric?” Quentle asked, looking down at his friend with a stern expression.

“Yeah, he got out of here,” Mel responded dryly, nodding his head toward the beach.

“Ah, well good,” Quentle replied. “What about you?”

“What are you on about...” Mel mumbled in response.

“You have anything to say to us?” Quentle said, his gaze and tone unfaltering. Mel sighed deeply before checking to see how close the soldiers were, and turned to face the boys.

“Yeah, I’m sorry I put all of you in danger due to my own lack of strength,” he replied seriously in a low voice, shifting his gaze from one to another before letting it fall on Quentle. “Even you, Quentle. You did a good job though, as I trusted you would.”

“Of course, I did...” he responded, furrowing his brow. “I was fighting for the Teutons, just like Cedric was.”

“Yes, and so was I,” Mel said, rubbing his neck and looking down. “Cedric’s ideals won out in the end, though. He’s going to be a great Heir.”

“Damn right, he is,” Quentle said, raising his voice and plastering a grin on his face. “After all, he had to beat out me and you to get it.” His grin grew wide as he reached his left hand out toward the sitting Mel, who hesitated before taking it and rising to his feet.

“Quentle, wait!” Selmy cried as the sound of cracking knuckles came from Quentle’s clenched right fist. He pulled Mel toward him before he could react, landing a vicious punch on his cheekbone that sent him flying back into the dirt.

“Mel!” Selmy shouted as she hurried over to where Mel lay. Without expression he sat himself up, raising a hand at the approaching Selmy, who stopped in her tracks. Upon seeing her dismay, Quentle averted his gaze and pressed his lips together.

“I get it, I deserved that,” Mel said, not bothered by the blood trickling down his cheek.

“Yeah, you did,” Quentle responded. “You caused a lot of harm, not to mention going behind me and Cedric’s backs. I don’t know if I can forgive you for that.”

“Yeah, I know...”

“But...I’m glad you at least didn’t get yourself killed because of your stupidity,” he followed up, turning his back to Mel.

“Yeah...you too,” Mel replied, a weak smile coming into shape. Selmy and Tess exchanged smirks as they watched Quentle walk away, trying his best to grin despite his watered eyes.

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At the peak of the long sloping beach, a group of men stood atop the fortified wall, gazing out as the Wolverine ships sailed into the distance.

“Men, all of you and your soldiers performed valiantly tonight,” said Chief Allen, who stood at the back of the half-circle facing the beach. “Samuel, your strength and command of the battlefield kept many men alive tonight, not to mention your mad heroics at the end...”

The perpetually-stern Samuel grunted and nodded his head. “Like I said, it was my battlefield to make a statement on.”

Allen chuckled through his nose, smirking. “Roland, Gregory, and Charles, you all executed your roles perfectly. You may trust your achievements will not go unrewarded.” The three men standing to Samuel’s right nodded silently.

“Valblin and Feng, your help tonight was crucial as well,” he said, looking over the old man and the charming blond with a smile.

“And of course, Hydrick and Al.” The two heavily bandaged young men stood tall to the left of Feng. “The relentless bravery and vigor you showed tonight is a testament to our Will, and why it remains so strong.” Allen glanced at Valblin before

continuing. "Your impassioned will to come out on top in order to protect your people, is the very essence of our Teuton Will. You should be proud to possess such strong wills of your own."

"You honor us, Chief," Hydrick replied with a bow, while Al nodded with a smirk.

"Allen, Valblin!" a voice called from a distance. The men turned to find Gambell emerging from the wall's rear stairwell.

"Gambell, what happened?" Valblin said, stepping forward to meet him.

Gambell trotted over to him and caught his breath.

"I have news from the volcano and the eastern battlefield."

"Go on, Master Gambell," Allen said with an anticipatory look, while Hydrick and Al looked on with interest.

"Cedric Cintog has become the Heir," he declared, triggering wide-eyed reactions from Valblin, Hydrick, and Al. "After an intense skirmish in the forest that led to the volcano and eventually the shore where the night's battle had ended in stalemate, Cedric left the island with two infantry soldiers on a transport ship belonging to the Red Wolves."

Valblin exhaled as if a weight had been lifted off his shoulders. "And you're sure he left of his own volition?"

"Yes," Gambell replied, "I have confirmed with Commander Giro that Cedric left with two of his infantry captains- Galgi and Ralin, I believe, were their names."

"Hah?" Al exclaimed upon hearing the names, his jaw hanging.

“Hoho, so the flare was a signal, after all,” Valblin mumbled, chuckling.

“Did Giro see which direction they were headed?” Allen asked.

“They seemed to be sailing toward the rear of the enemy fleet, according to Giro.”

“They fired the flare with the intention of sailing around them and our eastern shores, then.” Allen turned toward the sea, where the last Wolverine ships were sailing into the distance. “If they are indeed on that track, they might have fooled the Wolverines, for now, and sailed on. However, they’ll be on their trail soon. I’ll have to pull General Vlore from his naval post where he guards the island’s inlet between The Wall and Shlank land, and have him defend the Heir at sea. With that, it seems like the time has come for your mission to be executed at last, Valblin.”

“Mm, yes, Gambell and I will assemble our party and prepare for departure tomorrow evening, after we confirm things at the volcano,” Valblin said, gazing westward.

“I should add, the former General Cillavier was found at the volcano, and admitted to colluding with the enemy,” Gambell said, garnering surprise from everyone in the group aside from Allen.

“I take it he’s in custody, then?” Allen asked, his stern expression turning sour.

“Yes, he is,” Gambell responded with a nod before looking solely at Valblin. “As are the escaped prisoners from the central wall, led by Hastor Gladius- also known as the ‘Blonde Bandits’.

Valblin's expression hardened as he stroked his beard. "He and the girls will be joining us, Allen. You may interrogate them to your heart's content until tomorrow evening, but we need as many capable hands as possible." Allen merely nodded politely, remaining silent.

"Master, please allow me to join your party as well." All eyes turned toward the young man with fine, long blond hair. "I wish to be a part of the attack team."

Valblin and Al stared curiously, while Allen looked upon Hydrick with stern eyes. "Hydrick, you have an army of men here dedicated to your leadership. Are you prepared to leave that behind?" Hydrick turned and looked Allen in the eyes, unmoving.

"However, if Valblin is okay with your attendance, then I shall give your men to Al," he said with a slight sigh, glancing from the old man to the heavily-bandaged commander, whose jaw dropped.

"Ho, but of course," Valbin said with a warm smile before gazing out to sea. "My, what a victory we have achieved for Takanova here tonight, gentleman. The sword has left the island in the hands of our Heir, who intends to lead the enemy away from us so that we may rebuild. We have also dealt a crippling blow to the enemy forces and saw first-hand the revitalization of morale in our troops. Finally, we may execute my late comrade's mission, a plan of counterattack that will strike the very heart of our enemy."

Hydrick's expression was set ablaze by the old man's words, his fists and teeth clenched while Al and the others nodded confidently.

"This, gentlemen, is the beginning of the Teutons' counterattack."

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The flagship of the Wolverine fleet sailed through the dark waters, surrounded by fellow Wolverine ships. General Pursia approached Shuant, who leaned over the deck's railing in silent thought.

"General, it is as we feared," Pursia said, his facial muscles tightened as he bowed his head. "We never received Dax's transport ship, and a quick survey of the beach left us with no traces of the ship."

"What of Suguille?" Shuant asked in a nearly disinterested tone.

"Nothing so far, sir. A scouting ship has been sent to scour the area, but at this point going on shore is..."

"Impossible," Shuant said. "Their young Heir must have taken it away from the island, after all. This was always a possibility we were prepared to accept. Of course, I didn't foresee such heavy losses, so they did buy some time in both regards. What a shame for them, though... had we obtained the sword, I would have very seriously considered ending this particular war." Shuant smirked at the water below, chuckling through his nose.

"General, what are your orders?" Pursia pressed, frustrated. "Do we not make chase?"

"Yes, I'll leave the chase to you, Pursia," he replied in an off-handed tone.

"Me?" Pursia said, mouth agape.

"Yes, I think this is a suitable role for you," Shuant responded, still gazing out to sea. "It's likely they've taken our ship and are headed toward the Jaded Cavern."

"The underwater cavern..."

“Yes, a very dangerous place,” Shuant said in a mumble, finally moving away from the balcony toward the deck’s wall which had been partially destroyed by Samuel’s glaive. “You’ll have to catch them before they pass through the Jaded and enter Gleazon waters. If not, we’ll simply let the Heir collect most of the relic shards for us.”

“So, you believe that is their plan, after all?” Pursia asked.

“Yes, naturally,” Shuant responded, calmly lifting the glaive from the destroyed wall. “Collect the shards that Hedrick hid away before his death, and attack our castle on Felificia Island using their power. I’d like to prevent that kind of attack, but I would also be glad to have them deliver the shards to us... along with the lives of some of their strongest warriors.” He walked back to the railing and casually dropped the glaive over, watching as it speared the water’s surface before disappearing.

“Either way, Pursia, we shall defeat these uncooperative Teutons and take a step closer to our goal.”

“The Black Shlanks...” Pursia muttered.

“The origin of the Red Wolves,” Shuant seethed, his eyes remaining cold and focused. “Our debt of gratitude to our beloved people. The oath we took, to reclaim Shraunts Island from my corrupt kin. And in doing that, gain a foothold for our conquest of Dirac. We will make clear to the Teutons, and everyone else, that we are the strongest under the dome.”

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Several hours saw the sun peek through the dome, ending the long night and bringing a new dawn to Takanova Island. Miles east of the night's climactic battlefield, a Wolverine transport ship sailed along the shoreline.

Cedric glanced away from the map he held, to watch the view from the balcony as the ship drew closer to the wall that lined the shore. Two sets of footsteps sounded lightly behind him, drawing his attention away from the mountains beyond the city.

"We've made it this far without any pursuers in sight," Galgi said as he sauntered over to the railing, arms folded. "We'll be passing the point where the island curves toward The Central Wall of Takanova soon, so this will be my last chance to ask. Do you want to dock in and return, or do you still wish to keep going?"

"Keep going," Cedric said with conviction, his gaze falling back to the map in his hands. "Sea Serpent Cove, huh."

"The den of serpents at the end of the treacherous Jaded Cavern," Galgi mumbled, looking over his shoulder. "And then where?"

"Wherever this map, and the sword, tells me to go," Cedric replied, folding up the map and gazing out to sea. "Collect all the shards, it said. Only then can Shuant be defeated. Only then can the Teutons be saved."

"And you're sure you can do it, Cedo?" Ralin asked, grinning.

Cedric looked at his friends with conviction, before setting his gaze back to the sea ahead. "I'm certain I can. If this is the way to end the war, and for me to demonstrate my Teuton Will, to truly become a Teuton- I'll stake my life itself to make it happen. Will you two join me?"

“Heh, this ship ain’t gonna propel itself,” Ralin cheered with a boisterous laugh.

“Ral is right,” Galgi followed. “You’ll need our help with the ship, for a while at least. It pains me to leave our men like this, but I believe I speak for both of us in saying we want to go with you, Cedric.”

Cedric answered Galgi’s warm smile with a nod and a fierce grin of his own.

“Thanks, guys. Let’s sail on, then. Through the Jaded, to Sea Serpent Cove.” He picked up the great red sword from the balcony and held it up. “And wherever else this quest takes us.”

Galgi and Ralin raised their fists high, and together, the three of them let out a battle cry.

“Uohhh!”

**VOL 2 END**

**TO BE CONTINUED:**

***SWORD QUEST***

***VOL 3***