

Part I - The Conspiracy

Prologue

“Respect is earned, and it’s time we started earning it again.” The King, having finished his speech, stood up straight and stared at the crowd, clearly holding his breath and gripping the podium to stop his shaking. A couple audience members began to clap, followed by others, spreading to the whole crowd. A sitting ovation of polite applause.

In a way, this speech, held in the square outside of the royal palace in Neva in honor of the late Prince Arthanu’s funeral, ended the Fourth War. Leaving the people of Exbaltaira feeling lost, listless, and defeated.

On the side of the staircase, at the far end of a long table set up for certain nobles (such that Exbaltaira had), clapped Meciah. A fairly young elf at 212 years old, Merciah had dark skin, blue eyes, pronounced cheek bones, a pointed chin and black hair tied in what was then called a ponyless tail. He clapped with the rest of the table, which was curiously empty. There were twelve seats set aside for the Governors, and seven for the Sisters. Only half of the Governors were gone, as were many of the Sisters. He had hoped to find Sullivan there, but he was gone too. The rest, for reasons he dreaded to think upon, made him uncomfortable, and he found the prospect of the Sisters having equal place among them insulting enough. So he situated himself in the farthest corner possible, happy to be alone. And the rest seemed as happy to leave him alone.

All except for the one who sat beside him, clapping a fair bit more enthusiastically. He shot her a glare. Alasse Halldhor, one of the seven princesses of Exbaltaira. She had arrived late, just a minute before the King had started to speak. She had taken a quick glance over the table, and without a word plopped herself next to him. It looked like she had barely gotten dressed for the speech, instead opting for the clothing she slept in. Her hair was a unkempt bush kept in what looked like a bun.

“Cutting it under the wire,” he had said under his breath. Under your breath of course doesn’t actually mean anything in elvish culture, and its presence in Exbaltaira is evidence of cultural influence by the humans and other weak eared folk that so often shows up in Exbaltairan society. The point being, he had said it covertly, but in a way he was certain she would hear.

“Sorry,” she said, smirking, “I was hanging around inside hoping to catch the King changing. Turns out he sleeps in that getup.”

The remark had caused him to tense up and frown. She had giggled, either at his reaction or her own remark. There had been no interaction during the actual speech. When the King finished, and began picking up his crumpled papers, Meciah stood up, hoping to have a word with King Samuel. District Minnen, of which he was Governor of, was in desperate need of funding, especially now that ‘funding’ was actually required. The change in regime had upset many things, and the people of Minnen were adapting poorly. Also, perhaps this conversation would be his last chance to tell him the terrible truth.

“What did you think?” Alasse asked, breaking Meciah from his thoughts. He blinked a

couple times rapidly, and looked down at the princess. He blinked rapidly once more, and refocused on her hair, letting out a silent breath of exasperation. She had either forgotten to or deliberately did not button her top button, and Meciah assumed the first, naturally. He was a proper gentlemen, dammit!

“It was, well, lacking, actually,” he said to her hair. “He didn’t do much to inspire confidence. Kind of the opposite, actually.” He shrugged, shifting his eyes to the King. Handlers were starting to swarm him, and Meciah began to move. Alasse followed, for reasons that Meciah could not possibly imagine. He liked to think of himself as boring at his best. It kept people from bothering him.

“Well, if you were on top, what would you do differently?” she asked. Meciah began to form an answer, but his brain went through that curious routine most Exbaltairan elves did of picking out all of the sexual connotations of the sentence. An ironic habit that seems to come complimentary with the strict, perhaps oppressive by some standard, education regarding such things. He stumbled over his sentence, and looked back to Alasse. She winked.

“I am finished with this conversation. Good bye.” he said too quickly, taking up speed and leaving her behind. He could hear her laughing again, and the tips of his ears burned. He shook his head, trying to reshift his focus back onto the King. He needed to speak with him, that was his number one priority. He looked back to the steps, and Samuel was still there, speaking with another Governor. Aran, from the looks of it. He could never misinterpret the streak of bright red dye going through the Governor’s greying black hair.

He was just a couple feet away and about to call for his attention, when out of his peripheral came Dollthel, bounding up the steps, grabbing Samuel by the arm and dragging him the rest of the way. The King did nothing to resist, instead taking on a mask of quiet acceptance. Meciah stopped in his steps, watching his Lord and Liege be dragged away by a woman.

Halldhor would never have tolerated that

Meciah sighed, and turned around. He would have to speak with him some other time. He held on to this thought, understanding that there would be no other time. Tonight it began. He walked down the road, passing by dozens of elves who had decided to stand and gossip. Women walked about freely, a sight he honestly was not surprised to see. In the old regime, there were far fewer men in the cities than there were women, due to the compulsory military service for men. Now, men also walked, some with women, some with other men, and it all made him uneasy.

A large group of men had meant there was a battle or training to be had, and some apprehension was healthy. That was then; now he walked through the city on edge, before finally turning off the main road into an alley. He let out a sigh of relief, going from the claustrophobic open air to the strangely freeing narrow road. He walked down this some time, then he turned into another. And into another. He stopped in front of a door with a faintly glowing sign above it:

Hot Black Coffee

Meciah sighed, dread welling up within him, his bones seemed to suddenly turn to stone. He could not go in, not today. He was not ready, or he did not want to be. He looked back, thinking that perhaps he could run back, sprint up the stairs, and demand an audience with the King. Say that he had dire omens to give him. Or, failing that, perhaps he could trip on the stairs, and fall to a bumpy, painful, but ultimately merciful death. His would not be the first life those seven hundred steps had claimed.

He took a deep breath, in and out. What resolve he gathered from the motion melted the stone from his bones, and he brought his hand up to the knob. He knew that he had to go through with this. He had painfully thought over this decision for weeks. And his reasons were not going away. Not without force.

He opened the door and stepped into the coffee shop. Or whatever it pretended to be. There was coffee, to be sure. On every table there were at least four cups of coffee and as many elves. But the cups were not the “hot black coffee” being advertised. Elves, all men, all with dark skin, none with a shirt, strode around the shop, serving coffee, conversation, and innuendos to the clients. He had been in such an establishment once before the war, and then it had been filled with frustrated women whose husbands were either fighting a war with foreigners or “fighting a war” with the man down the block. Now, it was still mostly women, but several men were sprinkled in the tables, loudly appreciating the service.

A chill went up Meciah’s spine. He did not like this place. It was demeaning to him as a person. Even having just walked in, some of the patrons, their identities protected by the shadows cast by the dim lights, eyed him lasciviously. He sometimes wondered if the others chose this place intentionally. If they know of a secret back door, and only make him come in through the front to make him sweat.

He glanced at the bartender, an old blind elf with the ears of a bat. He was pouring coffee into a cup, and pulled out a bottle from under the counter. On it Meciah could barely read “Ol’ King Sam,” the newest and only brand of whiskey, just recently introduced into the market. The anger Meciah felt caused his face to flush, and he looked again at the patrons, judging. All he saw were perverts and drunkards. He walked up to the bar, and knocked three times. The bartender nodded, motioning his head to the back.

In the back, hidden in the shadows, was a door. Meciah took another deep breath. This door caused him more pause than the rest of the building, especially today. He walked up to it, and paused. Next to the door was a bowl with card in it. Meciah fished out his wallet, and from it retrieved his card. It was an identification card, with his name, number and address printed on it. They had been introduced under the new regime. Before, even with a chosen name, you were known by your position. He dropped his name in the bowl, and entered the door as the governor of Minnen.

The room was cramped, with only enough room for a sizable table. Around this table was a group of men, each covertly dressed in the grandest of black silks and jewels. Minnen sighed; Exbaltairans were not known for their subtlety, and as Governors it was perhaps their jobs to be so exaggerated. Going clockwise from the nearest, it was Eras, Belor, Tūmas, Heriagar, Suilanan, and Sturd. These, of course, were not their real names, but their titles. They were Governors of several Exbaltairan districts, and they sat around the table holding cards in their hands. A pile of chips sat in the center.

Suilanan was the first to speak, breaking out into a big grin when Minnen walked in. "Minnen! Glad you could make it you old sport. How was the speech?" Even in the dim light, Suilanan's cheeks were vibrant in their ruddyness, signifying that he was already well drunk.

"It was a bore. He didn't say much." Minnen say, acting coolly despite the shock he felt when Suilanan had asked the question. It wasn't much to assume he had gone to the speech, after all. Why else would he be so late, he rationed.

"Didn't say much, or were you too busy chatting up the girl to listen?" cooed Sturd, his voice rising high in the room. The rest of the table laughed, and Minnen almost began to shake. They had been watching him, they realized. They wanted to make sure he did not try to speak with Samuel. Perhaps tripping down the stairs had not been so mad a possibility. He once more felt the urge to run, to escape the hell of this room and this country. He had no place there, he thought in a panic. This was a story for cutthroats and daredevils, not himself!

Instead, he breathed, resolving to take the joke as a point of confidence. These men had resources, enough to place eyes and ears everywhere. They had the means to end him, this he knew. But they also had the means to make things happen. To make things change. Means the King lacked, surely. He breathed deeply, and sat down, smiling and chuckling.

"There wasn't much to hear. He just gave some sentimental appeal, and then waited for people to clap. Of course," he eyed each man individually, making sure to hold eye contact for a moment, "I'm sure you all know what he said, gentlemen."

There was a murmur of agreement around the table. Belor, a slight man who commanded an enormous presence by way of his perpetual glare and tense as a spring body, smacked the table. "Well, are we here to mumble and gibe, or are we here to talk? I've had enough of this waiting."

"Oh, where do you need to be?" quipped Heriagar, a nervous looking man with a balding spot. "Has your wife been falling behind in her chin lifts?"

"Where's your runt?" barked Belor, turning in his chair to face him. "Because I might have run over him on my way here. Unless that was the dog, I couldn't tell." The table fell into a roar as each of the Governors started yelling insults at each other, some in good fun, others in malice. Suilanan sat back, nursing his drink while enjoying the chaos. Minnen shifted uncomfortably in his chair.

"Gentlemen." The voice was only a whisper, but the room fell into immediate silence. The speaker was Tūmas, the one in the center of the table across from Minnen. He was old, older than the rest by a significant margin. He peered out of hooded, squinting eyes. His hair was grey all over, and his skin had the suggestion of wrinkles. None of this hid what was otherwise a cunning and wise face, with a certain glint in his eye that made people pay attention when he spoke. "Us fighting one another serves no purpose. Our guest here potentially joins us tonight. What sort of impression do you imagine you're making?" He spoke as if chiding children, and the governors reacted in kind. Minnen stared at Tūmas, who was clearly the leader.

This had been the fifth time attending these meetings. Most of this appearances beyond the first only lasted a couple of minutes before he left. And the group was never full, usually only one or two who could make the trip. And he had never met Tūmas; few people had. He rarely left his own district, sending a representative instead, most commonly his son. His family was

considered a rarity, not only knowing who his son was but also employing him. Minnen was only dimly aware of the children he had fathered.

This was the first time Minnen was seeing Tümas face to face, and already he could tell, only by the others' reactions, that he was a man to be respected. Or feared. Tümas gestured slowly to Minnen, slow not with grandeur but with age.

"Governor Minnen, it is an honor to meet with you at last. I had been hoping that you would join us. It has actually been vital, in my eyes." He spoke deeply, his voice drifting rich over the table.

"The honor is mine, lord Tümas," Minnen said, nodding. It truly was, he found the sentiment quite flattering, though not without confusion. "But how could I have been vital. Your group is already quite large, is it not?"

"Yes, it is, if you count by the men in this room." Tümas stared directly into Minnen's eyes, who found himself unable to look away. He feared what might happen if he did. "But if you count what they stand for, then you are by far the largest body here. These men," he gestured to his left, to Suilanan, Heriagar, and Sturd, "are not here. Really. Suilanan, Sturd, and Heriagar no longer exist. King Samuel has killed them. And we," he gestured to himself, Belor, and Eras, "are worse than dead. We are broken. We have been cut in half, like paper, and are nothing like our former strength. You see, Meciah," he pointed once more to Minnen. Hearing him say his name in this room almost felt vulgar, but Minnen could not bring himself to offense, "you represent something we cannot, not really. What we represent is vengeance. We have been wronged, and seek blood to repay what we have lost. You represent revolution. Your presence here justifies this movement, and means we can finally begin, knowing that we have the will of God behind us."

Throughout the speech, Minnen felt pride and wonder saturating his veins, pumped out by his heart. What unease he felt before had vanished, replaced now by zeal. He never felt so sure. But the last sentence caught him off guard, and he could not let it go.

"What do you mean by 'the will of God'? I thought you were of the opinion that Sarnu has abandoned us."

"Oh," Tümas said, his lips curving into a slight smile, "I am, and surely he has. He has been gone since we gave up his gift of immortality to save ourselves, when surely it was our time to die. No, I answer to a greater God, Minnen. For what power can be greater than Death?"

Death. The word sent a shiver through Minnen, and the way Tümas said it made it sound like a whisper in his ear. For a moment Tümas looked sickly, the hoods under his eyes making them seem like holes, and for a moment Minnen thought he stared at grinning Death. The moment passed, and Minnen had regained composure. Sturd had leaned forward.

"That is great and all," he said, "but we're not quite sure he's even with us, now are we?" He turned Minnen, smiling. Minnen could not return it, the feminine softness of his face placing him on edge. "Now, dear, are you with us?"

"Yes!" Minnen almost spat out, more sure than ever.

"Why?" Sturd said. The smile remained, but the friendliness was gone. Minnen scanned the room, and the rest of the Governors all stared at him. They did not seem curious, or even desperate. They were hungry. Ravenous. Minnen swallowed hard, and looked Sturd in the eyes.

“Because, I” and like that, Minnen could not speak. He stuttered over his words, his eyes darting back and forth from Sturd to the men. They seem to grow more ravenous by the moment, the flame of the single lantern flickering in their eyes. They seemed to be rising from their chair, readying themselves to pounce upon him, to tear him apart so that he might not leave this room. He looked back to Sturd, to his disgusting, feminine face. A face just like-

“I hate the new regime! I despise what King Samuel has done to our great nation, what lows he has dragged what once stood atop the mountain of civilizations. It disgusts me how he has allowed women to control this State while he leaves to play soldier. He runs about acting as Commander to the group of terrorists that tore what was rightfully ours from our grasps!” He turned around in his chair, his eyes trying to rip themselves out of his head, his arm out of its socket as he pointed at the door. “Out there! Those perverts that are allowed to operate so openly! To look upon me with such lurid, disgusting eyes!” He turned back to the group, now as ravenous as the rest. “I hate that I can do nothing to help my people, who are starving and homeless, because I must beg the crown for scraps! And then to have what my district has earned taken from me and sent to foreign lands. To the Wolf in the South! I hate King Samuel, curses to his name!”

The world spun, and Minnen too deep, long breaths. The table stared at him in silence. The adrenaline filtered from his system, and Minnen began to calm down. He looked at the table, considering whether or not he had overdone the theatrics. He was taken out of his thoughts by the sound of clapping. He looked up to Tümas, but his hands were laying on the table. He looked to his side, and saw Suilanan, beaming widely and smacking his hands together. The rest of the table follow suit, adding their hands to the din. Except for Tümas, who only smiled.

“Yes,” he said, gazing at Minnen. The clapping died down to silence, “I was correct. Your reasons vindicate all of us, Minnen. Gentlemen, we may begin. Minnen, it is time you met the final pieces of this conspiracy.”

Out of the corner of his eye, a man came into view. Minnen peered at that corner, and could not see any door or staircase. Perhaps there really was a secret door into this room. He found that he did not care. Whatever it was, he was ready to accept it.

The man was short, and wore a torn apart, black uniform. It was not a standard uniform, but an ornate affair, though what purpose it had served Minnen could not tell. He had a head of rough, badly kempt dirty blond hair, and a sly grin. Two swords hung at his sides. He held out his hand.

“Hello, sir. I’m glad to hear you’re on board. You can call me Barnabus, and I’m here to win us all a war.” He spoke with confidence, almost egotistically. Minnen had a hard time taking the boy seriously; for one, he looked so young. Like he had just come out of training. Minnen looked into the boy’s eyes, and saw a ferocity in them, but also a brokenness. This Barnabus did not inspire the confidence that Tümas did. Still, he took his hand in a strong grip. He wore leather gloves, and Minnen’s hand was lightly covered in ash when they broke away.

“It is a pleasure, Barnabus, but I do not know you. You can’t expect me to just take your word. Who are you?” Minnen made his suspicion plain in his voice as he eyed the boy. Barnabus simply chuckled.

“You don’t have to. Boys?” The man named Barnabus turned around to the corner he

had appeared in. Minnen's eyes widened in shock as the air flickered and three men blinked into existence. The first on the left wore an ornate uniform, not unlike the one the man Barnabus wore, only instead of tattered and ripped it was perfectly maintained and tailored. He held a mask of bored indifference, but the way his eyes darted about the room's corners betrayed a deeper paranoia. The second was wearing what looked like a Silversteel breastplate with runes twisting and curling across the surface. An eyepatch went across his face, and he scowled at the table. The third wore civilian clothes, but for a sword hanging at his side and a patch sewn to his chest. From this one a static, metallic smell came, and Eras in particular twisted his face in disgust.

Upon the breast of each of them was a pattern, either sewn in or painted on. From left to right, they were: α , β , and Ω . Archaic human letters that no longer held meaning to most, but the symbols sent a chill through Minnen and captured his breath. The appearance of these three, three legends thought to have disappeared upon the downfall of the Halldhor line, sealed in the finality of this day.

"Boys, I would like to present the former Grand Generals of Exbaltaira," announced Barnabus, gesturing to the men with a flourish. The one with the α bowed, smiling but with his eyes locked on Minnen. β snorted, glaring at Barnabus.

"Well? Are we ready to start this? I've grown weary of waiting for this craven group of women to act." He walked up to table, glaring at each Governor individually, daring them to challenge his statement. He received many likewise looks, but no one spoke. The voices seemed to have been stolen from the Governors in the presence of these men; they, in the old regime, had not been too far from King Halldhor in terms of respect demanded.

"Yes," Tümas said, unfazed by β , "I believe we are finally ready to begin our conversation."

1 - Samuel

Four months later, King Samuel and his party trudged across the landscape toward Exbaltaira, struggling with the whistling wind that heralded the coming storm. Samuel, King of Exbaltaira, was returning from the Council territory situated in the center of Keimin, where he had been acting as Commander to the Crusaders of the Council. Leaving, he had felt a mixture of relief and regret. The Crusaders, since he had left Exbaltaira two years ago, had been something of a family to him. A dysfunctional, angry, occasionally psychopathic family, but a family. Even then, though, he had been glad to leave them position of Commander behind. Leadership, he found, did not suit him as well as a professional soldier did. A grim thought to have on your way to being King.

Now he felt nothing of the sort, and the ring granted to him by Sarnu himself shone dimly in the twilight. It was a peculiar ring, one that, when worn, will dampen and repress the emotions of the wearer. Until it is removed, and the person is forced to experience every emotion repressed within an everlasting second. Samuel still remembered the first time he removed the ring, after keeping it on for well over a week. The memories were hazy, but he distinctly recalled strong arms holding him down as he thrashed himself against the floor.

He wore it now, cautiously wary and with full intention of removing it when the journey was done. He had only slipped it on after an attempt upon his life. Shemlan, a former Crusader and a full time assassin, had attacked the group. The fight was swift and brutal, leaving two of the men brought with them dead, and Samuel wounded.

Something to be understood about Samuel is that he is prone to angst. There have been many a day lost to self-reflection and tears. So while the ring's effect might seem a curse to some, it has done much to improve Samuel's productivity. So when he had looked upon the bodies of the men who died protecting him, feeling the wrath of an incoming soliloquy, he slipped the ring on, deciding it would be for another time.

At long last, the group came upon the bridge. It spanned across the Onisia river, the holy river of Exbaltaira and Ko'ebbe. The river held small significance to Samuel, especially in his lowered state of mind. To some elves, however, the river was an object of worship. In a way it was the unifying feature for the nations Exbaltaira and Ko'ebbe, who otherwise possessed a tempered animosity for the other. Now, it isolated Exbaltaira, forming the Eastern border to the great Exbaltairan Demilitarized Zone.

The river itself had few fords, and even at this narrow point the bridge spanned a half-mile. The party crossed over, and an air of melancholy fell over them as they touched the land on the other side. It was home, but it was not. Between then and the peninsula on which Exbaltaira now sat, they were not welcomed. The trees themselves seemed to whisper at them, to curse them for the blood shed upon their soil.

Samuel, though, was blissfully oblivious to the ill feelings of the forest, and pressed onwards, urging his remaining men onwards. There were now but four of the original six guards sent to escort him back to Exbaltaira. Samuel had been unwilling to be guided, but now appreciated the extra strength. Edward and Lanningham, two young men who might have been brothers, took the lead, while Emilio, a braggadocious sort, and Kidraff, who was a good deal

quieter, took the rear.

Something whistled between the trees. All four soldiers removed their weapons and stared out around them, searching for the source. Samuel, unperturbed, whistled back, shockingly off key. Chortles of laughter floated through the air, and a group of five appeared like from the air. They each wore casual clothing of linen and flax, or plain robes. Their leader wore a peculiar, ornate red outfit consisting of long pants and a shirt with a deep cut. His hair spiked up blond, though the roots betrayed the graying of age. He smiled at Samuel, still young but with some slight wrinkles below the blue eyes.

“Samuel,” he declared, planting his long red staff in the ground. His smile was disarming, but his looked at the other elf with cautious suspicion, like meeting a friend after years spent apart.

“Agarwaenor, or should I say Argollo,” Samuel stated coolly, eying him with total suspicion. Their time together in the Crusaders had been unpleasant, and even after all of that, this name Argollo was still strange to him.

Either from sensing the distrust in Samuel’s voice, or simply from hearing the other name, the smile on Argollo’s face faltered for a moment, then replaced with a chuckle.

“Yes, I would prefer that. Shall we walk?” he gestured East. “I’m not sure those are needed,” he said, looking at the still drawn swords, “we didn’t see any bandits on our way. Perhaps we didn’t seem like wealthy enough prey.” He chuckled at the joke, smiling good heartedly at Samuel. The stone faced elf did not respond in kind, but he did motion his men to be at ease.

They walked in silence, the soldiers resuming perimeter around the group, while Argollo’s mages, as they surely had to be, formed a sort of blob about the two Kings. Samuel looked disapprovingly upon the mages; they seemed more interested in enjoying the scenery than they were keeping an eye out for bandits. Or assassins. The forest of Exbaltaira used to be a sanctuary from such brigands and thugs. Any violence within the borders were more formal; men and women, displeased and disenfranchised, formed minor militias, and went through skirmishes with the military. The law indicated that civilians were to be left alone while the military routed these rebels, though the definition of ‘Civilian’ proved fairly flexible.

“Did you run into trouble on your way here?” Argollo asked.

“Yes. An assassin tried to kill me, instead he killed two of my men.” Samuel took a sidelong glance at Argollo. “Do you remember Shemlan?”

Argollo looked aside, as if trying to remember. “Barely. We did not speak much. All I remember is how upset he was with our imprisonment.”

“I suppose you wouldn’t remember him,” Samuel said, “well, it was him who attacked us.”

“That’s terrible,” he said simply, and the two fell back into silence. Argollo gazed into the forest, seemingly content with the walk and the silence. Samuel grew quickly impatient.

“So, this deal you want,” he said, “to patrol these forests outside my borders, yes?” He looked at Argollo. He remembered being infuriated when he received the letter, and knew logically that he should find the whole ordeal insulting. But now, he was just curious on how the red half-elf would sell the idea to him.

“That’s correct,” Argollo said, smiling. “As I’m sure you know, this land has taken to

bandits, looters in the cities, I'm sure you understand. I also understand that your military has been severely reduced."

There it was. Samuel could almost feel his pulse quicken, then swiftly slowed, and the gem on his ring glowed just a little brighter. It did not take emotionless paranoia to detect the subtle threat in that sentence, but that was not what might have bothered Samuel. Exbaltaira had been in the wrong in the Fourth War, this Samuel argued louder than anyone, but that did not make the reparations paid any less painful. The military might had been the source of the State's pride ever since its formation, either fifty thousand or five thousand years ago, depending on which documents you read.

"Yes, it has," Samuel said, reply in a naturally neutral tone, "making it hard to keep this area clean. Though I was thinking of setting up a volunteer program to patrol the DMZ. In exchange they wouldn't be taxed."

Argollo frowned at the notion. "You would send untrained civilians to fight bandits."

"The word 'untrained' describes no one in Exbaltaira, Argollo." Samuel said. Indeed, most of the nation was trained for military. Even the women, who are traditionally not allowed to enlist, were known to exercise and practise the sword, in the event they would need to protect their homes. And there were the plentiful women who joined the military disguised as men.

"Be that as it may, I imagine you can still use the assistance. Besides, it doesn't have to be only a military agreement." Argollo pulled out his knife, and held out a piece of his sleeve. He sliced a piece of the cloth off, brought it away from his arm, showing clearly that it was cut off, and held back against the spot it was cut. He brought his hand away, and the cloth had reattached itself. "Self repairing fabric!" he announced, beaming.

Samuel sighed, unimpressed by the thing and entirely focused elsewhere. "Can we return to talking about you placing armed guards outside my borders, please? We can discuss the fabric later."

Argollo frowned, and replaced his knife. "They wouldn't be armed, not all of them. Very few will have staves, even. They will be like the people I brought with me today." He gestured to the group he had with him, and Samuel took the time to take a closer look. A dwarf, gnome, elf, and a stony faced woman. The first three looked nervous as he inspected him, but the woman did not acknowledge him.

"No swords, of course. And neither did Twitch have a sword for much of its time with us," he glared at Argollo, "that is, if you remember Twitch."

"Yes," Argollo said, still smiling, but frustration creeping into his voice, "and I think you mean Lyza, which is the name Twitch goes by now. And I've actually seen Lyza recently."

"Well, then I suppose you understand my point," Samuel said, taking note of the comment about seeing Lyza, but filing it away. "Lyza, alone, could empty this forest of its bandits, and without lifting a blade. And the trees as well, I imagine. You can not expect me, after all this time, to not take magic into consideration. That all said, I might find it more helpful to just hire Lyza."

It was true, Samuel reflected with uncertain feelings. Lyza was frighteningly powerful as a Crusader, back when it lived under the name Twitch. It had been a mute, and somewhat deranged, and only seemed to get worse when it left the Crusaders and returned to its home in Famardy. It was a human, what gender Samuel could never divine, despite his best efforts, and

a blood mage. The bit about hiring Lyza had been a bluff, though. Last he had seen of it, Lyza had been trying to plant bombs and blow up the Bank of Jarlsjalfi, the largest bank in Keimin. It was supposed to be in a mental institution, but instead a double had been interned in its place. Samuel only found out when the double killed itself in custody. The memory of holding the lifeless human flashed through his mind, for reference purposes, of course.

Argollo frowned, and sighed. "Samuel, you mean you would take a single blood mage over me, with my army of mages? We are quite capable of helping, Samuel. We did take Corm'he, afterall. We can handle some bandits"

Another subtle threat, Samuel figured. Corm'he was the capital of Ko'ebbe, the Southern member of the Northern Elvish Alliance, and the setting for the Mages Rebellion of 777. Argollo had led his army of mages, up to that point forced into an internment city by the Ko'ebbian government, against the city and taken it.

Samuel shrugged. "Better the devil I know, I think is how the saying goes."

Argollo shook his head. "Samuel, we were Crusaders together. Why don't you trust me?"

"I don't know you, Argollo" Samuel said, placing special emphasis on the name. "In your time with the Crusaders, you went under several different names, each one with its own set of problems. One moment I would be speaking with Agarwaenor, then the next I would be wrestling Garth to the ground." At the mention of the name 'Garth', a flash of sadness overcame Argollo's features. Samuel continued, "I only learned the name Argollo later, from the Red Lady. Since then I have only heard stories of this Argollo knocking down cities and removing King's heads and wearing their crowns." Samuel spoke smoothly, watching Argollo's face for his reaction. "So tell me, should I trust you?"

For a minute, Argollo was silent. He shook his head, chuckling sadly. "I remember this, all right. You haven't changed at all." He looked pointedly at the top of Samuel's head, which was bare. "I don't know if you can say much about the crown, though, considering how you came to your crown."

"I did not kill Arthanu," said Samuel matter of factly, "nor did I execute him, even if the right was mine. And besides that, I was chosen to be King. Something tells me the people of Corm'he did not declare you king when you killed their old one."

Argollo groaned. "Samuel, I am offering this service in friendship, taking into consideration our time together in the Crusaders and for the help you and the rest of the Crusaders gave me in the Teardrop Isles. I have no interest in annexing the DMZ, nor would you or the Council let me if I did. Now do you want my help or not?"

Samuel stopped, as did the rest. He sighed, and rubbed at his developing headache. Considering all the factors, there wasn't much to lose from this deal, he figured. He held his head up and turned about, looking into the trees, and finally settling on watching the sunset to west. Allowing this would clean up the bandit mess that had been plaguing the forests of the DMZ. And it would give him a powerful ally in the Teardrop Isles, and he could use all the allies he could find. The headache worsened; he did not like this political nonsense. It had been much easier when he was just a soldier.

At that moment, something began to bother Samuel. He could not place a finger on it, but something seemed wrong. Samuel was not one to notice small details, which is what this felt like, but at the same time not. It felt like something minor had changed, and it unsettled him. The

wind was blowing just a bit too quickly, whistling a bit too high. And it had grown warmer. Then he realized what it was: the sun doesn't set in the west.

What followed took place within only a second. The whistling of the wind soared to a fever pitch, the heat raised to an unbearable degree, and what Samuel had taken for the sun blossomed to enormous size, and smashed straight into his chest. The impact was like an explosion, and the last thing he heard was a shattering sound, followed by ringing and an indescribable pain. Without even realizing it, the ball of flame had picked him up off his feet, and slammed him into a tree a dozen yards away. He felt the bones in his back cracking, but heard only the ringing, the audible pain in his ears. He tried to scream, but either no words came out, or he could not hear them. He focused on his sight, trying to discern his attacker. But his vision was a chaos of colors. He blinked, but all he could see was the dancing oranges and whites of flame. He could not tell if he was on fire, or if the image of the flame had burned itself into his mind.

He fell to the ground, or was pulled. Yes, he was pulled, Argollo was moving his mouth frantically. Samuel brought his hand to his ears, and tried to call upon his own healing magic. But simply touching his ears send knives of pain tearing across his face and back, and he ripped his hands away. Samuel looked back to the trees, and saw the blasted remains of the elf being consumed by flame, and the dwarf cowering behind a tree. He whipped his head around, looking for his men, but could not see them. Argollo dragged Samuel to his feet, which felt like clay. The hair seemed to boil, and a thick substance ran down Samuel's face. He opened his mouth to breath, and was met with the taste of iron.

Then he was running. Argollo was leading, running straight forward into what felt like the gates of madness. A tree ahead of them exploded into a ball of firey kindling, and the two of them were knocked off their feet. Samuel was the first to his feet, his training having finally kicked in. He roughly yanked Argollo off the ground, and started to run. The fire spread rapidly from tree to tree, but no more of the massive balls of flame followed them.

He ran without stopping, not even to think. His ears still rung, and his bones cracked with each step, but he swallowed the pain and blood and ran. Ran so far as his adrenaline could take him. Which turned out to not be very far; Samuel was still deafened, but Argollo clearly heard a defined snapping sound, followed by Samuel crumpling to the ground, screaming while clutching his back. The soldiers that managed to follow them carried him the rest of the way as he babbled, trying to hear his own voice, until he passed out.

When he woke up, the first thing Samuel noticed was the sounds. They were muffled, like they came from behind a wall, but he could hear. He gingerly touched his ears, and felt cotton secured to them.

"...just made them worse" said a voice, and Samuel turned. It was Argollo, looking down at him with concern. "Did you hear me?" he said, and the sensation of seeing him clearly but only hearing his muffled voice threw Samuel off balance. "Healing your ears just seemed to make them worse. But she told me that it worked, so we let them drain then bound you up." Samuel just nodded, not trusting his volume with the cotton on his ears. He tried to stand, and the sudden pain in his back stole his breath away.

"Every time. In this damned place," Samuel muttered, or spoke aloud, he could not tell.

Argollo did not react, instead moving away to another body on the ground. Samuel stood up all the way, gritting his teeth, and walked over. His body felt strangely light, or the world felt heavier than it should. The body on the ground was one of his soldiers, Lanningham. He was breathing heavily, and looked feverish.

“What’s wrong with him?” Samuel asked, developing some confidence in his voice. Argollo did not answer, and instead pointed grimly to his hand. The rest of his armor had been stripped off, except for his gauntlet. The metal had melted and fused to his flesh. Samuel could feel a wave of disgust pass over him, then be quelled by the ring. He looked down at the gem, and saw that it was a bright red. It seemed to glow brighter as he looked at it, and he averted his eyes instead.

“One of those fireballs caught him in the hand. Surprised it didn’t tear it off.” Argollo touched the skin near where the metal started. He pulled away, and his fingers were red. “His skin is hot as flame.” He looked back at Samuel. “You weren’t much better. Though you should have been a lot worse. That armor of yours had to have been blessed by a god.”

With the comment, Samuel finally noticed that the lightness of his body was due to his armor being gone. He looked down, and on his chest was a mass of scars and burn marks, stretching all over his upper body. Around his abdomen was especially inflamed.

“Every fucking time!” Samuel said, again under his breath.

“What?” Argollo looked at him strangely.

“Nothing. Where’re my armor.” In answer to Samuel’s question, Argollo pointed to a pile of burnt, partially melted pieces of metal. Samuel picked a piece up, and after some inspection determined that it was the sad remains of a breastplate. The runes, which had imparted protection against fire magic, seemed to have shattered and melted apart, becoming little more than running paint.

Samuel tossed the scarred piece of metal to the ground, and sat against a tree. He held his head in his hand, thinking.

“We had to peel it off of you,” Argollo said, “everything but that ring. We tried, but it wouldn’t budge. I was going to just cut the finger off and have Daria heal it back on, but then my dad always told me not to slice off fingers with flashing red rings on them.” Samuel removed his hand, and Argollo was smiling at him in clear jest. Samuel replaced his thinking hand. “You gonna share what that is?”

“No,” Samuel said.

“Why not.”

“Because you’ll tell me to take it off. And I might be tempted to.” He removed his hand and stared at Argollo. “Take comfort knowing that you really don’t want me to.”

Argollo shrugged, and returned to tending. Samuel looked around, taking a mental head count. The elf was gone, obviously, though the woman was still there. She had a scorch mark covering most of her body, but seemed unharmed. The dwarf, who he took to be Daria, was kneeling with Argollo by Lanningham. Emilio was walking around a perimeter, and Kidraff was up in a tree. He could not find Edward.

“Where did we run?” Samuel asked, his voice rasping slightly. His throat had started to burn, and he instinctively reached for his water skin. It was still there, but empty and burnt.

“East,” Argollo said, distracted by the body.

“Why?”

“Because those balls of fire were coming from the West.” He walked back over, and offered his waterskin, from which Samuel drank greedily.

“About those flames,” Samuel gasped after his drink, “what the hell was that?”

“Either a pissed off god, or a really pissed of person with an eldar artifact,” said Argollo matter-of-factly, “nothing more to it than that. I kind of hope its the god. Gods can be bargained with.”

“It couldn’t just be a really powerful mage?” Samuel asked.

“Not with the kind of magic we know. Sam, Flammencendo, the generic fire spell, isn’t actually fire. It’s essentially a blob of magic made to feel and look like fire, but it can’t actually burn. Most of the time, they can’t even warm” He gestured back east, and Samuel could see trails of smoke coming from the area. “That sort of fire can only be Eldar magic. Or, again, a god. Same thing, in this case.”

Samuel blinked, thinking hard about that. He could have sworn that Aurentir, one of the gods the Crusaders had dealings with in the past, had set fire to a pile of books. Suddenly, an old memory came back to him.

“I know of at least one person who could use fire like that,” he said. “I knew an old elf, a blood mage, ancient. He set fire to a tree, not unlike what happened back there. His name was Zeebs.”

Argollo got a funny look on his face at the mention of Zeebs’s name, like he was trying to remember something long forgotten. He shrugged it away. “He also probably used an Eldar artifact. This sort of magic would be beyond our control. That said, I hope you didn’t do anything to piss this guy Zeebs off.”

Samuel did not answer, too caught up in his memories. Zeebs had been a curious character. He had only said a couple of words in his presence, but it was enough make him worth respect, and fear. A year ago, Samuel had traveled to Exbaltaira in search of Barnabus, his love, but was attacked by Shemlan. Shemlan had dealt him a terrible blow, and almost gutted him. But he had been traveling with Zeebs, an ancient looking elvish mage, with bloody craters for ears, and tufts of white hair sticking out of his face. He had used a powerful form of blood magic to force Shemlan to leave them, without even touching him. “Leave, never come back” was what he uttered that day, and Shemlan went. He had then healed, but some definition of the word, Samuel’s wounds with blood magic, an act considered impossible and profane. But he had done it all the same. Samuel could not think of a reason Zeebs would wish him ill now, but he couldn’t rule out the possibility. He was king, after all, and making enemies is part of the job.

The party reformed, and consisted of Samuel, Argollo, Emilio, Kidraff, and a walking, limping Lanningham. Daria the dwarf was with them, as was a human man, an orcish woman, and the stone like Elf that Argollo had brought with him. Edward was never found, alive or dead, and the part had to move on. They traveled East, figuring to escape past the border and into Farthing. When they reached the bridge, they did not find a river.

All along the shoreline, a giant wall of ice soared into the air. The bridge was demolished, consumed by the ice. The wall extended down the Onisia river in both directions,

as far as the eye could see. Argollo and Samuel stared blankly at the wall, neither knowing how to process this new information.

“Oh! I have an idea!” Argollo declared. He turned to the stone like woman. “Caranist,” he said, “make a hole for us!”

The woman responded. Her eyes lit up blue, and she soared into the air, blasting the wall with fire magic. It chipped away at the wall, but did not melt any of it, and what she managed to break off only seemed to grow back. Suddenly, she rammed into the wall, burrowing a hole into it. It seemed to work for a minute, but the ice suddenly grew back, impaling and breaking apart what turned out to be a stone statue. Argollo and Samuel stared at the quickly filling hole, not knowing how to process the information.

“You see,” Argollo began, “this is clearly the work of an Eldar artifact.”

“Argollo” Samuel answered, “shut up.”

2 - Barnabus

Sweat ran down Barnabus's face in thick, engorged rivers. His whole upper body was covered in a shiny sheen of the stuff. The heat still pressed against him, threatening immolation. But he smiled. His lips stretched painfully across his face. He had watched them scramble, twist and turn looking for him. But they couldn't see him. He could see them. Attacking Samuel so directly had been risky.

Hello lover.

But Samuel had always been well prepared. He wouldn't let a little fire kill him. Not yet. Barnabus outstretched his arm toward where the group had run to. The skin of his arm cracked with the movement; his hands were scarred, blistered and black. The blackened skin ran up his arms, ending below his elbows. If someone were to touch them, they would be hot enough to burn, to char. But to Barnabus they were numb.

"It's me, Sam," he whispered, "Barnabus." Barnabus. Barnabus. The name rung then through his brain, repeating itself like a child with a vulgar word. It was his, but it felt wrong. It felt distant, like he had stolen someone else's name. Just saying it, and he expected the blow, the sting, the burn. *No. You are my Son, Brasiden.*

Barnabus looked at the flames, watched them dance in their own wind, consume the life around them like no eldritch fire can. These flames brought back memories of his time in Exbaltaira. Of the strange magics Arthanu, the former prince of Exbaltaira, had played with just to make these flames possible. How he had forgotten his work the moment he had the crown upon his skull.

Barnabus walked toward the sight. The flames danced as he did, and they laughed. Tiny orange faces with white eyes in the flames. Athanu looked out at him, laughing, taunting. *This is your flame, Brasiden.* The dance changed changed, and Samuel looked out at him, disapproving as always. He did not laugh, and in a moment the flames changed again. Samuel and Arthanu were fighting, only instead of Samuel it was Barnabus, or was it Brasiden? Or was he Arthanu? It was then, staring at the flames, that Barnabus knew the tears rolling down his face, mixed in with the sweat. The rage blocked his throat, and the flames were in his hands again. He concentrated on the faces, and with his hands pushed his rage into them. The trees exploded again, fire consuming fire, and the faces were gone. He was neither. Brasiden was neither. Brasiden had stood on the side, waiting, following. He was Barnabus. He acted.

He cracked his neck, scowling now. He looked around, and saw the body. The elf he had hit. The fool who had run straight into the ball. He had been aiming at the tree. He had been aiming at the tree. He had been aiming at the tree. The elf was no more than a pile of ashes and what was left of a skull. Barnabus slammed the heel of his foot into the skull. The action did nothing to satisfy him. He detected a presence behind him, and smiled.

"Archi!" he cried, not turning around. "So, is this the first? Our first kill of the season?" Barnabus pointed at the remains. "One of many, I guess, right?" The presence did not answer him, but Barnabus continued. Archidemus was always the quiet sort. He would talk when he

had something to say. "They're running now. Won't be long until they see our little gate for them. We should have our blanket ready by then, so they can't teleport out. I'm kind of surprised the King doesn't have a scroll on him just for that." Still the person behind him was silent, which did nothing to calm Barnabus down. Archidemus could infuriate him sometimes. He turned around, preparing to chastise his friend. "Hey, what's the matter with you? Why are you so-"

Behind him was not Archidemus. Instead, a soldier, with neatly cropped brown hair, a rectangle face and mad eyes, stood before him. He held a sword with both hands before him. Barnabus blinked, alternating between surprise and amusement. "Oh," he whispered, "and who is this?" Barnabus then recognized him: one of the boys escorting Samuel. He had disappeared right after the tussle began. Barnabus smiled, having finally decided on amused. This would be so much fun. "And what are you doing here?"

The man did not answer. It appeared his sense of honor did not extend to the prefight conversation. He charged Barnabus, throwing his weight behind his first swing. Barnabus slithered out of the way, not drawing his own swords. "I think I am owed some explanation, don't you think?" Barnabus smiled at the man, who was sweating under his heavy armor.

"You attacked my King," the man spat before charging again. This time he fainted, and the blade soared toward Barnabus. He ducked, and closed the difference between their faces, until they were an inch apart.

"And what if I did?" Barnabus breathed into the man's face. The man fell back, tripped over a root, and fell. He rolled over to his side, and regained his footing in time for Barnabus to kick him against a tree. His armor clanged loudly against the bark, and the man growled. He charged again, and was slammed back into the tree by Barnabus's elbow impacting his face. "What are you going to do about it? Look at what I did?" Barnabus gestured grandly to the burning trees. The man spat in response.

"Any halfling could make a bomb," he said, "and any dimwit could throw it."

Barnabus had to pause for a moment, thinking over what the soldier had said. A bomb? Did he think this was all from some bombs? Did he not know? Barnabus first chuckled, then laughed. The soldier took his opportunity to strike again. He did not hit, and was again against the tree. Barnabus was still laughing.

"Bombs?" Barnabus finally said. "You think this is all from bombs?" He held his left hand out to the man, palm up. He relaxed, and let the flame build in his hand. At first the man looked at the ball of fire with disinterest, but then he must have felt the heat. His eyes widened as he tried to comprehend what he was feeling. Barnabus laughed. It would be simple to wipe away any suggestion of this man's existence. But what did that accomplish for him?

"Tell you what," he said to the man, who had fallen silent staring at the first. Barnabus closed his palm, and the fire disappeared. The man visibly relaxed. "Because you've been so funny, I'm going to let you live. But you need to do me a favor, okay?" Barnabus stepped closer to the man, looking into his eyes. He had nice eyes, and a strong, handsome face. "You are going to go to Neva," he whispered, and brought his hand near the man's face. "And you're going to tell them." He traced the man's jaw with the tips of his fingers. The man tried to pull away when he felt the heat, but Barnabus pinned him to the tree, his hand pressing down on the side of the man's face. "Everything." The man writhed, screaming with pain as his skin sizzled beneath Barnabus's palm. His eyes, blue, looked as if they were trying to pop out of his head.

After another moment, Barnabus let go, and the man fell to the floor. The right side of his face was ruin, burnt and blistering.

“Go,” Barnabus said, and the man went. He ran as fast as his armor would let him, and forgot his sword. Barnabus watched him leave, feeling a mixture of regret, anxiety, and sadistic pleasure. The people in the capitol would have their warning. Not that he would make it there for another week, or two. Especially if he ran like that the entire way. He might just drop dead, either from exhaustion or some infection. Elvish bodies were frail and weak to disease, even Exbaltairans.

He waited there for some time, enjoying the snapping and popping of the fire. Some time afterwards, snapping branches and leaves alerted him to yet another presence.

“Can you please,” he began, “announce whether or not you’re one of Sam’s jar heads looking for revenge? I don’t want to talk to myself again.”

“What?” a voice said, and Barnabus turned around smiling. Archidemus stood behind him. He was a tall, bald elf with black skin and an overly sober face. He was looking at the trees, which had started to burn themselves out, and sighed. “What did you do, Brasiden? I hope you didn’t-”

“Archi!” Barnabus interrupted, a smile straining his face. “I said, call me Barnabus. That’s my actual name, after all. The guy who gave me Brasiden is dead, I think you remember.”

Archidemus sighed, rolling his eyes. “Yes, sir. Anyway, did you kill anyone?”

“Yeah,” Barnabus said, pointing to where the ashes had been, now long since blown away. “Just one though. I sent the rest running to the wall. Well, most of them.” He shrugged, and chuckled at what passed for a look of alarm go over Archidemus’s face. “One of them stuck behind, tried to take him out. I sent him running to Neva. Burnt half his face off, too. Give em a little message, you know?”

Archidemus shook his head, and pulled a sheet out of his robe’s sleeve. “Dammit, Brasi-Barnabus,” was all he said. He wrote something down, and slid it into his pocket. As frustrated as Archidemus must have felt Barnabus was certain it could not compare with what he was developing. He had just gone through a existential breakdown, and was not in the mood to be lectured by Archidemus’s shiny head. He started walking, brushing past Archidemus.

“Who was with him?” the mage asked. Barnabus stopped, thinking.

“A handful of soldiers, one of which is crapping themselves nowish. A couple of mages from the look of it, and a guy wearing a red suit. He kind of looked like a clown, but he was also talking to Sams a lot.” He looked around and Archidemus. “Did you get all that down?”

“A red suit...Brasiden!” Archidemus looked from the paper he had been writing on, looking almost irate. “Are you sure that wasn’t Argollo? King of the Teardrop Isles?”

“Barnabus. And yeah, I guess he did match the description,” Barnabus said, sounding and feeling bored. He hadn’t been thinking too much about who was with Samuel. The man in the red had used some of the time-space crap that Archidemus liked using so much, and he did seem like the mage’s leader.

“Barnabus, if that really was Argollo,” he sighed, now clearly annoyed, and Barnabus could feel his own pulse quicken. “This changes everything. You may have potentially pulled in a foreign nation, and a powerful one at that. We need to rethink everything now, down to-”

Barnabus decided, at that point, that he had heard enough, and launched a punch at

Archidemus. It seemed certain to land between his eyes, but the other elf seemed to disappear, and Barnabus fell forward into the empty air. He rolled around on the floor, and glared up at Archidemus, who had been standing behind him.

“No,” he said, like he was reprimanding a dog. “I don’t think you want to do that anyway. It would probably hurt you more than it hurt me.” He returned to his paper, while Barnabus scrambled to his feet, burning now with embarrassment and rage. He breathed heavily, and smiled. Then laughed.

“Okay, okay I’ll listen,” he said, chuckling, “but I think you’re making something out of nothing.” He pointed the way Samuel’s party had went. “That guy, Argollo? You said before, when we were going over all of this, that he was in the Crusaders with Samuel, right?” Archidemus nodded, looking at Barnabus warily. He continued. “So he was obviously going to get involved, there was no question. But, and this is important, I am willing to wager that he won’t be helping our lovely king.”

Archidemus raised an eyebrow at this notion, but did not speak. Barnabus continued. “I listened to some of their conversation, and Argollo wants to set up a deal where his mages get to patrol the land here,” he spread his arms around him, indicating the DMZ, “as a favor, of course! To clean up the bandits. But scouts become parties become platoons. Platoons need supplies, which creates camps which become military installments which become castles. It’s a land grab, classic expansion strategy. We protect your land for you, until we’re the only muscle around.” Barnabus leaned toward Archidemus, excitement building up in him. He had not considered this until just now, and he was loving the idea. “So, if everything goes to shit, and it’s utter chaos, and everyone’s taking a piece out of the pie, who’s to say Sammy’s new boyfriend doesn’t get hungry?” He laughed away the distaste the word ‘boyfriend’ had left in his mouth. “They didn’t seem entirely friendly to each other just then, if you catch my drift.”

Archidemus did not mirror Barnabus’s excitement. He actually looked quite worried. “Be that as it may,” he said, “drawing more parties in than we planned makes this more delicate.”

Barnabus waved away the concern. “It was going to happen anyway. Samuel’s throne owes money to half of Keimin. They were going to be looking into here eventually. And even Argollo’s people can be held back.” He looked confidently into Archidemus’s eyes. They were brown, almost black. “You can’t plan for all of these things, Archi, it’s like I’ve been telling you.”

He started walking again, and Archidemus followed. “Tümas won’t be happy with this though,” is all the bald elf said. Barnabus snorted.

“Let Lord Dumass get mad. He’ll follow me. Up until when he doesn’t,” he turned back to Archidemus, smiling wickedly, “then the fun begins.”

3 - Dollthel

Dollthel rushed down the hall with a stack of papers under her arm. She glared straight ahead, ignoring the people crowding the hall, other than to shove them out of the way. The hall, normally empty, was filled to burst, with dozens of dignitaries, states workers, civilian union leaders (which had not strictly been legalized yet) and folks who decided they deserved to see the King's return.

All Dollthel, princess of Exbaltaira and voice for the Seven Sisters, could think about was how late Samuel was. Several days late, now. What she had taken to be a small blessing, a another day to plan and keep the state reigns out of that fool's hands, had turned into something of a nightmare. She was just then coming from a meeting with a governor who refused to speak with her, having been under the assumption that the "true King" would have been back by now.

Someone knocked into her, and her glasses came askew. She pushed them back on, having barely noticed the person or the shove. She crashed into an office, where a distracted and massive elf was sitting, lying down ontop of the papers on his desk in despair.

"Minister," Dollthel said, dropping the papers down on the desk, "this all needs to be filled out an hour ago."

The Minister of Defense raised his head, looked at the paperwork, and dropped back down with a dry sob. "Why must planning a party be so hard!" he cried. "Who will Defend me against these bureaucrats!"

"I don't know," Dollthel said, "just get it done, I'm needed downstairs."

She left before Defense, as he was called, could respond. Dollthel rushed down the stairs, and made he way to the grand hall, where the preparations for the royal welcoming ball were being held. On her way, she passed by a room, and spotted something out of the corner or her eye. She scowled and groaned, and entered the room.

An elf in a long blue robe was snoring on the couch in the room, with a book covering her face, smelling faintly of brew. The book had strange rooms across the front and back, with no distinct cover. Dollthel snatched the book up, and smacked the girl awake.

"Ow..." she said, rubbing her head.

"Oriel," Dollthel spat, "why are you sleeping?"

"Resting, sister," Oriel said, smiling up at Dollthel through half-lidded eyes. "I took care of the calming potions like you asked. They're being brought down now."

"Did you have them test?" Dollthel asked.

"Um, well, you could say that."

Dollthel groaned, smacked herself with the palm of her hand. "Well, go do something else then. Talk to guests. Yell at a servant. Jus don't sleep! You'll embarrass all of us."

Dollthel, again, left without waiting for a response. She entered the grand hall, where servants were flitting to and fro, placing chairs, tables, removing chairs, cleaning tables, staining them again, removing the table cloth, carrying away tables, repeat. Truly, the extended hours to prepare for the ball were being put to good use. Dollthel walked across the hall, but stopped at the sound of shouting.

"No, not there!" shouted a familiar voice. "This was painted by Ellisandre, who was

beheaded by King Halldhor! You can't put them next to each other. Bring it to that wall."

Dollthel turned, and there was Elanor, pointing to the opposite wall. A group of servants were holding onto an oversized painting of a dramatic rock standing in a turbulent ocean. It was called 'Defiance' and had, indeed, gotten the painter killed. Dollthel let the servants pass her, and continued down the hall, quickening her stride as she went.

At the end of the hall was Canani, leaning against the stage and looking at a clipboard. She was taller than Dollthel by a significant margin, and had a bored look on her face. She looked up, and smiled as Dollthel approached.

"Hello sis," she said, "has the guest of honor finally arrived?"

"No," Dollthel said, grabbing the clipboard out of Canani, the eldest Sister's, hand. "Why hasn't the feast been finished?"

"Well," Canani said, before snatching back the clipboard. She turned it so that Dollthel could read it, and pointed at an item near the top. "The cooks, as you may have noticed, weren't paid. So they aren't cooking."

"But the deal was to pay them after the ball!" Dollthel snapped, grabbing back the clipboard.

"Yeah, which was supposed to be half a week ago," Canani took out a pen, and pointed at a note near the bottom of the paper. "Oh, and they're demanding more pay now, since they could have been using the time wasted to work other jobs."

"Work other!" The sentence stole away Dollthel's rational thought for a moment, leaving her stuttering for a moment. "We hire them! All the time! They're on a contract! They are paid on a salary! There's literally no one else they could be working for!" she shouted.

"Well, they were promised a bonus for this, and they want it now. And, unless Sam decides to take another month getting here, we're stuck with them." Canani suddenly smiled, as if struck by inspiration. "Oh! If you don't want to pay them, we can have Oriel cook the food! And hey, if the guests get high enough, they might not get angry about Kingy being late."

Dollthel groan, but otherwise ignored her sister's comment. She scowled at the clipboard, thinking hard. "They're replaceable," she said, "we can easily find other cooks, and have food just as good in a few days-"

"No." Canani snatched the board away again. She frowned at Dollthel as she said "We're not postponing. Not again. If King Samuel hasn't shown up by tonight, then we're either having the ball anyway, or we're cancelling it, and you get to explain to the royal ponces why we wasted their time. So I suggest you go to the kitchens," she smiled again at this, "and write the good chefs a check. Is this a problem?"

Dollthel didn't say anything, instead she just turned around and walked away. Her face burned from being ordered around by her sister, but she knew Canani was right. That said, it might not be a terrible idea, she thought, to ask Oriel to personally cook their dear sister's meal.

The grand hall bustled with guests and excitement. Every man of importance and his wife, or husband as the case may be, was present in that room, as well as several unimportant guests who decided they belonged anyhow.

Dollthel tried to be the image of calm, dignified royalty, but her shaking leg and shifting eyes betrayed her. The party had only just begun, and guests were already asking about the

King. The King who was not there. She signed, and poured herself a glass of the wine, newly imported from Sarenue. She took a taste, and grimaced at the unexpected, acrid taste of alcohol.

A sprite like figure bounded up to her, beaming. "How's the party going, sis?" Alasse said, beaming up at her sister.

"Terribly," Dollthel said, looking sullen. "The room's a boiling pot, and once enough people start asking about the damned King, it's going to explode."

Alasse scoffed. "I wouldn't worry about it. Just put more wine and whiskey out, that's the only 'King Sam' they really care about. A bunch of drunkard and perverts, they all are. Half of them probably won't remember that the real King Sam never showed up."

"Don't speak like that," Dollthel commanded. Alasse shrugged, and smirked around the room.

"I'm surprised by how few of the Governors showed up, though. You'd think they were planning something," she said. She pouted in an exaggerated manner. "Where's that Sullivan guy. He's fun to hang around."

"He wouldn't be here," Dollthel said, "or at least he shouldn't. He's not a Governor. Most of the people here shouldn't be here." She looked around, noting which governors weren't there. "And I don't see what you mean. Most of them are here. The only ones missing are Governor Meciah and Dumas."

As if on queue, a man entered the hall, scanned the room, and locked on Dollthel. He made his way over, and halfway Dollthel noticed him. She could recognize by the long face and old looking eyes Philius, the son of Dumas, Governor of Tümas. He smiled as he approached, and dropped into a bow.

"Regent Dollthel, regent Alasse, I'm glad to find you in good health," he said. He smiled at the Sisters, a grin that did not seem to reach his exhausted eyes.

"Oh, the pleasure is all ours," Alasse said, suddenly shifting her tone to a more elegant, refined cadence. Her voice sounded deeper and more mature, as well. "I hope your father is in good health?"

"He is, and I will be sure to pass along your concern," he said, smiling at her.

Dollthel frowned at the interaction. She never liked how her sister could pull off this sort of act. It felt like cheating.

"So I meant to give my respects to his majesty," the Philius said, "but it would seem that he's not available." His voice ran deep and soothing, but also knowing. Like he was participating in an unstated joke.

"I'm sorry," Alasse said, looking genuinely repentant, "but the King is not ready to greet guests at the moment. When I next see him, I will be certain to pass along your respects."

"I much appreciate it, madam." Philius nodded to the two of them. "I should do my father's duty, and mingle. A pleasure meeting you both again."

He turned and left, and Alasse waved pleasantly at him until he was swallowed by the crowd. She opened her mouth, and pointed her finger at it, making a gagging sound.

"Ugh," she said, "that guy gives me the creeps."

"Why?" Dollthel asked.

"It's the way he talks. He doesn't talk like the other Governors. He's just so...blandly

noble.”

Dollthel shrugged. Philius’s ‘nobility’ didn’t do much to bother her. The way she saw it, he was someone who wasn’t making a big deal out of the King’s absence, and he represented one of the Governors, so he might be able to calm others down, if it came to that. Dollthel herself was feeling more relaxed after the interaction. She decided not to let her sister’s analysis bother her. She took another sip of the wine.

Suddenly, the door at the end of the hall slammed open, and a strained voice echoed above the conversation and music. “I need to speak with the regent! The King is in grave danger! We’re all in grave danger!”

The crowd near the door gasped, and the crowd parted to let a soldier, covered in mud and blood, sprint up the hall. Several guards were following him, and a commotion could be heard outside.

Dollthel placed her glass down, and walked up. The entire situation seemed like something out of a dream. Or a nightmare. The man finally reached her, and collapsed, coughing and spitting blood. Everyone in the room stared at her, waiting for her to act. The doors in the back were closed once more.

“You there,” she shouted at a guard, “get this man some water. Go on, move!” The guard rushed off, and Dollthel dropped to her knees to the man on the ground. “Hey. Hey! What’s wrong? What’s happened?”

She helped the man up to his knees, but almost dropped him when she saw his face. Half of it had been burned off, and was now festering with burst blisters, bleeding sores, and infection. The eye on that side of his face was closed, and perhaps burnt out. He was breathing and shaking violently.

“The King, I was with him. Escorting. He was speaking with King. Argollo. We were attacked.” He grabbed onto Dollthel’s shoulders, either to support himself or to make sure she listened. “I ran! To Aglarham! But they’ve been attacked. Fallen. I-” he erupted into another fit of coughing. The commotion outside the hall grew louder, and it almost sounded like people were screaming.

Dollthel blinked several times. It was all a dream, this she was certain of. The party had stopped existing in her mind. Aglarham had fallen? She could hear Governor Aran of Aglarham in a panic, asking around if anyone knew, throwing accusations at anyone nearby who looked suspicious enough.

“What happened to the King?” she asked.

“I don’t. Separated.” The man’s eyes were closed, and he seemed to be falling. The guard finally came back with a glass of water, and Dollthel opened the man’s mouth and forced it down his throat. He writhed in pain, but he was awake. He yammered, delirious. Suddenly, Canani appeared behind the man, and his hands were glowing.

“Clear!” She shoved her palms into the man’s back, and a shock of blue and white light went through him. His eyes opened wide, and he gasped. Some of his sores seemed to close, but the burn remained.

“I was separated,” he said, “from the group. I tried to fight the attacker, but he bested me.”

“And so you ran,” she said. “All the way here? How did you not die, man?”

The man did not answer. Instead, he began to cry. Dollthel shook him by the shoulders. "Soldier. Soldier! Pull yourself together! What's"

"I didn't run all the way here," he said between sobs, "I was captured in Aglarham. Dragged to Neva. Your Highness, they're-

The screaming outside the hall reached a crescendo, then stopped. The doors, two massive pieces of oak, exploded inward, blasted apart by a ball of fire. The shockwave of the explosion knocked everyone near the doors off their feet. The doors themselves slammed into whoever was right next to it. The guests screamed from the shock, and the room erupted into chaos. Where the door once stood was now only a burning hole in the wall.

Dollthel got to her feet as fast as she could, and was the first to do so. She glared at the hole, trying to see through the smoke. Out of the flames and smoke walked a man. He wore a torn apart Exbaltairan uniform, and a shit eating smirk. He looked around the room, smiling like a hyena. He locked eyes with Dollthel, and began.

"Helloooo, Exbaltaaaairaa!" he shouted, throwing his arms into the air. The people about screamed. He shoved his hand into the air, and a ball of flame flew blasted into the ceiling. It smashed against the stone and spread, causing some debris to fall. "You all might want to pay attention," he shouted.

The screaming did not stop, but they paid attention. Except for Dollthel, who grabbed a guard and commanded him to rally everyone he could find and bring them. The man began to speak.

"I am here to deliver a message." He said, the smile gone. "Your King is gone. the city of Aglarham has fallen. Everyone who would not submit, we have killed." Aran screamed at this, but Barnabus continued. "This is a formal declaration of war," he said, "and you are all invited! This nation is crumbling. And I am just magnanimous enough to offer you a way out. It's simple: join me." His smile returned, and he scanned the room. "Join me in tearing apart this State brick by brick. I don't want you to submit to me, but that is an option."

The guards started to circle him; at least twenty men were surrounding him. "All you need to do," the man continued, "is tear her down," he pointed at Dollthel, and looked her in the eyes. And like that, she knew him, and her blood seemed to stop flowing. Brasiden, one of Arthanu's generals. Brasiden was in her hall declaring war on her!

"Those who want to oppose me: I accept the challenge with open arms!" He spread his arms wide, as if to embrace the room. "Let me just just show you what happens to those that do."

"Guards! Take him down!" Dollthel screamed, and the guards charged him. This man Brasiden slammed his hands into the ground, and the stone around him erupted into flame, consuming the guards. The floor melted into molten rock, and the men fell, screaming and writhing. The man stood up, grinning.

"I am Barnabus! Remember the name." He turned around, and walked through his own flames. He disappeared once more into the smoke and flames of the hole.

Dollthel stood rooted to her spot, unable to move or think. Processing what had just happened alone felt impossible. She shook her head.

"Everyone, get out of the room!" she shouted, and the people did so. More debris was falling from the ceiling, and the fire had spread to the walls. The guests rushed out of the room,

some avoiding the circle of fire, others not. Dollthel waited until everyone had left, and even then found she couldn't move. A pair of strong arms grabbed her from behind, and she was thrown over someone's shoulder. All she could see was the bottom of the dress, which matched Canani's. She closed her eyes, wishing that elves could just go to sleep.

Outside the building was more fire, but it was being controlled. There was no invading army, and no one had laid siege to the city. Whoever Barnabus was, he had come alone.

Canani placed Dollthel down on the steps. Dollthel turned around, looking for who was left. Most of the guests had vanished, but the Governors were all waiting for her. She approached them, not sure how to speak, or what to say. Whatever she came up with, she decided that she should be the first one to talk.

"Gentlemen," she began, "we are officially at war. You are all to stay in Neva, until such a time that we can safely escort you back to your districts. At which time, you will surrender all of your military might to the capitol."

This was met with groans and arguments. "You cannot be serious!" cried Aran, the long ornament in his hair hanging in front of his eyes. "My city has been attacked! My people are dying! And you want me to stay here?"

"Aglarham, if it were just about you rushing off to your death, I would gladly allow it," barked Dollthel, "but it's not. Your district has already fallen, and your leaving would accomplish nothing. As for the rest of you," she addressed the others, glaring at each of them in turn, "you are all to stay here as well. We do not know how large a force we are talking about here, nor how far they've spread. We cannot know if there are ambushes on the paths leading to your districts, and we cannot afford to lose any of you."

"You can't keep us here," growled Governor Orthel of Orthelian. Dollthel glared at him.

"As a matter of fact, I can. So long as Kind Samuel is not here, I am Regent of the State of Exbaltaira. And I am ordering all of you to remain here. You can do that in a well furnished bedroom, or in a cell. It's your choice. Any attempt to leave will result in immediate discipline. Am I understood?"

The Governors nodded, none of the looking happy. The only one who seemed almost neutral was Philius. He had not said a word the entire time, and instead watched. "And our military," he said, "why is it that you want us to surrender them?"

"That should be obvious, Tūmas," she said, "it's to give us the chance to launch a counterattack on this invader, whoever it is."

"That is obvious, but is it the truth?" Philius asked. "This man Barnabus just implored us to rise in rebellion. Is it possible that you mean to take away our arms because you do not trust that we will remain loyal?"

Dollthel did not answer, because the honest truth was that she was afraid of Governors going rogue. "Should I have cause to worry, Philius," she said, emphasizing the name.

"Of course not, Regent," Philius said, bowing deeply.

"Good." Dollthel nodded to the men. "You'll be escorted to a place to rest while the fire is controlled. You are not to leave Neva." She turned around, and left before anyone could answer.

4 - Archidemus

Archidemus lifted the pot, and poured for himself a glass of tea. He positioned his seat by his desk, just so, and sat. His desk, hastily made of a discarded tree trunk, sat outside, leaning against a tree. In the center of the desk was a puddle of water, reflecting the noon light. More importantly, it reflected the sky, still light blue in the water.

Next to the pool was a stone. It was smooth, round, and mossy green. Archidemus picked up the stone, and held it in his palm. It sat for a minute, during which Archidemus sat without moving. Then the stone began to vibrate, humming audibly. Archidemus took the stone and placed it inside his ear. The vibration caused mild discomfort, but Archidemus knew this irritation, and grew accustomed to it quickly. Focusing on the vibrations, Archidemus began to make out words.

“...and that’s how I know the son of a bitch,” growled a gruff, thunderous voice, who Archidemus recognized to be Beta, General of the former Regiment β . “You?”

“I only knew him after he joined Arthanu’s ‘project,’” rasped another voice, this one Archidemus did not recognize. The other Generals were not as talkative as Beta was, and he could not be certain this was either of the other two. But they were speaking of Brasiden, that is to say Barnabus. Cursed Exbaltairans and their obsession with names.

“He was another of those thugs,” the new voice continued, “had no respect for authority. Still doesn’t, I’d say.”

“Thinks because he got to lick the prince’s boots, he can do whatever he wants,” Beta said, “I’d like to remind him that I could wreck him the same way I did Arthanu when he barely knew a blade from his own prick.”

Archidemus flinched from the thunderous laughter that followed. He removed the stone and shook his head, scanned the perimeter, and the pool. All looked normal. He replaced it.

“..really did have a problem, didn’t you?” said the second voice, who Archidemus was figuring to be Alpha. “Or not. At least you can say you got two soldiers into high places.”

“Shut up!” barked Beta. “I had nothing to do with these punks. It was that company. Too many rotten eggs.”

“It ought to have been scrambled.”

“Heh, not much to be done. Everything is screwed up. That guy is probably shacked up with some whore, painting fences or whatever it is the king’s got men doing. Come on! I’m getting tense here; let’s get to talking.”

Finally, Archidemus thought. He took out a scroll hidden under the tree, and a pen.

“How should we begin,” Alpha said, “there is much to cover.”

“I say we start with the goods,” Beta said. He chuckled, and shifting paper could be heard. “What do you want?”

“Counting our veterans before they march, are we?” Alpha asked. He too chuckled. “I want this.”

“You rat! I wanted Tūmas!” growled Beta.

Archidemus wrote this detail down. He wants Tūmas? Does he mean the district, or the man?

“Fine,” drawled Alpha, “then I want the river.”

“Which one?”

“The Onisia, of course. You can have the Thrud.”

“The Thrud! Who wants that. We can let Omega have that one.”

Archidemus wrote all of this down. He was now certain that it was Alpha and Beta speaking. They were dividing up the land between them, but weren't they supposed to be helping Barnabus? Are they also plotting against Omega?

“Is that alright with you, pretty boy?” Beta asked, and Alpha chuckled. Otherwise, no one answered. “Good sport! Hey, do you need that on all the time? Smells like ass.” Again, no answer. Omega must be in the room with them. Archidemus wrote that down. The three were in cahoots, clearly.

“Well,” Alpha said, “that decides the map. Now how about we actually plan this out? What do we do about this boy of yours?”

“I said shut up! And that's simple. First, we get our boys back home!” A fist slammed on a desk. “These wet napkin governors might think they have an army, but they're just borrowing.”

“And it's time we take it back, yes,” Alpha said. “But how do we do so? I suggest sending birds to all the generals. They will know their true leaders.”

“And it sure as hell isn't Commander!” Beta spat at the mention of the title. “I say we go up to them directly. They can't argue with what's right in front of them!”

“That might prove too dangerous for many of them, at least near the beginning. We can shift to that once we've wrested a majority share away from the Governors. Omega, you do you have something to say? What's wrong?”

There was a loud rumbling, then silence. Then, like they were speaking right into his ear, Archidemus heard “someone's listening.”

Archidemus popped the stone out, said a word, and the stone disintegrated into fine green dust. He looked over his notes. The three Generals were working together, this much he knew. They seemed to be actively working against Barnabus, this much he feared. They planned to split Exbaltaira between the three of them. And they meant to wrest control of the military away from the Governors.

Archidemus sighed, folded the paper and placed it away in his pocket. He had told Barnabus that to trust these men would be foolish, especially General Beta. Either he had not listened, or welcomed the possibility. That boy just wants to die, Archidemus thought. If I were more merciful, perhaps I would let him.

The thought of allowing this plan of theirs to go unopposed crossed his mind. They would succeed, most likely, for a time. The military would go tumbling into their laps, and then it would be only a matter of time. Perhaps the Crusaders would arrive to thwart them, but not before those walls were taken care of. Before they could do anything, Barnabus would be certainly be killed. And they would have no reason to try and save him.

No. He could not let this plan of theirs go. He considered his notes again. Beta seemed to be the loudest of them, and the greediest. Alpha sounded sneakier, and what could be said for Omega? He could detect the stone. It would have to be enough to go on. If they did succeed, it would probably only last for so long before they started warring with each other, trying to expand. Beta wanted Eras, after all. Archidemus would just have to accelerate that.

He looked once more at the pool. The sky was still blue. He still had time. He took out a new scroll, and began writing. He wrote several letters, each one addressed to a different governor. He paused, considering. They were probably going to send letters to the current military leaders. He took out a scroll, upon which was a roster. He chose the ones he figured would have the most influence, and wrote a handful of letters for them. He signed these with the symbols α , β , Ω .

He took his sizable pile of letters, and held them in his hands. He spoke some words under his breath, and pressed down on the top and bottom. The pile condensed, his hand pushing into them easily, until they met and the letters were gone. They would take several weeks to reach their destinations, but they would do so before the Generals had much time to act.

He watched the pool of water. For several minutes the sky was blue. Then, in a flash, it was black. He looked up into the sky, and it was a comforting shade of blue. He spoke some words of transport, but they had no effect. Time and space, in the plane of magic, had been made to stop in Exbaltaira.

Archidemus placed away his supplies back in the cache. He stood, holding his staff. He began to walk, meaning to find Barnabus and relay the information. He had to know just what was happening.

Several hours later, Archidemus found Barnabus. He lounged against a rock, looking into the sky, smiling. Archidemus stood over him, casting his shadow over the man, who simply smiled wider.

“Archi,” Brasiden began, sounding tired and at ease, “I was watching the sky. For a moment, it was as if the clouds had stopped moving.”

Archidemus nodded. “Yes, the artifact worked. Time and space within Exbaltaira have...stopped is not the right word, as we can obviously speak with one another. And we will age. But the sun will not rise nor fall, nor will the magics concerning movement and manipulation of time function as they should. And the outside world, should it look in, will only see a normal, functioning nation.”

“Well, they’ll see an empty forest, since no one will be getting past the DMZ,” Barnabus said.

“There’s more, Barnabus.” Archidemus collected his breath. “The Generals. They are plotting against you.”

“Oh,” Barnabus said, not making eye contact with Archidemus, “are they?”

“Yes. They are planning to wrest control of the military from the Governors, and split the nation between the three of them.”

“Oh dear,” Barnabus said, “that wasn’t smart of them. How did you learn this.”

“I planted a listening stone in one of their trunks. It sends vibrations to its sibling stone. Or did, I had to destroy mine. The third General, Omega, discovered the other. Barnabus, we cannot allow them to continue. You must take immediate action!”

Barnabus stood up, and smiled at Archidemus. He had a mad glint in his eye that terrified Archidemus, so much as he could feel terror. “I don’t like being told what to do, Archi. You know this. Now, why should I take action?”

“Why? Barnabus, they could ruin everything you hope to do! They will easily wrest control from the Governors. And with the military, victory would be easily within their grasps. Can’t you see that?”

Barnabus chuckled. “Archidemus,” he said, “you’ve been away from the military too long. It doesn’t work like that. Those men, the soldiers? They’re not going to just flock back to the Generals like that. They do what they’re told, and they follow the leader given. Look at Sammy. He got a new set of bosses, and he fell into line so quick, it was like he was never in Exbaltaira.”

He began to pace around Archidemus. “And these men will be the same. Some will join them. A lot won’t. They have new bosses. They got their Governors. And they got Sam. That’s a lot of conflicting loyalties.” He stopped, and looked Archidemus in the eye with that same look. Archidemus realized what about it unsettled him. His eyes looked broken.

“Besides,” he began, smiling at Archidemus, “I don’t really have to worry, do I? Because you took care of it. Right?”

“How,” Archidemus shook his head, “how did you know I did anything?”

“I know you. That’s how. I have a general idea how you would act. So tell me. What did you do?”

Archidemus looked down guiltily. “I sent letters, before the spell went into effect. They...will confuse the loyalties of the military, and set the Generals against each other.”

Barnabus burst out into laughter, such that tears formed in his eyes. “Oh, Archi! We are a match made in heaven, I tell ya!” He wrapped his arm around Archidemus. His breath smelled vaguely of whiskey. “That’s exactly what I’m talking about! Now, even if they’re discovered, no one will know who they’re working for. It’s going to be chaos!” He threw his head back, letting out a long belt of laughter. A pit formed in Archidemus’s stomach.

“How is this good?” Archidemus asked. “Won’t this make it more difficult for you? To become the new King?” Even as he said it, the words sounded filthy and false in his mouth. Barnabus just laughed.

“King of a graveyard, my friend.” Barnabus waved his arm across the horizon. “This is my Kingdom, and I’m its grinning reaper. If you don’t mind me getting poetic. I always liked poetry.” He let go of Archidemus. “Could never write the shit, but hey, we’re not all meant to be artists, right?”

“But, you said-”

“Oh, what did I say?” Barnabus turned on Archidemus, baring his teeth and glaring. “That I would bring a new order to Exbaltaira? That I would lead it to a new age? Yeah, well this is it! This shit hole deserves to burn.” He flicked his wrist, and a bush lit on fire. The fire quickly spread to another bush, and to a tree. He watched the fire, and Archidemus watched him. The fire reflected off his eyes while the shadows played on his face. “It deserves me,” he whispered.

He turned back to Archidemus, grinning. The shadows made his face look fractured, broken. “Everything makes sense in Death, Archi. Dumass over there is the only one to really get it. Everyone is going to show the backstabbing, traitorous fuck they are, then they’re going to tear each other apart.” He grabbed Archidemus and shoved him against a tree. Archidemus tried to pull away, but Barnabus pinned him down. “That. Is my vision. And now, after today, you’ve helped make it happen. It’s too late to turn back now. You might as well stick around.”

Archidemus whispered the words for stasis, but nothing came. He burned, both in

embarrassment, the heat, and fear. This was fear. He had almost forgotten. Barnabus saw it, and smiled. "No," he said. He let Archidemus go, and turned around. "Now come on. Let's build my new empire."

5 - Meciah

“What’s the deal with us elves and forests, anyway,” Governor Sullivan of Sulnanan quipped. Meciah couldn’t come up with an answer for him. He himself had always liked the sprawling forests of Exbaltaira and Ko’ebbe. He saw it as a binding force between the two nations, along with the Onisia river.

They walked in a forest now, deep in the Exbaltairan Demilitarized Zone. Sullivan had asked Meciah to come walking with him, and it was either that or attend the ball for King Samuel. The affair, Meciah knew, would be a sight to see, but he did not feel ready to begin his act in such a violent, stressful environment.

“I don’t know, Sullivan,” he said, “we just kind of find ourselves drawn to them, I guess.”

“That,” Sullivan pointed his finger dramatically, “is an unfair, close minded, and quite frankly racist remark, good sir.” They looked at each other, a dead serious glare sat on Sullivan’s face. For a moment, then it shattered into grins and laughter. Meciah laughed as well. “I mean, I will have you know,” Sullivan said, “that I fucking hate forests! A hive for bugs, wolves and other pests. Give me a comfy bed and a glass of wine any day, thank you very much.”

At the mention of wine, Sullivan pulled the bottle of “Ol’ King Sam’s Brand Whiskey” to his lips, and took a great big swig. Meciah did not smile at the sight; Alcohol did not sit well with him. He had seen the effects of ‘lifting prohibition’ had on some of the men and women, and he liked not a bit of it.

“Why the long face, sport?” Sullivan said. He held out his bottle. “You want a drink? Don’t be scared, we’re not set to discover disease bearing germs for another thousand years at least.” Sullivan laughed, but Meciah just shook his head.

“Thanks, but no thanks. I haven’t touched the stuff yet, and I’m not sure I want to either. I think you’ve seen what it does to some people.”

“Oh, what,” Sullivan snorted, “so some people can’t hold their drink, and that’s what scares you? Besides, don’t tell me you never smuggled wine before,” he looked expectantly at Meciah, “you have, right?”

“What?” The question caught Meciah off guard. “No, I’ve never smuggled wine. Or much of anything. Well,” he shrugged, “there’s the matter of Kings Leaf, but I’m pretty sure everyone smuggled that.”

“Kings leaf!” Sullivan clapped Meciah on the shoulder, “I didn’t take you for a snorter!”

“I- what? No!” Meciah shook his head. “It was for hospitals!”

Sullivan erupted into laughter. Blood rushed into his face. “Oh Caranist, I know boyo! I’m just pulling your leg, eh?” He slapped Meciah across the shoulder again. “But still man, no wine?” He looked directly into Meciah’s face to say this, his eyes aghast. He had a squarish, ruddy with drink face, and dark hazel eyes. His breath also stank of whiskey, and Meciah shoved him away. Sullivan flew away, laughing and throwing his arms all about. “Come on man. You have sorely missed the point of your position.”

This last sentence hurt, and Meciah’s laughter started to strain. “I wouldn’t say that,” he said, “nor would I say that smuggling booze is a great use of my office.”

Sullivan dismissed him with an exaggerated wave of his hand. “Dry your blanket, skip,”

he said just as he took another drink. He lay against a tree, sighing with a reminiscent look in his eyes. "Ah, I remember back when I was a lieutenant. I kept hearing rumors of public officials having access to the highest quality wine imported from far away lands. My dream was to escape the rat race of military life, and drink heavy from the teat of public success." He dramatically raised his bottle to the sun as he spoke.

Meciah shook his head, and looked back at him. "So, you mean to say, you became a Governor so that you can drink?"

"Well," Sullivan brought his hand back down, "there was also the desire to personally spit polish the King's nob, but that one I don't bring up in polite company." He let out a bark of laughter, followed by another drink. Meciah rolled his eyes, and looked about. Sullivan finished his drink and continued, sounding more annoyed. "Of course, I claw my way to the top only to find out that the rumors had been cruelly calculated lies just to trick me into office. There was no wine, nor teats. Well, there were those, but the allure lessens when the State shoves them into your face like you're some sort of factory." He took another sip. "Add that to the whole lot of nothing I could do without the King personally signing off on it, and just about all I could do was smuggle wine."

He staggered off the tree, and smiled. He held the bottle up, with the picture facing Meciah. It was "Ol' King Sam," a portrait of the new King Samuel, wearing an overly ornate crown and holding a glass of whiskey while smiling. "This," Sullivan said, holding it out triumphantly, "is the only thing that gave me pause when deciding to throw Sammy to the dogs." He took another swig, and sighed. "And the way I sees it, after this is all done, I can have as many of these as I want." He tossed the empty bottle wide, and it sailed over the trees and out of sight. From a long distance away, they heard the bottle smashing.

"Are you sure that was a good idea?" Meciah said, "something like that could give away our position."

"Good thing we're gonna keep moving then." Sullivan resumed walking. "I wouldn't call this a position so much as a rest stop. Oh, speaking of rest stops, be a dear and cover me as I return mother nature her gifts."

Meciah sighed, and turned around, keeping a watch while Sullivan "returned mother nature her gifts." He tried listening to the birds, until Sullivan interrupted by whistling a jaunty dwarven tune.

"What position do you mean, anyway?" Meciah asked. "You don't mean to stay out here?"

"That's the plan." Sullivan finished, and Meciah turned back to him. "Else I wouldn't be wearing my Sunday best, now would I?"

Sullivan's dress had been confusing Meciah. He was wearing a long brown coat, nothing like an Exbaltairan uniform and more like something a pirate from the Teardrop Isles might wear. He wore brown fatigues, and boiled leather armor over his chest. A sword hung from his hip, a cutlass from the looks of it, and he wore a bandolier full of potions.

"You know," Meciah said, "I had assumed you were on mission here from the start. But you never explained why you're dressed as a pirate."

"Because I fucking can, that's why!" He drew the sword, which was indeed a cutlass, and brandished it. "This is the sort of freedom we're fighting for, isn't it? Besides, I know how to use

one of these things fairly well.” He slipped the sword back.

Meciah wanted desperately to scold him for being a fool, but he just looked so happy. Instead he chuckled, shaking his head. “Whatever you say. Where are we going, anyway?”

“Not too far from here. Just over this ridge, actually. I imagine you’ll want to head back soon, skip. You shouldn’t blow your cover this early, right?”

“What are you doing, anyway?” Meciah asked, now concerned. Sullivan hadn’t said anything at all about the mission on the way over, and he was just now mentioning anything about cover blowing.

“Me? Well, I’ve got some boys up near here. We’re gonna give Ol’ King Sam a surprise party. Harass him a bit, then leave.” He grinned at Meciah, his face still ruddy from the laughter and whiskey. “Not gonna kill him. Probably can’t. But let him know what he’s up against.”

Meciah stopped in his tracks, and stared at Sullivan. “Did Barnabus tell you to do this? Or Dumas?” he asked. Sullivan only snorted, waving his hand dismissively again.

“No, and it wouldn’t matter if he sent me a personal letter scribed with a virgin boy’s blood telling me not to. That boy’s not all there in the head, if you hadn’t noticed. And Dumas is too busy praying or being old to care.”

“Then why the hell are you doing this?” Meciah said. He hadn’t noticed, but the news made him fairly angry. “You’re going to blow your own cover.”

“Oh, stop it,” Sullivan said, now frowning. “I don’t have a cover.” He pointed a thumb at himself. “I’ve been treated as a fugitive since the start of all this. So far as I’m concerned, people already think I’ve gone rogue. Might as well give them all a confirmation. But that’s not all, sport.” He clasped Meciah on the shoulder, looking into his eyes.

“Listen, Meciah, you’ve got your job cut out for you in the shadows, but that’s not my role. I’m a Sarnu-damned Exbaltairan, and I do things in the sun.” He pointed to the sun, sitting in the noon position over their heads. “I think that might be the only part of this whole thing Barnabus seems to be getting. So I want Ol’ King Sam here to know that I’ve got his number.” He let go, and seemed to take the anger out of Meciah as he did so. That passion seemed to go straight into his eyes.

“Okay,” Meciah said, shrugging, “but are you ready for this? I don’t know if you should be fighting while drunk.”

“I can be sober when I want to be. Now come on, I want you to meet the boys.” They continued walking, and cleared the hill. Near the bottom, just as Sullivan had said, was a group of seven men. When they approached, they all got into formation, drew their swords, and waited. Sullivan stopped in front of them, and nodded. They all shoved their blades into the air, silent.

“They know their leader,” Sullivan whispered to Meciah. He turned to him, smiling from ear to ear. “Now go. You don’t want a light cast on your shadow yet.”

Meciah nodded, and pulled out a scroll. It was a teleportation scroll, one that would bring him back to his room in the Minnen district. He held onto it, said a word, and was gone.

Samuel popped his head through the trees, taking in a large breath of fresh air. His muscles strained from the effort of climbing, but it had also been exhilarating. He had forgotten what he could do without his armor weighing him down. He blinked against the sun, and scanned the horizon. He turned to face north, and his eyes widened. Down the hill and nestled in a valley, next to the Onisia river, and now embedded into the ice wall, was the city of Suilanan.

It was a fortress, with gargantuan stone walls that blocked all spying eyes. Inside the buildings were suitably massive, all made from stone and each one a fortress of its own. It was the rest of the world's gate into Exbaltairan trading, and the State's first form of defense.

Samuel had a history with the city. It was there that Samuel had first discovered what had happened to Barnabus, how he had changed his name to Brasiden and threw his allegiance in with the State once more. Just thinking back to that time could make him recall the iron taste the blood that had made permanent residence in his mouth that month.

Now a new taste made him twist his face up into a disgusted scowl. The district of Suilanan had been abandoned, its Governor, Sullivan, stripped of his title. It was entirely within the DMZ, and no one was allowed to live there. Yet, men marched before the city, and smoke billowed out from behind its walls. Someone had taken up residence within the city.

Dropping down proved much easier than climbing up, and in not a minute Samuel was on the ground. He turned to Argollo, who had been waiting.

"An army has occupied Suilanan," Samuel said. Argollo's eyes widened in shock, but Samuel continued. "This looks like a proper invasion. Perhaps Ko'ebbe, or Sarenue. We cannot rule out any of the Council territories-

"Samuel," Argollo placed his hand on Samuel's shoulder to get him to stop, "think about it. Who would send in an army, then close them in with those walls, denying them reinforcements? If this is anything, it's a rebellion, not an invasion."

Samuel nodded. He had not wanted to consider the idea, but it did not shock him. He had been reading the papers coming from Exbaltaira, and the public's opinion of him hadn't been getting any better during his stay with the Crusaders.

"In any case," Samuel said, "we need to return to Neva as quickly as we can. And you need to leave." He stared at Argollo. "All of you. I will not risk having you with us, and we can move stealthily as a smaller group.

"Samuel," Argollo said, "you need to let me help you?"

"What are you talking about?" Samuel asked.

"You have a rebellion, but not an army. I have a navy. Let me help you." Argollo looked into Samuel's eyes, pleading silently. Samuel glared back. Logically, he would need all the help he could get. There was no other choice in the matter.

"Fine," Samuel said. He removed his shield, and pointed at the standard on it. "If it flies this flag, don't touch it. If not, demand surrender. Leave children."

"Okay," he looked to his guards, and paused. He went over to Daria, said a few words, and walked back to Samuel, holding a sheathed knife. "Here," he said, holding it out. "I am going to teleport back for you as soon as I can. Just don't leave this spot. Use this if anything else attacks you. It can pierce any armor."

Samuel took it without reluctance. It was a weapon, and if he couldn't use his armor, neither could the enemy. The rest of his guards took out scrolls, read from them, and

disappeared. Argollo thought for a moment, then took out his own scroll. He nodded to Samuel, read from it, then disappeared.

Samuel surveyed his remaining group. It was just him, Emilio, Kidraff, and a limping Lanningham now. They had never found Edward, and Samuel had declared him dead. Most likely killed by whatever had attacked them in the first place, which they also never found.

"We should start moving," Samuel said, "stealth formation. We're using the trees to our advantage. With speed, planning, and a little luck, we should remain undetected until-" he was interrupted by the amulet around his neck vibrating.

"It's a bit late for that boyo!" a voice cried down from the trees. Samuel turned to face it, and instead saw four elves pointing bows at him. Emilio and Kidraff drew their swords and made to rush to his side.

"Halt!" cried the voice, and they did. "I wouldn't do that, if I were you. My boys here could punch a dozen in your boss before you had the chance to raise your little shields."

"Who are you?" called out Samuel. "Show yourself!"

"I don't take orders, but lucky for you I'm in a charitable mood." From behind a tree stepped a bizarrely dressed elf. He had the costume and swagger of a Pirate, which contrasted with his well kempt, blond hair that sat on his shoulders. He grinned down at the group, and Samuel knew him.

"Allow me to introduce myself. I am Sullivan, Lord of Sulanan," he took a deep, mocking, bow while maintaining eye contact, "a pleasure to meet you, Ol' King Sam."

Had he not been wearing the ring, Samuel might have been seething with hatred and rage. Now he was just confused. "Sullivan," he called out, "I thought you were happy with the whiskey. Why have you gone rogue?"

"What can I say?" he called out, "I wanted a bigger slice of the pie for myself, and you came along and took away the only bite I had."

"Are you here to kill me?"

"Don't even think that! I wouldn't end the fun here. What do you take me for? No sir," he pointed down at Samuel, "I wanted to size you out, if you catch my meaning."

Samuel smiled. Smiles were a sign of casualness, and it would be best if he didn't seem to take this clown seriously. "Are you sure you want to do that, Governor? I've been commanding a military unit, while you've been working a civilian job. It might end poorly for you."

"Boy," Sullivan said, his voice without the laughter in it, replaced by a sinister tone, "you will learn in the coming months that, in Exbaltaira, there are no civilian jobs. Now come on, Ol' King Sam," he drew his sword, "I want a duel, just you and I, and I'm not unwilling to tell my boys to pick off your mates if you equivocate."

The archers held their bows up. Emilio and Kidraff shrunk away, holding their shields up. The sound of creaking bow strings echoed behind them, and they turned around to see the three other archers that had taken up position behind them. Samuel turned back to Sullivan, whose grin was mocking him.

"Fine," Samuel said. The prospect of fighting did not worry him. He could boast about his time in the military all he wanted, but Governorship had made Sullivan soft. He was certain of that. He motioned for his party to back away, which they did, still holding their shields up. Lanningham sat on the side, having already given up on defending himself. Sullivan descended

his slope, grinning at Samuel while slipping on a buckler over his right arm. Samuel removed his shield from his back, slipping his left arm through it.

At the bottom, they were level with one another. “Now come on, let’s do this like gentlemen, right?” Sullivan asked, and Samuel nodded. They walked up to each other, and turned, still walking. They stopped when they could feel the other. The tradition in Exbaltaira was five steps. They took one step. Then another.

Sam turned and swung his sword hard. His sword was knocked aside by Sullivan’s buckler, and his breath was knocked out of him by Sullivan’s fist.

“Hah ha!” Sullivan barked, dancing away, “I knew I could count on you, boyo! Let’s make this a good show.”

Samuel growled. “I had expected a Governor to show more respect to tradition. I shouldn’t be surprised a traitor like yourself lacks that sort of honor.”

“Right back atcha, King-o!” Sullivan brandished his sword. The dance began. Sullivan proved quicker than Samuel had assumed, and profited from it early on. Samuel still had his shield, of course, and was much faster without his armor. They danced around each other for a time, then separated.

“Why the rebellion, Sullivan,” Samuel asked.

“Booze and women, Sam. Same as any rebellion, when you get down to it. Though I suppose you’d appreciate neither.” Before allowing a retort, Sullivan charged. Instead of leading in with a sword swing, he slammed his buckler against Samuel’s shield, pushing it up. He slid, and swiped at Samuel right past the shield.

“Argh!” Samuel grunted, stumbling back. He had forgotten what it was like to be sliced without armor, though the growing stain was doing a good job reminding him. It wasn’t deep, but it was enough to unsettle Samuel. Sullivan had rolled away, and was now back on his feet, grinning.

“So, Ol’ King Sam can bleed. Funny, the King I know bleeds whiskey.” He laughed wildly, and Samuel saw an opportunity to attack, but did not take it. If they came too close to killing Sullivan, his archers would surely attack. Instead, he took the second given to him to place his hand on the wound.

“Dagero”

A faint blue light shone through his fingers, and the pain stopped. Samuel resumed position, and looked at Sullivan. Sullivan was looking at him with comically widened eyes, and had thrown his hand into the air.

“What is the deal! With elves and magic?” he shouted. “Don’t most of us hate the shit!”

Samuel did not answer, instead going on the offensive. He knocked Sullivan’s buckler to the side, and took a swipe of his own. The other elf shouted, thought Samuel knew he hadn’t even gone as deeply as Sullivan had. The leather armor was more reinforced than he had anticipated.

“Okay, now this is a show!” Sullivan said before striking again. Samuel blocked this, but the force of the swing sent fibrations up his arm. Using a shield like this with no armor was more difficult than he remembered.

“Who else is rebelling?” shouted Samuel, feinting to the left, and catching Sullivan on the right.

“Now that would be telling,” Sullivan hooked his leg around Samuel’s, and pulled him down. Samuel rolled out of the way of his stab.

“Is it any of the other Governors?” Samuel asked when back on his feet.

“That’s the wrong question, boyo.” Sullivan said. The two were apart from each other again, and neither moved for a minute. Sullivan sighed, and had a sad look on his face. He glared across at Samuel. “Honestly, King Sam, I was kind of expecting something else. You aren’t quite like what I’ve been told. Certainly I don’t remember any of the generals complaining about the traitorous golem, if you get what I mean.” He pointed his sword at Samuel. “Maybe I should just kill you. Bring that Barnabus asshole’s little rebellion to a quick, efficient end.”

What?

Samuel blinked at Sullivan. “What,” he said, “did you say?”

“There’s the info you’ve been so desperate for,” spat Sullivan, “a young blood punk who’s got a fireball up his arse. Now that you know, are you ready to die?”

Samuel did not respond. He tried to speak, but no voice came out, leaving his lips flapping like a fish. Sullivan cocked an eyebrow at Samuel. His frown turned back into that smile.. “Oh? Is that a reaction I spy? I didn’t think you would recognize the name. Who is it, Ol’ King Sam? A former enemy? A friendship gone awry?”

What? Brasiden, but. What?

Samuel’s vision began to cloud, and everything blurred together, dominated by a sinister, red glow. He could hear the blood pumping in his ears. Could feel the tendrils from the artifact on his ring stinging in his veins, straining to regain control. He began to shake his head, and his breath came hard and fast. “Who, how do you, what?” he whispered.

Sullivan chuckled, but looked uneasy. “Did I break it,” he said to Emilio. The party was just watching Samuel, unsure of what was going on or how to react. Sullivan looked back at him as well. Samuel was no longer holding his shield up, and he had a shocked look on his face. But Sullivan wasn’t looking at his face. He was looking at the ring on his right hand, which was pulsating a dark, bloody red.

*What is he doing Why is he here Who is he working with Why is he rebelling Barnabus Brasiden
What is going on Does he know I’m here Did he*

The memory of the attack from before came swimming back into his mind, and all he could see and feel were the flames against his skin. With these memories, however, was the memory of the night he had fought Arthanu. Brasiden had been there, but he left. When the Crusaders tried to stop them, he lit a wall of fire between them. A wall of hot, burning fire.

Did he try to kill me?

Suddenly, the red glow in his vision vanished. Samuel looked down, and saw the thing, its band having retracted, falling off his hand and into the grass.

“Fuck.” His vision went black.

“What is going on with you, boy-” before Sullivan could finish, Samuel screamed. It was a guttural, bloody, animalistic scream. He set bloodshot eyes on Sullivan, and charged.

Sullivan had hardly a second to jump out of the way. Samuel kept going until he slammed into a tree. He roared and swung wilding, just barely missing the top of Sullivan’s head. His shield hung to the side, and Sullivan took the window given to him.

With one slice he opened a giant gash across Samuel’s chest, but the elf shaped beast did not seem to notice or respond. He came down hard on Sullivan in an over head blow that Sullivan barely managed to block. The force to the blow split his buckler in half, and the sword was embedded in the shield.

Samuel threw his shield to the side as Sullivan tried to wrench his arm out of the buckler, nearly pulling it out of its socket instead. With a great roar Samuel pulled out a knife and barreled into Sullivan, knocking them both of the ground.

“What do you know about Barnabus!” Samuel growled. Sullivan did not answer, preoccupied as he was with gasping. Samuel looked down, and realized he had embedded the blade deep into Sullivan’s gut. He pulled it out, and held it above his head, drawing back a little. Sullivan had a look of a mixture of fear, rage, and pure wonder. But mostly fear. “Tell me!” Samuel screamed.

“I don’t know.” Sullivan said, eyes widening, “I don’t know anything. I would tell you. Gods I would, but I don’t-”

Samuel did not wait. He slammed the knife back into Sullivan’s gut. An arrow slammed into his shoulder knocking him off of Sullivan. This was followed by several more, driving Samuel away. Samuel could not see the archers through the tears.

Sullivan struggled to his feet, drinking a healing potion. He gasped when he finished it, and stared at Samuel. His face had lost the humor and eccentricity from before. Now he was wary, and cautious, but above that amazed.

“So,” he said, “this is Ol’ King Sam with the chains off.”

Samuel was on his knees. The rage had passed, and was now replaced by the grief. He was trying desperately to control his tears.

I’m not going to cry I’m not going to cry I’m not going to cry in front of the one rebelling against me Sarnu dammit I’m not going to cry!

Sullivan replaced his sword. “Good show, Ol’ King Sam.” He looked at the ring, its gem now dull and red. “I suggest, for the rest of this war, you keep that off. You’ll need this kind of thing if you hope to have a chance.”

He turned to his men. “I want you all to retreat back to the city. Cover your tracks, and I’ll meet you there with new orders.” He looked back at Samuel. “We’ll be meeting again, King Samuel. Next time, I imagine it won’t be a gentleman’s duel.”

He removed a piece of paper from his pocket. Before reading it, he said “You might want

to start walking. In a few minutes, this sort of stuff won't be working, and your friend won't be coming to get you. He read the scroll, and vanished. The archers disappeared into the trees, and the party was left alone.

Lanningham got up, and limped to Samuel, kneeling down next to his crying King. Samuel was busy pulling at the hair on his head. "My lord," he said, unsure of how to proceed, "it will be all right. This is not the end."

"He's right," Kidraff said. Kidraff had a particularly high pitched voice, like a child's. Samuel would have objected to bringing someone so young if he hadn't figured that Kidraff was actually a woman disguised as a man. "We will bring the fist of Exbaltaira upon any who would dare stand against you."

"I'll slice up that Sullivan punk myself," Emilio said.

Samuel nodded, appreciative but not comforted. It was not the rebelling. Not even Sullivan's taunting. It was never about the rebellion. He could handle a rebellion. Even if he lost, he could handle defeat. He had only been King for a short period of time. No, it was everything from when he first got the stupid ring to now. Most of all, it was the terrible revelation.

Barnabus...why?

Part I - Epilogue

Near the end of that day, the skies of Exbaltaira changed. The ait above it flickered, and for a moment it appeared that a shell had formed to cover all of the land, and much of the water and nearby islands. This shell began small, and expanded to the walls of fire and ice that isolated Exbaltaira.

To the truly observant, it would seem like a black cloud hung over the nation, shrouding it from all eyes. This process lasted but a fraction of a second, then it was gone, with no one the wiser of it.

None but one. Some distance down the Onisia river, past Ko'ebbe and at the base of the mountains separating the North from the South, sat a cottage. By the cottage was the river, and sitting near the river was an old, elvish man. This elf was truly ancient, with skin hanging off his bones, spots on his face, and bristly sprouts of white hair poking out around his mouth. Most peculiar though was his ears. He had none, instead there were two bloody craters with ridges that might be bones. His arms were more scar than flesh.

He looked old and tired, and he looked far to the North, to Exbaltaira's sky. He had seen the change.

Out of the cottage came a boy. A human boy, perhaps on his way to being a man with time. He walked to the old elf, smiling.

"Say Zeebs, has the river gotten up and moved yet," he quipped before sitting down next to the old elf. "Whatcha looking at?" he asked.

Zeebs did not answer. He rarely did. Instead he pointed to the North. To Exbaltaira. He looked at the boy, whose name was Pick, still pointing. The man Zeebs had a look of deadly seriousness on him.

"What?" Pick asked, "you wanna go up there? What's up there?"

Zeebs took his other hand and placed it on his stomach. He began to mime scratching it, then clawing it, then hacking it apart as if with a daggar. It took Zeebs a moment to figure out his meaning.

"Sam?" he said, and Zeebs nodded. "He's busy being King. I don't think he has time for folk like us, Zeebs," he said.

Zeebs stood up, holding his staff for support. He pointed at a tree beside the water. He snapped his fingers, and the tree erupted into flames. He looked at Pick.

It did not take Pick so long to decipher this one. "Is Sam in trouble?" Pick asked.

Zeebs nodded, then turned. He began to walk North.

"Oh, shit, wait! Give me a minute!" Pick ran back into the cottage. When he came out, he was dressed in leathers, had a sword and a dagger hanging from his hip, and his cloak on. He carried a bag filled with basic supplies, including some potions and food. He could hunt, and Zeebs could brew, and they could both steal, so he wasn't worried. Zeebs hadn't gone far, but he hadn't stopped either. Pick caught up with them, and they walked North. North to Exbaltaira.