

Part IV

28 - Pick

Pick held out a hand, signalling the other two to stop. He watched the four elves up ahead; they hadn't seen them it, it looked like. They were just talking. Someone let out a war cry, and the four were on their feet, weapons drawn. Pick damn near shat himself, but they ran the opposite direction.

"Geez," Pick whispered, "they're thick out here."

"There will be a battle soon. It should let us pass unnoticed." Tyraetus loomed over Pick's shoulder, glaring through the trees. Clouds still hung heavy in the sky, and it was so dark that it were almost night, and his eyes worked better than Pick's now.

"So, Mr. Crackles, what do we have to know about this guy?" Pick asked.

"Stop calling me that. I may be wrong, but it's the General of the Omega Regiment, over a third of the former Exbaltairan army."

"Who is he fighting?"

"The General of the Beta Regiment."

"Tsk tsk. What is it with elves and their infighting?" Pick crawled forward some, then looked back at Zeebs. "How much farther we got, buddy?"

Zeebs shook his head, made some breathing sounds, and generally acted like usual Zeebs. Pick shrugged and smiled. "I guess it can't be that far, can it?"

"Omega might be holding the artifact," Tyraetus said, "so be prepared. We may have to kill him for it."

"You've got that covered, right?"

"Don't rely on me, Pick. I may not be able to call the lightning again so soon. Not like that."

"Whatever you say, Mr. Crackles."

The group edged through the forest, unseen and undetected. Like Tyraetus had said, the forces of Omega and Beta had begun to clash upon a city in eastern-Aglarham. Though strictly a part of Sullivan's kingdom, the city had been left unguarded for some time, and the two Generals had both laid claim to it. Beta took to the field, while Omega watched and calculated. Though outnumbered, Omega out maneuvered Beta considerably, and the tide turned dramatically.

Pick, Zeebs, and Tyraetus went behind the lines and came upon Omega. A handful of soldiers stood around him, but most had been sent to the field. Even his lieutenants, what few he had, were all gone. Pick started devising a grand plan to take the guy down, but Tyraetus had his own plan. He stepped into the open, ignoring Pick's hissing and swearing.

"General Omega!" Tyraetus called. The General turned around, his expression a blank slate. He wore no armor, and had only a sword on his belt. "It is I, Tyraetus. You may remember when I served Arthanu. Or when I served you, and rebelled under the name Tiriol."

"Great, awesome idea," Pick whispered, his face in his palm, "hey bro, remember that

time I stabbed yall in the back?" Pick sighed, turned to Zeebs. "I'm gonna circle around, and try to stab him when this shit falls apart. Cover me." Pick snuck through the trees, trying to circle around the group.

"I do not wish to fight you, General," Tyraetus said, "please, just give me the Eldar Artifact. I know you have it; I can see it around your neck." The General brought a hand up to the obsidian stone hanging around his neck. "Please, let us end this. Give me that gem, and we may yet make the sun set once more."

The General, for what it was worth, seemed to think it over. For a couple seconds, he even smiled. He looked at his nearest soldier, and made a slicing motion with his hand. The soldiers drew their swords, and Tyraetus sighed.

With a voice full of regret, he said, "I am sorry it had to come to this, General Omega." He drew his ax. "In this battle, I hope to finally give you a reason to be proud of me."

The four men charged forward. Tyraetus embedded his ax in the head of one, grabbed another and tossed him into the other two. He pulled his ax out, and began working on the other three, who proved better at dodging than the first.

Pick, having circled the group, got up behind Omega. From there it should have been simple. Kick to the back of the knee, followed by slicing open the throat. Grab the gem, let Mr. Crackles do his hocus, and move on victorious!

But when Pick tried to execute on this plan, something went wrong. He kicked, and he hit something, but it wasn't the back of the knee. Something in front of it, hard like metal, and extremely painful. He heard a cracking noise from his foot, and knew he had broken at least one toe. He hopped back, yelping in pain. Omega turned around, and his smile pulled into a small, innocent smile.

Pick lashed out, driving his dagger toward that smug ass face. Instead of slicing his cheek open, the blade stopped in mid air, and blue sparks formed and flew off the edge. Pick smelled something acrid, and then the knife bounced off, wrenching itself out of Pick's hand.

The General jabbed Pick in the gut, backhanded his face when he doubled over. Pick held up a hand to block the General's next attack, but was too focused on breathing to pay attention. The General grabbed his wrist and, with strength Pick hadn't expected, twisted his arm in new and creative ways that Pick had hardly even imagined were possible. His arm and several other areas of his body, snapped, and Pick screamed. He fell to the floor, beaten.

"Pick!" Tyraetus shouted before lunging into an attack. The General drew his sword and knocked the ax out of the way with only the hilt. He slid close to Tyraetus, who threw his other arm around him and tried to grapple him to the ground. The General twisted and push, and only Tyraetus fell. Omega took his sword and sunk it deep into Tyraetus's side. Tyraetus did not scream, only grit his teeth and try to stand. Omega planted his boot on Tyraetus's massive face, pushing it into the ground.

Pick opened his eyes, and tried to shout to Tyraetus. He opened his mouth, then stopped.

Zeebs stood behind the General, facing away from Pick, and lightly tapped his shoulder. Omega turned, throwing another backhand punch aimed for Zeeb's head. Zeebs caught the fist and held it. The sparks appeared again, and turned into a blue flame encasing Zeeb's hand, but he did not let go. Omega tried to pull away, but Zeebs must have had an iron grip on him.

Before Pick's eyes, Zeebs began to grow. He realized that he had never seen Zeeb's body under that robe. He always looked hunched over, but Pick has assumed that he would be as tall as any other elf, maybe even a bit shorter. Zeebs straightened his body, and towered over the General, who pulled away more frantically, his smile gone.

The colors began to melt into one another. First the reds mixed with the greens with the brown. The world seemed to become a wash of swirls, the only thing in focus being Zeebs, Tyraetus and the General. Pick barely noticed the whispering that had become so familiar to him by now. But they did not whisper; in his ears Pick heard a cacophony of screaming chants, each overriding the other. The General began to squirm, trying to rip his arm out of its socket, just to escape the grip.

Pick could not see his face, but he could tell that Zeebs opened his mouth. He could barely hear the General's screams over the chanting, matched only by his own.

As quickly as it began, it was done. The colors were back to normal, Zeebs looked like a weak, old elf, and Tyraetus was on the ground. The only things that had changed were Tyraetus's face, which had become white as rock, staring up at Zeebs, and the General. The General had crumpled onto the ground, his face twisted into an expression of pure horror, his eyes bulged and jaw unhinged. A spear of blood, dried and frozen, jut out of his chest, and the gem lay on top, skewered and broken.

Pick looked at the fire mournfully. He rubbed his arm, and looked back to Tyraetus. "Are you sure?" Pick asked. "We still have one more."

Tyraetus threw his baggage over his shoulder. "I am certain. I do not know where this path will take you, but I cannot follow you." He looked at Zeebs, then bowed his head. "I wish you luck in this quest, but I must go. I may meet you again. If so, do not come to be arms raised like a friend. It may be that I am an enemy. Good bye." Tyraetus turned, and began to walk away, into the forest and out of their lives.

Pick groaned, looking at Zeebs. He smiled sadly, "look what you've done, Zeebs old buddy. Who are we gonna use as a meatshield now?" He chuckled. "Guess we're in some trouble."

"Well, I guess that means this works then, huh?"

Pick stood up and drew his sword, glaring into the forests. His arm stung painfully, the potion having only half healed it. "Who the hell's out there?" Pick shouted.

An elf walked out from behind a tree, hands held up. He wore black, fancy looking armor, and held a shield with a torn apart standard painted on it. He had cropped blonde hair, and a sad smile.

"Sam?" Pick asked, then smiled. "Sammy! What the hell are you doing here?"

"Passing through. What about you? What the hell are you guys doing in Exbaltaira?"

Pick took the time to explain, trying to leave out all the uncomfortable, demony bits. Samuel nodded his head.

"Okay, I'm in. Do you know where the last one is?"

"He does?" Pick said, pointing a thumb at Zeebs. "I don't know how, but he's seem to got an Eldar-Radar."

"What's a radar?"

“Shut up.” Pick said, smiling. Samuel smiled too, and sat down. They all needed the rest.

29 - Meciah

Meciah and his troop cleared the hill, and below them sat the collective forces of Sullivan, King of Suilanan. He took the letter out of his pocket, reread it, and crumbled it in his fist. He motioned his men to follow. They entered the camp, and no one stopped them. Any who bothered to recognize them offered little beyond a look before returning to their business.

They found the main tent, and Meciah held out a hand to stop them. He entered alone. Inside sat Sullivan, his head laid on desk, holding a bottle of that damned whiskey he kept drinking. Meciah walked up to him, choosing not to sit.

“Still drinking that?” Meciah asked. Sullivan picked his head up. His eyes were bloodshot and miserable, and his face pale.

“Ran out,” Sullivan said, “long time ago. Supplies go fast, when there’s a wall in the way. Hehe.” He sat up, and looked up at Meciah, smiling. “Got my little birdie, did ya?”

Meciah threw the letter on the table. “So this is it? You’re giving up? Just like that? You’ve had the most success in this damn war, and have conquered half the damn state! Why stop now?”

“War? Hah! What war are you talking about? This back and forth, back and forth, haven’t you gotten it!” Sullivan stood up. Even without the alcohol, he swayed in place, grabbing the chair for support. “We were never supposed to win. Dumas, the boy, they just wanted us to eat each other, to tear each other apart.”

“What?” Meciah asked. “That’s stupid, why would they want that?”

“Because they’re damned psychopaths! Dumas has a point to prove about Sarnu knows what, and Barna is as stable as an Exbaltairan at peace.” Sullivan began to laugh. “And we all fell for it, me especially. No matter how hard I tried to screw it all up, I played right into their grimy little hands, didn’t I?”

“How were you trying to screw it all up?” Meciah asked.

“Oh come on, Meciah, as if I haven’t been acting like the biggest piece of shit in this little organization. Attacking before anyone else, stealing land, it was all to screw up the whole thing. I wanted the rebellion to crash and burn!” Sullivan still laughed, but Meciah saw the tears beginning to build in his eyes. “I should have just gone after them. The boy and the gnarly old fuck. It’d have been simpler, I imagine.”

Meciah took a second to register the confession. He looked at Sullivan strangely, like he was a different person. “Why were you trying to ruin the rebellion? I thought you wanted this? To drink all the wine, right?”

Sullivan held up the bottle of whiskey. “Guess I was wrong about that, eh? I could only ever find one o’ these.” He turned the bottle around to look at the faded, scratched up logo. “Say, you know what happened to him? To Ol’ King Sam?”

“He gone underground,” Meciah said, “Dollthel sits the Throne now. Philius and I are going to launch an attack. Join us, Sullivan! It doesn’t matter why you started, you can see this through to the end if you just come with us.”

Sullivan chuckled. “Take my boys. They’ll listen to you. I’ve already told em. I aint going

though. I'm done fighting."

"Sullivan—"

"Hey, Meciah! My friend." Sullivan held out the bottle again, showing Meciah the picture of Ol' King Sam. He stepped forward, and stumbled, falling into Meciah who just barely caught him and kept balance. With his head on Meciah's shoulder, Sullivan whispered a thing. Meciah shoved him off, and he fell back into his seat.

"That's it?" Meciah said, suddenly angry. "That's what you're getting so...dramatic over! That's why you're just going to throw this all away? Fine! Sit here and wallow in your own misery, you damned fool!"

Meciah stormed out of the tent. An official looking man walked up to him, offering a stiff salute. "We are ready to serve, Governor."

"Gather everyone," Meciah spat, "meet with the collective forces gathering near Neva, and then prepare for battle." Meciah motioned for his entourage to join him, and they did. They began traveling back to Neva, to the final battle of this rebellion.

Meciah walked up behind Philius, who was surveying the land before them. Thousands of soldiers stood ready to march. The clouds had gathered again, and rain was starting to fall.

"Ah, Meciah," Philius said, the smug smoothness back in his voice, "tell me, do you suppose that garden has begun to grow again? What with the rain?"

"I doubt it," Meciah said. "I doubt anything lives there. The dry months were too long for any to."

"Then I will just have to plant a new one," Philius said, "a grove to signify the new tomorrow."

"So you mean to rule then? In Neva?" Meciah asked, watching the back of Philius's head darkly.

"Well of course. My father can rot in his living tomb if he wants, waiting for Sarnu to come and smite him. I will rule as King. Perhaps I may follow the Halldhor tradition, and be elevated to that of a God."

Meciah shook his head. He had heard enough. "There is a problem with your plan, Philius. Gods cannot die."

"Oh?" Philius said, and he began to turn around. "And what do you mean by—" Philius turned all the way and stopped. He looked at Meciah, and then what Meciah held in his hand. It looked like a wooden stick, a bit sharp at the edge, but nothing threatening. Philius smiled. "Meciah, what is—"

"Bang." A shard of metal shot out of the ground, formed itself into a ball, and blasted forward, all within a second. The ball struck Philius between the eyes, entered, exited, and reduced the back of Philius's head to a bloody ruin. The corpse crumpled.

Meciah looked to the nearest shocked onlookers. "I am taking command of all Philius's men. Prepare to march. In a few hours, we will end this war."

Sullivan kept to his chair, cradling the bottle in his lap. He could hear the men outside pack up the camp, and he waited for the inevitable to come, where they would kick him out to take the tent. They never did, and after some time the outside fell to silence. Sullivan stood up, and

began to walk.

No one stood outside his tent, waiting for an order. The land had been cleared, his boys gone to better things. He chose a direction. That way looked good! And walked. He held the bottle loosely in his left hand.

The memories of the night came vividly to him. Dumas had called him in for an audience at some poncey get together in Neva. Only later did he realize that a new King was being crowned. Samuel, he looked like a boy pretending to be a man. Terrified as hell too. Sullivan had little hope for him, but then he had little hope for any of the Kings. He had only seen a few, but every time he tried to bring up the new haircut, skin color or disposition, someone would be there to shut him up. So he had stopped caring about who sat the Throne.

That was also the day he learned that King Sam had fired him, Soran, and Horus. Now that had hardly seemed fair, but Sullivan hardly seemed to care. The Governorship had been nothing but a pain in the arse. The smuggled wine was good and all, but minutia and constant politicking had driven him to exhaustion. More than one he had thought about letting an ill-conceived assassination attempt work, just so that he could take a break.

So Sullivan had been less than receptive to Dumas's offer. Overthrow the King! What a laugh. As if half a dozen others hadn't already tried. Oh, you have Sory and Hory with you? That's precious, really. Well, good luck. Don't let the door hit you on the way out!

Sullivan slipped on some mud. He leaned against a tree for support. He looked into the sky and smiled. Rain, and what looked like the devil's claw marks on the sky. He chuckled again, and looked around. So lost in his own thoughts, he had gotten lost in his own forest. He had to have been going East? North? That sounded about right?

Back down memory lane, Sullivan had drunk himself into a stupor that night. No more job, so he had nothing to wake up to in the morning. But then someone knocked on his door, right. He opened it, preparing a special insult to whatever staff it was. But it had been no staff, oh no, it was Philius! Dumas's son. You could tell because he's just as dour looking, and with all the creepiness to boot.

Sullivan had wanted no part in whatever he was selling. "Sorry sonny, talked to daddy already, and uncle Sullivan don't want to play." But Philius had been a dedicated salesman. He stopped the door from closing, and said a word that peaked Sullivan's interest.

They talked some, Philius showed Sullivan some papers, legal documents, birth records, and even a Calanthan speed-painting! At the end of the night, Sullivan was interested. He still didn't give a damn about Dumas's rebellion, and it all sounded doomed to fail. But what Philius had shown him that night, oh that was interesting. That he had to see for himself.

Sullivan stumbled through the forest, eventually deciding on a tree to sit by. It felt dry, at least, and he needed a dry spot to place his arse. He closed his eyes, and pictured it all in his head. He had to have sat there for hours, looking for Philius's notes and papers, questioning and accusing. But it had been true. It had to be true.

Something snapped, and Sullivan opened his eyes. He looked up, and in the distance he saw a group walking by. At first he thought he was dreaming. From the back of the group: a human, an old-looking fart of an elf, and a sad looking guy wearing platemail. It was only when he studied the armored one when he recognized the blonde hair, and angsty look to his face. They hadn't seen him, Sullivan realized, and were going to walk on by. Now that wouldn't do.

Sullivan stood up, cupped his hands around his mouth, and shouted "Oy! Ol' King Sam!"

Samuel stopped and turned, looking at Sullivan with confusion. His eyes widened with recognition, and he drew his sword. Sullivan ran, holding the bottle up in front of him, the bottom facing the sky.

"I've got something to tell you!" Sullivan shouted. Samuel held his guard up, but didn't move to meet Sullivan. Sullivan winded up his arm, and threw the bottle as hard as he could, aiming for Samuel's head. In a split second Samuel had his shield out, and the bottle smashed against it, splitting Ol' King Sam's face into millions of pieces.

Sullivan drew his sword, yelled, and pounced. He no longer had his armor, but screw it right? If things were going to end, this felt like the best way for things to go. The fight was quick; Sullivan's sword was knocked from his hand, and he closed his eyes, waiting for it.

*Sullivan tripped, his head landing on Meciah's shoulder. Into his ear, Sullivan whispered:
"He's got my eyes"*

Something hard, but decidedly not sharp, smashed Sullivan in the jaw, and he went spinning to the ground. He opened his eyes, strangely alive. He turned around and looked at Samuel. The boy looked down at him, almost pitying.

"I'm not too surprised to find you wandering alone, Sullivan," Samuel said. "Guess I'm not the only fallen King. Good to know, actually." He turned to the other two. "He's harmless. Let's go."

The group walked away, and Sullivan watched, breathing deeply and massaging his jaw. After they were gone, he began to laugh.

30 - Barnabus

Rain pounded the trees in thick drops. Barnabus sprinted through the trees, fighting to keep his legs moving and his heart from giving with the stress. He had been running like this for well over half an hour, and his body screamed in protest.

He heard screams in the distance, just overcoming the cacophony of the rain. Through the haze he could see smoke rising into the air, and he pushed to move faster. Gods dammit, let it all be wrong.

He burst into a clearing, and stopped in his tracks. A town had once stood there, but now lay as a burning pile of rubble. Corpses lay on the ground among the ash, wood and bones. Desperate looking men in tarnished armor, flying no flag, looted what few houses remained standing. Archidemus sat atop the fountain in the town's center, sporting a grin and holding a wicked looking, bloodied sword.

"Archi!" Barnabus screamed, and he sprinted forward. Archidemus looked at Barnabus, and for a second his grin dominated his sight. He had mad eyes, and his face seemed to crack and heal as Barnabus looked.

The world shifted. In an instant, men changed place and the rain had grown stronger. Archidemus, just before sitting atop the fountain, stood before Barnabus, still holding sword. With his free hand, which Barnabus helpfully ran into, he grabbed Barnabus about the throat and hoisted him into the air. Lightning flashed, illuminating Archidemus's face.

"What is this?" Archidemus asked no one. He spoke smoothly, but with a strange accent. Strange for him, in any case. The distance was there, but he also possessed a coo-ing quality similar to Soran. Mixed with his deep voice created an unsettlingly cruel voice. "Is it prey? Perhaps a lamb come to mingle with the lions?" He tightened his grip around Barnabus's throat. Barnabus could not answer, though Archidemus clearly didn't want him to. He gasped for breath while trying to pry off the fingers encasing his throat.

Archidemus chucked Barnabus away, throwing him into the side of a building. Barnabus punched through the wall, coughing and heaving. He looked up from his position and Archidemus, and noticed for the first time the changes. They were constant and staggered, like Archidemus himself was blinking in an out of reality, replaced with someone new each time. His face stretched and cracked with age, then suddenly drew together in youth. His clothing degraded, faded, changed color, pattern, tore itself and repaired. The air kept blinking and moving as the water sped up and slowed. Sometimes the rain flew up, or around him.

Archidemus inspected his fingers. "So, this hart has barbs. Little fires at his fingertips."

"Archi—" Barnabus paused to cough, "Archidemus. What's wrong with you?"

"This name: Archidemus. I have heard it so often, but I have begun to forget its meaning. And none remain to tell me, for I have killed them all." Archidemus pointed his sword at Barnabus. "You, Hart of Flame, will tell me what this word means."

"It's, it's you." Barnabus said while shaking his head. "You're Archidemus. That's your name!"

"Impossible. Or, is it?" Archidemus looked pensive, regarding the clouds. "I once believed that the sun could not change, that light was eternal. But now darkness has come to

dominate the sky. If such a thing as the sky may change, then perhaps an Archidemus may become an Aglar.”

“What’s wrong with you?” Barnabus asked, struggling to stand up. He winced in sudden pain; he could feel a large gash across his back. “Who are you?”

“I can answer that. I am Aglar of Sturd, founder of the new Empire of Exbaltaira.” He pointed his sword at Archidemus, and even that seemed to change. One moment it was a pristine blade, the next a chip, cruelly mangled talon. “So bow to me, Hart, for I am your new master. Those who do not will suffer the same fate as this village.”

“They, didn’t bow. So you killed them?” Barnabus pulled himself out of the house, and stood up. His legs shook.

“Many did, but a child ran forward and expressed disobedience.” Archidemus, or Aglar, breathed in and smiled, closing his eyes. He seemed to be savoring the memory. “A single spoiled drop will poison the pond.”

“Archidemus,” Barnabus said. His knees gave in, and he sunk into a bow. He tried standing, but couldn’t. Either his knees or his resolve were too weak to support his body. “What the hell have I done?”

“You have chosen wisely, Bar—” Archidemus shifted again and stopped. He looked confused, but kept smiling. “Hart. You will live to serve another day in my army.”

Barnabus reached up and tore off the necklace he wore, that he had been wearing since the beginning of this nightmare. The obsidian gem glowed a putrid green, and the words raced across the surface. The other two gems had been destroyed, and this last one held the dome aloft by itself. Barnabus held it up high to show Archidemus, and screamed through his tears.

“Archidemus! I know you’re in there. I’m sorry! I should never—I didn’t realize what this would do. I’ll stop. I’ll break it myself. Just come back!”

Aglar kicked Barnabus across the face, knocking him down into the mud. The gem flew away. Barnabus could not bring himself to climb out of the mud.

“Cease your tears, whelp. I still do not know who this Archidemus truly is, but your shouting will not summon him. Men! Pause your looting; you shall your spoils, but first bind our Hart.”

“No,” Barnabus whispered. He began to crawl to where the gem dropped. Not so far, he could make it if he just kept going.

Aglar began to laugh, and roots popped out of the ground. They tied around Barnabus, binding him to the ground, around his arms, chest and throat. The gem sat just barely out of reach though, so if he could just touch it.

“In my conquest, not a single person in the land shall be permitted to utter ‘no’ to me, Hart.”

Barnabus grabbed the gem. The power felt instinctual, rushing through him and exploding. The flame burst from about him in a circle, destroying the roots and pushing back, or incinerating, the men that had drawn near him. He screamed, as he felt the burns across his entire body.

Barnabus stood up and began to sprint. He would have to get away, find some way to destroy the damned thing. Maybe then, Gods dammit maybe then Archidemus would come back.

The world shifted again, and Barnabus did not have time to stop himself before running head first into Archidemus's open palm. Archidemus slammed Barnabus's head into the ground, and placed a boot on his chest.

"No, Hart," Archidemus said, "you will go nowhere. No one can escape my wrath."

31 - Samuel

The strangeness of that encounter with Sullivan stuck with Samuel, but he tried not to let it bother him. The man, who had arguably started the entire damn war, had been reduced to a mad drunk. It almost seemed sad. Had it been a couple days prior, Samuel would have slain the man in a heartbeat. Maybe if he had, then he could have gone back to Dollthel and won some favor. But no, he was done with all of that.

Pick and Zeebs, for their oddness, added a sense of normalcy to his life. The past year, or year and a half, or thirty years or however long it had been, had lacked it desperately. Zeebs led; Samuel didn't know why, and Pick didn't want to answer, but Zeebs seemed to have a sense for where the last Eldar Artifact was. The fact that they had destroyed two already had nearly knocked Samuel on his feet.

"So Sammy," Pick said from behind, "you never said, but how was being King like?"

"Look around," Samuel said, "and tell me."

"Aw, don't be so melodramatic. The magical, eldar, terror bubble isn't your fault!" Samuel didn't answer, and Pick said "It's not, right?"

"I didn't do it, if that's what you're asking."

"Good stuff! Then don't worry about it. I'm sure all of the, uh,"

"Civil war, multiple kings, and angered Governors?"

"Yeah! All that stuff will sort itself out!"

"I envy your optimism, Pick. I honestly do."

The group continued following Zeebs. He pointed a hand to the North, and walked faster. Smoke, barely visible in the rain, trailed out of the forest there. A sudden sense of forboding overcame Samuel, and he mentally prepared himself as best he could.

The treeline broke, and they walked into a clearing. Several buildings lay burned or destroyed. Men in broken armor ran about, some carrying food and clothes and jewelry, and other carrying torches to what few houses remained. Several ran about in circles, trying to put out a fire that have consumed them.

And at the edge of the village, a tall, robed elf pinned another to the ground with his boot. He raised a sword, and Samuel recognized the pinned elf.

"Barnabus!" Samuel shouted, breaking into a full sprint. With his shield out, he barreled into the taller elf, knocking him off Barnabus and tumbling them into the dirt. He felt a hand on his face, and suddenly he was alone on the ground. A boot slammed into his back, and found himself pinned to the ground.

"What is this!" the other elf shouted. "How dare you strike me! How dare you so much as touch me!"

"Barnabus!" Samuel shouted, twisting his head around. He saw Barnabus, sitting up and staring at him in utter confusion. "Where's the artifact?"

Barnabus dumbly held up the gem, which glowed a dark green. "You've got to destroy it!" Samuel shouted

"What?" the elf said, but he did not have time to follow. Pick knocked him off Sam, but avoided any further tumbling.

“What’s wrong, big boy?” Pick shouted, dancing from one foot to the other. “Lost your step there?” The larger elf stood up, baring his large, white teeth at Pick. A moment he was gone, and powerful hands gripped his neck from behind.

“Pick!” Samuel shouted. He stood up, grabbed his sword, and prepared a charge. But before he could, Zeebs ran up behind the large elf and smacked the back of his head with his. The elf turned around, growling. The air around the two began to twist about and blink. Pick rolled out of there, and looked at Barnabus.

“Hey!” Pick shouted, “you know how to break that thing?” Barnabus shook his head, still shocked. “Do you have any of the true-flame-primal-power-bullshit got going for you, by any chance?”

Barnabus nodded, but then shook his head. “Kinda spent,” he whispered.

“Then don’t worry about it,” Samuel said before turning back to Zeebs and the elf. They had begun circling each other. The elf had a long, twisted sword out, while Zeebs held his staff. Samuel never noticed it, but Zeebs was fairly tall when he stood up straight. Roots popped out of the ground, but withered and burned before they could do anything.

“Hey, it’s okay,” Pick said, “Zeebs can destroy the—” Zeebs and the elf struck at each other, and the two disappeared. Pick turned to Samuel. “Okay! That’s not an option! Any ideas?”

Samuel swore to himself. “I could really use that sword right now.”

“What sword?” Pick said.

“Don’t worry about it.”

Zeebs and the elf reappeared. Zeebs fell to the ground, heaving loudly. The elf stared at Barnabus, his eyes wide and mad with what Samuel could only call fear.

“You can’t destroy it,” the elf said. His voice had lost its deepness and accent, and sounded like a strained whisper. He shook his head, and walked toward Barnabus, who still sat on the ground. “Not now. Too late. I need to stay. In this moment.” He reached a hand out to take the gem.

Barnabus tried to crawl away, but the elf lunged forward, and ripped the gem out of his hand. He then disappeared, and did not return.

“Dammit!” Samuel shouted, tossing his sword onto the ground. Pick sighed, shrugging his shoulders. He walked over to Zeebs, who had managed to sit up.

“Well,” Pick said, “guess we have to chase down another crazy. Got any ideas?”

“We can’t do it alone,” Samuel said, “he’s too powerful. Barnabus, we need your—” Samuel turned to where Barnabus had been sitting, and saw an empty patch of dirt. Samuel sighed, and shook his head.

Samuel, Pick and Zeebs stared at the water. The coast of Tiriieldennes was rocky, broken, and ugly. So it was Exbaltairan. Samuel shrugged. “I guess we can try swimming,” he said.

“Guess it’s the last option, huh?” Pick said. “You sure these Crusaders are worth it?”

“They’ll at least have the numbers we need.” Samuel took a deep breath. “Okay, let’s give it a try.”

Before they could move, though, strange symbols appeared in the air only some yards away from the coast line. The symbols spread out circled each other, beginning a manic dance. Cracks formed in the air, and after a moment they began to break. Light shone through the

cracks, and with a loud cracking sound the air seemed to shatter. Dozens of boats appeared where before there were none, and they all carried the same flag: The standard of the Araneth of the Tear Drop Isles. On the flag ship, Samuel could see Argollo, waving a hand and shouting. Samuel smiled.

“That works too,” Samuel said.