

Hollow Bodies Act 2 - Dark City

By Bartan Tirix

Chapter 0

Machinae Supremacy - Dark City

"Where are we going?" The small Gnoll pup whimpered as he was carried down the street. "Why is everybody running?"

"They're leaving the city." The human woman gave him a sad smile. "It's called Evacuating."

"Why are they going that way then? Shouldn't we be leaving too?"

"I just want to get a few things from the lab first." She said.

"Like father?"

"Kasse..." She stopped in front of the door to the building. "Someone will get your father to safety. But we need to leave first. I'll let you say goodbye for now while I get a few things."

"Okie." The pup couldn't help but peer at the streets where everyone was running. Many of them with possessions and objects that wouldn't assist them in the new world in the east. But he didn't understand what they were afraid of.

The doors broke his vision as they entered the building. "Dr. Kase? What are you doing here?" A man cleaning the desk asked, then he glared at the pup. "And why did you bring one of these things back here?"

"These 'things' are our future, like it or not Robert. It's the only way we're going to pass on what we've learned." She gave another sad smile to the pup. "We discovered long ago that the human race was doomed. And we've finally found a way to make intelligent life that is very similar to ours." She turned back to the man. "Has my office been sealed off?"

"The emergency lockdown was disabled an hour ago. They must've cut off the power. The generator is keeping the building lit for the most part, but I doubt it will last much longer." A few people passed them by, carrying a transparent box that was filled with hard drives. "That is, if they haven't cleaned your office out yet."

"It's doubtful. Giggles likes to guard my room." The pup gave a cute chuckle when his father was mentioned. "Try to keep the front doors opened for now. I'll be out in a few minutes." And the Doctor headed down the hallway.

The trip up the building felt like it took a long time. The woman was not used to taking the stairs, whereas the elevator was probably disabled and not worth the risk of taking regardless. The closer they got to that fifth door down the hallway, the louder they could hear a barking noise. It got rather violent when Dr. Kase began to open the door, until the hyena seen her, and then began to emit a series of happy yelps.

"It's alright, boy. It's just us." The woman said, as she let the pup down in front of the spotted hyena. There was a strange resemblance between the small Gnoll and the hyena, but the Gnoll lacked the many spots Giggles had. Still, the canine did enjoy the company of the small pup, and vice versa. "Okay, I need to do a few things here, Kassel. I want you to say your goodbyes to Giggles for now."

"We'll see each other again, right?" The Gnoll whimpered a bit. His ears low until he got an assuring nod from the doctor. For a few minutes, Kase did her best to get as much data into an external hard drive from the battery of her laptop. But it was running out of power quickly. She managed to get the records and reports of her findings, let alone her studies on the behavior of their... 'Future' kind. Though it may be a long time before they had the technology to extract it from the device, perhaps they will understand where her species went wrong.

After that was done, the woman came up to the two males and gave them a sad smile. "I want you to stay here, Giggles. Okay?" The Gnoll gave her those puppy dog eyes, and she just smiled at him. "Someone will come and pick you up soon."

"Bye father." Kassel said, giving the canine one last hug before being picked up by the woman again. While the hyena gave out another whimper, it stayed put as the door closed. Her heart sank to leave him behind. But their son was more important.

Further to the coast of the city, many people were gathering to leave through the underground tunnels. The tunnels were recently built for emergency, though not much was known about the eastern continent. But it was safer than where they were, at least that's what everyone hoped. Staying away from the large crowds of people, many of them looking for something to blame for the catastrophe, Dr. Kase did her best to make her way around to the large tunnels. Covering the small pup with her coat.

A few loud, inhuman screeches could be heard in the far west, echoing through the dark city. The sound itself seemed to pierce the woman's heart and ache it, half knowing what it was. But it only pushed her to move faster. Moving quickly down the streets, witnessing the remains of a riot that was making its way towards the eastern tunnels.

A few moments later, she could see the tail end of the riot. The people of the city who were rejected to be part of the new world, and furiously lashing out at anyone in their way. The doctor's best chance was to somehow quickly move around them, through the back streets.

Going through the older areas of the city brought back some painful memories for the woman. Ones of barely getting by, and her family having to resort in illegal actions in order to get by. Though

now every one of them had passed, she hoped that they were proud of what the doctor had become. And had created.

Her thoughts got carried away with her, and she ended up running into the back of someone. Almost knocking them down. "Hey! Watch where you're going!" The man yelled, several others agreeing with him.

"I'm sorry! I-I just..."

"What the hell is that...?" One of them asked, noticing the tail coming out from the coat, and the Gnoll pup peering out. "Is that what I think it is?"

"Looks like one of our Replacements." Another one said, spitting on the ground.

"They're not replacements. They're just..." Kase really couldn't think of another word. Honestly, the man was right, to a degree. They were replacements for the human race that they had made. "I'm sorry for running into you, but I just need to get through."

"Now why would we let you do that?"

"Because if you don't, you'll have to deal with me." Another man said loudly, in a stern voice behind her. He was a large man wearing what almost looked like to be full plate armor and a cape. With a symbol of Oddin on it's left breast. "I won't ask you again, leave her alone."

The men just grumbled and walked away, while the woman gave a sigh of relief. "Thank you Clayon. But how on earth did you find me?"

"Elvayah warned me that you were going to be in trouble. You know how well she can hear." The man chuckled, taking off his helmet. "I'm just glad I made it in time." He walked up to her and placed his hands around her, being careful not to hold her too tightly.

"What about King Oddin? I thought he wanted the knights on the frontline."

"He does, but..." He sighed. "It won't matter if we're there or not. There's no stopping the Hollow ones." It hurt them both to hear that. "This is really it..."

"And... You can't leave your duty behind..." He shook his head. Then heard the Gnoll in her arms whimper.

"Hey there, little guy." Clayon gave him a sad smile. That look was beginning to haunt the smaller one. "I need you to take care of your mother, okay?"

"What about you?" He asked the Knight.

"I'm..." He looked at the doctor.

"He's going to get Giggles for us." Another giggle from the pup. "But he might be a long time

finding us again."

"Kassel." The knight got his attention as he took off his golve and gave the small one a strange looking ring. "I want you to keep this."

"Clayon..." She whispered to him, almost hurt. He just gave her a sad smile.

"Whenever you or your mother are in danger, I want you to wear it, and never take it off." The Gnoll looked at it strangely, being able to actually fit it on his wrist. "I want to make sure your work survives... That our future survives." The knight said to the doctor. Although the Gnoll didn't understand what was going on, the woman tried not to look sad.

"...Okay." She finally said, and they gave one last embrace.

"I love you, Jenna. Your brother would've been proud to see what you've become."

"I love you too, Alister." After a few moments, they broke the hug and took one last long look at each other. Then the man gave a bit of a wince, causing the woman to chuckle lightly. "Edgar calling you again?"

"Yes. He's calling all of us. Even after all this time, I can't get used to how high pitched that earring makes his voice." He smiled at her. And looked at the pup again. "It's up to you to make them a new life. Don't let us down."

"I won't." She said with a smile, and Clayon gave a nod. Placing his helmet and glove back on, he gave her a wave as he turned around and left down the hallway.

"He's going to get father, right?" The small one asked.

"Yes, Kassel. We'll see him again, don't worry." She reassured him, as she carried on towards the eastern tunnel.

The rocking of the boat was soothing, and did its best to let the Gnoll get his much needed rest. But he was getting parched, and that's what woke him up from his slumber... Y'know, besides me narrating once again. He gave a few grumbles, and felt something rather big nuzzle him a bit. Still not really sure what it was, he gave a smile anyway. "Finally awake?" His embracer mumbled.

"Getting there..." He yawned, trying to look to the direction of his captor. But the sunblinded him, causing him to grunt loudly. Eventually he recognized the voice behind him, and give a faint whimper. "...How long have you...?"

"Pretty much as long as you have been asleep. You're a very comfortable pillow." He felt the Dragonite rub her face on his long mane and his neck, getting a lick in the process. Kassel then gave a faint, embarrassing whimper when he found out what it was. "What's wrong?" She moaned, not really sounding very concerned.

"I... I'm just not used to seeing you be... Affectionate."

"Well, we're alone right now. Not like anyone else can see us."

"You think we're alone, but you don't hear a voice in your head." The statement made her chuckle. As the Gnoll tried to stretch and get up, she gave him a tight squeeze that got him to bubble out a bit. "Hey-hey!" He half laughed, the feeling tickling him. "Not so hard, I gotta make this thing last."

"Oh come on, a little squeezing won't kill you." Tobyas padded him, as she began to raise up. Still blinded by the sun, he was unable to see that she took her armor off and was in her under garments.

"She is?" Another whimper, and he covered his eyes from her.

"Is what?" She asked, still not used to the Gnoll thinking out loud.

"...You're... in your... Errm..." She just shook her head with a light smile. Then took her shirt off and tossed it over the Gray one. "W-what are you doing?"

"We're probably far enough out now. The water looks normal, and I really want to get cleaned. You should do the same, so strip down." She said, standing out from her underwear. Another embarrassing whimper. Seriously Kass, you didn't expect her to actually sleep in her armor, did you?

"I didn't think she would've cuddled next to be either." He mumbled, at least after he heard the Dragonite dive into the water. But she is right, you would make a nice pillow. "Thanks." He lightly groaned, rather optimistically at that. Getting his brown eyes used to the light, and holding up her shirt. It was a rather dull gray looking, that may have been white when it was new. Though it was covered, there was a few stains of the soot that seemed to leak through and make it smell rather terrible. A lot of it was probably from her holding onto you. "Me?"

Yes, you. You're saturated with the stuff. And if she was holding onto you...

His ears went a bit low, as if somehow it was his fault. Then the Blue one surfaced, shaking the

water from her face. Then took a look at the Gnoll who was still holding onto her undershirt. He yelped and dropped it, getting her to chuckle. "It probably doesn't smell great right now. And I wouldn't advise trying to sniff the others either, you perv." She teased him.

"I-I wasn't..." He rubbed the back of his mane.

"As enteraining as it is, stop being so flustered and get undressed. You're as black as the night right now."

"Get undressed with you watching me?" He whimpered while his ears and head went lower.

"Well, you should've done it while I was underwater." She smiled deviously at him. "Besides, I'm bound to see you in your fursuit eventually. This is the perfect place."

"How so?"

"We're completely alone. You can barely even see land around you. Besides me, there's no one here to see you. And if you want something to eat, you should listen to me." Again with that smirk. But she was right. They were completely alone besides the sea creatures. And the water looked so welcoming. So, so welcoming-

"Bartan!"

Just do it, you wussy.

Kassel sighed and turned around, taking his not-so dirty looking black shirt off. Then took a deep breath and untied his sash. Que saxophone music. "Bartan!"

Oh come on, consider it fanservice.

"Fanservice? You mean people are watching me getting undressed infront of a female I'm afraid of!?"

Reading. Not watching. They can't see you, but they can picture you doing this.

"Not really sure if that's suppose to make me feel any bett-"

"Take it off!" Tobyas yelled, half chuckling. Getting impatient and Splashing him with water.

"I'm working in it!" He sighed, and quickly threw up the tarp he fell asleep on, obstructing her line of sight. And with one fluid motion, he took off his pants and lept into the waters. Seriously, that's gotta be a record of some sort.

"Boo! You're no fun." The dragonite tossed her snout. Then dove underwater. It felt so refreshing to the Gnoll. From the very first moment he touched it, it was like the water itself was clensing him of the darkness that stained him. It even tasted nice, even if it was a little cold.

Resurfacing to get some air, Kass tried to shake out most of the soot out of his mane. Black liquid

which almost looked like oil sprayed along the boat and the waters. "Wow... That felt amazing." He said, expecting to see her to respond. After a few moments of silence he got a bit concerned. Then a small tug on his tail from below made him yelp a bit as Tobyas resurfaced in front of him with a fish in her jaws. "You... Were not kidding about catching fish." He looked at her, quite amazed. She just smiled and tossed it inside the boat before diving for more.

As the two got cleaned off, and rehydrated, they got back into the boat. It felt like it had been ages since he'd swam in clear and clean waters, that he forgot that the two were clothesless. Resulting in another embarrassing grunt and him looking away from her while trying to cover himself. "Oh please. Stop being such a gentlemen and look already. It's not like I let just anyone look at me like this anyway." She shook her head, smiling at him. "You're such a child sometimes, Kass." She teased him, giving him a friendly slap with the backside of her paw.

"It's just rude to stare, and..."

"I'm guessing no one's seen you naked since your mother?"

"...For the most part."

"And you're how old?" She asked, tending to her dirty clothing and armor. His only reply was a quiet exhale. "All I'm saying is that there's a time and place for things like this. Loosen up a little. Besides, I've already gotten a good view from underwater."

Another grunt, and he started to work on his clothing. "It's just something I don't like people to see."

"Why exactly? You think that people are going to somehow find out that you have that ring by judging how fluffy you really are?" She chuckled. "What are you afraid of? People laughing at you?"

"Not... Really."

"Then what?"

"You, for one."

"Why exactly?" She gathered her wet gear and came up beside him. It surprised him a bit, to the point where he looked at her torso and noticed she didn't have any breasts.

"Are they suppose to have them?"

Eh, some people like them on Dragon-like creatures.

"Kasse." She playfully pushed him a bit. "You're avoiding the question."

Another sigh. "You want the honest truth...?" She gave a slow solid nod, and he slightly looked

away, with a faint smile on his muzzle. "...It's... Fun to be."

There was a bit of silence, until Tobyas started faintly laughing, which then grew louder. "What?"

"It's kinda fun to be afraid." He smiled at her.

"That's gotta be the most ridiculous thing I think I've ever heard you say." She said, half laughing while grabbing two fish. Handing the Gnoll one. "I hope you don't mind them raw."

"It's fine. I'm not picky about food." He went to grab it, but she withdrew it out of his reach.

"You get this only if you start to loosen up. Alright?" Another quiet sigh, and he nodded. She gave him the fish and turned around to lean on the side of the boat. Kass did the same, and when he did, Tobyas moved closer and leaned on him a bit too.

Another faint smile and he took a bite out of the fish. "Not bad. What kind of fish is this?"

"Pffft. I donno." She shrugged.

"It's not poisonous, is it?"

"Maybe." That answer almost made him choke on his last bite. He looked at her, shaking her head with a smile. "You're so paranoid for being invincible."

"It's got nothing to do with being invincible. It's about not living in pain and regret." He took another bite. His brown eyes moved towards the pile of fish she caught. "Where did you learn how to fish so well?"

"Back in the city. I used to work for a grizzly that tried to catch fish in a boat. He caught me stealing one when I was younger, and I actually got away with it quite a few times. I guess my scale color gave him an idea, and eventually he offered me a job: I help him gather fish, and I got fed for the day without stealing or getting into trouble."

"Scale color?"

"Yes, I used to be like an Aqua blue when I was younger. It reminded him of the waters out here. As a Dragonite grows older, that color darkens."

"Which would explain your more sapphire blue now." He gave a slow nod in understanding.

"I was told that's how the ancient dragons were like as well. They got darker the older they got." She passed him another fish, and he accepted it. "But that was back before you came."

"What happened to him? The bear?"

"...He eventually got enough money saved up and tried to make it to the other side. No one knows if they made it." He gave her a sad smile, and placed an arm around her. "To sail there is so trechrous that the odds are of making it twice for a confirmation..."

"It's almost impossible to tell..." He mumbled quietly. But you know the answer, don't you?

"Kassel?" She got his attention. "What was it like where you were born? Your hometown?"

"I... don't really remember much of it. I remember it being crowded, and people being afraid of some big disaster that they were just waiting to happen."

"Disaster?"

"I don't know the details... But eventually we had to leave. I don't even remember the name of the city. I was too young."

"I can only imagine what you were like as a pup." She chuckled. See, now you got her thinking about children. Slow down a little bit Kass.

"Bartan..." The Gnoll smiled, shaking his head. Even getting the Dragonite too as well.

"...This is nice, isn't it?"

"Yeah... But I just can't help but think about... it."

"Ralkor?"

"Yes, and... Why."

"Well, there's only one thing to do to get your mind off of it then."

"What exactly?" He instantly regretted asking that when he seen her devious smile, and noticed that his arm that was over her was tied to the boat. "Tobias..." He whimpered as she got on top of him- Okay, guys. I can't describe this. I'm trying to keep this G for- Good lord! Tobias, is that even Legal? Don't answer that. "She can't hear you!" Good, then she doesn't have to answer- Oh wow, that's... Um. Nevermind. Next scene. Next scene.

After a few hours of rest, the other side of the bay was soon in sight. The Dragonite got up to stretch and took a deep breath. Then heard the Gnoll gnawing on the rope that was attached to his wrist. She just tossed her snout and chuckled at him. "I don't see how you find this funny. How in Oddin's name did you get this thing so tight?"

"Please, it's barely a knot."

"Says you. I can't feel my hand." She laughed at him again as she kneeled down.

"See this? You pull it like so. Then pull on this one over here. Loosen this one slightly, then pull this through it. Unwrap it like this, and tada. You're free."

Kass tended to his hurt wrist. "I still can't see how you manage to do that without me noticing."

"You're awareness just sucks is all." Tobyas stated. There was something strange in her voice.

"Are you... Disappointed?"

The blue one looked at him and sighed quietly. "A little, yes." His ears went low. "Mostly because it was like riding a petrified beetle."

"I..."

"You could've been into it a bit more, y'know? You don't have to be scared stiff. However, at least you got the stiff part downpacked." She chuckled. The Gnoll just lowered his head and looked away. "I'm guessing I was your first?" There was a bit of silence and a faint nod. "Well, there's only one thing to do about it then. And that is practice."

Kassel's head shot up, but his ears remained low. Again, letting out a faint whimper. "W-what?"

"You heard me. But not right now. We have a job to do." She got up and headed to her things. "Get dressed. We'll worry about this later."

"I feel like I have no say in this relationship." The gray one Mumbled.

"Simply put: you don't. But if I have to take care of you, I will." She smiled at him. It honestly made him feel a little worried, but don't worry about it. Be thankful for her, I'd say.

"Why?" He asked, tilting his head, and even getting a puzzling look from the Dragonite. "He's... Hiding something. Probably something about us."

It might be. But you'll find out eventually.

The Gnoll grumbled again. "You've gotta stop doing that." She shook her head smiling.

"Doing what?"

"Thinking out loud." See? I told you the same thing. "It makes people think there's something

wrong with you."

"There is something wrong with me. I'm hearing a narrator in my head." He chuckled.

"There's more than just that." The Dragonite laughed. "You gave me a list last night."

"Yeah, well, no one is perfect."

As the ship docked along an empty beach. As the two got off, and tied it down to a large rock nearby, they looked around the areas above the forests. The peak of several large towers could be seen over the trees to the southwest in the light of dusk. "Over there is where the city of Ralkor is." Tobyas pointed out.

"I don't remember there being Watchtowers built though."

"Neither do I. Looks like they were planning this invasion for a long time now. That, or they really got paranoid." The blue one took a deep breath. "Are you ready?"

"Ready enough." And the two began to walk through the forests. The Gnoll going first, and hoping that there wasn't any traps laid in it. "Are there any?"

I told you, I'm not a strategy guide.

"What exactly do you mean by that?" He asked, getting a silent chuckle from the female.

It means, I'm not here to tell you what to expect, and how to do this. The fun is to figure out for yourself.

"Easy for you to say, you're not the one falling into spike pits."

"Or getting your tail jammed into stone doors?" The Dragonite added. Kass giving her a surprised look. "I can half follow the conversation. Ask him what good is he."

I can hear you.

"He said he can hear you."

"Then what good are you, Bartan?"

I'm not suppose to be helping you guys. I'm just writing his story.

"He said he's just writing my story, and he's not suppose to help us."

"Doesn't mean you can't." She tossed her snout. "Come on, be a team player!"

...There's nothing but a few barricades in the forests. They do have strings attached that will trigger some bells in the base watchtowers. Causing the ringing to echo up. But they're not expecting

anyone with darkvision to walk through these forests without some sort of light.

"Barricades with strings. Got it." The Gnoll gave the blue one a smile as if to say thanks.

The two kept quiet as Kassel lead the way. They were careful along the wooden barriers that were built to prevent people from sneaking into the country's territory. Tobyas ended up tossing the Gnoll across, then carefully glided over herself. About midnight, they made it to the exits of the forests. In the distance, they could see the city of Ralkor, still lit up and awake. "What the...?" Tobyas asked.

"Since when has Ralkor had a Citadel?" Kassel asked in disbelief. It was then he knew without a doubt that someone from Ralkor was behind the attack. "It was?"

What are you talking about? Of course it was!

"Thanks for confirming it." The Gnoll snickered. Fine, you got me.

"Look up there. In the towers." Tobyas pointed.

"Why would they have bright lights lit up there? Be harder to see outside the walls like that."

"I'm not sure, but I smell a trap. Let's line the forest as far as we can, and see if we can find a way up that wall."

"Up?" Kassel asked, concerned. But following her anyway.

"Still have that silk rope in that thief's kit of yours?"

"It's not a Thief's kit. It's an Adventurers kit. And yes." The Gnoll replied, his ears backwards. "I don't like being called a thief." Well, you are kinda one. Kass growled loudly, causing the Dragonite to chuckle and getting an odd reaction from him.

"I don't think I've ever seen you mad before."

"I usually don't get mad. There's very few things that do." He said, his mane still a bit fluffed up.

"Good to know you have a pet peeve that I can use to my advantage." Another odd look from Kassel. Wondering what she meant by Advantage. My guess is angry sex, but.

"Angry Sex?" He said out loud again. Getting the female to laugh a little loudly, even though she was trying keep quiet. Seriously Kass, keep your mind out of the gutter. You're on a mission. "But you-!"

"Kass!" She said laughing and giving him a push, that was more like a shove and making him stumble forward a bit.

"Okay, okay!" He surrendered. As they made their way around the fields and traveled to the great wall in the shadows, they didn't encounter any other form of defenses. The wall was probably a

good one hundred feet tall, and very recently built. "Okay, what's your plan from here?"

"I was actually just going to try to fly up, but you..." Once again he sighed. And secretly cursed the fact he didn't have wings. "Give me that rope, and that hook if you still have it."

"I do, but I don't know how a fifty foot rope is going to help against an one hundred foot wall." As Tobyas tied the rope to the hook, she gave the Gnoll a sly look. Taking a few steps back, she began swinging the hook a bit and threw it to the middle window, about seventy five feet in the air. Leaving the bottom of the rope quite far out of reach. "Now what?" Kassel grumbled at her, only to get another strange look. "What's that look-?" He tried to ask, only to be grabbed by her, lifted up so she could place her paws under his feet, and then heavily launch him into the air towards the wall. He couldn't help but release a small yelp as he desperately tried to swim towards the silk rope and grab a hold of it.

Thankful he tied knots in it on a previous use, he was able to hold himself. But not without heaving in a panic. The Dragonite flew up beside him, transformed into her lesser form and attached herself to the wall, giving him another smile. "Why!?" He demanded, trying to make it a whisper.

"Because it was so amusing." She chuckled. "You're very entertaining when you're afraid of heights."

"I'm not afraid of heights." The Gnoll grumbled. Carefully climbing the rope in hopes the hook wouldn't suddenly give out... Which the thought made him whimper a bit. Shaking his head from that thought, he continued. "I'm afraid of falling and making the world's largest squeak, blowing our cover." It caused the Blue to to laugh again, just imagining it. And seeing her smile made him as well.

"We'll have to try that on the way down then. When our cover is already blown." She said, unknowing to Kass if she was actually joking or not. Honestly it's hard to tell. But from here, he was able to study her Form quite well. It was rather sleek and slender, though a bit longer and taller than her original form. She somehow carried none of her gear while like this, as if it was being reserved with her other form. Still that same color blue and those golden eyes, he would never have noticed that they were the same person. His mind also drifted to ask if they actually mated with these forms, and how good it-

"You're the one thinking that. Not me." The Gnoll replied. Looking up again, annoyed. Then looking back to see the Dragonite to see her studying him. When Kass gave out a small whimper, his ears lowered, and he tried to awkwardly look away. Causing Tobyas to figure out what I was talking about and once again try to hold in her laughter.

"Bartan, you perv." She shook her snout with a smile. What? Nothing wrong with being curious. "Don't worry Kass. We can try it later." Another grumble from the Gnoll.

Quietly they made it to the window, just now noticing a dim light coming from it. The Dragonite carefully looked in, to reveal a younger bird in acolyte clothing, studying some books and scrolls on a

messy table in candlelight. Whispering to himself "Where is it...?"

A knock at the door to the tower room, and another bird soldier came in. "That's who's in here. What are you doing? Let alone in poor light."

"What the pilot of the Askazar described... I know I've read it before. I wonder if it was a relic of Oddin. Or perhaps one of his knights."

The soldier tossed his head. "Don't start with that again. You know there was no such thing as Oddin. He was just a legend of nothing more than faith for the human kind that spread to every other species. He doesn't exist, and neither does any of his relics." The feathers on his wings fluffed out a bit while he crossed his arms.

"Then how do you explain what he'd seen?"

"That pilot has always been a bit hysterical. Not to mention it was quite a loss for our navy. I honestly think that the new weapon malfunctioned, and he didn't want to admit it. His story does seem rather... Tall." The Avian Soldier grumbled. "Besides, what could you possibly find in those ancient documents?"

"What he had seen was a weapon we have not heard of. It honestly reminded me of sorcery. And all the other ancient documents we've obtained were from Opportunity."

"Sorcery? You cannot be serious."

"Considering we are the only ones who violated that taboo, that would be my best guess. It's been said that many of the other species have performed miracles. From immortality, raising the dead, and performing feats that look like magic. Do you have a better explanation for 'The Air around our navy set on fire and exploded our ships'?"

"I told you what I think. And your father wants you to stop looking into such things before the King finds out. I'm already doing you a favor for not telling where you've been the past hour. Now get down there and at least act like you're enjoying the celebration before someone suspects something, Theo." The soldier growled harshly.

As the student sighed, he nodded, slightly tidying up the table. He blew out the candle and made his way to the door. "I still don't think it's a good idea to lie to our people about this..."

"The less they know what really happened to our navy, the better. Last thing they need is to have their pride hurt, saying our ships were whiped out by a defenseless city of thieves." The soldier slammed the door and made his way down the wall. Now's your chance guys.

Kassel, not looking through the window the entire time, climbed in before Tobyas. After she followed him, she resumed her normal form, retaining all of her equipment. The Gnoll looked at the lantern, and looked at the Dragonite. "I don't suppose you have a light?"

"I thought you could see in the dark."

"I can, but it's hard to read off of paper." Kassel, you have a light on you. "I really don't want to trust flint here, especially in a room full of books." That's not what I meant. A quiet sigh from him. Just relax and try it. Keep it small. And the wick of the lantren was ignited once again, lighting up the tower room once again.

The blue one looked at him a little bit. "How did you...?"

"It's..." He rubbed the back of his mane. "A long story..." She exhaled loudly, getting a little tired of that excuse. But she let it slide. As the Gnoll began to look through some of the books and scrolls, he recognized a few things within them.

"What are you looking for?"

"That acolyte was actually onto something, but he said that it was the other species that was able to use such things. Honestly, I didn't believe it at first, but these books... They're from the far north. In the library from Hoelhara."

"How did you know that?"

"I've been there before, a long time ago-"

"No, that he was an acolyte?"

"His clothing. Many of the Avian temple students tend to wear those robes."

"But you were not looking through the window..." He sighed, trying not to look at her.

"...Bartan told me." A few moments of studying him.

"He really is real, isn't he? You're not just making this up."

"Of course he's real. You'd think I'd fake something like this?"

"Well, it would somewhat explain your oddity." She playfully shoved him. He just smiled and shook his head. "What did he mean by Opprotunity?"

"Opprotunity. It was the tunnel the humans used to reach the other side. Back then, there was so many storms along the waters, traveling by water or flight was very dangerous. Let alone to find a proper place to dock. Instead, they took several years to build a tunnel past the ocean, nicknaming it Opprotunity." Kassel closed the books. "It was the same tunnel they used to evauate the last city of theirs." Another strange look from the Dragonite. "My mother..."

"Yes. She really liked telling you about history, huh?"

He just smiled. "It was a hobby of hers. And I can't say that it wouldn't hurt to know some of these things. But as soon as they reached the other side, the tunnel should've been closed. Sealed shut."

"Hence that Taboo they were talking about." The Gnoll nodded. "So they opened it?"

"And probably got some weapon ideas from the old civilizations. Humans were often at war with each other, until Oddin's rule united them."

"Just one more thing Kasse; why did they evacuate the city?"

"...I don't know. I don't remember." There was a hint of pain in his eyes when he answered.

"Alright then, we best be moving. If they're having a celebration, odds are most people will be distracted." Kassel nodded in agreement, and blew out the candle once again.

"I wonder what they told them though. About the navy."

"I'm not sure, but my guess is that they sent them to another city. Let's see if we can find the War room. Maybe we can find a few clues where they're heading to next."

Chapter 3

It was quite thrilling to be behind enemy lines, and sneaking around the arrogant bird species. Lucky for them, many of the soldiers and guards were lightly celebrating as well with the city folk. Probably to make sure they were not suspicious. Sneaking across walls was a little dangerous, but hanging and climbing off the outside edge was a rather safe way to sneak past some of the patrols. Across the large city walls, there was numerous Anti-Air and ground weapons, mostly ballistas and trebuchets. "They really were expecting a full on war here..." Tobyas whispered. "I'm counting at least twenty siege weapons across the north wall."

"Sounds about right. But why start one? What motive could they have?"

"Let's hope we can find out." The Dragonite said, creeping up to a door to hear if anyone is on the other side. Kassel, pull her back and get into the shadows. He did so, getting a faint yelp from the female. "What are you-!?" She shouted in a whisper, only to have the door swing open before them, luckily covering them from the series of soldiers that were exiting. Many of them seemed to be higher in rank from the others that were on patrol.

From inside the room, they could still hear a couple of them talking in a low voice. "...Is

something wrong?" One asked.

"Permission to speak freely, my Lord." It sounded half hearted.

"You may."

"This is a mistake. The invasion beforehand was a mistake. The King-

"The King knows what he's doing. And he as already attempted to make trades with the others."

"With no evidence to support that he did. Considering what we have to offer, I cannot see them turning down such an exchange."

"And from that experience, we've discovered that we are self-sufficient. We don't need trades from them."

"Then why the invasions? Why the war? It seems like he's reveiled new weapons and he wants to test them out. That's it."

"Because of our new weapons, we're going to be the biggest threat in the lands. Meaning we must show the others our place, our rank within the world. That's what he's planning to accomplish."

"So that others will bow down before him? It's not right, Sir."

"Sir Stigborg. Must I remind you that you are a Knight of the King's Feathers? He doesn't need your reasons or logic. He needs your protection. Let go of those doubts of yours. They don't hold any place in this war." And the larger Knight left the room. Stigborg soon after him. When the coast was clear, the two snuck into the room and sealed it.

"What on earth could this King be thinking?" Tobyas asked, looking at the large map on the table. "They look like they're planning to take over the entire country."

"All because of resources?" Kassel studied the map as well. "...Ralkor has fish, many forms of ocean foods. They're close to several mines, but relatively cheap metals." His finger went north across the bay. "Elbarenluf had ocean trades as well. As well as access to many forests and trees around." To the east a bit. "Lingerriff started off as a mining town, and eventually grew to a city. They have access to a lot of good metals within the mountains, as well as forests." Up north again. "Much of this area is no longer occupied. There were alot of settlements around, and tribes of many species tened to territorize these areas." Northeast. "Hoelhara is actually known for it's fur trades, as well as many other things. They tend to mostly be hunters that can take down many of the larger beasts around." His voice went a little quiet there. "But none of this is any real reason to start a war with them. And they probably spent alot more building these weapons than to attempt to offer trades."

"So, do you think that Stigborg is right? That this King just wants to show off his weapons?"

"It's that, or he's going to attempt an attack to the west continent, and he wants to test his weapons before doing such a thing." Tobyas looked at him worried. "...Whatever drove the humans out,

odds are they had very good resources still over there. Many of their equipment might even still work. If he could take out whatever threatened them..."

"Then he would have a half of a world to call his." She looked at the map again. "This must be Opportunity, right?" The Gnoll nodded. "Is it possible that the ancient technologies still work?"

"Unlikely, it's been a good three thousand years or so since. But..." He looked at the tunnel on the map. "That Tunnel was made to seal off everything. Including the air. It's likely that whatever was in there was preserved rather well. Not to mention it's surrounded by the ocean. It's probably cold as winter down there."

"I wonder if..." She got Kass' attention. "Those creatures in Elbarenluf, they looked... Human."

"The Dolls... Yes."

"Maybe they got them from...?" The idea caused his mane to fluff out and shiver.

"I don't want to think about it. Either way, it looks like those ships here are..."

"Sailing to Lingerriff...!" The Gnoll nodded. "We have to find a way to stop them."

"But those ships were destroyed. So it's not as critical for time now. However..."

"Odds are they have a few more Airships around. I'm not sure where they are keeping them."

"A base nearby?" It's possible they're even keeping them in the oceans. "Oceans?" Here, at times they make this very very large ship to hold air units. They call them Carriers. And Tobyas is looking at you funny again. "She probably is." He gave a faint smile. "They might be holding them on ships in the oceans. Long shot, but..."

"It's still a possibility." She grabbed a hold of the map and folded it. "I'm going to see if I can make it to Lingerriff to warn them of this. But I'm going to have to fly there..."

"In order to make it in time. Yes." Kassel Sighed. "I'll try to make sure you're safe."

"How exactly?"

"Well, you said so before, I make a great distraction." He chuckled lightly. "And I'll try to disable any air weapons on the walls."

"...Alright. But after I'm in a safe zone, you get out of here, okay? Jump if you have to. I want to hear that squeak." She demanded, getting a smile from the Gnoll. She then grabbed him, and kissed him deeply. "You come back alive, you hear me?"

"I will. Try to evacuate Lingerriff. Even if it's to get them to hide somewhere for a few days." The two headed towards the door, opening it right in front of a patrol guard. As the Avian and the Gnoll yelped loudly, the Dragonite trampled over him. Jumping off and transforming in one fluid motion. As

the guard tried to get up and pursue her, Kassel pinned him down. "It's been a long time since I was in scrap with an Avian. Where's your pressure points again?"

"Get off me!" The bird struggled and hissed at him.

"Is it the ribs?" He asked, rhetorically I hope, as he pried up one of the plates on the avian's armor and gave it a jab. But the feathered one still struggled. "Well, that didn't work. How about here?" Another jab, and the bird growled loudly as the Gnoll tried to keep his beak from shouting out to his comrades. "Oh! I remember now, it's under the jaw, right..." He pressed rather hard into the neck, beside its windpipe. It caused the bird to struggle a bit, and almost looked like it was having a hard time to breathe, at this point Kass got off him and held the area until the guard was asleep. "Here." He gave a little smile. Really don't like hurting people, do you?

"Nothing fatal, no. There's no need of it." He said that last part a bit quietly. Kassel, don't forget about Tobyas. "Right!" And the gnoll took off towards the first set of siege weapons. It was very unlikely the Trebuchets would be used against one smaller airborne target, but it wouldn't be a bad idea to sabotage them. Just to irk them if anything. "What do you suggest?"

See that large rope in the center? Give it a quick cut-actually take care of that guy first.

"What guy-?"

"INTRUDER!" Another guard shouted, causing the Gnoll to give out the world's loudest surprised yelp in history. If they didn't hear the guard, odds are they heard him. Well done, Kass, well done.

"Thank you?" He said, barely getting his weapon out to deflect the guard's glaive.

That was sarcasm.

"I knew that." Kass stated, though in such a tone I swear he couldn't tell the difference. "Not now, Bartan!" Confusing the enemy in the middle of a fight, not a bad idea. Considering the odd look he gave you, I want to say it worked. Another grunt from the Gnoll while he struggled against the glave's reach. A few parries, and he actually used the threatening weapon to cut the rope of the trebuchet, disabling it. While distracted by what he just did, Kassel took advantage of the guard. Getting in close and back handing him across the back. Then Getting his free hand in the avian's throat to get it to pass out.

Several units could be heard in formation on the lower levels of the walls. You better act fast, Kassel. "Right." The Gnoll carried on to the next large weapon, cutting another rope that was attached to the ballista. Then on to the next set of weapons. Upon reaching it, he spotted one of the guards had already loaded it and was trying to aim it at something in the distance. With a loud growl, the Gnoll jumped and kicked backwards while rotating, cracking the bird's helmet loudly and emitting a loud squeak from the foot's impact. A swift kick to the avian's shin followed, and Kass got a hold of her throat. Pushing it against the wall's ledge-

"-Her!?"

Yes. You're beating up a female.

The Gnoll whimpered loudly as the guard passed out. But once she did, he pulled her back onto the wall's floor. Seeing another unit of guards coming his way, he quickly cut the rope to the ballista... Only to cut the wrong one can cause the weapon to fire loudly into the night. Another loud yelp and a cringe in hopes he didn't hit his ally. "Kass!!" I don't think he's ever been so happy to hear her hiss in the distance.

"Sorry! Wrong rope!" He shouted in reply.

"You! Stop!" Another yelp in surprise and the Gnoll took off in the other direction of Ralkor's guards. Quickly, he ran into another tower and slammed the door. Then, for some reason began barricading the door with a small shelf.

"Why wouldn't I?"

The door opens the other way. Puzzled, he stares at the door for several of his precious seconds to get away, only to have the door fly open and see the guards on the other side. Another loud yelp, and he scampered across the large table while the guards tossed away the shelf. A quick slight of hand to open the door and close it behind him, and Kass pushed forward to the next, and probably final set of siege weapons.

Just above the tower he just left, Kass barely heard talons scrape against its roof, and barely dodged a Knight's threatening stab. The bird's weapon cracked the stone wall as he pried it out. As the Gnoll started to get a bit of distance between them, the Knight placed the tip of his spear on the ground and used it as leverage as he jumped forward and tried to sidekick the intruder. With a small yelp, he stepped to the side, almost getting hit by the claw on his foot. The avian then whipped his spear backwards, trying to hit the Gnoll in the back, and it almost worked. Kass barely ducked in time, spinning and kicking the bird in retaliation. Then guarding the spear swinging in the opposite direction as before, pushing it aside as he rolled to withdraw away from the knight.

The avian growled loudly, spinning his weapon upward and rotating, ending with a heavy thrust that just barely hit Kass in the chest. Letting out another odd squeak and sent him backwards. Rolling to recover, the Gnoll gave the siege weapons a quick cut, and quickly withdrew from the fight. Especially since the Knight was finally getting some backup.

Into the next tower, Kassel quickly closed the door behind him and leaned against it, catching his breath. Only to hear the readying of another set of glavies in his current room. As the Gnoll yelped again very loudly, the guards charged at him as he clawed to get the door opened.

From outside the door, the Knight heard all the noise and ordered his backup to stand down. Several spearheads from the inside pierced through the door, and for a few moments there was no movement. Meanwhile, inside the tower room, Kassel was pinned into the door, every spear nearly

skewering him, but completely unharmed. While the guards looking at him rather dumbfounded, the Gnoll began to push the spears aside and squeeze himself out of the door.

Back on the outside of the tower the guards were looking at the door. Noticing that the spearpoints that were through it, had no blood on them. Then witness them slightly moving in the wooden door, as if the intruder was prying himself out of their hold. A few guards gasped and held their breaths. The sounds of the inner guards fighting the Gnoll could be heard, as he took them out unarmed. "...What... Is that?"

The Knight snarled. "It's a spy. And one with just alot of dumb luck. Follow me!" And he lead them into the air.

Kassel came out of the other side of the tower, panting. "I've got to get out of here." He said, exhausted. Looking over the wall for the bottom, it was very dark and shaded. But he could hear water. "I really don't feel like swimming." But it would be a solid escape. Even if you do make it over on land, how do you expect to outrun something that can fly? He sighed in fatigue, shaking his head to refocus. A few more talon scrapes were heard on the roof of the tower he was near. "Oh come on! How many guards do you keep on patrol!?" The Gnoll complained, as he ran to the next tower door.

Kass, wait. I smell a trap here. You've been in a very predictable pattern so far.

"It's not like I have a choice here! I haven't seen a single set a stairs on this entire wall!"

That's because they're birds. Birds can fly, they don't need stairs.

"Doesn't mean they couldn't build them for other people." He grumbled. "But you're right. What do you suggest?"

See the ends of the floorboards sticking out of the tower's side? The Gnoll whimpered. How good do you think your balance is?

"Not that good." His ears lowered.

Well, it's that or take chances with a trap. Kassel took several seconds to stare at the door...
Kass?

"I'm thinking."

Do heights bother you that much?

"Well, what happens if I fall?"

That's simple: everyone will know your exact location.

"And if I go in the tower?"

They'll know your exact location.

"So there IS a trap waiting for me in the tower."

I didn't say that.

"But you just said-"

I meant those guys. The guards coming behind you. Another surprised yelp and he went to the ledge. Looking down, he could feel that this was a terrible idea, but started carefully stepping on the small blocks of wood sticking out of the stone tower. About midway across, another set of talons could be heard on the roof, as a guard tried to attack him from above awkwardly. Kassel had to duck to dodge it, but in return he lost his balance. Desperately trying to get a hold of something, he managed to grab the spear that attacked him. The extra weight made the guard slip off the roof of the tower, and the Gnoll ended up pulling them both down.

Panicking, the guard attempted to fly, but was unable to. Though it was difficult to see while falling, the height was still dangerous, and Kassel positioned himself so that he would hit the ground first. Though several tarps, ropes, and construction staging broke their fall into sections. Still, the impact was enough to knock the wind out of him.

Coming to, Kass was surrounded by guards at spear point, along with the other guard on top of him who was slowly getting up. Raising his gray paws to surrender, the Knight he fought before was pushing his way through the unit. As the guard double taked at his superior, he quickly got off and out of the way. The Knight studied the Gnoll with an angry face, mostly looking at his chest area. Then the avian picked up his spear and rested it heavily on Kassel's leg, which then began to squeak and balloon out a bit the farther that he pressed. While the intruder grunted at the slight pain it caused.

"I knew I didn't miss..." The guards looked at the Gnoll strangely, whispering to each other. "You." The Knight said, looking at the Gray one. "What kind of sorcerer are you? Or does your kind naturally sound this ridiculous?" Kassel remained quiet, trying not to look him in the eye. The Knight then snorted loudly. "Take him to the prison for now. Guard him at all costs. We'll find out how much he knows. You three, take off to see if you can find that blue one somewhere in the skies. I'll report this to Sir Lakotorro and the King."

"Yes, Sir Stigborg!" They shouted, as they took Kassel Prisoner.

The Jail cell was oddly new, as if it was recently built. The bedding that it held was actually quite soft and comfortable. It was nice to sleep in something that wasn't a hard tarp or cold grass. Granted, for how fluffy you are, I can't imagine it wouldn't make that much of a difference. The Gnoll moaned a bit as he got up and adjusted his eyes to the dark surroundings. Studying the walls, they looked like they were not 100% complete, but complete enough to hold prisoners. "You're awake?"

"Getting there." Kass grunted, tending to his stiff back. "How long have I been out?"

"Only about an hour." The guard reveiled himself. "You must have nine lives to somehow live through all the trouble you caused tonight." Though Avian kind, his words were rather friendly.

"Not nine anymore." The Gnoll chuckled. Although there was light in the hallway the guard was in, he could see something familiar about him. "You're...?"

"The one who went freefalling with." He whispered, with a smile on his face. "Thank you for that, by the way."

"For what?"

"I know you made it so you landed first. Having that special gift and all." The Gnoll lowered his head. "You could've taken me out and probably escaped, but..."

"But you could've been hurt."

"But you wouldn't be in a cell waiting to be interrogated." Kass remained quiet, as he laid back down on the bed. "Can I ask you something? About that power?"

"...It's not really a power. I can't tell you how you can obtain it."

"No, it's nothing to do with that, it's just... When I was a young chick, I remember a Gnoll coming through our village. He had the same ability, I remember it used to make me laugh. Was he your father?" Again, the Gnoll remained quiet. "He helped us out. There was some creature in the mines that drove our workers out. And he took care of it for us."

"...Yes, I remember her." Kassel mumbled.

"Her?"

"...Nevermind. But I remember that village. What happened to it?"

"Back then, Ralkor was considered a series of towns and villages. Eventually we just placed everyone into one big city."

"Makes sense." Kass said quietly. "It would've taken alot more resources to expand a wall across an entire boarder of land, than to build it around one city."

"Well, back then, we weren't planning to go to war with other cities." More silence between the two. "What happened to him?"

"Hmm?"

"Your father. You look maybe a day or two past nineteen. And that was at least twenty years ago since that happened. What happened to him?"

"Oh... He's still around. Went traveling for a few years. The guy never seems to stay in one spot for very long." A door opened at the end of the hall and got the Guard's attention. He gave a nod then looked back at the prisoner.

"Someone will be by soon to interrogate you. If I could do it myself and give you a fair trial, I would. But..."

"It's... Alright." He replied, and waited for the guard to leave.

It hurts a little, doesn't it? To lie to them.

"Yes, a bit."

But you never really said anything false. But you did beat around the bush. He gave a sad smile to the ceiling, as if I was up there. So what are you going to do now?

Kassel got up once again, looking at the door. "I don't have my gear with me right now, so I can't pick the lock."

What about squeezing through the door?

"Squeezing through the door?" He asked out loud. Again. And yes, you could probably fit through those bars if you balloon yourself a bit. He took some time to study it a bit. "I really don't think I want to try that."

Afraid of looking like that for the rest of your life?

"A little, yes."

Well, there's one other thing you can try that won't deform you. The Gnoll's ears went up and sideways while his head tilted. You can cut the bars.

"With what? My claws?"

You have claws?

"Not really." His head and ears sank.

Didn't think so. But with that Red power.

"I thought that just exploded stuff and set things on fire."

Were you not paying attention to any part of that dream with Flaytonn?

"...Yeah, he exploded stuff. Bugs mostly."

Once in a while, he would cover his blade with that Red. It would make it really sharp and much easier to cut through the Exoskeleton.

"But I need something sharp for that, don't I?"

Not really. Just concentrate on making the Red very very thin. Almost like a slash with your sword. Aim at the bottom of the bars, but not these ones. If you walk out there, you'll probably just run into more guards. Try the bars on the window for now.

"Okay, but if I explode, I'm blaming you."

Deal. He concentrated on the inch thick bars that vertically barricaded the window. They began to glow a bit red, wait stop.

"What?"

You're heating them up. You don't want to do that, or else they'll explode. You don't want to Charge them, you want to cut them.

"I don't understand."

Think of it more like throwing a sharp wave horizontally. Almost like a disk.

"I can do that?"

If you make it thin enough, yes. What Flaytonn was doing with it was more like extending the lethal end of his blade by superheating the particals around-

"Bartan-"

-his blade and shooting it outward past the tip. Letting it loose like a whip.

"Sounds like it could backlash pretty badly."

Not really. You cannot hurt yourself with it unless you really try. Same with others, unless you make it explode. Even then, it's not the Red that's doing the damage to others, it's the concussional force and the remains of the objects being-

"I got it. But what do you want me to do?"

Create a small sheet of Red at the tip of your paw, and then throw it at the bars.

"And this won't explode?"

Only if you really charge the Red for a long long time. Even then, it'd probably have to be something flammable.

"Hmm." Kassel studied his paw a bit. Just feel for it. It acts like another appendage. Slowly, he could see a very transparent shade of orange outline his paw in a semi-circle. Good, now if you move your paw around, it should follow it. He did so, being cautious about it. Congratulations, you just weaponized yourself. "I did?" Yes. Now, without trying to reach out and grab it, throw it at the bottom half of the window. The closer to the window sill, the better. Remember, it's not a Tool. It's part of you. "If you say so."

With a slight toss of his paw, he seen the orange outline be tossed out, as if it was unaffected by the gravity of the planet. It went up and cut through the bars with ease... as well as some of the wall.

"Oops?"

It's an okay thing. Now, I want you to try it without using your paw. Try using it without the gesture.

"Errm... Are you sure?"

The more you learn how to use this ability, the better. Just try not to overdo it until you're more used to it.

"Okay." A little more time concentrating, and a thin orange line started to glow in the darkness. Try to make it thinner. Flatten it a bit more. Alright, now push it forward, towards the top of the bars. Don't try to saw with them, just push them. Throw them if you have to. The orange light went through the wall to the outside, once again cutting the bars. They fell outside and didn't hit the ground until several seconds. You're free.

"Phew." He sighed. "It's still easier to use it like an object, but..." Kass said as he started climbing out the window.

It probably is, but it'd be good to learn how otherwise. For now, focus on escaping. Odds are they couldn't find Tobyas.

Looking outside, the wall was a dead drop to the coastline. By the look of this, he must've been moved to the far west of the city. "Who would build this here? Honestly..."

Well, they maybe birds, but odds are they wouldn't want to build a deck on the outside of the prison walls.

"Would make my life a little easier." The Gnoll mumbled, as he carefully made his way to the northern window. The walls still held the beams of the floor above and below him, still sticking out. Getting closer, he could hear the guards chatting among each other casually. Talking about the events that occurred that evening.

"T-the Prisoner! He's escaped!" Kass heard one of them shout in the hallway. Then all the guards from within that room rushed to him. Now's your chance.

Quickly, the Gray one climbed into the barless window, and shut the door to the hallway. Locking it, and barricading it with a nearby desk. Several pounds at the door shouted for Kass to unlock the door. "Not until you think about what you've done. By the way, where did you put my stuff?" Another series of loud shouts sent the Gnoll's head reatreating a bit. "Fine, I'll find it myself." He tossed his snout, alot like Tobyas.

She's rubbing off on you, you know that.

"Hardly. I've always done this." He said, looking around the room. Try that shelf over there. "Where-Oh!"

After re-equipping himself, he quickly started up the other hallway. Sneaking past a few guards by hiding in the shadows. Eventually, he came out to an opened area which looked a bit like a small courtyard. Most likely used for training. However, right now it was an area used for celebration. The massive amount of avians almost caused Kassel to yelp loudly. But they were civilians, not soldiers. I donno why you're in a panic.

"Because I'm a wanted prisoner!" He whispered out loud. At least remembering to whisper. And you are, to the guards. These people don't know of your pressence, let alone know that anything happened tonight. "They don't?" Nope. But they do. The Gnoll yelped, expecting a unit of guards behind him, but nothing threatening could be seen. "That's not funny Bartan!" He said out loud, getting a few odd looks from the civilians. Scratching his mane, he began to walk around the large group of people.

He headed towards a back alleyway. Wait a moment Kass.

"What?"

Think about this for a moment. The citizens have noticed you, but haven't done anything like point you out.

"What about it?" His ear went sideways as he casually walked forward.

If they haven't announced your pressence to them...

"Then odds are they wouldn't want people to know that I'm here. But I don't want them to know I'm here either."

Regardless, if people see the guards arrest someone, they're going to know something's up. The safest place you can be right now is within the crowd.

"As much as I really don't want to..." He scratched the back of his mane again, looking back and forth between the Alley and the streets. "You're right." Kassel quickly began moving through the crowds in the streets. "My only issue is, I have no idea where the front door is."

You're planning to go through the front door?

"Why not? They'd expect me to go anywhere else. For all they know, I jumped into the ocean."

It's a wonder you can hear me through all this noise.

"You're in my head. It's like I can hear you before everything else."

Hmm... KASSEL!!

The Gnoll yelped loudly and nearly jumped out of his clothing, while getting the same reaction out of several avians around him. "Don't do that!" He said, tending to his ears. Then looked at the few birds gocking at him. "Sorry. The voice in... my... head... Yelled at me." He whimpered then scampered on. "Seriously, what was the point to that?"

Was just curious. Kass grumbled loudly while looking for a map of the city somewhere. It's doubtful that they would actually have one around, they don't seem to be very fond of tourists. "Well, it's better than mindlessly running around and expecting to find the gate. Actually..." He looked at a small group of Avians that were nearby-Oh do not tell me- "Excuse me! I'm meeting a friend at the gate. Do you know which way it is?"

"You want to head down this way, and then take a left. Keep going until you see the fountain, and then head right. You should see it ahead."

"Thank you! And enjoy your party!"

I can't believe that worked.

"Never underestimate the kindness of others." He smiled, slightly looking up. "Besides, that actually told me a little bit more about this situation."

And that would be?

"That it's not all of Ralkor that's against the outsiders. It's only their King. And the civilians don't see us as enemies. They're not part of all this."

I suppose so. As Kassel made his way through the streets, he searched the skies once in a while, to see if any of the guards were flying or scouting. He noticed a few in the distance, and tried to hide himself away from them without looking suspicious.

Still getting a few looks from the birdfolk of the city, Kassel made it to the Gate without being horribly detected. At least not by the guards. Carefully studying the area around the gate, he noticed a few guards still patrolling that area. So much for your plan.

"Quiet you. I'll have to think of another." As he looked around the wall, he did notice several ways he could climb up it, but they would all take too long and he would most likely be noticed before he made it to the top. "This would be so much easier if they just made stairs." He sighed heavily. "Hmm?"

Something caught his attention over the buildings to the west.

Oh lord. Is that what I think it is?

The Gnoll rushed to that direction. After going through a few alleys between buildings, he came to what looked like a scrapyard. A series of siege weapons that were around were either damaged or being built. But one tall trebuchet seemed to be complete and nearly ready to fire. What exactly are you planning?

"I'm planning to get on the wall. And the quickest way possible. Maybe then I can find a way down. Even if it's through the water." He said, getting the weighted catapult ready. It took a lot of strength to pull and latch the ropes, but he was able to do it... Barely. "Hush! I'm not a musclehead like Tobyas is."

I'm telling her you said that. A faint whimper omitted from him as his eyes widened. Only to remember that she can't hear me.

Climbing in the... Erm... Basket? Launchy Thingy? He took a moment to ready himself. "Here goes nothing." He faintly whimpered, as he created a bit of Red and tossed it to cut the rope. The Trebuchet snapped loudly as Kassel howled in fear of the massive launch force. Only to realize he actually forgot to, you know, AIM the damn thing. Causing him to at least clear the wall and make it to the other side in a grassy field. Hitting the ground with a massive squeak that sent him bouncing to a few more. Eventually coming to a stop at the edge of a forest.

How do you feel buddy?

"My everything hurts..." Well, that's what you get for launching yourself out of a catapult. A few moans and pats to make sure he was still in one piece, he stumbled inside the forest to rest. Still, you made it out, and alive at that.

"I just hope Tobyas did too."

I'm pretty sure she did. Odds are, if she was caught, she'd beat the living hell out of those guys. The slight thought made him chuckle lightly. Ready to move on? The faster you get to Lingerriff, the better.

"Yeah, sure." He got up and stretched a bit.

"I'm sure he came through this way." A voice above him said, instantly causing the Gnoll to whimper and duck.

"I still don't believe you. I mean, I seen him running through the streets, and he looked normal to me."

"I know what I saw, and it ain't normal! He has something, I can feel it. Something magical. I want to actually say it's one of those Oddin things."

"Suuuure he does. T, take a look down there, will you?"

"Okay." A rather deep voice said. Only to almost immedietly hear a series of twigs and branches breaking above Kassel, and have a rather chubby bird land on him. Again, letting out a very loud Squeak. "I found him!" The large one said happily.

"Well, ain't that some luck." Two others landed in the small space where the Gnoll was pinned. One being rather tall and yellow, the other being dark with a tint of purple.

"See? Told you he was down here." The tall one said, crossing his arms and folding in his wings.

"You!? I'm the one who seen him go flying!" The short one gave the yellow one a swat.

"Would you kindly get off me...?" The Gray furred one wheezed out. The smaller avian snapped his fingers, and the light blue tubby one got up. Grabbing Kassel by the wrists and held him in place.

"So, you are still alive. Even after T's soft landing."

"That was soft!?" The Gnoll looked at the two in disbelief and whimpered. "I'd hate to see a hard one." Now finally looking at the birds, they didn't look like guards. Probably thugs. "Thugs? There's thugs in Ralkor?"

The blue bird looked at the captive with a bit of an odd look. "We got a strange one this time, Big."

"It's probably that jewelery that's making him that way."

"Jewelery? I didn't steal anything." The Gnoll's ears went back. "I'm not a thief."

"Yet you're dressed like one." The tall one said, getting a growl from Kass.

"Yous got something special on ya, I've seen it. And the guards don't want it leaked out. I just happen to see Stigborg do..." The short one came close and stepped on the Gnoll's foot, causing it to bubble out and squeak a bit. "This to you."

"Why does everyone hit the left foot?" He whimpered.

"Now that ain't normal." The yellow one tilted his head. "Is that how he survived the fall?"

"I heard about some of the cool artifacts the humans used to have. One set specifically was given to some guy named Oddin." The short one studded the furry one, motioning to see his hands and even looking at his ears.

"Oddin. He was their King." Kassel replied, trying to appeal to them a bit. "But the set was long gone with their civilization."

"Then how come you blow up like a balloon?" The bigger one asked, squeezing the Gnoll's wrists a couple of times.

"Call it a birth defect?" He whimpered, but they didn't buy it.

"I don't buy it." See? Told you.

"Quiet Bartan, please." He said out loud getting a few odd looks... Again.

"Tell me about this set of Oddin's. What did it have?"

"What makes you think I know?" The question made the smaller bird grumble and snap his fingers. The Larger one began squeezing him really hard with a bearhug. Causing Kass to yelp out loud. "Okay-okay-okay!"

"He's very soft, Big. Are you sure I can't keep him?"

"Maybe if he cooperates, we'll let him go. But if he doesn't, then you can keep him. We got a nice leash that I think will fit him back at the base." The short one said.

"Wait, you're Big? The short one is the big one?" Kass, now's probably not the time to question the irony of their names. The short one grumbled, lifting his hand to snap again. "Okay! He had two earrings, two rings, a belt, and an amulet!"

"And which one do you have?"

The Gnoll whimpered a bit, looking at the others. "...A Ring."

"Thought so. But you're not wearing any rings." He said, looking at the gray paws closely.

"Big..." The taller one whispered and motioned him to come closer. "I heard sometimes, in other cities and tribes that they tend to put a ring on their... 'Lower Horn'. If you know what I mean." The short one gave the yellow avian a strange look. "If you think about it, it'd be the perfect place for it. No one would think to look there."

"No one but you." The shorter one grumbled. "T, take off his pants." The Gnoll yelped again.

"What!? No! It's not down there!"

"Then where is it?"

Kassel exhaled and tried to look away. "It's... in my chest."

"Your chest? Like in your heart?"

"No... But if you feel around where my heart is, you'll feel it."

Another grumbled from the bird as he got closer. "You don't have fleas, do you?" The question made the Gnoll's ears went back and give an angry look. A snort from the bird, and he pulled down the collar of his shirt, feeling around the thick fur. Eventually his expression turned to surprise. "Well, what do you know... It's actually there." He retrieved his hand. "Now, how do you take it off?"

"I... Can't." The answer made the birds growl.

"How did you get it there in the first place?" The yellow one asked.

"...When I was younger, I cut into the flesh of that area, and... Placed it in."

"And now since it healed, there's no way to remove it. Clever."

"What do we do now, Big?" The big one asked, looking a little sad.

"We could still sell him or keep him as a slave. I mean, he is invincible. We could do something with that, I'm sure."

"Question?" Kassel asked. Getting the attention of all three of them. "Does anyone else smell burning tailfeathers?"

All three of them stopped to sniff the air. "Now that you mention it..." All three of them squaked loudly when they seen a small flame on their tails, causing the big one to let good of the Gnoll and get him to escape. "Damn it! Find him!" The short one shouted. But it was too late.

A good ten minutes away, Kassel stopped to rest again, keeping an ear up to hear any wingbeats. He suddenly heard one rush past in the skies and completely froze until it was long gone in the distance. Allowing him to breathe again. "Seriously, give me a break..." He whispered.

So... Under the fur of your chest? That's where you hid it?

"...Yeah. I kept losing it when I was little. Barely getting it back in time. Even had it attached to a string at one point, but..."

It won't work unless it's touching your body.

"Mhmm... And this way it can't fall into the wrong hands. Even if I have to live with it..."

So the question lies then; exactly how old are you?

"Buy me dinner first, Bartan. Then we can get to know each other." The Gnoll teased. Avoiding the question. "...I can't remember."

That long, huh?

"It feels like it."

Chapter 5

Coming out to a clearing, Kassel got a good look at the coastline of the bay. Close to where they docked earlier. The winds were slightly picking up while the sprinkles of rain were setting in. Down at the boat they arrived in, there was a tarp on the ground with something under it. Something dragonite shaped. "Tobias!" Kass shouted, running towards it. As soon as he got close to it, he ripped off the tarp to reveal a pile of sand that was slightly shaped.

"I thought that might draw you around." An Avian Knight came out from hiding. Probably the one you heard in the forest.

"What do you want? I don't have your battle plans." He didn't look like the one they called Stigborg. Perhaps the one he was talking to earlier in the tower.

"You sneak around my Citadel, undetected. You Toy around with my Soldiers. Then escape their captivity in less than two hours. " He snorted. "That is unacceptable. Especially if you think you can somehow return from the hole you came from." He pulled out a long, elegantly crafted glaive from behind him, and went into a ready stance. "Do not try to escape me. You can't."

"...There's no reasoning with you, is there?" Kassel said, rather coldly as the rain began to fall harder along the beach.

"Do not try to jesterize this fight. I will bring you back to Ralkor, and you will be locked away until we can figure out what you know and what you've seen." The knight said sternly. "I can only imagine that your friend went to Lingerriff. So I sent the airships in the direction." Kassel sucked in a breath, unable to really tell if he was bluffing. Still, it caused the Gnoll to look in the direction of the far away city. Almost roaring, the Knight took a large step to the side, back within Kass' vision. Circling his glaive forcefully, as if to say 'I'm your enemy'. There was silence between the two for a while. "...I've heard you are said to be invincible." The Gnoll didn't reply to the white feathered one. "Regardless, I'm still certain you can feel pain. And you can be knocked unconscious." Again, no reply. "I am Lakotorro, the Commander of the Ralkor invasion army, and the Leader of the Five Feathers of the King. Now Arm Yourself!"

Kassel sighed quietly and nodded. He withdrew his Falchion. "I am Kassel."

Surface Tension

"Well then, Kassel. This will be our only duel. Do not disappoint me." Lakotorro said harshly. For a while, they just stared at each other, while the rain started to pour down. With one quick initiative strike, Lako swung the glaive upward, ending with a downward cut. Following a cross one at neck height that Kassel barely got out of the way of. Then a rotation backwards while advancing, again at neck

height. Though it was blocked by his sword, it did stagger the Gnoll a bit. The Avian was very quick. If it wasn't for the rain, he wouldn't be able to see the attack pattern in time.

Trying to get in close for a quick middle slash, but the Knight was quicker to block and push the Gray one back. Attacking with a series of small slashes at a distance, it was all the Gnoll could do to parry them around. A middle thrust go through into his gut area, tearing through his black shirt and ommiting a loud squeak. Then an upward slash to the throat, and finally one across the head. Causing Kassel to hit the ground. His head felt a little dizzy from the impact, almost as if the weapon was completely solid.

As Lakotorro waited for the Gnoll to get up, he himself kept composed. Though he looked angry, as if he was insulted. Shaking the dizzyness off, Kassel got back up. Once again some silence between the two. Then the Avian's first strike; a power thrust, exactly what Kassel was hoping for. An easy parry to push it slightly and the Gray one could get in close for a series of cuts. But he was interrupted by Lako slamming the body of the Glaive into the Gnoll's chest, followed by a trip with the large weapon's blade at the back of his knee. It felt sharp, and if it wasn't for that Ring, it probably wouldn't taken the leg clean off.

Following through the trip, Kassel tried to roll back up quickly, but the Knight stomped on his back heavily. Then he felt the blade hit his grey neck hard, and give a sudden release. The sharp pain returned on the Gnoll's right side, soon after Lako's foot released. The blow to the side launched the Gray one a few feet away, and stun heavily. Loosing some of Kass' breath. He didn't even notice that he dropped his sword, until the Knight tossed it at the dirt beside him.

Again, taking a few breaths to recover, the Gnoll slowly got his sword and stood up. Still catching his breath while looking down on the ground, his eye caught something. Another look at the Knight's weapon, and something clicked in. Something very familiar about his fighting style. A swallow could be heard from his Gray furred throat, as Kassel sheathed his sword.

"Surrendering already?" Lakotorro asked. Again with that arrogant tone.

"Not exactly. Just changing weapons." He bent over and grabed a long branch that was fairly straight. Most of the twigs and small stumps were off of it, and it was rather smooth. Though it wasn't as long as the Knight's Glaive, it still held greater Reach than the sword would. Getting himself into a ready stance made the Avian laugh loudly.

"You cannot be serious. You downgrade to a stick you found on the beach?"

"I can't beat you with such small range. Regardless of what it looks like, it isn't a downgrade."

"Still. You plan to try to mimic my movements without any training? I was taught by the great Jhaiou Karann. He himself created the way of the spear. I was his final student!"

"But you were not his greatest."

"What did you say!?" The bird snarled loudly.

"You... Your father paid him to teach you, even though he refused several times. Eventually he was blackmailed into doing it. Even then, you still didn't accept the training as your own. As part of yourself. You used it only to gain power."

"What Nonsense! As if you could tell anything of the sort at your age. Karann died over thirty years ago."

"That weapon of yours... It's Solid. Something he would never suggest using." Another snarl. "You need some resistance and flexibility within your weapon. It's what he would always tell you-"

"Quiet!" Lakotorro roared, as he jumped forward and spun in the air. Upon landing, he swung the Glaive heavily at neck height. Only to have it go over the Gnoll's head, and get swat hard in the beak by the Branch. Following through the blow, he attacked with a large series of quick slashes again, but this time they were easily parried by Kassel's weapon. Until one thrust was too wide, allowing the Gnoll to get a staggering parry out and snap the long stick into the right side of Lako's face. Damaging his beak slightly. Flowing through that momentum, Kassel hit several areas one after another with his back to the Knight: left side, right shin, left side of the head, right bicep, left shin, right side, then finally a hard thrust to the chest.

The avian struggled to stay up. Growling loudly at the furred one. "...Just let me go. Please. No one has to suffer anymore tonight."

"Silence!" He roared, coughing a bit afterword. A few heavy breaths and he got back up. "I won't be beaten by a lowlife like yourself!" The Gnoll's ears went a bit low, mostly due to his lack of surrender. Another growl, and the Knight readied himself once again. Again, a few moments of silence while the rain poured on the beach. With a quick spin backwards, Lakotorro swung the Glaive around the middle section, purposely missing to get the Gnoll to block. Then quickly turned the end of the thrust, almost getting the Gray one in the belly. But Kassel still managed to parry the attack, driving the glaive into the ground. The Gnoll then stepped on it, and then slammed his improvised staff into the weapons base. A loud snap omitted, as the Knight shoved him away.

Pulling the glaive out of the wet sand revealed a crack at the base of the blade where it was connected to the pole. Another loud growl from the Avian seemed to echo over the storm as the winds picked up. He roared in frustration, as he tried for another heavy thrust at the Gnoll, whereas Kassel did the same. The two ends of the weapons collided, the blade of the Glaive splitting into the wood of the large branch. But the wood stayed strong against the pressure of the two, completely capturing the large blade and holding it still. Kass then kicked the side of the weapons heavily, snapping off the Glaive's blade and staff keeping it as its own. A quick rotation, and a slam down at Lakotorra's head, just as a strike of lightning hit behind the Gnoll, blinding the Knight from the attack. And the loud thunder overpowered the slam into his head.

For a few moments, everything went quiet. Even the sound of the rain couldn't be heard by Kassel,

still holding onto his weapon tightly and trying to hold back his tears. Staring into the eyes of the bird before him as a long trail of blood began making it's way down and around his beak. The broken Glaive blade managed to go through his skull and... Well...

The avian fell limp after a few moments. When Kassel's hearing returned, he could hear someone shouting in the distance. Kass... There's nothing you can do about it now. He nodded, and withdrew the weapon. Letting the Knight fall onto the wet beach. He tried to whisper his apologies, but he ended up running off before it was too late. As he made it to the edge of the woods, he looked back to see Stigborg land and examine the body of his late captain. Though a good fifty yards away, they locked into each others eyes. Lowering his head, Kassel withdrew into the woods.

It must've been four hours, the Gnoll was running through the woods and across barren fields of grass and wildlife. He eventually collapsed, and was forced to rest. Shaking his head from what he'd once again done-

"Bartan..."

...You never told them that you were trained in that weapon.

"Not many people know."

You're much better with it than you are with the sword.

"...Yes. I am. But everytime I use that weapon, someone dies." He said, taking a few breaths. "It's why I put it away. It's why I tried to use something different..."

...Get some sleep. You won't be bothered anymore through the night.

"...Okay. Thank you."

A few pokes in his ribs woke the Gnoll up. "Hey, you alive?" A few grumbles and Kass began move around a bit. "I guess that means you are."

"Who is that, Francis?" A rather feminine voice asked. His eyesite was still getting used to the daylight.

"Are you okay, son?" Kass could barely make out what seemed to be a badger, making the Gnoll yelp a bit. "It's okay, we ain't here to..."

"Mr... Honner?"

"Kassel? Is that you?" The female badger asked. "It must be, I never forget that mane. My, how

it's almost the same as I remember it."

"Gladis? Sonnor? What are you two doing here?" He asked.

"We were just traveling to Lingerriff after delivering some things to the mines that way." Sonnor, the male said. Pointing down to the south way of the road nearby. On the road seemed to be a large wagon pulled by a few horses. There were a few other people waiting on it.

"My, you haven't aged a day." Gladis said, looking over the Gnoll and trying to dust his shirt off a bit.

"I guess what you said was true then, son. Some Gnolls really do live forever." The male joked, hoping for more than the half sad smile that he got out of gray one. "Is something wrong Kassel?"

"Kinda... Have you two heard or seen any airships pass up to Lingerriff lately?" The two mates looked at each other in question, and shook their heads. A large sigh of relief washed over him, even for a moment. "What about a blue Dragonite? She was heading there in the night."

"We haven't seen anything dear. What are you doing sleeping out here? Last we saw you was in Hoelharra. And that was..."

"About fifty years ago." The Gnoll gave a sad smile. "I'm glad you two finally mated."

"You always said we were perfect for each other. No matter how much she lashed out at me-"

"I lashed out?" She playfully snarled at him, getting him to raise his hands in surrender. It brought a little flutter in Kassel's heart.

"I see Gladis is still as vicious as ever."

"You don't know the half of it, son." Sonnor placed a paw on his mate's shoulder.

"Kassel, what's wrong? Why are you worried about airships?"

The gray one looked down at the ground below him and took a moment for his words. "Have you heard what happened to Elbarenluv?"

"We heard alot of things about that city, but nothing out of the ordinary. Is that where you've been? Caught or blackmailed by thieves?"

"No... Ralkor set it on fire." The both sucked in a breath. "There's nothing left to it. And I just came back from infiltrating Ralkor. And now they're planning to do the same with Lingerriff." Another look at each other, as someone from the wagon called at them.

"Well, as far as we know, it's still fine. And there's been nothing in the skies. Come on, we'll give you a ride."

"Thank you. I really need some rest." He got up and started to follow them.

"So this Dragonite that you asked about...?" Sonnor questioned, while he motioned something to the folk at the wagon.

"We found a map that showed some of their battleplans. They're planning to take out every major city so they can run the entire land. We think anyway. She took off with the map to warn the city."

"She? You found yourself a mate, did you?" Galdis teased, causing the Gnoll to lower his head and ears while whimpering a bit.

"N-not exactly... We were just coming back from a job and..."

"It's rare to find a Dragonite who thinks of something other than themselves. She must see something in you, Kassel."

"Much like I seen something in you all those years ago."

"Gladis..." The Gnoll moaned, covering his face with his paws.

"Now dear, let's not pester the old one. He's probably exhausted. It will take about four hours to reach Lingerriff."

"Thank you again Sonnor and Gladis."

"Did you want something to eat? We don't have much on us, but-"

"That's alright ma'am. I'll be fine." She gave the Gnoll an unimpressed stare which puzzled him and made his ears lower. The badger then placed her paw through the hole in his shirt and he yelped.

"What I thought. You're still a twig. When are you going to take better care of yourself?"

"I just... don't need to eat much." He said, scratching the back of his mane, and half looking at the hole in his shirt.

"You never did. Even when we were growing up, you'd often give me and Gladis each a third of your meals when we were hungry." The Gnoll returned to his aged friend with a sad smile. "We never would've survived if it wasn't for you."

"I couldn't leave homeless pups out in the cold." He half shrugged, as he climbed in the wagon and greeted everyone there. Most of them tended to be repile folk, but there were a few others that were furnanns. Although the hard wooden floor of the wagon wasn't comfortable, Kassel could at least get some rest while also making some progress. Within a few minutes, he faded out once again.

A few shakes began to release slumbers held from the Gnoll, along with a few calls of his name. It sounded rather concerned, and much less settle. "Get him up!"

"...What?" Kassel asked sleepishly, still getting his eyes used to the bright sky.

"Kasse! Wake up!" A few grumbles from Sonnor's demands, and he looked at the badger, who was pointing at the sky towards the southwest. Following it, a fleet of airships in the distance could be seen. Much like the one that escaped Elbarenluv.

"Damnit!" The Gnoll cursed. "How far are we from Lingerriff?"

"Maybe about an hour, but you can cut through that forest to reach it quicker." Without a second thought, he jumped off the wagon. "Kasse?" Gladis asked.

"Stay away from it for now! I'm going to save who I can!" He shouted back, not stopping as he dove into the forest. Do you really think you can outrun a fleet of airships? "I can't be any help by sitting in that wagon while other people are getting hurt."

Fair enough, but... You can just...

"...I'm going to see if I can stop this. Perhaps find a way to make sure that no one has to get hurt."

What about a warning?

"Warning?"

Like a warning shot. Make an explosion into the sky above you, as far as you can reach. Let them know that the other pilot was telling the truth and it might demoralize them. Or give you at least a few minutes.

"That's not a bad idea." A few deep breaths, and he gathered some Red around his hands. Then threw it as far as he could into the sky above him. At it's peak distance, he let it detonate into the sky. Turning it red and sending out a faint heatwave with the bomb blast. "You really think this will work?"

It might. He grumbled at my answer and carried on. About twenty minutes later, he could hear the fleet passing over the forest. Cursing again out loud, the only thing he could do was move faster. The warning did give him more time than he expected, but it would still be about ten minutes before he could make his way to the city.

By the time he made it there, many of the buildings were damaged, but very very few were on fire. They didn't look like they were using their flame tactics on Lingerriff, which was a good sign. But those awful screeches of the Dolls could be heard. They must've set them loose on the townsfolk. "Probably the same tactic as before?"

Or it's another weapons test. They're seeing how well they perform alone.

The Gnoll was silent for a moment, until he heard another screech nearby of a Reppann. Rushing towards the direction, he could barely see the tall humonid Doll over a small wall. Unsheathing his weapon, Kassel jumped and rotated over the wall in a fluid motion while slashing down on the Doll's

head. Landing just in front of the victim. As the creature screeched again and slashed upwardly at the Gray one, nothing a simple Parry couldn't deflect and counter with a stab in the chest. A bit of twisting caused the creature to stutter, but not look like it was feeling any pain. He ripped the sword up and out of the creature's torso, and it fell to the ground limp.

Kassel then turned to the Red Reptile and overlooked him. His leg and a bit of his tail was injured, but he seemed fine for the most part. "Are you okay?" He asked.

"Y-yes. These creatures-"

"They came from the airships. I know. You need to get out of the city, but I need to ask you a few questions first. Did a Blue Dragonite make it here last night?"

"Blue Dragonite? Yes, she threatened the Mayor to evacuate the city."

"And how far did he get?"

"Well... Um..." The Gnoll sighed at the reaction. Knowing he probably didn't believe her. "Quite a few left. Due to the stories about Elbarenluf that the survivors told-"

"So there's at least some that made it out." Another series of creature screeches. "Okay, let me help you over this wall. Then I want you to hide in the forest. Don't reveal yourself until those creatures stop making noise."

"O-okay." He said. Though injured, he could still walk. "What about you?"

"I'm going to save who I can."

"Good luck. Oh, and most people would probably be at the town's square or the gate. There's a tunnel-"

"Underground of the city, I know. But that's been caved in for forty years. It's nothing more than a dead end." The Gnoll grumbled. I guess that's your next stop then. "Yeah..." And he took off.

On the way there, Kassel did encounter a few groups of Dolls, but made short work of them. They were rather unskilled fighters, many of them were already damaged when they came after him. "It's a good sign... To a degree."

I wouldn't worry about it. That one there has a deep cut into the neck, which should've finished it off.

"Means... They probably get back up, don't they?"

It'd be the perfect cannon fodder. A mindless soldier that comes back from the dead time and time again. That one there doesn't even look like its left arm was originally part of it.

"So, they can take body parts from another too?" The Gnoll sighed. But still headed to the town

square. He heard quite a few of the city's guards fighting against the Dolls, and by the sounds of it, they were pushing them back. It gave him a bit of relief as he made his way through the long alleys and over the small walls.

Upon seeing the large opened area that made the Square, he spotted something rather tall and Blue. "Tobias!" He shouted, getting the Dragonite's attention.

"Kasse!" She ran to him, fighting off the urge to squeeze him senseless. "Thank Oddin you made it out alive."

"Yeah, I heard that you made it here, but you can't do this." He gestured towards the large tunnel in the center of the square that was opened. A large stairway leading underground.

"Why not?"

"That tunnel collapsed about forty years ago. It's nothing more than a Dead end now. We'll be trapping them if we do this!"

"What do you suggest?" She looked at many of the townsfolk making their way down the stairs. Many of them hysterical. "We don't really have any other place for them to go."

"What about the north gate? Is it cleared?"

"I'm not even sure if it's been attacked. But I can clear it for them."

"Alright, try to get a few guards with you." Her ears went back. "N-not that you couldn't do it alone, but..."

She tossed her snout. "I hear you. Mayor! We have a situation."

The Gnoll couldn't help but study the formation of the guards defending the courtyard while the Dragonite updated the Mayor of Lingerriff. The creatures kept coming, and could be seen from a distance, but there was something odd about them. Sure, the creatures were fighting back, but hardly as vicious as before in Elbarenluf. "What do you mean?"

I mean, I wonder if this is some sort of trap. Can you get higher? On top of a building perhaps?

"Yes, give me a minute." And the Gnoll began to climb from rooftop to rooftop. Upon reaching a good height, he overlooked the streets. "What am I looking at?"

Look at how many of the creatures there are. Alive and... 'Dead'.

"They're filling the streets. What of it? Are you saying they're going to come back to life?"

Not exactly. They wouldn't do enough damage if they just came back.

"Bartan..." Kassel heard the Dragonite land behind him.

"I've convinced him-"

"Threatened. You threatened him, didn't you?" She tossed her snout as if to say 'Same difference'. It made him slightly smile.

"What is Bartan saying?"

"Something about the bodies of the Hollow ones."

"Well, tell him to spit it out already." She would've probably shoved me if I was there.

"Yes, she probably would. But seriously, where are you going with this."

They haven't used any flame tactics yet. Just sent in the bodies. And they haven't sent any of their own in yet either.

"Bartan...?"

Take a look at them. What would happen if they were all set to explode?

"...It would whipe out half the city, easy..." He whispered.

And it would take out Lingerriff's defense. And I can guarantee that they will expect the people to use that tunnel to escape.

"You're thinking they might've sent them in the exit too?"

It's what I would do...

"What did he say?" Tobyas asked, her ears suddenly went back as she looked a little discomforted. Even Kassel began to feel it, some sort of sound ommiting. After a few moments they stopped, but a bit of rumbling could be heard to the west. It sounded like it was underground, and seemed to hit some sort of barrier for a moment at the edge of the city. Then the thunderous noise came from the tunned as if something large exploded within it. Soon after, The Gnoll could hear the noise again. "Tobyas... Get to the north gate! Get everyone-"

The sounds of the creatures exploding, almost all at once, shot through the air. The massive force of them pushed the buildings against each other, and made short work of the guards that were fighting on top of the Dolls. Even the blast of the impact was enough to bring down the building they stood on, and the two quickly jumped off and into the streets.

After a hard landing. The two got up. "Are you okay?" He asked the Dragonite, and she nodded. "Just get out-" The formations of Ralkor's Avians interrupted him, as they began to leave the ships and surround the city. The Gnoll sighed in defeat.

"Hey! Don't give up!" She shouted at him, pulling him to his feet. "We'll save those who's left, then we'll figure out what to do." He nodded, and followed her.

Looking at the citizens which everything seemed to be moving in slow motion, he couldn't help but wonder what happened to those who survived Elbarenluc. Another shout from Tobiyas snapped him out of his thoughts. As he began moving, a large spear landed in his path. Followed by a Avian Knight. "Found you!" He growled, and instantly, Kassel knew who it was... Stigborg.

Behind the Knight, the Gray one could see the Dragonite withdrawing her sword to attack him. "Just go! I'll be fine!" Kassel shouted to her. "Take care of them!"

The Brown Avian pulled his spear from the cobblestone, and readied himself. "So, you do have enough honor to fight me one on one."

"She doesn't need to be involved with this." The Gnoll withdrew his weapon. "And... I'm guessing I can't talk you out of this either."

"Not with that blood on your hands." A quick stab with the spear, followed by a slam from overhead. "It took a long time of searching, but I will avenge Lakotorro's death."

"He didn't give me a choice! I tried to reason with him, but-" A small yelp, as he barely dodged a swing at head level. A few slashes at the base of Stigborg's weapon gave a strange flexibility to the metal. This one would be much harder to sunder. "I didn't want to do it, but I needed to save the life of my people! Wouldn't you do the same?"

"There's no justifying what you've done." A few more stabs, followed by a front kick. "Lako was an uncanny leader! One this world will never see the likes of again!" Another swing at head level flowed into another slam.

Dodging to the side, Kassel stepped on the spear's base and slashed at the opening on the Avian's neck. He stopped just before he wounded him. "He was a soldier! One who did his duty and never questioned it. He Died Following Orders! That's what a soldier does!" He growled loudly in a harsh tone. "To Expect Him To Live Forever Is Childish!" Stigborg hissed at him, as he pushed away the sword. Spinning backwards, he whipped out the spear once again at head level, and managed to slam the Gnoll in the face. A loud squeak omitted as Kassel took the blow. "Now what about you? You have your doubts about your King and your orders. Are you going to suffer the same fate as him because of your pride?"

Another growl from the Avian, but something caught his eye. The cannons of the airships were starting to glow. Even the Gnoll looked at them in a bit of fear. "No... No!" The Knight said. "Our soldiers are still out here! You can't fire that!"

"The Napalm?" Kassel asked him, getting his attention, but not getting an answer. They probably call it something different. "Bartan! The Red, can it act like a barrier of some kind?"

I suppose so, if you make it into a blanket, but-

"I've got to do something!" Gathering the bright red orbs around his paws, he pushed them

towards the sky, and tried to spread it like a field. The air around it becoming brighter and brighter.

"What are you doing!?"

"I'm trying to save us! Get your men-" Something in the Gnoll's chest gave him tremendous pain. It felt sharp and murky as it traveled through the veins in his arms. when it reached the hands, it looked like the Red began to fade into contrast. Colors of black, white, and gray. "Bartan!?"

I-I'm not sure...

The Gnoll kneeled down in pain. "You... Get out of here! Get everyone you can out of here!"

"What about you?"

"I can't... Hold it...!" The Avian looked at him for a moment, then took off. Doing his best to keep the massive energy at bay, it began to spread across the entire sky. Surrounding the city and the airships. With one more release of a final breath, the Blackness detonated...

"I Always Knew I Would Be... Regardless Of How Much I Tried Not To..."