

“You were out of line, Net-Haniel.”

“I don’t care. The rest of you can sit on your thrones all day and compose poems. I’m not going to stand by and watch while our enemies corrupt a world neither of us are supposed to be touching!”

The voice of Net-Haniel rang crystal clear in the courtyard outside the Hall of Lords where his counterpart dragged him from. Net-Haniel’s robes billowed as his ire rose, a white glow pulsing in the sleeve of his right arm.

“What will we do then, Markna? Hm!? I at least let our foes know that some of us won’t stand idly by and let them do as they please.”

Markna removed the hood of his white robes, sunlight catching his thick gray hair and making the silver strands shine. Experiences of life left creases in his face that gave him a wise and kind look. His voice was warm and soothing to the ear when teaching lessons or giving advice to his fellow man or woman. Grabbing Net-Haniel by his shoulders, Markna shook his young accomplice with the power of his bellowing voice.

“That’s exactly what we didn’t want you fool!”

Net-Haniel’s gray hood covered his face in shadow, like how he preferred it. Bringing his right arm up he smacks Markna’s hand away from each of his shoulder with hand clad in a dark leather glove with thin metal plates on the back of his palm and fingers. Onlookers walking along the smooth limestone path in the shade of marble columns paused as their curiosity became piqued by the two individuals standing in the middle of the courtyard.

Net-Haniel’s voice dripped with venom as he responded with a controlled tone. The younger of the two men wore extra-large robes that caught the breeze in the slightest way. Every flap of his robes heavy fabric revealed armor fashioned to be both mobile and moderate in protection.

“Then by all means Marknar, let us let the mortals die down below. Let us all sit back and let them be corrupted in mind, body and soul. “

“Boy, we have our way of doing things. We never engaged any force of the Corrupted on the Mortal world-“

“And why not? They haven’t spread across their world yet. We can confront these monsters in locations undiscovered.”

“You would throw us into war for the Mortal’s souls?”

“I would throw us into war because it is the right thing to do!”

Net-Haniel ripped the hood off his head stared fiercely into Marknar's soft blue eyes with the hard glint of his silver grays. His complexion pale and fair of youth, completely opposite of Marknar who was tan and leathered with age. A resounding slap echoes throughout the courtyard, Net-Haniel found on his knee, holding his left cheek as Marknar stands over him, a brilliant fiery orange aura of energy flicking around him.

"Don't use that tone of voice with me boy, or insinuate that you alone will bring war when it is needed. You were created for one purpose Net-Haniel. You will do well to remember that you are a product, not a Creator."

Net-Haniel growls, making Marknar laugh loudly. "You even sound like the Beast Folk. Fine, you want to protect them so ferociously?"

Net-Haniel could only glower, his expression quickly changing to confusion as Marknar grabbed him by the collar of his robes and heaved him off the ground into the air. His body began to burn, Marknar chanting words of powerful loathing, a curse, upon the young man. Net-Haniel began to writhe in agony as his grunts of struggle quickly grew in screams of pain. Onlookers in the courtyard could only bow their heads at the sight, none moving to prevent Marknar from continuing, and none moving to assist him either.

Marknar dropped Net-Haniel, the elderly man looking down at his former protégé with a scornful scowl. "You defend those lesser beings; you shall be a lesser being. Your curse, Net-Haniel. You shall retain the gifts your production, but they will be your curse. Your love will be the cause of your death, and your soul will never rejoin our kind. You will feel pain, suffering, loss, while compelled to fight against the darkness you wish to wage war upon. "

As Marknar speaks, Net-Haniel looks up at his former mentor. Deformed by normal standards, he bore the appearance of one of the canine species on the world below. His eyes were the same, silver, a mark of who he used to be. Gray hair that defied his younger age glimmered with hatred as he gasped for breath with alien lungs; his body on fire as thick fur replaced hair and his bones were re-arranged to take the complete form of one of the lesser Beasts.

"I banish you, Net-Haniel. I am saddened by this, for you showed much promise as a Templar design. We won't be making that mistake again. As a sign of your banishment and your punishment, three of our sacred symbols will be branded into your body."

Net-Haniel's fresh screams of pain once more filled the courtyard. Amidst the bright and sunny day with lazy clouds rolling across the skies, it was a dark contrast to the actions being formed below the yellow sun's gaze. His robes burned away, leaving him naked on the ground. The smell of seared flesh and fur filled the air, making the watchers cover their face and mouth with a murmur rising from them all. When Marknar lowered

his hands from where he held them over Net-Haniel. Three crosses burned on his body, the largest being on his back, the color of onyx that shimmered as the burnt flesh grew quickly back, but retained the color of the brand and permanently dyed the color of his fur. The same effect on his shoulders, his left a shocking white cross, matching the color of the scarred flesh underneath the fur, having lost pigment from the brand; on his other shoulder the crimson color of wrath burned in a shape similar to the others. The tips of the crosses where tapered points, a sign of aggression and of war, matching Net-Haniel's rage against the darkness he thirsted to lash out against.

His transformation complete, the fox beast shuddered and convulsed on the ground. Above him Marknar 'tched' and knelt down, grabbing the former man underneath his arm and lifting him up onto his limp feet.

"Pathetic. Templar you were designed to be but, you will never wear the mantle."

Dragging Net-Haniel out of the courtyard with its onlookers watching in amazement, Marknar strides to the edge of the floating village and stood on its dangerous edge. Below he could see the safety nets meant to catch anyone who might accidentally lose their balance. He looks down at the nearly dead man-beast and with a grunt of effort, hurls the limp body off the edge with inhuman strength.

"Be gone you failed experiment, hope your new life serves your heathen thinking much better than ours."

Net-Haniel plummets, unconscious, through the sky, his fox tail flicking and wiggling in the wind as it catches the wind. The ground zooms ever closer, farm fields, by the patches of green and yellow and tan. Now smoke trails lift from small rectangles and circular structures, they gain more shape and definition. Yurts dot the impact zone as Net-Haniel continues to fall. Black dots quickly shape into beings looking skyward, a stray arrow zips past the falling fox. The beings, no, beast people scatter with shouts as Net-Haniel comes crashing into the earth-

"AGGH!"

Nethaniel pants, his alarm clock going off on the other side of his dark bedroom. Outside his apartment window the honks of automobile horns and the occasional chopping of helicopter blades slicing through the air reminds him that it was just a nightmare. The grey fox and timber wolf crossbreed, pulls back his covers as he swings his legs over the side of his bed, foot paws coming into contact on the cold wood tiled floor.

Hissing as he performs a small dance to the bathroom, Nethaniel lifts the seat on his toilet and guides his morning relief into the bowl with water plunking as it makes contact. A brief relief as one mortal chore is completed for the day. Flushing and lowering the seat, he washes his paws before making his way back into his connected bedroom where he performs another hissing dance over to the windows of his penthouse and stands in front of them, lifting his feet and rolling his toes until he got used to the chill of the floor.

“Blinds, open.” He commands, followed by a soft click as his three meter tall window blinds rotate horizontally to expose the morning sun creeping over the horizon in the wintery morning. Drawing back on their motorized rollers Nethaniel gazed down on the sleepy city as the sun crawled its way into the sky as its beams of warming light reflected off of skyscrapers and warmed the outer-lying suburbs that encircled the city of Arch.

The chiming of his cellular phone brings the fox back to his senses. “Accept call.” He says out loud, turning towards the speakers in the ceiling to make sure his command was heard. Living in a penthouse provided by his company was a perk he hated to get accustomed too, given the life expectancy for someone who is involved with a lot of investigative fieldwork like his. The click of the call being connected allowed Nethaniel to once again move about his penthouse, his stomach growling urging him towards the kitchen.

“Morning sexy,” a honeyed voice greeted. Annabelle, Nethaniel’s partner at work who doubled as his secretary when she was bored, and not the productive kind. “What’cha up to today sugah?”

“Breakfast, then up to the office for some work.”

The sound of sheets and blankets being pulled away made Nethaniel look up towards his ceiling, before focusing on grabbing a box of cereal, the image of a chibi fox sticking out of an ACME hole-in-the-ground with his tongue sticking out, (because he was a very mature adult) and a bowl from his hanging cupboards.

“Sweets, you do know it’s Sunday, right?”

Nethaniel blinked, looking up as he finished pouring cereal into his bowl. “It is?”

“You betcha hun’.”

“Oh, good. It’ll be quiet.”

Annabelle's frustrated sigh made the fox grin to himself as he put the box of cereal up and walked to his refrigerator and crack open the polished stainless steel door to pull a half-full, half-gallon jug of milk out. He popped the plastic cap off and lifted it to his lips.

"YOU PUT THAT BACK DOWN MISTER!"

Annabelle's forceful tone made him hunch as though his own mother had caught him and was brandishing a wooden stirring spoon.

"Do you have to shout, 'Belle? It's bad enough you knew what I was about to do."

"Yes." She stated in a matter of fact manner. In the background Nethaniel could hear the rustling of papers and the thump as the skunk stacked them on her desk. "Also, you toss and turn a lot in your sleep."

"I was dreaming...and you were accessing my security footage without my consent. That's a tad creepy too."

"Oh shush, you know I do it more than once a month and you haven't complained."

"What? More than once a month?"

"Oops," Annabelle quietly stated and loudly started to rearrange her desk, making Nethaniel pin his ears back and grumble as he drank out of the half-gallon jug of milk quickly before capping the container and placing it back in the refrigerator.

Nethaniel wasn't too surprised that Annabelle was spying on him while at home. She always had a, infatuation if you will, with him. He never felt the same towards her. Sure, she was attractive, he would be lying if he said otherwise but, he never felt any tug of interest towards her.

"So what's on the agenda tomorrow?" He asked finally as he considered a bowl of bran and raisin cereal. He decided against it as he grabbed a bottle of a pre-mixed protein shake. Shaking it in his left hand he walked across the apartment towards a small gym set up next to the windows.

"Uhh, let me see. You have a meeting at 0900 with the head of the cost accountant department."

"Oh, lovely, another 'you're throwing away good paper!' meeting."

"I suspect so. The VP has asked for a report on your research into the ziggurats on the southern continent."

"Oh, has she? Has she approved of a trip down to examine the one discovered last year in the sunken valley?"

“No, she hasn’t, too high of a risk factor apparently and too expensive.”

“My ass...”, grumbled Nethaniel as he grabbed a weight vest, an extra twenty pounds to his regular body weight of 190, and fitted it onto himself. “Considering she sent two teams out last year that spent time vacationing in the Caribbean than checking on those supposed wrecked galleons. I’d figure she want something a bit more tangible to put on her records when she turns in the reports for the president.”

“Careful Neth’, you’re using common sense.”

“Yeah, yeah, not allowed in the corporate world.”

Nethaniel seated himself on a bench, working his legs between pads as he reclined back on the declined seat, crossing his arms over his chest, and began to draw himself up towards his locked in legs. Breathing in as he reclined and huffing out in exertion as he ascended, he mentally counted his repetitions.

“Those meetings should conclude in time for lunch at 1300. Any place in particular you want to go tomorrow?” Annabelle tapped her stylus on her tablet, the sound echoing through into Nethaniel’s apartment as rhythmic booms.

“Annabelle, you’re tapping again.” Nethaniel grunts as he pauses in the upright position, resting his arms on his knees.

“Oh, sorry. Thinking.”

Nethaniel removed one leg at a time from the leg locks and slid back on the seat before standing up and moving towards a crude pull up bar. “What about, usually you’re trying to throw me off my rhythm by asking me about my sex life about now. Something eating away at you?”

“N-no.” A hesitant space between the first sound made Nethaniel look upwards at one of the embedded ceiling speakers that he couldn’t, in all honestly, see and focus on. He resumes his workout, hopping up and grabbing onto the pull up bar, grunting as he exerts himself and pulls his weighted body up towards the bar.

“Well, kinda.” The skunk answered. “I’ve been seeing someone and, well, I want you to meet him.”

Whether coincidence or Nethaniel jerked on the bar in reaction to the news, the pull up bar collapsed inward, wood splintering and crumbling on top of Nethaniel as he landed on his back on his apartment floor, wind knocked out of him and holding the bar in his hands, clutched to his chest.

“NETH! Oh my god, are you okay?!”

“Maybe...” Nethaniel wheezed as he lay still amidst the ruined workout rig, collecting his thoughts.

“What happened?”

“I got fat.”

Nethaniel groaned as he pushed the debris off of himself and sat up, catching his breath while looking down at his chest to see wooden splinters stuck to the small sandbags attached to his vest. He picks them out as he breathes deeply and slowly to feel normal once more besides the aches and pains.

After rolling over onto his stomach, Nethaniel pushed himself up onto his hands and knees, crawling away from his ruined pull-up stand. Unzipping the weight vest he sits up and shrugs it off, placing it on the floor next to him before standing up completely. He makes his way to the bathroom, rubbing the small of his back above his tail base while Ameria started to talk to him again.

“Okay, well, sounds like you’re about to clean up.”

Nethaniel gave a perturbed glance towards the ceiling before shutting off the sink after having splashed some water onto his face, his slate gray fur darkened as droplets of the pure liquid clung to the edges of his facial fur.

“So, talk when you get to work?”

“Yeah, sure.”

“Okay, I hear the ‘brooding man’ tone. Talk to you later sugar.”

The click of the phone call ending brought Nethaniel to look back into the mirror and observe himself. “You know,” he spoke to his reflection. “She’s going to be the death of me.” He opens the clear glass door to his shower stall and balances on one leg to reach the water levers. Adjusting the temperature of the water, he closes the stall door and allows the water to heat up while walking back towards his bed where his dresser rested against the wall.

“Today at the office sounds like it’s going to be a long one, meeting after meeting after meeting...granted Annabelle never said what was happening after lunch, or where we were going for that matter.”

He pulls out the second drawer from the top, selecting a pair of undergarments, then moves on to his other drawers and to the armoire that housed his pants, slacks, jackets and sport coats. By now he can smell the steam accumulate in his bathroom, his sign to get cleaned up now that the water was hot enough.

Stepping inside the shower stall and closing the door behind him, Nethaniel allowed the heat to soak into his body. He usually enjoyed the morning shower, today just like any other. He leaned forward, lowering his head and closing his eyes, letting the water rain down his matte-gray form and drip off his tail which hung limply behind him, out of the water thankfully.

Nethaniel knew he smacked his head when his pull up bar mount came undone and brought him crashing to the floor. He could feel his head throb but that shouldn't have altered his vision /that/ much, should it? When Nethaniel opened his eyes he didn't see the black tile and lined with white grout in front of him. He was looking at a mud soaked wooden plank. A wall of mud soaked wooden planks to be exact. The stench of earthy decay, mildew, the acrid scent of gun smoke mixed with the metallic odor of blood.

Nethaniel took a bewildered step away from the wooden wall, feet clumsily splashing into the shin high mud he found himself mired in. He was wearing a drenched light brown uniform with double breast pockets, his right torn at its lower seam. He lifted his legs, one after the other, watching as thick mud clung to his puttee that wrapped around his lower legs and concealed the thin leather wraps on his feet.

"What the hell am I doing here?" He voiced, a weight on his shoulder causing him to look quickly to the right, his trench helmet's brim knocking into a metal barrel that stuck out of his right shoulder. Nethaniel unslung the heavy rifle, grabbing its bolt and trying to shield it from the rain with his helmet as he popped the lever up and pulled back a bit, exposing the dirty brass of a spent rifle casing lodged inside.

The foxes mind raced, 'Where am I? How did I get here? What's going on?' Wild eyed and feeling the icy claws of panic and fear take a firm grip into his body, he could barely hear the faint call being sounded on the other side of the trench, which he could barely see due to the morning fog bank that surrounded his immediate area, at least he hoped that was fog.

"INCOMING!" Cried a voice much less faint now; Nethaniel turned towards the source to see a field mouse sprinting around the corner ahead of him, holding his rifle with bayonet attached in one hand and holding onto his trench helmet with the other. "Artillery! Incoming!"

Nethaniel looked skyward, rain drops splashing rapidly into his face as he could hear the sound of what could have been a large sheet of fabric being ripped apart, the hint of a crimson trail arcing overhead and disappearing quickly out of his sight. The ground shook underneath Nethaniel's feet, the thundering explosion behind him in another part of the trench network threw him off balance and into the boarded up mud wall.

More and more artillery shells rained down, the few warning shrieks heard before they impacted scared the living daylights out of Nethaniel. He squatted down, throwing his arms above his head as a cascade of dirt and debris showered on top of him. Something metallic bounced off the brim of his helmet, catching his attention. A bloody watch, wrapped around a severed hand made him leap backwards, falling into the muddy muck surrounding him. Grunting and trying his best not to hurl he scrambled upright and ran. He wasn't sure where he was going, but he ran as fast as he could through the boggy mire. His ammo box slapped against his hip, gas mask container against his other side. His tail dragged through the mud, fur on end as he ducked and covered his exposed neck as a shell landed nearby, throwing him into the wall of the trench and showered him in debris.

He gave a howl of frustration and defiance; unable to figure out what was going on, drowned out by the roar of artillery being fired. As soon as the barrage started, it had stopped. Nethaniel kept himself frozen, flat against the side of a trench wall, looking upwards at the sky. His chest heaved, his lungs burned from inhaling the smoke of nearby fires and running through the trench. There he heard a new sound. Whistles being blown, shouts of alarm and the sharp cracks of rifles sporadically reported themselves to his left and right. Fear once more took ahold of him; he pulled his bolt back on his rifle and ejected the case inside. He fumbled for the box on his right. Fingers unable to loosen the strap keeping the flap as they shook from the adrenaline surging through him.

Nethaniel could hear screams and yells approaching, the reporting cracks of rifle soon became muted as the staccato drumming of machine guns joined into the fray. He could feel his heart hammering in his chest; he was trying to say something but, no words he could hear. Just the thumping, rapid thumping, of his heart as he finally got the flap to his ammo box open. Reaching inside he grabbed the first metallic thing he could get a grip on, a rifle cartridge clutched tightly in his shaking hands.

Trying to coach himself on with words of encouragement, thumps from exploding grenades echoed in his ears as the yelling soon overpowered the dwindling report of rifle and machine gun fire. Ramming the cartridge into the chamber and slamming the bolt home, he flipped down the lever in time for a shriek to announce the presence of another above him. Looking up he saw an emaciated Western Shepherd, his muzzle agape, fangs gleaming as he held an entrenching tool high in his right arm. With a blood curling cry he leapt towards Nethaniel, his sole intent to drive the hand held shovel into the foxes face.

Nethaniel blacked out as soon as the shove struck him on his head, his trench helmet dinging from the impact. Voices swirled in the foxes mind, too many to decipher what

was being said. Flashes of light, or rather images, penetrated Nethaniel's consciousness before an empty, painless, and silent void overtook him.