

Hejira: Crystalline Hall

By Mantrid Brizon

Aka, 'Ian Jacob Donahue'

Immuration/abdication.

Table Of Contents...

Page 2. Episode 00: Exordium

Page 23. Episode 01: One Small Portal

Page 48. Episode 02: Stopover In A Quiet Village

Page 66. Episode 03: On The Road To Ravenswood

Page 85. Episode 04: Tripping The Rift

Page 105. Episode 05: Through The Woods

Page 127. Episode 06: Tim The Enchanter

Page 140. Episode 07: Mushroom Samba

Page 146. Episode 08: Emancipation

Page 162. Episode 09: I Put A Spell On You

Page 169. Episode 10: B.S.T.

Page 184. Episode 11: Trouble In Paradise

Page 214. Episode 12: Just Right

Page 225. Episode 13: Temptation

Page 240. Episode 14: She Who Fights Everyone

Page 253. Episode 15: There Be Dragons

Page 271. Episode 16: A Deal With The She-Wolf

Page 289. Episode 17: Breadcrumbs

Page 299. Episode 18: Reporting In

Page 323. Episode 19: Hell Or High Water

Page 345. Episode 20: Transmute

Page 371. Episode 21: Fissure

Page 385. Episode 22: Crystalline Hall

Page 403. Episode 23: Crux

Episode 00: Exordium

A cold wind blew through the yard of the Coca Cola terminal. A guard sits in the shack, reading a magazine, illuminated by only a desk lamp. He looks to the wall as a cheap analog clock strikes midnight. A semi-truck pulls up and stops at the gate. The leaves rush past the rig as the lights beam into the shack. The guard looks up from his

magazine, shading his eyes with his hand as he glances at the truck that sits before the lowered gate.

The guard sighs in lazy frustration and reaches out, pressing a button mounted to the desk and raising the gate arm for the truck. It swings slowly upward as the truck idles. A blast of dust is thrown from underneath the rig as the air tanks purge the excess pressure with a loud hiss. The arm locks, aiming up to the stars as the driver slowly creeps into the lot.

The truck drives through the lot, it's red and white paint glistening faintly as it passes under the orange lights in the depot. The truck rounds the building and backs the trailer into an empty space. The driver pulls the buttons in the cab, and the tractor and trailer screech like an angry cat. The door swings open and the driver jumps out, landing on his feet with a loud thud. He looks around the lot as the cold October wind blows through his long, light brown hair; it normally hangs down to his mid-back, though the breeze throws it around his shoulders, neck and face.

"Damn... Last one back again." He grumbles.

He puts on his gloves and closes the door to the cab as he walks to the coupling area. He disconnects the air and electrical lines, placing them in their holders on the back of the rig. He cranks down the landing gear of the trailer until

the feet hover barely a centimeter above the concrete strip. He reaches under the apron of the trailer and pulls the locking handle out, releasing it. He climbs back into the cab, releases the parking brake, and pulls away from the trailer, dropping it gently in the yard.

“This vacation couldn’t have come soon enough.” He thinks aloud.

He drives his rig to a section reserved for bobtail parking and claims a space. He checks his rig, collects his lucky black M-1936 style musette bag, and locks the cab before heading into the office to return the keys. He heads out to his car, checking his phone as he puts the keys in the lock. He has one missed call from Kelly, his roommate. He listens to the voicemail as he sits in his orange 2012 Dodge Challenger, setting his pack on the passenger seat, and closing the door.

“Gary, bro! You need to get home soon! I can’t do all of this packing shit by myself. I have food to eat and porn to watch before I get to bed! Peace.”

Gareth laughs to himself as he deactivates the screen and tosses his phone on top of his pack. He turns on the car and peels out of the lot, driving fifteen over the limit, as he often does. Within ten minutes, Gareth pulls his car into the driveway of the house that he shares with his best friend

Kelly. He locks his car and walks up to the house. Stepping inside, he kicks off his shoes, closes the door, and tosses his pack onto the couch in the living room. As he steps into the kitchen and hangs his car keys on a rack near the light switch, Kelly appears from the laundry room.

Kelly is a twenty-three-year-old Caucasian male of Irish and British decent, standing roughly five feet and eleven inches tall, and weighing about two-hundred and sixty pounds. He would say that he has a 'husky' build, and despite his appearance is physically strong. Long sandy blonde hair hangs to his mid-chest as he pulls it into his almost trademark ponytail. He scratches his full but short trimmed beard.

"Hey man, I called you two hours ago. What the hell?" Kelly says, glaring at Gareth with his icy blue eyes.

"Sorry man. There was an accident on I-94 and I left my CB off. I didn't know until it was too late, and you know I never touch my phone when I'm in the cab." Gareth apologizes.

"Well, I packed all of my stuff, plus the camping gear. Didn't touch any of your crap though. Have fun." Kelly replies as he quickly walks past Gareth.

"What's your hurry?" Gareth asks.

Gareth takes a Coca Cola Zero out of the fridge and cracks it open.

"I downloaded a new Hentai, and it isn't going to watch itself." Kelly laughs.

"Oh Kel..." Gareth chuckles. "You and your anime whores." He smirks as he pops a straw into the open can.

"Hey, it isn't any worse than those furry girls you check out." Kelly quips. "At least my girls have visible skin."

"They're shaped like people, and besides, their fur keeps me warm." Gareth says as he takes a sip through the straw.

Kelly snickers and shakes his head.

"You do you, and I'll do me." Kelly says.

"I know you will." Gareth retorts.

Kelly walks down the hall and heads into his bedroom. Gareth sighs and heads into the living room, grabbing his pack before also walking down the hall and into his own room. He sets the black and red can down on the short table above his bed and heads for his closet. He feels himself grow nervous; the trip begins tomorrow and it's the first time that he has ever left the country, let alone the mid-west. He's resided in the state of Michigan his whole life,

and had never been further than Ohio or Indiana, but tomorrow they are leaving for a week's vacation in Belize, plus another week to travel to and from.

He stands before the closed closet door, looking at the large mirror that covers its exterior. He takes a deep breath and stares at his own reflection, looking at his dark green eyes. He too is a Caucasian male, though he is twenty-two-years-old, a full six months younger than Kelly. He stands five feet and eight inches tall and weighs around one-hundred and fifty pounds, with an average build. He strokes his long goatee.

"You can do this, man. It's only a foreign country in a completely different hemisphere. No worries." He talks to his reflection.

His nervousness melts away, as excitement and the thirst for adventure creep in to replace it. He opens up his closet door and sighs. He was hoping to get some real sleep tonight, but he slacked off until the last minute and still has to pack. He spends the next two hours carefully packing his gear before he collapses onto his floor mattress, still dressed in his Coca Cola delivery uniform. He reaches up and grabs the can of Coke Zero, but it's empty. He's too tired and lazy to get up and collect a fresh can.

It wouldn't matter anyway; he has to be awake in barely five hours to leave. They still need to pick up the others. As tired as he feels, he musters the strength to reach up and grab a thin binder that sits atop his table, next to his Kahr CT9 pistol. He opens the binder and admires the printouts contained within. His eyes grow tired as he looks at the images. He closes the binder and sets it atop his chest as he quickly falls asleep.

Early the next morning, a girl is awakened by a knock on her door. Her mother raps her knuckles on the wooden barrier, rousing her from her sleep.

"What?" The girl asks in a tired daze.

"Faye, get up. The boys are here!" Her mother calls out through the door.

"Yeah, alright... I'm up..." Faye answers as she rubs her eyes.

Faye grabs an alarm clock from her nightstand. It's exactly eight in the morning. Her alarm suddenly goes off, startling her. She presses the button and sets the clock back down as she climbs out of bed and walks to her closet. She stands near her closet door and stares at her poster of Lara Croft from the Tomb Raider reboot.

**“How early did you have to get up for your adventures?”
She asks the poster.**

Faye slides open the mirrored closet door and collects the clothes that she had set aside the previous night, setting them out on her bed. She is an attractive twenty-year-old female of Middle Eastern decent. Her parents are Lebanese, but emigrated to the United States when she was barely two-years-old. They left Lebanon as they were a part of the Christian minority, and didn't feel comfortable raising their children, or practicing their faith, in their homeland. Once brought to the United States, they assimilated, and have never spoken a single word of Arabic that she can remember. They didn't even want to give her an Arabic name, choosing 'Faye' to the hospital staff's displeasure.

She slips on matching black panties and a thirty-eight D-cup bra, before stepping into khaki colored pants. She puts on a light-blue tank top and black web belt with brass buckle, then slips on her white socks and brown hiking boots. She grabs her M-1936 style earth brown colored musette bag and slips it on, taking a moment to look at herself in the mirror on the closet door.

“Why do I have to look like the 1st Gen Lara?” She thinks aloud.

She stands five feet and six inches tall without shoes or boots, and weighs about one-hundred and twenty pounds with an athletic build. She exercises regularly and eats healthy. Now fully dressed, she takes a brush from her nightstand and brushes her long black hair that reaches down to her mid-shoulders. She stares at the reflection of her big brown eyes as she brushes and then braids her hair.

“What is taking her so long?” Kelly asks her father, Saeed.

He simply shrugs and calls out to his oldest daughter.

“While we’re still young, Faye!” Saeed says loudly up the stairs.

Kelly and Gareth have a unique relationship with Faye and her family. While Kelly and Gareth have been friends since early in elementary school, the duo met Faye on her first day of 7th grade. She was being teased by other girls for being Arabic, and called all manner of cruel names. Having been picked on in elementary school themselves, before Kelly grew into his more imposing stature, the pair defended and befriended her.

Though they are now adults and Faye is considerably attractive, she has never dated either of them. For the past

seven years they have treated each other like family, with both boys being regular sights at her family's home; the trio act like siblings, complete with occasional arguing and jesting backhanded compliments.

Kelly turns back to the door, and steps onto the porch. He looks to the street where Gareth waits by his orange Challenger, standing next to another mutual friend, Steve. Steve is a relatively recent addition, having met the trio only a year earlier at Kelly's job at a video game store. He has been charged with driving Gareth's car back for him. Gareth gestures by holding up his left wrist and tapping his right index finger on the face of his wrist watch. Kelly shrugs and steps back inside the house.

Steve is clean shaven, stands roughly five feet and six inches tall, with pale and freckled skin, a scrawny build, blue eyes and reddish-orange hair that reaches down to his shoulders. Gareth taps on the roof of his car for a moment as they wait.

"Alright. Screw it." Gareth suddenly says.

He steps away from the car and walks around the front bumper, towards the house.

"Where are you going?" Steve asks.

“Uh... Inside the house?” Gareth replies.

“Just like that?” Steve asks with a raised eyebrow.

**“Yeah. Saeed and Walla are like second parents.”
Gareth replies.**

Gareth walks up to the house and steps into the living room, but it is empty. Faye’s mother, Walla, walks out of the kitchen.

“Oh!” She says, placing a hand to her chest. “You startled me, Gary.”

“Sorry, mom.” He chuckles. “Where’s Kel?” He asks as he looks around the room.

“Oh, Saeed is showing him his new computer.” Walla answers.

“Guess we’re missing the boat.” Gareth sighs.

Walla laughs quietly and Steve walks into the room.

“You.” Gareth points to Steve. “You go make sure that Kel doesn’t stay all day, playing with electronics. I’ll see what’s keeping Faye and Naomi.” He says.

“Yeah sure.” Steve replies.

Walla shows Steve to the study where Saeed and Kelly are, while Gareth climbs the stairs. He walks past Naomi's door and stops, seeing that it's cracked open.

"Hey Nay." He calls inside.

"Don't call me that." Naomi replies.

Gareth chuckles and pushes open the door, seeing Faye's younger sister seated at her computer desk. He walks in and sits at the edge of her bed. Naomi is the fifteen-year-old prodigy of her family, with an IQ of one-hundred and seventy-five. She reads computer code the same way that the average Joe reads comic strips, and has skipped several grades. She recently graduated from the 11th grade early, and would probably already be in college, but her parents felt that she shouldn't skip ahead too fast.

Naomi is somewhat socially awkward, and they had hoped that keeping her back with her peers would be good for her, but she only seems to have become more withdrawn. When Gareth, Kelly, and Faye planned this adventure to Belize a few months ago, they wanted Naomi to go, instead of wasting away in her dark, climate controlled room, working on her computer.

"So... I see you're all packed and ready to go." Gareth comments.

She turns in her computer chair and glares at him with her dark brown eyes. After a silent pause, she turns back to her computer.

“Well you’re just bursting with excitement...” He adds sarcastically.

“You and I both know that my parents are insisting I take this trip. I could do without the humidity, insects, diseases and dangers of the rain forest.” Naomi replies coldly.

“Faye doesn’t feel that way.” He retorts.

“I’m not like our sister. You two enjoy the insufferable conditions. Just so you know, being hungry, cold, tired and dirty isn’t adventurous.” She grumbles.

“Yeah well... It certainly helps set the mood.” Gareth laughs.

“Shut up, Gary...” Naomi replies with a faint smile.

“Come on! It’ll be fun. Like those animes that you and Kelly like so much. Maybe we’ll even get shot at? You could probably hack a defenseless bank and ‘borrow’ some money to aid in our grand escape.” Gareth teases.

Naomi closes out her programs and turns back to him in her chair. She reaches out with her right hand and presses

her thumb onto a plate that is plugged into her tower. The computer brings up a DOS prompt box.

“Command?” A male computerized voice asks.

“Shut down.” Naomi says.

“Affirmative.” The voice replies.

The computer screen fades to black and the tower turns off.

“Impressive.” Gareth comments.

“I know. I wrote that program myself, and installed the necessary hardware. It’s good practice. I’ll need these skills when I inevitably conquer the digital world.” Naomi boasts.

“Samantha Carter would be proud.” Gareth replies with an approving nod.

Naomi gets up and walks over to her dresser. She is exceptionally pale, and stands barely five feet tall, with a slender build and long black hair that reaches down to the small of her back. Faye suddenly appears and flips on the light switch. Naomi turns and shields her eyes, hissing at her sister like a cat.

“Look at that! You didn’t catch fire!” Faye teases.

“Why are you dressed like Lara Croft from the 1996 Tomb Raider?” Gareth asks, raising an eyebrow.

“I thought it would be appropriate.” Faye replies, looking down at herself.

“We’re boarding a ship, not going to a convention.” Gareth quips.

“Is Gary corrupting you with his sarcasm?” Faye turns to Naomi.

Naomi slowly nods her head ‘yes’. Faye steps inside and grabs Gareth by his bright orange t-shirt.

“Come on, you lazy bastard.” She says as she pulls him up from the bed.

“Hey, watch the shirt. I only have twenty of these.” He jokes.

Faye walks over to Naomi’s already packed bags and tosses one to Gareth. Saeed and Kelly suddenly walk in, with Steve close behind.

“Is she going quietly?” Saeed smirks.

“Don’t I always?” Naomi retorts.

“Now don’t be like that. You four will have fun. Think of the ancient temples you can visit, and the exotic animals!” Saeed says.

“The monkeys don’t have high-speed Wi-Fi, and the Mayans didn’t either.” Naomi quips.

Saeed sighs and looks to Faye.

“Packed and ready to go?” He asks his daughter.

“Yeah. My bags are just inside of my room.” She replies.

Saeed taps Kelly on the shoulder and the pair walk down the hall to Faye’s room to collect her bags. Faye and Naomi walk out into the hall and past Steve, while Gareth shuts off the light and exits last. He watches Steve, who leans over to watch Faye walk down the stairs.

“Hey, Steve...” Gareth says.

“Huh?” Steve turns back.

“Don’t eye-rape my adopted sister please...” He warns Steve quietly.

“I wasn’t... I. Uh, I-” Steve stammers.

“Good, because Kel would tear your head off if he saw that. I’m much more forgiving.” Gareth interrupts.

Gareth brushes past Steve and walks down the stairs. Heading outside, he walks up to his car, which Faye and Naomi are standing beside. He unlocks the car for them and pops the trunk, placing the bag into the back. Kelly and Saeed quickly follow behind, with Steve in tow. They pack the bags into the now completely full trunk.

“Alright sons...” Saeed says to Kelly and Gareth as Walla steps outside. “Take good care of them.” He says.

“They’ll be fine.” Kelly assures him.

“Who knows? Maybe Nay will actually enjoy herself for once.” Gareth adds.

“Stop calling me that, and no I won’t!” Naomi says from the back seat of the car.

Steve closes the trunk and climbs into the back seat, sitting beside Naomi who is smooshed between him and Faye. Kelly takes the passenger seat as Gareth climbs into the driver’s seat. Saeed and Walla wave good-bye to the group as Gareth turns the key and the car roars to life.

“There’s a crate down here.” Naomi points out.

“Yup.” Gareth replies.

“What’s in it?” Naomi asks.

“Stuff.” Kelly says with a laugh.

“Very descriptive...” Naomi mutters.

Gareth puts the car in drive and peels out as he races down the street. He turns on his stereo as he catches a red light. With a thumb drive plugged into his aftermarket radio, he selects his Mutiny Within discography and skips to the song ‘In My Veins’. The song blasts through the speakers as he gets a green light and peels out again, racing towards the docks.

“So why couldn’t we go to Japan?!” Naomi asks, yelling over the loud music.

“Because Japan is the Mecca for advanced technology; it’s city living!” Faye shouts.

“Sounds fine to me!” Kelly adds.

“You’ll see when you get there! Belize is beautiful!” Gareth says, turning down the music.

“Then you two can go to Belize, and Kelly and I can go to Japan.” Naomi says.

Faye shakes her head in disappointment. Gareth makes a forty-five-minute drive in just under thirty, and parks the car at a guard shack. Using a printed pass that he received from the Captain, he is allowed in. They drive through what appears to be an industrial zone.

“This is where your ship is?” Steve asks in surprise.

“Yeah. We opted not to take a cruise ship or fly. Too expensive and not very adventurous.” Gareth replies.

“So what are you taking?” Steve asks.

“A cargo freighter. We found one that was okay with passengers, and the crew are all American, so that’s a bonus.” Faye answers.

“Yeah, I’ll bet sailors will have a *lot* to talk about.” Kelly remarks in jest.

They find the ship, a smaller cargo trawler with the name ‘Madima’ painted on the side. Gareth parks the Challenger and they all pour out. Apparently waiting for them, the Captain walks down the gangplank mere seconds after they emerge from the car.

“I’m Captain Johnathan Smith.” He says to the group.

“Seriously?” Naomi asks.

Faye quickly smacks her in the back of the head.

“Ow.” Naomi grunts.

The Captain, a weathered looking man in his late forties, simply chuckles and takes a bag from Faye's hand. He motions for them to board as Gareth pops the trunk. Gareth, Steve, Kelly and Faye unload the bags from the trunk, moving them all up the gangplank in a single trip. Kelly, Steve and Gareth return to the Challenger where Gareth and Kelly take out the locked crate from the back floor of the car. They set the crate down as Steve holds his hand out for the car keys, a sinister grin on his face.

"I love this car, man..." Gareth begins.

"I know." Steve replies.

"Seriously. It's the most expensive thing I own and I bought it used. I want to return to it intact and unmolested." Gareth continues.

"I'm not going to rape your car." Steve laughs.

"And if he was, he wouldn't tell you." Kelly chirps.

"Right!" Steve nods.

Gareth begrudgingly hands Steve the keys.

"You sure you don't want to come along? Two weeks in a foreign country. We can swing by and get you passport and bags right now." Kelly urges Steve.

"Nah. I have a career I kind of want to work on, and I don't really like jungles anyway." Steve replies.

“Bitch...” Gareth mutters with a smirk.

“Yeah, because being an assistant manager is a real career. Come on! Don’t you want to come and waste your life with us?” Kelly asks.

“Some other time... Some other life.” Steve replies as he walks to the driver’s seat.

Kelly shrugs and grabs one end of the crate. He waits as Gareth watches Steve peel out and take off.

“Want me to get you a tissue?” Kelly asks.

“No, I’m good.” Gareth replies.

“Good, so come over here and grab a handle.” Kelly says.

Gareth turns back and grabs the other end of the crate. They walk carefully up the gangplank and set the crate down. The Captain directs them to where their unessential luggage can be stored, before showing them to their quarters. As they settle in, the ship moves slightly as it leaves the port. Kelly looks out of the port hole from his shared quarters with Gareth.

“Probably should’ve gone to Japan...” Kelly thinks aloud.

“Come on, man. What’s with you and Naomi? You have no sense of adventure.” Gareth says.

“We’ll see...” Kelly replies.

Episode 01: One Small Portal

The trip to Belize, though longer than they would have liked, was pleasant and uneventful. The Madima’s small crew only openly noticed Faye’s figure for the first day, before they learned how to rubberneck effectively, avoiding Gareth’s and Kelly’s combined wrath. After reaching the port, they hailed a cab and squeezed everything and everyone inside. The cab driver took them to a middle-class hotel, which was well within walking distance of the main city, but also a good hike away from the edge of the jungle. For financial and security reasons, they agreed to use a single room with two large beds in them, with the girls in one, and the guys in the other.

The squad spent the next few days going to tourist trap temple ruins, and on hikes through established trails. Kelly seemed to enjoy the jungle after warming up to it, but Naomi seemed unhappy for the majority of the trip. On the third day of hiking, she stayed at the hotel, locking herself in the room to use the power outlets to charge all of her electronics, and watch anime stored on her eight-terabyte

hard drive. Although Faye and Gareth seemed to be at home in the jungle, by the night of the third day, they were restless.

“What’s up with you?” Kelly asks as Faye sits on the edge of her shared bed with Naomi.

“Huh?” Faye turns to Kelly.

“You and Gary. You’re both acting kind of... Bored.” Kelly asks.

“I had noticed this myself. I must admit that I am quite perplexed by your conditions.” Naomi adds.

Faye looks towards the large window; Gareth sits in a chair beside the window, staring outside as though in a trance.

“I could use a real adventure...” Faye seems to think out loud.

“Hell yeah. Something unplanned, and *not* a tourist trap.” Gareth adds.

“It sure sounds like you both got what you wanted out of this trip. I even started to like it.” Kelly adds.

“Not me.” Naomi mutters.

“Yeah, but a *real* adventure would be nice. Discover a temple no one else has seen. Cut the vines from it myself!” Faye says as she stands and walks toward the window.

“I believe in a country this size, with its population density, that would be highly improbably.” Naomi says, looking up from her custom-built laptop.

“That’s what makes it fun.” Faye replies, looking back at her little sister.

Gareth strokes his long goatee as he looks out of the window. Faye stands beside him and looks down at the streets below.

“You know... I heard one of the guys in the hotel bar talk about a temple that no one gets to visit because it’s off the normal trails. It’s not new, but it might be sufficiently overgrown and abandoned.” Gareth says, looking to Faye.

“Really?! Awesome!” She says excitedly.

“You thinking what I’m thinking?” Gareth asks.

“Hell yeah!” Faye replies, holding up a clenched fist.

Gareth stands up as he and Faye walk towards the door.

“Where are you two going?” Kelly asks.

**“Just to do a little digging. Maybe we’ll get lucky.”
Faye answers.**

“Be back whenever!” Gareth replies as they walk out.

The door shuts behind them as Kelly grumbles.

“Figures...” Kelly murmurs.

“So... Want to watch Endride?” Naomi asks Kelly.

“Maybe. What all do you have on there?” Kelly asks her.

“Pick your poison.” Naomi giggles as she turns her laptop towards him.

For the next four hours, Kelly and Naomi watch several episodes of different animes. It starts to become dark outside, and Faye and Gareth still aren’t back yet. Kelly tries to call Gareth, but they have no cell service in this city. Naomi doesn’t seem worried, but more annoyed at her situation. Kelly gets up and walks towards the crate that sits on the floor by the bed he shares with Gareth. Suddenly the door swings open quickly as Faye and Gareth walk inside, pleasant smiles on both of their faces. Kelly jumps, but Naomi stares at the screen of her laptop as though nothing has happened.

“Holy shit, you scared me!” Kelly says as he spins around.

“What delayed you?” Naomi asks.

“Lady and loser, we have an adventure planned.” Gareth says as he walks up to the bed.

“What adventure?” Kelly asks.

“We asked around and found a bartender who knows the name of the temple ruins we heard about.” Faye says.

“Not only did he know about it, but a friend of his is a rent-a-guide and will take us there.” Gareth adds.

“And he’s cheap!” Faye smiles.

“A cheap guide does not sound very reliable.” Naomi comments.

Faye sits back on the bed and reaches out, placing her hand on the back on Naomi’s laptop and closing the lid. Naomi’s eyes widen in horror as the screen disappears under the closed lid.

“That’s half the fun. He’s going to be here in the morning, and we are going to hike there.” Faye begins. “There’s a catch though...”

“What kind of catch?” Kelly asks as he crosses his arms.

“It’s far... Really far...” Gareth answers.

“What measurement does ‘really’ represent in this context?” Naomi asks softly.

“He didn’t say, but it’ll take up the rest of the trip. Two days to hike there, one to explore, and two to hike back and make it to the boat.” Faye explains.

Kelly drops his arms to his side and his eyes grow wide. Naomi blinks as though in shock and tilts her head to the side slowly.

“It’s not *that* bad!” Faye says defensively.

“What about our stuff?” Kelly asks.

“I took care of that. We’ll mail everything that we can’t carry on our backs back to Saeed, and collect it when we get there.” Gareth answers.

“What about the crate?” Kelly points a thumb towards it.

“I’ll take care of that too. No worries.” Gareth answers.

Kelly shakes his head in a mixture of frustration and surprise. Naomi lies back onto the bed, staring at the ceiling.

“Do you plan these things ahead of time, and feign the surprise? Or do you just make things up as you go?” Naomi asks.

“The second one. It works better that way.” Faye answers as she takes off her boots.

“I feel like this is a bad idea.” Kelly speaks up.

“Noted.” Gareth smirks.

That night, they all struggle to sleep. Naomi struggles out of fear of a hike through the jungle, Kelly out of frustration, and both Faye and Gareth out of childlike excitement. The next morning, they pack up all of their belongings and prepare for an extended hike through the jungle. Gareth seems exceptionally tired, but powers through it with the help of his giddiness and caffeine.

They head downstairs where the guide is already waiting. He is early. They explain the situation to him, and he is willing to wait while they take their luggage to the post office for overseas mailing. Gareth and Naomi stay behind with the few bags that they will be carrying, while Kelly and Faye head for the post office, hailing a cab to take them there.

After over an hour, Kelly and Faye return empty handed. The four adventurers collect their remaining gear, putting on everything that they will need immediately on

their belts and in their pockets. The guide hails another cab as they collect their packs. Gareth seems to struggle with his small black musette bag.

“Geez. How much can that little pack hold?” Faye asks him with a concerned look.

“You’d be surprised.” Gareth replies with heavy breaths.

“I can probably take some of that for you, Gary.” Kelly says.

Having a genuine hiking pack with an internal frame, Kelly is more than prepared and starts to take off his pack, but Gareth stops him.

“That’s alright, Kel. No worries.” Gareth says with a raised hand.

“Alright, suit yourself.” Kelly replies, resituating his pack on his shoulders and hips.

They load their packs into the trunk of the cab and climb in, packing it like a sardine can. After a long and bumpy ride, they get out at the edge of a small town that is on the outskirts of the city. They collect their packs and begin hiking through the trail.

“You follow me, okay?” The guide says in broken English.

He takes out a machete and swings it like a sword as he prepares himself. They walk the path for a mile or two before he finally starts to use it, cutting through the brush as they wander off the known trail and into the jungle. Kelly takes out his own machete, which he had brought from home. It is an exceptionally long machete by Cold Steel, designed to look and function like a Katana. He walks ahead of the others, just behind the guide, and helps him blaze a trail for the three behind them.

They cut their way through miles of dense jungle, stopping only for short breaks. Naomi complains almost the entire time, but manages to keep up, even with her ankle-high black dress boots. Gareth seems to hold his pack off his shoulders with his thumbs, regularly shifting the straps. They walk until darkness falls, making a small camp when they have already resorted to using flashlights.

The guide seems nervous about building a fire, but doesn't tell them why. He eventually allows them a small campfire, but rain douses it during the night. The only reason that they were not soaked by the rain is a combination of affordable rain gear, and Gareth's skills as a bushman, having crafted a large but simple shelter while illuminated by the flashlights.

The next day, they continue their journey, eating only basic food stuffs from their packs, though the guide also kills a monkey with a small caliber bolt-action rifle, which he intends to cook later. The group hikes until twilight, when they finally approach a large stone structure. They have finally made it to the temple. It is exactly as Faye and Gareth have both imagined it. The action-adventure video games that they have played can't top the real thing, regardless of modern HD graphics.

"Wow..." Gareth says, staring at the structure.

"It's beautiful..." Faye says in a soft voice, nearly stunned silent.

Kelly and the guide cut away the vines and find the steps. They climb the steps and reach the peak, looking out at the jungle as the light quickly fades. Gathering what little wood they can, they build another small fire, but do it inside of the stone shroud at the peak of the temple pyramid. Gareth shaves off the wet wood with a large recurved knife as the guide cooks parts of the monkey over the fire. He offers pieces to the others.

Naomi turns away, raising a hand in polite refusal. Kelly seems to look at it for a moment and hesitates. Gareth shrugs and reach out, taking a piece of the monkey's flesh and pulling it towards him, tearing it off of the charred carcass. Kelly and Faye soon follow along, trying the

monkey's meat. Gareth washes down the meat with water from his BCB Crusader canteen. He places the canteen back into the pouch, which carries the complete cook set. He places a hand on his head as he starts to have a headache, and winces in moderate pain.

"Are you alright?" Kelly asks.

"Caffeine withdrawal. I thought this might happen." Gareth replies. "It's nothing to worry about." He adds, looking back at the others.

They camp inside the temple for the night, eager to explore the grounds the next day. Even though they slept on hard stone, most of them somehow managed to sleep in, even the guide. They awake to find the sun is already high in the sky, and Gareth's watch, which he set for Belize's time zone, says it is half past noon. Gareth and Faye quickly explore the grounds, leaving their gear behind. The walk around the pyramid, but only see the path that they had blazed last night.

They return to the pyramid within an hour as the guide and Kelly cook breakfast over the campfire. The rain begins to fall once again as they eat.

"Isn't it beautiful?" Faye asks the others.

Gareth nods in agreement and stands near the entrance to the temple's room. He looks at the horizon and watches the rain cascading down the stone walls.

"You know what I love about the rain forest?" Naomi asks.

"The rain?" The other three all answer sarcastically.

"Exactly. Humidity does *wonders* for my electronics." Naomi adds.

"You brought that stuff?" Faye asks, turning to her sister.

"Of course I did. Trust a custom laptop and my entire media collection to foreign international mail? Please... I have standards." Naomi says, closing her eyes snobbishly.

After a while, the guide seems bothered by something. He stands and looks towards the horizon, staring in a particular direction.

"We go now. Yes? Must go now." He says in a very nervous voice.

They put on their packs and try to douse the fire.

"No time. We leave now!" He says insistently.

They move carefully down the slippery steps of the ancient temple as the guide seems very concerned. As they touch the ground, the bushes rustle. The guide grabs Kelly's arm, as he is the closest one too him. A man appears with an AK-47 rifle, shouldered and ready to fire. He fires a burst of rounds as the group scrambles to safety.

"Oh shit!" Gareth exclaims.

He spots two more men exiting the bushes with old shotguns. They turn the corner of the pyramid, following the guide who runs towards the jungle. They race after him, avoiding the dense secondary jungle flora that beats the group in the face, chest and legs as they push forward. The guide comes across a small clearing near the mouth of a cave. He sees the cave and hesitates to enter. He seems to recognize it.

"Should we go in?" Faye asks him.

"No!" The guide says. "Bad. No go in."

The guide turns around and takes a step as red mist flies around his body. Gunfire erupts as bullets tear into his torso, neck and head. Brain matter and bits of skull fly away from his soulless husk as his corpse drops to the ground with a thud. Naomi and Faye both scream in shock

and Kelly stares in stunned horror. Gareth looks away. Kelly grabs Faye's arm and pulls her towards the cave, hitting Gareth's shoulder and getting his attention.

Gareth grabs Naomi's arm and pulls her as she trembles in fear, dragging her towards the cave as the men with shotguns approach them from another direction. They don't take aim, but watch them enter the cave. Though the cave seems small from the outside, the interior is extensive.

"Got to get into my pack..." Gareth says repeatedly as he scrambles to hide and take off his musette bag.

"Come out. Cave not safe!" One of the assailants calls out to them in broken English.

"The hell?" Kelly thinks aloud.

"We not hurt you. Cave bad. Come out!" The voice urges.

"Screw that." Faye says as she takes out a flashlight.

The others take out their flashlights as well, and Gareth slings his pack back over his shoulders. They follow the only path in the cave, which goes deeper and deeper, until light is no longer available from the mouth of the cave.

"Maybe we should wait them out?" Gareth suggests.

“That doesn’t sound wise.” Naomi says.

“There may be a way to escape this system.” Faye adds.

“Those guys didn’t chase us in here. They didn’t even point their guns at me when I stepped in. They may want to kill us, but maybe for some cultural or superstitious reason, they can’t come in here. We have food and water. They’ll get bored and leave.” Gareth explains.

“That sounds like something worth trying.” Kelly agrees.

Faye looks back at the deep and dark tunnel, then back to Gareth.

“Alright, Gary. We’ll try it your way, but if they don’t leave by nightfall, we explore the cave. Deal?” Faye asks.

“Deal.” Gareth nods.

They return to the mouth of the cave, staying just inside. The men patrol the entrance of the cave with shotguns and a single AK-47 rifle. There seems to be four assailants outside. The four adventurers sit in the shadows and wait for the men to give up and leave. Minutes turn to hours, and the hours drag by. Twilight approaches and the men seem to have built a campsite right outside.

“You leave cave, before it too late! If not, you die!” The man says to the darkness of the cave.

Considering their first impressions, the group looks to each other and silently decide that they can’t risk stepping outside, or waiting them out. Gareth nods to Faye, admitting his plan has failed. Night falls and the hostile villagers stay camped outside, urging them to come out. Instead, the four head deeper into the cave, hoping to find another means of escape.

They move through the cave for what seems like an eternity, winding around and heading deeper into the earth. As they round a final corner, they see a faint glow. In their eagerness to escape, they mistake it for daylight, having already forgotten that it just became night outside of their earthen prison. As they move through the tunnel, they discover that the passageway leads to a room covered in blue glowing crystals.

“Wow...” Naomi says as she looks at the crystals.

“It’s amazing!” Gareth smiles as he touches a small crystal.

“I’ve never seen anything like it.” Faye gushes.

“I’m getting hungry...” Kelly says casually.

The others turn to him for a moment. Kelly points to something and the others turn back around. At the end of this crystalline hall is a pedestal located near the middle of the room. On the pedestal there appears to be a crystal skull. They approach the skull and Gareth comes very close to it. Examining the skull, it appears to be that of an unknown three-eyed creature, with a faint resemblance to a baboon. The faint light of the crystals made the pedestal and skull hard to see, until they further entered the room.

"I wonder what animal this is supposed to be?" Gareth thinks aloud.

As he looks at the skull, he leans in and the skull begins to glow a sickly green hue. Gareth steps back, but Faye steps closer.

"I do not like this..." Naomi mutters.

"It's just a beautifully carved rock... I wonder what it's worth..." Faye smiles.

"Easy there, Lara. We can rob the next tomb." Gareth comments.

"I'm just 'borrowing' it." Faye replies as she reaches a hand out for the skull.

"I do not think it wise to touch the skull." Naomi warns.

“I’m pretty sure no boulders or poison darts are going to kill us if I touch it.” Faye laughs.

“Perhaps not, but I still wouldn’t...” Naomi reiterates.

Faye turns back to Naomi and grins a sinister grin. She quickly takes the skull into her hands and rushes at Naomi with it. She jumps back and squeals as her sister dashes toward her.

“I’ll swallow your soul! I’ll swallow your soul!” Faye teases her with a gruff voice.

“Keep that thing away from me!” Naomi shouts.

Her mission accomplished, Faye laughs and returns the skull to the pedestal. She sets the skull back down facing the wall, though it was previously facing the entrance to the room. She steps away from the pedestal and looks around the room with Gareth. They don’t see any other way out. The single long passage leads only to this room, with this skull.

“Well... This sucks.” Gareth comments.

“Uh... Guys...” Kelly speaks up.

Everyone turns back to Kelly, who points at the skull. The skull's hue grows brighter as the blue crystals become dimmer. The light in the room fades as they bring up their flashlights. The skull's three eyes glow a bright cyan and the green hue also fades. After a moment, only the skull's three eye sockets are glowing vibrantly. It partially illuminates the room.

"What the hell is happening?" Faye thinks aloud.

"You're the one who had to piss off the ancient Gods by using their skull as a toy." Kelly says.

Bright cyan beams shoot out of the three eye sockets and focus on the wall. As the beams merge into one, a brilliant glowing pool seems to form, radiating away from the single large beam.

"It... It looks like an event horizon from a Stargate!" Gareth exclaims in shock.

"What?" Kelly asks.

"The visible entrance to a wormhole. Sci-fi shit, you know?" Gareth answers.

"Right. That is your field." Kelly comments.

Naomi is overcome with scientific curiosity, and steps towards it.

“Stay here!” Faye shouts to her.

“I just want to take a closer look...” Naomi says, almost in a daze.

“Now she feels adventurous.” Faye mutters.

Naomi looks to the skull for a moment before she suddenly swishes her hand in front of the beams. Still possessing all of her fingers, she looks at her hand. She turns back to the others, then suddenly turns, steps forward, and touches the glowing pool. As her fingertips brush the shimmering pool of what could only be described as light blue tinted mercury, the pool jolts from the wall and grabs her arm, pulling her into the portal.

To their horror, she disappears into the wall. Gareth rushes to grab her, taking her exposed hand just as it disappears, himself being dragged into the wall. He sees flashing lights and feels air swirling around him violently. He feels as though he was just dropped into the eye of a hurricane, and his stomach churns and rolls. The light is so bright, he can't keep his eyes open. He feels as though his body is going to be ripped apart, when suddenly he lands with a thud. He slowly opens his eyes, only to see daylight above him.

He sits up and sees Naomi, lying unharmed on the vibrant green grass. He looks around and sees a veritable sea of green; they are sitting in the middle of a vast field. He looks around, then back up to the sky, where the portal hovers overhead. He stands and jumps up, trying to touch the portal, but it floats easily three meters off of the ground. He begins to take off his pack to allow for a higher jump, when the portal spits out Kelly and Faye, who land with a loud thud on the grass.

“How nice of you to drop in.” Gareth smiles, holding both hands out, one for each of them.

“Where are we?” Kelly asks as Gareth helps him up.

“It appears to be a field.” Naomi replies, sitting on the grass.

“It’s... Daylight...” Faye says as Gareth helps her up.

“I noticed that too.” Kelly replies.

“Looks like that portal sent us to some other place. Maybe another country. It should be daylight in Central Asia.” Gareth comments.

“Teleportation?” Naomi suggests.

The three older friends look back to the portal, which stays open. They attempt to reach it, but after a few more seconds, it suddenly shrinks and closes. They stare at empty air, where the portal used to be.

“It suddenly feels colder.” Faye comments.

“Yeah. This must be a temperate zone.” Gareth replies.

“Feels like we’re right back in Michigan.” Kelly comments. “You think we’ll find a Seven-Eleven around here?” He chuckles.

Gareth sets down his pack and unbuckles the main flap. It is packed to the very top with gear. He takes out a baggy of .45 ACP full metal jacket ammunition and sets it on the ground, along with a leather belt, several 1911 magazines, and a brown leather flap holster containing Kelly’s full-sized, nickel-plated, Rock Island Armory 1911 pistol with rosewood grips.

“Is that my gun?” Kelly asks.

“Sure is. Your gun, holster, belt, mags, and all two-hundred rounds of ammo.” Gareth replies.

Faye and Kelly lean in as Gareth sets Kelly’s weapon and gear aside in a small pile for him. He reaches back into his pack and draws even more gear from it. He takes out his Kahr CT9 pistol and six empty magazines and sets them aside. He then withdraws a large Ziploc bag that is double bagged, and full of 9x19mm Parabellum full metal jacket ammunition. He reaches in and takes out a second.

“So that’s why your pack was so heavy.” Faye comments.

“Yup.” Gareth says, reaching in for more.

“We left all of that stuff in the crate!” Kelly says.

“We did!” Gareth smiles.

“When did you have time to pack all of that without any of us seeing you?” Faye asks.

“The night before we left for the temple, when all of you fell asleep. I waited until Kelly started snoring, then I figured it was safe. I was slow and quiet, just to be sure. Took me nearly an hour to carefully pack all this crap in here.” Gareth chuckles. “Ready to share the load?” He looks back at them.

Gareth reaches in and very carefully withdrawals his prized possession; he takes out his heavily customized 4th Gen Glock 22 .40 S&W pistol, still inside of his custom-made kydex holster. It is a left-handed, outside-the-waistband paddle holster.

“There she is...” Gareth says softly as he takes out his sidearm.

“You brought her?” Faye asks in amazement.

“I’d never leave the country without Vetra!” Gareth replies.

He has converted the pistol to fire 9mm ammunition with a stainless steel, match grade and threaded barrel, manufactured by Lone Wolf. Other modifications include a golden thread protector and slide cover plate, a steel guide rod with single recoil spring rated to factory specs, triton night sights for a Glock 26/27, a Glock GTL-10 tactical light, all eight of his magazines having a +2 baseplate extension, and an aluminum grip plug with the word "Vetra" laser etched into it. He named his prized sidearm after his favorite character from Mass Effect: Andromeda.

He takes out a large green belt pouch and checks the contents. It holds his original .40 S&W barrel, magazines, and a double bagged Ziploc of ammunition. The pouch also contains a lanyard for Vetra, that attaches to his belt, and a smaller Ziploc bag that holds twelve replacement batteries for his tactical light, giving him six reloads, as well as a few spare bulbs wrapped in pieces of bubble wrap.

"So what do we have?" Faye asks, kneeling down by the pile.

"Kelly's 1911, my Kahr and Vetra. Two-hundred rounds of .45, one-hundred rounds of .40, and six-hundred rounds of nine-millimeter. I have six mags for my Kahr that hold eight rounds each, three .40 caliber mags that hold seventeen rounds each, and five nine-millimeter mags that hold nineteen rounds each. I didn't count Kel's mags." Gareth replies.

“I have six clips that hold eight rounds each.” Kelly says.

“... Mags... Six mags.” Gareth replies, glaring at Kelly.

“Yeah. Six clips.” Kelly smirks as he taunts Gareth with improper gun lingo.

“Fuck you...” Gareth mutters.

Kelly laughs as Gareth opens a doubled bag of nine-millimeter ammunition. Gareth loads three magazines of nine-millimeter and takes a single extra round, manually loading it into Vetra’s chamber. He stands and slips on his holster, moving the paddle behind his belt. He then undoes his belt and adds his double magazine and binocular pouch to it, before buckling it and slipping the spare magazines into the pouch and Vetra into her holster.

Gareth reseals the doubled bag of ammunition and slips his remaining weapon, magazines and ammo back into his pack. He buckles the flap shut and slides the pack over his back.

“Ahh...” Gareth sighs in relief. “That’s much better!”

“I’ll bet.” Kelly says as he puts on his holster and pockets his loaded magazines and spare ammunition.

“So what’s the plan?” Faye asks.

“Well... Civilization is usually based around water. I guess we can pick a direction and start walking until we find ourselves a stream, lake, or whatever.” Gareth says, adjusting his pack on his back.

“That is a sound plan.” Naomi agrees.

“Then what?” Faye asks.

“Then we follow it?” Gareth replies with a raised eyebrow.

“Bet you didn’t know he was going to say that.” Kelly chuckles.

“Shut up, Kel. I’m just being thorough.” Faye retorts.

With no bearing and no sign of anything around them, the four begin to walk, hiking through the field and hoping that they will find what they are looking for.

Episode 02: Stopover In A Quiet Village

After walking for several hours, they leave the field and enter a temperate forest. It is primary forest, with old growth trees and considerable space to move around in, underneath a canopy that shades them overhead. As they journey deeper into the forest, they hear the sound of rushing water. Moving towards the sound, they see a small

stream cascading over a road of smooth stones. Gareth takes his Crusader canteen and begins filling it in the river.

“Aren’t you worried about pathogens?” Naomi asks.

“Normally, I would be, but if we find a town, we’ll first stash our weapons, and then find out if we can go home. By the time I get sick, I’ll hopefully have access to a hospital, and plenty of powerful antibiotics.” Gareth answers.

“And if we’re terribly unlucky?” Kelly asks.

“Well... We’ll boil our water, I guess.” Gareth adds.

“Okay... Can I have your stuff when you die of explosive diarrhea?” Kelly smiles.

“Hey! I get first dibs!” Faye jests.

Gareth laughs and puts away his canteen.

“I’m not hearing a no.” Kelly teases.

They follow the stream upriver and walk along it for several miles. The forest suddenly ends as they reach a moderate clearing containing what appears to be a primitive village. As they agreed, Kelly and Gareth take off their guns and stash them in their own packs before walking out of the forest and towards the village. As they approach, several villagers see them and point. They walk closer and

can clearly make out a few of the villagers. Some of them look Asian, but a few look Caucasian, and one seems African.

“Where the hell are we?” Faye thinks aloud.

“You’re at my home.” A feeble sounding voice answers.

They all quickly turn around to see an old European looking man sitting beside a boulder that they were just passing.

“Have you been traveling long?” The frail old man asks them.

“A few hours.” Kelly replies.

“I see. It’s been quite a while since we had any visitors here.” The man replies.

“So who are you?” Kelly asks.

“I am called Casius.” The old man answers. “Come! This way!”

The villagers greet the four strangers with pleasant smiles as the old man leads them. Casius gives them food and water, and sets aside a place for them to sleep that night, in a small hut used for storage. They sit and eat a stew that seems to contain venison. While eating, Gareth

notices Casius sitting in front of his own home, holding something small. He looks closer and sees Casius admiring a handful of ancient coins. Gareth sets down the bowl of stew and approaches Casius.

“Pardon me. What are those you have there?” Gareth ask politely.

“Just something that reminds me of my old home.” Casius replies.

He reaches out and hands Gareth a handful of Roman coinage. Gareth looks at the coins and notes that they are a mixture of Dupondius, Denarius, and Sestertius. The coins look badly weathered, but not as though they were buried in the ground for two-thousand years; they appear to have simply darkened from many years of changing hands. Ancient history is a hobby for Gareth.

“Where did you get these?” Gareth asks in amazement.

“I earned them. Back then, they were new.” Casius chuckles.

Gareth stops and looks up at the man. Is he senile, or just playing with him? He can't be certain.

"I remember those days. Sometimes I miss them. The adventures I and my men had..." Casius seems to reminisce.

Casius leans back and places a hand on the side of his face and sighs. He scratches his chin slowly as he looks up at the sky. A cool breeze blows through the village. Casius seems to be in a trance.

"Go on..." Gareth encourages him, handing him back the coins.

"Hm? Oh!" Casius seems to snap out of it. "I was a Legionnaire. Emperor Claudius had sent us there to keep the peace, and to patrol the new lands of the empire. You know how well that goes, sending in *soldiers* to keep the *peace*. Oh, it was wonderful fun." He says with a big grin.

"So if you were once a Legionnaire, shouldn't you be speaking Latin?" Gareth asks.

"Latin? You *are* speaking Latin." Casius laughs.

"Right! Silly me." Gareth smiles.

"You'll understand, in time." Casius says, patting Gareth on the shoulder.

The others finally approach, curious about the conversation that Gareth and their ancient host are having.

“So, learn anything fun?” Faye asks.

“Yup. Casius is a retired roman Legionnaire and served under Emperor Claudius just about two-thousand years ago.” Gareth answers.

“Well... You look good!” Kelly quips. “I’d have said you weren’t a day over one-thousand.”

“Generous of you, boy.” Casius chuckles as he shifts the coins in his hand.

“So how old are you, really?” Faye asks Casius.

He stops shifting the coins and sighs. He looks to the others with a solemn expression on his face.

“In this world, time seems to drag on forever.” Casius begins.

“This world?” Faye raises an eyebrow.

“We age incredibly slowly here. I have been living here, in *this* village, for just over three-hundred years. Of course, I was already forty years old when I first arrived. As young as you are, you could easily make it to four-hundred or more. I came through the skull, but some people who were born here can make it to nearly five-hundred years old.” Casius explains.

They are immediately skeptical, save for Gareth who seems more curious than offended by the old man's ramblings.

"The ones born here are the unluckiest of them all. I can't fathom being alive so long." Casius thinks aloud.

"We came through the skull too. It was in a cave near a jungle temple." Gareth explains.

"I'm sure. That's just one of many skulls. I never saw further than the empire I served. The skull I used was within the empire. It brought me here, but not to this area. Different skulls seem to exit at different places in this plane of existence. I walked here over many months. I liked this village enough to settle here. It reminded me of the village that I grew up in, before I joined the Legion." Casius continues.

"So if we aren't on earth..." Kelly begins.

"This is the realm of Sahvath. Sahvath created this planet, and brought all who reside here. He created this world to be his home. He also created the Sahvorai, and many others beings that live here. But now you must sleep!" Casius says with a smile.

"Woah. You're going to dump information like that on us and tell us to go to bed?" Kelly asks.

"Yes... Yes I am." Casius replies, standing up.

"Okay." Kelly shrugs. "I don't suppose I could trouble you for more stew, could I?" Kelly rubs his stomach.

“Of course you can!” Casius replies.

“Thanks!” Kelly says happily.

Casius simply nods. He points to a large bronze cauldron; Kelly takes a second helping before he joins the others at the storage hut where they have placed their packs and set up for the night. Kelly quickly eats the second helping of stew as the other three unroll their sleeping bags, getting comfortable. After their adventure, they are all very tired, but they still don’t sleep very well.

Gareth bundles up his spare clothes and uses them as a pillow. He reaches into the back flap of his musette bag and takes out the thin binder from within. He shifts so that more of the daylight can illuminate the pages and admires the artwork in the book. Kelly looks over to Gareth and watches him for a moment.

“Looking at your cat girls?” Kelly asks.

“Actually, this one is a rabbit.” Gareth quips.

Gareth turns the book around to show it to Kelly. Faye turns her head and looks as well. On the page is the form of a human women, covered in white fur, with digitigrade feet, a fluffy bunny tail, short snout, tall and pointy ears, and flowing pink hair. She wears blue daisy duke shorts and a white tube top. She is drawn posing like a centerfold.

Gareth turns the book back around and flips another page. Faye chuckles and turns back over.

“Too bad you couldn’t bring your stash.” Gareth comments.

“If my stash was on paper, it’d fill up this hut.” Kelly retorts.

“This is just my ‘favorites’ binder. My complete collection is just as impressive.” Gareth adds.

“I doubt that.” Kelly laughs.

“Guys, this isn’t a ‘who has the most porn’ contest. Get some rest!” Faye grumbles.

Once they finally succumb to their exhaustion, the group sleeps through the rest of the day, and throughout the night. Early the next morning, Faye wakes up from her sleep and rubs her eyes. She sits up, her back and shoulders sore from the hard floor of the hut. She takes her spare clothes that she had rolled into a ball and used as a pillow, and places them carefully back into her pack. She looks around, but sees no one else inside. Looking to the door, she sees Naomi brushing her long hair. It shifts gently in the breeze, the ends waving like a flag.

“Where are the boys?” Faye asks Naomi, her voice deeper and cracking from the grogginess.

Naomi doesn't answer, but reaches out the hand that holds her hairbrush. She points over to her right.

"Please, not in so many words." Faye says facetiously as she stands up.

She walks up as Naomi glares at her. Faye looks back down to her little sister, who holds out her hairbrush to her. Faye's eyes look up towards her brow and sighs, taking out her braid. She takes the hairbrush from Naomi's hand and throws her hair over her shoulder, quickly brushing it smooth. She gives back Naomi's hairbrush and walks away from the hut as she braids her hair all over again. She looks around and sees Kelly sitting in front of Casius' home, holding a bowl and eating more stew. He sees her and waves as she approaches him.

"Hey." Kelly says as he brings the bowl to his lips, drinking the broth.

"Hi. Been awake long?" Faye asks him.

Kelly holds out a hand and rotates it back and forth.

"I'm not really used to sleeping on dirt." Kelly laughs.

“Well, we still slept a whole day away.” Faye retorts.

“Yeah, well... It takes a lot of energy to keep this body going.” Kelly chuckles.

Faye notices that Kelly is wearing his pistol openly. The leather flap of his holster completely covers the back of the pistol, but she can see how it shifts as he leans back, and spots a faint gleam of light as it bounces off the nickel plating.

“You’re wearing your gun.” Faye says.

“Very observant!” Kelly smiles. “After last night, Gareth thought it would be a good idea, and I agreed with him.”

Faye shrugs and looks around the village center. She spots a flash of bright orange and dark green moving behind a hut. She turns to follow the flash of color and walks around the back. There she sees Gareth in his brown hiking boots, dark green cargo pants, and bright orange t-shirt, looking a bit like a budding flower. He sits with Casius, who is cleaning some clothes on what appears to be a small bronze washboard, sitting inside of a wooden bucket filled with soapy water. Faye sits parallel to Gareth and Casius. Gareth nods to her as she waves to the two; Casius speaks to Gareth, continuing their conversation.

“The crystal skulls seem to react to touch, not to the position of the skull, or its placement on the pedestal. The delay you described must have been the result of weak crystals.” Casius begins.

“Did you test that theory?” Gareth asks.

“I did! When I first opened the portal, I was curious, but afraid. I opened it dozens of times, trying all manner of positions and scenarios, but it only ever turned on when touched by skin. It didn’t even need to be on the pedestal to open. After opening it so many times, it began taking longer and longer to open each time. Realizing that I may never get another chance to step through, I gathered my weapons and equipment, collected a considerable amount of food, and entered the portal.” Casius explains.

“So do other people come through a lot?” Faye asks.

“They did before, but no one has come from the direction you had, in over 30 years. I assumed that skull had finally run out of power. It seems that I was mistaken.” Casius replies.

“Well, it did take a good minute to power up.” Gareth comments.

“That is about how long it took my skull to open, when I finally had the nerve to use it.” Casius adds.

“Is there a way to get home?” Kelly asks as he steps around the corner.

“There *is* a rumor about a way back; The ‘Crystalline Hall’ is said to be able to return a person to their home, but it is only a rumor. No one I’ve met in nearly three-hundred

years has ever seen it, but everyone who has ever spoken of it claims that it is in the mountains to the north.” Casius answers.

Kelly sits down beside Faye, quickly joined by Naomi, who sits beside Kelly.

“How far north?” Faye asks.

Casius chuckles as he stops washing the clothes. He looks up from the washboard at the young woman and shakes his head as he sighs.

“You people ask quite a few questions.” Casius says to them.

“I just have a lot of hentai that I want to watch, and I don’t think Naomi has *that* in her collection.” Kelly replies.

“Perhaps... Perhaps not...” Naomi quips.

Casius seems confused as he looks to Kelly. Perhaps he didn’t understand any of it, or perhaps he did and was appalled?

“I’m sorry. This is all new to us.” Gareth says.

“That’s alright. Consult the stone. It’ll tell you all that you need.” Casius says as he stands up.

The four rise in unison, following the elderly Casius as he walks around the back of the village. He heads away from the village and up a small hill, towards a black stone, carved atop the hill. The four had arrived from the opposite end of the village, and on level ground. They were unable to see this stone when they arrived. The stone is carved into the shape of an obelisk and stands nearly three meters tall.

Casius stops and points, presenting the obelisk as though it were a gift. He stands there as the others walk by him and stop in front of the obelisk. Carved onto the surface, on all four sides, is a flat depiction of the planet, as though it was an atlas. There is strange writing on the bottom of the world map that none of them can read. As Faye tries to focus on the writing, it suddenly begins to transform before their very eyes.

“Did you see that?!” Faye says in amazement.

“I said that you would understand soon...” Casius chuckles.

They read the writing, which is a very matter-of-fact description of the world that they are in. The planet has a Pangea, with a vast ocean surrounding it. The world is

incredibly small by comparison to earth; it's diameter is listed as exactly 941 miles, making it just smaller than the earth's moon. The circumference is 2,956 miles, and the Pangea is exactly 333,490 square miles, making it somewhat larger than the entire state of Texas. The planet's moon has a diameter of exactly 316 miles. According to the writing, all of the water on the planet is freshwater. The continent has a strange shape.

"That's odd. The land looks somewhat like an anorexic diamond." Gareth says.

"Or a husky red cross logo." Kelly adds.

Casius steps between the two men and reaches out to the obelisk. He takes his boney finger and gently taps the bottom end of the Pangea.

"We are about here." Casius says. "The Crystalline Hall is supposedly around here..."

Casius sweeps his finger along the atlas, resting it over the top end of the Pangea, clear across the entire continent. The others stare in shock. Kelly's mouth drops open and Faye steps closer, blinking hard in disbelief.

"Oh my God..." She mutters.

“That’s nearly eight-hundred miles away!” Gareth says as he reads the world’s description below.

“I don’t suppose you have invented the car yet.” Kelly turns to Casius.

Casius raises a bushy grey eyebrow in confusion.

“There is a large human settlement here.” Casius continues.

He moves his finger back down to the bottom of the continent, placing it along the east shoreline, a few millimeters north of their current location.

“It’s one of the first human settlements. Stone buildings and everything! It’s called Ravenswood.” Casius says, stepping away from the obelisk.

“Why did you say ‘human settlement’?” Gareth asks as he follows Casius.

“Oh, right. I nearly forgot! The pitfalls of old age... There are many strange creatures and races here. The only other race that can communicate are called the Sahvorai. They are the animal-folk, followers of Sahvath, and his creation.” Casius answers.

“Animal-folk? You don’t say...” Gareth seems intrigued.

Kelly, Faye and Naomi all turn back, looking to Gareth.

“I guess Gary won’t be going home with us.” Faye chuckles.

The three leave the obelisk and catch up to Gareth and Casius who return to Casius’ home. Casius hands Gareth a satchel of dried food and hands Kelly strange pieces of metal. It appears to be coinage, but the coins are various shapes and sized, with only numbers placed on them. Kelly looks at the ovals, pentagons, hexagons, triangles, and squares of metal.

“How come I get the money and the thin guy gets the food?” Kelly asks.

“Perhaps I thought he could use it more.” Casius quips.

Naomi and Faye giggle. Gareth turns to Kelly and passes him the food, taking the strange coins in return. Gareth pockets the coins inside of a small pouch on his pants, protecting them with a button sealed flap. Casius waits for them while they collect their packs and gear from the storage hut. The group follows Casius as he takes them back to the black obelisk, walking past the hill and towards a worn, thin trail that sits behind it.

**“This will lead you north-east, towards Ravenswood.”
Casius says.**

**“But... The sun rose from over there.” Gareth points to
the opposite direction.**

**“Yes. On this planet, it rises in the west and sets in the
east.” Casius replies.**

“Oh...” Gareth mutters.

“This planet always keeps us guessing!” Kelly chirps.

**“Well, it’s not yellow brick, or a road, but it’ll do.”
Gareth comments.**

**“Okay, O’Neill...” Faye chuckles. “Let’s get this over
with.”**

**The group takes a few steps down the path when
suddenly Casius grabs Faye’s arm. She turns and looks
back to the old man. He glares at her and leans closer.**

**“Beware the Sahvorai. They do not get along well with
humans, and should not ever be trusted.” Casius warns.**

**Faye pulls her arm away from the old man. After a
short pause, she turns back and quickly walks to catch up
with the others. She looks back to Casius, who stares at the
group as they move further away from the village. He waves
to them for a moment before turning and walking back, soon**

disappearing behind the hill. Kelly looks to Faye, who seems disturbed.

“Are you alright?” He asks her.

“Huh?” She turns to Kelly. “It’s nothing... Just...”

“Just what?” Kelly presses.

“I just have a bad feeling about this place.” Faye answers.

Episode 03: On The Road To Ravenswood

The four walk down the path, noticing the lack of any real interesting scenery. The trees all look the same, as does the grass. They have only seen humans, and only spoken to one. None of them talk as they hike down the path at a steady pace. They are all deep in thought, though some more than others. The trees creep ever closer to them as they move further down the path. Soon, they are underneath a dense canopy of leaves. They rustle and shift as the wind blows gently overhead. The sound is rather comforting to Faye and Gareth, though Kelly and Naomi seem less effected.

They walk for several hours before taking their first break. Unsure of how far Ravenswood is, they don't want to take the chance of being caught out in the wilderness at night. They sit for fifteen minutes, snacking on the dried food in the satchel, which consists of dried cherries, apple slices and strips of jerky that has a decidedly gamey taste. Gareth takes a drink from his canteen and stares towards the path.

"Is something on your mind?" Naomi asks him.

Gareth turns back to her and slowly shakes his head 'no' before looking back to the road. He stands up, resting his hand on Vetra's grip. He brings his wrist up to his chest and looks at his watch. The time is clearly wrong in this location, but at this point he is only using it to measure their breaks and keep track of their hikes. The others get up and put away their supplies, adjusting their packs and preparing for another long walk.

The walk down the trail as it begins to curve, winding through the forest in sharp and confusing turns. After over an hour of navigating the trail, they hear a sound in the distance. It sounds like faint voices. They move with considerable vigor, the hope of encounter more friendly people boosting their energy. They rush towards the voices as they begin to make out what they are saying to each other.

“You already have the pack. Just let me go.” A feminine voice pleads.

“I think we might need more than that pack.” A gruff male voice replies.

Gareth draws Vetra from her holster and takes a strong two-handed grip on the pistol. Kelly takes out his own pistol from his holster as the two move around another sharp bend in the trail. Barely ten meters away stands three men in what appears to be armor made of plates of hard brown leather. Two of them hold bows at a figure that stands between them; they are unable to see who the intended victim is. Hearing the noise, one of the bowmen and the leader, armed with only a small bronze dagger, turn and face the two men.

“Drop the... Bow!” Gareth says to the thief, pointing Vetra at him.

The bowmen haven’t drawn their arrows, but Gareth places his finger over the trigger regardless. Kelly flips off the safety on his 1911, having chambered a round earlier and leaving the hammer pulled back; he prefers to carry his sidearm in Condition One. The robbers don’t seem to realize that their two adversaries are holding weapons.

“Oh good! More victims. Hand over whatever those are and any supplies you are carrying.” The leader demands confidently.

Kelly and Gareth look to each other, and can't help but chuckle. Gareth looks back to the men and shakes his head 'no'. The bowman to his left begins to draw and Gareth impulsively pulls the trigger. The gunshot echoes, startling everyone, including Gareth who had never fired without ear plugs before. A round flies out of Vetra's muzzle, striking the bowman in the right shoulder. He falls back and cries out in pain as he drops the bow. Their ears ring for a split second and Gareth's hand trembles.

“Oh shit...” Gareth mutters.

The leader takes up the bow from the ground as Gareth suddenly aims at him as well. Kelly places his finger on the trigger of his pistol as the ne'er-do-wells suddenly turn and run to the right side of the trail, heading for the woods. Gareth suddenly experiences a massive boost in his confidence, and can't help but taunt the feeling thugs, despite his trembling hands.

“Where you going?! Don't you ignore me! This is a perfectly good moment to throw your life away!” Gareth shouts at them.

“Did you just reference The Boondocks?” Kelly asks.

“Yeah... I never had to shoot anyone before...” Gareth says, visibly shaken and trembling. “I’ve never even aimed a person...”

“Well, good job.” Faye says.

He lowers Vetra to his side and clenches his fists tightly. His knuckles turn white as he squeezes Vetra’s grip. He takes a deep breath and turns to the woman being robbed. To everyone’s amazement, she is Sahvorai, exactly as described by Casius. Gareth looks at her as she stares back at him. He snaps himself out of his daze and takes a step towards her. Faye reaches out to stop him, but he pulls away.

“Hey there... It’s alright. I’m not going to hurt you.” Gareth says to the girl.

He reaches down to a primitive looking backpack that seems to be made out of animal hide, complete with fur on the exterior, and shoulder straps of thick, dark brown leather. It’s roughly the same size as his and Faye’s musette bags. He lifts the pack and takes another step closer as the girl backs away. He sets the pack down in front of him and backs away from it.

“This is yours, right?” Gareth asks her.

She stands there silent, staring cautiously at the four strangers. She slowly nods in response. She has the appearance of a humanoid feline, standing about five feet and four inches tall on digitigrade feet with four toes tipped with round and pointy claws. Her long tail hangs a few inches above the ground and sways slowly. She has a slender but athletic build, and from a glance, Gareth would guess her weight at about one-hundred and ten, or fifteen pounds.

“It’s yours.” Gareth says as he steps away from her pack.

He watches her as she carefully approaches the pack on the ground, quickly snatching it up and backing away again. Her body is covered in short, tan and white fur with a two-tone tuxedo pattern. Her large feline ears have white borders but are primarily tan, and her short snout has white fur, with a tan face. She has a pink nose, but no whiskers on her snout. Her feet and hands have white fur just past the wrists and ankles, and she has white fur on the tip of her tail, and on her exposed midriff.

She wears a dark brown leather top that can only be described as a breast plate. It begins at the base of her neck, where it seems to tie together with cordage just behind her. The top has a distinct triangular shape,

widening as it covers her breasts, and tucks underneath them, with cordage tying it together at her mid-back. He can't help but notice her smaller B-cup bust and attractive hourglass figure, with a slender waist, and wider hips.

She shifts as she steps back and puts on her pack. She wears a medium length brown leather skirt, and Gareth can see that it ties both above and below her tail as she turns her body. Her wheat gold hair is kept in a high ponytail and she stares back at him with beautiful golden eyes. Long bangs seem to fall before her eyes, vaguely shrouding them. The wind blows and rustles the leaves as she quickly turns her head, shaking her bangs from her face.

"It's okay. We're not going to hurt you." Gareth repeats in a soft voice as he steps closer. "My name is Gareth."

The girl's eyes rush down to Vetra, still planted firmly in his left hand. Gareth looks down at his prized sidearm and thinks for a moment. Lifting up his hand he shifts the pistol, holding Vetra by her side. He presents the pistol to the girl, as though offering it as a gift. The others look on in shock, as does the girl. Her mouth drops open at the offer. Her teeth gleam a pearl white, and seem omnivorous, much like a human's. Her canines, however, are considerably larger and pronounced, like the fangs of a cat.

She looks at the pistol, but doesn't take it, or even move from her place. After a short pause, Gareth holsters his pistol, and they stand there, staring at each other.

"Kahlera..." The girl suddenly says.

"Kah-Le-Ra..." Gareth repeats slowly. "That's a nice name. This is my brother Kelly, and my sisters Faye and Naomi." Gareth introduces his party.

"Thank you... For helping me." Kahlera says, lowering her head in a respectful bow.

"Anytime." Gareth smiles.

Kahlera is surprised by how friendly Gareth is. She isn't used to positive encounters with humans. This is the first that she can remember.

"Well, I have to go." Kahlera suddenly says.

She turns and dashes swiftly into the woods to the left of the trail, running in the opposite direction as her attackers. Gareth and the others barely have time to react. Gareth watches the bushes shake behind her as Kahlera disappears, and sighs.

"Damn..." Gareth mutters.

“It’s okay Gary.” Faye steps up beside him.

“Huh?” He looks back at her.

**“Yeah, I bet there’s plenty more cat girls in the forest.”
Kelly smirks.**

“Shut up.” Gareth mutters.

Gareth reaches down and collects his spent shell casing, slipping it into a large pocket on the upper leg of his pants. The group resumes walking as Kelly and Faye both share a laugh, and tease him about Kahlera for the next few minutes. Gareth walks in silence as they rip on him.

“Is she going to be the girl that got away?” Faye taunts.

“I can draw you a nice ‘lost pet’ poster to stick on some trees.” Kelly teases.

“I don’t think I have any catnip on me...” Faye adds.

“We can always go back and follow her. Maybe we’ll find her up a tree somewhere.” Kelly snickers.

“Yeah... She was cute as hell.” Gareth admits with a grin.

After walking for several more hours and following the winding trail, the forest becomes less dense. Soon, they exit and see a long, straight path the leads for several miles. In

the distance, they can see walls, and what look like a few multi-story buildings behind them. They eagerly hike the trail as they close the distance. The settlement's walls appear to stretch to the forest on either side, appearing like a dam of civilization, centered in a valley of dense forest.

The trail moves over several hills which regularly reveal and then obstruct the view of the wall. The trail curves and leads to a large opening. There, sitting down by a rock is Kahlera, staring into the shadow and looking at the city gates. The group approaches as Kahlera notices them from the corner of her eye. She turns and stands, as though prepared to run, but seems to relax as she sees the four humans from earlier.

"Oh... It is you..." Kahlera says in a dry monotone.

"Don't look so excited." Gareth jokes.

Standing near her, they turn and look toward the gates of wood, reinforced with iron strips. It appears medieval. A sign is posted above the gates. The strange letters quickly morph into English, which reads 'Ravenswood'.

"You aren't going inside?" Gareth asks.

"I cannot. This settlement does not allow Sahvorai. They already turned me away." Kahlera replies.

“Seriously?!” Gareth seems genuinely offended.

Kahlera seems confused by his frustration. She doesn't understand why he would even care.

“So what brought you here, anyway?” Faye asks Kahlera.

“Looking for something...” Kahlera answers sharply.

Faye raises up her hands defensively, and turns away from Kahlera. Faye and Kelly approach the gate as Naomi stands near Gareth.

“Well it was nice to see you again.” Gareth says to her in a gentle voice.

“Too bad I cannot say the same...” Kahlera grumbles.

“Ouch... Rejected.” Kelly murmurs to Faye.

Gareth lowers his head and gently shakes it, chuckling as he does. Kahlera is confused and looks closer at Gareth. Her mistrust is not without cause; She has never met a good human before. He looks back up to her and she leans back away.

“What do I have to do to prove to you that I’m friendly?” Gareth bluntly asks her.

Kahlera pauses to think, tapping the short claw of her right index finger against her bottom lip.

“Hmm... There is one thing.” She begins.

“What’s that?” Gareth asks.

“There is a medicinal herb that my tribe needs. It only grows in the southern region. I came down here from the north to collect it, among others, but I haven’t been able to find it on my own. If you can find some inside this village, I will *begin* to trust you.” Kahlera explains.

“And how will I find you once I have it. Are you just going to wait here?” Gareth asks.

“No. I’ll move around and to the north end of the village. You can exit the other side and present them to me.” She answers him.

“Alright. It’s a deal.” Gareth replies.

Kahlera briefly described the herb’s size, shape and color. She purposefully describes one of the most rare herbs. Gareth turns and walks away with Naomi, entering the gate that was only recently opened by the gatekeeper.

“Idiot...” Kahlera thinks to herself. “That should be the last I see of him.”

They step through the opening as the gatekeeper closes and latches it behind them. Kahlera quickly turns and darts alongside the wall, disappearing into the forest. Once inside Ravenswood, Gareth promptly abandons the others.

“What’s with him?” Faye comments as she looks back to Kelly and Naomi.

“I suppose he is trying to find the herb that Kahlera asked for.” Naomi answers.

“What?” Kelly raises an eyebrow.

“He asked Kahlera if there was anything he could do to earn her trust. She asked for a medicinal herb.” Naomi explains.

“Are you fucking serious?!” Faye growls angrily.

“Let’s just leave him alone for now. We can do what we need to do and he can go pick flowers for that pussy... Cat...” Kelly says, looking back to Naomi.

“Fine. Whatever.” Faye comments.

“What *do* we need to do here?” Naomi asks.

“Good question...” Kelly shrugs.

The remaining three ferret around for details about the rumored Crystallin Hall, effectively wandering from stranger to stranger and questioning them about it. They stop into a tavern and hear a young male bard singing. They approach the barkeep, an older looking woman with salt and pepper hair pulled into a bun.

“You’re newcomers, aren’t ya’?” She asks.

“How could you tell?” Faye asks sarcastically.

The barkeep chuckles and strikes up a conversation with them. The bard finishes his song and overhears the strangers talking to the barkeep about the fabled Crystalline Hall. The bard quickly approaches them and claims to know roughly where it is, from an old folk song that he often sings. To their surprise, he immediately tells the others the location, without singing or asking for payment.

“You don’t want anything for this information?” Faye asks in surprise.

“No.” The bard answers with a pleasant smile.

“That does not benefit you.” Naomi points out.

“Actually, it does. Newcomers always stir the pot when they get here. It’s really annoying. Most people who rush off to find the Crystalline Hall never come back. You’re doing

me a favor.” He answers honestly before walking away from the three.

“What a nice man...” Kelly says facetiously.

Meanwhile, Gareth finds a shop with a familiar icon on the sign. He opens the door and steps under the sign of a mortar and pestle carved into a large chunk of wood. He looks around the shop, amazed by the variety of flowers, herbs, and spices that line the walls. Glass jars of dried flora, and living plants in small pots are everywhere. His sinuses quickly begin to burn from the intense aroma within the building.

“May I help you find something?” The middle-aged male apothecary asks him.

“I hope so. I’m looking for a particular herb.” Gareth replies, walking up to the counter.

“I’m certain I can.” The apothecary says confidently.

Gareth describes the plant almost verbatim, and the apothecary immediately walks around the counter towards a small section in the back corner of the building.

“This is the only plant that would match that description. It is exceptionally rare.” He tells Gareth.

“Wow. It looks just like Nirnroot.” Gareth chuckles.

“What-root?” The apothecary seems confused.

“Nothing. What are you asking for it?” Gareth replies.

The apothecary takes a single pot with several plants inside of it, pulling it away from the others on the shelf. He walks back to his counter and asks Gareth what he has to trade. Gareth, already forgetting about the coins that Casius gave them, begins listing off his supplies, carefully omitting the gear that is too valuable or necessary to part with.

The apothecary takes an interest in Gareth’s small collection of knives. Gareth shows him his three knives that he is willing to part with, keeping his large recurved knife and Kukri for himself. The other three knives, a small skinner with bone grips, a fileting knife that looks like a miniature bowie with wooden grips, and a larger skinner with wooden grips. All of the knives are carbon steel, with the exception of the final knife, which is stainless steel.

The apothecary seems very interested in the fileting knife, admiring its small size, comfortable handle and usefulness. He is even more amazed that it is genuine steel.

“Is steel good?” Gareth asks in surprise.

“Steel is *very* rare here. Pure iron ore is exceptionally difficult to come across, and most tools, weapons, and

armor are made from bronze, and occasionally iron.” The apothecary explains.

Gareth barter with him for Kahler’s herb. The apothecary takes the knife, but surprises Gareth with his honesty. He provides a small pouch with several dozen seeds for the same plant.

“This knife is worth more than just those plants alone. Trust me.” The apothecary replies.

With a handshake, they make the deal and Gareth lovingly packs away Kahler’s supplies. The seed pouch he places into a pocket, while he carefully wraps the herbs in a cloth and gently slips it into his pack. He heads outside and looks for his friends, only to see them standing in front of a shop. Without seeing him, they head inside. Gareth wonders if they are looking for him. He quickly follows behind them, entering the shop. It is a clothier.

He looks around for his friends, but the aisles are tall and packed with assorted clothes. A woman suddenly steps out of nowhere, startling Gareth.

“You must be a newcomer!” She exclaims. “Oh, but these clothes will never do! Unnatural materials will fall apart quickly here.” She says.

The somewhat heavy-set woman, who looks to be in her mid-thirties, grabs him by the strap of his pack and drags him down the aisle. She looks through a collection of leather boots as Gareth looks around, exceptionally confused.

“Somebody. I’m being assaulted by a saleswoman.” Gareth says as he looks around.

“Just tell her no means no, sometimes.” Kelly answers as he steps around a corner, holding a pair of boots.

The woman sizes Gareth’s feet at a glance and sets some boots aside.

“Yes sir. Must protect your feet!” She says as she gathers the groups clothes. Gareth is suddenly drawn to an article that hangs on the wall. He approaches the dark brown leather vest and admires it. It has a considerable number of pockets of varying sizes that all have flap covers and close with stitched buttons that fit through small slits on the flaps. He touches the vest and notes how soft and pliable the leather is. The back is adjustable with a stitched leather strap that has a brass buckle.

“*I need this...*” Gareth says quietly to himself.

Taking the vest from the wall, he approaches the counter where the other three are standing. Kelly and Naomi immediately trade their hiking shoes and dress boots respectively, opting to wear the newer leather boots from the shop. Faye and Gareth both decide to hold onto the new boots, and keep using their hiking boots. When asked for payment, the others look to Gareth.

“What?” Gareth asks.

“The coins...” Kelly says after a short pause.

“Oh! Right!” Gareth replies. “Damn... I probably could’ve kept that knife.” He mutters as he takes out the coins from his pocket.

“Casius was always so generous.” The clothier says as she takes the proper payment, leaving the rest of the coins in Gareth’s hand.

“I better hold onto those...” Kelly says, taking the remaining coins.

“Whatever.” Gareth replies, picking up the boots and carefully squeezing them into his pack, next to the herbs.

The group walks back outside and looks up at the sky, noting the height of the sun as it moves to the east.

“Do you think we should keep walking?” Kelly asks.

“Might as well make tracks while we have daylight. We can set up camp before it gets dark.” Faye replies.

“Or we can rent a room here.” Naomi offers.

“I like that plan. Let’s do that.” Kelly says.

“We probably should keep moving.” Gareth comments.

“Hundreds of miles aren’t going to walk themselves.” Faye smirks.

She brushes past Kelly as she takes the lead, heading for the north gate of the city. Naomi, Kelly and Gareth follow close behind. The gatekeeper unlatches the gate and slowly pulls the large door open, presenting the northern path to the four.

Episode 04: Tripping The Rift

They walk through the gate, which closes and latches behind them, and head down the path, which is considerably wider and more worn than the southern trail. Gareth looks around as they walk. They had been inside of the city for several hours, but Kahlera is nowhere to be seen. He doubts that she is behind them; she must have sent him on a fool’s errand.

“Figures...” Gareth grumbles.

**“So, what are you going to do with your plants now?”
Faye asks him.**

“Maybe start a little garden?” Kelly chuckles.

“I kept my word, so I’ll hold onto them. Otherwise, that knife was traded for nothing.” Gareth replies.

“It probably was, bro.” Kelly says.

“In a world this vast and unknown, the chances of seeing the same person again are remote, at best.” Naomi adds.

“Well, I’ll take it on faith and see what happens. Until then, this plant lives in my pack! Maybe I’ll talk to it; I can name it Bob!” Gareth says with a smile.

They hike the path for over an hour as the sun slowly begins to set in the distance. Nearly ten miles down the road, they see a moderately large boulder with a being laying across the top. At first, they wonder if they are alive, but then the figure crosses its’ legs, gently swaying their feet. To everyone’s surprise, it’s Kahlera, who seems to sun herself atop the rock.

“Knew it...” Gareth says to Naomi with a smile.

Kahlera sits up and blinks in surprise as she sees the same four humans walking up to her, for a third time.

“Are you following me?!” She growls as she stands up.

“No, but we do seem to be walking in the same direction.” Gareth replies.

He approaches Kahlera and kneels down, setting his pack on the ground in front of him. He unbuckles the flap and immediately presents her with the herb, and the pouch of seeds. Kahlera is visibly surprised, and quite puzzled. She hops down from the boulder as Gareth closes his pack and slips it back over his shoulders. She still seems apprehensive.

“What do you want in return?” She asks, tilting her head to the side.

“Only what you promised earlier.” Gareth swiftly answers.

“That is a high price to pay for a plant...” Kahlera admits. “Where are you going, anyway?” She asks.

“We’re looking for the Crystalline Hall.” Faye answers.

“I have heard of it, but I have never seen it. It is said to be close to my own tribe.” Kahlera begins.

Her eyes shift to back Gareth, who she quickly looks over. She has never had a reason to trust a human, but his

body language is sincere. Perhaps he and his friends are an exception?

“Perhaps if we travel there together, the priestess of my village might know where to go from there... If that sounds acceptable to you, of course.” Kahlera offers.

“I’m not su-.”

“That’ll be fine.” Gareth says, holding up a hand and interrupting Faye.

“Good.” Kahlera says with a head nod.

Gareth can’t help but smile. Kahlera sees his warm expression and grins in turn, her eyes scanning him quickly once more. Faye looks over to Gareth, then back to this strange cat girl. She sees her tail swaying and looks at the girl’s almost sinister grin, remembering Casius’ warning. Faye hesitates to trust her so openly. She looks to Kelly and Naomi. Naomi doesn’t even look at her, and Kelly merely shrugs.

“We should start walking now.” Kahlera says after a pause.

“Right.” Gareth says as he steps up to her.

Gareth and Kahlera look back, making sure that the others are following their lead. As they walk along the path,

Faye reaches out and slows Kelly and Naomi, allowing Gareth and Kahlera to advance ahead. Neither of them seem to notice. As they walk together, Gareth can't help but talk to Kahlera; his curiosity won't allow him to remain silent.

"So, what brought you all the way down here? Your village is so far away." Gareth asks.

"I was with a group. We were tasked with looking for medicinal herbs to stockpile. We were only supposed to be gone a week, but we could not find any of the herbs on our list, and our leader did not want to return empty handed." Kahlera answers.

"You didn't want to just go back?" Gareth raises an eyebrow.

"Of course." She turns her head to him.

"So why didn't you?" He asks.

"She was the leader. We should never question or disobey our leader." She replies.

"I see..." Gareth pauses to think. "But what did *you* want to do?"

"I did not want to be here in the first place. The priestess asked me to go with them herself, and I could not refuse." Kahlera sounds annoyed.

"What happened to the others?" He continues questioning her.

“About a week ago we were attacked by raiders. In the fight I was able to escape, but I lost my weapons. The others were not so lucky. I have been scavenging and wandering back towards my village alone since then.” She answers.

“What did you lose?” Gareth asks.

Kahlera sighs and glares at Gareth.

“How many questions are you going to ask me?” She growls.

“I’m sorry. I’m just... Never mind.” Gareth apologizes.

They walk in silence for a few moments.

“You know... You can always ask me questions too. Dialog might help build trust.” He suggests.

“What would I possibly want to ask *you*?” She snickers.

Gareth sighs in frustration and becomes silent. Kahlera turns her eyes to Gareth, who looks ahead, staring down the trail. She suddenly feels badly for what she had said to him, but she can’t explain why. The regret wells up, and she takes a deep breath.

“A bow and a sling. That’s what I lost...” Kahlera suddenly speaks.

Gareth turns to look at her as she lowers her head.

“I am not a very good fighter. I am a healer. I was necessary to the group because I could recognize the herbs we needed. I am a good hunter, but it is not what I do for the village... I admit that if you and your friends had not arrived when I was being robbed, I would certainly be dead right now.” Kahlera says as she looks back, staring into Gareth’s eyes.

“You’re welcome, then.” He says with a smile. “And for what it’s worth, I’m glad you went with that group. I never got to be a hero before, so thanks for that.”

Kahlera seems to smile back, but quickly turns her head from his view. Gareth decides not to bother her with further questions; they walk in silence. Kahlera shifts her eyes, glancing back at Gareth.

“What do you think they are talking about up there?” Kelly asks the girls.

“I don’t know, and I don’t care, but I don’t trust her...” Faye replies.

After hiking until twilight, Kahlera stops and turns back to the others. Once the three catch up to them, they build a basic camp about fifty meters from the path, and prepare to spend the night. Kelly and Gareth gather a considerable amount of firewood and build a moderate fire, keeping the surplus wood close by so that they can feed it throughout the night. Faye and Naomi cook a simple meal with Kelly's large cook set, while Kelly organizes the food into manageable rations.

Gareth sits away from the others, his back to the fire as he looks towards the road. Kahlera looks over at Gareth, staring at him. Faye watches the cat girl, her gaze fixed upon him. She won't allow herself to trust Kahlera, especially with Gareth, who clearly has a bizarre attraction to her; Faye questions Kahlera's every move. Suddenly, Kahlera gets up and walks towards Gareth. She kneels down beside him as he turns to see whoever is approaching.

"Oh, hi." He says as he turns back to look at the road.

"Hi..." She says as she looks down at him.

Kahlera sits down on the ground beside him, crossing her legs in front of her.

"So... What are you doing?" She asks.

"Sitting." Gareth chuckles.

"I can see that. Why are you sitting? Are you alright?"
She questions him.

"I'm fine. I'm just thinking." Gareth replies.

"... About what?"

"Everything... Two days ago, I was on a trip with them... Now we're here, wherever here is, and all they want to do is leave." He explains.

"Do you not want to leave?" She asks.

Gareth sighs but doesn't answer her. He looks solemnly at the road, as though her question had somehow hurt him. She looks Gareth over; she is fascinated by this human. She struggles to think of something more substantial to say. She feels as though she has to say *something*, in order to justify being this close to him.

"That vest is very nice. Is it new?" She finally says.

She immediately feels embarrassed for failing to say something more meaningful.

"Thank you, and yes, it is." He replies.

"It... It looks very good on you..." She comments.

Gareth turns to look back at her, a little smile on his face.

“N-not that I was looking at you or anything!” She says defensively.

“Thanks.” He chuckles.

“It makes you look like a hunter.” She adds.

“Is that good?” Gareth shifts his body to face her.

“In Sahvorai culture, hunters are the most respected, and all hunters are warriors. Only tribal elders such as priests and chieftains are more respected.” She explains.

“Yeah, that’s good.” He smiles.

Kahlera feels quite embarrassed. She tries to come up with something else to say. She looks away, struggling to speak. This does not go unnoticed by Gareth.

“So maybe you’d like to know how we got here?” He asks her.

She nods her head silently, so Gareth explains their situation. He starts from the first day of their vacation and ends with their first meeting Kahlera on the road. He spares the details that he would consider too boring or unimportant

to mention. After rambling on for nearly twenty minutes to a curious Kahlera, he finally finishes.

“That sounds like quite a journey.” Kahlera replies.

“It’s certainly something. I think the others are just eager to find a way home.” Gareth says.

“Only the others?” Kahlera prods.

“Why? Are you going to miss me?” He winks.

“No! Just... Uh... Curious.” She nervously answers.

“For me, the journey is the destination.” Gareth begins.

“What does that mean?” Kahlera tilts her head to the side.

“It means that I am going along for the ride. I enjoy the adventure itself, not where it is that I am going. I’m perfectly happy walking the distance, whether or not I get anywhere.” He explains.

“Oh!” Kahlera’s tail sways.

They sit in silence for a moment, looking to the road. Gareth looks back at the others and sees that they are talking amongst themselves. He leans a little closer to Kahlera, who turns her head quickly to him, as though startled.

“I’ll tell you something, just between us...” Gareth whispers. “Considering what my life was like at home, I don’t really care if I ever find a way back. I just want to see how it all plays out. Maybe this world is better?”

Kahlera visibly smiles, her sharp teeth glinting in the moonlight. After a moment, she lowers her head and her smile fades.

“I admire your spirit, and I hope it works out, but you may not like this world either.” She says.

“I guess I will just have to see for myself.” Gareth replies. “I’m going to get something to eat before bed. Coming?”

He gets up and walks away from her, leaving Kahlera to sit in the dark. She watches him walk back to the camp and prepare some food. Gareth prepares two meals and sets one aside.

“What are you doing?” Faye asks.

“Uh... Getting Kahlera some food?” Gareth answers in a confused tone. “She has to eat too, after all. What’s-his-name shared our food, before he got smoked.” He adds.

“We spent two days with the guy and you don’t remember his name?” Kelly laughs.

“Do you?” Gareth turns to him.

Kelly sighs and pauses to think. He looks to the others and then back at Gareth before shrugging his shoulders.

“That’s what I thought.” Gareth smirks.

Kahlera soon joins them, and the group quietly eats their individual meals of jerky and dried fruit. Kelly and Faye soon ask Kahlera what they can expect; she describes the mountain pass that they will have to go through, and potentially climb over. Kelly and Naomi seem bothered, but Faye only seems more excited. Gareth sits quietly, unfazed by the daunting task ahead.

They unroll their sleeping bags and attempt to get comfortable for the night. Gareth notices that Kahlera only uses a simple bedroll that sandwiches her body. He feels badly, as he worries that it will get cold during the night, but looks to the others and says nothing. He lies back and eventually drifts off to sleep. Naomi struggles to sleep, tossing and turning endlessly. After nearly an hour, she sits up in frustration.

She pushes two more logs into the fire as it was beginning to die down. The fire grows taller, so Naomi pushes a few more logs in, hoping to keep the fire alive until

she can fall asleep. She begins to lie back down and sees Kahlera sitting up almost parallel to her. She focuses her eyes, and as they adjust she sees that Kahlera's head is turned, watching Gareth closely as he sleeps. She even seems to have moved her bedroll nearer to him. Naomi is more surprised by Kahlera's interest in Gareth than anything else; she remains silent, watching her for a moment.

The next morning, Naomi wakes to the sounds of voices and clanking noises. She slowly opens her eyes to see Faye passing her some dried fruit and jerky. She kneels down by her sister's sleeping bag and smiles warmly.

"Hey. You get enough sleep?" She asks her.

"No..." Naomi grumbles.

"Well, too bad!" Faye exclaims, patting Naomi on the head.

"We've got a whole day of suffering ahead of us." Kelly adds as he walks by.

Naomi eats her rugged breakfast as Faye packs her sleeping bag for her. Gareth, Kahlera and Kelly wait for them by the road as the two girls catch up. They start their hike early in the morning and walk for hours, stopping occasionally to rest or relieve themselves at any available bush or tree. They find a stream just in time for their

canteens to run dry; Kahlera seems to be using a hollow gourd with a rope sling as a canteen.

"I really hope my feet are going to callus over soon." Kelly thinks aloud as they sit for a moment.

"No longer enjoying the adventure?" Naomi asks.

"I never was to begin with, and I definitely don't enjoy pain." Kelly quips.

"Don't be such a bitch. Pain is just weakness leaving the body." Faye scoffs.

"Whatever you say, Miss Gutsy." Gareth murmurs.

They soon continue walking. As Kahlera had said during last night's dinner, the group approaches a large mountain range. The hills are very steep, almost vertical; climbing them without professional gear is all but impossible for the group. They grow taller and more imposing as they hike down the path, which winds through a natural valley. There are rock formations on all sides of the valley. Occasionally a rock breaks off and rolls down the stone wall, towards the path.

As they turn a corner, following the path, they find another rock formation in front of them. The path forks to the left and right of the formation. As they approach the fork, they all note the incredible height of the formation; it is easily over forty meters tall.

“This looks a lot like Appalachia.” Gareth comments.

Gareth turns to Kahlera. She looks back at him and blinks. They stare at each other for a moment; as they do, she becomes visibly nervous.

“What?” She asks sheepishly.

“Lead the way, please.” He says warmly and with a smile.

“Oh, right!”

Kahlera turns to the pass on the right and they begin to walk towards it. Kelly stops as he hears rocks shifting. He calls out to the others, who stop and turn back to him. More rocks tumble from the formation before them, then suddenly and without warning, a major rock slide occurs. Large rocks, some bigger than an SUV, break off from the central peak and come barreling towards the group. They all scramble out of the way; Faye and Kelly rush to the left while Gareth, Kahlera and Naomi move to the right.

They struggle to climb the steep walls as rocks fly past them and head for the turn in the road, slamming into it and creating a wall of rocks that grows taller and thicker with each passing second. What is easily one-hundred-

thousand tons of broken rocks and boulders form an impenetrable barrier and splits the group in two. The rock slide stops as suddenly as it had started. Gareth looks to the two women on either side of him and checks to make sure that they are alright. To their amazement, none of them were crushed, or even so much as scratched.

They look around and see that they have been separated from Faye and Kelly, who are on the opposite side of the rock pile, which is easily ten meters tall. Looking ahead, the fork has essentially collapsed, leaving two thin paths with a nearly impenetrable obstacle between them. Behind them, the rock slide has slammed into the valley wall, rather than following the curve in the path; the valley wall is a sheer cliff that's at least twenty meters tall.

Faye and Kelly can't possibly climb over to them safely, if they are even alive. Gareth and Naomi call out to the others, shouting their names. After a moment of silence, Faye and Kelly call back to them. They are alive and unharmed. At first, Faye and Kelly try to scale the freshly built wall, but the rocks shift and begin to move towards them, as though the pile will collapse. They back away in fear. Gareth tells them that it's too dangerous to even try.

Speaking up, Kahlera says that they may have to take an entirely different way to the village, as the left fork winds around the mountains entirely. The right fork, which

Gareth, Kahlera and Naomi are on, heads through the valley in a relatively straight line.

“Exactly how far does this left fork go?” Kelly shouts over the wall.

“You will be at least a week behind us!” Kahlera replies.

“Fuck that!” Faye says as she scrambles up the wall, causing more rocks to fall and nearly starting another slide.

“What the hell are you doing?!” Kelly grabs her by the hips and pulls her back.

“Naomi is over there! Gareth is over there! We can’t just go another way! What if we get lost?!” She screams at him.

“I can tell you where to go! Just remember these directions!” Kahlera yells over to them.

“Wait!” Faye shouts back.

She quickly takes out a small memo pad and a pen from her musette bag and prepares herself. She tells Kahlera to begin and Kahlera slowly shouts very simple directions, following the path and noticeable landmarks. As soon as she is done, Faye reads them back to confirm. As she does, Gareth has an epiphany.

“Kelly’s pack is carrying nearly all of the food, as well as the large cook set.” He whispers to Kahlera.

He is leaning close to her ear so that Naomi won't hear him. Kahlera turns back to him, but his proximity causes her snout to brush against his face. She looks up at him, freezing like a deer caught in headlights. She doesn't move back or speak as her pink feline nose rests at an angle alongside his cheek. Without thinking, she breathes in through her nose, quickly memorizing his scent.

"Uh... We... We'll have to h- hunt and forage along the way." She nervously whispers back.

Left without any other choices, they split off into two groups and take separate routes. Faye looks at the rock pile in frustration. She can't believe that they are forced to walk around the mountain pass. She wants to simply climb it, but looks back at the mountains. She could never make it over them without snapping her legs, ankles, neck or back. Kelly doesn't even want to entertain the idea, content with following Kahlera's directions and catching up to them later. Though she doesn't voice it, Faye doubts Kahlera's directions from the start.

Kahlera and Gareth begin to walk towards the pass, but Naomi looks to the rock pile and begins sobbing quietly. She sits down on a rock and buries her face in her hands. Her companions hear her cries; Gareth reaches out, grabbing Kahlera's wrist to stop her. Startled by his touch,

she turns back to him as he motions to Naomi. He returns and kneels down in front of her. Kahlera watches the two as Gareth tries to comfort the distraught girl.

“It’s going to be alright.” He says as he wipes away her tears with his thumb.

“No... It’s not. What if she doesn’t make it? What if we don’t make it?! The odds of finding each other, in continent with this square mileage, is mathematically improbable!” Naomi cries.

“Hey...” He gives her a gentle hug. “Improbable is *not* impossible. Besides, Faye’s a hard ass, and as her little sister, you’re at least half as hard. Maybe even three-quarters.” He assures her.

“That is not funny...” She grumbles.

“I’m sorry. Faye is tough. Her and Kel will get out of there like that.” He says as he snaps his fingers. “What we need to do is be strong, and meet them on the other side of the mountains. You’re going to see her again real soon.” He smiles.

“What if something else happens?” Naomi looks to him with glossy eyes.

“I won’t let anything bad happen to you. I’ll be here for you, so long as I live. I promise.” He assures her.

“Okay...” Naomi nods slowly. “But what about Faye and Kel?”

“They’ll be fine. What you need to do is worry about *you*.”

Kahlera is touched by the display. Perhaps the rhetoric of her own tribe is false, and some humans really are good? They are certainly capable of all of the emotions that the Sahvorai are. Naomi quietly stands and Gareth rests a hand on her shoulder, giving her a reassuring squeeze. He guides her away from the rocks and up towards the narrow pass. Kahlera stands there as they approach. He stops and looks to Kahlera. After a brief gaze, he reaches out and gently takes her hand into his, pulling her away from the pass as well. They march on, determined to make it to the other side, and to Kahlera’s village.

Episode 05: And Through The Woods

It’s been three days since the rock slide separated the party into two groups. Gareth, Kahlera and Naomi are nearly out of food, and have even been gathering wild edibles alongside the road the entire way, but miner’s lettuce, flower heads and handfuls of berries can only go so far. They are nearly out of the valley, and the hills are becoming easier to move through, should they need to. They set up a campsite for the night, but Gareth seems distracted.

Kahlera kneels by Gareth and asks him what is bothering him. Gareth smiles to her and stands up. He reaches out a hand to her and she takes it. He pulls her up and motions for her to follow. They walk to his pack as Naomi builds the fire, placing more logs into it. He takes out his Kahr CT9 pistol and checks the chamber for a round, and the magazine for ammunition, before setting it next to Naomi. He reaches back into his pack and collects a large spool of brass wire.

“We’re going to set some snares. Only use that if you have too. We’ll be right back.” Gareth says to Naomi.

“Where’s my babysitter? Or am I old enough to be left home alone now?” Naomi snarks.

“You have a gun. You’ll be fine. We won’t be more than one hundred meters away anyway.” Gareth assures her.

She merely shrugs as Gareth and Kahlera head into the woods. Gareth looks carefully for animal tracks and other signs of life. He sets a deadfall trap over a small game trail. As he sets the trap, he explains how to build it to Kahlera, who takes mental notes. They move on and find another area with rabbit tracks. Gareth sets a snare, also explaining how to make it, as he sets it. There is an area with deer droppings nearby, so Gareth sets a large snare around chest height. They set several more snares and deadfalls before night begins to creep in.

"I have never set traps before... I have only ever hunted with a bow and a sling." Kahlera admits to Gareth.

"Well, now you know, and knowledge is power." He smiles.

"This is true." She says.

"Besides, I'm sure you are going to teach me things that I don't know." He adds.

"What could I possibly teach you?" She asks.

"I don't know. I still brush my hair like a princess, thrown over my shoulder. Maybe you know a more dignified method." He shrugs.

She giggles at his silly remarks. She doesn't know why, but she finds him to be charming. She is quickly growing to enjoy his company. They return to the camp where Naomi waits for them. They eat what's left of their food and lie down for the night. It becomes unusually cold and Naomi moves closer to the fire, regularly feeding it logs. Gareth looks to Kahlera who holds her bedroll closed. He isn't sure, but she appears to be shivering.

"You know, Kahlera... If you're really cold, we could always cuddle." He half teases her.

"No thanks... Shivering is more comfortable." She quips.

"Fail..." Naomi murmurs.

“You just look cold. At least take a space blanket. I have one for emergencies.” He says as he sits up.

She pauses and looks at Gareth. He appears genuinely concerned for her well-being. She grips the bedroll tightly and then sighs. Why did he have to give her the option? She doesn’t want the opportunity, and yet she does; she is conflicted.

“Fine...” Kahlera grumbles as she sits up.

Gareth looks over to his nearby pack. Digging through the musette bag, he finds a small stuff bag that carries emergency supplies. Opening it, he looks through the contents for the silver space blanket. As he digs, he feels his sleeping bag shift. He turns to see Kahlera climbing in with him.

“That works too.” Gareth says in surprise as he holds the space blanket in his hand.

“It is *only* because it is cold. Do not get any ideas.” She growls.

“Absolutely no ideas will go through my head.” He assures her.

“Just like every other day.” Naomi teases.

He puts the space blanket back into the stuff bag, cinches it closed, and then buckles the flap of his pack. He slides back down into the now crowded sleeping bag. Her fur rubs softly against his flesh as he buries himself into the bag like a tick. She places her back towards him and leans in. Gareth slides his makeshift pillow over towards her and pulls up his pack, using it as a headrest in place of the pillow. Kahlera is surprised by his generosity, and wishes that she didn't like this as much as she does.

"You must really trust me." Gareth suddenly comments.

"What?" She asks.

"To put your back against me like that. It's a very vulnerable position." Gareth nudges her gently.

Not realizing that he's just playing with her, she struggles to turn over, facing him instead. She stares at him as they lie there and he gently places a hand on her upper arm. She clenches her teeth and growls; it's all she can do to keep from smiling. He pulls his hand away from her, his expression silently apologizing.

"Warm?" He asks her.

"A little..." She answers softly.

After a brief staring contest, she suddenly turns back over, pressing her back against his chest. Gareth slowly wraps an arm around her and holds her close.

“Don’t make me break it off...” She mutters.

“It’s just until you warm up. Don’t be so stubborn.” He says sternly.

His tone takes her by surprise, and she seems to purr in response. His sudden aggressiveness is appealing. Her tails drapes over his waist, within the sleeping bag. His arm doesn’t move a centimeter, staying wrapped gently around her waist.

“Are you warm yet?” He asks.

“Oh... It... It is getting warm.” She answers softly.

“Good.” He smiles.

He rests his face just behind her shoulder as he holds her. His nose rests near the nape of her neck as he slowly breaths in and out. He likes her faint scent, which is not dissimilar to most women’s. After snuggling for a while, Kahlera’s eyes shoot open. She turns her head and glares at Gareth, bearing her teeth. Gareth tries to pull his hips away from her body in the confined space.

“I’m sorry. It’s not my fault.” He whispers.

“If you ever want to use that in the future, I better not feel it again.” She quietly warns.

“Hey, I’d like to see *you* control your body when you are pressed against someone as attractive...” He blurts out defensively.

He stops mid-sentence and her angry expression quickly morphs into one of shock. He closes his eyes and sighs, frustrated at his own impulsiveness. He stops talking and shifts his body so that she doesn’t notice, but continues to hold her close.

“Is that better?” He asks.

“... Yes...” She murmurs.

“Hey... About what I said... I-” He begins.

“You didn’t say anything.” She interrupts.

“Good.” Her whispers.

Though he didn’t finish speaking, she is certain what he would have said had he continued. She presses herself against him again, resting her back against his chest. Although she no longer feels his pelvis pressed against her, she doubts his condition has changed, and though she won’t ever admit it, hers hasn’t either. She only hopes that this hasn’t ruined anything that may be between them. She rests

easily; warm and comfortable in his arms. The pair soon drift off to sleep.

They awaken early the next morning, almost simultaneously. Gareth's arm has shifted up, tucked underneath her bust. Though she is awake, Kahlera takes the time to enjoy the moment, pretending as though she were still asleep. She doesn't want him to move; she is content where they are. Gareth, oblivious to the act, lies there and watches her silently. She eventually decides to feign her awakening. Gareth is quick to pull his arm away from beneath her breasts, though they slept fully dressed, and give her room to move. She crawls out from the sleeping bag, followed closely by Gareth. She stretches and turns to him, smiling faintly.

"Have a good sleep?" He asks her softly.

She simply nods her head. As Naomi wakes up, they leave to check their traps. The deadfalls are all empty, and the first few snares are too. They collect the snares as they move. They approach the final snare and see a large figure stuck inside of it. The body of a small whitetail deer hangs in the snare, caught by its neck. It's a juvenile, and not full-grown. Gareth sits by the carcass and takes out his bone handled skinner.

“Okay...” He says with a sigh. “I haven’t done this in a long time... Or ever.” He comments.

“I don’t have a knife, but I will talk you through it.” Kahlera replies.

At her direction, Gareth guts and cleans the deer on the forest floor. Kahlera collects the snare and Gareth carries the carcass back to camp, throwing it over his shoulders.

“See? You taught me something already.” He says with a smile.

“You did well, Gareth. You are not as dumb as I thought you were.” Kahlera snarks.

“Thanks, I guess. You don’t have to call me Gareth. You can shorten it, or say something else entirely.” He replies.

“You do not like Gareth?” She asks in surprise.

“Not the whole thing.” He admits.

They make it back to camp and cook the deer for their breakfast while Kahlera dries the remaining meat over the fire. Kahlera stuffs dried meat into her pack and places more meat above the fire, moving like an assembly line. Gareth watches her as he eats, and turns back to his pack. He digs out his larger stainless-steel skinner with wooden grips.

“Hey, Kahlera.” He says, getting her attention. “I want you to have this.”

Gareth presents the knife to Kahlera. She hesitates to take it.

“What is this for?” She asks apprehensively.

“To cut things.” He says facetiously.

She glares at him, silently demanding a serious answer.

“You need one... Plus, this one is stainless-steel. It’s very resilient to rust and corrosion. It’ll last longer than my knife.” He explains.

“What do you want in return?” She asks.

“Nothing.” He replies with a smile.

“Nobody just gives away things like this.” Kahlera says as she eyes Gareth with suspicion.

“I guess you haven’t been given many gifts, huh? At least not by a human.”

“That is true...” She admits as she slowly takes the knife, looking down at it with a faint smile.

“But wait, there’s more.” Gareth says as he reaches back into his pack. “It’s getting colder, so take this too.”

Gareth pulls out an orange and black Keffiyeh, presenting it to her.

“Oh no, I could not!” She says; his attention embarrasses her.

“It’s alright. I have a few.” He replies.

He takes out an entirely black Keffiyeh for himself and wraps it around his neck. Her faint smile grows ever wider. She clenches her fists as she tries to hide it.

“Orange is one of my two favorite colors.” He comments.

“What is the other?” She asks.

“Purple.” He answers.

“Purple is my favorite too.” She adds.

Gareth examines his worn hiking boots, and takes them off, saving the laces but tossing the boots aside. He takes his new boots from his pack and slips them on as Naomi and Kahlera take down the campsite.

“Help would be nice.” Naomi grumbles as she watches Gareth.

“I catch and kill the food, you do the dishes.” Gareth smirks.

With the campsite dismantled, the trio put on their packs and get back onto the road, continuing the trek north. A cool breeze rustles the trees and throws Gareth's and Naomi's long hair over their shoulders while Kahlera tightens her high ponytail. After a few hours of walking, they approach a group of four men who sit in a circle on the road. Gareth and Kahlera stop in their tracks; their guts tell them that there is something wrong. The men see them and stand up, casually walking towards them as they draw swords. Gareth balls his left hand into a fist before spreading out his fingers, preparing to draw Vetra from her holster.

"Well, look at what we have here." One man says.

"Two bitches, and their pet cat." Another laughs.

One man steps forward. He seems to be the leader, as the other three look to him and watch his every move.

"So, I will play nice with you. Hand over all of your things and surrender that innocent looking girl, and you can go." The man begins.

"I never screwed a Sahvorai before!" One of the goons says excitedly.

"Actually, on second thought, pass that fur ball over here too. We can have some fun with her." The leader grins.

“Okay. *That’s* not going to happen.” Gareth answers.

“Hah! And what the hell are you going to do about it, shithead? I don’t see a sword, dagger, axe, or bow between the lot of you.” The leader laughs confidently.

Gareth steps into a bladed stance, drawing Vetra slowly and holding her tightly with a two-handed grip. The men don’t seem to realize what he is doing. Gareth feels like he is cheating them, but he is pragmatic; they brought this on themselves.

“Fire from the Gods... Don’t make me burn you.” Gareth glares.

“Fuck you!” The leader steps closer as he holds up his bronze sword.

Two shots ring out as he falls back onto the ground. Gareth holds Vetra close to his stomach, firing from a crumpled weaver stance. The rounds plow through the man’s abdomen and rip into his intestines. His last few days of life will be spent in horrendous agony, as he dies slowly of septic shock. The gang’s leader writhes on the ground as blood pools beneath him. Gareth stretches out his arms, aiming at another man. The three goons turn and run. Gareth fires a third round, striking another man in the shoulder. He holsters his sidearm as he watches them flee in terror.

“What the hell are you doing?!” Kahlera shouts. “Finish them off or they will come back for us!”

“I don’t want to kill them if I don’t have too.” Gareth replies.

He takes a deep breath and tries to control his adrenaline. He successfully fights the urge to vomit. He takes a moment to collect his spent brass, pocketing it with the other casing. While the three goons abandon their leader, Gareth, Kahlera and Naomi make their escape, casually walking past the injured man on the ground.

“You really should have killed more of them...” Kahlera comments.

Gareth wonders if he made a mistake by not killing more of the men when he could have. They keep a swift pace, nearly jogging as they head north. Barely an hour down the road, Kahlera suddenly stops. She turns back and her ears twitch.

“Run!” She yells.

She grabs Gareth and Naomi by their wrists and pulls them as the three raiders return on horseback, riding in from the south. They must have had a camp just inside the woods

where their horses and gear were kept out of sight. They all have bows and arrows. Knowing that they could never outrun horses, Gareth turns and fires several rounds, startling the horses. He side-steps towards his right, moving off to the left side of the road.

Kahlera and Naomi rush towards the woods, following Gareth's lead. The riders pursue them, and Gareth fires several well placed shots, killing a horse and causing it to fall over, injuring the rider by falling on him. They flee through the woods, which are too thick for the remaining horses to enter. Several arrows fly past Gareth as he backs into the forest. He turns and runs through the dense brush, trying to catch up to Kahlera and Naomi who are just ahead of him, and barely in his sight.

Branches snag, scratch, slap and jab him as he barrels through as fast as he can. After a few moments of running, he catches up to Kahlera and Naomi, who are carefully moving towards a small waterfall that runs from a large stream and into a considerable pond. The two girls disappear behind the waterfall, and he realizes that there is a cave behind it; it is very difficult to see, as the waterfall is positioned so that sunlight doesn't beam on the cave opening.

He breaks several branches and tramples a bush at the edge of the clearing, creating a false trail. He turns back and rushes up to the large pond and carefully heads

inside the cave. He passes underneath the water where a soaked Naomi and Kahlera stand with their backs against the wall. Gareth stands beside them and checks his pistol's magazine while Naomi moves even deeper, pushing against the opposite side of the cave. Gareth takes his Kahr CT9 from his pack and offers it to Kahlera.

"I do not know how to use that." Kahlera says.

"It's easy. I'll show you." Gareth replies.

He hands her the pistol and gives her a very brief lesson in firearms safety.

"Assume every weapon is loaded, and never point it at anything you aren't ready to kill or destroy. Never put your finger on the trigger until you are ready to shoot. Squeeze the trigger carefully; don't pull it quickly, or you might miss your target. Never point a gun at a man unless you intend to shoot him, and never shoot a man unless you intend to kill him. No warning shots." He quickly coaches her.

He holsters Vetra and stands behind Kahlera, taking her hands into his and showing her the proper grip. Kahlera's heart races, as much from his touch as from the dash through the woods.

“There’s only two left, but I don’t want to kill them if I don’t have too.” Gareth whispers into her ear.

As they hide in the cave, the raiders walk close by. Kahlera tries backing away, as she worries her image will be seen through the waterfall. A raider seems to notice movement and walks closer. She bumps into Gareth; he doesn’t move or say anything, and seems to be almost meditating, as he breaths very slowly and deeply. He wraps his right arm around her and rests his hand on her toned abdomen, pulling her gently away and guiding her deeper into the cave as they both back away from the waterfall.

The raider seems to look at his own image in the rushing water, standing there for a moment. Gareth slowly draws his sidearm from his holster. The raider lifts an arm and flexes his muscle, admiring his reflection. Gareth leaves his hand in place. Kahlera notices, but doesn’t say anything. Gareth suddenly and gently scratches Kahlera’s flat stomach with his fingertips. She likes it, but looks back and bears her teeth at Gareth, hissing quietly. He glares at her and brings Vetra’s barrel to his lips, shushing her.

Kahlera is surprised, and gazes at Gareth. She feels almost aroused by his growing dominance. Soon, the raider walks away without a word, heading into the woods as he follows the false trail. Gareth and Kahlera stare at each other as their faces slowly move closer together. Kahlera’s pink nose touches Gareth’s and her breathing grows

heavier. Naomi watches from the opposite wall of the cave, rolling her eyes.

“Hey... They’re gone now...” Naomi interrupts.

As though snapping out of a trance, Kahlera quickly turns away from Gareth and pulls out of his grasp. She exits the cave and steps through the waterfall. Gareth turns to Naomi and glares at her with clenched teeth. She grins wide as she also exits the cave.

“Shit...” He murmurs, holstering Vetra again.

He leaves the cave and joins the girls, who are already heading back for the road. Kahlera passes Naomi the pistol as they enter the brush. They never see the other two raiders, though one raider lies dead, his mangled leg trapped underneath his equally dead horse. They begin walking down the road in silence.

“Are you alright?” Kahlera asks as she looks to Gareth.

“Yeah. Why?” Gareth responds.

“I can smell your blood...” She answers.

“Just a few scrapes from those tree branches.” He replies.

Kahlera shrugs and they continue their hike as though nothing had happened. After nearly an hour, Gareth slows his pace and seems to be in pain. Naomi turns and asks if he is really alright, but he simply tells her not to worry, ignoring the actual question. Kahlera looks back at him. She still smells the blood, but now she can see it as well; it runs down his right side, staining the waistline of his pants. Kahlera stops and walks up to Gareth.

“Show me those ‘scrapes’ of yours.” She demands.

“It’s fine.” Gareth barks at her.

He tries to walk by her, passing on her right, but Kahlera grabs his shoulders and pushes him back, pinning him against a nearby tree.

“I am *not* asking.” She growls.

She reaches out and moves his vest out of the way to find a hole in his shirt. Lifting the shirt, Kahlera can see a considerable gash on his right side.

“Damnit. I only have three of these.” Gareth grumbles. “A branch slid up under my vest and cut me.” He tells her.

“That is not a cut. This needs to be treated right now. Why did you not say anything?!” Kahlera asks.

“I didn’t want to slow us down... Or make you even more angry...” Gareth replies.

“Next time, tell me.” She says softly.

She takes him by a wrist and leads him away from the road. Naomi follows close behind, still holding the Kahr pistol. They walk into the woods to stay out of sight, if anyone should come by. Kahlera reaches into a small pouch tied around her waist. She takes out several bundles of leaves and selects a roll, placing the rest back into the pouch. She takes a few leaves from the bundle and places them in her mouth, then returns that bundle to her pouch as well.

She chews the leaves as she takes a cloth from her pack. She sits Gareth down beside another tree and lifts his shirt up. She spits the chewed leaves out onto the cloth and presses it into his gash. Gareth groans and winces in pain.

“That really hurts!” He comments.

“Do not be such a baby.” Kahlera says.

“I just couldn’t help but notice that you are pressing on a painful bleeding gash in my side.” Gareth snarks.

**“If you *must* talk, do something *other* than complain.”
She grumbles.**

He grits his teeth as she seems to push the bandage deeper into the wound. He clenches his teeth as sweat beads on his forehead from the pain. He suddenly grins, chuckling faintly.

“I’m only, fallen through the cracks. I’m only, losing my will to live. I’m only, broken and beaten down. I’m only. I’m only.” Gareth sings softly.

Kahlera glares at him. He smiles back at her.

“What? I’m not complaining. It’s a song.” He says defensively.

Kahlera shakes her head, amused by his jocularly.

“Just be quiet.” She says with a smile.

He stops singing and breathes slowly and deeply.

“Good boy... If this wound stops bleeding soon, then you will not need stitches.” She adds.

“So what happens if it *doesn't* stop bleeding?” He asks facetiously.

Kahlera looks up at him and presses even harder on his wound.

“Ow, shit! Stitches. Got it.” He groans.

They sit there for a minute while Naomi watches the road from a bush. Gareth's wound soon clots and stops bleeding on its own. They take a short rest; Kahlera sits beside him, pressing her shoulder against his.

“Are you ready to go?” Kahlera asks softly.

“Yeah. I think so.” Gareth replies as he slowly stands up. He feels a little woozy, but feels confident that he can keep going. “Hey, Kahlera...” He begins.

She turns back to him. Her ponytail flutters in the cool breeze. He looks at her for a moment, a faint smile on his face. He wipes the sweat from his brow with a shirt sleeve, and walks up to her.

“Thanks for helping me.” He says, reaching out and taking her hand.

“Yeah well... I do not want to make a habit of it. Try not to be so clumsy next time.” She replies as she pulls her hand away and walks back to the road.

He shakes his head and chuckles. They walk back on the well-worn path and Naomi returns the Kahr pistol. He slips it back into his pack as they keep marching down the long and lonely road.

Episode 06: Tim The Enchanter

“God damn, I thought my legs would get used to all of this walking!” Kelly groans.

Faye grumbles something incoherent as she marches up the steep incline. The left pass that they were forced to take has wound around several mountains, confusing the pair as they march up and down rolling hills. They have marched every day, throughout the day for a full week, and have yet to escape the mountains, or see a single sign of life besides the flora and themselves. They are running low on food, and have struggled to find a water source the last few days.

Thunder claps overhead as a cold breeze blows through the pass. Faye looks up at the sky as her long hair flutters in the wind. A drop of rain touches her skin, stampeding around her forearm and running down to her elbow. The rain is ice cold. She isn't prepared to surrender, but it appears that their luck has finally run out. Hungry, dehydrated, and now they may die a painful death of hypothermia, caught unprotected in a rainstorm. She wonders what she did to anger God, that he would allow them suffer like this.

The drops become rain, and the rain evolves into a torrential downpour. Her matted hair sticks to her face as her eyes burn with rage. Faye marches on as Kelly struggles to keep up. They move through the storm, but can't see farther than a few feet. They lose the trail and end up roaming through woods.

"Fuck! We must have missed a turn!" Faye yells angrily.

"Just calm down! We'll be okay!" Kelly shouts over the screaming of the storm.

They march on, trying to return to the trail. As they move through the woods, they encounter a hut which seems to appear almost out of nowhere. They quickly approach

the hut as a flimsy looking door suddenly flies open, but not due to the howling winds.

“Oh good! Visitors!” A middle-aged looking man says.

He is unkempt and filthy, with wild green eyes and brown hair that seems long on one side, but short on the other. He motions for them to come inside. Kelly pops the flap on his holster, preparing to draw his pistol, if need be. They enter the hut and the hermit closes the door behind the duo. He sits down by a fire pit dug into the floor. A small bronze cauldron sits above the fire, suspended by a bronze handle that hangs from a short rope tied to a tripod of sticks.

He scoops out stew from the cauldron with a large wooden spoon, placing them into strange bowls made of a bizarre, white material. He passes them the stew. His mannerisms are bizarre and he moves as though he were possessed.

“Go. Eat.” The man says, repeatedly tilting his head to the side.

They take the bowls, feeling very uneasy about the man, but don't have any reason to mistrust him; he's opened his home and offered food and has yet to even ask their

names. They eat the stew with simple wooden spoons that the man provides, drinking the broth straight from the bowls afterward.

“So...” Faye begins, breaking the uncomfortable silence. “What is your name?” She asks.

“There are some that call me... .. Tim!” The man replies.

“Well... Tim... Thanks for the stew. It was very good!” Kelly says with a nod of approval.

Tim giggles with a bizarre and frightening pitch. He stands and walks back to the door. He swings it open as the storm rages on outside. He motions for them to follow. Hesitantly, Faye and Kelly stand up from the floor and follow the bizarre hermit. He leads them back out into the storm and rounds a corner, presenting them with a second hut.

“My hut, your hut! My hut, your hut!” He chants as he sways his arms back and forth.

He rushes back inside his own hut before shutting the door, leaving Faye and Kelly outside in the swift winds and frigid rain. They enter the hut, quickly shutting themselves inside. The hut is used for storage, with sacks of various sizes and several wooden crates lining the floor. There is a

moderate log pile; Tim must use it to protect his firewood. Using their flashlights, they find a small fire pit also dug into the floor of the hut. They take some of the hermit's log pile and build a small fire for warmth and light. They stow their flashlights, preserving their batteries.

Kelly sits by the fire and looks at Faye. She seems almost possessed, something that he has never seen before. They sit in silence, keeping close to the fire as the wind screams like a banshee. Kelly can't believe that this flimsy, dome shaped hut hasn't blow away already.

"So what do you think about 'Tim'?" Kelly asks, breaking the uncomfortable silence.

"Crazy..." Faye replies in a cold monotone.

"Right... How crazy?" He presses her.

"What the fuck do you want from me?!" She suddenly snaps, glaring at Kelly with fiery eyes.

"To keep you talking..." He answers. "What's your problem, anyway? We're out of the rain, had something to eat, and tomorrow we'll keep going." Kelly says defensively.

"Pfft." Faye looks back to the fire.

"You've been acting almost as crazy as Tim since the rain started. What is going on with you? Don't you want to keep going? Don't you want to find Naomi?" He asks.

“How fucking dare you!” Faye yells.

She scrambles to her feet and lunges at Kelly. Startled, he moves back and she pushes him down with surprising strength. She grips his shirt with both hands as she glares at him.

“All I want to do is find my sister and get the hell out of this place! It’s the only thing that keeps me going, but we can’t catch a single break! It’s been pain and suffering for seven continuous days!” She begins.

“Not *continuous*, and we’re getting a break right now.” Kelly says, gently placing his hands over Faye’s and pushing her off him.

“This isn’t a break.” She continues as she stands. “This is a test. God is using this vision to test my faith. He put you here too. I’m not angry. I’m anxious to prove myself and get this over with.”

“So your pissed off attitude is... What? Unhinged enthusiasm?” Kelly clarifies as he raises an eyebrow.

“Exactly. I’m going to pass this test and crush everyone and everything that gets in the way... Then I can wake up...” Faye says as she clenches her fists tightly.

Genuinely frightened by her suddenly change in personality, Kelly stops pressing her. Faye sits back down parallel to him and warms her hands by the fire, a twisted

little smile on her face. After a few hours, the storm seems to die down. They lay out their sleeping bags and try to go to sleep in Tim's storage shack. The fire crackles as it burns dimly. Kelly struggles to sleep; he looks over and places another small log within the flames.

The fire brightens the interior of the hut; Faye doesn't seem to have a problem sleeping. Kelly tosses and turns on the hard floor, but that's not what keeps him awake. For some inexplicable reason he can't close his eyes, fearing that they may never open. The storm dies down enough for him to hear the sounds of the forest outside, but as he lies there, he hears something else.

He gets up and carefully leaves the hut, leaving behind all of his belongings and his pistol belt. He carefully approaches the strange noises, finding that they are coming from Tim's hut. He very slowly pushes open the door to see Tim kneeling on the floor in front of a bizarre object. Tanned hide and bones jut out from all directions, looking almost like an oriental hand fan. Tim chants incoherently to the object, worshipping it. He suddenly speaks actual words as he bows to the totem.

"Oh thank you, dark Goddess. Thank you for bringing me more flesh. Thank you, benevolent mother of suffering. I honor you with mutilation." Tim prays.

He takes a bronze dagger and slowly slashes his own chest. He leans over the alter of bones and tanned skin, letting his blood drip onto it.

“I will bring you more sacrifice my Goddess of torment. I will feast on their flesh in your name.” Tim says, slowly standing.

Kelly backs away quickly, trying not to make noise. He moves around the hut towards the storage shack. He knows that he needs to get his gun and wake Faye before it's too late. Kelly approaches the storage hut, but the hermit cuts him off. Tim must have another exit that he didn't see. Tim screams in a frenzy, attacking him in a psychotic rage. Kelly jumps back as Tim slashes with the small dagger. Kelly stumbles as Tim lunges forward. Kelly grabs him, throwing him past him and into a tree. Tim's face smacks into the tree trunk, and he falls down to the ground in a heap.

Kelly looks around but doesn't see the dagger anywhere; it's no longer in Tim's hand. He rushes up to the storage shack but is suddenly struck in the back. He turns to see Tim trying to club him with a large stick. How did he get up so fast? Tim swings again, striking Kelly's forearm. Tim tries for a third strike, but Kelly grabs the club and wrestles it from him, swinging the man through the air like a flag.

Tim loses his grip and falls back. Kelly walks up to him and clubs him in the left shin, keeping him from standing. He raises the club high and slams it into Tim's head, knocking him unconscious with a single blow. Blood runs down Tim's face and stains the dirt. Kelly turns back to the storage hut, limping towards it, but Tim jumps up and latches onto his back.

"What the fuck are you?!" Kelly yells as he spins around.

He pushes back, slamming Tim into the wall of his own hut. He slams him into the wall as he tries to force him to let go, only for the wall to give way on the fourth hit. They crash through and fall inside of the hut. Tim lands near his fire pit and the fur of his hide garment catches fire. He scrambles to his feet and squeals as he throws off the hide kilt. Kelly gets up and grabs a bronze leaf-shaped sword that sits in a corner.

He turns to Tim and immediately turns away from his visible genitalia. Tim rushes naked towards Kelly, screaming like a madman. Kelly dodges his charge and Tim hits the wall. Tim gets back up and Kelly slashes the sword.

"Don't make me kill you, you crazy bastard!" Kelly growls.

Tim doesn't listen. He rushes again as adrenaline courses through Kelly's veins. Kelly swings again as he shouts in anger. As he swings, a beam of cobalt blue light covers and extends past the sword, reaching nearly four feet long. The light hits Tim and slashes a deep diagonal gash through his chest. The blue light is physical. Kelly looks at the blade in amazement.

"Aura... You..." Tim coughs up blood.

He turns and points, but Kelly isn't giving him any more chances. He swings the blue blade and cleaves off Tim's hand, slicing through the bone of his forearm. Tim looks at his bloody stump as a burst of hot crimson shoots from his veins. Kelly swings again, decapitating the insane hermit. He steps back from Tim's twitching corpse and looks at the blade. As his adrenaline wears off, he suddenly turns and vomits. He gasps for breath and looks back at the sword. The glowing blue blade fades away, leaving only a normal bronze sword in his hands.

Faye rushes in, awoken by the fighting. She holds Kelly's pistol in her hands and looks around. Her mouth falls open and she lowers the weapon.

"What the hell happened?!" She demands.

“I... He... Sacri... Fucking... Crazy...” Kelly struggles to speak between gasps.

He sits down on the floor as his head spins, a side effect of such a sudden adrenaline rush. He takes a moment to gather his bearings and Faye looks around the hut, examining the shrine.

“These bowls... They’re the tops of human skulls...” Faye says, looking back to Kelly.

“Seriously?” Kelly asks as he slows his breathing.

“There’s a human finger in this stew...” She adds.

“I guess we really do taste like chicken.” Kelly quips.

He tries to laugh, but the thought makes him ill and he leans back. Faye walks up to him and offers her hand. He takes it and she helps pull him up. Kelly explains the battle as articulately as he can in his state. As he describes the blue blade, Faye’s eyebrow raises. She snickers as he insists it happened exactly as described.

“Look. I’ll prove it!” Kelly says, taking up the bronze sword.

He swings the blade but nothing happens. He swings it again, and then a third time. He has recreated the conditions as best he can, but nothing happens. Faye crosses her arms and taps a foot mockingly. Kelly becomes frustrated and his grip tightens. He can feel his blood pressure rising as he realizes that he looks almost as crazy as Tim was.

He grunts and swings the blade angrily, concentrating on the sword. Suddenly, a flat, cobalt blue beam surrounds the sword and extends nearly four feet. Faye jumps back, her hands dropping to her sides. She stares at the blade as Kelly begins laughing.

“Hah! I told you!” Kelly smirks.

“So... You found a lightsaber. Congratulations.” Faye gives him a mocking golf clap.

His curiosity gets the better of him, and Kelly touches the blade with his fingertip. The blade feels solid, but warm. It's certainly not contained plasma, and it doesn't feel like metal, plastic, or bone. He isn't sure what it is. After a moment, the blade fades away again. He looks around the hut and finds a sword frog. He wears it on his belt and slips the bronze sword through the loop, sheathing it opposite his pistol, which Faye promptly returns, along with his holster.

They move Tim's corpse outside and loot his house for anything valuable. They take coins identical to the coins Casius gave them, dried food, animal hide bags of water, and several smaller articles that might prove useful. Before heading back to the storage hut to search it and get some rest, they destroy the alter, smashing it to pieces and leaving it strewn on the floor.

The next morning, they step outside with their packs filled with food and valuables. They look to the sky together; the sun shines brightly, the breeze isn't so cold, and the light warms their skin. They feel reenergized, and start walking away from the hut. As it turns out, during the storm they had wandered onto a path that leads directly to the hut. They follow the path back to the road. Faye remembers that when the storm hit, they were moving uphill. Recalling this, they continue walking out of the mountains range.

"How long do you think we'll be going before we get out of here?" Kelly asks as they march.

"As long as it takes." Faye says with a sinister smile.

Episode 07: Mushroom Samba

A storm rages outside as Gareth, Kahlera and Naomi sit around a small fire placed just inside of a moderately sized cave. When thunder broke the peace of the twilight, they walked away from the road and towards a distant cliff face, in order to find shelter. Naomi and Kahlera both seem preoccupied and irritable, but Kahlera in particular has been rather clingy with him. She stays near him, and has moved her bedroll next to his sleeping bag; she did not ask if she could do this, but he certainly isn't complaining.

In fact, they've both been acting strangely since the night before last. Gareth tries to hold a basic conversation, but Kahlera becomes easily frustrated and tells him to stop talking for the next few days.

"Are you alright? You both are acting strange." He asks her.

"It is nothing that you need to concern yourself with." Kahlera replies.

"I just don't understand why you're angry lately... Well, *angrier*." He adds.

"Idiot..." Kahlera mutters.

"It's just a *cyclical* problem that we share." Naomi comments.

"Oh... Oh! I'm sorry. Is there anything I can do to help?" He asks as he blushes.

“Just stop talking and obey without question.” Naomi laughs.

“What she said.” Kahlera groans. “Actually...” She lifts her head. “I can make a pain-relieving potion, but I am missing a primary ingredient. A toxic mushroom cap.” She says.

“I’ll get right on it.” Gareth immediately offers.

Thunder claps and lightning lights up the night sky.

“I’ll get right on it, in the morning.” He reiterates.

Kahlera smiles and leans against Gareth, resting her head on his shoulder. That night, as the first two, she sleeps closer to him, her bedroll touching his sleeping bag. Early the next morning, the storm has passed and the sun shines brightly. Kahlera gives Gareth a rough description and tells him to look near moss-covered rocks wherever there is moisture. As they have camped near a visible cliff, no one believes that he could become lost. He leaves the Kahr pistol with the girls and wanders off into the woods.

He marks his branches as he heads deeper, breaking them in a particular way every three or four meters. The girls sit down and eat deer jerky and wild berries when Kahlera’s eyes suddenly widen in horror. She has only just remembered something important; he isn’t supposed to

touch the mushrooms with his bare skin. She moves to the cave mouth and calls out to him.

“Gare!” Kahlera shouts.

“Gare?” Naomi raises an eyebrow.

“Gare! Come back!” Kahlera yells. “Oh no...” She groans as her heart sinks in her chest.

He walks through the woods, well out of range of Kahlera’s voice. He finds a small clearing with several large, moss covered rocks near soppy grass and oozing mud. Various mushrooms surround them, dotting the dark green and brown grass like freckles. He takes a closer look at each and every mushroom type. One seems to fit the description perfectly, but he can’t be sure. He looks to the other mushrooms and considers his options. He looks back and forth at the different mushrooms for several minutes.

“Damn... Well... Screw it!” He says with a sigh.

He bends his knees and squats down, picking every mushroom cap with his bare hands, and placing them into his musette bag. He spends several minutes picking nearly one-hundred mushroom caps as his fingers start to tingle. He heads back, following his blazed trail of broken branches. His head starts pounding and he feels as though he is listening to heavy bass at a nightclub. As he walks, his

vision starts to blur, only for it to return and the colors to appear much more vibrant.

“Eh! You ova’ there!.” A male voice calls out.

“Huh?” Gareth turns around, looking for whoever is talking.

“What’s wiff you breaking off me fingers, mate?” A tree talks to him in an exaggerated British accent. “You are one cheeky bastard, you know that? I’d neva come and snap off yor fingas... Well, maybe I would...”

“I uh... I needed to blaze a trail. I didn’t want to get lost.” Gareth says to the talking tree.

“Lost? Just ask for directions, mate. Why can’t you people ever ask foh ‘elp. Is it a human thing?” The tree chastises him.

“I’m sorry... How do I get back to the cave?” Gareth asks.

“Well first you turn around, then you walk a few hundred paces and ‘ang a left. Oh, who am I kidding? I’m a fucking tree! Haha! I have no idea, you stupid bastard.” The tree laughs.

“You don’t have to be so mean about it.” Gareth blinks as his vision blurs again.

“I neva’ get tired of that. Oh, bloody ‘ell.” The tree cackles.

Gareth stumbles around and hears growling from a bush. He backs against the tree, which grabs him by the shoulders with its branches.

“Eh dog! Get ova’ ‘er and do me a feva’! Eat this stupid prick foh me!” The tree calls out.

Gareth shakes off the branches and pulls away.

“Eh! Where you goin’ you wanka’! I’m not through with you foh damn sure!” The tree yells.

Gareth steps up to the shivering bush and rubs his eyes as a wolf’s skeleton emerges. It’s holding what looks like a human femur in its toothy maw. It slowly walks up to Gareth and sets the bone down before sitting in front of him. Its jaw hangs open and the sound of panting echo throughout the forest, though the skeleton has no flesh, tongue or lungs to speak of.

“Do you want to play? Is that it?” Gareth asks.

He picks up the bone as the wolf’s skeletal tail wags happily. He tosses the bone and it runs into the woods, chasing after it.

“Why the ‘ell did you just throw yor own leg?” The Brit tree asks him.

Gareth looks down and panics at the sight of a floppy, boneless left leg. He stumbles back and falls onto the dirt, which turns into a sloshy ooze of mud. He coughs up mud and scrambles from the pit as it seems to come alive. The ground turns into quicksand behind him as he hobbles through a tunnel of tree branches. He sees a vast, grey faced monster, as a demonic looking Kahlera and Naomi stand in its jaws. Kahlera approaches him, her glowing yellow eyes and spikey ears twitching as her mouth opens to reveal razor sharp, chrome plated fangs. He falls forward onto the ground as his body begins to tremble and he feels the urge to vomit.

Kahlera steps up to Gareth and kneels down beside him as he hallucinates on the ground. With Naomi’s help, they drag him from the mouth of the cave and set him down by the fire. Rummaging through his pack, Naomi spots the mushrooms. Naomi dumps the contents of the pack out onto the ground while Kahlera takes the correct mushroom, picking it up with a cloth, and setting it aside. She looks at the other mushrooms and notices one in particular.

“Well look at this!” Kahlera exclaims. “This mushroom can counteract the effects of the toxic mushroom that he

touched. I'll whip this potion up first." She says with a relieved smile.

She takes out a small stone mortar and pestle from her pack and grinds the ingredients together, then mixes in a bit of water. She seems to hum a tune as she grinds away. Naomi recognizes the tune as the chorus of 'Only' by Ra, the song that he sang to her when Kahlera was patching the gash on his side.

"If you aren't sure, don't even touch it. Les Stroud said so. If you aren't sure, don't even touch it. Les Stroud said so." Gareth chants.

He claws at his pant legs with his finger nails while rocking side to side and laying down in the fetal position. Kahlera takes the freshly made potion and sits beside Gareth. She and Naomi hold him up as Kahlera puts the mortar to his lips. He drinks the potion and they lay him back down.

"That wasn't shaggy mane." He mutters repeatedly.

"I should never have told him to go... This is all my fault." Kahlera laments.

"If you hadn't, he'd have left anyway and brought back the whole forest." Naomi reassures her.

Kahlera cleans the mortar and pestle before mixing the second potion that will relieve their menstrual pain.

Episode 08: Emancipation

Several days have passed since the mushroom incident, and Kahlera and Naomi are back to normal. They have left the cave and walked over twenty miles further north. There is only a few hours of daylight left, so they set up a camp for the night in a clearing about fifty-hundred meters from the edge of the trail. They haven't seen a sign of sentient life in days, and no one feels like wandering into the woods for a more secure campsite. Gareth is collecting firewood just inside of the woods while Naomi prepares a meal near the campfire.

Kahlera sets snares around the camp by small game trails, but something catches her attention. She spins around and her ears prick. She squints her eyes as she looks around and listens carefully. She hears the faint sound of male voices nearby. As Naomi sets food aside in three portions, Kahlera appears from the edge of the camp and rushes up to the fire.

“Put this out, right now.” She tells Naomi in a quiet but stern voice.

“What? Why?” Naomi asks.

“Raiders are nearby.” She tells Naomi.

Kahlera scoops up handfuls of dirt, but Naomi panics and throws water on the fire before Kahlera can stop her, creating a thick cloud of smoke. Kahlera scrambles to put dirt on the fire, but five raiders show up and interrupt them, rushing them on foot. Naomi looks for the Kahr, but left it on the other side of the campsite. The raiders completely overlook it as one of them tackles Naomi to the ground. Kahlera puts up a fight as she is tackled by two other raiders.

Though she struggles, they lift her up and cart her off, while a third raider struggles to tie her wrists together. A single raider walks behind as Naomi and her assailant wrestle on the ground. She kicks the lone raider in the face, but he grabs her ankles. After several minutes of struggling, he pins her down and sits on her stomach.

“Now I’ve got you, bitch.” He grins.

Naomi screams and a shot rings out. Blood pours out of a hole in the thug’s temple as Gareth plants a foot on his side and shoves him off the young girl. The stunned Naomi

shivers as she wipes the blood off her face. Gareth kneels down and helps her up, giving her a tight hug. She cries as she grips Gareth's vest tightly. He looks around but doesn't see Kahlera.

"Son of a bitch!" He cries out as he stands. **"Fucking shit! Not her too!"**

He spots the tracks and drags Naomi to her feet. He holds her wrist and pulls her violently behind him as he rushes to catch up to the other four raiders. He doesn't lose their trail, but the daylight begins to fade. He struggles to keep on the trail, but as luck or fate would have it, the raiders camp was not far from their own. He stops and sits Naomi down by a large rock, standing on a hill that overlooks the raider's camp. He watches with binoculars as Kahlera is tied to a tree, her arms pulled high above her head.

She is still clothed and seems unharmed, but she struggles as two of the raiders leave and enter a nearby tent. A raider runs his hands along her body, placing them over her breasts. He seems to fondle her as he says something to her; Gareth's blood begins to boil as he grips the binoculars tightly. They quiver in his hands and the plastic creaks as he squeezes. The raider releases Kahlera and leaves, followed shortly by the fourth. He isn't sure what their plans for her are, but whatever it is, he isn't going to allow it. He turns back to Naomi and kneels beside her.

“I need you to listen, okay?” He says softly. “If they are going to hurt or rape her, then I’m going down there, and you’ll have to wait. If they leave her there for a while, then I’ll wait until it gets dark and go get her. Either way, I’m not going to leave you for long... Okay?”

He sets his hand on Naomi’s chin, turning her head to look at him. She nods slowly and Gareth turns back to watch the camp. He puts away his binoculars and starts to head closer to the camp, trying to be silent. Kahlera struggles with the ropes on her wrists and looks over her shoulder. The raiders are arguing amongst themselves inside of a large tent. They seem to be debating who will rape her first. She concentrates and manifests her aura claws. She sticks out her right index finger as a golden blade nearly nine inches long grows from her fingertip.

Gareth stops and watches the blade extending from Kahlera’s finger. She tries to cut the ropes above her wrists, but a raider suddenly comes out of the tent, dropping his pants. She coils her finger, hiding the blade as it fades away.

“Looks like I won. Ever had a human?” He asks with a twisted grin.

He holds his erect penis as he steps up to her from behind. Gareth draws Vetra and rushes him, but shuffles leaves and sticks while he is still a distance away, catching the raider's attention. The raider stops and looks into the woods.

"Who's there? Is that you Mack?" He calls out.

Gareth has already hidden himself behind a tree, not wanting the raider to call all of his friends out at once.

"Fuck!" The raider pulls up his pants. "Don't play games, you asshole. I could be balls deep by now!" He says as he draws a dagger and moves toward the woods. "I get to go first, so fuck off!"

Gareth creeps around the large tree trunk, in full view of Kahlera, who watches on. Gareth stands behind the raider who looks into the darkness. He aims at the back of his head, and squeezes the trigger without hesitation. Blood, and bits of brain matter explode from his skull, and he drops to the ground with a loud thud. Gareth whistles in amazement at the sight, and quickly moves to another tree, dashing away from the corpse. The other three thugs come out and look around, drawing swords and axes.

"What was that?" One asks.

“I don’t know, but Mack isn’t back yet.” Another says.

“Where did Donovan go?” The first thug asks.

“Shut up and walk the camp!” The third barks.

They wander the camp and quickly find the corpse. The man calls to his friends as he stands over the lifeless husk. The other two rush to the body and the three raiders examine it. Gareth steps out from behind a tree and aims, firing into the unsuspecting raiders. Several rounds rip into the body of one, and the other two scatter. Gareth walks calmly up to the men, his rage at its peak. He fires slowly with well-placed shots, hitting another raider in the back. The final remaining raider turns back to look at his attacker. He stumbles, falling over onto his side as Gareth casually walks up to him.

“Scream for me...” Gareth says with a smile.

“What?” He cries out in confusion and terror.

“Scream for me, bitch!” Gareth demands.

Gareth stands well out of reach of his victim, just about five meters away. He aims down at an angle, pointing Vetra at his head. He slowly moves the pistol around as he seems to decide where to shoot the man.

“Please! Please don’t kill me! I didn’t mean it! I-”

Gareth fires a single round into the man's throat, interrupting his pleading. He holsters Vetra and squats down, as he watches the man choke to death on his own blood. He gets up and returns to Kahlera, who watches in awe. He takes out his large recurved knife and gently rests a hand on her wrists as he cuts her free.

"Why did you do that?" Kahlera asks in a soft, melancholy voice.

"He had it coming, and he knew it. He was already dead." Gareth replies.

"No..." Kahlera clarifies. "Why did you come after me?" She asks.

"What the hell kind of question is that?!" Gareth growls angrily.

"This is the second time I have caused you trouble. Third if you count that mushroom thing. I am not worth it." Kahlera says as she looks solemnly to the ground.

"Yes, you are! Don't ever belittle yourself like that again." Gareth barks.

Her eyes immediately race up to look at him; they well up with tears as he speaks.

“Look... You are a part of my group; my companion. I like *and* trust you, and I’m not going to let anyone hurt you, at least not while I’m alive. You had better get used to that. Besides, when you have people that you care about, a little suffering comes with the territory.” He speaks with a smile.

Kahlera’s eyes keep welling with tears as he frees her from her bindings. He sheaths his knife and reaches out to her, gently caressing her arm. She can’t contain herself any longer and lunges at him, holding him tightly as she cries. He wraps his arms around her and gently strokes her back, trying to comfort her. Her tail sways and she buries her short snout underneath his chin, laying her head on his shoulder. Emotionally, this is as close to a male as she has ever felt, and it overwhelms her.

“It’s alright.” He says softly into her feline ear.

He wipes a tear away with his thumb and gives her a tight hug. He gently strokes her cheek with his hand. She slowly calms down and releases him, pulling away from his grasp. He looks around and searches the camp, finding her stainless-steel knife and Keffiyeh that the raiders confiscated from her. She looks over the camp, collecting important tools, extra food, and currency, before placing them in a sack. Gareth taps Kahlera on her shoulder. As she turns around, he presents her with her knife and scarf. She takes them from his hands as they lock eyes.

“You seemed really into that.” She says as she motions to the bodies.

“I uh... I enjoyed it.” Gareth begins. “Not because I enjoyed killing, but because I wanted to punish them...”

She looks at him with curiosity. He hesitates to continue, but as he gazes into her eyes, he feels his emotional walls crumbling. He wonders why he is even bothering to hide his feelings.

“They had the audacity to think that they could take you away from me, and I really liked making them pay for it. I don’t ever want to lose you...” He admits, lowering his head in embarrassment.

He worries that she will be afraid of him now. He can’t blame her if she was, as he is almost afraid of himself. He has never killed so gleefully before. He didn’t even realize that he was capable of such actions. He is also scared that he revealed his feelings too soon, and that she may not share them. His heart pounds in his chest, even harder than during any encounter he had with the raiders. Her mere presence makes his heart race, and the gaze of her golden eyes makes his temperature rise.

Kahlera is touched, and finds the sentiment very sweet. She struggles to find the words to speak to him, but her heart pounds and her hands twitch. She doesn't want to feign disinterest any longer. She steps up to him and rests a hand on his chest. He looks back to her as she shakes her head, moving her bangs from her face. She looks up at him with her golden eyes. A gentle breeze blows; their hair flutters in the wind as though they were dancing, while they gaze at each other.

She slides a hand up and rests it on the back of his neck, tilting her head slightly. She pulls at him and Gareth leans in. He slides his arms around her body, holding her up against him. They lean ever closer as she moves her other hand around his back. They hold each other as their lips meet. They share a passionate kiss and her body trembles. Everything is turbulent; her emotions and the excitement, combined with his actions, are clouding her mind and making sound judgement impossible. This is pure impulse.

They hold each other and kiss repeatedly, as she grips his back. Their breathing becomes labored as his hands slide down towards the small of her back, creeping ever lower. She moves her hand from the back of his neck and down his side, racing towards his belt. Their hearts are beating out of their chests. She suddenly stops and pushes away as she struggles to come to her senses. She should not be succumbing to her desires so easily, nor should she be consorting with a human at all.

“Wait, wait.” She says.

“What?” Gareth asks, concerned.

Kahlera pauses, as though trying to come up with an excuse. She suddenly has a realization.

“Where is Naomi?” She asks him.

“Oh, damn.” Gareth mutters.

He picks up the sack of valuables and takes Kahlera by the hand. They walk back up the hill towards the rock where he left Naomi only moments earlier. Naomi sits behind the rock, unmoved since he went down the hill. She keeps her eyes closed tightly and covers her ears with her hands, as though hiding from the reality of the situation. Gareth calls out to her, but she can’t hear him. He startles her by tapping her shoulder. She looks up and leaps at him, hugging him as she realizes that he isn’t dead. She climbs off him and the three of them walk back to their camp.

“Hey, Kahlera... What was that thing you did?” Gareth suddenly asks.

“What thing?” She answers in a confused tone.

**“That claw thing. I saw it when I came down the hill.”
He replies.**

**“Oh, that... That was my talent. One of them, at least.”
She says with a sigh.**

“What talent?” Naomi asks.

As they walk, Kahlera lifts her right hand. She focuses on her claws and after a second, golden blades grow from her fingertips, startling Naomi. She smiles and waves to her human companions with the nine-inch claws.

“Okay, Krueger. You can put those away now.” Gareth tells Kahlera.

He looks in awe as the blades fade away.

“How did you do that?” Naomi asks.

“I sometimes forget that you are new here.” Kahlera begins. “It is my aura; the physical manifestation of my spirit.”

“Kind of sounds like ‘The Force’.” Gareth thinks quietly.

“Some people have an aura strong enough to control, using powerful skills called ‘talents’. I have several, but they are somewhat weak. I did say that I was not much of a fighter. With focus, you can summon the talents at will,

though unskilled users typically only see them appear when they are in mortal danger, or very upset.” Kahlera continues.

“Does everyone have these talents?” Gareth asks.

“No. Maybe only a quarter, and only a few of that quarter are exceptional. I am not exceptional.” She answers.

“So why didn’t you use them when you were being captured? I didn’t see those guys with happy magic claws.” Gareth comments.

“The reason that I did not use my aura talents is because people with talents, especially the Sahvorai, are often targeted by people without talents. If I used my talents and failed, I most certainly would have been killed right away, a risk I was not willing to take. Waiting to use my powers and allowing myself to be captured was a better option than fighting, at least in that particular situation.” She answers.

“I understand the reason, but you were almost raped...” He retorts.

“Well... I am not letting that happen again.” She adds.

“And neither am I... So please, if there *is* a next time, feel free to use whatever you can.” Gareth says with a smile.

Kahlera smiles back; she knows that he is sincere. They arrive at their camp, just in time for the darkness of night to shroud them completely. Gareth removes the raider’s corpse, dragging it from their camp. They eat the

meals that Naomi had set aside earlier and sit in relative silence. There isn't anything to say tonight. Gareth and Kahlera keep looking back at each other, sometimes at the same time. It is soon time to sleep, and they prepare their sleeping bags and bedrolls for the night. Gareth motions to Kahlera, who is a short distance away. She approaches and kneels down beside him, holding her bedroll under her arm.

"I want to keep you close." Gareth says with a smile, patting the space right beside him.

Kahlera feels herself flush as her heart beats harder and faster. She sets her bedroll down next to his sleeping bag. It isn't nearly as cold as it was the previous nights, so he unzips the sleeping bag, keeping it draped over him like a blanket. Gareth uses his pack for a headrest, giving her his clothes pillow again. They lay there in silence, supposedly trying to sleep, but Gareth looks back over to her as she keeps her back to him. Quite a bit of time passes and they are both still awake. Gareth looks over to her again and wonders what he is waiting for.

Kahlera is suddenly startled as Gareth moves closer to her. She turns her head and looks over her shoulder as he presses his chest against her back, and his pelvis against her buttocks. He drapes an arm over her and leans in, resting his face just over her shoulder. Her mouth hangs open and her eyelids lower as she breathes heavily. He places his hand on the ground, his arm brushing against her

flat stomach. He nuzzles the side of her snout with his nose for a moment, before giving her a passionate kiss. She promptly rolls over onto her back and gazes up at him.

The spontaneous release of the built-up tension pushes her mind aside all over again; she invites the impulsiveness, and Gareth, with open arms. He leans over her and kisses her again and again as his free hand explores her body, starting from her abdomen and working its way up. He feels her breast underneath her top; it fills his hand, and her soft fur rests between his fingers. She pulls at Gareth's belt and he climbs atop her, holding himself above her on his elbows and knees. They kiss passionately as her hands caresses his body, sliding up and underneath his shirt as she feels his skin on her hands. She gently scratches him with her claws, and he seems to enjoy it. His flesh is so warm and inviting to her, and hers to him.

"Wait." Kahlera suddenly whispers.

"Yeah?" Gareth stops.

"Is Naomi awake?" She asks him.

They both look over, seeing that Naomi is fast asleep. She seems to mumble, and briefly snorts as she rolls over. Gareth shakes his head 'no' as he looks back down at Kahlera.

“Good.” She says with a lustful grin.

She repositions herself underneath Gareth, spreading her legs farther apart as he kneels between them. She reaches down and lifts up her skirt, but struggles with his belt and pants. Gareth can’t help but laugh quietly, before doing it himself.

“Do you need help with this part too?” Gareth winks.

“No. I know what to do from here.” She coos.

“Good. So do I.”

He leans in and continues kissing her. His lips move from hers, traveling along her snout and past her cheek. He necks her tenderly, and she closes her eyes. His touch is intoxicating; she can’t believe that she is letting this happen, or that she waited this long. She holds onto his hips and prepares herself. He leans into her slowly; her grip tightens as she suddenly gasps.

Episode 09: I Put A Spell On You

Several days have passed since Faye and Kelly have left Tim’s hut. They walked all day and through part of the

night, stopping only for short breaks to snack and drink. When they were both too exhausted to march any longer, they reluctantly set up camp. They have repeated this pattern for the last few days. Using their flashlights, they begin to construct a basic campsite for the night, pushing leaves and sticks away from their would-be campfire. They have already had to change their batteries; Faye worries that they will soon have to start camping at twilight.

“Do you wonder what Gareth or Naomi are doing right now?” Kelly asks Faye, as they collect dry tinder.

“Naomi’s probably built a wind-powered generator and is watching anime on her laptop right now; Gareth is probably screwing that cat girl.” Faye answers.

“You think so?”

“Oh yeah. Did you see how he was looking at that *thing*.” Faye comments.

“No, I meant the generator.” Kelly corrects.

Faye looks back at him and sighs. She shakes her head and smiles as she squats down and brings up her magnesium flint stick. Striking the flint with the back of her Mora knife, she sparks the magnesium and gets the campfire going. Kelly sets down the pile of sticks in his arms and turns back, away from the infant fire. He is suddenly startled by the appearance of a hideously pale girl, standing half-naked before him, her hand resting

against a tree trunk. Somehow, she silently approached the both of them, and stands within arm's reach of Kelly.

"Holy shit!" He exclaims as he stumbles back, kicking the burgeoning fire and promptly killing it.

"Hey, you idiot! Watch your fat feet!" Faye growls.

Kelly draws his pistol and aims at the woman, who doesn't seem to realize that he's holding a weapon. She looks to him, wearing a top of animal hide that slings over a single shoulder and bears her midriff, and an animal hide skirt that ends just past her buttocks. She squats down and moves over to Faye, who turns to see what he is pointing at.

"Oh God!" Faye exclaims as she stumbles back.

The girl reaches out and touches her leg as Faye pulls away, backing up behind Kelly's legs. Her grip is ice cold.

"Who the hell are you?!" Faye cries out.

"Can you help me? I need to find my way home." She says in a soft but unsettling monotone.

Kelly and Faye look back at each other and then to the sheet-white girl. With nothing to pack away, and not sure

how else to make her leave, they silently nod in agreement to one another.

“Alright...” Faye begins as she stands up.

“We’ll help you.” Kelly finishes.

The girl gets up and grins, slowly tilting her head to the side. She begins to walk away from the pair, heading slowly back into the woods. They turn on their flashlights and carefully follow behind. The pale girl sees their lights and looks back. As their lights touch her skin, they realize just how white she actually is. She appears to have absolutely no blood in her body, and her eyes are dark and glossy. The girl holds up her hand and closes her eyes, summoning her aura to create a ball of glittering white light that floats and follows her.

The two adventurers are amazed by her casual display of what can only be called magic. They turn off their flashlights. She leads them through the woods, as though she knows where she is going. She moves past obstacles in the dirt as if she had walked this path dozens of times before. They ask her repeatedly where she is heading, but she never answers.

“I need to go home...” She says repeatedly.

“Don’t we all...” Faye mutters.

The girl suddenly turns and walks through bushes, before she disappears into the darkness. Stepping through, Kelly and Faye find themselves at the edge of a large graveyard. The girl sits atop a tombstone, carved into the shape of an hourglass, in the center aisle and at the rear of the graveyard. She swings her feet back and forth childishly as she looks to them, a twisted little smile across her face.

“Welcome home.” She says in a deep and echoing voice.

Her violet aura glows around her, as she stands atop the tombstone. She lifts her arms up to the night sky and tilts her head back, cackling maniacally as a violet mist pours from her palms, filling the air. She looks back to the two as Kelly takes aim to fire. The witch sees his lack of fear and assumes the silver L of metal must be a weapon. She reaches ahead and the pistol is pulled from his hands telepathically.

“Naughty boy...” She says as she waves the pistol slowly, as though presenting a trophy.

Faye draws and throws her Mora knife, a skill she has practiced occasionally at home. To her amazement, the knife plants itself just above the girl’s left hip. She screams

and swings her arms, throwing the violet mist at her. Neither of them know what the mist is, but they know that it can't be good. They dive out of the way as it slams into a tree. The tree withers and dies in a matter of seconds.

Faye gets up and looks for a weapon, but doesn't have anything. She suddenly wishes that this whole mess could have happened a year later, when she was old enough to buy her own handgun to smuggle along to Belize. She runs through the cemetery as the witch swings her arms, moving the mist to follow her. It withers the trees on contact, as she jumps over a tombstone and hides behind it. The tombstone slowly erodes away, as though the mist is speeding up time itself.

The witch suddenly screams in pain as Kelly slashes a huge gash in her left calf muscle. She was so focused on Faye, that when Kelly dove out of the way and landed behind her, the witch never turned to deal with him. She turns back to him and extends a hand. A violet shockwave blasts Kelly back from her as the witch struggles to stand on her injured leg. She suddenly falls over and lands with a thud on the ground.

Faye rushes her with a large stick, intent on clubbing her to death. The witch grabs the stick with both hands, dropping Kelly's gun as the two women begin wrestling over the stick. Faye suddenly releases the stick, grabbing her knife that sticks out of the witch's abdomen. She quickly

yanks it out. The witch screams in pain and forces Faye back with another shockwave, as Kelly tries to slash at her with the sword again. The witch throws him back with yet another shockwave, and subsequently summons the mist.

She heaves the mist towards Kelly, who panics and puts up his left arm to shield himself. The mist slams into a translucent, cobalt blue wall of concentrated aura, flying around and behind him without so much as a scratch. The witch seems horrified; Kelly has talents like she does. Using her telekinesis, she drops a large branch on Kelly, tangling his legs within it. She turns back and charges at Faye, determined to finish her off quickly.

Faye charges in turn, roaring in blood rage as a faint orange glow radiates from her body. The witch throws the violet mist at Faye, who screams in anger. The mist is blown through the air by a powerful orange shockwave that shoots out from Faye's hands. Faye keeps charging and grabs the witch by her icy cold throat before managing to fire a second shockwave. The blast snaps the witch's neck, and simultaneously heaves her body over ten meters from Faye, impaling her on a broken branch of a tree, nearly six inches in diameter.

"Fuck you..." Faye mutters as she gasps for breath and raises a middle finger to the witch's dangling corpse.

Episode 10: B.S.T.

Faye walks up to the RIA 1911 that sits in the dirt. She picks up the pistol and brushes it off, noting that Kelly never even took the safety off. She walks over to Kelly and hands him his sidearm and the two collectively push the large branch over enough for him to free his legs. He stands and looks at the swaying corpse that hangs in the tree. Blood runs down the witch's legs and drop onto the ground, making considerable noise in the eerie silence.

"What was that shit?!" Kelly looks to Faye. "I mean, she was all glow-y, and insane and you were just as bad, and you killed her with the same powers and..." Kelly rambles.

"Shut up." Faye says, holding up a hand.

Kelly looks at her hand and side steps away.

"You did that shield thing." Faye point out. "Maybe it wasn't the sword that was powerful. Maybe it was you."

"How sweet of you to finally notice." Kelly chuckles.

“A cemetery means a nearby town, or at least a village. We’re probably not far from people.” Faye thinks aloud, running a finger along her bottom lip.

“As long as they aren’t like her.” Kelly comments.

They walk around the cemetery for a moment as they look for a trail, or any sign of civilization. It doesn’t take them long to find a well-worn path that leads away from the graveyard. They begin hiking down the path, and after only a matter of minutes, turn the corner and exit the woods to see that the trail leads to a small village. They enter the town and hear voices coming from a building. There are no signs to reveal what any structure is, but as late as it is, they don’t know what else to do.

They push the door open and step inside of the building, startling the patrons of a tavern. They look to the newcomers with suspicion, and demand to know where they came from.

“The graveyard.” Faye replies with a cold stare and a colder monotone.

“You’re with... Her?!” A patron cries out in terror.

“That bitch we left strung up in the tree?” Faye asks.

“No. We are not associated with any evildoers of any kind.” Kelly immediately adds.

The patrons talk amongst themselves for a moment as Kelly and Faye look on.

“The witch was ruling our village as a Goddess. Every so often she would come and drain the life force from one of us, to feed her aura.” One patron says.

“By killing her, you’ve done us a service, and freed our town.” The barkeep adds.

The villagers rush outside and head directly for the cemetery as Faye and Kelly sit on crudely carved wooden stools in front of the bar. The barkeep sets down two pints of ale before them.

“I don’t drink.” Kelly says to him.

“I never got that. You’re Irish, but you never drink.” Faye comments.

“I’m also British. The tea totaling loser often wins out.” Kelly smirks.

“A shame...” Faye murmurs.

She reaches out and grabs the pint, sliding it over to herself. Kelly is left in shock by how drastically Faye has changed, and in such a short time. She isn’t anything like

the girl that he and Gareth had spent the last ten years treating like a sister. She starts chugging the first pint as she leaves a hand on the counter. It trembles slightly as she tilts her head back, drinking the entire pint without taking a breath. Townsfolk barge back into the tavern, cheering and shouting happily.

“They killed the witch!” One shouts.

“Praise to our deliverers!” Another exclaims.

“Looks like this is all on the house, now.” The barkeep laughs.

The villagers swarm the two and shower them with praise. They crowd around them as Faye seems more annoyed. She clenches her teeth and her knuckles turn white on the counter. The muscles in her arm bulge as she seems to tense up. Kelly immediately notices and leads the villagers away from her, actively talking and joking with as many as he can. After nearly an hour, many of the villagers return home to sleep, but they have all decided to throw a feast for their two saviors the very next day.

The tavern soon clears out and Kelly walks back to the barkeep. Though the tavern hasn't functioned as an inn since the witch took over the town, there are still beds upstairs. Kelly makes a deal with the barkeep to stay the night, and promises to find better accommodations the next day, if they should be required too. The barkeep is

exceptionally generous, and doesn't accept currency when Kelly offers to pay. The barkeep begins cleaning, leaving the two alone at the bar.

"Alright, Revy..." Kelly begins as he turns to face Faye. "I don't know what the hell your problem is, but you need to get a grip. Right. Now."

"The fuck are you talking about?" Faye grumbles.

"You know damn well what I'm talking about. You were adventurous and kind of hard core back at home, but this is something else entirely. I don't know what has gotten into you, but you're turning into some cliché action girl with a dark and troubled past, and you aren't that. You're Faye."

"Valentine?" Faye smirks.

"No... I grew up with you. I know you. You hardly ever swore! But whoever you are right now, I don't know this person." Kelly says.

"Maybe this is just who I am? Maybe I've always been like this? Maybe it took me coming here to realize it?" Faye turns to him.

"No. I went through middle *and* high school with who you always were. She was an adventurous, spirited, but gentle and passionate girl. She had a heart, and more patience than a chipmunk. She wasn't Riza Hawkeye, Electra, Lara Croft, or Michelle Rodriguez. She was Faye." Kelly continues.

"Touching..." Faye says, glaring at him with cold eyes.

“That’s what I’m talking about! Where did that dead stare come from, and why is it focused on me? I’m not the bad guy here, and you aren’t either.” Kelly finishes.

“Maybe this is how I’m coping with the stress.” Faye poses.

“Well killing everyone and everything in sight isn’t a good way to cope, especially when they’re a bunch of innocent people, thanking you for freeing them from tyranny. There are better ways to cope.” Kelly scolds her.

“Whatever. I don’t feel like talking anymore.” Faye grumbles.

“Fine... Just think about what I said.” Kelly says as he gets up from the stool and walks upstairs.

Faye slumps over on the bar and rests her head on the table. She sighs as she stares at the dark, musty wood. She reflects on how she was before the trip to Belize, and how she is now that they are in this bizarre world. In truth, Faye doesn’t even understand why she is acting the way that she is. She is so anxious and upset; she wants to race to the finish line, and blow the mountains up at the same time. Her anger over her situation, and her desire to be rid of this world, are boiling over and turning into pure, unadulterated hatred. It’s all she can feel.

She rises from her seat, and walks slowly up the stairs. She sees a door partially open and peeks inside. Kelly lies back on a bed with a single candle on the nightstand

illuminating him. She tries the door across the hall and sees that it is empty. She walks inside and picks up a candle. She shaves a bit of magnesium from her fire starter and rubs the shavings into the wick before striking the flint with the back of her Mora knife, lighting the shavings and the wick. She sits on the bed, noting how uncomfortable it feels compared to her old bed.

“Still better than the ground, I guess...” She thinks quietly aloud.

She lies back and stares at the ceiling. For a moment, she thinks about what Kelly said to her earlier that night, before they even encountered the witch. She wonders what Naomi is doing right now. Is she sleeping? Is she running? Is she even still alive? She ponders Naomi’s fate, and clenches her fist tightly. As she imagines Naomi in the wilderness, cold, hungry, afraid, or even dead, her eyes well up. A tear runs down her face. She forces the thoughts out of her mind and rolls over on the bed.

She takes a few deep breaths, conquering her emotions. She stares at the flame of the candle until it burns nearly an inch of wax away. As her body becomes exhausted, but her mind races. She is determined not to fail Naomi. She blows out the candle and wills herself to sleep.

“Hey, Faye.” Kelly says through the door as he knocks.

He's been awake for several hours, and the sun is high in the sky. If he had to guess, he would say that it is almost noon. The villagers have prepared a feast in the town square in their honor, and are nearly ready to begin. Personally, Kelly would rather wait until later, but would never turn down free food, regardless of the time. He knocks again on her door.

"Faye. It's almost time to eat. Are you alive in there?"
He calls into the room.

He hears shuffling from within, and after a moment, the door slowly creaks open. A groggy looking Faye stands just inside of the doorway, still fully clothed and wearing her boots.

"Breakfast?" Kelly smiles.

"Sure..." Faye groans.

Kelly turns to head down the hall.

"Hey." Faye begins.

"Yeah?" Kelly stops and turns back to her.

“About last night... I’m sorry. I’m just having a tough time.” Faye apologizes.

“You and me both... I’ll see you at breakfast. Man, I hope they have steak!” Kelly grins.

Faye chuckles as Kelly rushes quickly down the stairs, before running outside. She looks out of a window and sees the festival atmosphere down below. She takes a deep breath and sighs as she prepares herself. She clenches a fist tightly and tries to contain the burning rage as she walks downstairs. She smooths out her hair and ponytails it before exiting the tavern. A crowd is gathered around, talking to Kelly.

As soon as Faye opens the door, dozens of people notice her and begin talking to her. They praise her and thank her, but the voices turn into a cacophony of noise that vibrates inside of her skull. She moves through the crowd, noticing that many of the townsfolk are surprised that one of their champions is a woman, especially the other females. She finds Kelly at a table, flanked by several young women, who all swoon as he regales them of the battle. She takes a seat parallel to him and collects a plate.

As she places food on the plate and takes a cup of wine, she notes that Kelly praises her skill and fierceness in battle; he doesn’t attempt to exaggerate himself even the

slightest. Regardless, he still has a small army of fans, most of them women, and he is certainly not shying away from any of them. Faye remains silent throughout the feast, content to eat quietly and allow Kelly to do all of the talking.

As Kelly talks to the thankful and joyous villagers, he continues to regale them with the witch's defeat. Several villagers then explain the aura and talents to the pair. They explain the basic use to their champions, and seem rather surprised that they *don't* already have full control of their abilities. For once, Faye is capable of focusing on what the villagers are saying to her. While she is interested in learning more about her powers, Kelly is interested in bragging about said powers to the women.

At some point, Kelly leaves the table and talks with various groups of people, moving deeper into the crowd. Time passes by and Faye becomes frustrated as Kelly does not return. Originally, she assumed that 'feast' meant 'eat and leave' but is unpleasantly surprised when she is trapped in several hours of socializing. She doesn't care to socialize; she wants to keep walking to road. Naomi is out there, and she needs to find her.

When she struggles to maintain her composure, she moves away from the table and looks for Kelly. After searching the festival grounds on her own for some time, she can no longer stand being around the crowds of people,

every single one of whom can't help but talk to, or praise her. She quickly walks back into the tavern, shutting the door behind her and racing up the stairs. At this point, she is ready to push the bedframe against the door and wait there until she is no longer famous.

She quickly climbs the steps and rounds the corner, walking down the hallway. She sighs in relief as she can finally hear herself think. She nearly forgot what peace and quiet sounded like. She leans against the wall and rests her head on the doorframe to her room, when she hears a strange noise. Curious, she pushes open the door to Kelly's room, where the noise is coming from. Her face flushes as she stands frozen in shock.

Kelly sits naked on his bed with an equally nude girl straddling his pelvis, his back against the headboard. His hands grip her ample bust as she holds onto his shoulders, bouncing up and down atop him. He buries his face between her breasts. Beside them on the bed Faye can see the legs of a second girl, apparently passed out after having been thoroughly used. She steps back as she shuts the door, unnoticed by the lovers.

She heads into her own room and closes the door, sitting down on the floor with her back against it. As she sits there in silence, she can hear Kelly's grunts and the girl's groans and moans. She grits her teeth and clenches her fists in anger.

“That selfish bastard...” She thinks aloud. “I can’t believe he would abandon me like that, just to fuck some village whores. He could have at least warned me! He knew damn well that I wasn’t comfortable being their poster girl. Whatever happens next is on him...”

Faye stands up as her blood boils. She can feel her temperature rising by the second. She grunts, and her grunt evolves into a scream as she thrusts her hands before her and throws a focused shockwave at the bed, shattering the frame. The bedframe’s pieces fly into the wall, jutting out the other side as Faye breathes heavily. The release of energy serves to calm her down. She decides that now is a perfectly good time to train.

She leaves the room as Kelly steps out, a weaved cloth blanket covering his waist and below. He begins to speak, but Faye points the palm of her left hand at him, quickly silencing him. She walks down the steps and exits the tavern. The villagers see her and step away in fear as she walks by. She grins as she feels empowered by their terror. This must have been the reason for the witch’s behavior; she understands fully now, and relates. She walks to the path that leads to the graveyard. Heading back, she is determined to put her skills to the test.

“I’m so sorry for this.” Kelly says as he leaves the tavern, now fully dressed. He passes the barkeep some coins and heads outside. “Did anyone see where Faye went? Where’s the girl I was with?” He asks.

“She went to the cemetery.” A young boy’s voice calls out from the crowd.

Kelly rushes back to the cemetery. He hears headstones breaking as he moves ever closer. He turns the last corner and sees Faye, standing atop the hourglass shaped headstone, shattering tombstones with focused blasts from her palms.

“What are you doing?” Kelly asks, carefully approaching her.

“Practicing.” Faye says with a pleasant smile.

“Oh... You know you wrecked that tavern...” Kelly adds.

“So?” Faye blasts another tombstone into pieces.

“So that’s not good... .. What is bothering you?” He asks with a raised eyebrow.

Faye stops and looks back at Kelly. She jumps down from the tombstone and approaches him, weaving her fingers together and bending them backward to crack her knuckles.

“Nothing is bothering me, so just go back and finish up with that tramp of yours. I get the feeling I interrupted you.” Faye snickers.

“Are... Are you jealous?” Kelly asks in surprise.

“Hah! Not in the least, or at least not of you.” Faye laughs.

“So you want to get laid?” Kelly struggles to understand.

“I’m out here relieving stress. I feel better when I do this, so go back and relieve your own stress. It’s not like I’m hurting anyone.” Faye explains.

“Yeah... Except for the people who no longer know where their loved ones are buried.” Kelly says as he shakes his head.

“If they cared enough to visit, they wouldn’t need tombstones to know that.” Faye retorts.

“That’s not the point. It’s the principal of the thing.”

“Look, God damnit! You need to fuck off right now, or the next thing I hit won’t be a piece of meaningless rock!” She snarls.

Unwilling to fight her, he backs down and leaves. He returns to the village as Faye keeps working. She destroys every single headstone, saving the hourglass headstone for last. She finally feels calm, and even a little tired. Now late in the evening, she walks down the path and back towards the village. She stops when she sees Kelly and the same

girl from earlier sitting together on the path. She approaches them, looking down at the two.

“Faye, this is Marcella.” Kelly begins. “She’s a huntress for the village and knows a way over the mountains that can save almost a week’s worth of walking.”

“Really? I didn’t know you had time to talk.” Faye taunts.

“In between love-making, we actually shared quite a bit.” Kelly slings back.

“So what’s the catch?” Faye asks.

“I go with you, and we leave right now.” Marcella replies.

“I didn’t know she could use her mouth to speak. Does she know any other tricks?” Faye mocks her.

“Hey, you did my village a favor, but you’re dangerous and scaring everyone. They aren’t happy about the tombstones either, but if you leave immediately, that will be the end of it.” Marcella says sternly.

Faye shrugs, as though she doesn’t take the situation seriously. With twilight fast approaching, they return to the tavern and collect their gear before swiftly departing. Marcella leads them down a road and turns towards the mountains, taking a well-hidden pass with a steep incline. They climb as quickly as possible as the daylight fades away. They eventually reach level ground on the pass.

“We’ll have to camp here tonight and move on at daybreak. It’s too dangerous to travel at night, even with your lights.” Marcella tells them.

“Whatever you say... Marcella.” Faye snickers.

Faye doesn’t care. She’s just happy to finally be moving again. She looks back at the village in the distance and smiles, giving a single hand wave to the pathetic little speck of civilization. Marcella starts a campfire as Kelly gathers wood. Faye leans against a rock and looks up at the sky. She wonders how Naomi is doing, and imagines herself climbing through the mountain pass. Her daydream is only interrupted by Marcella’s and Kelly’s talking and laughter.

Episode 11: Trouble In Paradise

Gareth wakes the next morning; he slowly opens his eyes as a gently breeze flutters the sleeping bag which covers him. He lies flat on his back with his head resting on his makeshift clothes pillow. Kahlera sleeps peacefully, tucked underneath his arm with her head on his shoulder and her snout buried in his pectoral muscle. Her leg drapes over his, with her knee resting between his legs, while her tail stretches across her hips and over his pelvis. Her hand

rests on his torso as she holds him close, like a child with a teddy bear. He looks down at her and smiles, watching the cat girl sleeping peacefully.

Sunlight beams down, warming his skin as Kahlera shifts. She slowly opens her eyes and yawns. Gareth reaches down and gently moves her bangs from in front of her eyes. She looks up at him and smiles, her golden eyes gleaming brightly. He reaches out and gently taps a finger onto her pink nose as she curls her fingers, gently scratching his bare chest with her claws. As they gaze at each other, she suddenly seems surprised, as though she has just awakened from a dream, and doesn't know where she is or what she is doing.

She bolts up, tossing the sleeping bag off her body. Looking down, she realizes that she's topless. Her full breasts show openly, covered in only the soft white fur of her body, matching her belly. She quickly covers her chest with her arms as she scrambles around, looking for her clothes. She finds her top and quickly covers her chest, tying the cordage behind her neck and mid-back. She stands, but isn't wearing her skirt either. The white fur reaches down, covering her groin and inner thighs. She reaches down to cover herself with her hand while she looks for her skirt. She can't find it anywhere.

"Over here." Naomi calls out.

She holds up Kahlera's skirt with one hand, pinched between her thumb and index finger. She sits with her back facing the lovers. Kahlera walks up and takes the skirt from the girl, wrapping it around her waist and tying it above and then below her tail. Gareth slips on his underwear and pants, buckling them before he slides his belt through the loops. He looks for his shirt, seeing it sitting far on the other side of camp. Perhaps the wind had blown it there? He gets up and puts on his boots before walking over to his shirt, sitting near Naomi. He reaches down and picks up the shirt.

"I am going to check the snares." Kahlerla says.

"I'll go with you." Gareth chirps.

"No... *You* stay here... I will be right back." She quickly replies in a stern voice.

"Uh... Okay." Gareth replies in surprise.

He's quite confused. As Kahlera walks away from him, he can't help but stare. He wonders why she is suddenly uninterested in spending time with him. He frowns and sighs. Naomi turns back to him, seeing the deep scratches on his back and shoulders. She blushes and quickly turns back away. Gareth slips on his orange t-shirt; he winces as the shirt slides over the red claw marks. He collects Vetra from near his sleeping bag. He sits down next to Naomi; they remain silent for a moment.

**“Hey... I’m uh... I’m sorry you had to see any of that.”
Gareth apologizes to Naomi.**

“Copulation is natural and healthy.” Naomi replies.

“I just want to make sure that you’re alright. I don’t want to scar you for life.” Gareth smirks.

**“Nothing that I cannot overcome, but are *you* alright?”
Naomi asks as she turns to him.**

“I don’t know... I guess.” Gareth begins.

“How do you not know?” She questions him.

He takes a deep breath and sighs.

“I think I was expecting this morning to play out a little differently...” He answers.

“What do you mean?” Naomi raises an eyebrow.

“You know... Happier, and less like she had made a mistake.” Gareth explains.

“Perhaps she is adjusting. I highly doubt it was purely impulsive behavior.” Naomi assures him.

Gareth drops his head and laughs.

“What’s so funny?” She tilts her head in confusion.

“Instinctive behavior dominates the subconscious; pure impulse is a damn powerful force. It often makes you do things that logic says you shouldn’t. You might be *too* logical to understand.”

“You think that I am wrong?” She asks, offended.

“Possibly.” He mutters.

“Possible, but improbable.” Naomi quips.

They sit there for a few more moments. Gareth unloads Vetra and seems to play with his sidearm, pointing at several trees and spinning the Glock on his left index finger. He notices his tactical light is dimming; he quickly swaps the batteries for a fresh set. After waiting a while for Kahlera, Naomi and Gareth begin cleaning up the campsite, leaving only enough supplies to cook breakfast. As they build a new fire, Kahlera appears from the woods, the snare wires bundled in one hand and a large hare in the other, already skinned and cleaned.

She sets the rabbit down and cuts off pieces, adding water to the small cook-set that Gareth owns. Kahlera makes a rabbit stew, adding bits of leftover deer jerky, wild berries and edible grasses. Gareth tries to talk to her, but she ignores him. She stares straight ahead like a shell-shocked veteran, as though she is very deep in thought. She makes a strange red tea from herbs and a dried mushroom cap that are stored in her medicine pouch. She mixes the tea

in a wooden bowl and brings it up to her snout. She sniffs it, then blows on the tea to cool it down.

“What’s that for?” Naomi asks her.

“It prevents pregnancy.” Kahlera casually replies.

She brings the bowl to her lips; Naomi watches inquisitively, while Gareth’s face flushes as red as a stop light. They eat in silence before throwing dirt over their small fire and collecting their packs. Kahlera leads the way back to the road. Without a word, she begins walking, not even waiting for her companions. Naomi and Gareth both rush to catch up to her. Gareth walks close to Kahlera and leans in.

“Are you alright?” He quietly asks her.

“Fine. Why?” She replies in a dry monotone.

“Because I care about you.” He answers.

“Do you?” She murmurs.

Her words cut him deep inside. Her golden eyes glance at him. His concern is sincere, but she looks back to the road. They continue to walk in silence. Hours pass. They stop only for short breaks, and to fill their canteens near a small stream that appears beside the road. Sometime during the early afternoon, they see a figure lying alongside the

path. They all stop as Gareth draws his sidearm. He holds Vetra before him, gripping her tightly with both hands. They slowly approach the motionless being.

Lying on the ground, and covered in bloody wounds, is an unconscious Sahvorai male. Gareth looks around, expecting an ambush at any moment. Kahlera looks over the Sahvorai, but doesn't recognize him. He appears as a rabbit, with thick brown fur, long and wide ears that come to sharp points, and a short, fluffy tail. She rolls his body to check the extent of his injuries. The wounded Sahvorai groans, barely conscious as he slowly opens his eyes. Kahlera notes how his injuries have already started to fester.

"There is nothing I can do for him... We better keep going." Kahlera says.

"What, and just leave him here?" Gareth asks, jarred by the suggestion.

"And what would you have me do?" Kahlera growls as she glares at him.

Gareth doesn't have an answer for her. He looks down at the man and feels horrible; no one should die alone. He kneels down by the man and rests a hand on his shoulder. The man opens his eyes and begins to speak.

"Five... Humans... They..." He chokes out.

“It’s alright. Don’t talk.” Gareth says softly to the man. “Don’t you have anything to ease his pain?” He turns to Kahlera.

She stares silently back at him.

“Attacked me yesterday... Went south... Be careful.” The Sahvorai continues before passing out.

“It sounds like you took care of them already.” Kahlera comments.

Gareth looks at the Sahvorai. He can’t fathom what he has been through. He must have been laying there, bleeding and suffering, for nearly 24 hours.

“We should keep moving.” Kahlera says. “More raiders might be near.”

“We’re safe.” Gareth assures her.

“This man is going to die, no matter what we do.” She adds.

“Well he shouldn’t die here alone!” Gareth barks at her.

“Easing his pain would be a waste of resources.” Kahlera continues.

“Then let’s just stay with him until he passes.” Gareth poses.

“You cannot save everyone, Gareth.” Kahlera says.

“She’s right. We need to keep going.” Naomi agrees.

He is appalled by their coldness; Naomi especially surprises him. He realizes that they are correct, but can’t bring himself to simply walk away from the dying man. Gareth reaches out with his right hand, taking the man’s hand in his. He draws Vetra with his left hand and rests the barrel over his temple.

“I’m sorry.” He whispers before squeezing the trigger.

Naomi turns away, but Kahlera watches. He fires a single round into the man’s skull, ending his suffering in an instant. Gareth drops his limp hand, collects his spent shell casing, holsters Vetra, and slowly stands. He stares at Kahlera with fiery eyes. She is taken back by his furious glare, and quickly steps aside. Gareth moves past her and keeps walking down the road. The girls quickly follow. They walk until twilight, before gathering firewood and setting up camp just inside of the woods. Gareth sits at the edge of their camp and looks towards the road, keeping a vigilant watch.

Kahlera sits with Naomi as she stokes the fire, adding a few more logs. They crackle and snap as the fire grows taller and brighter. She leans close to Naomi, surprising her.

“Earlier today...” Kahlera pauses. “Is he always so passionate?”

Naomi simply nods. He returns to the campsite and sits down, taking out some deer jerky to eat. Naomi stands and moves to the other side of the fire, sitting with Gareth. Kahlera stays put, parallel to Gareth with the fire between them.

“What are your burial rituals?” Gareth suddenly asks.

“Sahvorai burn their dead atop alters of wood.” Kahlera answers.

“It’s a shame he can’t have a proper funeral.” Gareth laments.

“Sometimes that is just the way it is...” Kahlera begins. “I did not see you so eager to bury those raiders.”

“That was different. He was a *victim*. Aggressors get everything that they deserve, but innocents should be given the respect that was robbed from them.” Gareth solemnly replies.

She looks to the ground as though ashamed; Gareth is far more compassionate than males that she has previously known. He grows silent. They unpack their gear, setting up for the night. Gareth turns to Kahlera who lays out her

bedroll across from him. She turns to see him watching her. He motions for her to come closer, but she refuses, shaking her head 'no'. She lies down, her back facing him. He clenches a fist in silent fury; her rejection cuts deeply. He grabs his clothes pillow and tosses it over to her.

"Here." He grumbles.

She sits up and looks at the pillow.

"No, thank you." She replies in a cold monotone.

"Take the fucking pillow!" He yells, startling both girls.

He lies down, resting his head on his pack and looking up at the night sky. He thinks about Kahlera's recent behavior; he liked how they were before, when she acted as though she enjoyed his company, and cared about him. In that moment, he briefly wishes that he could go back in time and not make love to her. He rolls over and gradually drifts off to sleep. He awakens during the night after having a nightmare; he was drowning in a sea of blood. He was reaching out for anyone to help him, but he sank beneath the waves where he drowned, alone. He can still taste the iron in his mouth. Sweat beads on his forehead as he rubs his eyes.

He looks over at the now dead campfire. He spots a few hot coals and takes some dried leaves, crunching them in his hands as he smashes them into powder. He leans forward and sets the powder near the hottest coal. Something catches his eye. He looks up to see gleaming orbs. He focuses his eyes and the orbs shift; Kahlera's eyes glow as she watches him in the darkness. He blows gently on the hot coal, feeding it oxygen and quickly reviving it. It ignites the leaf powder, and an infantile flame grows.

He feeds it whole leaves, then small sticks and twigs, and finally large logs, rebuilding the fire. As it grows, it illuminates the campsite. Gareth can see Kahlera atop her bedroll, sitting upright in the fetal position, with her side facing him. Her knees are pulled close to her chest and her arms wrap around her knees, her hands holding each elbow.

"What's wrong?" He asks her softly.

"Nothing..." She grumbles.

"Can't sleep?"

She turns her eyes to him, but doesn't answer. He sighs in frustration, before lying back down. He stares at the stars and struggles to return to sleep. He merely waits out the rest of the night until dawn returns. Naomi wakes to see both Kahlera and Gareth sitting away from each other, tired and already packed. They rush her from her sleeping bag and leave without eating. Naomi knows that something is

very wrong with the both of them, but she doesn't dare mention it. Her stomach growls as they march in relative silence.

"Here..." Gareth speaks.

Naomi turns to see him handing her a wad of the remaining deer jerky.

"You sound hungry." He says with a smile.

"You heard that?" She replies in embarrassment.

"Who couldn't?" He laughs.

Kahlera watches their exchange. Naomi takes the food, snacking as they walk. As the sun reaches its zenith, they crest a hill and see a village down below, camped directly over the road. The village is a little over one kilometer away. They crouch down as Gareth takes out his binoculars. The village is made up of yurts; they are clearly a nomadic tribe. He watches the inhabitants of the village, and breathes a sigh of relief.

"What is it?" Kahlera asks.

"They're all Sahvorai." He replies.

"That might not be a good thing." Kahlera begins.

“Why not?” Naomi asks.

“Sahvorai and humans often do not get along. In my northern village, very few trust, or would be seen with a human.” Kahlera continues.

Suddenly, her behavior is beginning to make sense to him. They stay firmly planted as they look over the village. Gareth grows impertinent; taking a risk, he puts away his binoculars and starts walking down the road. He doesn’t wait for Kahlera or Naomi.

“Hey! Get back here!” Kahlera growls.

Gareth ignores her and continues walking. Soon, several Sahvorai seem to notice him and gather around the road. Some have spears, and one draws a sword. He sighs and raises his hands in surrender. Kahlera and Naomi stay put. As he approaches peacefully, the Sahvorai lower their weapons. One of them suddenly waves, then turns and walks away. They return seconds later with another Sahvorai who seems to be in charge; the others look to them for direction.

As he approaches the village, the Sahvorai comes into focus. They are a voluptuous female, standing roughly five feet and seven inches tall. She has a healthy, curvy build, and looks to be about one-hundred and twenty or thirty

pounds. She crosses her arms, tucking them underneath her impressive bust, which easily competes with Faye's D-cup. Her full white hair hangs loosely, fluttering in the gentle breeze as it reaches down to the top of her breasts. Shorter strands repeatedly cross over her black nose and vibrant blue eyes. She has the appearance of a wolf woman, and looks relatively young, like Kahlera.

Her fur is thick and shiny; it is grey, black and white in color. Black fur paints her inner thighs, which Gareth can see below her black cloth skirt, which is nearly identical in form to Kahlera's, though considerably shorter. The black fur runs between her legs, up her toned belly, and over her breasts, which are covered by a black cloth top that ties together at her right shoulder. The black fur runs up her neck and over her snout, ending below her eyes. Her snout is rather long.

Black fur covers her digitigrade feet, just past the ankles, as well as her arms, covering up to her elbows. Her tail is bushy and thick, like a wolf's, and is entirely black, with the exception of a thick grey spot at the tip, that stretches a few inches down her tail. White fur covers her eyelids and sockets like a mask, as well as her chin, bottom jaw, all of her fingers and toes, and both ears. The remainder of her body is a light, foggy grey.

"Well, you certainly are a brave human." She says in a gentle but deep feminine voice.

Gareth can't help but think that she sounds like Yoko Kanno from The Seatbelts.

"I have my moments." Gareth shrugs.

"I see..." She stares at him.

"My name is Gareth, but you can call me 'Sir'." He continues.

"Hah! I am Sarvah, and this is my tribe, the Feather Fingers." She greets him.

She extends her hands out, as though presenting the land to him.

"That's a very pretty name you have." He smiles.

"Flattering me already?" She chuckles.

"Well, when you meet a powerful leader, it's best to get on their good side... Besides, compliments come easy when they aren't lies." He replies.

"Indeed..." She smiles back at him.

"Well, Sarvah... This is a lovely tribe." He compliments.

"Thank you. So, what is a brash young human doing all alone in the wilderness? Are you lost?" She asks in an exceptionally sweet voice.

“I’m not alone. My companions and I are heading north and-” Gareth stops as he turns around to see that Kahlera and Naomi are not with him.

“What companions?” She tilts her head curiously.

“Seriously?!” Gareth yells, cupping his hands to his mouth. “Get down here!”

“You are not one of those crazy humans, are you?” Sarvah asks.

“Not today.” He smirks.

She chuckles; she is immediately captivated by his charismatic personality. He turns back to Sarvah, who visibly eyes him from feet to head, a strange grin spread across her face. She takes her time as she looks him over. She brings a hand to her chin and taps her bottom lip with the black claw of her index finger. She’s gazing up at him; she doesn’t bother to hide it. He blushes faintly as she stares at him. Even his physical form is fetching to her. Her icy blue eyes turn to the figures a considerable distance away.

“Should we wait for them?” Sarvah asks in a vaguely sensual tone.

“Only if you want too.” Gareth shrugs.

She wonders if he is being serious, or if he is merely teasing her. She briefly entertains the thought, but they wait for several minutes regardless. The two figures slowly come into focus.

“So Sarvah... Why is your tribe called the ‘Feather Fingers’. You aren’t pickpockets, are you?” He raises an eyebrow.

“No.” She answers.

“Good, because we’re poor as hell.” Gareth humbly jests.

Sarvah laughs and steps closer to Gareth, now within arms-reach of him.

“We were given our name by tribes that we have visited. We are *very* profitable. That is where the name comes from... I think...” Sarvah replies.

“Robbing them blind with shrewd business practices. I can respect that.” Gareth nods.

Sarvah giggles and eyes the human. She appreciates and admires his calm and confident attitude; few humans are so casual in her presence. They stand in silence for a few moments as they wait for his companions to make their way up the road.

“What the hell was that? You just let me walk off without backup?” Gareth asks as the girls come into focus.

“It was *your* choice.” Kahlera begins.

“We were not obliged to follow you.” Naomi finishes.

“Thanks for your support...” Gareth mordantly comments.

He shakes his head and turns back to Sarvah, who seems to glare at Kahlera.

“Anyway, these are my companions, who are apparently willing to let me walk right into a potentially hostile village alone... They are my true friends.” Gareth continues derisively.

“Lovely! Welcome!.” Sarvah says as she turns.

She looks back, smiling pleasantly as she motions for the three to follow her. Gareth walks close behind as Kahlera and Naomi tail him. Sarvah gives them a brief tour of the village, introducing the tradesmen and merchants by title. It is obvious that they have amassed considerable business with other local villages. Their knowledge of the terrain could be invaluable to their journey, Sarvah presents a small yurt and stands before it.

“This is often where we store excess supplies, such as yourself.” Sarvah teases. “You can stay here for the night.”

“It’s barely the afternoon.” Gareth comments, raising an eyebrow.

“We really should keep going.” Kahlera adds.

“Stay for the night... I insist.” Sarvah says in an eerie monotone.

Her blue eyes swing back to Gareth as she gazes at him.

“We are *very* friendly.” Sarvah coos.

“I never would have imagined...” Gareth quips.

Sarvah giggles as her eyes burn icy holes through Gareth; he suddenly becomes nervous. He wonders if this is how prey feels when they spot a predator raring to pounce upon them. Kahlera looks between the two and grumbles incoherently, brushing past them and entering the yurt.

“She is friendly.” Sarvah says facetiously.

“We should probably talk.” Gareth begins.

“An excellent idea.” Sarvah says, narrowing her eyes.

"I have some questions I'd like to ask you." He continues.

Sarvah reaches out and grabs Gareth by the wrist rather tightly, leading him away. Her fur is quite soft, like Kahlera's. Naomi watches them leave before entering the yurt. She looks around and sees Kahlera sitting down on the ground, facing a fabric wall with her head sunk low. Naomi walks over and reaches out, gently resting a hand on her shoulder.

"Go back to your bit-" Kahlera grumbles. "... Oh. It is you... Sorry..."

"If this is bothering you, you should probably tell him." Naomi says.

"I cannot. I mean, it is not..." Kahlera replies.

Naomi sits beside her and watches silently. Kahlera seems to be struggling with her own thoughts.

"We should not have even... .. It is not right, he and I. It was a mistake. I should not feel this territorial. He is not mine..." Kahlera thinks quietly aloud.

"Is it *that* hard to admit that you care for him?" Naomi asks her.

"Yes..." Kahlera replies.

Kahlera suddenly stands up and turns to the flap of the yurt. She pushes it open and steps out, walking away and leaving Naomi alone. Sarvah leads Gareth to a much larger yurt with a rather sophisticated and expensive looking patter woven into the fabric. She walks over to a thick rug, lined with pillows made of down and red silk, and stitched into cylinders. To Gareth, they have a strangely middle-eastern appearance. She sits down and motions to Gareth, who sits diagonally from her. He explains their journey and destination to Sarvah, who listens patiently.

She leans back as he talks, thrusting out her chest as though presenting herself to him. He flushes red, turning his head away as she giggles. Looking back, he can see her slide down onto the rug, lying flat on her back with her head resting on a pillow. As she lies back her short top doesn't cover the underside of her full breasts. Trying to maintain his focus, he tries to discuss the nearby terrain.

"You must know this area very well. Do you-" He begins.

"I have a human fetish." Sarvah suddenly interrupts him.

"I see... Uh... So..." He stammers.

He pulls his shirt away from his neck as he feels his temperature rise. He feels as though he is about to sweat, and hesitates to speak.

"I have a Sahvorai fetish." He suddenly blurts out as he lowers his head.

"Really?!" She sits up, grinning wide. "I *never* mate with Sahvorai. Humans are my favorite." She continues.

"Likewise. Sahvorai I mean..." He adds.

She looks down at him and stretches out a leg, resting here ankle atop his shin.

"Do you know a clear path to the north?" He asks.

"I love dealing with human villages." She sighs lustfully, as she seems to reminisce.

She completely disregards his question, moving her leg along his. She slides her body ever closer to him.

"Yeah, I bet..." He mutters.

"You know, in the center of the continent, Sahvorai and humans deal with each other all of the time, and many pair together. I hear that some even have children together. I cannot figure out why the humans and Sahvorai on the furthest ends of the continent are so isolationist." She says.

He remains silent, trying to resist her seduction. His heart beats faster as he attempts to remain focused.

“Would you marry a human?” He impulsively asks.

He closes his eyes in embarrassment, as he feels his willpower declining.

“Pair? I do not know.” She sets a claw against her bottom lip as she thinks. “I suppose I would, but he would have to be a very special human to make me want to be monogamous. Sweet but assertive, intelligent, and an excellent lover.” She winks.

“I see...” Gareth blushes. “Sounds like a fantasy to me.”

“That is why I am testing the waters. I will find him sooner or later... Until then, I will keep hunting...” She says as she leans closer.

Gareth leans back as Sarvah suddenly presses herself against him. He clenches a fist and tries to scoot away. He feels as though his strength is unavailing, when pit against her feminine wiles. Her every breath lures him in.

“What is wrong? I know that you really do like Sahvorai; I can smell that girl all over you. How many times have you mated with her? Just once?” She asks with a sinister grin.

Gareth looks down at her with a cold stare. Sarvah seems to have struck a nerve, exactly the way she likes it.

“She is not your mate, and she is not here.” She coos.

She leans harder against him as her large breasts seem to wrap around his arm. She touches his chest with her hand, gently scratching the cloth of his shirt with the claw of her index finger, slowly moving her hand lower. She rests her hand on his leg and squeezes gently. She brushes his chin with her snout as his long goatee crosses over her nose. She rests her cheek along his shoulder and licks his neck with the tip of her tongue. Gareth shifts as though to pull away.

Worried that she may lose him to his burgeoning willpower, she reaches over, grabbing his crotch and feeling his erection through his pants.

“Oh my...” She swoons. “What a pleasant surprise.”

She is genuinely taken back by the considerable size of his member, which she feels through his pants. Gareth backs away and quickly gets up, hastily moving away from

her. She looks up at him as he stands before her, almost expectantly.

“Okay. No means no.” Gareth says sternly.

“I did not hear you say no.” She smiles.

“Well, I thought it.” Gareth replies.

“What else are you thinking?” She asks as she looks down.

Gareth looks down in turn, setting both hands over the noticeable bulge, his face turning bright red as she giggles.

“Okay, I’ll admit it. You are *beautiful*, and under different circumstances, we’d be a few minutes into an all-night session.” Gareth begins.

“Ooohh...” She coos.

“But I can’t do this. I can’t hurt Kahlera like that. It wouldn’t be right.” He explains.

“Well congratulations for being so honorable. You *are* a rare breed.” She smiles.

“Thanks.” He sighs.

“But I still want to mate with you... Repeatedly.” She winks.

He can't help but smile as he backs away, chuckling as he approaches the flap of her yurt.

"Are you coming back?" She asks.

"We'll see..." He replies as he looks over his shoulder to her.

He turns a corner and walks away from Sarvah's yurt exactly as Kahlera walks by. She ducks behind the corner of another yurt as he passes. She sniffs the air and balls a fist as she becomes angry; she can smell Sarvah on him. Sarvah steps out from the yurt and watches him for a moment, her back toward Kahlera. She crosses her arms and sighs before heading back inside. Sarvah won't be so easily deterred. Kahlera grits her teeth. She walks around the corner and towards Sarvah's dwelling. She takes a deep breath and pushes the flap open, stepping inside unannounced.

"Well hello there!" Sarvah says in surprise as she stands in the middle her yurt.

"We have to talk..." Kahlera says, closing the flap behind her.

"Is this because I tried to mate with Gareth?" Sarvah ask in a condescending tone.

"Stay. Away." Kahlera growls.

"I would rather not." Sarvah smiles.

"I am *not* asking..." Kahlera clarifies.

"Oh? Well what does it matter to you anyway? You clearly do not want him." Sarvah begins.

"It is not that... I... I am from the north." Kahlera interjects.

"You northern Sahvorai and your human-hating ways. It is just as foolish as the humans of the south. You and I both know that there is no reason for it." Sarvah continues.

"But my people..." Kahlera hesitates.

"You are *not* your people. You are you, and let me tell you something, you are really missing out if you do not have him as often you can. Humans and Sahvorai go together like a drunkard and ale, or a fat person and cake." Sarvah laughs.

"Yet you did not mate with him?" Kahlera presses her.

"Oh, I certainly tried. Sadly, he turned me down. He has incredible willpower. I did everything but part the valley for him, if you know what I mean." Sarvah winks.

Kahlera's blood boils as a rage builds within her. She clenches her fist so tightly that it begins to shake. She steps up to Sarvah and lunges at her. Sarvah reaches out and the two girls simultaneously grab each other by their throats.

“I do not understand why you are so upset. You should be glad. He is far too concerned with your feelings to give into his own carnal urges. He said so himself; if he were not so worried about hurting your feelings, he would already be breeding me right now.” Sarvah laughs.

“You shut your mouth!” Kahlera yells.

“It really is a shame. I imagine him as being excellent in bed. Do you think our children will be pretty?” Sarvah taunts.

Kahlera roars and raises a hand. She grows her aura claws and swings, but Sarvah grabs her forearm. The stronger and larger wolf girl places a foot behind Kahlera’s ankle and pushes into her throat, tripping Kahlera and dropping her with a loud thud onto the rug.

“Do not test me, little girl.” Sarvah growls.

She clenches Kahlera’s throat tightly, her claws digging into her flesh.

“I will rip your head off and eat your pretty eyes right out of their sockets!”

Sarvah pauses as she holds Kahlera down, as though considering it.

“Actually, that is a good idea... Maybe then Gareth will mate with me!” She grins, bearing her teeth.

Kahlera swings a leg and slams it into Sarvah’s waist. Sarvah gasps as Kahlera knocks the wind out of her. She throws Sarvah off balance and flings her off. Kahlera quickly stands, the fingers of both hands tipped with golden, nine-inch long claws. Sarvah looks to her and smiles arrogantly. Kahlera breathes heavily as her body relaxes. Her claws fade away.

“He was *very* good.” Kahlera begins with a mocking grin. “As skilled, passionate, and large a lover as I have ever experienced, but *you* will never know that. I have already claimed him.” She says as she points her finger to Sarvah.

Sarvah smirks. She chuckles quietly, but soon cackles loudly.

“I underestimated you.” Sarvah begins. “But you are not paired, and until are, you should watch your back, and ‘your man’... Even when you *are* paired, watch him, because I will be waiting to pounce, and I *do not* lose...” She finishes as she opens the flap to her yurt, presenting Kahlera with the exit.

She walks up to the flap as though to leave, but stops. She looks over to Sarvah for a moment and glares at her.

**“Try and seduce Gareth again, and I will not come this close. I will shoot you with a bow, right in your heart.”
Kahlera warns her, tapping Sarvah’s chest gently with the claw of her right index finger.**

Kahlera leaves the yurt and walks away. Sarvah watches her with a sinister grin. This could be much more fun than she had originally anticipated.

“I’d like to see you try...” She thinks aloud.

Episode 12: Just Right

Early the next morning, Kelly, Faye and Marcella strike their camp and prepare to leave. They take only the time needed to cook and eat their breakfast before continuing their ascent into the mountains. Marcella seems to know exactly where she is going. Kelly can’t help but gaze at Marcella, as she leads the way up the mountainside. True to her word, she shows them the meager pass. She explains

that by staying on this path, they can make it to the other side in only a few days, rather than walking around the entire range in a week or more.

They climb for hours and all of their muscles burn. The sun rises high in the sky as the pass levels off. Already thoroughly exhausted, they take a moment to rest and drink from their water bottles. Kelly walks towards a bush to relieve himself. He steps through it and behind a tree as he unzips his pants and begins urinating. He closes his eyes and sighs in relief as he leans back. He hears a branch break, and assumes that Marcella is peaking.

“You know that all you need to do is ask.” He chuckles.

“Ask what?” A deep female voice says.

His eyes shoot open and he turns to see a brown furred Sahvorai standing only a few feet away, looking around from behind a tree. Startled, he jumps back, nearly urinating on the girl’s feet. She steps back as he falls from behind the tree, yelping as he lands with a thud, his upper half on the trail. He scrambles to pull his pants up as Marcella and Faye both come running. The Sahvorai steps out from behind the trees.

She is quite tall, standing about five feet and ten inches, almost perfectly eye level with Kelly. She is well

built and muscular, but with a distinctly feminine figure. She wears an animal hide loin cloth and top that could best be described as a poncho, tied together on each side. Her long brown hair is braided on the sides of her head in an almost elven fashion. She has stubby and rounded ears, with a longer snout, and a little nub of a tail; she looks like a human-grizzly hybrid. She looks to the humans who all seem ready for battle.

“What are you doing here?” Marcella asks the strange girl.

“I uh... Live here?” She answers with a confused look.

“Oh... Well, we were just walking through the pass.” Marcella adds.

“Fine. This way!” The bear girl chirps.

The girl motions for them to follow her as she walks down the pass. The three humans begrudgingly tag along. After walking for only a few minutes, they walk across a recently built log cabin. The cabin is well constructed, and rather large, complete with square glass windows that are a vibrant blue hue. The girl opens the door and a voice speaks from within.

“Where have you been?” Another female voice says.

“I met some f... Friends... You are friendly right?” The girl asks, turning back to the three.

“Of course.” Kelly nods.

“Absolutely...” Faye says in an eerie monotone.

“See? They are friendly.” The girl adds before stepping inside.

“Oh! Can I see?!” Another female voice says.

Kelly and Marcella back away from the cabin as the girl walks back outside, followed by two more bear-like Sahvorai females. The girls appear to be related, as they look incredibly similar, though none of them seem old enough to be either of the other’s mother. The girl from the trees seems to be the middle sister. Faye stays put, looking up blankly at the much large females.

“Oh! She is so cute!” A girl says with a squeaky voice.

“She is. What do you think?” The middle girl turns to her sisters.

“Well... Alright.” The oldest begins. “Would you like to come in for... Tea?” She seems to think.

Kelly and Marcella are very uneasy about the three bear-like Sahvorai sisters. Faye smiles, looking at them with her blank eyes.

**“I don’t know... We have a long way to go before-”
Kelly says.**

“We’d love too.” Faye interrupts.

“What?” Marcella asks in shock.

Faye suddenly follows the youngest sister inside of the house, disappearing into the darkness of the cabin. The other two sisters look back at Kelly and Marcella, grinning twisted grins and showing off their white fang-like teeth. Their appearance is unsettling; Kelly can suddenly appreciate a Sahvorai like Kahlera, especially when compared with these women. With Faye already inside, and left with little options, Marcella and Kelly look to each other. They reluctantly walk inside of the cabin.

The sisters gaze at each other for a moment before heading back inside, closing the door behind the humans. Kelly backs against a wall, struggling to see in the dark cabin. The windows face the wrong direction, and sunlight doesn’t enter directly; only the residual light of the day pierces the grey shroud within the home. He very carefully tries to slowly and silently open the flap of his holster. He hears shuffling inside of the cabin as his eyes strain to adjust. A candle suddenly lights in a corner, before lighting several more candles.

He turns to see Faye standing in the middle of the room like a mannequin, while Marcella looks towards him on the

other side of the one room cabin. He turns his head, looking for the sisters, only to see the youngest sister's face near his. He steps back, startled as she holds a candle near her chin, as though making a concerted effort to be frightening.

"Hi..." She says in an almost sensual tone.

One of the sisters lights a fire within the fireplace, at the back wall. The cabin interior slowly lights up. The older sister stands in front of Faye, looking down at her.

"So... About that tea?" Marcella begins.

"Which one do you like?" The middle sister asks, ignoring Marcella.

"I like this one!" The youngest says, looking at Kelly with a sinister smile.

"He is too fat." The oldest says.

"I'm husky... And big boned..." He retorts.

"Well, then too boney." She quips.

"Okay, how about her?" The middle asks while looking over Faye.

"She looks too tough." The oldest says.

The youngest sister cackles maniacally. Kelly steps away from her, but she quickly reaches out, grabbing his right shoulder hard. Her claws stab into his shirt, digging into the flesh beneath.

“Where do you think *you* are going?!” She growls in a gruff voice.

“Nowhere in particular... I guess there’s no tea, huh?” He jokes.

“That one looks just right.” The oldest says, turning to Marcella.

“Yay! Can I skin them this time? Pleeaaaaaase?!” The youngest begs childishly.

Marcella draws a dagger as the middle sister steps up to her. Swinging she cuts her palm and the girl reels back.

“You bitch!” She roars.

The middle sister lunges at her, attacking her like a wild animal. The youngest yanks at Kelly, pulling him off balance as he struggles to draw his pistol with her claws in his flesh. She opens her toothy maw and screams like a banshee as he quickly aims in her general direction and fires twice. The noise startles all inside of the cabin as the youngest sister falls back, blood gushing from two wounds

in her abdomen. He takes aim to finish off the youngest sister, only for a large hand to swing down, crashing into his wrist.

He drops the gun and it slides away from him as the oldest sister, easily six feet and two inches tall, grabs him from his underarms and lifts him with ease.

“You are going to pay for this!” She roars.

She lunges forward to bite his throat but he lifts his palm to shield himself. He wishes that she could be blinded, giving him a fighting chance, and in that split second, a blinding flash of light radiates from his hand. She drops Kelly to the ground and covers her eyes, screaming in pain. He looks at her as she seems to smell him and lunges again. He puts up his arm and shields himself. His aura shield blocks the girl, who slams into it. They fall away from each other like repelling magnets.

Faye turns to the middle girl and wrestles with her on the floor. She seems to be playing with the bear girl, only using weak versions of her powers; she seems to want to drag the fight out for as long as possible. Kelly draws his sword and manifests his sling-blade, the cobalt blue aura that covers the sword. The oldest sister lunges, but he dives to the side and swings, slashing her side. She cries out in

pain and anger. He turns in time for her to grab him by the shoulders and shove him across the room.

He slams into Faye, still wrestling with the middle sister, and the trio fall into a heap on the floor. Kelly lands atop Marcella's twitching body. She is horribly mangled, and he cannot tell if she is still alive or not. The sticky blood covers his hand as he struggles to stand. The oldest sister grabs him again and throws him clear across the room towards the other side. He lands next to the youngest sister, who grabs onto him and tries to bite him. She is very weak, but she manages to sink her teeth into his left shoulder.

He grits his teeth from the pain, but spins the aura sword around and jams it past his side, right into the youngest girl. Her arms fall limp and her jaw loosens. Faye seems to grow tired of playing with her assailant and stands, aiming a palm at the middle sister. She uses an aura push and throws her back, while simultaneously breaking her arm. The older sister turns back to Faye and both sisters charge at the same time. Kelly stands, determined to keep fighting. Amazingly, Marcella is still alive, and struggles to stand.

Faye releases an aura shockwave of considerable power. It throws the two remaining sisters, as well as Kelly, Marcella, and everything in the room that is not nailed down. The middle sister lands into the fireplace and her fur ignites. A cauldron flies away from Faye's side and right into the

youngest sister's skull, crushing it. Kelly flies into the wall hard, nearly cracking a rib. Marcella is thrown through the glass window behind her, and the oldest sister is impaled on the blunt end of a leg from an overturned table.

The middle sister screams as she crawls from the fireplace, setting the ground on fire as she struggles to move. The smoke and stench of singed hair fills the cabin. Kelly groans, hobbling over to the burning Sahvorai. He swings his sling-blade and decapitates her, cutting a deep gash into the floor. He stumbles back and breaks through the wooden door of the cabin, falling backward onto the ground. Faye walks up to the oldest sister, who reaches for the table leg that juts from her lower chest.

"I think this is the part where I'm supposed to say some cliché one-liner..." Faye says with an eerie grin.

She holds out her hands and concentrates. Orange blasts of aura fly from her palms, merging into a single focused stream. The aura burns the girl's body. She screams for several seconds and writhes in agony as her body becomes rigid from the intense heat, her fur singed off completely, and her skin turning black. Faye looks down and collects Kelly's pistol. She walks out of the cabin, using her free hand to blast the aura like a flamethrower, setting the house ablaze.

She stands over Kelly and flips the safety on before handing him his pistol, butt end first. He takes pistol and struggles to get up from the ground.

“Hurry up. We need to keep going.” Faye demands.

“What about Marcella?” He asks.

“Oh. She’s over there.” She answers casually, pointing to her side.

Kelly turns and sees Marcella’s mangled and bloody corpse. She is covered in cuts, exposed compound fractures, and bits of blue glass that jut from her flesh at odd angles. Kelly sees the body and stares for a moment. He turns over and throws up at the sight of her injuries, and the pungent smell of her blood. Faye sighs as though she is becoming bored.

“Are you done yet?” She asks calmly.

Kelly looks over to Faye, who’s dead eyes and faint smile haven’t changed. Maybe this really is her true self? Maybe some people have this inside of them, and don’t need tragedy, or a horrible childhood? He holsters his pistol, buttoning the flap closed.

“Yeah... We can go.” He says as he takes labored breaths.

“Oh, wait. Silly me!” Faye exclaims, walking up to Marcella’s corpse.

She pats her legs and torso, checking her body thoroughly. She finds a pouch of coins tucked into her boots.

“Now we can go.” Faye says as she slips the pouch of coins into her pack.

Kelly looks back at Marcella’s corpse, then to the burning cabin, and finally at Faye, who is quickly leaving him behind.

“Shit...” He mutters as he quickly hobbles to catch up.

Episode 13: Temptation

As the day wears on, Gareth and Kahlera both spend it away from the camp, and each other. Kahlera wanders the west end of the camp, looking back towards the woods in

the distance. She collects her thoughts and feelings, reflecting on Gareth, and their time together. Every thought of him brings a smile to her lips. Gareth makes her feel wanted, but she knows that she can't pursue it. They are heading back to her village, and she worries that if she returns with two humans, and smelling like she has spent the whole journey consorting with Gareth, none of them might be welcome there.

Her fears are palpable. She sighs and hangs her head. Her bangs dangle before her eyes, swaying gently with the slow breeze. She wishes she had been born in a village further south, then she could just be with him, and not have to worry so much. She just wants Gareth to sit with her, to tell her that everything will be fine. Gareth stands beside a yurt, watching Kahlera as she seems to sulk in the distance. He looks around, as though making sure that no one is watching him. He wants to speak to her so badly, but he doesn't know how she feels. He sighs, turns, and walks away.

"Hello Gareth." Sarvah's voice calls out to him.

"Hi." He replies.

He turns to her. She stands between two yurts, smiling at him as she steps closer. His head hangs low but his eyes look up, past his brow and towards her. She notices the melancholy expression on his face and is taken back by it.

She feels genuinely sorry for him; it doesn't deter her. She frowns and walks up to him, resting a hand on his shoulder. She gently squeezes his shoulder reassuringly. She won't stop her selfish pursuit.

"Where did you come from?" He asks.

"Oh, around." She winks.

"Yeah, that answers my question." He jests.

"I like to check up on the members of my tribe every so often. I just happened to see you standing there in a daze, and thought you could use a friend." She says softly.

"How thoughtful of you." He smiles.

"I have my moments." She smiles back.

She pulls him close and guides him through the camp. They walk around and pass several yurts, until they are on the far east side of the camp. She sits down on the grass and looks towards the horizon. Gareth hesitantly sits beside her.

"Kahlara came to see me, earlier." She begins.

"What? When?" He asks in shock.

"Not long after we... Talked." She smiles.

"I got the strange feeling that she wasn't too fond of you... What did she want to talk to you about?" Gareth asks.

"You." She blurts out.

"Oh..." Gareth looks down at the grass.

"She was born in the north, and she is still very young. The fact of the matter is that she should not be consorting with humans; it is taboo for *her* tribe, and she risks being shunned or mistreated if she returns home with you, especially if she smells as though she has been mating with you. She both wants and needs to distance herself from you." She begins.

"I didn't realize it was so much trouble..." Gareth says.

"You are an attractive human..." Sarvah continues.

"Thanks for finally noticing." He jokes.

"And charming." She giggles. "She knows that you two are dangerously close, and she cannot have that. After your night of impulsive mating, she came to her senses."

"She said that?" He asks in shock

"Yes. It was just tension that had built up. You told me that you had encountered raiders, twice. I imagine that you helped her both of those times. A handsome stranger saves a young and impressionable girl; you can only imagine what happens to her body when she sees you..." She winks.

"I suppose." He blushes.

“There *was* tension, but you released it for her. You did her quite the favor. I hear she greatly enjoyed getting rid of all that energy.” Sarvah gently strokes his arm with her claws.

Gareth’s face grows even more red, as he shies away.

“But now she needs to move on. She simply doesn’t know how to tell you that she does not care about you the way that you care about her. I am sorry.” Sarvah finishes, sliding an arm behind Gareth’s back and resting her hand on his shoulder.

Gareth’s expression is solemn, and the pain in his chest grows more prominent. His eyes begin to burn, he clenches his teeth, balls a fist, and forces the pain down into the back of his mind, where it belongs. He takes a deep breath and sighs.

“I just wish that she could have told me this herself.” He looks to her.

“She is still a young girl...” She says.

“She’s nineteen.” Gareth interjects.

“Still, a few years ago, she was a juvenile with a curfew. She does not know how to properly express herself.

Only women like myself have learned that skill." She smirks as she squeezes his shoulder.

"If you don't mind my asking, how young are you?" He smiles.

"I am all of twenty-three." Sarvah smiles back.

"That's not much older... You're still a girl yourself." Gareth points out.

"Maybe, but I am a big girl." She coos.

She leans closer to him as her bust brushes against his arm.

"You know, there is only a one-year difference between us. I'm twenty-two." He comments casually.

"Really? I would have thought you were older. You certainly have the confidence of a more experienced male." Sarvah says.

"Thanks. I would have guessed that you were nineteen or twenty." He laughs.

She giggles and narrows her eyes lustfully as she gazes at him. She suddenly stands and turns back. She takes a few steps away from Gareth.

“Hey, Sarvah!” He suddenly and impulsively calls out to her.

“Yes?” She stops and turns back to him.

“I appreciate you telling me. I guess I can call you a friend after all.” Gareth says softly.

“Of course you can. If you need *anything*, please come and see me.” She assures him in a pleasant tone.

She turns and walks away. Her eyes shift back toward Gareth as she leaves him behind.

“It is only a matter of time now...” She thinks to herself.

Gareth sits and thinks, watching the clouds as he lies back in the grass. The hours pass by slowly; by the evening, Gareth still sits alone at the edge of the camp. He watches the sun as it begins to set in the east. He gets up and sighs. He has been thinking and sulking for too long. He begins walking back to the yurt, but stops when he realizes that he still hasn’t learned anything of real value from Sarvah. He looks at the setting sun, then toward Sarvah’s yurt. He hesitantly approaches the yurt and enters.

Kahlera returns to their own yurt and looks around. Only Naomi is inside; Gareth is nowhere to be found. She steps up to Naomi and sits beside her.

“Are you okay now?” Naomi asks her.

“No... But I think I will be.” Kahlera replies with a sigh.

“When Gareth gets back, I have something important to tell you both.” Naomi says with a pleasant smile.

“You do not want to just tell me now?” Kahlera sounds puzzled.

“No. It will be considerably more effective if you both hear it at the same time.” She replies.

The two girls sit and wait for Gareth as the sun drops behind the horizon. They maintain small talk and share their thoughts and feelings on their trip as they lounge around. They maintain this for nearly two hours. Suddenly, a strange male’s voice calls out, saying that they were sent by Sarvah. Kahlera steps out to see two guards holding a large wooden tray, with a considerable dinner arranged neatly atop it. Although she doesn’t trust them, and certainly doesn’t trust Sarvah, she accepts the food, so as not to seem rude, or arouse suspicion.

The guards leave and she enters the yurt. She sets the food down as Naomi eyes it closely. She reaches out to take a large, ripe strawberry, but Kahlera quickly smacks her hand away.

“What’s wrong?” Naomi asks as she rubs the back of her hand.

“I do not trust it...” Kahlera says as she crosses her arms, staring at the food.

Her stomach growls loudly as she looks at slabs of well cooked beef on the wooden plate. Her hunger starts to break down her will, and her hand slowly creeps towards the plate. The flap suddenly opens and Gareth steps inside.

“Man, I am starving!” He says as he takes a seat beside Kahlera.

He reaches out and takes a dried apple slice from the plate, quickly eating it. The two girls watch on. Naomi smiles and confidently reaches for the strawberry.

“So now that you are both here I-” Naomi begins.

“Where were you?! And why are you eating this food?” Kahlera interrupts.

“I was with Sarvah, and I’m hungry.” He replies with a raised eyebrow.

“What if that bitch poisoned it?” Kahlera growls.

“I *asked* her to bring it.” He laughs.

“So you two are close now? Is that it?” She yells at him.

“Uh, what? No. She’s not all bad. Just mostly.” He defends her.

“Excuse me, I-” Naomi tries to speak.

“No, that wolf is evil.” Kahlera barks.

“Evil is a bit extreme.” He snickers.

“She cannot be trusted. What could you two possibly be doing for so long anyway? It was dusk a few hours ago; you only just came back!” She growls.

“Hello. I have something to say...” Naomi sighs.

“I was busy! I wanted to know what the terrain looked like.” Gareth replies.

“Yeah, I bet you did, you pervert.” She accuses him.

“WHAT?!” Gareth stands up.

“I have smelled her on you since she first tried to molest you earlier today, and I still smell her now, so how can I be sure?”

“Be sure of what?” He snaps.

“Be sure that you two didn’t...” Kahlera clenches her fists.

“Why do you care so much?!” He demands.

“Who said I did?!” Kahlera screams.

“You are confusing me. Why are you so angry?” Gareth whines.

“Because I! ...” Kahlera stops mid-sentence.

She turns to Naomi and looks at her. She motions with her head for her to leave. Naomi gets up and walks out of the yurt quietly, heading a short distance away before sitting down. Sahvorai villagers seems to be listening in on the conversation as they gather around Naomi, standing and sitting quietly.

“You might as well go back to her. I do not care.”
Kahlera grumbles.

“Don’t you?” Gareth asks.

“What do you mean?” She replies, a surprised look in her eyes as she feels herself flush.

“Even if I did *that* with Sarvah, is it really your business? We aren’t paired. In fact, for the last couple of days you’ve acted like you hate me. I never expected someone who didn’t care about me, or my personal life, to throw such a fit.” He points out.

“I do not know what you are talking about...” She says quietly, averting her eyes from him.

“Just say that you don’t care. Tell me, right now, that you do not want my companionship or affection. That’s all I need to hear from you, and I won’t bother you with it anymore.” He says.

She looks to him but doesn’t answer. She can’t make herself say the words, no matter how hard she tries. She

reaches across her chest and grabs onto her own arm as her eyes tear up. He runs his fingers through his long hair and sighs, sitting back down beside her.

“I’m sorry... I just don’t like being kept in the dark. You don’t have say anything; you can talk to me when you’re ready.” He says in a soft and gentle voice.

He reaches out for another apple slice. She scoots closer and leans against him. He turns and looks back to her, giving her a pleasant smile. A single tear rolls down her cheek. He feels horrible for yelling at her. He reaches out and gently brushes it away. He slides an arm around her back and holds her close, placing his hand on her arm and caressing her. She rests her head on his shoulder, as though in silent confirmation.

“I do...” She says softly.

“I know...” He rests his head on hers, giving her a tender kiss.

“Do you?” She asks, shifting her eyes up to him.

“Well... I do now.” He says as he squeezes her arm.
“Ooh! Steak!”

He reaches for the steak when it suddenly levitates, floating through the air and gliding across the yurt. They

turn in amazement as the steak floats towards the flap. Naomi stands just inside with a glowing ruby red aura over her hands as the steak floats in front of her.

“Now that this has been resolved, can I talk now?” She asks with a smile.

The next morning the trio packs their bags; they are preparing to leave, and are determined to return to Kahlera’s village in the north. They head for the road where Sarvah stands with several guards. She looks at Kahlera with an apprehensive glare, but looks to Gareth with a pleasant and warm smile. Kahlera worries that Sarvah isn’t going to allow them to leave peacefully. Gareth steps up to Sarvah, motioning for the two girls to stay behind.

“Well, it’s been real fun.” Gareth begins.

“You can say that again.” Sarvah says with a wink.

“Well, it’s been real fun.” Gareth jokes.

Sarvah laughs.

“But it’s about time we left. We have somewhere to be, after all.” Gareth continues.

“Taking the little kitten home?” She cracks.

“Among others.” He nods.

“I hope to see you again... *Very* soon.” She coos.

“Who knows. You just might.” He winks.

They lean in simultaneously and give each other a relatively benign hug. Kahlera clenches a fist. Sarvah seems to smile as she glares at her. Kahlera takes a single step forward, but Naomi reaches out and grabs onto her wrist.

“I know you lied to me last night.” He whispers into her ear.

“Yes, I did... Are you mad?” She whispers back.

“A little...”

“All things considered, was it so bad?” She asks sensually.

They end the hug and he steps back from her.

“I’ll get back to you on that.” He says as he turns back and motions to the others.

Naomi and Kahlera walk by Sarvah. Kahlera stops and glares at her. Sarvah grins sinisterly, bearing her teeth. Kahlera turns her body to face her.

**“Before you go...” Sarvah motions to one of her guards.
“I would like you to have this...”**

The guard stands beside Sarvah. She takes the items, presenting Kahlera with an already strung yew bow, several spare strings, and a quiver with a dozen freshly made arrows.

“I thought you could use it.” Sarvah says nonchalantly.

The bow is an obvious mocking dare to Kahlera, and she knows it. Kahlera hesitates, but glares at Sarvah and takes the gift. As she touches it, a guard places his hand on the grip of his sword. Kahlera slings the bow and quiver of arrows over her body, then slips the spare strings into her pack.

“Thank you for your kindness.” Kahlera says through clenched teeth.

Sarvah nods to her as she turns back to her companions, who watch the encounter with quiet anxiety. Kahlera turns back to look at Sarvah, waving politely to her as they walk away, before suddenly raising her middle finger.

“She’s stronger than I thought.” Sarvah chuckles.

Episode 14: She Who Fights Everyone

Several days have passed since Kelly and Faye escaped the three bear’s clutches. Every day they hike throughout the day, and well into dusk, stopping only when it is barely light enough to see without tripping, or falling off a cliff. They march through the pass, following Marcella’s trail clear over the top. and down the other side of the mountain range. Just as Marcella said, they clear the mountains in only a few days.

On the other side of the mountains, the trail from Marcella’s pass winds through the forest. exiting in a clearing. In the distance, a wide and well-traveled path can be seen. They pick up their pace and make it to the path. It is so thoroughly trampled, and the dirt so tightly packed, that it could almost be considered a genuine road. Using the position of the sun, they discern north and continue walking. Within a couple of hours, they see a village in the distance, very similar to Marcella’s, but considerably larger.

They approach the village, but as they enter, no one seems to greet them, or care that they are there. Having limited food left, and very little water, Kelly takes most of the coins, agreeing to meet Faye elsewhere, after he buys supplies for their journey. To Kelly's dismay, Faye promptly heads for the nearest tavern. Faye disappears into a building with a wooden sign that displays a hand carved ale cask. Kelly walks through the town, looking at the various signs hanging above the shops.

He comes to a cul-de-sac with booths lining it, all selling various wares. Knowing that they need food to last the journey, he examines the wares of a dry goods booth. He purchases a considerable quantity of a dry, crackeresque bread, assured by the shopkeeper that it would keep for at least a week. He purchases scores of long strips of dried fish and beef as well, wrapping them in cloth and packing them tightly within his pack. He purchases dried berries and salted pork from another booth.

With enough supplies to hopefully last until the next town along the road, he walks back to the first gate, retracing his steps and returning to the tavern. He pushes the heavy wooden door open, looking around the room. It is lit by dozens of candles, and the few plate glass windows that are built into the stone walls of the structure. Faye sits on a simple wooden stool in front of the bar, an empty seat on either side of her. He approaches and sets his pack down between them.

“Well, I have what we need. Ready to get going?” He asks.

“Have a drink. Unwind.” Faye says in a dry monotone.

Kelly looks to Faye, who turns her eyes toward him. Her blank face gives him a chill down his spine. Though he wants to leave, he decides to placate her. He turns to the barkeep and orders a pint of ale. For the first time in his life, he consumes alcohol, sitting beside Faye. He is barely half done with his pint when a strange, redheaded girl approaches him. She takes a seat beside him and smiles.

“Hello there.” She begins.

“Hi.” He says as he looks her over.

“You’re new here, aren’t you?” She asks.

Kelly nods silently in response. She looks him over and seems interested in what she sees.

“So what brings you here?” Kelly asks.

“I live here.” She answers. “You look like you could use some company.”

“Well, technically I have company, but she’s out of order at the moment.” Kelly quips, pointing back to Faye.

The girl giggles and reaches out, taking a hold of his hand.

“I’m much better company anyway.” She says as she pulls at him.

“I bet.” He murmurs.

He gets up from his stool, following her lead. He turns back to Faye, who stares at the two. To his surprise, the girl walks towards the staircase that leads to the tavern’s bedrooms. She begins climbing the stairs, pulling him up behind her; he doesn’t hesitate to follow. A few minutes pass as Faye finishes her pint, before grabbing Kelly’s unfinished mug. Faye asks the barkeep for another. He sets the mug of ale down onto the counter. She chugs Kelly’s leftover ale, before taking hold of the new mug and bringing it to her lips. She is approached by a man who takes a seat beside her, claiming Kelly’s stool.

She doesn’t seem to notice him, paying him no attention. After a moment, he leans closer. As she drinks from her pint of ale, he whispers something into her ear. Her eyes grow wide as she blushes. She grits her teeth and becomes angry; the rage is building.

“I’m not interested.” She grumbles as she turns to him.

“Alright then. How about ten if you just show me your breasts.” He asks, holding up a small coin purse.

“No...” She says through clenched teeth.

“Come on. It’s easy coin, and I won’t even touch you. I just want to see how good those big things look.” He pleads.

“I’m not a whore.” She says to him.

“Are you sure?” He asks with a raised eyebrow.

Faye is offended and enraged. She turns her body to face the man and rests an elbow on the table, flattening her hand as she faces her palm towards him. Her fury is at its peak.

“Bye.” She says with a sinister grin.

Upstairs, in one of the tavern’s rooms, a bed creaks and shifts as the redhead gasps and groans. Kelly kneels atop the bed near the footboard. Situated behind his lover, with her on her hands and knees before him, he holds onto her hips tightly. He moves his pelvis back and forth with considerable force. She gasps and leans forward before moaning loudly into a pillow.

“Oh shit...” He grunts as sweat beads on his forehead.

Suddenly the room tremors from as a loud blast comes from below. The candle on the nightstand tips over and dies; wax runs down and drips onto the floor. Kelly and his lover both lose balance.

“Shit!” Kelly yells as he pushes away from her.

He struggles to pull up his pants as he falls off of the bed, landing on the hard floor with a loud thud. He climbs to his feet and pulls up his underwear and pants, quickly dashing out of the room and back down the stairs towards the bar. He looks around, desperate to see what has happened. Faye stands before the bar, her stool tipped over as a man lies before her, writhing in agony on the ground. Using an aura push on him, Faye has broken his nose and popped his eyeballs like balloons. Patrons gather around her as Faye cracks her knuckles in preparation, a wide grin on her face.

“Well?” Faye asks the crowd.

A man rushes her as she reaches out and uses another aura push, crushing his ribcage and heaving him across the room. He slams into the stone wall; blood spews from his mouth as he struggles to breath. Several more patrons rush her, but Faye reaches out with her other hand, throwing an

aura flame at them. She sweeps the inferno through the crowd. Kelly watches in horror as Faye seems to enjoy burning the unarmed barflies. The barkeep hides behind the counter, cowering in fear. Hearing his pathetic grumbling, Faye turns back and snickers. She reaches over the counter, smiling at the terrified man.

“Hello there.” She says, waving a palm.

“No! Stop!” Kelly cries out as he rushes down the stairs.

Faye blasts the man with flames from her palm. Kelly stops at the foot of the stairs, while the barkeep gets up from the floor. He waves his arms wildly, flailing about as he smacks into a wall and rolls over it, before falling dead onto the ground. His body singes and turns the color of charcoal, as pieces of his skin and clothing flake off, landing as ashes on the floor. Faye laughs aloud as she holds the flame on his body.

The few remaining patrons have since escaped, pushing their way through the heavy wooden door, leaving it open. Faye turns to Kelly and aims a hand in his direction. He ducks down and puts his arm up before him, creating a translucent, cobalt blue aura shield.

“Faye! Stop! It’s me, Kel!” He yells at her.

Faye moves her hand, and Kelly can hear the screams of the redhead that he was sleeping with only moments earlier. He turns just in time to see Faye's push slam her into the wall, crushing her chest, and splitting her flesh at the sides. Organs and entrails spill out from her open wounds as she collapses dead on the ground. Kelly looks at the gore and turns away, vomiting violently over the side of the staircase.

"You're just upset because you didn't get to finish." Faye laughs.

He looks to Faye, seeing the expression on her face. He now realizes that Faye truly enjoys killing people.

"She was a whore anyway. I saw her head upstairs with two other men before you came in." Faye adds.

"She never asked me for money." Kelly comments, wiping his bottom lip with his shirt sleeve.

"Then she was either a stupid whore, or was giving you a freebie. Either way, you won out." Faye smirks.

Faye turns around and casually walks out of the tavern, passing through the open doorway. Kelly stumbles down the stairs, trying to keep up. As he approaches the

doorway, he sees soldiers armed with bronze swords, clad in leather armor surrounding Faye.

“You need to come with us, and answer for your crimes!” A soldier demands in a stern tone.

“I’m sorry, officer. Did you need to shackle me?” She asks with a suspiciously innocent voice.

She extends her wrists out before her, as though surrendering. Kelly immediately pushes the heavy wooden door shut, hiding behind the wall, next to the door and opposite the hinges. He presses his back to the wall, just in time for Faye to perform a powerful shockwave. The men all scream, and some of them sound as though their voices become quieter. Simultaneously, the heavy door is blown from the hinges, flying across the room, and striking the wall on the other end of the tavern. The plate glass windows shatter as glass flies through the room. Parts of the wall crumble from the force of her shockwave. Grey and tan dust fills the tavern.

Kelly looks around the corner to see that Faye is standing alone. Many of the soldiers are dead, having been flung into hard surfaces. Other soldiers are simply gone, having been blown several meters away from her. Soldiers from nearby buildings, the village watchtowers, fire arrows at him. They merely assume that he is in league with her. Kelly has no choice now but to escape with Faye or be

killed. He brings up his shield and grabs Faye by the arm, pulling her back inside.

“We have to get out of here.” Kelly gasps.

“Yes. I figured that out on my own.” Faye smiles.

“We need to move through the town and keep heading north.” Kelly adds.

He takes his pack from before the bar counter and looks to the man who’s face Faye had mangled. He is still alive and gasping for breath. Faye looks to him with a blank expression. Kelly stares back at her in silence.

“Kill him.” Faye suddenly says.

“What?!” Kelly looks at her in shock.

“He is clearly suffering. Put him out of his misery, or I will.” She continues, pointing a palm at the man.

Kelly looks down at the man who struggles to back away, clearly terrified. Kelly takes a deep breath and forms his aura blade from only his palm, something he had never tried before. He swings the blade at the man’s neck. To his surprise, it bends like a whip. The flexible blade glides across the poor man’s throat, swiftly decapitating him as arterial spray flies out; a brief crimson geyser leaves them both in awe.

Faye chuckles at the sight before turning away and walking for the open doorway. A part of the wall begins to crumble as a fire slowly consumes the interior of the tavern. Kelly takes a final look at the carnage before shaking it off and rushing out of the tavern, staying close to Faye. They fight their way through the town. Faye keeps soldiers at bay with her aura push and flamethrower, while Kelly guards them both with a large aura shield.

They soon reach the edge of the village on the north end. As they head for the gate, they see a child crying over a corpse of one of the soldiers; Faye had killed the little girl's father. Kelly approaches the child slowly, but she backs away. She turns her head to look past Kelly, only for another push to throw her into the stone wall several meters behind her, snapping the girl's neck and spine on impact. Kelly spins around to see Faye holding out her hand, a twisted smile on her face.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?!" Kelly screams at her.

"She was an orphan now. I did her a favor." Faye rationalizes.

"WHAT?! You don't know that! She might have had family! A mother, and brothers or sisters!" Kelly cries.

“Oh...” Faye rubs her bottom lip with her index finger. “I suppose you’re right. Well, I’ll just go find them real quick.” She says as she turns back around.

“No! We’re leaving right now!” Kelly yells.

He dashes toward her and grabs her by her arm, pulling her back toward the open gate. Faye laughs, as though this were some sort of game. The soldiers and villagers have since stopped attacking them, seemingly content with allowing their adversaries to leave peacefully. Kelly drags Faye down the road and away from the town, moving as swiftly as he possibly can. Faye suddenly knocks his hand away from her and stops.

“We should go back and take care of them.” Faye says as she looks toward the town.

“What? No. We’re going to keep moving. Do you think this is some kind of game or something?” He demands.

“Something like that.” Faye smiles.

“Faye...” Kelly sighs as he steps in front of her view. “What about Naomi? Don’t give up on finding her.” He tells her in a soft and comforting voice.

“Naomi... Right... I can’t leave her in this nightmare.” Faye mutters as she looks down to the ground, a solemn look on her face.

She turns back to the road and follows it. Kelly walks a distance behind her, watching her closely. He feels horrible for the villagers, but also for Faye as well. He knows that after this, she may be completely lost. Is she redeemable? Does she even realize what she has done? They hike down the road, exiting a fork that turns into a single, large and well-traveled path. This path moves almost directly north. As they hike, dusk approaches.

While looking for a place to camp, a horrible stench fills their nostrils. Approaching the source of the pungent odor, they find the corpse of a Sahvorai. The maggot infested body is difficult to identify, but it appears to be a rabbit-man. His body is mangled beyond recognition, but Faye notes a bullet hole in his skull. Realizing that Gareth must have killed this man, she stands and turns to the road.

“We’re right on their trail!” Faye exclaims.

“Are we? He has been dead a long time.” Kelly points out.

She runs down the road ebulliently, as Kelly struggles to keep up. She completely ignores his logical statement.

“Faye! Slow down! You’re going to lose me, here!” Kelly cries out.

“I’m sorry, Kel. I’m just so excited. We aren’t far behind. Naomi is over there somewhere, and so is Gareth. Then we can escape!” She exclaims.

Kelly hasn’t seen her so excited since before they left for the temple in Belize. She slows her pace, staying close to Kelly, and the two continue to hike north. Though they soon set up camp, Faye keeps her eyes on the road, smiling pleasantly. She can’t wait to find her sister. Kelly sits away from Faye, watching apprehensively. She is still the same girl that he grew up with, in body, but her mind has morphed into a stranger that he cannot trust. He wonders if it is even safe to sleep, lest she hurt or abandon him during the night, but he doesn’t have any other choice.

Episode 15: There Be Dragons

Kahlera stands high in a tall tree, perched atop a large branch. She holds her yew bow, looking down at the bait that she had placed near a clearing, about fifteen meters from the tree. A whitetail buck appears with small six-point antlers. She draws an arrow from her quiver, resting the back against the string of her bow. She takes aim, waiting patiently for the deer to come closer. It stands over thirty meters away, eyeing the bait as though it knows it is a trap.

“Come on. Just a little more...” She thinks to herself.

Suddenly, she feels a gentle tap on her leg. Looking down she sees Gareth, who sits on the tree branch with his side leaning on the trunk of the tree. He holds up Vetra, pointing to himself with an innocent, childlike expression. She smiles at him and nods her head once, lowering her bow. Gareth clenches his fist and pulls down in silent victory. He turns back to the deer, who has stepped a few feet closer, now just under thirty meters from them. He takes aim with Vetra, holding her tightly with both hands and resting an arm on his knee. He slowly exhales as he squeezes the trigger.

He fires a single round, dropping the deer with a clean shot to the side of the head. Kahlera seems to jump in surprise, quickly regaining her balance on the tree branch. They look at the deer lying dead on the ground for a moment before Gareth holsters Vetra and jumps down from the branch. He falls five meters toward the ground, landing and rolling forward, before quickly standing and walking towards the deer. Kahlera slings her bow and jumps down, landing gracefully on her feet and hands.

“I do not think that I will ever get used to that sound.” She comments as she approaches the carcass.

“Give it time.” He says, kneeling down beside the body.

“I would like to do it this time.” She says as she takes out her knife.

“Sure thing, babe.” Gareth smiles as he steps back.

Kahlera brushes against him as she kneels by the carcass, smiling back as she looks him over. She cleans the deer, removing the unwanted organs and entrails and leaving them in a pile near the bait. Gareth carries the deer back to their camp around four-hundred meters away, where Naomi patiently waits for them. They have spent a full week walking north along the road, and were running very low on food. Naomi cooks deer meat for them, while Kahlera dries the remainder and Gareth checks Vetra.

He unloads his sidearm before removing the slide, and switching the barrels. He inserts the original, .40 caliber barrel instead. He reassembles Vetra, reloading her with his limited supply of hollow-point ammunition.

“What are you doing?” Kahlera asks curiously.

“I’m going to use more powerful ammunition. We’re getting farther north, and I just like being prepared.” He answers.

They take the time to rest, preserve the excess deer meat, and spend quality time together. For the past seven days, when they weren’t walking the road, they were resting

or eating, so being able to sit with each other for an extended period is a welcome break from their journey. Naomi looks at her laptop, trying to remember what it looked like when it was turned on. Gareth lays on his side behind Kahlera, his stomach pressing against her. Kahlera takes a piece of hide from the deer and fashions it into an elongated oval, poking holes on each side. Using Gareth's boot laces, she fashions a traditional sling, a weapon she is quite proficient with.

Gareth strokes and scratches her back gently, regularly distracting her as she tries to work; she certainly doesn't mind. She ties the second boot lace to the body of the sling and quickly sets it down, turning back to Gareth who lies behind her. She leans over him, grinning wide. She leans in, giving him a passionate kiss. She gives him kiss after kiss, as he lies back, pulling her over him. Naomi looks up from the blank screen of her dead laptop, watching the couple. She sighs and shakes her head, before clearing her throat to get their attention.

"I'm only a child..." Naomi softly scolds them.

"Sorry." Gareth smirks.

"Why couldn't I have just been trapped with Faye and Kelly instead." Naomi comments.

"I certainly would have preferred the privacy." Kahlera quips.

As the day wears into the mid-afternoon, they finally strike their camp, going back to the road. They walk for several hours, finding a stream that bends near the edge of the road. They fill their canteens, but Naomi is curious to see if the stream grows larger; she has hoped to bathe and wash her clothes for several days now. They decide to leave the road behind, and follow the stream to see where it leads. They follow it into the forest, marking trees with Gareth's Kukri knife, as they journey ever deeper.

The stream turns into a small river, and after a short distance, they find that it is fed from a moderate body of water. It is hard to say whether it would be considered a large pond, or a very small lake. The water is somewhat cold, but crystal clear. They can see all of the way to the bottom, where it is being fed from a submerged spring. They set up a small camp near the edge of the lake, taking the time to wash their spare clothes. Naomi wades into the water, slowly adjusting to the temperature.

She turns back to Kahlera and Gareth, who sit by the campfire, drying the spare clothes from a branch high above it. Naomi clears her throat to get their attention. Desiring privacy, she shoos them away. The couple look to each other and smile. Kahlera stands, grabbing Gareth by the hand, and pulling him away from the campsite. He quickly takes Kahlera's bedroll with his other hand.

“We will be right over here.” Kahlera says, while leading him away.

“Yeah. Take all of the time you need.” He adds.

“Oh please...” Naomi mutters as she rolls her eyes.

Naomi knows that they won’t be back to disturb her, so she takes her time. She climbs out of the water when her fingers begin to visibly shrivel, before drying herself by the fire. To her surprise, Gareth and Kahlera have yet to return.

“Guys?” Naomi calls out to them.

“I am a girl.” Kahlera yells back from a distance.

“I certainly hope so.” Gareth quips.

Naomi follows the sound of their laughter, where they lie together on the grass, undressed but underneath the bedroll. Naomi returns to the camp as Gareth and Kahlera take their turn, bathing together in the water.

“I’m glad that I’m getting to wash up. I was getting a little worried that my smell would bother you.” Gareth admits.

“I like your smell.” Kahlera coos as she wraps her arms around his neck.

“That’s good, because I didn’t.” He laughs.

He gives her a tender kiss, holding her tightly as they wade in the water. They are soon passionately making-out, as his hands hold her submerged hips, reaching ever lower. She holds him tightly as he caresses her taut buttocks. She purrs as he squeezes.

“Again?” She asks sweetly.

“If only.” He replies, tilting his head back towards Naomi and the camp.

Suddenly, they are startled by a gunshot from behind them. They turn back to see Naomi holding the Kahr pistol, pointing it at the woods.

“What happened?!” Gareth asks.

“I saw something!” Naomi yells back.

“I get that... What was it?” Gareth demands.

“I... I don’t know. It’s head looked a lot like the skull from the cave. It was really scary...” Naomi’s voice trembles.

Gareth and Kahlera quickly climb out of the water, rushing to put on their clothes.

“We should get back to the road, just in case.” Kahlera suggests.

They quickly brush dirt over the fire, and collect their belongings. Naomi returns the Kahr pistol, which Gareth slides into his waistband. He keeps Vetra held tightly in his hands, following the river back to the road. As they walk along the river, they hear strange noises in the forest. It certainly sounds like creatures, but it is unlike anything Gareth has ever heard before.

“It is The Fallen...” Kahlera comments. “We must leave quickly!” She urges.

Her tone of voice expresses unbridled dread.

“What are The Fallen?” Naomi asks.

“They are a terrible creature; vicious beasts that hunt all living things in large packs. As strong as a bear, and more numerous than a family of wolves. They are one of the four most feared animals of the forest. Very dangerous, and territorial. We must leave this area before they decide to attack us.” Kahlera explains.

“Why are they called The Fallen?” Gareth asks, keeping his eyes trained to the woods.

“It is said that they were once the first race made by Sahvath, but they disobeyed, and punished with a terrible curse that made them what they are.” Kahlera answers.

The sounds of The Fallen grow more numerous in the distance. To their horror, the sounds seems to be quickly approaching them. Once on the road, they hasten their pace, until they are jogging down the path. The sounds follow them from just within the bushes, staying within earshot, but out of their sight. They approach a fork in the road and stop.

“We need to go left. Sarvah said that was the way.” Gareth says.

“No...” Kahlera begins. “I do not trust that... Woman... We should go right.”

“This isn’t the time to be jealous. I don’t think she would lead us into some sort of trap.” Gareth replies.

“If I am wrong, I will concede and begin to trust her... Maybe.” Kahlera says as she starts to walk the right path.

“God damnit.” Gareth mutters.

Reluctantly, Gareth and Naomi follow Kahlera’s lead, taking the right fork. It quick becomes narrow, winding through the forest. The sounds are so close, Gareth is certain that the next shriek will be accompanied by a hand reaching out, grabbing at him from the bushes. The path

grows ever steeper, and they soon discover that it leads up a hill, between a small rock valley. They soon reach the crest of the hill, only for the trail to dead end at a sheer rock cliff that surrounds the area like a crescent moon.

Gareth turns back to Kahlera who is visibly embarrassed. He sighs in frustration and places a hand on her shoulder, squeezing gently before leaning in and kissing her forehead.

“It’s okay. We’ll talk about this later, babe.” He says softly.

The bushes tremble in the valley behind them. They move just past the path, standing on a cliff that overlooks the valley. They are boxed in, and the creatures seem to know it. Several of the creatures step out, looking up at them. The Fallen stand roughly four feet and six inches tall, covered in stringy black or grey fur. Their digitigrade feet are lined with long, razor sharp claws, as are the three fingers and thumb on each hand. The claws are easily three inches long. Their three eyes are vibrant colors, with one red, one blue and one yellow eye each. Their faces look otherwise baboonesque, with long snouts devoid of fur, and six sharp fangs that can’t be covered by their lips, two on the bottom and four on top, on either side of the bottom fangs.

The Fallen roar loudly as they stare at the three. Naomi charges her aura, while Kahlera takes out her yew bow and an arrow, covering the tip with her own golden aura. Gareth sighs and makes sure that Vetra is ready to fire, unclipping the flaps of his double magazine pouch in preparation. The Fallen sudden rush them, attacking in a wild and unorganized fashion. As the three are positioned well above the creatures, aiming down a valley that runs parallel before them, they kill nearly a dozen in a matter of seconds, before they can even reach the top of the hill.

Naomi had been regularly practicing her aura talents with Kahlera, who trains her, as soon as she discovered she had them. She has since mastered the aura push, shockwave, telekinesis, flamethrower, and shield. She fires concentrated shockwaves, and short blasts of burning red aura streams down into the valley. Kahlera fires enchanted arrow after enchanted arrow, of which she has several dozen, having made more over the course of their journey. Gareth aims for center-mass, firing one to two rounds per second.

He fires Vetra empty and quickly reloads, swapping the empty magazine for a full one in a single fluid motion, before returning the empty magazine to the pouch on his belt. The creatures struggle up the hill, over the blood and bodies of their fallen kin. As though realizing their defeat, they soon disperse, retreating back into the forest. Having fought off a large wave, and without so much as a scratch, the girls are elated.

Gareth, however, immediately sets down his pack, taking out the Ziploc bag of .40 caliber ammunition. He had fired a magazine and a half; he quickly reloads his magazines, just in time for the creatures to return from the forest in even greater numbers. They rush through the valley, towards the peak of the hill, as quickly as they can. They scramble over the dead of the first wave. Naomi and Kahlera barely have time to bring up their weapons before the first Fallen makes its way to the top of the hill.

Gareth fires as it rushes him, dropping it dead on the ground barely three meters away. He moves towards the entrance of the valley, while Kahlera and Naomi attack the Fallen who are bottled within. Gareth fires as quickly as he can into the creatures, felling them in droves, though every corpse seems to land closer and closer. He reloads and continues firing, then reloads again. The wave begins to let up, but Vetra suddenly runs dry. One of The Fallen clambers over the bodies, leaping at him.

To Kahlera's horror, The Fallen latches onto his shoulders, trying to sink its teeth into his neck. They fall backward onto the ground. As he lands with a hard thud, Vetra's slide moves into battery. Impulsively, Gareth pulls the trigger on his empty sidearm, firing a purple bullet of energy from the pistol, and into the chest of The Fallen that leans over him, holding him down. He pulls the trigger again,

firing another as blood sprays over his shirt. The Fallen lies dead over his body, pinning him down.

Another Fallen stands before him, jumping at him and clawing viciously at the body that lies atop him, as though it doesn't realize that it isn't Gareth. He aims for its head and fires another purple bullet. Naomi and Kahlera can see the dark aura bullet as it strikes the second Fallen, killing it instantly. The second wave breaks and returns to the forest as Kahlera rushes up to Gareth, pulling both corpses off him and helping him up. She latches onto him, holding him tightly. The blood from his shirt stains her top, and the fur on her firm belly. He wraps his arms around her and feels her trembling.

"I thought I lost you!" She exclaims,

"Not today, babe." He says softly, stroking her back.

"Not ever! I need you..." She coos.

"Guys!" Naomi yells to them.

They turn back as the creatures run through the bushes in the background. They appear to be regrouping for another assault. Gareth and Kahlera return to the cliff beside Naomi. Gareth reloads his magazines with the last of his .40 S&W ammunition, taking out the spare Kahr magazines as well.

“You used an aura.” Naomi comments.

**“Yes. Why are you using those instead of your aura?”
Kahlera asks.**

**“You said people could use it in desperation. I’m not
going to trust that to work again; Better safe than sorry.”
Gareth replies.**

**He keeps his weapons and ammunition close, returning
to the entrance of the valley. Kahlera and Naomi both join
him; Kahlera is nearly out of arrows, popping open the
retention snap on her knife. Naomi charges both palms with
her crimson aura, preparing herself for battle. The
creatures rush them in a third wave, that is about the size of
the first. Gareth fires round after round as Kahlera uses the
last of her arrows. Gareth passes his Kahr to her so that
she can keep fighting.**

**Kahlera nervously fires several rounds, while Naomi
roasts The Fallen alive with her concentrated aura streams.
Gareth reloads as they come close enough to claw the
three. They step back as they fight off the creatures.
Gareth soon runs out of ammunition again, as does Kahlera.
One of The Fallen reaches out its hideous claws towards
her and slashes at her neck. She stumbles back as Gareth
watches in horror.**

**The slide of his empty pistol locks forward on its own.
He takes aim, firing another purple bullet from Vetra and**

into the monster's temple, killing it before it can touch his lover. He gives her his hand, pulling her to her feet before passing her several magazines for the Kahr. He keeps firing purple aura bullets from his weapon as Kahlera reloads and rejoins her comrades. Soon, the last creature has been slain, and the few remaining run back to the forest. The noises grow distant and quickly disappear.

Gareth turns back to Kahlera, holding her close. Naomi collects the spent brass for Gareth, on impulse, as her hands tremble from the adrenaline rush. Gareth kisses Kahlera's cheek, and she nuzzles his face with her snout. They gaze into each other's eyes; the reality of almost losing one another sinks in.

"It's okay now. We're safe." He says softly, stroking her cheek. "I'm not ever going to let anything take you away from me... I love you."

Gareth had never said that to her before. The look on Kahlera's face speaks volumes. She rests her head on his shoulder and squeezes tightly.

"I love you too. I cannot live without you." She confesses.

"Then don't." He whispers softly into her feline ear.

They kiss passionately as her tail sways, moving past her waist and wrapping behind his back.

“I’m sorry to interrupt, but we should really leave, before The Fallen come back.” Naomi says.

“Right.” Kahlera agrees, pulling away from Gareth.

They quickly grab their packs. Naomi passes Gareth as much of the spent brass as she could find; he slips it into his cargo pants pockets. Kahlera returns the Kahr and empty magazines to Gareth. They rush down the path, through the valley of corpses, and out of the dark woods. They never hear a single creature stalking them. They return to the fork, taking the left path as the sun begins to fade away.

Not wanting to risk being caught by more creatures, they decide collectively to walk as long as they possibly can without stopping, to put as much distance between them and The Fallen as possible. As they walk, Kahlera tells Gareth how rare it is for both he and Naomi to have talents. She offers to train and practice with him, as she already does for Naomi. Gareth readily accepts. They walk for several hours in the pitch dark, using only Gareth’s flashlight and Vetra’s light to see. Now well over ten miles from the battle, they make camp.

Naomi lies down in her sleeping bag near the small campfire, quickly passing out from exhaustion. Gareth and Kahlera lie next to one another, snuggling together atop her bedroll. He looks down at the blood stains on her fur. He sits up, taking out his Crusader canteen and a cloth from his pack. He wets the cloth and gently dabs at her belly, cleaning her.

“I was so scared I was going to lose you...” Kahlera begins, speaking softly. “I have never felt like this for a male before. I do not want to live my life without you in it.”

“And I don’t want to live without you either.” He replies, while gently wiping the rust colored stains from her fur.

Once her fur is clean, he puts away the cloth and canteen. He lies back down with her, pulling his sleeping bag over them, using it as a blanket.

“Thank you.” She says as she snuggles with him.

“You’re welcome, babe.” He says before kissing her forehead. “You know... Even if there *is* a way back to earth, I’m not *ever* going to leave you. I promise.” He adds.

Her grip tightens as he speaks, and she nuzzles his neck with her snout.

"I know that my tribe will not like our coupling, but I do not care. Whatever happens when we get to the village, I would rather be happy with you, than unhappy with them." She coos.

"Would they send you away?" Gareth asks.

He suddenly feels horrible for the position that he has placed her in. As much as he cares for her, he feels as though it was out of turn, making her choose between him and her own people, even if inadvertently.

"Perhaps, but so long as we are together, I will be fine." She replies.

"You are something special." He says with a smile.

"I know." She grins.

They share a quiet laugh and get comfortable, keeping both pistols loaded and near their heads. Gareth has already switched back to the nine-millimeter threaded barrel, and loaded all of the magazines for both firearms. He wasn't taking any chances if any of The Fallen should come back for them. They hold each other tightly; Gareth gently strokes her back as she seems to purr. This is certainly the strangest relationship that he has had, but it feels more real than any of the others.

Episode 16: A Deal With The She-Wolf

Sleeping in the following morning, Gareth, Kahlera and Naomi all awaken, sore and exhausted from their ordeal with The Fallen. They eat a quick and simple breakfast of wild berries and deer jerky before striking camp and making their way down the road. They hike slowly, struggling to find the energy. They just want to rest, and take another day to recover. They manage to walk a few more miles down the road, before they have had enough. It's only mid-day, but they can't go on any longer.

Kahlera takes a moment to walk the perimeter of the camp while Naomi steps just behind a tree, to relieve herself. Gareth sits on a log, his back facing the south. He sets his forearms along his thighs and leans over, staring at the ground. His hair falls past his shoulders and sways in the gentle breeze. He mentally calculates their distance from the village, briefly wondering if he has the strength to make it the rest of the way; the village is easily over two week's hard walk. All of his muscles perpetually burn, while the blisters on his feet are quickly callusing over, his flesh becoming as rigid as the soles of his boots.

He hears a noise behind him; grass shuffles and a twig snaps. Knowing that Kahlera is walking around the camp, he assumes that it is simply her returning. He doesn't get up

or move, but stares down at the ground. A hand gently strokes his back, making him shiver. He enjoys the sensation, and sits upright impulsively. Suddenly, it rests on his shoulder. He turns to look and sees that it isn't Kahlera's. The hand is covered in black fur with white fingers, and tipped with black claws. He shoots up and turns around to see that the hand belongs to Sarvah, who stands right behind him. Several of her guards wait a distance away.

"Sarvah..." He sighs in relief. "You scared the hell out of me." He chuckles.

"Did you miss me?" She asks with a wide grin.

"Possibly." He smiles. "What are you doing here, anyway?"

"Well I was just in the neighborhood, and thought I would drop by." She winks. After a short pause, she continues. "Well, I may have been the slightest bit worried about you... A-And your friends! We picked up our pace when we found that sea of bodies you left behind. I am impressed."

"Oh, well... It was nothing." He smirks, jokingly looks over his fingernails.

She giggles and steps closer.

“You know, if you had stayed to the left like I told you too, you probably never would have had to fight them.” She adds.

“Were would be the fun in that?” He chuckles.

“I missed that...” She happily sighs.

“Missed what?” He raises an eyebrow.

“Your sense of humor is refreshing... Besides, I have never been this far north! There could be quite the market for our goods and skills, and I never turn away from business.” She continues.

“Very wise.” He nods.

“Well, the area is clear.” Kahlera speaks up, exiting the woods from the west.

She stops in her tracks at the mere sight of Sarvah. She clenches a fist, glaring at her.

“What are *you* doing here?” Kahlera demands.

“I was just passing through, and thought I would steal your mate away from you.” Sarvah facetiously answers.

“I would like to see you try.” Kahlera growls, stepping up to her.

“Woah. She was only joking!” Gareth interjects, placing his hands on Kahlera’s shoulders.

She turns her head to look at him, smiling faintly, and placing her hands over his. Naomi appears from behind the tree, to see what is going on. She casually approaches Sarvah.

“It’s very good to see you here.” Naomi says as she extends a hand to her.

“I hope you washed that.” Sarvah smirks.

Naomi lowers her hand. Kahlera and Sarvah glare at each other, while Gareth stands between them. The tension builds, surrounding the three like a dense fog. The silence is deafening.

“Sarvah is heading north towards your village.” Gareth begins, his voice cutting through the still air.

“What?” Kahlera looks to him.

“I think we should travel together...” He continues.

“Excuse me?!” She exclaims in shock.

“It would be beneficial to both parties.” Naomi adds.

“We have been doing fine on our own. We do not need her.” Kahlera grumbles.

Gareth steps closer to his lover and wraps his arms around her, giving her a gentle embrace.

“Yes, we do. We have a long way to go still. It’s safer to travel in numbers, and we can help each other.” He says softly into her ear.

Kahlera rests her hands on his back and holds him tightly, gripping onto his brown leather vest.

“I do not like her...” She quietly admits.

“I know, but she’s not taking me away from you, and we need her help.” Gareth replies.

Sarvah’s expression becomes solemn as Gareth speaks. She turns away, walking slowly back to her guards. Naomi watches her curiously. Kahlera silently nods in agreement with Gareth, and he releases her, turning back to Sarvah.

“Wait!” He calls out, rushing up to her.

Sarvah slowly turns back, her icy blue eyes glancing towards him. He smiles pleasantly at her and raises a fist, jutting out his thumb as he points it towards the road.

“I believe you’re going my way.” He jests.

“Good, but there are a few rules.” Sarvah begins.

“And what would those be?” Naomi asks.

“Shoes off in the house, wash your hands before dinner, and be home before dark?” Gareth guesses.

Sarvah laughs, and a smile crosses her lips.

“Something like that.” She replies.

She steps away from Gareth, gliding her black claws over his chest, gently scratching his orange t-shirt. She walks up to Naomi and gently pats her on the shoulder, then passes by her as well. She steps up to Kahlera, who glares apprehensively at the she-wolf. They stare at each other for a brief but tense moment.

“Play nice, and do not get in the way...” Sarvah quietly warns Kahlera.

“The same applies to you.” Kahlera adds with a nod.

“Well, I cannot guarantee I will play nice, but I will not interfere with your relationship. You will lose that on your own time.” Sarvah smirks.

She mockingly blows a kiss to Kahlera.

“Oh, and I believe you will need more arrows! I will take care of that.” Sarvah winks.

She turning away from Kahlera, and walks back toward Gareth, who stands near her guards. Gareth, Kahlera, Naomi, Sarvah and her guards sit and wait, resting for a few hours while the remainder of the Feather Finger’s catch up to them. Gareth sits beside Kahlera and watches the tribe marching down the road in the distance. Naomi sits off to the side, her back against a tree. She looks over at the couple, then notices Sarvah in the corner of her eye. Having shoed away her guards, she stands alone and leans against a tree. Sarvah seems to be solemnly watching the pair from a distance.

A guard watches the tribe approaching and raises a hand over his eyes, shielding them from the sun. He strains to see the tribe in the distance. He stands about five feet and six inches tall, with a toned build and covered in light brown fur with splotches of black, seemingly added at random. He has short cut chocolate brown hair that hangs just over his jade green eyes, and has a canine appearance. Something about this Sahvorai reminds Gareth of Leon from Resident Evil.

Gareth stands up, leaving Kahlera’s side. He approaches the guard and takes out his binoculars from his

belt pouch. He stands beside the man for a moment, then passes his binoculars to him. The guard looks through the binoculars and seems quite impressed.

“Hm... This is considerably easier to use than a typical telescope.” He comments, passing the binoculars back to Gareth.

“I didn’t know that you had any telescopes here.” Gareth replies.

“There are a lot of things that you do not know about this place.” The man adds.

“This is true... So, I’m Gareth.” He says, extending a hand.

The man looks at him, and then down at his hand. After a short pause, he reaches out, grabbing his forearm in an archaic handshake.

“I know... I am Volaren.” He answers.

“You’ve heard of me?” Gareth chuckles.

“Of course. All of the Feather Fingers know who you are.” Volaren replies.

“Well shit... I’m famous. Who would have thought...” Gareth smirks.

Volaren motions for Gareth to follow, as he begins walking down the road. Gareth places his binoculars into the pouch and rushes to catch up, slowed considerably by his sore muscles and aching feet. They walk in silence for a moment as they approach the others. Volaren seems to look over to Gareth often. His expression seems suspicious, or even disdainful.

“If you have something to say to me, you might as well say it, before we have an audience.” Gareth suddenly speaks.

Volaren seems surprised, but bows his head.

“Fine. I do not trust you, or your intentions.” He begins.

“Pardon?” Gareth snickers.

“You have a considerable power over my leader; I have never seen it before. When you arrived, she took to you like a fish to water, and when you and your females left, she was truly upset. She packed up the tribe and lead us north without warning, the very next day. I have no doubt who was on her mind when she made such a decision.” Volaren continues.

“Sarvah cares about her tribe. She saw a market in the north, and took the opportunity to enrich her people. That has nothing to do with me.” Gareth interrupts.

**“Do not be coy. It is obvious that she desires you.”
Volaren snarls.**

“Her interest in me seems purely physical. Leading a tribe on a dangerous trip north, over a male you want to bed, seems extreme. Why even concern yourself with the reasons? *Sarvah* is in charge. Her intentions don’t need to be voiced to all of her people; whatever her reasons were, they must have been valid. Don’t pretend to understand her mind. You’re just a soldier.” Gareth scoffs.

“That may be, but I have traveled with the Feather Fingers for two years, and I have never seen Sarvah treat a male the way that she has treated you. Never has one been allowed inside of her yurt without a guard present, and only to discuss business. In my time with the Feather Fingers, I have never overheard her mating with anyone, and I guard her yurt often.” Volaren explains.

“Really? ... That’s... Very hard to believe...” Gareth admits.

“It is, is it not?” Volaren nods.

“I assumed that she was regularly with males.” Gareth adds.

“And yet she is not.” Volaren mutters.

Gareth looks back to see that Kahlera, Naomi, Sarvah and the remaining guards are following them, a distance behind the two men.

“Still, to claim that I am the sole reason she is taking you north sounds ridiculous to me.” Gareth sighs.

“Perhaps there is more to it than the simple desire to mate with you? If she only wanted to experience a human male, she easily could, *without* risking her tribe on a dangerous and long journey to the northern lands.” Volaren poses.

“She has only known me for a few days. That’s hardly enough time to fall in love with someone.” Gareth laughs.

“This is true. Maybe it is only the potential that she is pursuing. Remember that lives are much longer here, and investing your time means considerably more. Regardless, if you hurt her, I will not hesitate to kill you in your sleep. It is nothing personal, but I am loyal to Sarvah, and she takes care of all of us.” Volaren warns him.

“Understandable and agreeable.” Gareth humbly nods.

“Good.” Volaren grunts.

Gareth and Volaren approach the convoy. Volaren orders the group to stop. Men, women and children begin collecting the poles and cloth fragments from the back of wooden carts, which are pulled by oxen. They swiftly begin preparing the camp, setting it up in a nearly identical format as before, building it directly over the road. Gareth is amazed by how quickly they can establish their nomadic village. By the time that the others have reached the growing campsite, half of the yurts framework has been

placed, and two women build a large fire in the center of the village.

As the afternoon approaches, the villagers prepare a considerable feast. That evening everyone joins in, feasting around the large campfire in the center of the village. Many of the villagers talk and laugh amongst themselves. Gareth, Kahlera and Naomi sit near Sarvah and her personal guard, which includes Volaren. Sarvah keeps close to Naomi, who is between her and Gareth, while Kahlera is on his other side. Gareth looks over to see that Volaren is glaring at him.

After an awkward dinner, the three travelers retire to the same storage yurt that Sarvah had allowed them to use previously. Volaren escorts them himself. Kahlera and Gareth cuddle together as they prepare to sleep.

“We were better off on our own...” Kahlera suddenly speaks.

“Is it really so bad traveling with others?” Gareth asks her.

“It is not traveling with others. It is traveling with *her*... I do not trust that conniving wolf.” She answers.

“You don’t have enough faith in people.” He says, kissing her tenderly on her cheek.

“Perhaps you have too much...” She poses.

They snuggle together as she presses her back against his bare chest. His hand strokes her side as she purrs. She turns back, looking over her shoulder. He pecks her cheek and winks at her. She rolls over to face him, kissing him passionately. Naomi sits up and sighs. Gareth and Kahlera pause, as they turn to look back to Naomi.

“Should I leave?” Naomi grumbles in frustration.

“I’m sorry. We’ll behave.” He replies.

Naomi gets up from her sleeping bag, stepping out of the yurt anyway.

“Do you think she will be back soon?” Kahlera asks him.

He shrugs his shoulders. She reaches up, places a hand on his cheek, and pulls him back down to her. Naomi walks away from the yurt and sits down on a crate about twenty meters away. She turns to look at the night sky, and is startled by the sight of Sarvah. She sits near a crate, which blocked Naomi’s view of her as she approached. Naomi begins to speak, but Sarvah slowly brings a single finger to her lips, shushing the girl. They sit in silence for a moment as Sarvah leans back against the crate, her eyes

closed. After nearly twenty minutes, she opens her eyes and looks to Naomi.

“You can go back now.” Sarvah says to her as she stands.

Naomi stands up and looks back at the yurt. Was Sarvah listening to Gareth and Kahlera having sex? She slowly walks back to the yurt, cautiously entering. Looking inside, she sees Gareth holding Kahlera from behind, his face buried between her shoulder blades as he sleeps. Kahlera is also asleep, her arms resting over Gareth’s, a smile spread across her face. Kahlera’s fur seems matted with both hers’ and Gareth’s sweat. Naomi rolls her eyes, then climbs back into her sleeping bag.

Naomi wakes the next morning as Kahlera places a meal of cooked venison, shredded lettuce, and bread near her head. Naomi sits up and looks at the food, then back to Kahlera. Kahlera smiles at her, gently brushing a strand of hair from Naomi’s face. Naomi smiles back; Kahlera’s presence is strangely comforting. She is quickly growing attached to her.

“Eat. We will be leaving soon. They are already packing up the camp.” Kahlera says softly.

“Okay.” Naomi rubs her eyelids.

Kahlera pats Naomi's shoulder softly, then moves across the yurt, where she continues packing supplies. Outside, Gareth stands with Volaren, helping him load wooden crates onto the oxen driven carts. Sarvah approaches the two.

"Hello, Gareth." She says with a smile.

"Hi again, Sarvah." Gareth says with a wave.

She merely nods to Volaren. He stands there for a moment, which seems to irritate her. She glares at him; he seems puzzled, as though he lacks direction.

"Go... Busy yourself!" She coldly snaps.

She waves a hand, as though shooing away a fly. Volaren steps away from them. Gareth is stunned by her rude treatment of her loyal soldiers. It causes him to hesitate. She turns her eyes to him and stares, a little grin on her face.

"Uh... You know... You don't need to say the whole name. I don't really like it anyway." He adds.

“What should I call you then?” Sarvah asks, genuinely curious.

“Gare! We are almost ready.” Kahlera calls out from the yurt, before stepping outside.

“That works.” He says, tilting his head to Kahlera.

“Alright then.” Sarvah nods.

“Well... What a pleasant surprise...” Kahlera sarcastically comments. “Why is it that whenever I look for my lover, you are around?” She asks as she approaches the two.

“It is nice to see you too.” Sarvah grins sinisterly. “Have a pleasant sleep?”

“I would, if we had done much sleeping last night. I am actually still quite sore.” Kahlera taunts her with an equally malevolent smile.

The two women glare at each other for a moment. Gareth looks nervously between them.

“So, what’s the plan for today!” He asks, interrupting their staring match.

“We will move on and try to cover ten miles or so.” Sarvah answers.

“Oh good... More walking... My favorite!” Gareth exclaims, rubbing his hands together.

Sarvah laughs at his droll candor.

“I will take it slow...” Sarvah begins, in a tender and sincere voice. “For both of your sakes.” She glances at Kahlera.

Sarvah turns and leaves, waving her fingers at the couple as she rounds a corner of another Yurt. Kahlera sighs in frustration. Gareth turns to her and gives her a hug, gently stroking her back to comfort her. She rests her hands on his shoulders and quickly calms down, nuzzling his face with her short snout. Naomi appears from the yurt, burping loudly. Gareth chuckles, and the three quickly take down the yurt, packing away the fabric and poles.

Within an hour of awakening, Naomi looks at the now completely disassembled camp. Sarvah takes the lead, setting the pace as she walks. Her guards flank her in a wedge formation, as Gareth and the girls walk just behind them. They move rather slowly, which everyone notices. Volaren falls back from his position and walks close to Gareth.

“This is entirely your doing.” Volaren whispers to Gareth.

He glares at Gareth for a moment, then hastens his pace, reentering the formation.

“What did he have to say?” Kahlera asks Gareth.

“He’s just being an ass hole. I guess everyone can’t like me.” Gareth laughs.

As he smiles at his lover, he looks back at the gentle pace of the tribe behind them. He looks ahead and watches Sarvah as she walks very slowly and casually, as if deep in thought. Perhaps he simply didn’t want to see it, but it’s becoming readily apparent; everything he says to her has a genuine effect on Sarvah and her decisions. He immediately feels terrible for the position that the Feather Fingers have been placed in, a direct result of his interactions with Sarvah. He sighs, rubbing his brow with his fingers. Kahlera looks to him, noting his solemn expression.

“Are you alright?” She asks him.

“Yeah... Everything is going to be just fine. It’s just a light headache.” He says, before reaching out and gently stroking her cheek.

Episode 17: Breadcrumbs

Back on the road, Kelly and Faye head north, keeping a swift but steady pace. Faye seems possessed by the desire to reunite with her sister. She is perpetually convinced that she is around every corner, and over every hill. They walk down a hill, staying on the well-traveled path, and come upon a patch of land that has been trampled flat; it had clearly been used recently as a campsite for a moderately large group. Faye looks over the post holes dug into the ground with growing excitement.

"They had to have come this way..." Faye thinks aloud.

"I hope that whoever was camping here was friendly, and didn't hurt them." Kelly comments.

"If they were human, then that is a guarantee." Faye replies.

"Are you so sure about that?" Kelly asks.

"Exactly what do you mean?" Faye grumbles.

"I'm just saying, Kahlera didn't try to kill us on the spot, but the humans did." Kelly explains.

"Did you forget those three monstrosities?" Faye barks.

"All I'm saying is that there doesn't seem to be much of a difference between the two. They are as likely to be attacked or treated fairly by human or Sahvorai." Kelly poses.

"I doubt that." Faye says through clenched teeth. "And you're starting to sound like Gary. That's not very wise..." She warns him.

Kelly looks at her with puzzled eyes, his brow lowering as he turns his head. He doesn't recognize her anymore. She stands and turns back to the road, quickly jogging north. She moves up the next hill as Kelly struggles to catch up, gasping as he stomps up the path behind his companion. As they reach the peak of the hill, a group is walking toward them in the distance. Faye stops and watches them for a moment. They walk ever closer, keeping their steady pace. The leader rides a large steed, giving them a polite wave; the half-dozen men approach apprehensively.

"Hello there!" The knight calls out.

"Greetings." Kelly gasps.

"Where are you two heading?" The knight asks.

"We're looking for two friends; we lost them at a mountain pass during a rock slide." Faye begins.

"They were traveling with a Sahvorai woman, too. We were heading north, to find the Crystalline Hall." Kelly says through labored breath.

"Newcomers, eh?" The knight chuckles.

"Most people give up on the Crystalline Hall after the first few days of walking. Too hard for them..." Another soldier adds.

“Have you seen them?” Faye asks.

“No.” The knight says, while climbs down from his horse. “We haven’t seen anyone on this road. We’re actually looking for someone ourselves.”

“Oh?” Faye raises an eyebrow.

“A witch!” A third soldier comments.

“Burn the witch!” Another jests.

Kelly and Faye look to each other and then back at the knights.

“A witch, you say?” Kelly comments.

“Yes, a witch.” The knight replies.

“And how do you know that she is a witch?” Faye poses.

“If she weighs the same as a duck...” Kelly murmurs.

Faye jabs him in the ribs with her elbow.

“She came through a town called Blackwater and slaughtered half of the village with powerful aura talents. She started in a tavern and moved through the town heading north. She was rumored to have a slave boy with her, who

also has talents. He spent the battle guarding his mistress.” The knight continues.

“Slave boy?” Faye laughs.

“Mistress?” Kelly scoffs.

Kelly’s heart drops. He tries to contain his nervousness.

“There’s quite the bounty on their heads.” The knight smiles.

“Well if you have a price on your head, you’re doing your job.” Faye says with a sigh.

Kelly’s heart sinks, and he takes a step back. He looks at the knight who blades his body, as though preparing himself.

“Excuse me?” The knight asks, narrowing his eyes.

“I don’t suppose I can collect my own bounty. Do I have to be dead or alive?” Faye snickers.

“Either...” The knight grunts, drawing his iron sword.

Faye holds out her right palm as she blades her own body. Her hand glows a vibrant orange as the soldiers draw their blades. Kelly steps back as the knight approaches

them without fear. He turns to Kelly, quickly walking by Faye.

“There’s not much of a bounty on you.” The knight begins, pointing the tip of his blade at Kelly. “If you cooperate, I won’t kill you...” He offers.

“What about her?” Kelly asks, genuinely considering his options.

“She’s dead either way.” The knight replies.

Kelly draws his bronze sword with his right hand and brings up his left arm. His aura shield quickly forms over his left arm as his sling-blade covers the sword with a vibrant blue glow. The knight laughs as he lunges at Kelly. The knight’s sword glows a vibrant white, as he too charges a sling-blade. The other five soldiers all attack Faye who quickly sets them ablaze with her aura flamethrower. They writhe in agony, dropping their weapons and falling to the ground. Faye turns to Kelly and the Knight as they lock blades. She aims her palm at the knight, who stands between her and Kelly.

“No!” Kelly yells. “I’ve got this one!”

Kelly shoves forward, knocking the knight off balance. He stumbles backward but quickly regains his composure.

“You’re a lot stronger than you look. And here I thought you were just fat!” The knight laughs.

The knight lunges again, as though he had not fought a swordsman in quite a long time. Kelly spins, knocking his sword away with his own blade, and slamming him in the shoulder with his shield, pushing the knight to the ground. Kelly steps up to the knight who quickly swings his blade, but Kelly blocks it with his shield. Kelly thrusts his arm out; the knight’s sword flies away from him, sliding across the ground. The white aura immediately dissipates as the sword tumbles away. Kelly plunges the blade into his chest.

“Too easy.” Kelly thinks aloud.

The blue aura easily slides through the knight’s iron armor. The knight groans, spewing blood from his mouth. Faye smiles as she watches Kelly pull the blade from the knight’s chest. The knight struggles to speak as Faye approaches. Blood oozes out of his mouth and nose as he coughs. He glares at his killer with fiery eyes, struggling to point a finger. His lips move as he croaks.

“I think the dead should shut up, unless there is something to say.” Faye comments.

She reaches out her palm and aims at the knight, preparing to roast him alive, but Kelly swiftly decapitates him. His head rolls away as his helmet flies off. Kelly steps back as his shield and sling-blade fade. He sighs and slowly slides his bronze sword into the frog on his belt. He hangs his head low, as his blonde ponytail flows over his shoulder. Faye approaches the corpse, searching it for valuables. She checks the other five corpses, collecting small quantities of food, water, and coinage, though much of what is left is burned beyond use, or recognition.

“I should probably start saving the fire for people who *really* piss me off. I’m destroying too much loot.” Faye thinks aloud.

She looks to the horse who sidesteps from her. She reaches out and takes the reigns.

“You don’t know how to ride.” Kelly comments, looking at the knight’s twitching corpse.

“You don’t either... How hard can it be?” She replies.

“Very.” Kelly retorts.

“Well, it’ll help us catch up to Naomi.” Faye continues.

“What about Gareth and Kahlera?” He asks.

“Huh? Oh, right. Them too...” Faye murmurs.

Kelly steps up to the horse and Faye places a foot in the reigns, quickly pulling herself up.

"I think I probably should've gone first." Kelly comments.

With a frustrated sigh, Faye dismounts and Kelly takes her place. Reaching a hand out, he takes a hold of Faye's wrist and pulls her up onto the back of the horse. He holds the reigns tightly, pulling to one side. The horse turns around. He can barely contain his own excitement, controlling the powerful steed. It slowly moves back, facing north along the road. He thinks back to video games, attempting to imitate the movements. He taps the heels of his boots against the haunches of the horse and shakes the reigns; the horse begins to move down the road. A few more taps and it begins to trot.

Kelly grins wide as he controls the beast. He quickly brings the horse to a gallop. Faye wraps her arms around Kelly's waist, holding tightly as the horse gallops down the trail. They ride for an hour, alternating from a swift gait to a slow trot. Kelly tries not to push the horse too hard. Faye demands they keep moving, barking orders into his ear. They push the horse until it can't go any further; they need to stop and rest. Though Faye wants to keep moving, without regard for the animal, Kelly holds the reigns; sitting behind him, she is forced to yield.

They stop as the daylight begins to fade, having already ridden nearly thirty miles. After resting for nearly an hour, Faye insists they keep moving. Nothing is going to stop her. They climb atop the steed and begin moving through the darkness, illuminated by their powerful LED flashlights. After a short while, the horse struggles with the second gallop. Faye smacks the horse on the rear, determined to keep moving, no matter what. It whinnies with every slap of her palm.

“Stop! It can’t keep this pace!” Kelly yells to her.

“Shut the fuck up and ride!” Faye screams.

The horse suddenly stops, neighing in frustration. It begins to rear up, narrowly throwing its riders. Faye jumps off as Kelly leans forward and pets the horse on the neck, trying to calm it down. He dismounts and holds the reigns, slowly walking the horse down the dark path.

“Kel.” Faye suddenly says.

He turns back to her, only to see her holding out her hands. He quickly releases the reigns, jumping aside as Faye blasts the horse with a powerful push. She crushes its ribcage and snapping its legs. It falls over, making horrible noises as it suffers. Unable to bear the sound of its agony,

Kelly pulls out his pistol and fires a single round into its skull, ending its life in an instant. With a blank expression on her face, Faye pushes past Kelly as she keeps moving north up the road.

Kelly is terrified of Faye, who no longer seems to regard any life with value. He isn't even sure if she was calling his name to warn him, or make him look at her before killing him. Faye walks a steady pace throughout the night. Though Kelly's legs burn as though they were on fire, and his eyelids feel as though they were made of lead, he manages to keep up with her. They come upon a fork in the road that leads to the left and the right.

They take the right path on impulse, hiking down the road as it quickly becomes narrow, winding through the forest. It opens to a valley that leads up a hill, which is lined with bizarre rotting corpses. Faye rushes up and examines the corpses. Many are burned with an aura flamethrower not dissimilar to her own, though many others have arrows sticking out of them, and wounds that look suspiciously like bullet holes. Further investigation reveals small quantities of .40 S&W shell casings from Gareth's beloved pistol.

Faye rushes up the hill to the peak, only to find that it is a dead end. They look through the putrid corpses, noting that they are several days old, as well as that none of their friends are among them.

“They have to be alive! They just have to be!” Kelly says with excitement.

“We’re coming, Naomi. We’re right behind you.” Faye mutters to herself.

They quickly rush back down the hill, through the valley, and out of the forest. They return to the fork in the road, taking the left pass, with their energy boosted from their discovery.

Episode 18: Reporting In

Gareth takes aim at a whitetail deer from a high branch of a tree, having baited it an hour earlier. He takes aim with Vetra as he leans over another branch that juts out in front of him at chest height. Volaren stands beside him, on the same branch, taking aim with a bow and arrow. Gareth reaches a hand out and stops him. Gareth slowly squeezes the trigger as he exhales, firing a purple aura bullet from his sidearm and killing the deer that stands below, roughly twenty meters away.

“Holy bolt, five. Deer, zero.” Gareth chuckles as he jumps down.

“Why do you call that talent ‘holy bolt’?” Volaren asks as he jumps down beside him.

“Diablo.” Gareth replies.

“What?” Volaren asks in confusion.

“Nothing. It just sounded good.” Gareth laughs.

They collect the deer’s corpse; Volaren slings it over his shoulders as they return to the camp. They exit the woods and approach the Feather Finger’s yurt village, where Kahlera is busy cleaning several more deer, among other game animals. Their carcasses lie in a large pile near a wooden cart.

“Another one?” She asks them with a smile.

“There are plenty of them out there. Why? Too much for you, babe?” Gareth asks.

He leans in and gives her a kiss on the lips.

“No. I just like a break in between sessions.” She replies with a sly grin, resting a hand on the back of his neck.

“Should I leave?” Volaren jokes as he drops the carcass.

“Only if Kahlera leaves too.” Sarvah suddenly interrupts.

She approaches them, her arms crossed underneath her bosom. She smiles at Gareth as she glances to Kahlera.

“You never quit...” Kahlera sighs, a faint smile on her face.

“Persistence is the key to getting what you want. That is true for everything, especially the male of another woman.” Sarvah replies.

“Well it does not seem to be working for you.” Kahlera giggles, holding Gareth by the arm.

“Perhaps in time.” Sarvah winks.

In the past three weeks that they have traveled with the Feather Fingers, Kahlera and Sarvah have come to a mutual understanding; They regularly tease and taunt each other in a rather playful way, but are no longer openly hostile to one another. Shortly into their journey with the tribe, Sarvah had proven her commitment to the three; she has watched over them, fed them, given them purpose, and has never steered them in the wrong direction.

“So, princess, why have you graced us with your presence this morning?” Gareth asks.

“Aside from stalking you?” Sarvah grins at him, bearing her teeth.

“Yes, aside from that.” He nods.

“We are nearly at the village. At our current pace, I think we may see it by nightfall.” Sarvah continues.

“It is possible. We *are* very close.” Kahlera adds.

“Is that why we have done so much hunting?” Volaren asks.

“Indeed.” Sarvah nods. “I would like us to have more to trade when we arrive... So, get back too it, before we strike camp!”

“Yes, princess.” Gareth bows in jests.

She waves her hand and chuckles as she turns back, walking away from the three. After cleaning the rest of the game and skinning the carcasses, they pack up the camp, preparing to leave. Sarvah takes the lead, with Gareth and Kahlera standing beside her on the right. They keep a steady pace, stopping only to rest briefly. The main body of the tribe lags behind, but Sarvah and the others keep moving, a small platoon of guards right behind them in a wedge formation, a favorite of theirs.

To everyone’s surprise, they see Kahlera’s village in the distance by mid-afternoon, far sooner than they had anticipated. As they draw near, villagers in the distance seem to prepare for battle, scrambling to the road and

bearing weapons. Realizing that they need to start on a good note, Kahlera, Gareth, and Sarvah move ahead of the others, quickly approaching the village as they leave the soldiers behind. As the villagers come into focus, Kahlera holds out her hands, signaling for Gareth and Sarvah to stay back.

They obey as Kahlera runs up to meet the villagers. They all seem to know her and are elated to see her. Gareth and Sarvah stand a distance away, waiting as they watch Kahlera talk to several of the villagers. After a moment, an older looking male appears, followed by a female who quickly embraces Kahlera, obviously delighted. Kahlera turns back and motions for them to approach.

“Ready to make a good impression?” Sarvah asks.

“Always, princess... Please try not to embarrass me.” Gareth smirks.

“Funny. I was about to ask you the same thing.” She winks.

They walk up the road to meet the villagers, who look at them apprehensively, especially Gareth. Many glare at him, their hands still tightly clutching the handles of their swords and axes.

“You did not say that your savior was a human...” The older man says.

“I am sorry.” Kahlera apologizes, bowing her head.

“No matter. I am Gishner. I am the chieftain of the Blue Feet.” He continues.

“Blue feet?” Gareth silently mouths, looking to Kahlera.

She shakes her head, urging him to be silent.

“And I am Kina. I am the village priestess.” The older female replies.

“It is a pleasure to meet you. I am Sarvah, leader of the Feather Fingers. We are a nomadic tribe of merchants, and skilled craftsman.” She gives a polite introduction.

“I understand that you have been traveling with Kahlera and her companion for some time.” Gishner begins.

“This is true. We also hope to establish trade with the Blue Feet, and have come a considerable distance.” Sarvah nods.

“Then consider yourselves welcome guests of the Blue Feet... Even you.” Gishner says, turning his head to Gareth. “Come, Kahlera. You must tell us everything!”

Gishner and Kina turn back to the village, walking away as Kahlera quickly follows behind. Sarvah and Gareth

look to each other and shrug their shoulders, silently agreeing to tag along. As they walk through the village, Gareth notes the structures within. Many are stick and hide wickiup shelters, nearly identical to Native American and African tribal structures. The chieftain and the priestess approach a large wooden cabin, reminiscent to a great hall. Kahlera follows them, but as Sarvah and Gareth climb the steps behind her, she turns and puts out her hands, stopping them.

“I will be back shortly.” Kahlera says in a soft whisper.

She leans in and kisses Gareth tenderly on the lips and nuzzles his face with her snout.

“Please be patient.” She urges him.

Kina calls out to her from within the great hall, so Kahlera turns and heads inside, leaving Sarvah and Gareth standing on the steps.

“/did not get a kiss...” Sarvah facetiously mocks him.

“Did you want one?” Gareth chuckles.

“Is that an offer?” She winks.

Gareth smiles and sits down on the steps. Sarvah sits down beside him for a moment as they wait. As the minutes pass, she taps on her leg with her fingers, quickly becoming restless. Suddenly, she stands up and walks off the steps.

“Well, I better meet the rest of the Feather Fingers and get to work. There are many deals to make. Will I see you later?” She asks.

“You know you will.” He winks. “Have fun, and be back before the street lights come on.”

Sarvah laughs as she walks away, leaving Gareth alone on the steps. Inside the great hall, Kahlera sits before Gishner and Kina. She tells them everything, from their failed mission, losing her group, being saved by Gareth and his friends, being separate from the other humans, traveling with Gareth, being saved again, and on until they have arrived at the village. She only omits the personal details that she does not wish them to know.

After thirty minutes of waiting, Gareth finally becomes restless himself. He leaves the stoop of the great hall, spending his time wandering around. He walks back to the road, seeing that the Feather Fingers main convoy has arrived. He walks around aimlessly, and watches many of the Feather Fingers dealing with the tradesman of the Blue Feet. He soon runs into Naomi, who is with a small group of children around her own age. Surprisingly, in the three

weeks of traveling, Naomi has made quite a few friends among their Sahvorai hosts, and is very popular with them.

As Gareth walks alone, he stops and leans against a tree. He looks around at the villagers who go about their daily routine as though nothing had ever happened, ignoring the only adult human in their midst. He suddenly notices a particular male chopping firewood, who reminds him of someone. It takes him a moment to realize exactly who, but as he does, he can't help but laugh. The feline Sahvorai male has orange and cream tabby fur, orange human hair that is shoulder length, blue eyes, and is nearly identical in height and build to the human Steve. Gareth approaches the Sahvorai who suddenly sets down his axe.

"I'm sorry to bother you, but what is your name?" Gareth asks.

"I am Polahn." The man replies.

"I see... I'm going to call you Steve now." Gareth says with a smile.

"Okay?" Steve looks puzzled.

Gareth quietly turns and walks away. He keeps wandering slowly throughout the village, gently kicking small stones with his boots. He feels rather out of place, but not because he is a human among the animal-folk; he doesn't know their customs, and has nothing to contribute,

though he greatly desires too. The crowded isolation begins to bother him. He unknowingly walks by Sarvah. She sees him as he passes, and is immediately elated. She notes his slow pace and solemn expression. He looks very lonely, and her heart aches as she watches him.

“Gare! What are you doing out here, all by yourself? Does your master know you got out?” Sarvah teases him.

“No. I’m being a bad boy.” He smirks.

“Aww... Are you lonely?” She asks him, leaning closer.

In jest, he makes an exaggerated frown and slowly nods. Sarvah smiles and pats his shoulder. The two begin walking together, moving in circles around the entire village.

“So how are the deals coming along?” He asks.

“Well, I have only just started, but it looks promising.” She replies.

“That’s good. At least you are planning ahead.” He comments.

“Do you not plan ahead?” Sarvah asks.

“Not really. I often go day by day. They say that making plans is the easiest way to make God laugh.” Gareth answers.

“Well, one day I desire to settle my people somewhere and build a permanent home for them; a trade hub that is open to all, especially human males.” She says with a wink.

Gareth chuckles, taking a seat on a long log. Sarvah sits beside him as they look to the horizon.

“You know, we’ve been traveling together for a while now... I never took the time to really sit down and thank you for all that you have done for us...” Gareth begins.

“Gare...” Sarvah says softly.

“We might not have made it here without you. We barely made it through our first battle with The Fallen. The second time was even worse, but you and the Feather Fingers were there. Hell, Volaren saved my life when he took that claw to the back. We owe you more than we could possibly repay, and I just want you to know that it means a lot to me. You’re one of my most trusted friends and allies, and you always will be.” Gareth continues.

He turns to her, suddenly giving her a warm embrace. Sarvah’s heart pounds in her chest, and she holds him back. Her arms grip him tightly. After a moment, he lets go, while she reluctantly releases her grip.

“You know, we owe you just as much...” Sarvah begins.

"I doubt that." Gareth chuckles.

"Gare, you proved your skills as a warrior in that battle. That holy bolt of yours killed more Fallen than all of my soldiers combined, and Kahlera is an excellent healer; the best I have ever seen. Volaren took a claw for you, but she made sure that he would not even have a scar from it. She has kept the Feather Fingers in better health than the most expensive apothecary I could possibly hire. I... We are lucky to have met you... All of you, I mean!" Sarvah continues.

"Likewise. I'm glad that we found each other on that road. Plus, being Sahvorai made it a lot more interesting." He comments.

"How so? Or are you talking about your Sahvorai fetish?" She asks. "There is always time to play..." She coos.

"... I wish I wasn't a human. I'd rather be Sahvorai. I've never said that to anyone, even Kahlera." Gareth says softly.

Sarvah is left dumbfounded. She has no idea how to respond. She takes a moment to think, while Gareth stares at the ground. He seems to be deep in thought.

"Well, I like you as a human, but if there were a way to appeal to Sahvath, then you should do what makes you happy... Of course, I may not want you anymore if you did such a thing." She says in jest.

**“You always know just how to ruin a moment, princess.”
Gareth laughs.**

**“You say that as if you *want* me to want you.” She
comments.**

“Being wanted is nice.” Gareth admits.

**“It is, though I notice you did not actually answer me.”
Sarvah pressures him.**

**“What can I say? I learned from the best.” Gareth
winks.**

“Well, do you want to learn more?” She asks.

**Gareth shrugs as Sarvah stands up. He accompanies
her as she travels throughout the village, making deals and
speaking with the Blue Feet craftsman. He shadows her for
hours as night begins to fall. After speaking with nearly
every able-bodied villager, the pair return to the great hall.
As they approach the steps, Kahlera finally appears,
apologizing profusely for her delay.**

**“It is fine. I watched your human while you were
working. Next time, however, I may charge you by the hour.”
Sarvah jokes.**

**She promptly leaves, while Kahlera takes Gareth by
the hand, bringing him into the great hall. There, Gareth sits
with Gishner and Kina for the first time. He notes a striking**

resemblance between Kina and Kahlera, but doesn't say anything. Gishner thanks Gareth for all that he has done, the least of which is bringing back Kahlera alive and safe, but also helping her retrieve the rare medicinal herbs, *and* bringing a trade convoy from the south to them. He tells him that he and Naomi are permanently welcome at their tribe as thanks, being granted honorary membership, then he waves them away.

Kina stands and leads them out of the great hall, which seems to also be Gishner's home. Gareth and Kahlera accompany Kina as she walks towards a well-built log structure; it is her own home. Kina sits the two down as she strikes a flint with a rock, trying to start the fire. In an effort to help, as well as show off his value, Gareth politely interrupts Kina's efforts and creates a faint purple aura flame, placing it within the tinder bundle. He lights the tinder bundle with his aura, bringing the fire to life before placing it within the small pit.

"So, you really *do* have talents." Kina smiles.

"I would not lie." Kahlera retorts.

"I apologize in advance, but I can't help but notice how alike you two look. Are you related to Kahlera?" Gareth finally asks Kina.

The priestess admits their relation with a simple nod of her head.

“Is that normal? Earth priests and priestesses often don’t pair, or have children.” Gareth further inquires.

“That is often the case for Sahvorai culture as well, but I could only subdue my natural urges to mate for about two-hundred years. Kahlera was a gift from a night of passionate and spontaneous release.” Kina readily admits.

Kahlera feels herself flush as she looks at the floor, embarrassed.

“I thank you for saving my daughter, twice. I owe you a great debt.” She adds as she reaches out and shakes Gareth’s hand.

“You don’t owe me anything.” He humbly replies.

“Perhaps... May I speak to my daughter alone?” Kina suddenly asks.

“Alright. Keep this up, and you’ll have to start chaining me outside.” He jokes, standing up and leaving the building.

Kahlera and her mother both laugh. Once he departs, Kina smells her hand and looks to her daughter.

“He is an interesting character...” Kina comments.

“He is.” Kahlera nods, a small smile spread across her lips.

“So how long have you been mating with him?” She suddenly asks, to Kahlera’s embarrassment.

Kahlera hesitates to reply, choking on her words. Kina watches her daughter nervously struggling to speak, shaking her head.

“I can smell him all over you. In fact, you almost do not have a separate scent anymore, as though you two were one being.” Kina continues.

“Alright...” Kahlera sighs. “I admit that we have mated... Several times... Several dozen... I also sleep next to him every night.”

Her mother becomes upset, raising a hand to her forehead.

“But it is because I love Gareth!” Kahlera immediately defends herself. “I would pair with him in a heartbeat if we were able.”

“That is what I expected you to say.” Kina grumbles.

“It is the truth. I know how I feel in my heart.” She adds.

“You are barely an adult, Kahlera. You may not know what is best for yourself... But I will support you regardless, because you are my daughter, and I love you. If you truly love him, then I want you and your mate to stay with me, at least until his friends make their way to the camp. Naomi, being alone without either of you, is also given this invitation to stay with me.” Kina says reluctantly.

“Oh, thank you so much, mother!” Kahlera exclaims as she pounces, latches on to Kina and hugging her tightly.

Meanwhile, Gareth waits outside. As he sits on the steps of Kina’s home, he sees Volaren walking by as though on patrol. Volaren stops and looks at Gareth with a pleasant smile. He looks around, as though worried he may be seen with Gareth, motioning for Gareth to follow him. Gareth stands up from the porch and leaves with Volaren. They walk just beyond the home, stepping behind a large pine tree.

“What’s going on?” Gareth asks.

“We are friends, are we not?” Volaren asks.

“Of course we are! You took a claw to the back for me, and I made sure you didn’t die from it.” Gareth replies.

“Then there is something I feel that I should tell you...” Volaren says nervously.

“What is it?” Gareth asks with a concerned look.

“Well...” Volaren speaks hesitantly. “When we first met and I spoke to you, telling you how greatly you affect Sarvah, and warning you not to hurt her, I said I was doing it out of loyalty to her... A loyal soldier obeys their orders...”

“She told you to tell me that?!” Gareth exclaims in anger.

“Shh...” Volaren places a finger to his lips. “She greatly desires you, and she is willing to go to great lengths to attain you.”

“So was everything else a lie too?” Gareth sighs in frustration.

“No. I was honest in every regard, except for my reasons for first speaking to you. We are true friends, and I hope that this will not effect that. I am sorry.” Volaren laments.

“So you didn’t lie about Sarvah’s lack of boyfriends?” Gareth raises an eyebrow.

“If you mean does she often mate, then no. I did not lie about that. She hasn’t even looked over a male in years, besides you. Perhaps that is why she has tried so hard?” Volaren shrugs. “Despite her behavior, she is the monogamous type.”

Volaren quickly walks away, leaving Gareth behind the tree to contemplate the revelation. He sighs and walks away from the home, looking for Sarvah. He quickly finds her inside her own yurt, where he enters without hesitation.

“Oh, Gare! Hello. Is something wrong?” She asks.

He sighs and sits down before her. He closes his eyes and brings a hand to his face, gripping the bridge of his nose with his thumb and index finger.

“Gare?” She leans closer.

“I just had a talk with Volaren... He told me that you put him up to everything that first time he and I talked.” Gareth begins.

“Oh... I, uh...” Sarvah sounds embarrassed.

“First, please don’t punish him for it, because he came to me in confidence, as a friend. Second, why are you going through such-”

“I am not going through such lengths any longer.” Sarvah interrupts.

“You... You’re not?” He asks, surprised.

“No. That was weeks ago. I have decided that it is not worth the trouble.” She continues.

“Really?” He raises an eyebrow.

“Really... After all, Sahvorai often live to be over seven-hundred, and as I am only twenty-three, I have nearly three-hundred more years of fertility ahead of me. I can afford to

wait, until you come to me on your own. I am certain it will happen long before then." She smiles.

"I see... And what happens if I don't?" Gareth wonders aloud.

"I do not lose..." Sarvah says in an eerily sinister monotone.

She gazes at him with her icy blue eyes. Gareth hangs his head and chuckles.

"What is so funny?" She asks curiously.

"I'm not oblivious... Okay, maybe a little, and certainly at first; I thought that you just wanted my body because of your human fetish. Maybe it was, the first day or two, but it's more than that now. It's clear that you have genuine feelings for me." Gareth explains.

"Maybe I just do not like failing? I am *very* determined, and something of a perfectionist." She admits.

"Your body language, your speech, how you joke with me and laugh at all of mine, even when I don't think they are very funny... You care about me more than you are willing to admit." Gareth leans closer.

Sarvah leans back, feeling as though she has been boxed into a corner.

"I... I do not know what..." She stammers.

"It's alright. I'm not upset or anything. Honestly, we get along very well, and our personalities are a pretty good match. I could talk with you for hours and never get bored, and you *are* beautiful. If I had met you first, who knows..." Gareth begins.

Sarvah is speechless. She sits there, silently staring back at him as he speaks, her heart pounding in her chest until she feels as though it is visibly bashing through it.

"But I have been with Kahlera, and I love her. She's a good person. She is there for me, and I like being there for her. So long as we have a future, I want to pursue it." Gareth continues.

He slides next to Sarvah, who visibly frowns. She lowers her head and leans against him, resting her head on his shoulder.

"You are a wonderful person, and any man would be lucky to have you. I know I would be... I care about you, and I want you to be happy. It isn't fair to you to keep waiting on me when it may never happen. I just don't want you to miss out on a good match because you have a crush on me." He says softly, rubbing her arm gently as he tries to comfort her.

"I want you to be happy too." She says softly. "If staying with Kahlera makes you happy, then do it." She sighs sorrowfully.

"Okay. Are we alright, still?" He asks sweetly.

Sarvah nods her head in silent agreement.

"Are you sure? You know I'll be here for you if you need me. You're my best friend." He assures her.

"I will survive. You must have forgotten who you are talking too." She smiles.

"Silly me, princess." He grins.

He holds her for a moment before slowly getting up and leaving her yurt. Sarvah sits alone and watches the flap. Her heart aches even more as she grits her teeth. Even his rejection is sweet and considerate. She can barely stand it; her feelings are intense. She rushes to the flap, looking outside. She watches as Gareth walks away from the yurt, turning a corner around a house.

"I will give you a few years... Then *maybe* I will move on..." She thinks aloud.

As he walks back to Kina's home, he sees Naomi sitting with some of her friends.

"It's time to go. You can play with them more tomorrow." He says to her.

Naomi gets up, says goodbye to her friends, and collects her pack, which she always keeps close by. They return to the cabin where Kahlera and Kina wait for them.

"Where did you go?!" Kahlera asks, rushing up to him.

"I just wanted to find my little sister." He replies with a smile.

"I am glad you are back." Kahlera coos, hugging him tightly.

Gareth looks to Kina nervously as Kahlera nuzzles his neck with her snout.

"Oh, uh... You see... Uh, we're..." He mumbles nervously.

"It is alright." Kina says, raising a hand. "Kahlera told me everything. You may both stay here with us. Gareth may also sleep next to my daughter, as you have been for nearly a month."

“How open minded of you.” Gareth comments in surprise.

“Make no mistake. I do not agree with it myself, but the happiness of my child is more important to me than my own convictions, and a few judgmental stares.” Kina replies.

Gareth sits down with Kahlera as they hold hands. He seems to be deep in thought. Kahlera turns to her lover and leans in, resting her head on his shoulder. She gazes up to him with her golden eyes. He looks back and smiles, brushing her bangs from her face.

“Are you alright?” She asks.

“Yeah...” He murmurs.

He leans in, kissing her tenderly on her lips, before resting his face alongside hers, their cheeks touching.

“When we have a minute, there is something that I would like to tell you.” He whispers into her ear.

Episode 19: Hell Or High Water

Naomi, Gareth and Kahlera sit around Kina in a semi-circle. They meditate in silence, focusing on their talents, their hands glowing the vibrant color of their individual auras. Kina has taken it upon herself to train all three of them in their talents, helping them master their natural powers. Though Kahlera's powers were ever present, they seem to have grown since encountering Gareth. Volaren walks by the group, taking a moment to stop and watch them. He himself has no aura talents to speak of, and is fascinated by the mystical light that radiates from the three.

After a moment, one of several companions taps him on the shoulder, gaining his attention. The party leaves the village and enters the nearby woods. They move carefully through the forest, following a game trail. The Feather Fingers are finally preparing to return to the south, having made several deals with the Blue Feet. They have traded supplies for valuable resources that may only be found in the north, and have spent more than a week camped on the road outside of the Blue Feet village.

Though it is still early fall, snow has covered the ground this morning, as it has several mornings previous. Volaren, Steve, and several others follow animal tracks through the white powder that layers the ground. The tracks wind through the forest and exit the woods, crossing over the road. As they follow the tracks, Steve notices something in the distance. He calls out to the others who turn and look.

Lying in the snow over eight-hundred meters away, just over half a mile, are two figures.

They carefully and cautiously approach the figures, keeping their weapons at the ready. They move closer and closer to the motionless beings, they slowly come into focus. Lying side by side is a large, heavy-set human male, next to an athletic and attractive human female. The female is thin, with a large bust and long black hair twisted into a sloppy braid. The male has a thick, full beard, with long sandy blonde hair that is pulled into a ponytail.

“Who are these humans?” Steve thinks aloud.

One of the group shrugs and leans forward, feeling the man’s neck for a pulse.

“This one is alive, but very weak.” He looks back to his comrades.

“I think... These are friends of Gareth.” Volaren begins. “They fit the description that he has told me. This woman might be the sister of Naomi.”

“In that case, we need to take them back.” Steve comments.

“What about the hunt?” Another Sahvorai asks.

“We already have plenty; it was just an exercise of our skills, and this is far more important.” Volaren admits.

Slinging their weapons, the hunters pick up two humans and their packs, carrying them off. They move slowly up the slippery road. Kelly is hung between two Sahvorai, while Faye is carried over Steve’s shoulder. They bring them back to the Blue Feet village, interrupting Kina’s aura training. Naomi sees Faye draped over Steve’s shoulder and rushes toward them, tears of excitement streaming down her face. Kahlera and Gareth follow behind, dashing up to Kelly; Volaren and a companion set him down. They stretch out their backs as soon as they release him.

“Where did you find them?!” Naomi asks excitedly.

“So, these *are* your friends?” Volaren clarifies.

“Yes.” Gareth nods, kneeling by Kelly.

“We found them some ways down the road, over an hour’s walk.” Steve explains.

“So close?” Kahlera thinks aloud.

She kneels down by Faye, feeling her neck and wrist. She touches various parts of her body, quickly examining her. She turns to Kelly and does the same.

“Faye needs attention right away. She is very weak and near death. Kelly is stronger, but he needs herbal supplements. We must bring them inside and keep them warm.” Kahlera continues.

Sarvah notices the commotion and approaches. She stands by Gareth and leans over, looking at the two unconscious humans.

“Are these the ones?” She asks Gareth.

“They certainly are.” He answers with a smile.

Sarvah looks over Kelly carefully, resting a hand on Gareth’s shoulder.

“Hmph. I see. Well, I am glad that you found them.” She casually remarks as she straightens.

“Not curious about the strange new human male in town?” Gareth teases.

“Why would I be?” Sarvah shrugs.

She walks away, clearly uninterested in either of his friends. Gareth can’t help but notice that for all her talk about liking human males, he is the only one that she pays

any attention too. Kina approaches the group and stands by Kahlera.

“How are they, daughter?” She asks her.

“You don’t know?” Gareth sounds surprised.

“I am a priestess, but my daughter trained as a healer and apothecary. She heals the body, whereas I may heal the soul.” Kina replies.

“They need attention right away, mother. I can make a potion to increase their strength, but they need warmth, food and water.” Kahlera answers.

Kina turns and heads for the great hall. Volaren, Steve, Gareth and Kahlera drag Kelly and Faye back to Kina’s home. Shortly after setting them down, Kina returns with Gishner in tow.

“I see your friends have returned...” Gishner says apprehensively.

“We all knew that they might at some point.” Kina adds.

“I will allow them to stay, as you are friends of the Blue Feet, and they are yours. There is a storage hut that they may use, once they have recovered enough to move on their own. Until then, they are under Kina’s care.” Gishner continues.

“Thank you.” Gareth replies, gratefully bowing his head.

Kahlera quickly begins mixing herbs in a large mortar and pestle as Naomi sits by her sister’s side, eager to help. Gareth exits the home with Volaren, Steve, Gishner and Kina. Gareth thanks Volaren and Steve, shaking Steve’s forearm and giving Volaren a manly hug. As they depart, Gishner turns back to Gareth, glaring at him.

“I hope you realize that I do not entirely trust your kind...” Gishner begins. “In the past, it did not end well for us. They are here only because you have done us a considerable service, and their invitation is valid so as long as yours is.”

“I understand. They will *not* cause you, *or* the Blue Feet, any trouble.” Gareth replies, bowing his head again.

“We shall see...” Gishner grumbles.

He turns and returns to his home, leaving Kina standing beside Gareth. Soon, he is out of sight and earshot. Kina turns to Gareth, resting a hand on his shoulder.

“I apologize for his behavior. Gishner is nearly five-hundred years old, and in that time, you may be the first human who is capable of earning his trust. Be patient and understanding; he is not an unkind man.” She explains.

“Well, how long did you say humans live again?” Gareth asks.

“Here, the oldest human I have heard of was four-hundred and fifty years old.” Kina replies.

“Then it looks like I have plenty of time to prove myself.” Gareth smiles.

“That is the spirit.” She chuckles.

They return inside, where Kahlera has finished mixing a potion for the two. Naomi sets aside other herbs, bandages, and medical tools. Gareth stands beside Kahlera, who sits on the floor beside Faye.

“Gare, help me give them this medicine.” Kahlera orders.

Without hesitation, he sits down on the floor, opposite Kahlera, following her instructions carefully and without question. Kina watches with a smile.

“So eager to obey.” Kina comments.

“I know better than to question her.” Gareth quips.

“Yes, he is a good boy.” Kahlera grins.

They keep a vigilant watch over their two unconscious friends the entire night. Faye groans as she turns her head, slowly opening her eyes. Kahlera gently presses a damp cloth against her forehead, dabbing the sweat from her brow. Sitting beside her is her sister Naomi, in the flesh. Seeing Naomi's face, her eyes grow wide. She struggles to sit up. Kahlera reaches out, placing her hands on her shoulders.

"Be still! You are still too weak to move." Kahlera urges her.

"Get your hands off me!" Faye growls.

"Faye, you might hurt yourself!" Naomi pleads.

"Gare!" Kahlera calls out.

"I need Naomi. I can't wake up until I get her." Faye mumbles.

Gareth quickly enters the room and forces Faye back down, keeping her flat on the ground. He holds her down as she wriggles. Her skin radiates heat like a furnace, sweat running down her flesh. Her fever is intense, and her body is weak.

"Stop struggling, Faye. You aren't dreaming." Kelly weakly speaks.

“How long do I have to dream... I just want... Wake...”
Faye murmurs before passing out.

“What is wrong with her?” Naomi looks to Kelly.

Gareth turns to Kelly, noting the bizarre expression on his face.

“I think Faye has cracked... She... She’s done things... I think she believes that this is a dream, and there are no consequences. She keeps using these... Powers...” Kelly explains.

“She has aura talents too?!” Naomi asks excitedly.

“You mean...?” Kelly narrows his eyes.

Naomi lifts her hands, making her palms glow ruby red. Gareth makes his palm glow a deep purple, and Kahlera’s glow golden.

“And here I thought I was special...” Kelly laughs.

“Yeah, life sucks and then you die.” Gareth quips.

“You *are* special. You *all* are. Four newcomers arrive, and all have aura talents... It is unheard of.” Kina explains.

“Oh... Who are you? And how long have I been out?” Kelly asks.

"This is my mother." Kahlera begins.

**"We are at her village in the north; the Blue Feet."
Gareth continues.**

"Blue Feet?" Kelly raises an eyebrow.

**"You have been asleep for two days and three nights."
Naomi finishes.**

Kelly sits up slowly, resting his back against the wall. He greets Kina, introducing himself. Kahlera tends to Faye while Kina and Gareth aid Kelly. Suddenly, Sarvah enters the home.

"Well, we are about to leave..." Sarvah speaks with a melancholy tone. "Oh... He is awake?" She asks, stepping up to Gareth.

"Yeah. He just came too." Gareth replies.

"So you are one of Gare's friends?" Sarvah asks while kneeling down beside Gareth.

Kelly nods his head in response.

"A friend of yours, 'Gare'?" Kelly smirks.

"One of my best friends, actually." Gareth smiles, placing a hand on Sarvah's shoulder.

She grins, but quickly turns her head away as though to hide it.

“Replaced me already...” Kelly laughs.

“Well, you were probably dead, and I needed a best friend...” He retorts.

“You have no idea how good it is to see you again, Gary. I have been hiking with Linda Blair for the last few weeks!” He says through labored breaths.

Kelly’s expression suddenly changes, becoming very solemn. Something is clearly disturbing him. Gareth sighs, sitting down on the floor and crossing his legs in front of him.

“What’s going on, bro? Talk to me.” He asks.

Kelly rests his head against the wall. He stares at the ceiling as Kina hands him a small bowl with a rejuvenating potion. He takes the bowl, drinking the purple liquid.

“Heh... Kind of tastes like flat Seven-Up.” Kelly comments.

“Kel... Bro... Talk to me.” Gareth urges.

Kelly lowers his head and takes a deep breath. He seems to tremble as though he were about to cry. He is unable to hold back any longer, explaining everything to them. Kahlera, Kina, Gareth, Sarvah and Naomi listen in awe as he details their journey after the rock slide. Kelly mentions Tim, reveals Faye's breakdown in detail, describes the defeat of the witch, the discovery of their powers, the encounter with the three bears, Faye's massacre at Blackwater, the murder of the village child, the fight with the bounty hunters, and the horse. They have walked almost ceaselessly for weeks, as Faye refused to stop. They hiked the last four days without food, and one without water; upon awakening, they were nearly six days unfed and three without water.

Naomi can hardly believe her ears, looking to her unconscious sister. Kelly has never lied to her before, and Faye was clearly delirious when she was awake. Could it all be true? Is she really such a cold and vicious killer? Kelly finishes his rant, talking non-stop for over thirty minutes as they listen in stunned silence. Kelly rests his head in his hands and takes a deep breath.

"I just want to find this Crystalline Hall and get out of this place..." Kelly groans. "I want to go home and watch anime."

"Don't worry, buddy. I'll help you get there." Gareth replies.

“Wha-... Aren’t you coming too?” Kelly looks to Gareth.

Gareth looks to Sarvah, then back to Kahlera. She leaves Faye’s side, sitting down next to Gareth. She rests her arms over his shoulders, wrapping them around his neck and pressing her face against his. He slides an arm around Kahlera’s waist, looking back to Kelly.

“I’ll *help* you get there, but I’m not going back. There’s no room at the bottom where I’m from.” Gareth replies.

He turns, giving Kahlera a tender kiss on the lips. She rests her head on his shoulder.

“That’s deep, Gary... Fire From The Gods, right?” Kelly smirks.

“You caught me. Every powerful feeling and personal situation has already been written into song lyrics.” Gareth smiles.

“Well it didn’t take you all that long to go native.” Kelly sighs.

“He is staying right here with us.” Sarvah adds.

“That sucks... But if it makes you happy...” Kelly says in a melancholy tone.

Kelly leans back and slides against the wall, lying down on his side. He keeps his back pressed against the wall for support as he relaxes. Gareth and Sarvah help him get comfortable as Naomi watches Faye. Kahlera and Kina talk quietly at the far end of the home. Kelly fades in and out of consciousness, watching the figures as they become blurry. Sarvah leaves the home, followed by Gareth, Kahlera and Kina. Volaren waits outside for her. She embraces Gareth, then her friend Kahlera, wishing them good luck. Gareth holds Volaren's forearm for a moment.

"Take good care of her, and yourself." He says with a smile.

"I certainly will." Volaren assures him.

"You uh... You be careful, Gare. You too Kahlera. Watch out for Faye." Sarvah warns them.

She turns and leaves, returning to the Feather Fingers, who have already packed away their village. Kina turns to Kahlera and Gareth, a concerned look on her face.

"I know that they are your friends, but Faye is dangerous, and Kelly is still very weak. I must warn Gishner about this. When Faye is well enough to walk, she may be forced to leave. She may be a threat." Kina warns them.

"I understand." Gareth bows head.

"I will do what I can to keep her under control, mother."
Kahlera adds.

Kina turns, speed walking to Gishner's home. Kahlera and Gareth look to each other. They embrace, holding each other tightly. This isn't how either of them expected this to unfold. They head back inside where Naomi hand feeds Kelly stew from a small bowl. They sit beside each other atop their large bedroll, cuddling with each other. Kelly looks over to the couple and chuckles.

"So... How long has that been going on?" He quietly asks Naomi.

"Almost a month. They seem really happy together." She replies.

"I kind of thought that wolf girl was his." Kelly murmurs.

"Sarvah is... Complicated." She adds.

"Harem plot... I get it." Kelly closes his eyes.

"Yeah... We know how it goes." She laughs.

"I got the feeling that the wolf was more his type though..." He continues.

"You can worry about my personal life when you are strong enough to walk to the outhouse by yourself." Gareth suddenly says.

"Oops." Naomi smirks.

Kelly shakes his head as he laughs silently. He slowly lies back down. He awakens to daylight piercing the doorway of the log home. He sits up and looks around. Faye still lies unconscious, being tended too by Naomi and Kahlera, who gingerly administers the purple rejuvenating potion. He turns to see a Sahvorai male, sitting with Gareth, discussing something.

“Oh! You’re awake again. This time it was only a day.” Naomi smiles.

“Hey, Kel. Get enough sleep this time, or should I wake you up tomorrow evening?” Gareth jokes.

“Nah. I don’t really want my beard getting any longer.” Kelly quips. “Who’s your friend?”

“Who this? This is Steve.” Gareth points to the man beside him.

“My name is actually Polahn.” Steve interjects.

“It’s Steve now. Just call him Steve.” Gareth retorts.

Kelly looks over the man for a moment.

“Oh. I see it now! Hi Steve.” Kelly waves.

Steve lowers his head and laughs. Kelly slowly struggles to stand, but his knees buckle. He slowly pulls himself towards the center of the home, near the stone fire pit. Kahlera pours him a large bowl of stew, and sets out a clay pot of water. As he eats, Faye suddenly moves. She slowly awakens, looking around the room. She sees Gareth, Kelly, Kahlera, and two unfamiliar Sahvorai faces. She struggles to sit up as Naomi brings her a bowl of stew. She looks to her little sister and lunges at her, holding her in her arms, nearly spilling the contents of the bowl.

“Woah! ... Watch the food!” Kelly exclaims.

The sisters laugh as they hold each other. Faye tries to grip her tighter, but her fingers and arms are weak. Gareth and Steve move to either side of Faye, who looks to Steve in confusion.

“You look familiar...” She comments.

“My name is Polahn.” He replies.

“I call him Steve.” Gareth interjects.

“Oh yeah... I see it now.” Faye chuckles.

They rest her up against the wall as Naomi begins to spoon feed her older sister the stew. Kahlera brings another clay pot of water, setting it beside her. As Faye

looks to her sister, she feels no rage. She is as calm as she has ever been. Gishner enters the home, greeting Kina and the others politely. He sits down beside Kina and begins to speak.

“I understand that both of your friends are now awake. That is good.” Gishner begins.

“News travels fast around here.” Gareth quips.

“I was sitting outside for a moment. Now that they will soon recover, I will tell you how to reach what you seek.” Gishner smiles.

“The Crystalline Hall?” Faye weakly asks.

“Yes.” Gishner nods.

“Is it really a way to leave this world?” Kelly asks.

“I honestly do not know. I only know that it is the fabled home of our creator, Sahvath. If Sahvath is there, he may be able to return those of you who wish to leave.” Gishner explains.

Gishner carefully explains where the fabled hall is located, giving directions up the mountain pass. He hands Kahlera a small cloth patrol map; it is an ancient artifact of the tribe.

“As soon as you have recovered, and have the provisions you require, you may journey north to the hall.” Gishner assures them.

Though Gishner doesn't say it, Gareth and Kahlera believe that the chieftain hopes Faye and Kelly will leave immediately, without causing any trouble for his tribe. The chieftain takes his leave. Over the next couple of days, Kahlera, Naomi and Gareth nurse Kelly and Faye back to health, waiting on them hand-and-foot. Kelly quickly returns to normal, becoming more jovial as his strength returns. By the second day, Kelly is moving freely around the home. By the third, he explores the Blue Feet village. Faye is able to slowly wander, and tends to her own needs without much aid.

When they have the time, Kina continues to train Gareth, Kahlera, and Naomi in the use of their talents; as Kelly grows stronger, he soon joins them in training. When Faye has recovered enough to walk outside of the home, she sits on the porch and watches her friends meditating. Though Kina doesn't wish to train Faye, considering her past actions, she offers regardless, so as not to arouse her suspicions. Faye sits in the semi-circle, charging her aura as she attempts to meditate. Her hands glow a brilliant orange. Naomi looks to her sister.

“How come you get to be a super Saiyan?” She asks.

Kelly and Faye can't help but laugh; their auras fade as they lose concentration. Kina sternly reprimands them. They train for most of that day; after quietly meditating and focusing their power, they practicing using talents on the hillside. As the daylight fades, they return to Kina's home for a final meal. Once inside, Kina serves them cooked venison, fresh berries and baked bread. As they eat, Faye watches Gareth with Kahlera. She notes how close the two have become.

He treats her as though she were another human, playfully teasing her, and doting on her like a typical boyfriend. She feels her stomach churn, though she maintains her composure. As darkness falls, Gareth and Kahlera claim their bedroll, snuggling with each other. They appear quite comfortable and content. Kelly and Naomi don't seem to find it strange. Faye quietly walks out of the home, sitting on the steps outside. She looks at the night sky and sighs. She wonders why she is imagining Gareth with a beast-girl; his peculiarity never really bothered her, but this makes her feel uncomfortable.

"Are you alright?" Naomi asks, as she sits with Faye outside.

"Yeah... I'm just..." Faye pauses.

She looks back to the home and then to her little sister. She leans in close.

"I don't trust the Sahvorai. They are as evil as they are inhuman." Faye whispers to her.

"What?" Naomi laughs. "The Sahvorai have taken you in, nursed you to health, fed us, and are helping us on our quest."

"You don't know them like I do. You should have seen the ones that tried to kill us." Faye continues.

"Oh, Kelly explained the whole thing." Naomi interrupts.

"Then you *do* understand." Faye sighs in relief.

"I understand that there are evil people of *every* species." Naomi retorts.

"Some are more evil than others..." Faye glares.

"Then by that logic, *humans* are the most evil creature, since only humans have tried to rape and kill me, when I was traveling with Gareth and Kahlera." Naomi quips.

Faye becomes frustrated. She wonders if Naomi has become brainwashed, or if she truly believes that these beast-men could be as benevolent as humans.

"These 'Sahvorai' are just animals..." Faye whispers.

“That is fantastic racism.” Naomi quips. “If they *are* animals, then they are animals with abstract thought, culture, feelings, and a comprehensive language. That’s quite impressive for an oversized house pet.” She continues.

“Then what about our quest? This Crystalline Hall we’ve walked for over a month to find. Don’t you want to get home to your computer? Electricity? A comfortable bed? Dr. Pepper?!” Faye interrogates her sister.

“At this point, I actually like it here. I don’t need to watch anime when I get to live one, and humans live longer here too. I’ve adapted well to life without electrical devices, and I survived Caffeine withdrawal; Gareth did too. As for the quest, for me it has been about bringing Kahlera back home to her people, and not about returning to mine, as if I really had any to begin with.” Naomi explains.

“Don’t you miss mom and dad?” Faye growls.

“Of course I do, but I’m happier here, and I think that they would rather I be happy here, than unhappy back home.” She retorts.

Naomi stands up and turns back to the doorway. Faye sits there in silence. She shakes her head as she realizes that her little sister has changed, and possibly not for the better. She runs her fingers through her long hair, taking down her braid. She enters the cabin as Naomi lies down in her sleeping bag. Faye’s rage slowly builds at her sister’s rejection, but she believes that once she convinces her to return, she can finally wake up.

Episode 20: Transmute

The following morning, Faye awakens from a deep sleep. She rubs her eyes and looks around the room. Kelly and Naomi eat a large breakfast consisting mostly of yesterday's leftovers. Kahlera braids Gareth's long goatee for her own amusement. Gareth sees Faye and waves to her. Faye runs her fingers through her hair, braiding it tightly before joining Naomi and Kelly. After they have eaten, Kina shows them to the storage hut that they will be living in for the remainder of their stay. Gareth and Kahlera stay behind.

As they leave Kina's home, the couple look to each other. It's time for them to go as well. They take only Gareth's pack, with a small quantity of food and water, along with a single jade colored crystal. They quickly head out from the house and walk towards the northern mountain pass.

"Are you *sure* this is what you want?" Kahlera asks him.

"Yes, it is." Gareth replies, holding his lover tightly.

"I just do not want you to do this for me." She adds.

He strokes her back as her tail sways. She purrs as she nuzzles his neck with her snout, before gazing up at him with her golden eyes. They share a passionate kiss before they begin their hike. Steve waves to them, calling out to the couple, but they seem to ignore him. He shrugs his shoulders and continues on his way. Steve walks through the town, carrying his woodcutter's axe. He splits logs for nearly an hour, humming a pleasant tune. He is suddenly surprised by Sarvah, and the reappearance of the Feather Fingers.

"Hi, Steve." Sarvah begins.

"That is not my name... And what are you doing back so soon?" He asks in surprise.

"Oh... No reason. Is Gareth around?" She asks.

"No. I saw him and Kahlera taking the northern mountain pass a short time ago." He points in their direction.

Sarvah quickly passes him as she seems to look frantically for Gareth.

"You are welcome!" He shouts to her as she darts off.

She rushes to Kina's home but finds it empty. As she leaves, she runs into Kina who is about to enter. Kina gasps as their chests press into each other and they both stumble backward.

"I am sorry! Where is Gareth?!" Sarvah pleads.

"He has left. He is going to appeal to Sahvath." Kina replies.

"Did you give him the stone?!" She growls at Kina.

"Of course I did... It was his choice." Kina smiles.

"Take me to his friends, now!" Sarvah demands.

Sarvah grips Kina by the shoulders, spinning her around. Kina complies, leading her to the wickiup where Faye, Kelly and Naomi are staying.

"Hello, Sarvah!" Naomi greets her happily. "You are back awfully soon. Couldn't stay away?" She teases.

"We have to find Gareth right now. It is very important. His life may be in danger!" Sarvah insists.

The three immediately rush to collect their packs.

"No time! We need to go!" She barks.

"What is going on?!" Kelly asks.

"He is going to appeal to Sahvath." Kina answers for her.

“What does that mean?” Faye asks.

“He is trying to become Sahvorai.” Sarvah answers.

They race to the northern pass, leaving Kina behind as they hike hastily up the steep incline.

“How can a human become Sahvorai?” Naomi asks Sarvah.

“And why are you back so soon?” Kelly adds.

“We had just arrived at a small tribe not far from here. I learned of it from speaking with the hunters. While there, I heard a legend of transmutation; a human may appeal to Sahvath to become his chosen race. They place a colored crystal on an altar of worship, and Sahvath grants them a place among his people. Gareth told me he desired to make this appeal. When I learned that it might be possible, I came back as soon as I could, only to learn that Kina had already given Gareth a jade crystal, a relic of the Blue Feet.” Sarvah explains.

“Why are you so worried then? How is his life in danger?” Naomi asks.

“The legend says that the old self will be destroyed in Sahvath’s holy fire. It is not worth the risk.” Sarvah continues.

While hiking through the pass, they encounter the corpse of a large mountain lion. The carcass is warm to the touch, and riddled with burn holes from Gareth's main talent, the holy bolt. They rush up the mountain pass as rocks fall from the hills around them, cracking loudly as they roll past them.

"Déjà vu." Kelly thinks aloud.

"Is this also the way to the Crystalline Hall?" Faye asks.

"I do not know. There are several mountain passes." Sarvah says.

"Shit. I didn't bring that map." Kelly mutters.

After hiking for about an hour, they see a stone temple in the distance. The temple is in the form of a step pyramid, made of dark grey stones of varying sizes, and jutting from the side of the mountain; the back half of the pyramid seems to be either buried by rubble, or carved out of the rock. Sarvah clambers up the hill with incredible fervor, leaving the others behind.

"Are you sure you want to do this? There is still time to turn back." Kahlera pleads with Gareth.

"Why would I want to do that?" He asks her.

“I just do not want you to feel as though you have to do this.” She says.

“If I do this, we can pair. Besides... This is something of a dream of mine. It is as much for me as it is for you.” He explains. “Who knows... You might like me more this way.”

“I like you quite a bit already.” She mutters.

Kahlera lowers her head. They stand at the top of the pyramid, at the mouth of a small room built atop it. Her heart pounds in her chest, turning her eyes to Gareth. She watches him walk towards a small pedestal. He looks at it, noting the impression carved into it. He takes off his musette bag, boots and vest, setting them neatly to the side as he takes out the jade colored, translucent crystal. Its flat, hexagonal base is a perfect match for the space carved into the pedestal.

Sarvah climbs the steps of the pyramid as Naomi, Kelly and Faye struggle to keep up a few meters behind. They reach the top of the stairs, and see Kahlera standing near the opening of the pyramid. Sarvah races up to her, grabbing her by the shoulders.

“What are you doing?!” Sarvah growls.

“It is what he wants.” Kahlera replies, swatting her hands away.

“This might kill him!” Sarvah barks at her.

Gareth places the crystal on the pedestal as it begins to glow. Faye, Kelly and Naomi rush towards the room but stop as it grows brighter within. They are afraid that whatever is going to happen will affect them too, if they are close enough. Sarvah watches with watery eyes as a light beams up from the crystal and into the ceiling. She can't fathom her life without Gareth being in it. Her fear is palpable. Kahlera too becomes terrified that Gareth is about to die, and she feels her heart breaking.

The light beam strikes another crystal, which is mounted high in the ceiling of the temple. The clear crystal is cut like a polygonal dome. As the light from the jade crystal enters the center of the dome, it passes through and beams down nearly a dozen more cones of light onto the floor. They illuminate the floor in a perfect circle; Gareth is already standing in one. As the light touches his flesh, he begins to smoke, as though being burned by a giant magnifying glass.

Sarvah and Kahlera are both petrified, as it appears that Gareth is about to spontaneously combust. The light grows more intense over him as he groans in pain. He falls to his knees and the light grows ever brighter, making it impossible to see him within the temple. The five shield their eyes or turn away entirely. Gareth cries out from inside the room; Sarvah tries to step inside to get him, but Kahlera and

Kelly both grab onto her arms, holding her back. Sarvah struggles with them for a moment.

“Let go of me. I cannot leave him in there!” She cries out.

“It is too dangerous!” Kahlera warns.

“I do not care...” Sarvah whimpers.

Kelly’s grip is too strong, and Naomi soon wraps her arms around Sarvah’s waist; they keep her from entering the temple. She bites her bottom lip as the light pulses. It oscillates throughout the room, as though searching for more targets. After a moment, it begins to dim. It has soon faded enough to see within the temple. Gareth leans over the pedestal, gripping the crystal tightly in his left hand, as though trying to remove it. The light maintains its current strength as his body completes the transformation before their eyes.

His feet and head have already altered shape, taking on Sahvorai characteristics. A tail sticks out above the waistband of his pants, in a rather painful looking bend. He stretches out his arms and roars as his hands crack loudly, still changing shape. His fingernails fall to the floor, black claws springing up in their place. Smoke grey fur quickly grows over his body, visibly darkening his figure as it covers his flesh. He turns his head to reveal a moderate snout. His human ears appear to shrivel, falling from his head as new

triangular ears, similar to Kahlera's, sprout atop his skull. He spits out several bloody teeth at regular intervals.

The group watches in mixed awe and horror as the transformation seems to finish. Gareth slumps over the pedestal as the crystal falls out of its place. It rolls away, and he barely grabs it before it tumbles to the floor. He looks at the dull jade crystal in his hand, noting his claws. He moves his arms wide apart and arches his back as he stretches, groaning as he flexes his muscles. He turns, but stumbles as he looks down to his feet.

"Well *that's* different." He casually comments as he clicks his black claws on the stone floor.

Sarvah is elated to see that he isn't dead. Now, though, she is worried to see his appearance.

"G... Gareth?" Sarvah meekly calls out to him.

"Sarvah?! What are you doing here? I thought you were off trading." He replies, his voice unchanged.

He steps out of the temple. Faye gasps and turns away in horror, though Kelly and Sarvah stand in stunned silence. Kahlera and Naomi seem more intrigued, as they both approach him slowly.

He stands the exact same height as before, though his brown hair has turned black, and his eyes have become a deep purple, like his aura. His new fur is a solid and shiny smoke grey color. It seems almost iridescent, as it shines more when he moves in the light, and is very soft. His beard has been replaced with noticeably longer fur on his chin, that is reminiscent of a goat's beard. His mustache has disappeared entirely, as did all other facial hair. He has a distinct feline appearance, though his ears seem taller and thinner than Kahlera's, and his snout slightly longer and more squared; it remains shorter than Sarvah's. He has a pink feline nose, and no whiskers along his snout.

"Wow... You're soft..." Naomi comments, touching his arm.

"And still quite handsome..." Kahlera says, looking him over.

"Thanks. I'm sure glad I didn't do this to become uglier." Gareth laughs.

"I didn't think that would be possible." Kelly quips.

"Why did you do it?" Sarvah asks with tear filled eyes.

"Because I wanted too." Gareth promptly answers.

"I liked you the way you were..." Sarvah mutters.

"Yeah, this is kind of weird..." Kelly adds.

"I look on the outside how I always felt on the inside. You will get used to it after a couple of days. Plus, I should live another two-hundred and fifty more years, right?" He turns to Kahlera.

She smiles, nodding her head as she wraps her arms around him and feels him against her. She sniffs his neck and sighs.

"You are still my Gare. You do not smell differently." She coos.

"That's another thing... My senses are enhanced. My vision is better, my hearing is sharper, and I can smell *all* of you... Especially you, Kel." Gareth jokes.

"Should have brought more deodorant..." Kelly chuckles.

"So, is this your Faustian bargain?" Faye barks.

"What?" Gareth asks.

"Powers and a longer life in exchange for being... That!" She growls.

"No. Those are just a bonus. I really didn't like my human body much to begin with. It was kind of pale and pathetic." He smirks.

"You surrendered your soul..." Faye mutters.

"My soul is still in here, and so is my heart and mind. I just look better now." Gareth replies.

Sarvah slowly looks Gareth over, from his digitigrade feet to the tips of his ears. He looks drastically different, but he acts the same, sounds the same, and even smells the same. He hasn't *really* changed from before. As she looks up to him, his purple eyes turn to her, locking with hers. As she stares at him for a moment, she sees into his heart, and it is unchanged as well. Moreover, to her surprise, she still finds him physically appealing.

He sees the tears in Sarvah's eyes and steps up to her. Kahlera watches for a moment as Gareth gives Sarvah a hug. She feels his fur against hers, and the warmth of his arms. She feels herself melt from his touch, just as she did before he transformed.

"It's alright. I'm still the same guy, and I'm still your best friend." He speaks softly into her ear.

She feels his snout alongside her face, and as he speaks, his words strip away her worries and fears. He leans back, gently wiping away her tears with his thumb. He smiles at her, bearing his teeth. He suddenly turns and touches his new teeth with his fingers.

"That is sooo cool." He says aloud, poking his fangs.

Kahlera and Sarvah both chuckle as Gareth plays with his own jaw.

“Well, now I know who to blame when I find dead birds in front of my house.” Kelly laughs.

“It’s a present, because we’re such good friends.” Gareth grins.

Naomi grabs Gareth’s arm and rubs her cheek against his shoulder.

“Mmm... Soft!” She grins.

“Faye, please take her back now, before she rubs it all off.”

Faye sighs in frustration, and reaches out. She seems hesitant, as though worried that Gareth is going to suddenly maul her. She grabs Naomi’s arm, pulling her away from Gareth; Kahlera quickly takes her place.

“Aww...” Naomi groans.

Gareth turns back and collects his things, slipping his vest and pack back on, but carrying his boots, as he is no longer able to wear them. He turns and tosses the jade

crystal to Kelly, who throws it aside like a hot rock, only for Sarvah to catch it.

“You don’t want a turn?” Gareth chuckles.

“Hell no.” Kelly replies.

Sarvah returns the jade crystal to Gareth’s pack for him. They all climb carefully down the stairs of the temple. Sarvah lags behind a few paces on purpose. She stares at Gareth, looking him over as she struggles to accept it. Though she is adapting to his new appearance, what she struggles with is the fact that she still desires him, even though he is no longer human. The mere fear of his potential demise nearly destroyed her, and only furthered her realization of her true feelings. She has never cared about a male so much in her life, even her previous lover; his outward appearance is inconsequential. She worries she can’t live without him.

“So... What did it feel like?” Naomi asks.

“Do you want the Disney version, or the truth?” Gareth asks.

“... The truth...” Naomi replies, after briefly thinking it over.

“At first, it tingled like when your arm or leg falls asleep and is starting to wake back up. Then it began to burn so hot that it felt cold. After that, everything went

numb. I lay over that pedestal to keep from falling over. As my hands, feet and face changed, it stung quite a bit, but then it all subsided. I didn't even notice the tail, claws, teeth or ears. When the fur began to grow, it tickled all over; I could feel it sprouting. Then I suddenly felt normal. All in all, it really wasn't too bad." Gareth recalls, tapping a black claw against his bottom lip.

"I see..." Naomi seems deep in thought.

"Why do you care?" Faye grumbles.

"It's fascinating. Aren't you the least bit curious?" Naomi asks her.

"Nope!" Faye replies.

"Glad to see you woke up on the right side of the bed this morning." Kelly quips.

As they hike from the temple, Gareth briefly struggles with his new tail. He pauses to cut a slot into the backside of his pants, allowing for his tail to poke through, without bending so painfully. As they walk down the pass, he quickly adapts to his feet, but finds it awkward walking only on footpads.

"This feels very strange." He comments.

"Does it hurt?" Kahlera asks.

“No. Even though the ground is cold, it doesn’t seem to bother me like it would if I were walking on bare human feet. It’s a very strange feeling.” He answers.

“You will grow used to it soon. You adapt very quickly.” Sarvah adds.

They walk down the mountain pass as Gareth seems winded.

“I think the transformation process drained my energy. I feel like taking a cat nap. Heh... Cat nap.” He says with a little grin.

As they hike down the mountain pass and back towards the village, Gareth stops at the mountain lion. He briefly laments having to kill it. They return to the Blue Feet village as Gishner and Kina wait for them at the mouth of the pass. Kina and Gishner both smell the air, before looking to the grey furred Sahvorai.

“Hi!” He says happily, with a wave.

“I see it was a success.” Gishner comments.

“Gareth... You look different.” Kina says with a smile.

“Did you do something to your hair?” Gishner jokes.

**“Do you like it? I heard that grey fur is ‘in’ this season.”
Gareth quips.**

They pass by several more Sahvorai as they return to Kina’s home. Volaren sees Gareth as he approaches Sarvah. He stops in his tracks, smelling the air.

“Gareth? Is it really you? ... You look different... It suits you.” Volaren comments.

“You think so? They asked me if I wanted torch red or mustang blue, but I went with lowrider primer.” Gareth smirks.

Steve suddenly approaches, having spotted the familiar posse walking back from the pass. He stops and sees the foreign, grey furred Sahvorai. He smells the air, taking a step back in surprise.

“Gareth? You look different...” Steve comments.

“I didn’t do shit to my hair.” Gareth snaps.

“What?” Steve sounds confused.

“Nothing. It’s a joke.” Gareth chuckles.

**“It is not quite as funny when I do not understand it.”
Steve points out.**

“That’s half the fun. Besides, I understand it, and that’s why I said it.” Gareth replies.

“Well, you look like you belong here now.” Steve adds.

“I didn’t before?”

“Not really!” Steve admits.

“Well good. It’s all going according to plan.” Gareth says facetiously, rubbing his hands together.

The group walks to the storage hut, where Gareth, Kahlera and Sarvah part ways with Kelly, Faye and Naomi.

“I’m feeling very tired, so I’ll see you tomorrow, bright and early... Or I’ll just see you tomorrow.” Gareth smiles, his fangs gleaming.

Kelly and Naomi say goodnight, even though it is barely mid-day. Faye is very apprehensive, even quietly disgusted; she doesn’t say anything to Gareth. He and Kahlera return to Kina’s home, followed by Sarvah and Volaren. Once at the foot of the steps, Gareth says goodbye to both of his friends, giving Sarvah a hug and Volaren a forearm grip. Sarvah and her soldier walk away, but as Gareth turns and walks up the stairs, she stops and watches him, sighing as she looks him over.

“Hm... I did not know that about you.” Volaren suddenly says.

“Know what?” Sarvah asks.

“You are still interested in him. Your only other mate was a human; I assumed that Gareth becoming Sahvorai would eliminate your desire.” Volaren replies.

“Be silent, and mind your business.” Sarvah mutters.

“Apologies.” He smirks.

Inside, Gareth and Kahlera sit next to each other on their bedroll. Gareth’s eyes feel heavy. Kahlera feels his forehead and notes a mild fever, possibly a side effect of transforming. She takes his pack off and sets it aside. Kina suddenly sits down before them, looking Gareth over. Kahlera returns the jade crystal.

“Well, now that you belong with us, I suppose we will need to construct a home for you and Kahlera. I hope you two will pair very soon.” Kina says with a smile.

Kahlera looks down, clearly embarrassed. Without allowing either of them to answer, Kina stands up and leaves the home.

“I wonder where she is casually walking off too...” Gareth says in a tired voice.

“Just lie down, Gare. Your body needs rest.” She speaks softly.

She lies Gareth down on the bedroll, placing a soft pillow beneath his head. She gives him a kiss on the side of his snout, before lying down next to him. She watches him, covering him with a blanket before burrowing underneath it herself. Lying beside him, she slides an arm across his chest and snuggles with him.

“Well... Today has been pretty interesting! My best friend is a cat now.” Kelly laughs.

“And we still have several more hours of daylight ahead of us. Maybe one of us will turn into a dog?” Naomi quips.

“Do you two really think this is funny?!” Faye barks at them.

“Yeah, actually. I do. Don’t you?” He asks.

“No! This nightmare is getting worse...” She grumbles.

She places a hand on her forehead, gritting her teeth as she clenches her skull in her fingers. Kelly and Naomi look to each other in combined worry and fear.

“It’s not so bad. If he gets into anything, we’ll just blast him with a spray bottle.” He jests, hoping to get a laugh out of Faye.

“Maybe petting him will help reduce stress?” Naomi teases.

“Just... Both of you... Shut the fuck up.” Faye grumbles as she lies back.

“Are you tired too?” Naomi asks.

“I’m tired of everything...” Faye murmurs.

“Let’s take a walk!” Naomi urges.

She reaches out and clutches Faye’s arm, pulling her up. Naomi takes her sister outside, trying to keep her calm, as they walk away from the village. They come to a hill, just away from the village, and serving no real purpose. In an effort to take Faye’s mind off the events of this morning, Naomi and her sister train with their talents. Kelly sits alone in the wickiup for a moment, staring at the stick and hide ceiling.

“Left alone, again...” He sighs. “Damn, I wish I had a PSP or something... I could go for Pokemon right now.”

He eventually gets up and walks out of the hut, taking a look around outside. He doesn’t see Naomi or Faye anywhere, and Gareth seemed out of it. Eager to find a familiar face, he roams around until he finds the Feather Finger’s convoy. Volaren is packing up a wagon, and notices Kelly.

“You look rather lost. Is there something I can help you with?” Volaren asks the human.

“You’re one of Gary’s buddies, right?” He asks.

“Yes.” Volaren nods.

“Cool. Everyone ditched me, and I’m feeling out of place. I need something to do. A chore... Anything.” He says.

“I believe I can help you.” Sarvah suddenly speaks.

“Oh, good.” Kelly replies as he turns around.

“Someone told everyone to unpack, but we are not staying. You see those empty carts over there? Pack them back up, and do it right... That will keep you busy for a while...” She dryly orders.

“Thanks, I’ll g-” He begins, but she walks away before he can finish. “Man, she’s a *lot* nicer to Gareth.” He comments.

“This is true.” Volaren says, before returning to his work.

Kelly walks over to the empty carts and examines the stack of supply crates. He begins loading the carts, stacking the crates quickly but carefully. He loads one cart, and then another. Out of eight carts, he loads six of them in what feels like minutes. He stops for a moment, wiping his brow with the back of his wrist, as sweat only now begins to bead on his forehead.

“Taking a break?” A soft feminine voice asks.

He whips around and sees a girl sitting atop a wooden crate. She is young looking, with a rabbitesque appearance. Her snout is short and broad, with large and tall ears that come to sharp points, with a flat, pink nose and a fluffy poof of a tail. She is covered in short white fur, with blue eyes and white, wavy human hair that is cut to shoulder length. She wears a cream-colored top and skirt made of simple cloth; at a glance, she almost appears nude. She sways her feet, and is clearly quite short.

“Uh... No.” He answers. “Just a second, really.”

“Oh. Well you look like you are working hard.” She smiles.

“Nah. This is nothing. You should have seen me move people’s furniture. I could break down a whole house and load it into a tru... Cart in under an hour.” He smirks.

“Well you certainly look strong enough.” She adds, her eyes gliding over his body.

“You think so? I’ve been on a strict jerky and berry diet. I didn’t think it was working out.” He says, while jokingly flexing a muscle.

The girl giggles, sliding off the crate and stepping up to him. She is quite small, standing barely five feet and two inches tall, and couldn't possibly weigh more than one-hundred pounds.

"So, what is a snow bunny doing out here all by herself?" He asks.

"Just... Poking around." She winks. "So, what is a strong human doing loading carts?" She asks, gently tapping him with an index finger.

"Nothing better to do." He replies.

"Really? Well, I can think of quite a few things." She coos.

"Oh boy... I bet you can, Lola." He comments, stepping back from her.

"Lola?" She seems puzzled.

"Sorry. It's a joke. I'm Kelly." He says.

"And I am Vahna... Do you think you could help me, Kelly?" She asks sweetly.

He looks around, almost expecting to be surprised by cameras at any moment.

"Yeah... Sure, why not!" He replies.

Smiling wide, she takes him by the hand and leads him away from the carts, taking him toward a yurt. The situation feels familiar, but he isn't entirely comfortable. They turn the corner and there, in a pile before the yurt, is a considerable stack of fabric rolls and nearly a dozen empty carts. Kelly laughs aloud as he looks at the mountain of cloth.

"What is so funny?" Vahna smiles expectantly.

"You just uh... Oh, nothing." Kelly replies.

"I did ask you for your help." She adds.

"Exact words, right?" He chuckles.

The two of them carefully load a cart with the rolls, packing it full. As they work, Vahna regularly eyes Kelly.

"So why do they have such a small girl doing this kind of work?" He asks.

"I am stronger than I look." Vahna replies.

After loading two of the twelve carts with fabric rolls, he begins to sweat; Vahna seems fine, and even content. He wipes his brow, taking a deep breath. Vahna sits atop a large fabric roll, crossing her legs at the knees as she leans back. Her eyes narrow as she gazes at Kelly.

“Take a break now?” She asks with a smile.

“Sure...” He says, sitting just below her feet.

She lies back on the roll, gently swaying a foot.

“You seem like you enjoy this.” He comments.

“I am just a happy person.” Vahna replies.

“Plucky girl, eh? So then when you want to actually have fun, what do you do?” Kelly asks.

Vahna looks down at him and sits up. She scoots closer to him, quickly looking around.

“Would you like me to show you?” She asks sweetly.

“Sure!” He blurts out.

She swiftly stands up, pulling him by the hand. She leads him away from the fabric rolls. She slips into the yurt, pulling him through the flap behind her. The flap smacks him in the face as he passes under it. He lets go of the girl’s hand and steadies the flap before turning back. As he looks at Vahna, she stands in the middle of the yurt, facing him.

She reaches to her right shoulder, pulling the knot free in a single motion and dropping her top down over her body and onto the ground. His eyes widen as she reaches behind her and does the same to her skirt, now completely unclothed. He looks over her form and is surprised by how human it is. He can't help but become curious. He turns back to the flap, suddenly second guessing himself. Vahna approaches him, pressing herself against him.

His brain tells him to leave, but his body stays still. He thinks back to Gareth and Kahlera, before his transformation; he is compelled to stay. He reaches out and rests an arm around the girl, her soft fur on his arm. It immediately bothers him, but he still hesitates to leave. He has no idea which impulse to follow as Vahna pulls back and lies down on the ground, looking to him as she presents herself. He wonders if he can truly know how he feels, until he has actually experienced it.

“Damn...” He mutters.

Episode 21: Fissure

Naomi and Faye return to the hut as it becomes dusk. They have been gone for several hours, training in the woods. To their surprise, Kelly isn't there. They build a

small firepit in the center of the floor. Faye constructs a tipi of sticks, and ignites it with her aura; it warms and lights the interior of their dwelling. They prepare a dinner for themselves, and Kelly, for when he returns. Naomi keeps Faye talking about positive memories; family vacations, holidays, and funny incidents that happened throughout their lives. Faye seems to be in good spirits when around Naomi.

As it becomes dark outside, Kelly suddenly walks inside of the hut. Both girls greet him, but he only raises a hand silently. He sits down and looks at the food, but doesn't immediately eat it. He seems to stare at it for a moment, as though trying to decide whether or not he is hungry.

"Are you alright?" Naomi asks him.

"Huh? I'm fine. I was just uh... Working." Kelly replies.

"So, you *aren't* hungry?" Faye raises an eyebrow.

"Uh. Yeah, sure. I mean, yes." He takes the food.

"So, what were you working on?" Naomi asks.

"I was helping the Feather Fingers pack up." He answers.

"Stuffing those boxes full, right?" Faye comments.

"Don't say that!" Kelly suddenly snaps.

"Say what?" Faye leans back in surprise.

“Nothing... I’m just tired. I was working it hard... I mean... Shit. I’m going to bed.” He grunts as he sets the food down.

He climbs into his sleeping bag as Faye and Naomi look to him, then back at each other, not sure what to make of his bizarre behavior. He lies there, but notices their stares. He rolls over, facing his back to the girls. He struggles to sleep that night. The girls split Kelly’s food. They stay up for several more hours, talking, joking, and otherwise bonding with each other, for the first time in over a month.

Kelly wakes up the next morning feeling well rested. The girls are still asleep in their sleeping bags. He can’t be sure exactly how long the two stayed up last night. He sits up, carefully unzipping and stepping out from his sleeping bag. He considers striking the fire and cooking something to eat, but looks back to the girls. He doesn’t want to wake either of them. He quietly steps outside and stretches. He looks around and takes a seat on a stump near the hut. He leans forward, resting his elbows on his knees, and his chin on the palms of his hands.

“Hey Kel! Slacking off as usual?” Gareth calls to him.

Kelly turns and sees him walking from the direction of Kinda’s house.

“Yeah, I just figured I’d come out for some air before I go back inside, eat Doritos and masturbate.” Kelly facetiously remarks.

“Sounds like a rich, full day.” Gareth grins.

“So how are you feeling today?” Kelly asks.

Gareth stands before Kelly, his tail swaying gently as his long black hair flutters in the wind.

“Well, I...” Gareth suddenly stops.

He looks to Kelly as his mouth hangs open, the tips of his fangs visible as he stares at his friend.

“What? Do I have a booger or something?” Kelly comments.

“Kelly... You dog...” Gareth smirks.

“Huh?” Kelly sounds puzzled.

Gareth sniffs the air and chuckles.

“You keep this up and you’ll have a girl in every village.” He adds.

“What are you talking about, Gary?” Kelly asks.

“Don’t play stupid with me. You can’t fool my new nose.” He says, tapping his nose with a claw.

“Shit...” Kelly hangs his head.

“So who was it? I know four female’s scents by heart, and it isn’t any of theirs.” Gareth remarks.

Kelly takes a deep breath and sighs. After they sit in silence for a moment, Gareth pats Kelly on the shoulder.

“I’ll buy you breakfast, and you can tell me all about it.” He laughs.

“Aww, I don’t wanna...” Kelly complains.

“Kelly, turning down free food? What is this world coming too?” Gareth jests.

“Breakfast, always. Talking, not so much.” Kelly retorts.

Kelly follows Gareth to the village’s central fire, where he takes some fresh venison from a recently skinned and gutted deer. He places the meat on a brass grill and begins cooking it. Kelly takes a seat at a carved wooden bench, with another bench opposite it, and a table in between.

"You're just taking a piece of that?" Kelly asks.

"I've bagged quite a few for the village already, so yeah." Gareth replies, taking a seat on the bench opposite Kelly. "So... How did it go down? You weren't raped, were you?"

"Hardly." Kelly laughs.

"Good, because I'm fresh out of hot chocolate and marshmallows."

"It was just a life experience, and I'm definitely only interested in human women." Kelly tells him.

"That's it?" Gareth asks.

"Yup... That's it." Kelly sighs.

"That story sucks. I would like to refund my wasted time, please." Gareth grumbles.

"No exchanges or returns." Kelly quips.

"Fine... So you're not into Sahvorai... Did you at least finish before you figured that out?"

"Oh, hell yeah." Kelly smirks.

"So was she Blue Feet or a Feather Finger." Gareth asks.

"Feather Finger, I think... Are they still here?" Kelly asks.

"They sure are. They have plans to leave this afternoon." Gareth answers.

"I figured they would be gone by now." Kelly thinks aloud.

"I guess they didn't pack up everything in time, and weren't going to travel in the dark." Gareth comments.

"There you are!" Naomi calls out. "We wondered where you went."

Naomi quickly dashes up to them, while Faye walks casually behind her. Naomi greets Gareth with a hug, and sits beside him. Faye glares at Gareth as she sits beside Kelly. Gareth gets up and cuts two more slabs of venison from the carcass, placing it on the grill beside Kelly's food.

"Try not to get hair on it." Faye murmurs.

"Maybe I should just spit on it instead?" He jokes.

"Whatever, Gareth..." She grumbles.

"Gareth?" Kelly repeats.

"Why use my whole first name?" He asks as he sits back down.

"Because 'Gary' is dead, and you killed him." Faye remarks.

Naomi and Kelly look between the two, before staring back at Faye.

“That’s a very myopic view. Just because I’m Sahvorai now doesn’t mean that I’m not the same guy; I grew up with you, like a brother, for ten plus years.” He reasons.

“Really? Because it’s pretty fucking hard to tell... I just see a talking cat!” She growls.

“Think of it as a permanent costume.” He retorts.

“If you were even still Gary, maybe that shit would work!” She becomes irate.

Kelly and Naomi look around at the Sahvorai, who seem to be listening in, watching the drama unfolding before them.

“Guys, try to keep it civil...” Kelly urges them.

“Where the hell is this even coming from?!” Gareth demands.

“Casius was right about the Sahvorai. They can’t be trusted. By changing yourself, you killed Gary, and became some monstrosity. I don’t even know who you are!” Faye yells as she stands up.

She storms off in a rage. Gareth gets up from his seat, chasing after her, and leaving Naomi and Kelly at the village center. Faye stomps through the village, looking for the hut that she temporarily calls ‘home’. She sees a similar looking hut and steps inside, but it is not the right one.

“Where the fuck am I?” She grumbles.

Gareth enters just behind her, standing in her way when she turns around to leave.

“Move, fur ball.” She snarls.

“No, you shut the fuck up and listen, you stupid bitch! You’re going to hear me out!” He roars.

Faye is genuinely surprised by his assertiveness, taking a step back.

“I don’t look the same, but I *am* the same person. I remember when Kel and I met you for the first time, in that hallway. I remember the first time we hung out at your house; dad was so paranoid that your two new friends were boys, he literally watched us play PlayStation for five hours straight. We all knew he had better things to do! I was the guy who picked you from your late shift at two in the morning when your car broke down and Saeed and Walla slept through your call. You knew I would be awake because I worked a late shift too. Don’t you remember all of that? Because I do.” He pleads with her.

“Yeah... I do.” Faye smiles faintly.

“We share those memories, so I must still be the same guy... Why is it so hard to get over my outward appearance, especially when you know it makes me happier?” He asks.

Faye lowers her head, placing her hands on her hips. She chuckles softly as she steps up to him.

“I’ll admit, I didn’t think much of your fetish, and never judged you for it. I even held my tongue when you were so gentle to Kahlera, but I never expected to dream you altering your entire being. This must be some kind of sign, or life lesson that I need to learn...” Faye answers.

“Dream? Is that what you think this is? A dream?”

“What else would it be? Now get out of my way, before I kill you...” Faye demands with a cold, emotionless stare.

She tries to walk past him but he places a hand out, resting it on the frame of the entrance.

“This isn’t a dream Faye. You aren’t going to wake up. If you kill me, I’ll be dead for real.” He says softly.

Faye suddenly turns and grabs him by the throat, squeezing tightly. Her palm begins to glow as she prepares to use a talent. Gareth quickly swings an arm, slamming it down on her elbow and shifting his body. He tears her hand

from his throat, grabs her forearm, and throws her to the ground in a single swift motion. She quickly turns, using a weak push. Gareth lifts a hand, blocking it with his translucent purple shield. The blast flips all of the objects inside of the home, as Faye stumbles back and walks out. Gareth gasps, his eyes wide in horror; he is forced to come to terms with the fact that Faye just tried to kill him.

He steps outside and watches her head back to the others. He quickly heads back to Kina's house. Faye is unhinged, and becoming considerably dangerous. Faye returns to the village center where Kelly and Naomi still sit. They eat venison steak as she approaches, brushing off the spot where Gareth was sitting. Satisfied that it is clear of his fur, she sits down next to her sister, who slides a plate toward her. They watch her carefully, prepared for another outburst at any moment.

"So how did it go with Gary?" Naomi asks.

"Gary's dead. Did you mean that monster?" Faye replies.

"Gary's not dead. He may shed a lot more, and I have to worry about stepping on his tail, but he's still my best friend." Kelly retorts.

Faye slams her fist into the table, quickly standing and leaning forward.

"Gary. Is. Dead." She says slowly through clenched teeth.

"Do you really believe that?" He asks.

"If you don't, then maybe I can't trust you anymore..." She grumbles.

"And what if I don't believe it either?" Naomi asks.

Faye glares at her sister, and for the first time, Naomi feels genuinely afraid of her. Faye takes the plate and stands up from her seat, leaving the two behind as she walks away. She won't be reasoned with. The two look to each other and quickly get up, rushing off to find Gareth. They find him seated on the steps on Kina's home, staring at the ground. Naomi sits down beside Gareth as Kelly kneels in front of him.

"Hey, are you alright, bro?" Kelly asks.

"She tried to kill me. I stopped her just in time before she popped my head off." Gareth looks to him.

"No..." Naomi mutters in disbelief.

"She's dangerous. She is convinced that this isn't real. She doesn't think there are consequences for her actions. I already warned Kina and Gishner... She needs to go, *before* she kills someone, and she will." He continues.

Naomi's eyes water; she softly cries. The two men attempt to comfort her.

"Alright... We'll leave for the Crystalline Hall today." Kelly thinks aloud.

"Whatever we have to do to get her out of here." Gareth agrees. "You better go check on her and keep a close eye on her. I'll let everyone know what's up."

Gareth gets up and leaves Naomi and Kelly on the porch. He first reports to Kina and Kahlera, who are right inside. Gareth leaves Kahlera to pack some supplies, while he updates Gishner. Kelly and Naomi find Faye back at the storage hut, packing her musette bag. They manage to talk her into waiting for them to leaving. To their surprise, Faye agrees to let Gareth, and several other Sahvorai, escort them through the pass.

Gareth leaves Gishner's home and quickly heads toward the Feather Finger's convoy. He finds Sarvah as she prepares the last few carts for transport. Pulling her aside, he explains Faye's condition, and that he and his friends are leaving for the Crystalline Hall that very day. Sarvah immediately volunteers to go. Gareth leaves the decision to her, telling her as a courtesy; she orders the tribe to wait another day. As Gareth leaves the convoy and returns to Kina's home, he walks by Steve.

“Hey, Gare. How are you doing?” Steve greets him.

“Had better days...” He answers.

“Yeah, me too. I went home to get my woodcutting axe and someone wrecked my place. They flipped my table and threw my stuff everywhere.” Steve comments.

“That’s just uncalled for.” Gareth replies as he walks passed Steve.

Gareth returns to Kina’s home, where Kahlera waits for him, their packs at the ready. Gareth makes sure that he has both Vetra on his belt and the Kahr in his pack, with loaded magazines, just in case. The couple leave for the storage hut, only to find Sarvah waiting outside for them. The trio find Kelly and Naomi waiting with Faye, right outside of the hut, their bags full packed and the hut returned to the condition it was in before they ever stayed there.

“Ready to go?” Faye asks in a cold monotone, glaring at Gareth and his Sahvorai companions.

“Yeah... Let’s do this.” He replies.

Episode 22: Crystalline Hall

The party of six move to the north end of the village, walking along the bottom of a steep cliffside. Kahlera leads them, passing by the trail that winds up to the temple, where Gareth transformed. They approach another path that appears to be carved out of the rock of the mountain.

“This is it...” Kahlera says anxiously.

“Are you alright?” Naomi asks her.

“It is just that no one has ever taken this path, or at least not that I can recall. It is forbidden.” Kahlera answers.

“Forbidden is good. You learn a lot of secrets in forbidden places.” Faye grins.

“When we find the statue of liberty half buried, I’ll let you do the dramatic screaming.” Gareth jokes.

With considerable vigor, Faye rushes down the path. She takes long strides, hopping over large rocks that block her way, while the others struggle to keep up. She seems almost possessed by her desire to reach the end of the trail. Marching behind her, Gareth looks to his mate. He notes the expression on her face; a sad brow with hazy eyes, and the corners of her lips curl down in a soft frown. He leans closer to her, and brushes the back of her hand with his.

“Are you alright?” He asks her softly.

“I am. It is just unnerving to come through this pass. As a child, I was always told not to.” She says.

Sarvah walks closely behind the couple and leans in, her eyes locked on Faye who stays a few meters ahead.

“Do you not think that you should be leading?” Sarvah asks Kahlera.

“She already knows this path as well as I do. I do not believe it matters who walks ahead.” Kahlera replies.

They march along the thin, winding trail. Broken rocks and patches of snow covered grass both litter and border the pass. It is clear to all that they are the first to set foot there in as many centuries. The path turns sharply, leading up a steep incline. It levels off and turns again, slithering up the side of the mountain like a serpent. They navigate the treacherous pass, dodging the occasional falling rock, and hoping over small fissures. After several hours of hiking, the air gradually becomes thinner.

Following Gareth and Faye’s lead, everyone takes deep breaths as they step, but after a short time, Naomi becomes light headed. Her concern for her sister outweighs her desire to reach the end of the pass, so Faye stops the adventurers to rest. She checks the map while sitting with her sister. Kelly sits with Gareth, who himself is flanked by

Kahlera and Sarvah. They eat a light snack of deer jerky and dried fruit, taking small sips from their canteens and water bottles.

"I don't really like jerky." Kelly comments as he takes a bite.

"I didn't think you were a foodist." Gareth quips.

"All foods are created equal, but some foods are more equal than others." Kelly retorts.

"How long do you think we have until we reach the top?" Sarvah asks.

"It is hard to say." Kahlera looks up at the crest of the mountain. "We are barely a third of the way to the peak, but the trail may end long before that."

"Maybe we can ask Faye to show us the map?" Kelly poses.

"I thought you had it." Gareth interjects.

"I *did*, but she took it." Kelly replies.

"So, ask for it back." Sarvah chuckles.

"Fuck that. I like being alive. There's still too many foods I haven't eaten." Kelly laughs.

"Alright you clowns..." Faye says as she stands up. "Let's keep moving."

She rolls the old cloth map, slipping it back into her musette bag before placing it over her shoulders. She takes Naomi by the hand, keeping her close as she hikes up the pass at a somewhat slower pace. She coaches her sister on how to breathe in the thin mountain air. They march, climb and jump, as they navigate ever higher. The pass slowly becomes more narrow, until it abruptly stops. They have reached the end, but there is nothing in sight.

Faye yanks out the map in frustration and unrolls it. Following the simple instructions on the map, she finds a large boulder in the shape of an arrowhead and counts her steps. She turns suddenly at a lonely tree, surrounded only by grass and a few small stones. She counts her steps again. She approaches a small cliffside that curves into a crescent, with small valleys on either side. She takes the left valley and counts her steps.

“I feel like we’re hunting for buried treasure.” Kelly jokes.

“What are you going to do with your share?” Gareth asks.

“A lifetime supply of Nachos, Seven-Up and permanent PlayStation live membership. You?” He replies.

“A big screen HD TV and a new copy of Skyrim. I’ll have to pick a different race though. Maybe something exotic, like a human.” Gareth laughs.

After two more turns, they are looking down a valley shrouded in mist and shadows. The cliffs on either side seem to have been crudely carved by thousands of hands, and stand well over eighty meters tall. The valley leads straight through and begins to climb, as a structure is visible in the distance. Faye runs through the valley and towards the object, nearly pulling Naomi's arm from the socket. She recites Psalms twenty-three as she races ahead.

The others rush to catch up to Faye who quickly leads them, nearly tripping her own sister several times as she drags her up the carved steps of the valley. Faye quickly approaches the distant object and stops, underwhelmed by the discovery. She was expecting something from her imagination to be more profound. The hall is not a hall at all; it is simply a half sphere cut out of the rock, about ten meters in diameter.

The carved sphere is lined with smooth translucent crystals that are blue in color. In the center of the half sphere is a pedestal, carved out of the same rock as the mountainside. The pedestal has a figurine carved onto it, being one solid piece of rock. Is this statue a depiction of Sahvath? The small statue is in the form of an androgynous creature, who looks almost cliché in its appearance.

It is bipedal, tall, thin, with spindly arms and legs, and a large head with bulbous eyes, reminiscent of a Preying

Mantis. The head is crowned with evenly spaced tendrils or dreadlocks, that hang just past the shoulders. It has no nose, but four thin diagonal slits. It has a very small mouth and rounded chin, that tapers like a dagger. The shoulders are broad, with a triangular chest that narrows to an emaciated stomach and narrow hips. The feet have three evenly spaced toes, but they are digitigrade, like the Sahvorai. On its back are angelic wings.

The being holds its hands above its head, presses together at the wrists. In its hands, surrounded by disturbingly long fingers is a dark blue crystal ball, a little smaller than a tennis ball. It is perfectly spherical and has no visible tool marks, or imperfections of any kind; it is utterly flawless. A faint light seems to glow in the center of the perfectly formed crystal. The others stare in amazement at the find, looking over the figurine, and the crystal ball that it holds in its hands.

Gareth, Kahlera, Sarvah, and Naomi do not want to touch the crystal ball. Though curious, Kelly hesitates. They stand around the object for a moment as Faye suddenly reaches out. Kelly suddenly stops her.

“What?!” Faye snaps.

“Are you sure this is a good idea? What if this isn’t the hall? What if it sucks all of us through to earth or something? If it did, who knows where it would spit us out

at... We could all wake up in Saudi Arabia for all we know.” He warns.

“Or maybe it opens the gates to Emerald City.” Gareth quips.

Gareth, Sarvah and Kahlera immediately back away, moving towards the steps.

“I guess we won’t know until we try!” Faye grins.

She yanks her arm away from Kelly and grabs the crystal, trying to take it from the statue’s grasp. The fingers hold the crystal tightly, and though she fails to remove it, it begins to glow brightly. Like the skull, her touch has activated the device. Naomi and Kelly back away, while Faye stands only feet from the device. Naomi moves toward her Sahvorai companions, who slowly retreat down the steps. A blinding flash of light suddenly surrounds Faye, and then she is gone.

The flash takes Kelly next, as he backs away from the device, pressing his back against the wall of the carved sphere. Although they believe that they are out of range, the remaining four are covered in a blinding light. Their eyes struggle to adjust as all six of them stand in a dark room. They have been transported to what appears to be an underground facility grown out of crystals.

“Wow... This is like something out of StarGate!” Gareth says in astonishment. “These walls look a bit like the Tok’Ra tunnels, and that beam was like an Asgard teleporter.” He gushes as he feels the cold, crystalline walls.

“Now *this* is what I was expecting.” Faye says with a smile.

Looking around the room, which is illuminated by vibrant white lights, that also appear to be made of crystals, they find a single walkway. The room has no doors. They walk out and enter a long hall, that seems to be dedicated only to traveling to the previous room. They walk slowly and carefully down the hall, where they see another walkway. As they enter, they stand in a large room, spherical in shape and easily one-hundred meters in diameter. In the center of the room is a pedestal with steps before it, and at the top is a throne; a being sits there, watching them with its’ black eyes.

“You look just like the statue...” Gareth comments as he places his foot on the bottom step.

“Yes, former human... I am Sahvath.” The being speaks in a deep and sepulchral voice.

Kahlera and Sarvah immediately bow before the being.

“No! Do not worship me!” Sahvath demands.

The two immediately rise from the ground, but keep their heads bowed in reverence. Sahvath stands, walking down the long flight of steps toward the adventurers. Gareth looks over the being. Sahvath stands eight feet tall, with off-grey flesh and large black eyes. The eyelids blink from the sides. The tendrils on its’ head are light grey. Sahvath doesn’t have wings, as depicted on the statue. Sahvath is genderless, and though their voice is deep, it could easily be male or female. It wears a black body suit, with grey bands around the wrists, ankles, and collar. It is made from some unknown material that behaves like spandex, but shines like latex.

“I do not want to be worshipped...” Sahvath begins. “It is one of many mistakes that I have made.”

“So, you created the-”

“Yes...” Sahvath interrupts Faye. “I already know every question you wish to ask, so please listen... I created this world as my own. That was my second mistake. My first was failing my own Creator, The One. He who made the universe, and all of my kind, was betrayed by a third of His own army, of which I took part. I was misled by a great deceiver, as many of my kin were. We were punished for our rebellion, and our Master formed a new being to replace us... Humans. Many of my kin hate the humans, seeking to defile them;

they know their final judgement comes, but I could not bear it. This world was my escape. It is where I hide from Him.”

“This story sounds awfully familiar...” Gareth thinks quietly aloud.

Sahvath walks slowly down the flight of stairs, their voice solemn and its’ expression very sad, even lonesome. Sahvath sits near the base of the steps, looking at the adventurers. It takes a deep breath and closes its eyes as it slowly sighs.

“He has damned us for our betrayal, but only He knows when it will occur. I desired repentance, but my kind cannot achieve it, for we know Him. The creation of mankind gave me the idea to build this world. I formed a new dimension. Though I am not the strongest of my kin, I am certainly among them.” Sahvath continues.

“If you are only here to hide from damnation, where did everyone come from? Why make the Sahvorai?” Faye asks.

Sahvath slowly opens his eyes, seemingly annoyed.

“I told you to *listen*... After millennia of solitude, I grew lonely. I began creating new creatures, as He had done. The Fallen were my first attempt, but they were a failure. I wanted sentience; I wanted to create a soul, but I am not even one-millionth as strong as Him. Several more failures

taught me my error. Only He can make souls. Instead, I made a temporary portal to return to your realm. I placed the skulls and quickly returned. Almost immediately, humans began to arrive in my world. I waited until six-thousand had come, then I gathered them all, revealing the nature of this world, and myself.” Sahvath speaks slowly.

Sahvath stops and lowers its’ head. The tendrils fall forward, and it places its hands through them, resting its’ face on their palms. Sahvath seems horribly depressed.

“The humans who would not stay near me I ignored, while the remaining four-thousand became my family. As a sign of gratitude, I gave them a gift of *their* choosing. They asked for the powers of the beasts, so I created a device which turned them into the Sahvorai. I do not know where they created the name. It really is not a remarkable feat; all Sahvorai are merely modified humans. The Sahvorai only live longer because of a genetic defect in their creation, which I could not resolve. They are not even my own beasts. I reformed them with animals that He had made.”

Sahvath chuckles as it crosses their arms over their spindly legs.

“It is ironic that one third of mankind rejected me, is it not? Regardless, the Sahvorai are my first success, and also my greatest regret. Although they are over ninety-nine

percent genetically human, and are compatible with humans, the difference between them caused a war. They slaughtered each other until nary a human was left, so I sent them to different halves of the continent to live separately, and left the skulls in place. I realized that every time I interfered, I only made things worse, so I created the Crystalline Hall as a hideaway within a hideaway. I made it forbidden, so that none would dare to seek me out, and ask me to intervene.”

Sahvath’s eyes water as they reminisce. Kahlera and Sarvah look to each other in shock. This is *nothing* like the legends that they had been told since birth. Kelly and Faye both step up to Sahvath, who looks between them. Faye opens her mouth, but Sahvath raises a hand, stopping her before she can speak.

“I know, but unfortunately I never created a way back to your realm. My kin can travel between realms freely, and many of my kind might have come here, had I not hidden it so well. Mortals, however, cannot travel without aid, and I cannot aid you myself. You must remain here for the rest of your lives.”

Sahvath turns their head to Kelly and continues speaking.

“I know that you are curious about the aura. This is actually the spirit of every human; Sahvorai have it because they have human souls. Not every soul is powerful enough to use the aura. No one with an aura was chosen for any given reason. It is simply a side effect of living in this realm, which does not obey the same laws as yours. As for your second question, humans and Sahvorai *can* breed, though the child will be the same species as the mother. That, too, is an interesting effect that I could not fully resolve.”

Kelly looks at the others as his face flushes from embarrassment. Sahvath turns their head to Gareth and continues speaking.

“You too have questions. You would like to know how this realm works... You would be incapable of understanding fully until *after* your death, but simply put, this realm is in another plane of existence. It is a world between His realm, and yours. As a result, beings here live longer; He is the creator of time and space, and the closer to Him you are, the longer your lifespan. Here, humans cannot exceed four-hundred and ninety years, while Sahvorai cannot exceed seven-hundred and seventy-seven years. In this realm, a full month is only a minute for Him, but a year for your realm...”

Faye’s eyes widen in shock as she stares at Sahvath. It slowly turns to look at her and nods.

“Yes... In the months that you have been here, over two years have passed in your realm. I am sure that you have all been declared dead a long time ago.”

Faye begins to tremble as she sits down on the floor. She brings her knees to her chest, rocking back and forth slowly.

“This is *not* happening. This is *not* happening. Wake up.” She mumbles repeatedly to herself.

“The mortal mind... So adaptable, and yet so fragile.” Sahvath chuckles.

Sahvath stands and leaves the steps, walking around the group as it stares at Gareth.

“The skulls are in many places around your world, and time functions differently here. As a result, there are humans who are alive in my realm, who thousands of years ago were also alive in yours. You are correct to believe that Casius was truly a Roman Legionnaire. The oldest humans in this realm would have seen wonderous things; The pyramids in pristine condition, or the Great Wall of China being built. As for the language barrier, that was His work,

to keep mankind spread throughout your world. My only other successful work here was creating the microbes that allow you to read and speak in tongues, granting universal understanding.”

It turns its’ head to Naomi and looks at her, narrowing its eyes.

“Your questions are possibly my favorite...” Sahvath continues. “The device is not magical, but scientific. I invented it to splice the genetic code of humans with that of animals. The codes of over one-hundred animal species are within the device. To decide what animal to splice with the host body, it reads both the subconscious mind, and the physical makeup. The animal chosen is a perfect compromise between the human’s personality, and their inherently dominant physical traits. A large and aggressive man is more likely to reform into a bear, and a smaller, subservient woman may be spliced with a mouse. Coloration is based on their personality and aura. The device is powered by the planet’s core.”

Sahvath takes a deep, slow breath.

“It is true that only my Master can create souls, yet children are born in my realm... The answer is simple... He is here as well, and I have failed to hide from Him. *Everything* exists to *His* will, including the world that I created. When it

is time for my judgement, He will simply appear, and take me. All I can do now is sit here, repent, and prevent myself from further corruption. I cannot, and *will not*, interfere for any reason.”

Sahvath walks back towards the steps, looking over the group. It walks toward Faye and slowly kneels before her. She gazes up with tear filled eyes, hot streams flowing down her cheeks. Sahvath tilts its head to the side as it reaches out, placing their hands on her face. Her eyes widen as Sahvath’s fingers wrap around and behind her head, and it closes its eyes. The others look curiously as Sahvath holds Faye’s head. It releases her and slowly stands. As it turns back towards the steps, Faye begins to cry uncontrollably.

“What did-” Kelly begins.

Sahvath raises a hand, and his words become caught in his throat.

“I gave her understanding. She will no longer question the reality of this world.” Sahvath says as it turns back to the others. “She must now come to terms with her actions, as I must...”

Sahvath points a finger at Faye and she rises from the ground as though in a trance. It moves its hand and sends her down the hall, back to the room where they first appeared. Sahvath does the same to Kahlera, making them all leave, one by one. It turns to Sarvah and smiles.

“Do not worry. Patience will bring you peace.” Sahvath says to her.

It points, waving her down the hall. It turns to Kelly, but Sahvath’s expression is much more solemn.

“Do not grow attached. Focus on the greater good.” It urges him.

It points, waving him down the hall. It turns to Gareth.

“Do not turn your back to the pink rain. It will be your undoing.” It warns.

It points, waving him down the hall. Finally, it turns to Naomi. Sahvath steps before her, also with a solemn expression. It looks down at her and brushes her cheeks gently with the backs of its’ fingers.

“Be wary; your red eyes will see the path, but your heart will know the truth. Trust your heart instead.”

Sahvath steps away from Naomi and waves her down the hall. They walk through the long hall and towards the room as though zombified. They gather around each other in a circle, in the center of the room. A blinding light washes over them. They awaken fully aware of what had just happened, standing in the half sphere and looking at the figurine. The blue crystal ball is missing from the statues grasp, but everything is otherwise as they had left it.

Having learned the truth of this world, and hearing the answers to all of their questions, they silently turn and walk the path. The group remains silent as they march back to the Blue Feet village, all of them deep in thought. Naomi walks beside Faye, brushing against her older sister. Faye drapes an arm over her shoulders as they walk. Gareth hikes beside Kahlera. He reaches out and takes her hand in his. She smiles at her lover, who smiles back at her; they know the truth, but it changes nothing. This is their home now, and they have much to do.

Episode 23: Crux

They return to the village as a blanket of darkness slowly slips over them. Gareth walks his friends back to the hut that they had been using.

“I’ll talk to Gishner about building you a better home soon.” He assures them.

He and Kahlera continue on, walking Sarvah back to her yurt, recently erected by her servants. They wish her a good night, before returning to Kina’s home. They enter the home quietly, but Kina is awake, eagerly awaiting them. She bombards them with questions, but neither wants to talk about what it is that they had seen. Quickly realizing this, she avoids pressuring them, instead leaving them alone and entering her own room in the back of the cabin.

Now alone, Gareth and Kahlera strip off their clothes, leaving them in a neat pile on the floor beside the firepit. They lie down on their large bedroll and pull the covers over them; Gareth lies on his back and stretches out as Kahlera tucks herself under his arm, her hand on his chest. He stares up at the ceiling, as though focusing on some invisible object.

“Are you alright?” She asks him.

“Huh?” He turns to look at her.

“I asked if you were alright.” She reiterates.

“I am, but I’m worried about the others, especially Faye... They really wanted to leave; I was just thinking about how they are going to cope to life here.” He answers.

“They will be fine. You were.” She assures him.

“Yeah, but I’m not like them.” He retorts.

“I know.” She coos.

She gazes up at him, feeling his soft fur in her hands. She rakes her claws gently across his chest, gaining his attention. He looks down at her, wrapping an arm around her body and stroking her back with his own claws. She closes her eyes and purrs, trembling at his touch. He rolls over onto his side, sliding Kahlera off him. He leans on an elbow, looking at her. He strokes her side with the claws of his free hand. Their eyes lock and she grins wide at him, her fangs poking out from behind her upper lip.

“You know, I never had the chance test out this new body...” He winks.

“Do you need any help?” She asks sweetly.

Her hand reaches over, still underneath the blanket, resting gently on his side. He leans in and presses his snout against hers, their lips touching. They passionately kiss, as her hand slides down his side, exploring his new body. His hand moves in kind, carefully slipping between her legs. She closes her eyes and moans softly. Her hand reaches

ever lower, brushing his member. Her eyes open and she looks down at the blanket.

“I think this body is a bit bigger than my last one...” He comments with a rather smug grin.

They share a laugh as he leans in, wrapping both arms around her, kissing his lover as he slowly climbs atop her.

“Lucky me.” She coos.

Back in the hut, Faye sits upright, in the fetal position. She stares at the fire as Naomi and Kelly cook lean ham on a small brass grill. She cries softly as her sister and friend watch on. They look to each other, wondering if there is anything that they can say to Faye to make her feel better. Naomi scoots closer, sitting beside her sister.

“Are you going to be alright?” She asks Faye softly.

“I... I did... Horrible things...” Faye chokes out.

“But you aren’t a horrible person.” Naomi assure her.

“Aren’t I? I nearly killed Gareth. I nearly killed Kelly. I murdered dozens of innocent people... A child! Oh God... What happened to me...” Faye weeps.

She drops her head down, resting it on her knees, while the tears stream down her face like an open faucet.

"It's going to be okay. You didn't realize what you were doing." Naomi says softly, trying to comfort her sister.

"It doesn't matter. They are all still dead." Faye retorts.

"It does matter. You can get through this. You aren't a bad person. You just made a mistake." Kelly adds.

"I nearly killed you!" Faye yells sorrowfully as she looks to Kelly.

"But you didn't, and I'm not mad about it. You are going to be alright now." Kelly replies with a pleasant smile.

Faye lowers her head again and cries.

"Have something to eat. Food always makes me feel better." He continues.

He leans over, presenting her with a wooden plate of cooked ham.

"I'm not hungry." She murmurs.

“Miss Piggy sacrificed herself to become a delicious dinner, *and* tomorrow’s breakfast.” He quips.

“So... You’re eating Miss Piggy?” She asks.

“Yeah... Wait... No? Maybe?” He thinks aloud.

The girls both giggle. Faye reaches out and takes the plate.

“Give me that.” She says with a smile.

“That’s better...” Kelly grins.

Early the next morning, Gareth slowly opens his eyes. He sits upright on the bedroll and looks around, taking a moment to stretch his arms and back. Kina sits by the fire, stoking it with a brass poker, while Kahlera takes a sip from a familiar red tea that she had mixed with her mortar and pestle.

“Good morning, love.” Kahlera smiles.

“Hey, babe. How is it that I never wake up before you?” He asks.

Kahlera shrugs her shoulders and quickly drinks the potion.

“Is that...?”

“Yes, it is. We are not quite ready for children... Just yet.” She winks.

Kina hands Gareth his clothes. As he dresses, she cooks some lean ham for their breakfast. Kahlera sits beside him; they finally begin sharing their tale with Kina, revealing everything that they had learned from Sahvath. They talk as they cook and eat their breakfast, sparing no details. Kina is amazed at the revelation; she looks depressed by Sahvath’s true nature. Kina openly pities Sahvath for losing its way. After revealing the truth of their origins, and Sahvath’s being, Kina asks for permission to inform Gishner. They grant it without hesitation. Kina quickly departs to tell Gishner, leaving the couple behind.

“I’d like to go check on the others.” He begins.

“We should also see Sarvah and see how she is coping.” Kahlera adds.

They exit the home and walk toward the camp, where the Feather Fingers have already packed nearly their entire village. In the distance, Volaren stands at attention as Sarvah barks an order. He quickly turns and leaves. She sees her friends approaching and her expression suddenly changes, becoming noticeably happier.

“Come to wish me well?” Sarvah asks with a smile.

“If we have too...” Gareth jokes.

She laughs as she looks to Gareth. She hugs them both.

“You *know* you are going to miss me.” She smirks.

“Maybe...” Kahlera smiles.

“Well, *maybe* I will be back then.” Sarvah retorts.

“Please, take your time.” Kahlera quips.

“Seriously though, how long do you think you will be gone?” Gareth asks.

“I am not sure. I plan to visit several southern villages; the nearest is three days away. In order to truly profit, I must travel much farther, but I have made arrangements with Gishner to regularly return, and barter supplies. You should see me once every month, give or take a week.” She explains.

“Oh good... Another monthly visitor to annoy me.” Kahlera sarcastically comments.

“She learns quickly.” Sarvah interjects.

“I’ve been training her.” He nods.

“Well, keep up the good work. With a proper sense of humor, I may actually be able to talk to her.” Sarvah chuckles.

Sarvah turns to her people. She waves goodbye to her two friends, then walks away, her bushy tail happily swaying. Inside, her chest stings as she leaves, but she must lead her people, and she knows that she will see him again. Even if there was no profit in it, she will visit as often as she can. The couple sits on a log and watches the tribe march down the long southward road. As Sarvah and her tribe slowly shrink into the distance, they are disturbed by Kelly and Naomi running towards them. The humans look frantic.

“Thank God we found you!” Naomi speaks, gasping for breath.

“We already tried Kina’s house.” Kelly adds.

“What’s wrong?” Kahlera asks.

“We were about to come and see you.” Gareth adds, standing to face them.

“Faye is gone...” Naomi says through labored breaths.

“What?!” Kahlera asks in shock.

“She packed some supplies and left during the night. We woke up this morning and she was already gone. All that she left behind was this note.” Naomi explains.

Naomi hands over a small slip of memo pad paper, written with faded ink. Gareth recognizes it as part of Faye's adventure kit, used to make patrol maps. He takes the note and looks it over. It reads:

"Dear family,

I'm very sorry to have to do this, but it's the only way. I can't come to terms with who I am, and it's better if I just go. I'm going to walk the earth, or whatever this planet is called, and let God decide what to do with me. Stay strong and support each other, just like you tried to support me. This isn't your fault. There was nothing you could have done to fix me.

Forever yours, Faye."

Gareth lowers the note, placing a hand on his brow, and closing his eyes tightly. He hands the note to Kahlera, who quickly reads it over.

"When do you want to leave?" She asks him.

"Whenever Naomi and Kelly are ready." He grumbles.

"We're ready now!" Naomi chirps.

“Yeah, after we get our gear.” Kelly quips.

“Then gear up.” Gareth grunts.

**“We will meet you at the hut when we are ready.”
Kahlera interjects.**

The couple quickly returns to Kind’s home, where they collect their gear. Gareth packs a quantity of food and emergency ammunition in his black musette bag; he has mastered holy bolt. He only carries loaded magazines in order to either enchant the rounds and enhance their power, similar to Kahlera’s enchanted arrows, or to use as a backup, if too weak to use his talents. He places his web belt through the loops of his faded cargo pants, attaches his holster, recurved knife, Crusader canteen and pouch, and double magazine pouch. Kahlera does not wear her pack, but takes two goat bladder canteens, coated with tree resin to prevent leakage, along with her stainless-steel knife, yew bow and arrows.

They rush back to the storage hut where Kelly and Naomi are already waiting for them. Kelly wears his pistol belt and a water bottle, with a makeshift sling that wraps around the bottle’s neck, but neither wears a pack. Wasting no time, they begin by walking the parameter of the village near the hut, looking for Faye’s trail. Using her enhanced vision and keen sense of smell, Kahlera picks up her trail. Though Gareth now shares these traits, he is still adapting to them; although his nose can find scents from a distance, his untrained mind can’t discern them yet. They follow

Faye's trail, picking up faint footprints in the light snow, and discovering several broken branches.

They follow the tracks nearly a mile away from the village, before coming upon a stream. They follow Faye's trail along the stream until it widens, before the faint tracks end, the scent disappearing. Faye had taken care to cover her tracks by hiking through a stream. They cross it, walking a quarter mile in both directions, but can't find her trail again. Faye is long gone, and her trail has grown cold. Naomi is devastated.

With no other leads, and nothing else they can do, the search party gives up and returns to the village, hoping that Faye will change her mind and return. A day passes, and then another. Every day Naomi walks around the camp, several times a day and at regular intervals. She maintains her vigil for the next week. Faye never returns. Kelly, Gareth and Kahlera had quickly realized that there was no point in hunting her down, instead quietly resigning themselves to her loss, something they kept from Naomi.

One afternoon, Kelly walks through the camp, trying to decide what to do with himself. The boredom often becomes palpable. Gareth and Kahlera are building a life and home together, and both have tasks in the village. Naomi is quite popular among the Blue Feet, and also Kahlera's apprentice, learning her skills as an apothecary and healer. Kelly, however, has nothing to do but train with his talents,

and eat; the latter hobby is considerably expensive in a society that has to provide everything for itself. He sits down at a blank patch of dirt and sighs, staring at it.

The barren land at his feet once held the village's shrine to Sahvath. In the time since they had returned from the Crystalline Hall, Kina and Gishner decided to share the truth of Sahvath's nature to the entire tribe. Though some find it difficult to accept, most adapt quickly, and manage surprisingly well. The shrine was taken down only a few days earlier, in accordance to Sahvath's own desire not to be worshipped. He looks over and sees a familiar, grey furred Sahvorai sitting on the porch of Kina's home.

Gareth holds a small piece of wood in his hand, using a small bronze knife and tiny chisel to carve something into it. Kelly approaches Gareth, watching him work. He is carving a deep impression of a Christian cross into the piece of wood. His spent shell casings sit in a small cloth sack beside him.

"Hey Gary... What are you doing?" He asks, sitting beside his friend.

"Just carving a mold." Gareth replies.

"Oh... Why?"

"Well..." He sighs, taking a moment to think. "I guess it just makes me feel better..."

“Right on... So, then you’re going to make it out of brass?” Kelly looks down at the cloth sack.

“Nothing else I can do with them, and I have enough blades.” He smirks as he holds up an empty hand, flashing his claws.

Kelly chuckles and looks at the ground while Gareth quietly whittles the cross into the chunk of wood.

“I never expected village life to be so... Quiet.” Kelly suddenly speaks, breaking the silence.

“Well, what else did you expect?” Gareth asks, his eyes focused on his project.

“I don’t know... Adventures. Demon slaying, then coming home to a feast every night. Prostitutes that are so impressed that they don’t charge you afterward.” Kelly retorts.

Gareth laughs, still carving the cross.

“Sounds like you need a trade, or at least a useful hobby.” Gareth comments.

“Escape one dead-end job to find another?” Kelly raises an eyebrow.

“That’s just life, Kel, anywhere you go. Although, here a trade actually provides something tangible, and not just Fiat money. Plus, that’s a very bleak outlook.” He explains.

He inhales with his feline nose and gently blows the wood shavings from the completed work. He stands and takes the cloth sack in his hand and walks toward the village forge, where the smith, Balahn, waits for him.

“I’m just getting use to this place, is all. You adapted fast. A lot faster than I can. Naomi too.” Kelly continues.

“You’ll find your place too, bro. Everyone has one. Start talking to the tradesmen, I’m sure you’ll find something to occupy your time. Something that you can do in public, anyway.” Gareth laughs.

He hands the block of wood to the older Sahvorai male who runs the forge. The smith holds the object in his hands and looks it over curiously.

“So, this is it?” Balahn asks. “This is a strange symbol.”

“I know.” Gareth replies, handing over the bag of shell casings. “Let me know as soon as it’s done. You can keep the leftover brass, if there is any.”

“I will. Do not forget that venison you owe me.” The bronze smith adds.

“Just remind me a few dozen more times, because I’m sure I will forget.” He facetiously remarks.

Balahn shrugs his shoulders and set the shell casings on a workbench. Gareth turns to Kelly and pats his arm.

“Don’t worry. You’re going to be fine here. Just give it time.” Gareth smiles.

“Thanks dad...” Kelly mutters sarcastically.