

Shift World

by

Christopher W Gamsby

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Revision I; Correction I

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Synopsis

A vibrant, living world connects to the Shift World, a world of monsters, ruins, and treasure. One in ten thousand people can travel between the two worlds, and they are known as shifters. Shifters created empires, became merchant barons, and influenced much of the world's culture. Schools teach about shifters' exploits, and shifters even dictate fashion and entertainment. Children dream about a life of adventure in the Shift World.

A young shifter named Karp was saved from the brink of death in a small trading post called the Village of the Traitor's Tavern. While recovering, she befriended the general store's manager and apprenticed under a local shifter named The Whitecoat. The store manager, her adopted son, and The Whitecoat became Karp's family, and the Village of the Traitor's Tavern became her home.

Karp's idyllic life is threatened by a spreading sickness which takes the lives of shifters. An encounter with a mysterious stranger in the Shift World almost leaves Karp dead on the general store's floor. To save her new home and family, Karp will need to search the ruins of Shift World for weapons, find powerful new allies, defeat unrelenting enemies, and avert an unclear calamity that looms over everything.

Edition Notes:

Revision I: After a year more of writing and editing, I've found many new tools and have become much more proficient at writing. I've made some changes to phrasing, especially at the novel's beginning and made extensive changes to punctuation through the whole work.

Correction I: I made corrections to a humbling amount of typos that I missed after releasing the first edition.

Preface

Welcome and thank you for downloading the E-book or purchasing a physical copy. I hope that you enjoy the story and if you do, future works or more information will be located at www.traitorstavern.com. This is my first novel and really my first attempt at creative writing, so my website will be relatively empty for a while. I've currently (June, 2017) added over 50,000 words of short stories and guest posts since the release of Shift World's first edition. My inspiration for the novel came unexpectedly.

One day I was playing a video game called Final Fantasy 13: Lightning Returns. A main mechanic of that game is that in the middle of battle you could press a button and your character changed their entire gear loadout. The character didn't just take out a different weapon; she completely changed her clothing, abilities, and weapons. I realized that there was no real explanation as to why Lightning had that ability (at least any that I could remember). Mostly the game only seemed to use the logic of 'because video game.'

That's the same logic which says that monsters should courteously wait for the player to search their inventory during battle or that lets the main character somehow carry 100's, if not 1000's, of pounds of provisions and gear. I've noticed these unexplained abilities as long as I've gamed. During the days of playing The Legend of Zelda on the NES, Link could somehow open every chest he came across without a key. In modern first-

person shooters, the playable character will gain health by just not getting shot for a short time. This line of thinking brought forth a cascade of unexplained video game tropes, cliches, and mechanics which became the skeleton for the worlds in Shift World.

Each week I spend many hours reading scholarly articles and non-fiction books, so I rarely read fiction for pleasure. In my leisure time, I generally either play video games, watch movies, or watch anime. As you read, I think my influences from anime will become apparent from my character's slightly exaggerated personality quirks and interactions. The worlds themselves are heavily influenced by both eastern and western cultures.

I guess I've rambled on long enough; I really hope you enjoy.

-Christopher W Gamsby

Prologue

“I will tell you all this world knows of shifters.” began Tolk the School Master. Despite almost every student apathetically daydreaming, Tolk was confident that students enjoyed a little dramatic flair and embellishment with history lessons. The children were almost teens and quickly approached the end of formal schooling. Most didn't see how history would help them work their family's farms or businesses and they long lost the curiosity typical of children starting their education. Hidden among the bored children was one excited child hanging on every word. Nort was ambitious but spacey and dreamed of becoming a powerful shifter one day.

Tolk walked to a hand-drawn map hung on the side of the classroom. A landmass drawn in the center was a slightly flattened circle with jagged, irregular coastlines. Three mountain ranges converged from the ocean to the center of the continent, creating three distinct regions. The two northern regions were approximately the same size and the southern region was as large as the other two combined. The northwest region of the map was labeled the Arid Desert.

“A chain of active volcanoes located just off of the northwest coast cause the desert. Constant eruptions and lava flows heat a large air system known as the Ocean Breeze. The Ocean Breeze moves inland and is trapped by the mountain chains. The hot air rapidly evaporates any water not trapped deep below the topsoil. Plants are scarce, and so animals are rare.”

The southern region was labeled the Lush Forest.

“The volcanoes on the west coast extend past the whole continent, but the peaks scatter further apart as the range travels south. The Southern Wind is warmed by lava flows and traverses the whole length of the Lush Forest. Since the lower two mountain ranges are almost parallel with the wind, the hot air is blown back out to sea and not trapped inland like with the Ocean Breeze. Forests cover most of the southern region, but in years of heavy rain, the forests are more like swamps or marshes. Farming is a common way of life here since the soil is rich and easy to work, but many tradesmen make a living shaping and collecting wood.”

The northeast territory was labeled as the Creeping Ice.

“The mountain ranges naturally block the Ocean Breeze from reaching the northeast. Some arable land rests in the shadow of the mountains, but snow and ice cover the land moving away from the mountains before reaching the ocean. Miniature ecosystems formed around lakes and ponds. Seals, dogs, and smaller animals hunt fish that live in the ponds. Bears and dire wolves hunt everything.

The three mountain ranges meet in the center of the world, but don't connect. A nameless village formed in this natural valley. People eventually called that village the Crossroads.

The balance of power was radically different 1000 years ago. The Crossroads was little more than an outpost serving as a

waypoint for travelers moving between regions.

Cutting down a tree using nothing but stone could take days or weeks. Processing the tree to build something could take 2 or 3 times as long, and so the few buildings at the Crossroads were made of clay bricks dug out of the desert. Most buildings in the Lush Forest were made of sticks. There were as many Nomads in the Creeping Ice as there were Foresters in the Lush Forest and Clay Workers in the Arid Desert.

Tord the Elder was the first person to change everything. Even though it should have taken decades, in a matter of years, he built three large storehouses in the Crossroads. On the surface, they were used to store hard to move goods like lumber and clay, but secretly Tord built large gates and guard stands. Each entrance to the Crossroads is naturally framed by a hundred foot gap between sheer cliffs. In order to enter from any side, you must walk in between mountains from different ranges. One day Tord started digging ditches in the gaps, and then overnight, he put up gates. Preparing the lumber and digging should have taken years, but once again only took months.

Tord now controlled all access to trade between the three regions, and no one could stop him. The more a region relied on trade, the more Tord exploited them. Foresters from the Lush Forest were the most independent and were given the best terms. The Clay Workers of the Arid Desert could only survive by exchanging earthenware with neighboring regions. They didn't fair nearly as well.

Traditionally during trade, a Clay Worker headed south with two pots of equal size. Foresters with extra grain headed north, and the two met at the Crossroads. The Forester returned south with one of the pots and the Clay Worker returned north with its twin filled with grain.

Tord demanded that Clay Workers submit ten pots worth of clay for every pot of grain. Tord gave the Foresters two empty pots for one pot of grain. In this way, Tord kept supply high while exploiting the Clay Workers. He also exploited the Foresters by harvesting all of the forests near the Crossroads. Soon Tord had enough clay and wood to build his city in the Crossroads and named himself king. According to legend, he ruled there for over 150 years.

Over time tensions between the Nomads and Tord grew. Unlike the Clay Workers, the Nomads could survive mostly independent of commerce. Traditionally Nomads survived by moving from lake to lake, fishing, and hunting. The Nomads burned oils and fats to heat their homes and used pelts and skins to build tents and make clothing. Weapons were fashioned from bones and claws. Eventually, efficient hunters had extra pelts or weapons and traded with Foresters for food. That food eased the need to hunt which ensured a healthy supply of prey. Before the walls went up, a bear pelt brought four times its weight in grain, but Tord only gave them half the weight.

At first, the Nomads refused to trade with Tord, but as time went on many communities had a glut of furs, teeth, and weapons

but still hunted food. Smaller game became scarce, and predators attacked Nomads. Within a few years, Nomads begrudgingly traded again. Nomads started disappearing from bear and wolf attacks, and those who survived became wild and hard like the animals they now routinely fought off. The Nomads finally decided to act, but they had waited too long.

None of the Nomads' bone and claw weapons could damage a large gate made of logs. If they even attempted to break through, the guards along the tower could kill them before the wall was damaged. Several Nomad communities gathered at the wooden gate separating the Crossroads and the Creeping Ice. Nomads threw bottles of heating oil onto the wooden gates as stone arrows rained down from the guards. After hundreds of bottles had smashed against the gate and dozens of men and women lay dying or dead a single person took a torch and charged the gate. One arrow punctured her left arm and with little more than a stagger, she continued toward the gate. A second arrow grazed her thigh and ripped her fur pants. After a few near misses, the woman finally reached the gate and threw the torch. Her reward was two arrows to the chest. She fell into a puddle of oil and was consumed by the spreading flames.

The remaining Nomads gathered just out of arrow range and waited for the gate to collapse. There was no change in the gate for several minutes until popping came through the roaring flames. A loud crack snapped the cold air, and the gate collapsed within the smoke. The Nomads charged forward, but Crossroad guards' arrows cut through the smoke. Members of the charging

hoard hit the ground one by one, but most people were going to make it through. The people in front halted just short of the fallen logs. They stood gaping at a large stone wall. Unsure how such a thing even existed, the Nomads turned and fled, broken and disheartened. That large stone wall became known as the Burnt Gate.

This failed revolution forced the summer of starvation. Almost 20% of all Nomads fell outside the gate to the Crossroads. The greatest hunters led the first charge and so most of the dead were the men and women responsible for trapping, killing, and hauling the animals essential for survival. The remaining communities fractured as families with members strong enough to hunt broke away. Communities that used all of their oil on the assault froze to death within a month. Those lucky enough to still have oil starved to death.

Individual families had a chance, but since hunting parties now consisted of such few people, the hunters found themselves victims to larger predators. If the hunters in a family died, then it was only a matter of time until their families shared the same fate. More than half of all Nomads were dead within three months. Eighty percent were dead within five years. The remaining families came together, and finally, fortunes started reversing. Within another ten years there were two communities and only one person for every four there was before the summer of starvation started.

Some texts call the burning of the gate the sun rising in the

summer of starvation. If that's the case, then Tord's riders were the moon rising on the last day of summer. 15 years after the initial revolt, Tord sent emissaries to the leaders of the new communities. The riders came with an ultimatum, either the communities could swear loyalty to Tord and submit to rule by an appointed lord and start to receive fair compensation for any goods or be completely cut off and watch their communities die off again.

Tord erected a trade lift on the stone wall. At first, no one brought anything to trade, but as friends and family starved to death, people became desperate. Survivors exchanged all the possessions of a deceased family for only a few days worth of food. Tord shrewdly amassed massive wealth while watching his enemy die off anyway. Tord managed to plunder the Creeping Ice without ever leaving the Crossroads.

When humans must choose between survival or pride, eventually pride fades. The community leaders swore allegiance to Tord and with that agreement the Nomads were saved. Within 50 years of sealing off the Crossroads, Tord finally ruled the world. The Clay Workers were so dependent on trade that within a decade of the Clay Gate's construction, they were begging to be ruled by Tord. The Clay Workers suffered at Tord's hand too, and nearly half died from starvation or were murdered for what little food they may have possessed. The Foresters were reluctant to having a ruler, even though Tord had given generous trading terms for decades. Tord used the pillage from the summer of starvation to bribe southern leaders to convince Foresters that

their prosperity was due to him. The Foresters submitted to rule shortly after the summer of starvation ended.

Tord's Empire built a port on the eastern shore of the Lush Forest with ships capable of traveling around the mountains separating the Creeping Ice. Tord's main objective for the port was to reduce the number of Nomads near the Crossroads and reduce the chance of another rebellion. Tord was able to take advantage of one misstep by his enemies and became the first ruler of the world after fighting only one battle and having no casualties. Tord's Empire remained for another 450 years, and so did the animosity of the Clay Workers and the Nomads.

The second person to change the history of the world was Snorg the Conqueror. 500 years ago he and his followers appeared in the eastern port and attacked the city guard in order to secure the sea route for himself. Survivors described The Conqueror as a demon shroud in an evil black aura that repelled all arrows and spears. He moved twice the speed of a normal man and used fire to cleave his victims in two. His eyes glowed red, and a fiery crown adorned his brow. Some texts say that The Conqueror received his power from eating special berries. Of course, we now know the 'evil black aura' was simply armor, the 'fire' he used was a sword and the 'fiery crown' was red steel on his helm. This was the first time that anyone had ever seen metal, so the confusion is understandable. Originally The Conqueror was called The Demon King, and he was the first person ever to receive a name based on their armor. This tradition started with The Demon King because his identity was unknown, but his

exploits quickly spread and people needed to call him something. They settled on The Demon King because anyone would know the ghastly sight of a demon. The royal family still uses black steel lined with red steel and are named with demon."

Famous warriors and nobles were given titles based on some characteristic of the armor they wore. These titles had no official importance but instead originated organically as people used a set of armor's defining characteristics to identify important people. Warriors took pride in the notoriety implied by needing a name. Nobles were shamed if commoners knew so little about them as not to recognize them on sight.

“Shortly after taking the eastern port, Nomads flooded the Lush Forest. Texts have been unclear whether The Conqueror was a Forester who used the hatred and fighting abilities of the Nomads to his advantage or a Nomad who wanted a footing in the Lush Forest before bringing his comrades over to march to the Crossroads. Attacking the Crossroads through the Lush Forest was necessary because there were no strong defenses facing south. The Foresters lived easy lives, and there was never a risk of rebellion.

In contrast, the Nomads became strong fighters during the 500 years of oppression by Tord's Empire. Every day in the Creeping Ice is a battle against nature. Suffering through cold, exertion, starvation and killing large predators are constant trials to a Nomad. The Conqueror took only 500 Nomads, all experienced killers clad in different types of armors and marched north to the

Crossroads.

Foresters lived mainly from farming and infrequently hunted. Even when a Forester hunted, they generally killed an animal from a distance with stone arrows. The Foresters did not know how to fight at a close distance and stone arrows couldn't penetrate the Nomad's armor. The Conqueror marched from stronghold to stronghold with no interference on the road. At first, strongholds stood against the Nomads, but each time they tried, metal axes tore open wooden doors as arrows bounced off breastplates and helms. Everyone who resisted was killed in plain view of the whole keep. The Conqueror released the most frightened captives and waited weeks before departing for the next stronghold. This ensured that all the towns on the way to the Crossroads heard the tales of The Demon King and not the tales of a conquering man.

The strongholds approaching the Wooden Gate were soon either empty, or their lords immediately surrendered. After only one year from entering the port, The Conqueror marched on the Wooden Gate. Snorg stood at the entrance and demanded surrender. Only the most loyal guards remained, and they refused. The Conqueror cut a hole in the Wooden Gate, but this time the rebels only found a short and incomplete stone wall standing blocking the Crossroads. The Conqueror spared no noble family and took no prisoners; the Nomads killed all the guards and inhabitants. The Conqueror stood atop the Burned Gate and witnessed the shouts and celebration of the Nomads.

To Snorg's surprise, elders waited for him at the Clay Gate. The Clay Workers no longer supplied the Crossroads with clay or stone while The Demon King moved across the Lush Forest. Snorg now controlled the Crossroads and appointed Clay Workers and Nomads to rule the strongholds of the Lush Forest.

Nomads rebuilt the Crossroads using stone quarried with the newly discovered metals. They replaced the Wooden Gate with a large iron gate which subsequently was called the Iron Gate. The Burned Gate was altered to allow free passage between the Creeping Ice and the Crossroads. All wealth flowed from the Crossroads and the Lush Forest into the Creeping Ice. Nomad lords built stone palaces and fortresses well insulated from the harsh cold. Charcoal found deep within the mountains and wood imported from the south burned to warm large stone halls. The Nomads hunted for leisure and no longer needed large game to supply oils and hides.

Metal axes felled trees in minutes instead of days. Metal tools could break the soil and clear crops much faster than bone or stone. Even though the Nomad lords who ruled the strongholds of the south demanded reparations; the Foresters produced grain and wood so efficiently that they paid the high tariffs without needing for anything. After the Nomads had assumed lordships, metal armor became the sign of nobility. A noble's rank could be measured by the rarity and intricacy of their armor.

The Elder lived on for a century after taking decades to control the world; The Conqueror only lived for years after winning the

crown. The Conqueror was in his 40's when he became king, and within ten years he died an old codger. Snorg's children ruled after his death. Although the lords kept faith in the royal family, they took liberties with how they treated the Foresters. The lords who starved and lost loved ones to the foul treatment of Tord's Empire returned the favor to the Foresters who lived easy lives. The royal family became less involved in running the empire. Lords constantly clashed in attempts to gain more land, protect oppressed neighbors or to defend against imagined slights. Within 100 years of being formed, the empire threatened to tear itself apart until the Conqueror's great granddaughter Tash the Demon Reborn took control.

The Ivory Bull was once known as The Iron Bull and was lord of a small hold on the easternmost inhabitable region of the Lush Forest. The Ivory Bull invaded and supplanted half a dozen lords under various dubious pretenses. He controlled the whole eastern region of the Lush Forest, and to this day that region is known as the Pasture. As the empire appeared on the brink of collapse, Tash called all of the lords of strongholds to negotiate laws to govern the land. At the conference, The Ivory Bull rose and interrupted Tash as she addressed the crowd. The Ivory Bull proclaimed that he was king of the Pasture and none would oppose him since the royal family was nothing but weak cowards. Tash came off the dais, wearing the leather tunic which was the standard dress of any common Forester.

Tash challenged The Ivory Bull to single combat. Tash proposed to not only allow him to become king of the Pasture if

he won, but also offered to surrender all of the world. The Ivory Bull gladly accepted her challenge and ran straight at Tash but stopped dead in his tracks by a red sword on his neck. A woman clad in black armor with a red steel crown outlined on the brow of her helm held the sword. Dead eyes peered through a slot in the face mask. Tash had disappeared, and The Demon Reborn stood in front of The Ivory Bull. He was so shocked that he shouted for his comrades waiting outside the hall. Warriors dressed in armor of every color flew into the hall at his command. To his dismay, the warriors' lifeless bodies dropped to the ground instead of drawing their swords. The royal guard dressed all in matching red steel armor stepped out of the open doors and climbed in the open windows. The royal guard became known as the Dragon Guard because of their matching dragon fire steel. The Ivory Bull started to plead for his life, but The Demon Reborn only said in Tash's voice 'one on one' and took his head. From then on, all of the nobility heeded the laws of the first council or faced The Demon's Wrath.

The grievances between the Nomads and Foresters eased from generation to generation. The lords began to negotiate with village elders and often held trade conferences. The attending Foresters noticed that as the lords negotiated, subtle changes took place in their appearance. A cleanly shaven lord may suddenly appear to have stubble from one moment to the next. A smudge may appear on an otherwise pristine plate of armor. People referred to these small changes as shifts. The envoys and lords known to shift were called shifters. Some suspected that this

strange phenomenon was related to the power The Conqueror used to take the world, the power the Demons used to control the lords and the sudden appearance of metal. They were right of course, but it took several decades before the truth became common knowledge.

Then around 300 years ago common Foresters began to appear possessing weapons and armor. Wild tales circulated of a mysterious land that on the surface appeared similar to this world, but was filled with treasure, weapons, and monsters. Snorg's Empire began to fear armed uprisings and tried a new tactic that surprised everybody: the truth. The empress announced that there was, in fact, a world connected to this one filled with monsters, treasure and metal weapons. Every year people are born with the ability to travel between this world and that world on a whim. Those were the people who became known as shifters, and so the other world became known as the Shift World. While a shifter is in the Shift World, time stops in this world. Any changes that happen to a shifter in the Shift World also happen to them in this world. If they die in the Shift World, their bodies disappear from this world. They can also bring objects from one world to another.

Shifters have immense power in the Shift World, like the ability to destroy enemies with magic bolts, and the ability to alter metals at will. The shifters pay the price, however, the longer a person stays in the Shift World, the quicker they age. This is the price The Conqueror paid while he was king. The war appeared to be a one-sided slaughter by a supremely outmatched opponent, but in reality, Snorg spent years of his life getting equipment and

planning his strategy. The Conqueror only lived another ten years in this world because he was living in the Shift World securing weapons and developing tactics for the Demons and his lords so they could maintain power.

Much of the world's culture has been changed around the emergence of shifters. Shifters commonly secure safe houses in the Shift World, where they store food, water, and valuables. Shifters go to those storehouses during negotiations to consider how best to proceed and to contemplate terms. After returning to this world, the shifters could control the pace of negotiations by quickly making offers and counter offers. Their negotiation partners felt the need to respond quickly and so could easily be tricked into making short-sighted or poor deals. In order to combat the growing paranoia that one party was actually a shifter, nobles and envoys would arrive at negotiations with intricate patterns shaved into the back of the head, so if their hair grew, they could not recreate the pattern themselves. Since much of the Shift World is destitute, polished seashell steel became the symbol of diplomats and traders. If a shifter went to the Shift World, sand and dust quickly tarnished polished white armor, and it became impossible to clean.

Metal is now common for everyone to own. Metal axes and picks have made building sturdy structures affordable for everyone. We have holidays to celebrate some of the most influential shifters through history, like The Demon King and The Demon Reborn. There are now tournaments held every ten years to find the strongest fighters. These tournaments were originally

used to determine lords and then they were used to find shifters who were strong warriors capable of leading armies.

The Shift World still has mysteries, for example, recently we found clothing made from a soft fabric. Since then fabric clothing became a symbol of wealth amongst commoners. Although the fashion hasn't caught on for everyday wear, most people wear some form of cloth during special events and holidays. This clothing is too delicate to replace the brown leather worn day in and day out by Foresters.

We are not sure why one person becomes a shifter over another. People with family that are shifters are more likely to become a shifter themselves, but it's not a guarantee like hair color or eye color. During the dawn of the new age 300 years ago, one in 2,000 people were shifters, but today that number is closer to one in 10,000. Just like we don't know why people become shifters, we don't know why people are losing that ability.

In fact, there are only two known shifters in this region, Korg the Whitecoat and his protege Karp."

Chapter 1

Karp stumbled back and thrust her staff into the ground in a last ditch effort to stop from falling. The ringing in her ears nauseated her til she dizzied. The last exercise for the day's training was basic armored combat with her master Korg the Whitecoat. Before training for the first time, Karp insisted on learning to fight with full plate armor, but The Whitecoat insisted she learn to fight in chainmail. Combat in plate armor was usually a battle of attrition, the loser tires first and Karp was too physically weak to outlast most opponents. Karp was intelligent and had a keen natural desire to understand her opponents and exploit their weaknesses. In light armor, she could outmaneuver her opponents, surprise them or retreat and make the best use of her cunning. It was the right decision, but every time Korg connected with his staff, Karp felt a shockwave travel through her chainmail hauberk, thick leather under armor and deep into her muscles and bones. It was a painful reminder of every little failure.

The Whitecoat shuffled his feet while he waited for Karp to make her next move. Karp could only lean on her staff analyzing all of Korg's movements.

his right foot leaves the ground, and his left hand raises slightly and returns. then his left foot and right hand. if i attack his left side as his right foot lowers, that moment of hesitation as he switches from lowering his hand might be enough.

As Korg's right foot started to lower, Karp shot out the end of her staff toward Korg's left shoulder. In one flawless motion, the right side of Korg's staff rose up, swung around, and knocked away the incoming blow. The left side of the staff dropped down, shot up, and struck Karp in the chest, knocking her into the air and onto the ground. If Karp's skill showed that she has been learning to fight for three years, then Korg's skill reflected 100 years of training.

Karp rolled onto her stomach, coughing from the dust that lined the training field. Karp attempted to take The Whitecoat unaware by raising her staff for a downward strike as she rose from the ground. The staff came down with enough force for the end to lodge in the ground. Karp hadn't even seen Korg move, but his staff connected with the back of her leg and she dropped to one knee.

“Oh, what's wrong? You're not getting tired are you?”

Karp loosened her grip on the staff and concentrated on the world. The sky shook, and the ground circled around her. Cracks formed throughout her field of vision, and the cracks filled with the view of a room. Cabinets and a roof appeared through the voids; the swirling ground tore to reveal a dirt floor. The sky, forest, and field shrunk into little cracks that disappeared altogether. Karp knelt in a room with clay jars lining the walls and wooden cabinets anchored above them. Karp started her ritual for when she didn't want to be discovered shifting.

right knee on ground. left heel even with knee. back straight.

head looking at end of staff on ground. left hand on 4th notch from end. right hand in center. right arm fully extended. elbow over knee.

Karp repeated these thoughts while committing the feeling in her limbs to muscle memory. After a few minutes, Karp finally felt comfortable enough in her memory to stand. She leaned the staff on a small square table in the middle of the room and started toward a cabinet on the far wall. Every step was agony, lifting her feet took all her concentration, and each step crashed to the ground. Karp placed a hand on the side of the cabinets to steady herself and used her other hand to swing open one of the doors. She was too tired to accurately move her body around the opening door and accidentally clipped her chest. She reached into the cabinet and pulled out a piece of paper and charcoal. Karp took them back to the little desk in the center of the room and drew an outline of a person. Karp looked down at her legs and then drew a dark circle on the right knee. She looked down and drew a few lines on the right side of the drawing's chest. Karp cataloged the dirt, stains, and smudges from the front of her armor. She removed her chainmail, placed the pieces front down on the table and cataloged the back. When she was satisfied that everything was recorded, she opened one of the clay jars that lined the wall and removed a piece of bread, fruit, and salted meat.

korg was right; i was getting tired.

Karp took a bite of salted meat as she walked toward a door. She moved more quickly without the weight of her steel

chainmail. Karp grabbed the main door leading outside and shook the handle. The door was tightly secured. She walked over to a small bedroom connected to the main room and removed her leather gear. Karp finished her meal before laying on the bed and sleeping for the night.

- - -

Karp stood in the sand under a blazing desert sun wearing her full practice gear. She circled and imagined Korg matching her step for step, poised to counter any attack. Karp lifted her staff for an overhead strike and pictured The Whitecoat dodging toward her lead foot, and so she feinted the strike, pivoted, and brought the staff down to protect the back of her leg. Karp spent two weeks training in this manner. She was running low on patience and rared to return and finish the match with Korg for real. Karp went back into her storehouse closed the door and sealed it shut again. She carefully dusted the sand off her chainmail and picked up the drawing laying on the table.

One of the clay jars on the large table contained dirt and Karp used the dirt to recreate the pattern on her armor from two weeks ago. She clumped dirt on her knee and lightly smeared dust on her chest. Her armor and weapon were perfect, so, she headed to an open area in her storehouse. She meticulously recreated her pose, not only remembering the positions but remembering the feel of

her position. When she felt everything was right, the world cracked and swirled around her, and she shifted back to the training ground.

Karp rose and adjusted the staff in her hands for an overhead strike. Karp turned to face Korg but was surprised by his livid expression.

“I told you not to go back there!”

Korg struck Karp in the stomach much harder than he expected and she popped off the end of his staff. Korg felt one of her ribs break. He dropped his staff, rushed over to Karp, and fell to his knees to check if she was alright. Karp swung her staff as hard as she could muster despite laying injured on the ground. She cracked The Whitecoat across his helm, and he reeled and ended up laying a few feet away. He groaned in pain but also laughed a little. They laid quietly for a few minutes thinking about their injuries.

“how did you know?”

"I didn't know for sure at first, but you went from barely being able to stand to rising with purpose and determination. When you turned around, and I saw that smudge on your chest, I knew. There was no smudge when I was facing you, and you didn't hit your chest when I buckled your knee."

the cabinet door. i was too tired to account for it.

“You promised me that you wouldn't go back without my

permission.”

“i need to go back to make a purchase at the store.”

“Fine. But if you disobey me again, you'll be out on the street!”

- - -

Karp approached the Traitor's Tavern wearing a light everyday leather outfit of a Forester. Her steps were brisk while free from the heavy training leathers and chainmail. This far south in the Lush Forest, pants were made of a soft brown leather that hung loosely off the skin and ended just below the knees. Leather tops had no sleeves and were open to the collar bone. Even during the winter, Karp and others only needed long sleeves and full pants. Far east near the royal port and far north near the Crossroads, leather outfits covered the entire body during the summer, and multiple layers of fur were worn in the winter.

She quickly reached the heavy wooden doors of a famous inn known for its rich history. The Traitor's Tavern Inn was originally the keep of a lesser lord who died 400 years ago at the failed rebellion during the First Council. When The Demon Reborn named a new lord for the area, he moved the region's capital south toward the ocean and built a new stronghold made of stone. The new lord kept the original building to be used as a way station

along the first leg of the trade route that led to the Crossroads. Traders in the region supplied the Crossroads with lumber, salted meat, seafood, leather, and recently cloth. The village slowly changed from a community dependent on serving the lordship to a village based on free trade with travelers and tradesman.

The Traitor's Tavern Inn was the first large-scale wooden building in the region. The inn was built soon after The Conqueror claimed his empire. Sturdy logs driven deep into the ground formed the foundation, and wooden beams framed the interior. Thin wooden planks dyed gray were layered over the exterior to protect from wind and rain. The roof was covered in curved light red clay tiles imported from the Clay Workers of the Arid Desert. Karp winced as she pushed open the door and walked into the main hall. She carefully crossed the floor of loose wooden beams sitting on the ground below. Karp sat at a small table near the stairs to the second floor, and a serving girl brought her a mug almost as soon as she sat.

“one good thing about living in an inn, always close to beer. i'm going to eat later.”

Karp always spoke with an even inflection, and often, people who didn't know her had trouble reading her intentions. Karp tried a little smile, but the serving girl left with a queer glance. Sitting in the tavern in pain made Karp think about her time in the town and her life before coming to the village. Karp never had an easy life. Her parents died when she was young and left no inheritance or land. A farmer let her live on his farm and in exchange Karp

worked as a farm hand. She broke up soil in the fields, hauled hay bales, picked vegetables, and helped sell crops at market. During the winter she chopped wood or cleaned the house; she managed anything she had to do to earn her bed and bread for the day. The work was tedious and unfulfilling, but she was alive and dreamed of the future. Everything changed when Karp was around 14 years old. The farmer tried to convince her that he had 'easier work' than field labor. She was unsure exactly what that meant, but her instincts told her to run.

Karp journeyed town to town working fields and completing odd jobs. She survived without any issues until winter, when all field work stopped. One day with nowhere to stay and no one to help her, she couldn't go on and collapsed in the snow. On the verge of death, the world started breaking apart. She awoke in a desert. Sand replaced snow, and the sun was on her face. Since she was no longer freezing to death, enough fatigue left her body for her to rise. There were no buildings or people in sight, and so she headed toward large mountains in the distance.

After walking toward the same peak for several hours, she found a run-down house. The house was unlike anything in the Lush Forest. Instead of walls made of reeds or wood, the outer walls were made of clay bricks. The house was small, missing large sections of roof and looked completely uninhabited. The remaining portion of the roof was made of straw held down with thin wooden slabs. Karp cautiously pushed open the door and looked around. To her relief, there was no one there, and likely the house was abandoned. Unfortunately for her, there was no

food either. The only valuable Karp found was a small steel dagger. Karp picked up the dagger and continued searching until she was sure nothing else was important. Even though the cold was gone, Karp was exhausted since she hadn't eaten for days. Karp went into a bedroom that still had roofing and laid on a bed to sleep.

Karp woke in the middle of the night to scratches along the side of the wall, and she instinctively rolled onto the floor and under the bed. She grasped the steel dagger, waited, and listened. Heavy breathing came from just outside the main door, and something shuffled toward the entrance. The door didn't open in a smooth constant flow but jerked open with a few small thuds.

Karp didn't voluntarily hold her breath but she couldn't breathe while it was in the house. The creature shuffled about as if it was looking for something. After a few minutes, it stood in the small bedroom where Karp took refuge. She became aware of her every heartbeat and felt the thuds were so loud that the creature must have heard. The longer the creature loitered, the slower time moved, the quicker her heart beat, and the shallower she breathed. Karp closed her eyes, hoping she could wish away the thing standing at the end of the bed. She felt cold and opened her eyes to find herself clutching the dagger while laying face down in snow. Karp unconsciously shifted back to the Lush Forest to protect herself from the creature, just as she had shifted to the Arid Desert to protect herself from freezing.

Karp found her way to the local inn, and before the inn keeper

threw the homeless girl back into the cold, Karp negotiated a trade. Karp traded her steel dagger for a week's worth of room and board. Luck was on Karp's side because the owner's daughter was in the late stages of pregnancy and the inn was shorthanded. Karp worked at the inn through the rest of the winter but had to leave in the spring after the owner's daughter recovered from childbirth. The owner returned the steel dagger as a going away present. At the time Karp assumed the present was out of gratitude for all the hard work, but later she realized the owner's motivation was probably guilt. A sharpened steel dagger could have paid for a month's room and board and still have been a bargain. The owner tried to take advantage of someone starving and dying but found she genuinely liked Karp for her pride and work ethic. Now, she was sending a child back into the world unprotected and unaware of how to survive.

Karp left the village and headed southwest. She worked on farms and taverns to pay for food, clothing, and lodging during the frequent rainstorms that occurred during the summer months. Progress south was slow from working almost every day to sate her needs. When winter came again, she wasn't far enough south to avoid the cold and snow. Starving and freezing again, Karp decided to return to the Shift World and find supplies to trade for lodging. She hadn't been back since returning with the dagger, and so she didn't exactly know how to shift. Karp circled behind the local village's inn, unsheathed her dagger, laid on the ground, and concentrated on shifting, but nothing happened. She concentrated more and more, but still, nothing happened; she was

only getting wet from laying in the slush outside the building. In a way, she was relieved at her failure, because now she didn't have to face the creature. As she relaxed her muscles, the world swirled and cracked, and she laid under the bed again.

She was calmer this time and noticed the creature's feet were pointed away from the bed. A moment later it shuffled off. This was in stark contrast to her memory from a year ago, but she stayed under the bed clutching the dagger until well after sunrise. She hesitantly pulled herself from under the furniture and looked around the small bedroom and then the main room and other bedroom. There was no sign of the creature, and Karp felt free to breathe for the first time in hours. Any of the creature's footprints or markings in the sand outside the main door had blown away, and there were no signs a creature ever even appeared. Several more dwellings sat in the direction of the mountains and Karp headed toward a medium sized building.

The building's lower walls were clay bricks. The roof was constructed with hay and wood shingles, just like the house, but this building had several windows shut tightly with wooden covers. The door was cracked open, but otherwise undisturbed. Sand accumulated just inside the door, which made opening it a little more difficult than Karp expected, but it was a welcome sign that nothing entered or exited the building in some time. The outside of the building may have been similar to the last, but the inside was completely different. This building had only one large main room and one small room on the far end. Large clay jars and cabinets lined the main room's walls. Most of the jars had small

cabinets anchored in the walls over them. Most of the cabinets were empty except a few had old paper, charcoal, and other secretarial tools. The jars probably stored the community's food and valuables at one point, but now were empty except for a few that held sand or dirt. Karp pulled her dagger and paced around the tables, looking for a sign of anything alive. After clearing the larger room, Karp headed to the smaller room.

The room's door was heavy and fastened tightly. It wouldn't budge no matter how much she pushed. She found a key laying under a pile of sand after searching the main room for an hour. The key opened the door to the smaller room, but Karp's dreams of treasure were cut short. There was a large desk in the center of the room, a small cabinet on the left-hand wall and an urn on the right wall. Karp moved around the desk but recoiled at the sight of a person. Under closer inspection, the person was bones wearing cheap armor. Its leather pants and top cracked and broke to tatters from the dry air over the long years since this person died. Karp could still sell the iron helm and short sword, but both were dull and worn, and worth little. Karp sheathed her dagger and opened the small cabinet. The cabinet had a few iron leatherworking tools and small iron knives.

Karp picked up the small iron knives and shifted back to standing outside of the rear of the inn. Inside the tavern, Karp traded the small iron knives for a week's lodging and food and drink for the night. The next morning Karp went to the general market and traded the helm and sword for two weeks worth of fruit and meat. The village's leather worker gladly traded a new

summer outfit and enough coin to spend another two weeks at the inn for the leather working tools.

Karp returned to the market when she finished the food she purchased. Karp inspected an apple while considering how to pay. Karp had nowhere in her world to store valuables or food, and so she left everything in her storehouse in the Arid Desert. Without even thinking, Karp shifted to her storehouse to check for valuables to trade. Karp placed the apple on a table and walked over to the cabinets. There was nothing she could part with for only a few days worth of meals, and so she backed away from the cabinet and shifted back to her world.

The store owner watched her and noticed when she shifted back in another position. To Karp's surprise, the owner rushed over, grabbed her arm, and shouted for the village guard. Karp panicked, broke free, and ran away followed by the owner's shouts.

“Help! Help! Guards! Guards! She's a shifter.”

Karp turned around and saw the owner talking to two men in full armor. They stared at her, so she fled town to avoid any trouble, but didn't understand the store owner's hostility and accusations. Karp continued her journey south and learned a hard lesson.

Karp began to master shifting without drawing attention. She stopped staying at inns since the majority of the valuables she found went to lodging. Karp cleared out the small office in the

Shift World and dragged in a little bed from the first house where she stayed. Karp slept in the Shift World with the main storehouse door tightly secured, and the door to the office locked. Since Karp no longer slept in the world at night, she trained at the outskirts of town or nearby woods. Regular exercise wasn't interesting, so, Karp practiced fighting skills with her dagger. The trees she struck didn't present much of a challenge, but over time she learned the feeling of thrusts, slashes, and blocks in her skin, muscles, and bones.

Karp also practiced throwing her steel dagger and could plant it into her target, regardless of the angle she threw. On rainy nights Karp used this skill in taverns to earn enough coin for drinks and a room. Most taverns in the Lush Forest had a large wooden board along one of the walls. The board could range from a few feet wide to several yards wide, and, generally, was as tall as the ceiling. Pictures, numbers, or writing covered the wall. Opponents agreed on a condition for victory and alternated turns throwing knives at pictures until someone satisfied the condition and won. Those who were confident in their ability to throw would make the condition to hit every target of a certain type. The more confident the person, the smaller the target. Although this was the simplest type of match, two skilled opponents often stalemated for hours before a winner was finally decided.

Clever people tended to suggest a game where each participant gave a riddle and the first person who solved the riddle, won. Victory in this game was usually determined by correctly assessing your opponents' strengths and weaknesses as much as,

or more than, throwing skill. If your opponent was intelligent, but poor at throwing knives, giving a simple riddle that had a long answer was the best strategy. A convoluted riddle with a short answer was the best strategy against someone unintelligent but skilled with a knife.

As a shifter, Karp had a strong advantage against difficult riddles with short answers. While awaiting a throw, Karp could travel to the Shift World, contemplate the answer and shift back after solving the riddle. When playing for coin, Karp often acted the fool to entice her opponent into choosing a difficult riddle. There were sometimes fights or even murders over the throwing board and so Karp never played for high stakes, and never played for coin against the same person twice. She only gambled when she absolutely needed coin and only swindled someone who looked affluent.

Karp learned to shift without being noticed well enough to steal food but she felt guilty when she stole, and it became the last resort for when she had no coin, no stores, and nothing valuable to trade.

During the day in the Shift World, Karp cleaned the storehouse and searched nearby buildings for valuables. The valuables paid for her food supplies, and she found enough to stockpile things she didn't need to sell. The majority of her stockpile was small iron weapons like knives, short swords, or morning stars. Karp also had small tools that she didn't recognize but held onto in case they were valuable.

Karp spent no more than a few days in any village. She left the villages either willingly in order to avoid suspicion about her strange behavior at night or was forced to flee after making a mistake while stealing or cheating at the throwing board. Three years ago Karp arrived at the Village of the Traitor's Tavern.

For the first time in her life, Karp saw garments made of cloth at the general store. She was fascinated by a blue top embroidered with small white flowers that started over the right breast and flowed around the shoulder. The fabric was smooth and looped around her fingers. The material bunched and parted as she stroked the shirt. Karp returned the merchandise to the shelf, took a step back from the display, and shifted to her storehouse.

Karp didn't know the exact value of cloth, but people saved coin for years to purchase just one set. There was nothing in the cabinets or pots Karp was willing to trade for something as expensive as the fancy outfit. Her steel dagger was the only item she owned that she could trade directly for a set of clothing. All of her small iron weapons may have been worth trading for the blouse, but Karp didn't want to trade a weapon unless she owned more than one of that type. Karp never stole anything she didn't need, and so her only option was to check the last few unsearched buildings near her storehouse.

Mountains loomed in the distance; peaks lost in clouds. Karp approached the building in the settlement closest to the mountain chain. The building was a medium sized clay brick house with a fully intact roof. All the house's shutters were closed, but the door

was cracked open. Karp gently pushed the door and stepped into the dark house. Light poured into the room, revealing several large clay jars and a small wooden table in the corner. Karp walked over to a room on the left side of the main room, and the door gently glided open. Someone inside wore old dried and cracked leather. They slowly rose and turned toward the door in a stiff jerking motion. Karp moved back to allow light to enter the bedroom, but the instant sunlight hit the stranger she shrieked, leaped at Karp, and tackled her to the ground. The stranger wailed and cried while slashing at Karp with her left hand.

The stranger had two legs, two arms, a head, a face, and looked human in the dark, but its skin was a scaly light gray in the sunlight. Its eyes held no soul, compassion, or understanding; only hatred and anger. It was stronger than any human, and its claws were sharp enough to cut through leather and tear skin. Karp covered her face and took each blow with her arms, chest, and stomach.

The blows stopped long enough for Karp to move her hands and look at the creature. It raised a dagger then drove it down, knocking Karp's hands aside and driving the blade into her left shoulder. Karp screamed, and the creature wrenched the dagger from her shoulder, rendering a piece of flesh from her body. Karp threw up her right arm to block the next attack. A strange tingling in her fingers spread as her hand held weakly in the air. The feeling grew from her fingertips and traveled down through her knuckles and into her palm. The feeling departed her fingers in the same manner and grew in her palm.

The creature lunged with the dagger for the base of Karp's neck. A shockwave emanated from Karp's palm and tore the creature's arm from its body. The wave continued upward and blew a hole in the ceiling. Light poured down directly on the creature, and it screamed and clutched its face with its remaining hand. The creature's spine straightened, it wailed and moved away from Karp. During its momentary confusion, Karp reached across her body and unsheathed her steel dagger. The creature went to continue its assault when Karp reached up and plunged the dagger into its eye. The creature fell limp on Karp, and she pushed it off with the last of her strength.

Karp felt the dirt floor on her back change to the shop's hard wooden floor. A woman shrieked at the sight of a person laying covered in blood. People rushed toward Karp, and she felt the ground pull away.

Karp woke in an unfamiliar room with bandages covering her upper body. A preteen boy sat in the room staring out the window. He explained what happened: Karp stood looking at a shirt one moment and then was laying in a pool of blood the next. The store's manager Slart used medical supplies from the store to stop the bleeding and cover the wounds. Slart and a few customers carried Karp to the Traitor's Tavern Inn and brought her to an empty room. Karp was unconscious for five days before waking. The owner of the store Korg the Whitecoat, Slart, and Slart's adopted son Nort took turns watching over Karp as she lay unconscious.

Later that evening they all gathered in the Traitor's Tavern Inn to hear what befell Karp. The Whitecoat was impressed by Karp's natural ability. Usually, a person shifted for the first time in their early teens. The shifter was then brought to a local lord or a known shifter and became an apprentice. While an apprentice they learned the basics of shifting, the limitations of shifting, and learned about the Shift World. Karp lived in such solitude her whole life that she didn't even know she should seek out a master but was still an expert at traveling between the two worlds undetected and even survived an attack from a skeleton. The Whitecoat offered to train Karp and make her his first apprentice.

In exchange for her room in the Traitor's Tavern Inn, Karp spent her days working at The Whitecoat's trading compound outside of the village. The Whitecoat started training by educating Karp on the Shift World and by training her to fight with weapons. She didn't shift for a full year after barely surviving the skeleton attack but returned for the first time two years ago. She's trained and gathered supplies in the Shift World ever since.

Karp finished the last of her beer and stirred from thoughts of her past. She stared at the steel dagger she was digging into the table. The dagger was proof that she survived and that she overcame. She sighed and stood but banged her hip on the table, and when it stopped shaking, she counted four empty mugs.

i guess trading this in is harder than i thought. i shouldn't put this off any longer.

Karp sheathed her steel dagger and headed toward the door to

find out if the item she wanted was at the market.

Karp entered the general store through the side entrance in the alley between the Traitor's Tavern Inn. There were almost always customers inside since it was the only store that sold non-leather clothing located outside of the Crossroads or a major provincial capital. Cloth was too fragile for everyday use but was popular during festivals and holidays and so most people needed to buy at least one set.

It was common knowledge that 20 years ago The Whitecoat invented a way of creating cloth in the Shift World and since then clothing became a sign of wealth for the peasant class. The Whitecoat hadn't taught Karp how to make cloth because training between master and protege in the Shift World was implausible. Shift World was a destitute plane of existence full of monster-infested ruins. Karp's storehouse was somewhere in the southern part of the Arid Desert, and The Whitecoat was in the Lush Forest. The Crossroads in Shift World teemed with monsters and passing between regions was incredibly dangerous. Time, however, made a master and protege meeting impossible.

Although Karp and Korg existed at the same time in the world, there was no way to know how much time separated the two in Shift World since there was no culture or civilization, and

therefore no one tracked the year. If Karp were to fight her way through the Crossroads and wait in ruins south of the Iron Gate, she might have to wait ten years for Korg to appear or he may have to wait ten years for Karp to show. Shift World training was done indirectly by explaining what was possible and how it felt to accomplish something while still in the world. One day The Whitecoat might confide his secrets to her, but there was no guarantee she would ever be able to make cloth.

Karp walked up to the counter and addressed Slart.

“is it here yet?”

“Ummm- yeah it's -uh in the back.”

Slart had a tendency to end every sentence with a rising intonation. That made people who didn't know her well think that she was unsure of herself or easily confused. Slart and Karp became close friends in the three years since Slart saved her life and so Karp knew better. She might sound unsure and even a little ditsy, but she was actually confident and intelligent. Karp liked Slart's carefree attitude and appearance because talking to her felt relaxing, almost like the danger of Shift World was some distant person's fear and no threat to her. Despite feeling Slart was a kindred spirit, Karp and she had lived differently.

Slart's life was mundane compared to Karp's. She's lived in the Village of the Traitor's Tavern her entire life and worked in the general store for as long as she could remember. The death of Slart's parents must have been difficult because they died when

she was in her teens and even though she approached 30 years old, she still wouldn't talk about what happened. Slart dedicated herself to work and had worked her way to general manager.

Slart placed a small rectangular box on the counter, opened the top and spun it around. Karp eagerly eyed the water steel dagger. The dagger had a light metallic blue blade which shone with a blue gleam when held at just the right angle. The dagger's handle was a glossy rich blue. The dagger's blade was the natural color of water steel, and the handle was coated with enamel to give it an ornate look. Armor was treated with a similar coating and the distinctive look and coloring of armor were actually named based on the color of the enamel and not the steel itself. By law blue enamel was only used on water steel, black enamel was only used on demon steel, and one color enamel was only to be used on one type of steel. Sometimes counterfeit armor was found where a weak, but common metal such as iron or regular steel was coated in the enamel of a stronger, more expensive metal. Veteran tradesman like Slart knew how to recognize counterfeits, but many lords only knew after their armor was pierced.

“how is nort?”

Slart had a history of taking in damaged people that started before saving Karp. Eight years ago Slart found a starving, crying child wearing his father's armor wandering the road alone. Slart took him in, but no one ever came looking. Nort was so upset that he didn't speak for almost six months. Slart raised him like her own son ever since.

"Well, uh, you know, he's as spacey as ever. Just daydreams about being a shifter and uh well if he doesn't shift soon, he's probably not actually one. It'll break his little heart!"

"the whitecoat still train him?"

"Uh, yeah, it's not helping though. It'll just hurt him more."

"he there now?"

"Nope, just cleaning the shelves in the other room."

Slart pointed to the stone door at the end of the counter. The vault in the general store was the only room in the whole village made entirely of stone and was originally a secure storehouse in the old lord's stronghold. The whole general store was built around the stone shed to safeguard valuables.

Karp stepped back from the counter and shifted to her storehouse in the Arid Desert. Karp turned to face the largest cabinet which housed her accumulated wealth. She jumped back when she noticed a man bringing his arms back down as if he were just reaching up toward the top of the cabinet. Karp was momentarily distracted by his clothing since his pants and top were both noticeably too small. He sensed her presence and stepped back and faced her.

"Have you seen my book?"

Karp shifted back to the store where Slart gave her a strange look.

"i'll get it tomorrow."

Karp didn't wait for a reply, but just turned around and left.

Chapter 2

Nort and Slart shared a small apartment on the second floor of the general store as part of an agreement to work for Korg. The entire apartment consisted of two bedrooms connected by a small hallway, and there were no other living spaces. Since there wasn't even a kitchen, Nort and Slart ate most meals at the Traitor's Tavern Inn. In exchange for the rooms, Slart opened the store at night for emergencies, such as a traveler in need of medical supplies or traveling government officials who couldn't wait for the store to open in the morning.

Nort stood in the middle of his bedroom attending to his daily ritual of trying to shift. He closed his eyes and focused on breathing. He slowly breathed in, then carefully released the breath. He imagined a field of snow drifting in a harsh wind and then pictured a flash of light as the sun crept from behind a cloud, but he couldn't feel cold on his skin. He gave an exacerbated sigh as he released his last breath and opened his eyes. He still stood in the same boring room, getting ready to go to the same inane school he attended for almost ten years.

Nort continued his breathing exercises, closed his eyes, and imagined a desert. He pictured a sea of sand with blistering heat, and the sun beat down on his face, but this time he felt its warmth. Nort's heart raced, his fingers tingled, and a shiver ran from the back of his neck down to his lower back. Nort was sure he really shifted this time and was blinded by sunlight when he opened his

eyes. His eyes adjusted, and the familiar features of his bedroom drained away all excitement. The sun had risen even with a small window in his room, and the heat he felt was from morning rays.

Disappointed at another failed attempt, Nort slunk off to the top of the stairs and sat down to put on his leather shoes. He picked one up, crossed his leg over his knee, and paused before slipping on the shoe. A thin layer of sand covered the bottom of Nort's foot. He smirked, shook his head, wiped off the sand and slipped on the footwear.

The general store was the largest store in the area and sold goods imported from all over the world. Clay pots and jars from the Arid Desert were among the most popular items because they were impossible to make in the southern region of the Lush Forest. Nort imagined his mother's voice:

“Every ugh.... pot comes with a free pound of Arid Desert!”

Nort and Slart tracked sand into the apartment for as long as he could remember, but recently Nort found sand on his feet almost every morning. He and Slart stopped wearing shoes in the apartment to try and stop the sand, but that didn't work. Nort headed down the stairs, opened the door and stepped into an alley between the general store and the Traitor's Tavern Inn that was wide enough for two horse-drawn carts to travel side by side.

Nort took a right from his front door, passed a sign that read 'Knock after hours' and exited the alley past the length of the store. Nort turned right onto Village Square Road and headed

west. 10 wagons could fit abreast on the road and sometimes did during the busy trade season when caravans traveled east to caravan staging areas or west to meet the main trade route. If this road was the main artery of town, then the heart was the center where the Traitor's Tavern Inn and general store stood on the north side, and the village hall sat on the south side.

The village hall was a single room building where village leaders conducted meetings on the governance of the Village of the Traitor's Tavern. A large ceremonial field expanded from the rear of the hall to the woods that lined a river. During festivals or times of crisis village elders and leaders addressed crowds from a platform on the roof overlooking the ceremonial field. Most local festivals were arranged around the inn, the store, and the village hall on Village Square Road.

Nort continued along Village Square Road until he reached Widow's Road. Village Square Road continued west and eventually looped north to meet the main trade route. The northern gate sat at this meeting and marked the boundary to the Village of the Traitor's Tavern. The gate was made of a large wooden beam supported by two almost identical logs. The gate was blue with red stenciling that didn't form a particular pattern but was designed to invoke the image of running blood. Even though the large wooden structure stood 15 feet tall and was called a gate, it didn't serve any practical purpose.

The Elder built the Iron Gate, the Burned Gate, and the Clay Gate 1000 years ago and villages built gates facing the Crossroads

to show respect to the new empire. Over time the structures became strictly ornamental, but people still referred to them as gates. A gate's appearance reflected a village's personality, history, or specialty. Traitor's Tavern's red stenciling represented the blood spilled by the old lord during the failed rebellion. The blue background represented the watery grave of his widow, who jumped from Widow's Bridge when she learned of her husband's fate.

Nort turned left onto Widow's Road and continued south toward the school. Merchants' houses changed into small farms, and then there were woods on the sides of the road. After a few more minutes, the packed soil road changed into the wooden planks of an old bridge. The Widow's Bridge was never further than 15 feet off the ground but spanned over 50 feet. Nort stopped crossing the bridge around the middle of the 30-foot wide river that flowed beneath. He stepped up to the railing, looked into the water and reflected on the legend surrounding the Widow's Bridge and the Widow's Road.

After the First Council, rumors circulated that The Demon Reborn and her Dragon Guard killed many of the lords lead by The Ivory Bull, and planned on installing new lords after killing all the relatives of the deposed. One day the lady of the keep dressed in her finest leathers, quietly ate dinner in the main hall, thanked her servants for their faithful service and while on her nightly constitutional calmly jumped into the river.

The water's so still. Is it even moving? No one would die

from such a short fall. Could that legend even be true? If it's not, what else do they tell us that's not true? Oh no, I'm going to be late!

Nort quickly headed toward the school building located on the other side of the bridge. The school house was only one story tall and about ½ the size of the Traitor's Tavern Inn. The building was broken into five rooms, each corresponding to a class.

The largest classroom was for toddlers to 5-year-old children. The students learned basic history and some mathematics and reading, but this class was mostly babysitting for parents who needed to work their fields or businesses. The second class was for children from 5 to 10 years old. The children didn't only learn academic courses like history, reading, and mathematics, but also learned principles of farming and meteorology. Children of farmers and day laborers usually left the school after this class to work on their parent's farm or take up their parent's trade. The third class was made of children 10 to 15 years old. They learned advanced world history, methods, and theory of trading, principles of diplomacy, basic world culture, advanced mathematics, reading and literature. Children from lesser lords and merchants took these classes in order to rule over municipalities or run businesses. The fourth class was made of young adults from 15 to 20 years old. The students learned advanced trading, diplomacy, economics and advanced world culture. These classes were designed to teach children of powerful lords and traders to rule and work with people from multiple areas in the world. The final class taught adults from 20 to 30 years old.

Upon graduating, the students were sent into the world to either become private tutors for ruling class lords or to start a new school in a different area.

Nort hurried to the school building, pushed open the door and raced inside.

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Karp pushed back her chair as she rose and left a half-eaten breakfast of eggs and shredded, boiled potatoes. Karp turned to the stairs that lead to her room in the inn and hustled to the second-floor landing. The door next to hers opened, and her eccentric neighbor stepped out. Barp arrived several months ago and spoke with a strange accent, ended almost every sentence with 'ha ha' or 'ho ho' and constantly read from a tattered old journal. His name was a little unusual, normally Barp was a woman's name, and Borp was a man's name. According to Barp, he was from a small village in the Creeping Ice where names were different but Karp had never met anyone else from the Lush Forest, Arid Desert, or Creeping Ice whose name violated the rule.

Karp entered her room and refocused on the task at hand. Karp moved her furniture to give herself an area spacious enough to warm up. Karp punched the air and breathed out, held her right arm fully extended with her left arm close to her body and fist

near her chin. When Karp finished breathing in, she thrust her left arm forward, drew her right arm in and quietly breathed out. Karp continued this pattern until her arms loosened and she no longer felt resistance from her muscles. Karp lifted her knee to waist level and kicked out her leg, bringing her foot to an imaginary opponent's stomach. She brought her foot back to the floor. Karp lifted a leg straight above her head and swung back toward the ground. Karp twisted her hips as she followed through and returned her foot to the ground behind her. Karp looped her foot in front of her, and her momentum spun her to face the opposite direction. Karp planted her left foot, dropped down, and used the back of her right leg to sweep the ground behind her. Karp finished the spin facing her original direction and rose into a defensive stance. Karp practiced until she completed the sequence without feeling any strain in her legs or lower back. Karp was sweating and her breathing slightly labored by the time she was ready to face the man who invaded her storehouse.

Karp waited a minute to capture her breath and drew her steel dagger from its sheath. She slid her left leg forward, raised her hand to intercept any punches and drew the dagger toward her chin with its blade facing the floor so she could quickly thrust toward the man's neck or eyes. Karp kept most of her weight on the ball of her back foot so she could withdraw the left side of her body and counter strike with her dagger if the man attacked with a weapon. Karp was now mentally and physically ready to confront the stranger and shifted to her storehouse.

Karp's eyes darted to the cabinet where the man was standing,

and she moved her stance to intercept anyone coming from that direction. Karp stopped moving, mostly from surprise, but partly from relief. No one stood near the cabinet. Karp distributed her weight evenly between the balls of both her feet and switched the dagger from facing the floor to facing the ceiling so she could take the man if she surprised him. Karp slowly and silently moved through the storehouse searching for the stranger. Karp stopped, stood silently and listened for any clue that she was not alone.

A sound came from behind. Karp slowly rounded a work table and a child no older than ten sobbed into the sleeve of an adult's tunic. The other arm clutched onto something across his chest. A pair of brown eyes peeked out from under the sleeve, and the child bawled and cried out when he saw Karp. There was no sign of the man, and so Karp decided to get what she came for and leave.

Karp reached inside a cabinet and removed two sharpened long swords, a polished steel maul, two steel helmets and a small iron toolkit with a few steel tools. Karp grabbed everything at once and shifted back to her room in the inn.

how am i going to bring everything to the store?

Karp heard footsteps approaching from beyond her door as she stood thinking. The footsteps began near the wall, passed her door and stopped at her neighbor's room. A moment later the door opened and closed again.

he must have walked past my room without me noticing.

when? while i was warming up? why though?

Karp somehow managed to balance everything well enough to go down the hallway, down the stairs, through the side door of the Traitor's Tavern Inn, cross the alley, and make it into the general store. Karp was tired from her exercises and was losing control of the almost 80 lbs of metal she carried. Slart saw her friend coming toward the counter and decided to help.

“Go! Go! Go!”

Slart pumped her fist in the air. Karp tripped on the leg of a table she couldn't see and stumbled forward but then overcompensated by pulling all her weight back. One of the helms started falling forward off the large bundle.

“Wooooooo! Yeah!”

Karp leaned forward to stop everything from tumbling to the ground and walked faster and faster to stay under the falling goods.

“Karp! Karp! Karp! Gooooooooooooooooo...”

Karp was almost at full stride when she ran out of store and smashed into the far wall. The sudden shock of hitting something solid caused Karp to stop in her tracks, and everything fell from her hands and crashed to the ground. A helm flew loose and cracked her shin. Slart almost died laughing as she watched her friend hop around the store on one foot, face dark red and cursing up a storm. Workers charged to the front of the store with

weapons taken from displays. They gaped at Karp putting their manager in a headlock. Slart wiped away tears as she waved them off.

Karp released Slart, walked over to the bundle on the ground and picked up the weapons and armor.

“Bring the dagger!”

Karp circled her arms and stretched her sore back until Slart returned with the dagger. Slart opened the case and handed the blade to Karp.

it's amazing how light this is. it feels like it would just break in a fight.

Karp removed her steel dagger from its sheath and slipped in the new one. Karp stared at the weapon she carried all these years and felt a pang of nostalgia when she thought about how it saved her life once.

“people don't really know the value of things.”

Karp placed the dagger on the counter with everything else.

"Well.... Yeah.... A water steel dagger is worth, uh, two, no, three times what you paid.... but.... uh.. anyone that can afford water steel doesn't want a dagger. They want um some big flashy weapon like a sword or maul. This dagger could uh cut any iron or steel weapon, but it could take two years to sell, and even then it won't go for much. But um people will pay wayyyyyy too much for a sharp steel sword or steel ax. Because uh well it looks really

good in armor. In 3 months I can sell everything for a little less than the dagger."

Slart fully extended one arm with three fingers raised, closed one eye and peered through a small gap between her thumb and pointer finger with the other eye.

she's dangerous. when I made an offer to trade her for the dagger it only took a few moments to calculate out exactly what she would need to sell at the same price of the dagger and in only a fraction of the time.

Metal wasn't natural to the world but was discovered by shifters in the Shift World and brought back. There were eight types, and their value varied greatly based on rarity and strength, but generally, the rarer it was, the stronger. The most common metal was iron. Almost everyone owned at least one piece of iron. Hunters owned a few iron arrow heads, farmers owned iron picks or hoes, and city guards owned iron spear heads. Iron was also used for currency. Iron was the easiest metal to identify because it was the only dull metal. The dull gray never shone, no matter how often it was cleaned.

Steel was a lighter gray than iron and luminous. Steel was more rare than iron, but still common enough to be used in high-quality farming, mining, and wood cutting equipment. Lords preferred steel over iron, and so they owned steel pots, kettles or other daily use goods that only belonged to the privileged. Steel was also used to make coins. A steel coin could be traded for 50 iron coins of the same size.

Sunshine steel looked similar to steel but had a yellow hue when held at the right angle. Sunshine steel was considerably rarer than regular steel. A sunshine steel coin was worth 1000 iron coins of the same size. Since these coins were so valuable, they were usually only used for large scale purchases, like transactions involving land or lordships. Sometimes a lumber baron or mining baron owned axes or picks made of sunshine steel for its increased durability, but generally, sunshine steel was only used for a lord's personal armor and weapon.

Seashell steel was a little more uncommon than sunshine steel and had a white hue. Seashell steel was adopted by merchants to represent their trade and so even though rarer than sunshine steel, many commoners had seen seashell armor, but not sunshine armor. Approaching a keep in full armor was an act of war except for merchants in seashell steel armor who used the armor to announce their presence and defend themselves from thieves on the highway.

Water steel had a blue hue and was more scarce than seashell steel, but not rare compared to sunshine steel. For every three pieces of sunshine steel, there were two pieces of seashell steel and one piece of water steel. A sharpened water steel dagger was strong enough to puncture any piece of iron or steel but wasn't guaranteed to instantly break sunshine steel or seashell steel. Water steel was more durable than seashell steel which was more durable than sunshine steel. If two evenly matched opponents fought with one person in seashell steel and the other in water steel, the seashell steel would break first. Sunshine steel would

break even faster.

Dragon fire steel was rare and made more scarce by the royal guard who was often called the Dragon Guard because of their matching dragon fire steel. They owned 30 complete sets of armor as well as enough spare pieces to repair any damage where the broken slivers could not be recovered. Although dragon fire steel was legal to own, only a scattered handful of lords possessed the metal since the royal family paid handsomely for any piece. When a shifter found dragon fire armor or a dragon fire weapon, they were given enough land, stores, and coin to live comfortably for the rest of their life.

Water dragon steel had a purple hue and was so incredibly rare that there was no known complete set of water dragon armor in the whole world. High ranking lords sometimes owned a single piece which became an heirloom of their lineage. That heirloom was so expensive that a trade of equal value was impossible and so it only changed hands through war, theft, or murder.

Demon's steel had a black hue and was the rarest and strongest of all metals. There was only one complete set and two incomplete sets of demon steel armor. Demon's steel had been a sign of the royal family since the days of Snorg the Conqueror. In order to secure all pieces for themselves, The Demon Reborn declared wearing or owning demon's steel a capital offense. The royal family would not pay for demon's steel but spared the life and family of anyone who voluntarily relinquished the metal to the court. Tales said that no other steel could penetrate the

legendary metal.

Karp finished talking to Slart and headed to the side door so she could go to her room at the inn before departing for The Whitecoat's compound. She couldn't wait to try out the half-pound water steel dagger to see why it's worth more than 80 lb of regular steel.

maybe after finishing with korg i'll come back to the tavern and play a game at the throwing board with slart.

- - -

Karp exited the main entrance of the Traitor's Tavern Inn and headed east on Town Square Road toward The Whitecoat's compound. A waypoint for caravans sat past small businesses and merchant's houses on Town Square Road. There were six staging areas fitted with guard stations on each side of the large fields dotted with wood barbecue pits and latrines. Food stalls lined each side of the road erected between the entrances of the staging areas. The food stalls opened based on which staging area was occupied. The village council assigned incoming caravans to a stall. The council was obligated to evenly distribute the caravans, so food stall merchants had equal opportunity to sell their wares, but new allegations of favoritism and misconduct arose each year.

Karp passed the last caravan stall and crossed a small woods

that marked the edge of town, and The Whitecoat's compound was roughly 2 miles farther up the road. Past the little woods, the side of the road changed to open fields. Karp heard a sound similar to a baby crying, but instead of a continuous whine, this cry sounded like a chorus of smaller whines. Karp checked the side of the road and found baby fly traps.

Baby fly traps were carnivorous flowers that ate small insects and were especially fond of crickets. The fly traps' bulbs looked like large green coin purses while closed. When they felt vibrations, the bulbs opened and emanated a sweet smelling gas between ridges of the partially opened bulb causing the slight whining which sounded a little like a baby crying. A sweet liquid inside the open bulbs paralyzed anything that entered. The poison was too weak to have any noticeable effect on a person, but any insect was paralyzed and died. Once the bulb closed, it released a digestive acid.

After Karp had examined the bulbs to her satisfaction, she continued out of the woods and into a clearing. The Whitecoat's compound sat on a hillock in the distance. The compound was walled with 15 feet tall sunken logs. The main wagon entrance was visible miles away. The gate only opened for returning wagons and supply wagons with expected deliveries and remained closed and barred all other times. A small pedestrian gate offset from the main gate remained open all day with two sentries allowing entrance. During the night that gate closed, and the only way to enter the compound was via a retractable ladder that led up to the eastern parapet.

The compound's most prominent feature was the warehouse in the northeast corner which stored all of The Whitecoat's merchandise before distribution to his regional stores located throughout the Lush Forest. Stables in the southeast corner supplied horses to pull wagons which lined the southern wall. Employees worked 12 hours a day for three days and then had three days free. The majority of The Whitecoat's workers lived with their families in the Village of the Traitor's Tavern while not working and stayed in a 60 person barracks in the compound's southwest corner during work days. 50 beds filled two large halls which were divided into night shift and day shift.

Ten employees didn't have anywhere to live in the village and were given permanent room and board in private chambers. In exchange for staying in the barracks, on at least two of their off nights they acted as emergency security. The chow hall was directly next to the barracks and also acted as a recreation center for off-duty workers. The common area was designed to resemble the Traitor's Tavern Inn, but alcohol was not served in order to maintain discipline.

The crowning jewel of the manor was the Pavilion of the Three Rings. The first ring was The Whitecoat's mansion, which was a series of small buildings that formed a square and were connected by thin, long verandas. The main building which had the living quarters, guest rooms and private kitchen sat in the southeast corner of the square, just west of the front of the warehouse. The two living quarters were roughly $\frac{1}{2}$ the size of the Traitor's Tavern Inn, but only one story tall. There was a large

single room caddy corner from the living quarters. The Whitecoat trained and exercised there during inclement weather. Three room-sized buildings used for private meetings and entertaining were located in the northeast corner, southwest corner, and western edge of the square.

The second ring was made of starry night bushes. In direct sunlight, the bushes had green spade-shaped leaves and closed black flowers, but at night the flowers opened, and the stamen glowed red. During the day, the bushes weren't anything special, but every night revelers at the central pavilion became enshrouded in stars. White stars dotted the sky, and little red stars encircled from the bushes.

The third ring was made from special sand imported from the Arid Desert. This sand was used by shifters to create the glossy enamel coating that covered their weapons and armors. The sand was infused with crystalline structures that refracted light and changed color based on the angle of the sun. Raking the sand in different directions changed its apparent color. Patterns drawn into the sand changed colors throughout the day. There were two paths to the pavilion. The first extended from the small building along the western edge of the square and the second was located in the center of the eastern veranda. At the edge of the bushes, the regular walking path changed to a series of large cut path stones laying in the sand.

The pavilion itself was unremarkable, except that it was made from one large carved stone. Four pillars carved into the corners

supported the roof. A long rectangular table with matching benches was carved into the middle. Karp found The Whitecoat sitting on a bench drinking tea.

Korg took a second cup from a tray, poured tea inside and placed it on the opposite side of the table. Karp sat in front of the teacup, tested the temperature before she grasped it with both hands and sipped. Karp took her time explaining the strange man she saw while shifting in the general store, his book and the child she saw when she shifted in her bedroom. The Whitecoat sat, sipped his tea and thought carefully before he spoke.

“Did you look at the book the child had?”

“no. i didn't know if the man was around. since i didn't know what i was dealing with, i just got what i needed and left.”

“What do you mean?”

“well, time in shift world should stop while i'm not there. when i come back everything should be exactly the same as when i left, but this person suddenly appeared and disappeared. it shouldn't be possible, but it happened and if that person has that kind of power, i shouldn't tangle with them without learning more.”

The Whitecoat sat sipping tea while contemplating his response. Karp found his hesitation a little out of character since he usually had an answer right away.

“Well... there is still a lot we don't understand about shifting. We don't even really understand why it works in the first place.

It's likely that whatever caused a person to appear and disappear is some anomaly of a fundamental principle of shifting. It's also possible that the child you saw was just the person from before they lost their book. If I was you, I'd try not to nit-pick the fine details of shifting; you will probably just spend the whole time losing the forest for the trees."

Karp wasn't satisfied with Korg's cryptic answer but knew better than to argue with him when he's like that. Korg turned his head and seemed to stare into space.

"Did you understand what I said?"

Karp couldn't tell who he was addressing until his gaze lingered for a few more seconds and she saw a guard coming up the path.

"Yes, sir! You said not to be disturbed when meeting with Karp unless there is an emergency and...."

Korg didn't need to hear the rest to understand, he rose and headed for the building where the guard originally emerged.

Chapter 3

A panting man ran through the woods peering into the dark behind him. He occasionally glanced forward to avoid hitting a tree. He knew the woods around the village where he grew up, and that knowledge kept him ahead of his tracker. He arrived at a break in the trees just as a brush rustled in the distance behind him. Two steps later the bushes to his right moved. The man stopped running and looked forward. A shadowy figure stood at the end of the clearing.

“Wait!”

The man knew he had no choice except to fight and only hoped he was far enough from the village to prevent any more damage. The man was unsure of his opponent's powers and fighting prowess. He had never before fought at such a disadvantage. His only advantage was that he knew his opponent's objective. If he beat the figure without using his best gear, he'd probably survive. If he needed his best armor, the figure would kill him at the first opportunity. Out of breath and out of road, the man shifted into a set of steel full plate armor with a steel longsword in his right hand.

The man hadn't fought or practiced in steel armor for many years, and so he lumbered toward the figure. The man's steps crashed to the ground. The plate armor limited his range of motion, and the figure danced around his wide and sweeping

swings. The man lifted his arms and brought down a powerful overhead strike, but the figure side-stepped and the sword stuck in the ground. The figure drew a sunshine steel short sword and struck the man's blade near the hilt. The first strike cracked steel. The second strike splintered the sword further, the third strike further, and the fourth strike severed the blade from the hilt, and the man stumbled back. The exhausted man eyed his broken blade.

In an instant, the man wore a full set of seashell steel chainmail, with matching gauntlets, boots, and helm. He drew a seashell steel short sword and danced around the figure's blind spots. The chainmail was considerably quieter than the plate armor, but the figure still heard every move. The man's movements were quicker and more polished, but the figure continued to dodge the man's predictable strikes at the last moment. For several minutes, each time the figure countered, the man dodged to stay in a blind spot. They stalemated until the figure understood the man's movements, feigned a counter attack and spun to square off with his enemy.

Surprised by abruptly losing the initiative, the man recoiled. The figure jutted out his hand and shot forth a shock wave. The man jumped back, but the wave traveled too close to his right hand and burst his white gauntlet. The sword flew from his bloody hand and he drew the wounded appendage to his body. Shattered metal scored his palm and wrist, but the hand was otherwise unbroken. The man shifted again, this time appearing in a set of full plate water steel armor.

This blue enamel covered armor was far more intricate than the regular steel plate. White piping inlay outlined his gauntlets, couter, greaves, tassets, boots, and helm. A manta ray was pressed into the cuirass's backplate. The ray expanded past his shoulder blades to his lower back and the manta ray's tail wrapped around his side to the front breastplate's lower section. Compared to the seashell mail, the man's range of movement was constricted, but he was incomparably faster than when wearing the steel plate armor. He drew a barbed dragon fire steel sword from a scabbard on his side. The barbed tip was designed to render flesh from its victims.

The figure barely dodged the incoming blows. The second slice of the dragon fire steel sword cut the figure's sword in half. He dropped the hilt, extended his hand and released another shock wave. The man rolled away. A tree exploded in the background. The figure continued his shock wave assault. Although every shot was closer to the mark, the figure's movements became more sluggish with each attempt. The man rolled forward and right. The figure shot another bolt close enough to crack and gouge the man's left gauntlet, but the bolt was not strong enough to injure him or shatter his armor.

The man raised the dragon fire sword as he exited the roll. The figure was too tired to completely dodge the blow, and the barb cut clean through his steel chainmail and ripped the flesh underneath. The figure struggled to get away, fell backward, and sat leaning against the trunk of a nearby tree. The figure examined his bloody chest, looked at the man and then raised his hand, but

the hand only limply dropped to his side without firing a bolt. The man rushed the figure, pressed his left forearm into the figure's neck and poised his sword under the figure's ribs.

“Don't feel bad you lost this one.... after all, this fight lasted only an hour for you, it lasted YEARS for me!”

While the man gloated his victory, the figure raked his hands across the smooth gauntlet pressing on his neck. His hands fruitlessly slipped over the blue steel until one of the figure's fingers caught in a crack in the gauntlet. Skin touched skin and the man screamed, glowed from under the armor and limply fell backward. The figure gasped when the pressure eased on his neck.

After a few minutes, the figure stood and hobbled to the man who hadn't moved since he screamed and fell. The body laid face down, and the figure kicked it over. The helmet slid off the rolling body and revealed the face of a withered old man.

- - -

Karp walked through the open door of the Traitor's Tavern Inn and waved to a serving girl darting from patron to patron. Nort and Slart sat at their usual table near the rear staircase and Karp was so late that she was surprised the pair were still eating. Karp sat in the open seat, and the serving girl set down a mug of blueberry stout and a plate of cubed grilled lamb with stewed coarse chopped potatoes.

“So uh, did you get a chance to use the knife yet?”

“no.”

“Wanna try it out?”

“yes.”

Karp already finished eating. She had the habit of eating like her food might get taken away at any moment. She probably developed that habit because at one point in her life that would happen. Karp, Nort, and Slart headed to the throwing board.

“let's just make this simple. first person to hit all of the bees wins.”

Every throwing board was arranged differently, and this one was nature themed. Seven drawings of bees scattered around its 5 foot by 10-foot surface. Bees were the second smallest picture, with each one around the size of a thumb. The smallest pictures were 13 cat's eyes which were about the size of a thumbnail.

"Starting off easy, hmmm?"

"just go."

Slart removed one of 5 small knives she kept in individual pouches along her waist. She stood at the throwing line and disinterestedly flicked her wrist. The knife drifted toward the board, the blade slowly arced down, and the sharpened front edge perfectly bisected a bee. Slart strolled over to the board, removed the knife, and returned it to its pouch with a quick spin.

“now you're just showing off.”

Karp always seemed calm on the surface but struggled to control a fiercely competitive side. Slart figured that out a long time ago and enjoyed riling her up.

Karp stepped to the throwing line and removed her water steel dagger from its sheath. The dagger was roughly the same length and width as her old steel dagger, but much lighter. Karp felt the new weapon should be fragile despite constant assurances from Slart and Korg that the lighter steel was actually more durable and sharper. The dagger felt slightly unbalanced since the handle was relatively heavy compared to the blade. Karp would have to fix the enamel next time she was in the Shift World.

Karp felt satisfied she understood how to throw the dagger to achieve the proper arc and angle to hit the same bee as Slart. Karp threw the dagger, but the blade flew faster and straighter than she had anticipated. The dagger hit the board dead on three inches above the bee. The dagger stopped when the handle smashed into the board. The blade slid through the throwing board, and into the wall behind. Karp's face turned bright red, and Slart snickered. Karp tugged at the dagger, but it wouldn't budge. Soon she cursed under her breath, sweated, and had both feet on the throwing board trying to pry the dagger free. The dagger popped out of the beam behind the throwing board and Karp crashed to the ground. The entire tavern watched, and everyone broke out laughing as Karp hit the ground.

"Oh, honey, why don't you try?"

Nort walked up to the throwing line, and Slart handed him a little knife. Nort stood palming the blade, moving it around until it felt comfortable and balanced. He was aware of all the eyes on the trio and wanted to impress everyone. Nort threw the knife full force at the board. The perfect throw hit its mark with the sharpened front edge, but the knife ricocheted to a nearby table and stuck in the floorboards. The tavern filled with laughter again and Nort's face turned beet red.

“I - I - I uh have to go study for an exam tomorrow!”

Nort stormed off. Slart looked up from pulling the knife out of the floorboard.

“He must have been desperate to get away if he's really going to go study...”

Slart forced a little giggle. Just as Slart learned to read Karp's emotions despite her cool effect, Karp learned that even though Slart appeared to wear her emotions on her sleeve, she usually thought and felt something deeper. Slart didn't want to burden others with her problems, and so she tried to act lighthearted and ditsy even when something bothered her. Karp had the feeling this was one of those times.

“is everything with nort ok?”

Karp knew by Slart's expression that her instincts were right.

"Well.... um... it's this whole shifter thing. I found him the other day in the vault, well, staring at just uh boxes. I put my hand

on his shoulder and he turned and said 'it worked.'"

Slart pantomimed putting her hand on a shoulder.

"he shifted?"

"Well... no? I asked him why he thought that! He said... he just knew... he was cleaning and felt a little different.... I tried, you know to tell him he would be in a different place. A different time. It wouldn't be a feeling; there would be no question. He's been insisting more and more, but when he tries, he fails. Little failures like with the knife make him really, really upset! Ah! I don't know what to do. What if it gets worse!?"

Slart grasped Karp's left forearm with both hands and stared wide-eyed into Karp's eyes.

"should i talk to him?"

"Can you talk to Korg, maybe? I think Nort just takes that uh.... training too too seriously."

Slart gripped tighter while asking her question but then slacked when she saw Karp's reaction. Karp just thought about what happened while she was at The Whitecoat's compound.

"he's probably on his way to the village of the bog djinn by now."

"What happened there?"

Slart was grateful for the change in subject.

"while i was talking to korg earlier, a convoy returned to his

compound with news from the way point at the village. they stopped to get traffic and stores reports for the whitecoat and found the village was destroyed. most of the buildings either burned down or had fire damage. the stone vault was blown apart and all the weapons were gone. the strangest part is that all the people were missing, except for one old man they found dead and stripped naked outside the village.”

“That's a cursed place!”

Slart spoke in a low, raspy voice, but was half serious. Local legends said that a djinn lived in the swamp north of the village. The djinn was 300 years old and granted wishes to the desperate. They lived out the rest of their lives, but after death, it took everything they ever loved. The djinn supposedly built the school Nort attended, and, so, every child in the area grew up hearing the legend.

“i wonder if this has anything to do with the person i saw when i shifted.”

“Uh... how could that be?”

"well... time in the shift world is strange. sometimes you shift for a month and age one month, sometimes it's three months, sometimes six months. what if that old man was a young man caught in a time anomaly and became old and died? could that anomaly have affected the town though?"

Slart just shrugged.

“i think korg knows more about this than he lets on.”

“ohhhhh?”

Slart raised an eyebrow and puckered her lips.

“well, a few months ago he told me not to go back to the shift world. he said i wasn't ready to fight stronger monsters, but then why did he almost break my ribs when he saw i went back? he also seemed to know more about those people i saw, that he didn't tell me. something is going on...”

- - -

Karp approached the counter at the general store to pick up another order. This order was nothing as extravagant as the water steel dagger. Since Karp promised The Whitecoat she wouldn't return to Shift World; she lost access to months of supplies in her storehouse. So Karp ordered a few weeks worth of dry goods to store in her inn room for the days she didn't have time for a proper meal at the tavern. Unlike the dagger that cost nearly 100 lbs of steel, Karp could pay for this whole order with a single small steel coin.

Karp placed the coin on the counter with a snap. As abruptly as the coin rang out, she had a vision of the man in her storeroom from a few days ago standing under a collapsing wall. The man wasn't in a defensive position with his hands raised or cowering under the falling debris. He calmly stood erect, with his feet

together, arms down in front with palms facing out. His face showed no sign of distress. Karp snapped back to the general store and staggered as though she was just struck on the side of the head. She steadied herself on the counter and tried to make sense of what happened.

was he trying to commit suicide? if i didn't shift, how did i end up there?

“What's wrong?”

The visions quickened, and Karp saw the man in Shift World for longer than she saw the store. Every vision flashed in her mind. Karp felt dizzy and moved back from the counter to stop herself from hitting it if she fell.

“Karp! Karp!”

The visions came so quickly that time appeared to stop in Shift World. Karp felt her mind tearing. The strain of being pulled between worlds so quickly was too much for her to handle. The man standing under the falling wall opened his eyes even though the rocks stood suspended in midair. The man's eyes showed fear, confusion, and an intensity that scared Karp. Karp collapsed from the pain. She felt the flux of sand changing to wood and wood changing to sand. Each change battered her body. To Slart, Karp was convulsing on the floor of the general store.

“NORT! NORT!”

Slart shouted with a completely uncharacteristic desperation

and sincerity. From the ground, Karp saw a book suspended in the air near the stranger's feet. He turned toward her, and she forced her gaze up toward his face. He completely turned in her direction, lifted his arm, and took a step. The convulsions stopped. A dazed Karp looked up at the ceiling of the general store.

Nort shoved his way through the vault's stone door. Slart was on her knees, sitting back on her heels with her hands on the ground, shoulders hunched and bawling. Relieved of the mental strain from whatever just happened, Karp's energy slowly returned. Karp sat up by the time Nort reached her on the floor. Slart latched onto Karp and continued sobbing. Nort's face showed a mixture of relief and confusion over what he missed while in the vault. After a few minutes, Karp was back on her feet.

“Don't pretend like, uh, nothing just happened! Nort, you go with Karp. Take her supplies and YOU rest until I come to see you later.”

With one look into her eyes, neither Karp nor Nort were going to argue. Nort lifted a jar that was as tall as his knee and escorted Karp out the side door. As they crossed the alley, Karp saw her neighbor Barp head west onto Village Square's Road. Karp and Nort entered the Traitor's Tavern Inn, crossed the dining hall, and ascended the stairs. They reached Karp's room and entered. Nort put the contents of the jar into several smaller pots set up under Karp's bed. Karp only thought of revenge while she laid on the

floor of the general store, returned to her room, and even while she watched Nort empty the jar. As soon as she shut the door after Nort left, she drew her dagger, took a defensive stance, and shifted. She looked around the storehouse, and the man stood near a table. The intensity in his eyes softened, and now, he just looked tired.

“who are you?”

“My name is Wili.”

“why did you try to kill me?”

“What?!?!?! I'm not trying to kill you! I need your help!”

“my help? after what just happened!?”

Wili desperately pleaded his case.

"I really remember only the last few days. I was in the desert with one pervasive thought "Read the book quickly." There was some kind of journal in my hand, so I opened the cover, and three things were written:

- 1: Your name is Wili**
- 2: You are a scholar**
- 3: Find a safe place to continue reading.**

I looked around and saw a large stone spire in the distance, so I headed off toward it. The tower was connected to a large stone building with diamond shaped windows. I was walking around the outside looking for an entrance when I heard a

creaking sound. I looked up to see the tower wall collapsing. I put my hands up and next thing I know I'm in here. I didn't have my book, but you were standing there. I asked you about the book, but then I was under the falling tower again, but everything was frozen, and you were there on the ground. Then we were here, talking right now."

"why is this book so important?"

"I don't know, but I feel like it can explain whats going on. So will you help?"

i don't know who this guy is and he did almost kill me.

Karp sighed and sheathed the dagger.

"look, i believe that you didn't mean to hurt me. i also believe that you don't know what's going on. frankly i think it would be too dangerous to help you and besides, i wouldn't get anything out of it. if you can figure out how, please just leave"

Karp shifted away without waiting to hear any objections, complaints or counter offers.

Chapter 4

The sunset gave workers erecting stalls in the village square a last bit of sunlight to complete preparations for the Founder's Day Festival. Only the word 'festival' was accurate since it lasted three days, not only one day and the festival's days didn't correspond to any significant event related to the founding of The Conqueror's Empire. Originally the festival celebrated the start of the convoy season and was a small scale event attended mostly by local residents and workers from the season's first convoy. It steadily grew and was pushed back to the week before the first convoy and eventually grew large enough to draw the Crossroads' attention, who co-opted it to become another celebration of the empire.

The festival was the largest in the southern Lush Forest. Merchants, lords, and peasants wealthy enough to travel came from all over the southern and western regions. Minor lords and traders rented every room in the Traitor's Tavern Inn. Two convoy staging areas housed four warehouse-sized tents where peasants slept on the ground for a nominal fee. The other four convoy staging areas became sprawling tent cities for major lords and traders who brought throngs of servants and employees to see the festivities.

Karp and The Whitecoat supervised the final preparations from the patio of the Traitor's Tavern Inn.

“do you think a lot of people are going to come this year?”

“I don't know. A lot of people are scared.”

Tensions hung heavy over preparations this year. The strange aging sickness first discovered at the Village of the Bog Djinn spread. Famous shifters in areas surrounding the swamp had been found as dried husks laying stripped of all valuables.

“Do you still think that man is involved?”

“i don't know, but i'm sure shifting is involved, and the disease has been spreading.”

“Why does it have to be shifting though?”

“well, they were all found naked right? that means they were robbed after death. no one just walks around in their armor; something must have scared them enough to think they needed protection.”

The Whitecoat searched for a serving girl, made eye contact, and raised two fingers. The young woman scurried away, and The Whitecoat brought his attention back to Karp.

“How long has it been? Since you saw that guy.”

“about 16 months. i've only been back a few times, but haven't seen him since.”

“I think you might be right about them shifting and putting armor on before they died, but I'm also pretty sure you're wrong about this Wili guy.”

A serving girl brought another round of drinks to Karp and The Whitecoat as they 'supervised' the final preparations. The serving girl handed Korg his drink and winked. He blushed and turned toward the workers now leaving the square. Karp smirked before sipping from her mug.

“Let's go inside. And Karp.... keep your ideas to yourself, or you might scare off more people.”

Karp nodded. They entered the tavern and moved to the table Karp, Nort, and Slart usually shared. The tavern was normally full of local merchants, farmers, and workers from The Whitecoat's compound but Karp couldn't find anyone she recognized. Karp heard the familiar thud of the throwing board and glanced to see who was competing. Two men wearing unblemished tailored leather threw medium sized steel daggers at pictures of apples. Those two would have been the perfect marks from the days before Karp lived in the Village of the Traitor's Tavern. They clearly wouldn't miss a few iron coins. Chances were they had never even worked a day in their lives. The one on the right was competitive and boisterous, but also unskilled. He'd likely never accept that a clumsy, ditzy young woman could beat him.

“No Karp.”

Karp chuckled.

“i was just thinking of the good old days.”

“Good old days”? You mean the days where you were starving, running from village to village? The days that ultimately

led to you bleeding to death on the floor of my store? Those 'good old days'?"

"it had its good parts too. if i wasn't bleeding to death on your floor, then i never would have met nort or slart. ah or you either."

The Whitecoat wasn't most impressed by Karp's adaptability, fighting prowess, or intelligence. He loved the simplicity of how she lived and wanted to live. Every month Korg rejected shifters of all ages who showed up at his door requesting to become his apprentice with dreams of becoming the next merchant baron. Karp just wanted to learn and spend her time with those she loved. Korg felt a pang of guilt, knowing the world was a cruel place and one day her dream might be shattered.

"How is Nort?"

"he's good. really calmed down since the incident."

"After that happened Slart came pleading to me, asking if I could stop training Nort."

"i remember that."

"Yeah, the way Slart tells it, you almost died."

"it wasn't that bad..."

"Must have been bad enough, I think the whole thing really opened his eyes. Not just seeing you there... again, but also his mom's reaction. As strange as it sounds, I think he felt a little guilty afterward."

“guilty?”

"He's always been a.... sensitive boy, and I don't think he fully understood the emotional impact that him being a shifter would have on his mom. I think seeing her crying made him understand why she objected. He felt guilty he pushed the issue so much."

“it might be too late for him anyway. he may have another year at the most, but if he doesn't shift, he's not a shifter.”

- - -

Most of the year Town Square's Road was lightly traveled. Local merchants, farmers, and workers traversed the road to buy supplies, sell goods, conduct business at The Whitecoat's compound, or stop at the Traitor's Tavern Inn for a pint. During the convoy season, however, large horse-drawn wagons carried lumber, hides, leather, salted meats, salted fish, textiles, and a variety of marine goods into the convoy staging areas. A few times a month, a large convoy left the village and headed toward the main supply route to the Crossroads. Town Square's Road became a mudslide, workers in brown leather, guards in leather armor with iron or steel tipped pikes and spears, wooden wagons and horses poured down the street. The Founder's Day Festival was the only time in the year where the road became a field of flowers blowing in the wind. Vibrant, flowing, and alive with changing colors in a sea of green.

Green cloth with light embroidered floral patterns was the most popular style in the Lush Forest. At the festival almost every adult and children from wealthy families wore cloth. Children of peasant families wore leathers because cloth was an expensive luxury and only worn a few times a year and so peasant children customarily don't receive a cloth outfit until they turn 15.

Lesser lords wore unnamed iron or steel armor which was often too large or small because they couldn't employ a shifter to alter the armor to fit properly. Greater lords, merchants, and shifters wore named armor made of colored steel. Around 30 great lords and merchants attended the festival, which was similar to previous years. Only ten shifters in named armor attended which was $\frac{1}{4}$ of the previous year. A large part of the festivities centered around shifters demonstrating their skills and talents, and so odds were against the festival lasting three days.

The morning of the first day centered around The Whitecoat's exhibition. Korg held a staff fighting contest every year for the last decade. Any challenger who landed a clean hit was awarded a wooden staff with steel supports. Anyone who defeated him won his quadhelix staff. The staff had a seashell steel outer cover with an intertwined quadruple helix inner support. In the contest's history, Korg has only awarded a dozen wooden stave, and no one has come close to winning.

Karp stepped off the crowded front porch of the Traitor's Tavern Inn. The revelers were so dense she couldn't drink from her mug without someone knocking into her elbow. Karp

normally didn't wear armor unless training and that also made drinking awkward. Karp wore a steel hauberk and greaves over training leathers. In the Lush Forest business associates meeting for the first time customarily removed their helms and right gauntlets. The Whitecoat planned on introducing Karp to his associates, and so she decided not to wear gauntlets and wore an open-face steel helmet instead of constantly removing a closed face helm.

Once off the porch, Karp walked to a nearby cart carrying a large wooden cask and withdrew a few iron coins and handed them to one of the serving girls standing nearby. The tavern's serving girls wore white cloth embroidered with red stenciling similar to the pattern on the northern gate. The serving girl filled and returned Karp's mug. A small crowd gathered near the inn to watch a pair of fire jugglers.

The performers wore matching red tights, and red wooden masks with blue circles around the eye holes and blue horns protruded from the forehead. The masks covered the top half of their faces, and the rest of their face was painted red except their lips were painted blue. The jugglers held two torches and suspended two more in the air. One torch launched in the air just before a thrower caught another. The jugglers threw faster and faster until they created rings of fire. They slowly separated; one foot calmly crossed in front of the other until they were 5 yards apart.

The jugglers caught the airborne torches, turned toward each

other and threw two torches slightly staggered. They caught torches behind their backs, between their legs, and over their heads. The thrown implements moved so quickly that they appeared to be ringed in fire. The torches flew high and far. The jugglers did backward somersaults, and each caught a torch during the apex of their turns while their hands were in the air and feet were planted on the ground. Within four turns the tumblers stopped, faced the crowd, lifted three torches over their heads, and caught the final ones in their mouths.

The performers bowed. Spectators cheered at the perfect synchrony. Lesser lords dressed in armor threw small coin purses and peasants threw individual coins. Children wearing pointed red hats gathered the coins piled at the performers' feet and deposited them in clay jars sitting on the jugglers' small supply cart.

Karp finished the last of her drink, gave the empty mug to the serving girl and headed for the general store. Slart was in front of the store with a group of guards armed with steel-tipped spears. Four of the guards paired off, and each couple carried a large chest. Slart finished giving directions to the guards, who lifted the end of their spears, smashed the butts back into the dirt and then headed east toward The Whitecoat's compound. Slart's white tunic and pants had wide steel strips with smaller seashell steel strips down all the seams. Slart's outfit was typical of a high-ranking merchant's employee.

“Ohhhh... Looky at you all dressed up!”

“this is just what i normally wear training, except i normally

have gauntlets”

“I hear it's a big day for you!”

Slart pretended to remove a glove, straightened her back, presented her hand and spoke in a voice much lower and more gruff than normal.

“Slart of the Traitor's Tavern. Empress of the general store. Mother of Nort the hero. Bastion of all that is fair and just!”

Karp extended her hand, grasped Slart's wrist, straightened her back, looked into Slart's eyes, looked down and bowed slightly.

“karp, the whitecoat's apprentice.”

“uh.... You learned the greeting OK.... but your introduction stinks!”

“you closing up shop already?”

“nooooooo....”

Slart pouted.

“We've already sold all the steel and iron goods, and not very many people are buying cloth by now, so I ah, sent the profits to The Whitecoat's compound. We'll stay open for the rest of today, and then tomorrow we'll keep the rear open for merchants but close the front.”

Slart pouted further and sighed.

“I'll get to see the festival tomorrow, but hmmm this year

there won't be much goin' on.”

“that reminds me, the whitecoat is probably almost done with challengers.”

Slart giggled and put her hand up to her mouth.

“I stilllllll can't believe you did that last year!”

“i just exploited my enemy's weakness, and now i have a wood and steel staff in my storehouse.”

Slart put her hands on her hips and shook her head like a disapproving matron. Karp shrugged. Slart waved farewell and returned to the store. Karp turned toward the village hall and moved around the west side to the rear field. Karp stopped at a food stall that sold steamed buns. The buns were made of a light, slightly sweet sticky bread filled with either spiced meat or red bean paste. Karp removed a dozen small iron coins and handed them to the woman working the food stall. She took a spiced beef bun and a red bean paste bun and asked the worker to bring a second bean paste bun to Slart at the general store. The woman obliged and Karp headed around village hall. The buns were expensive, but Karp and Nort both loved them, and they were only available during the festival.

Hundreds of spectators surrounded the ring where The Whitecoat took on all challengers. Karp pushed her way through. People parted at someone dressed in armor pushing through the crowd. One of the guards restraining the crowd allowed Karp through, and she walked to Nort at the side of the ring. She

handed him the red bean bun and bit into the spiced beef one. Nort wore leathers this year, but next year he would wear cloth. Slart planned on giving him a white cloth outfit with thin iron strips down the seams after he graduated the third class at school. Slart planned on Nort spending the next five years working with her in the store and taking advanced trading and economics classes from the fourth class. After Nort turned 20 Slart hoped to give him a new outfit with steel strips down the seams.

Five wood and steel stave hung on iron hooks by the side of the ring. Since all five stave remained, no one landed a clean blow on Korg again this year. Korg only lost one staff in 5 years. Last year Karp won a staff by enlisting the aid of a couple of serving girls from the tavern. The girls helped Karp distract The Whitecoat just long enough for her to land a blow while he was preoccupied. He was no longer amused after picking himself off the ground, and Karp didn't get close to landing a second blow. She smirked when she noticed a new sign that read 'NO LEWD DISPLAYS.'

Karp looked over to the queue of remaining fighters. Each year dozens challenged The Whitecoat, and each year the majority were drunken oafs that only participated because of the dares of less drunken oafs. There were generally a few serious challengers, and The Whitecoat showed them the courtesy of effort. He always showed a boisterous showmanship when facing the drunks.

Korg stood in the center of the ring wearing a seashell steel cuirass, hauberk, open face helmet and chainmail leggings. For

the festival, he wore white cloth under his chainmail instead of thick leathers in order to maintain a uniform white appearance. He wore finger-tip-less gloves covered in white cloth. Seashell steel plates protected the back of his hands and upper fingers from glancing blows. His boots were leather covered in white cloth with seashell steel reinforced ankles, heels and toes. His namesake came from his long white woolen coat crisscrossed with thin strips of seashell steel that were thin enough to allow it to flow like a regular coat. The coat was mostly ornamental but could distract, blind, or disorient The Whitecoat's enemies and conceal his movements. The coat affected an enemy's aim, so they were less likely to hit a vital spot but offered little protection if they landed a blow.

A large drunken man swung wildly while stumbling toward The Whitecoat who blocked with slow sweeping motions and always dodged at the last moment. Korg raised his staff and swung a downward strike. The man stopped, and the staff missed his upper body. He looked smug for a moment until The Whitecoat's staff smashed his foot. The man dropped his staff, grabbed his foot and howled. The crowd roared with laughter as The Whitecoat played them up. The man angered and rushed The Whitecoat, but forgot he dropped his staff and slid on the piece of wood. He crashed face first into the ground. The audience laughed harder. He looked up, and The Whitecoat rested his staff on the man's forehead. He chuckled nervously and raised his hands in defeat. The crowd cheered.

Korg defeated the last two challengers with similar dramatic

flare. After the last match, Korg ran to the side of the ring and took his quadhelix staff from Nort. He returned to the center and held it up. The crowd cheered the champion one final time before dispersing. Korg walked over to Karp and Nort after the crowd turned away.

“No one even hit me again this year!”

The Whitecoat looked at Karp as though he was still sore at her for breaking his five year streak.

“There's someone I want you to meet.”

“Uh. I have to go help at the store.”

Nort ran off after sensing impending boredom.

“Traitor!”

“Come on.”

Karp and Korg crossed the field and met a man near the rear entrance of the village hall.

“You put on another great show this year. It's always the highlight of the first day!”

The man wore a complete set of sunshine steel armor under a leather riding cloak with a green cloth lining. The cloak was turned inside out, so the green cloth showed. Karp heard of him from The Whitecoat. His name was Jorn the Sunflower. He was a lesser lord from the coastline south of the Village of the Traitor's Tavern. While The Sunflower was younger, his helm was his only

piece of sunshine steel, and everything else was iron. Others mockingly referred to him as The Sunflower because of the sunflower top on a stem of iron. As he grew in prominence and bought a complete set of sunshine steel, he had the riding cloak made to remind those who dubbed him The Sunflower that he hadn't forgotten.

“I have someone for you to meet.”

The Sunflower understood The Whitecoat's meaning and removed his glove.

“I'm Jorn the Sunflower, Lord of the Bamboo Coast, Educator of Children, Bringer of Riches and Champion of the Emperor's Tournament.”

Karp straightened her back, met eyes with Jorn, lowered her eyes and bowed. Onlookers entering and exiting the village hall gawked at the little ceremony and whispered in disbelief that Korg officially accepted an apprentice.

“i'm karp, apprentice of korg the whitecoat.”

The Sunflower extended his hand, and Karp stood fully erect and grasped his wrist. A moment had passed before they released grips and Karp returned to standing normally. Jorn slid on his gauntlet and inspected Karp.

“You're the one that, uh, hit The Whitecoat last year, aren't you?”

“yes.”

“That was really clever and certainly surprised him, but watching that match, I didn't think you needed trickery.”

“then you don't know the whitecoat.”

“He is inhuman, when it comes to fighting.”

“Karp. The Sunflower and I need to discuss business in the village hall. Why don't you join Nort and Slart in the general store and I'll come find you when I'm done.”

“alright.”

Karp didn't understand the dismissal but was glad just the same that she didn't have to endure a business meeting.

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A man's hand reached out to a water steel gauntlet with white piping in the enamel and slid it on. He dawned the other gauntlet and balled his fist. Although his hands moved with ease, something felt off. He removed the gauntlets and cupped one between glowing hands. Metal from the gauntlet's palm liquefied and trickled up to redistribute around the rest of the gauntlet. More metal melted away from the fingertips. He slid on the gauntlet, and his hands flexed with an even flowing motion. He rose from the chair and walked over to the bed at the edge of the room. He grasped a nearby bedpost and smiled as he felt the post on his palm and finger tips. The man walked back to the desk and

reworked the second gauntlet in a similar manner and slid in his hand.

He picked up a helm and examined the distinctive piping. He slid his hand over the enamel, and the piping disappeared. He donned the helm, rose, and walked toward the door. He reached for a long leather riding coat hanging on a hook and paused when he heard a familiar voice.

“Oh me! What a festival he he.”

“Is this your first year?”

“Oh yes. I've always been out of town. Ha ha.”

“Did you see The Whitecoat fight?”

The figure was distracted by the mention of The Whitecoat and the familiar voice. He cracked open the door and peeked out. Right away he recognized the older man with the strange speech pattern as an associate of The Whitecoat but didn't recognize the boy. He knew something must be special about that child if the strange man took an interest in him. The figure closed the door and waited for the voices to stop. When the hallway cleared, the figure slipped out of his room, crossed the tavern and exited the side door that led to the alley adjoining the general store. The figure stepped out of the alley and looked around. Soon he heard whispers around him.

“Isn't he dead?”

“I thought he disappeared?”

“I guess the rumors were lies.”

The figure took a few more steps into the road toward the village hall. He looked around, and all eyes were on him. He stopped and turned around. The onlookers saw the manta emblem on his back, and the whispering increased. The figure hesitated but turned to face the crowd. A woman wearing a white cuirass over a white cloth outfit approached. A black and red strip rolled down the left breast of her cuirass. Four warriors in steel full plate armor guarded her flanks. All four carried long swords, and two also carried long steel polearms. Black and red on white symbolized that she was a royal envoy.

Royal envoys represented the empire in all civil and judicial matters. Envoys spoke with all the authority of the royal court and interfering with their work constituted treason. An envoy's authority was so sweeping that most people had never seen a member of the royal family since they were not needed to enact laws. The emperor acted as the head of state, and only his decree could overrule an envoy's authority. Most great lords have met the emperor to appeal a tariff or law, but his progeny were kept a secret to protect the realm from extortion by kidnapping the prince or princess.

The figure stepped toward her and extended his arm. Reflexively the woman reached out and grabbed his wrist. Their eyes had met before she realized the oddity of the whole situation.

“Hey, you're not...”

The guards lowered their polearms to separate the figure and their mistress. The envoy flashed, and a dried husk fell to the ground. The onlookers frenzied.

“She's not a shifter!?!?”

Many onlookers came to the festival believing they were immune to the shifter's sickness. When the truth was revealed, the crowds stampeded, trampling each other to escape. The guards swung their polearms at the figure, but he caught one of the polearms' shafts during the heavy steel's slow downswing. With a flash of light from his hands, the polearm's head snapped from its base and fell to the ground. The guards jumped back and drew their swords, and the figure drew his dragon fire sword. One of the guards rushed the figure, but the dragon fire sword cleaved the guard's incoming blade and continued through the guard's collar and took their head in one motion. A second guard rushed forward, and the figure's blade turned toward the guard's heart. The steel armor parted for the dragon fire steel, almost as if it melted around the blade. The blade slid out as the guard's body fell. The two remaining guards fled in opposite directions. The figure chased the guard running west, grabbed her forearm and with a small flash her gauntlet shattered and with a second touch her body flashed under the armor, and she fell limp to the ground. The figure turned, but the last guard disappeared in the crowd fleeing east.

The figure's eyes searched east but were drawn to a teenaged boy exiting the main entrance of the Traitor's Tavern Inn. He

recognized the child as the one conversing with the strange man. He sprinted toward the boy, grasping his dragon fire sword and the figure's stare froze him in place. The figure crossed the alley linking the general store and tavern. The gap separating the two almost completely vanished and he drew back his sword arm just before reaching the child.

A seashell staff smashed the figure's hand, knocking away his sword. The Whitecoat dropped to a knee and followed through with his staff to take out the figure's leg. The figure tumbled head over heels, smashed into the ground, and laid out sprawled. Nort snapped out of his stupor and ran past the alleyway and stopped in front of the general store.

Karp rushed out of the general store carrying a guard's spear. She looked over at The Whitecoat standing near someone wearing water armor. She ran in his direction until The Whitecoat shouted.

“PROTECT NORT!”

She turned, and Nort cowered near the store's entrance. She ran to him, put a hand on his shoulder and turned to face the combatants. The figure returned to his feet and darted for the dragon fire sword laying near the alley entrance. The Whitecoat smashed the back of his helm, and the figure grabbed his head and staggered a few steps away. The Whitecoat knocked the sword further into the alley.

The figure gave up on the sword and faced The Whitecoat. Korg kept the figure at a distance by attacking at unpredictable

angles. The figure grabbed for the staff coming toward his helm, but it dropped below his grip and speared his neck. The figure jerked forward and incomprehensible words mashed and bubbled from his mouth as he gasped for air through his collapsed windpipe. The Whitecoat aimed for the figure's legs. Each hit tripped him and slowed his progress. Korg spun and took out his opponent's knee, knocking him off his feet. Korg shed his coat, and it landed over the figure. Korg's quad-helix staff smashed into him while he was blind to the incoming blows. Disoriented from pain, confusion, and blindness, the figure couldn't defend himself, and his water steel armor creaked, cracked, and splintered from the repeated blows of Korg's reinforced staff.

During the excitement, The Sunflower left the village hall. Korg thrust the staff downward and knocked off the figure's helm. Korg turned at the sound of someone approaching and saw his friend.

“Stay out of his reach!”

Korg turned back to the figure to deliver the final blow. He hesitated for an instant when something dropped behind him. The Whitecoat's quadhelix staff dropped toward the figure's head and stopped with a jerk. A bare hand grasped Korg's neck. He looked over to see his friend The Sunflower staring in his eyes. Korg's coat slipped off the figure as he rose and Korg saw his exposed face. Korg gasped and then shouted.

“Karp don't....”

The words trailed in a moment's hesitation, and then The Whitecoat slackened. The Sunflower dropped Korg's limp body. Karp stared at the figure's face, but didn't know him and didn't understand The Whitecoat's message.

don't run? if i run, they will catch up and kill me and nort

don't fight? if i fight, they will probably kill me

don't give in? that would be a waste of last words

don't let them have nort? why do they even want him? it's out of the question anyway. there's only one thing i can do.

The figure retrieved his sword. The Sunflower and the figure headed toward Karp and Nort. Karp shifted to her storehouse.

Chapter 5

Karp dropped her spear, removed her helmet, and threw it into a bunch of practice stave that crashed to the ground. She dropped to her knees, placed her left hand in the dirt and impotently punched the ground. She hesitated and tears rolled down her cheeks.

“Did something happen?”

Karp scrambled backward into a nearby table. She patted the ground until she found her spear and raised its tip toward Wili.

“What are you doing here?”

Wili lifted his hands, palms toward Karp and waved them as if trying to shake away any allegations.

“I was here asking for help, and you refused, and then we were in different places. You threw the helmet and....”

but i came and left and he wasn't here... is time jumping around? something like that?

“how come you always show up at the worst times?”

Wili shrugged.

“So will you...”

“NO!”

Karp's brash answer and intense voice shocked her and she sat

trying to calm herself.

“listen, my master was just attacked by two very strong opponents. i need to train and find better equipment if i'm going to save him and nort. understand? i don't have time to find your book.”

“Yeah but, but... you might find what you're looking for in the book.”

“how? what's that book about?”

“I don't know... I just remember I need to read it.”

Karp returned to her feet and inventoried the pots that lined the storehouse wall. Under normal circumstances, the dried and preserved foods could last a year. Tightly rationed the contents could last 18 to 20 months. Karp carefully weighed her options.

“What are you going to do?”

“there are ruins northwest of here, along the mountains. i was exploring those before our first run in and i stopped coming back here. i'm going there. going to explore the houses and the large run down keep. don't get excited, that big tower isn't there.”

“I'll go with you.”

“if i ration my food carefully it might last a year and a half. with you in tow it probably won't last 6 months. why should i?”

“Well... I can help with guard duty! You're looking for weapons, right? I can carry the extra you find. If you want to

train, you'll need a partner, right? Plus uh it will be safer too."

Karp looked him over. He wore tight leathers that didn't even cover his whole upper body and carried no weapons.

"safer? can you even fight?"

"I don't know.... I don't think so... but I can learn."

Karp sighed because Wili's answers did not fill her with confidence.

"so you'll be a pack mule, punching bag, and alarm?"

Karp didn't like the idea of having a tag-a-long, but she didn't want to spend months wandering the desert alone. Even though he seemed incompetent, Karp felt an inexplicable sense of familiarity and trustworthiness.

"fine, but you can't travel like that. you'll get killed at the first stop."

Karp motioned to Wili and he followed her to a small cabinet where she removed a set of Korg's training leathers. Next, she looked over an iron hauberk, compared it to Wili and widened the hip and shoulders. She handed him the hauberk, leathers, and an iron helm. She moved to a large cabinet, withdrew a pair of steel gauntlets and slid her hands inside. Karp picked up the stave she knocked over, found her helm on the floor and returned it to her head. Karp removed a steel and wood staff from a holder on the wall. She picked up the guard spear, gave it to Wili and motioned

for him to get dressed in the back room.

Karp removed two folded canvas bags from the large center cabinet and poured a jar of food into each. She took two large hollow gourds, shook them to verify they held water, and affixed a gourd to each bag. Wili exited the backroom, and Karp shoved a bag into his chest.

“it's morning now and we can probably reach the safe house before dark.”

“What happens if we don't make it before dark?”

“i've never cared to find out.”

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Dawn broke on the first morning of travel. A bolt on the door of a small shack scratched as it slid from the door jam and snapped to a rest. Light filled the windowless building. Karp walked out squinting and tried to block the sun with her arm. Wili followed and was equally disoriented by the bright light. Karp reentered the shack after adjusting to the brightness, reached into her canvas bag and pulled out a handful of nuts and dried fruit and threw them in her mouth. She washed down the food with a gulp of water from the hollow gourd.

The old shack was an abandoned guard post. A series of guard posts rested along some long extinct highway that shadowed a

mountain range. Each post was approximately a day apart, and every one was built in a location with access to water from a well, or nearby stream. The shacks were ideal for traveling between ruins because they all locked and could store items. Karp left the shack carrying her staff and Wili exited with his spear.

“first thing every morning we are going to train. today we only have about an hour if we want to get to the next stop before dark.”

“How will we know when an hour's up?”

“it's actually quite easy, you just...”

Karp swept Wili's legs with her staff and he fell to the ground.

“don't do needless things.... i mean, don't ask needless questions.”

The Whitecoat did the same thing and gave Karp the same message when she first started training and so she felt a little nostalgic. Wili groaned while he rose to his feet.

“pick up the spear”

Wili bent over, picked up the spear and held it gingerly. Karp knocked the spear from his hand with a quick downward strike.

“grip it tightly.”

Wili picked it up again and grasped it forcefully. Karp smashed his hand, and he dropped it again.

“why would you just stand there and let me hit your hand?”

Wili picked up the spear again. Karp swung at the spear and Wili moved it, she swung at his hand, and he moved, so she hit the spear. She swung at his other hand, and he moved the spear out of the way. Finally, she swung the staff and hit his shoulder. Wili dropped his weapon and grasped where the staff impacted.

"an opponent is going to adjust; you must too."

Karp swung the staff at his right hand, at his shoulder, at his left hand, at his other shoulder, and finally connected with his left hand. He hissed in pain and dropped the spear.

"pick it up."

Karp conducted a series of shots aimed at his hands, shoulders, and chest but didn't connect for several minutes. Wili smiled at his progress and Karp belted him across the side of the helm.

"You can die at ANY time! You got cocky for one second, and you died!"

Karp's hands shook until she realized who she was talking to and felt the weight of her words. They practiced for around an hour until Karp looked at the sky.

"let's go."

Wili's hands bled, his shoulders ached, his head rang, and his armor felt heavy. Karp took a handful of food from her bag, quickly ate it, took a sip of water, and they departed for the next station.

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Karp and Wili departed Karp's storehouse a week ago and spent all their spare time training. They unbarred the door to a safe house on the edge of a settlement of ruins and left the house carrying practice weapons. Karp swung her staff at Wili's hands, shoulders, chest, and head. Every attempt was from a predictable angle with a typical trajectory. Wili parried, blocked, or dodged every strike for almost a full hour. Karp raised her staff over her head, and Wili lifted his spear to block. Instead of bringing the top of the staff down, Karp brought the bottom up and smashed him in the abs. Wili dropped to his knees gasping for air.

"you're improving at an incredible rate. it took me a month to do as well as you. korg said it takes most people six months to do that well. i think you might be able to go in the keep with me."

Wili tried to sit up straight, but his abs clenched and he balled up again.

"don't worry. anything we face in there will be predictable; you should easily be able to protect yourself."

"oh-oh-OK."

"that's the attitude."

Wili used his spear to push himself to his feet.

"what do you remember about this world?"

“Just what I told you a week ago.”

“a week ago? oh right, so you don't remember anything. come over here.”

Karp and Wili walked to the other side of the safe house and looked into the small settlement. There was a two story stone keep with a small tower on the west side surrounded by around a dozen small clay houses like the ones found near Karp's storehouse. The keep's clay bricks cracked along their edges, and the wind blew away clay slivers. Sand piled around the building's sides. Images of daisies were pressed in the doorway's main arch.

“we're located somewhere in the arid desert. along the southern mountains judging by the sun and mountains. the shift world is geographically similar to our world, with small differences, like an oasis that exists in shift world that doesn't exist in our world. that kind of stuff. buildings are similar in shift world, but in some ways vastly different. for example houses in the arid desert in our world look almost identical to these clay ones, but in our world only the greatest of lords have a keep made of stone. most settlements in shift world have at least one stone ruin.”

“Why is that?”

“i don't know. our world has only had metal for 500 years and it's impossible to work stone without it. maybe some ancient civilization that always had metal built a lot of stone structures. before the monsters came and killed everyone that is.”

“Monsters?!?”

"you heard them last night, didn't you? shuffling around outside the house."

“Yeah, but how do you know they are monsters?”

Karp was losing patience with Wili's denial and naivety.

"well... i've faced two types of monsters. skeletons look like people or rather they look like a person's skeleton with skin draped over it. there is nothing in their eyes. no pity, no fear, no hatred. they just sluggishly attack you. if they have a weapon, they use that, if not they claw at you."

Wili looked bothered by Karp's description.

"i've also faced devils, they are kind of like skeletons except they are fast, vicious and fight with a degree of skill. they have pure hatred in their eyes, they'll kill you on sight."

“Are there more than those two?”

"i've never seen them before, but korg told me about banshees, asaghi, and dragons. banshees are as fierce, smart, and strong as devils, but they tend not to use weapons. instead, they shout and when they do any monster that hears it will come running. asaghi can fly, shoot fire, and use a much wider range of weapons. they are naturally reinforced with armor. dragons fly, shoot fire, and are huge. their claws can rip apart stone and steel with ease. water steel can damage them a little, but dragon fire steel, water dragon steel, or demon steel are the only way to kill it."

“What are we going to do if we face a dragon?”

“according to korg, dragons and asaghi fly and shoot fire at night, so we should have seen one last night if they were here.”

Karp winced every time she mentioned The Whitecoat, but then she used a sudden realization as a distraction.

“have you tried using any powers?”

“Powers?”

“yeah. we can repair armor, change its shape, make a shield, shoot a shockwave.”

“No? I don't think I can do that.”

“take your spear and put the butt into the sand. ok. now lower it down, put the spear tip between your hands. now concentrate on thinking about it changing. do your palms feel warm? no? well, try to force a warm feeling...”

Wili tried everything she asked but nothing happened.

“ok... let's try something else.”

Karp went into the house and removed two chairs. She placed the first in the sand a little distance from the house and brought the second one toward Wili. Karp took a few steps away from Wili, slipped off her gauntlet, straightened her arm, pointed her palm toward the chair, and closed her eyes. She concentrated on her palm, which glowed and a shockwave shot from her hand. The shockwave knocked the chair into the air, blew it into two

dozen pieces, and created a twenty-foot semicircular divot in the sand. Karp winced and swayed weakly, but caught herself before she fell. She deposited the second chair in the 20-foot groove.

“you try now.”

Wili raised his hand and concentrated. A few minutes later nothing happened, and he lowered his hand.

“it's ok... i don't think we should use powers unless we absolutely have to. stick close to me, we'll clear one floor at a time and then gather all the valuables, armor and weapons.”

“If we have power, why shouldn't we use it?”

“i'm not going to have powers in the real fight. i have to win without them.”

Wili didn't understand but nodded anyway. Wili and Karp examined the exterior of the main keep. The largest section was two stories tall and had small rectangular windows. A tower rose another story in the western corner. Karp opened the door and entered. The windows were boarded up, and little light shone in the hall. Karp and Wili's eyes slowly adjusted to the darkness. Karp stepped off a stoop into the main hall and froze at the sound of a snap. She tensed as her foot slid. She crushed the femur of a corpse which had likely sat in the hall for hundreds of years. Dried leather surrounded the fleshless bones.

Karp opened a door on the north side of the hall. Bodies were stacked waist high on the floor of a kitchen. Pots, pans, knives,

and different types of metal valuables littered the room, but nothing would be useful in combat. Wili opened the door to the southern room, and a skeleton sat in a chair. Wili crept behind it, and its head slowly turned, creaked, fell off the body, and bounced on the ground. Karp removed a helm from the skull, slid gloves off the body, and handed them to Wili.

“uh.... thanks?”

“oh please, every piece of armor there is came from a dead person, one way or the other.”

After clearing the first floor, Karp and Wili headed to the second floor. The second floor was the keep's living quarters. Karp opened the door closest to the stairs. A child's skeleton rested on a small bed. The skeleton's arms crossed over its chest and grasped a doll. Decomposed flowers ringed the skull. Karp searched the room for valuables. Dust encrusted the room's furniture except for a chair sitting on the bed's side facing the body. Karp and Wili searched the toy chests and wardrobes but left the room after failing to find any valuables.

Another door led to a room with a large empty bed made for two. Dry rotted leathers hung in the corner of the room. A small pouch rested on the dresser near the end of the bed. Karp opened the pouch and poured a small iron coin into her hand. The iron coin had an engraving of a person on its face. Karp wondered at the strange picture, since coins in the regular world were based on weight, engravings seemed like a waste. Karp and Wili cleared the second floor and ascended the stairs in the western tower.

Karp noticed a chest in the rear of the landing, removed her right glove, and headed for the treasure. Wili reacted too slowly to stop the devil bearing down on Karp. The devil attacked her flank and Karp reflexively released a barrier from her palm. The barrier sent the devil flying across the room but also sent her flying to the other wall. Wili stepped between the devil and Karp. The devil bounced back to its feet and rushed Wili. The devil's claws wildly struck Wili's chest and arms, doing light damage to his iron armor. Karp ambushed the devil while it waylaid Wili and stabbed her dagger through the side of its head. The devil dropped dead, and Karp recovered her dagger. They cleared the room before Karp relaxed again.

“training wise this trip was a failure”

“What do you mean? We just learned devils can set ambushes.”

Karp wondered if his words were wise or ignorant. She continued to the chest, grabbed the lock securing the lid closed and melted it away. The chest popped open to reveal a steel breastplate and a sunshine steel helm. Karp lifted the helm and cupped it in her hands. The faceplate melted away and the sunshine steel redistributed to create an open-faced helmet. She picked up the plate armor and slowly changed it to a chainmail hauberk. Karp exchanged Wili's iron hauberk for the steel hauberk and was amazed to find that the devil's attack only broke a few links.

Karp and Wili collected the remaining valuables in the keep

and brought them to the safe house. At the safe house, Karp resized a pair of steel greaves to fit Wili. The two finished clearing the keep with enough time to spar a few hours before shutting the safe house door for the night.

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Karp and Wili spent another week clearing the settlement and training. A few skeletons hid among ruins but were easily dispatched. Just as most of the creatures in the area were cleared out by some long forgotten shifter, any valuables or armor in the ruins were also stripped away. Karp and Wili spent the next two weeks traveling from guard post to guard post until they arrived at the next settlement. There were still no signs of the tall stone tower with diamond windows.

They trained every morning and evening for as long as time permitted and both felt confident entering the next keep. The keep was a two story stone building with small square windows. Sand blasted the building for centuries, stripping away its former glory. White paint flakes were the only remnants of a colored coating on the stone. A single tower extended another two floors. A small kettle placed over a campfire was pressed into the main door's archway.

Karp pushed open the door and entered the main hall. She stepped off a stoop without waiting for her eyes to adjust to the

dark causing her to misjudge the stoop's height and hit her foot on the ground. An echoing clank stirred the skeletons lining the hall. Six skeletons rose, three near the rear staircase, two near the stoop, and one at the middle of the right wall.

Wili engaged the skeletons near the entrance. Karp ran to the skeletons in the rear. A skeleton swung a short sword at Karp as she arrived, but she dodged the blow with a momentary stutter in her stride. She broke the skeleton's hand with her staff, and its short sword fell to the floor. Karp thrust her staff into the skeleton's chest as it recoiled from the pain and it dropped to its knees. Karp reached down, picked up the short sword and cut off the skeleton's head with a rising slash. Karp threw the short sword and dispatched a second skeleton before the first skeleton's corpse hit the ground.

Wili impaled a skeleton with his spear, spun, and hurled the corpse and spear onto another skeleton. Wili strolled to the pinned creature struggling to free itself, picked up an iron short sword, and stabbed down into its head. Wili looked across the hall and ran toward Karp.

Karp dodged left, parried right, and blocked the skeleton's attempt to grab her. When she was satisfied her enemy wasn't going to land a blow, she unsheathed her dagger and stabbed the skeleton through the eye. The motion of its body dropping freed her dagger, and she returned it to its sheath. She turned toward the sound of Wili running. A skeleton lunged and tackled her to the ground. The skeleton sat astride her and raised its arms to strike.

Karp lifted her hand and released a shockwave that blew the skeleton apart, continued to the ceiling and struck with an explosion that cracked the floor above. When Karp released the shockwave, the palm of her gauntlet burst, sending shrapnel into her hand. Karp sat up at the sound of a snarling devil rushing down the stairs. She bound to her feet, drew her dagger, and hurled it at the devil. Her aim was off and slow because of the blood and pain. The devil fainted right, and the dagger hit its left shoulder, immobilizing its arm. Karp rolled to the devil's limp side, picked up her staff and smashed its leg. The devil fell to one knee. Wili leaped and drove his sword into the devil's chest so hard he slid five feet. Karp removed her damaged gauntlet and pulled her dagger from the devil.

“i got careless.”

“Why does it matter? You can always use your powers to save yourself.”

“here i can. if this happened in the other world, i'd be dead. if that was a devil and not a skeleton, i'd be dead.”

Karp winced as she cut into her hand and removed a small piece of metal caught in her palm. Her eyes watered because of the pain but she used that moment to let a few tears flow. She quickly stopped crying and become stoic once more.

“Let's clear the rest of the dungeon.”

“dungeon? you mean keep?”

“Keeps are where people live. Dungeons are for the dead. It only seems right.”

Other than the skeletons ambling in the main room, there was only the devil drawn to the shockwave's explosion, and so Karp and Wili cleared the rest of the dungeon without fighting another monster.

A small chest on the tower's second floor contained a medium sunshine steel shield and a steel short sword. Karp passed her hand along an edge of the shield and removed a strip of metal. Karp worked the larger section of sunshine steel, curving and molding the metal into a buckler. She ran her hands along its right edge and created four small, evenly spaced indentations. Karp fashioned four identical small knives with the remaining piece and slid each one into an indentation. She donned the new armor piece on her left forearm and adjusted small handles, so the buckler no longer slid. She pushed herself off the ground and assumed an offensive stance.

Karp glided her finger over a divot, removed a knife, and threw it at a nearby beam. The knife landed 4 inches higher and 2 inches left of her target. She repeated the motion three more times, and every shot flew wide of the mark with the last throw even missing the beam.

“a little practice and that will do nicely.”

“You're not very good with those. Why did you decide to do that?”

“i have a friend that carries around little knives like these. she could kill a fly at 20 yards. i figure that would be a big advantage in fighting at a distance.”

Karp handed Wili the sword.

“you should learn how to use this.”

“Why?”

“spears have a nasty way of getting caught in things. we'll gather up the rest of the valuables in the dungeon and spend a week or so clearing out the ruins. we'll follow the mountains after that, but I don't know what's there.”

“I thought you knew this area.”

“i wasn't able to explore too far before the shifter sickness started. once shifters started dying, my master forbid me from returning. so i've only been back a few times since then.”

“This master must have been quite a person if you mostly listened to them.”

“he and two others saved my life.”

Karp and Wili searched ruins and cleared dungeons along the main highway for six months, resupplying at Karp's storehouse every 1.5 to 2 months. Despite all the traveling, they still had no clues on the location of the tall tower. Everyday Karp practiced

throwing knives and sparred with Wili. Although he only used a short sword for several months, he wielded it like he's been fighting with one for a decade.

Generally, the higher level the monsters, the more likely they were to find high-quality gear. The farther northwest Karp and Wili traveled, the more devils they faced. After two months, Karp wore a sunshine steel hauberk, leggings, and helm, steel gauntlets and greaves, a seashell steel buckler with yellow throwing knives and had a water steel dagger on her hip. Wili wore a sunshine steel buckler and a steel helm, leggings, boots, hauberk, and gauntlets.

Karp and Wili stood in front of a sprawling three-story stone dungeon with two towers that extended another two stories. A sun shaped window adorned the eastern tower, and a crescent moon shaped window was cut into the western tower. Wili drew their location on a map with perfect scale, direction, and landmarks. Wili began drawing maps to chronicle the lands they traveled after leaving the area familiar to Karp.

“that's amazing. i remember the first map you drew; it was rough lines in the wrong place and dungeons were bigger than mountains.”

“I'm a fast learner that's all.”

Karp smiled a little, and Wili noticed.

“you remind me of my friend's adopted son. he learns things at an amazing rate, but he doesn't really apply himself. he also

sometimes learns quick, but fails, like with knife throwing. he throws a knife with perfect technique, but his knives always just bounce off... thinking about it, he looks a lot like you, but much younger... hey, do you think you could be his father?"

Wili turned red and fervently shook his head. Karp decided to change the subject at hand and save Wili the embarrassment.

"it's been six months, and you still can't use any powers..."

"I don't know. I try to feel things the way you say, but nothing."

Karp shook her head. Karp motioned toward the main door, walked over, and carefully pushed open the door. Karp and Wili stepped inside and waited a few minutes for their eyes to adjust to the darkness. Karp silently stepped off the stoop and stalked over to a skeleton, stabbed it in the side of the head with her water dagger, caught it, and gently lowered its body. Karp continued into the hall, and one of three skeletons lingering in the center of the room turned toward the entrance. Karp fingered her buckler and threw three knives in quick succession. The first knife killed the skeleton facing her before it could alert the others. The remaining knives hit their marks, and the skeletons dropped. Karp skulked over to the downed skeletons, retrieved her knives and replaced them in the slits in her buckler.

A final skeleton stood in the corner of the room facing the wall. Step for step Karp and Wili snuck behind the skeleton. Karp quietly drew her dagger but was so focused on the kill that she

missed the clay goblet laying in the darkness. Karp was still ten feet from the creature when she shattered the goblet. The creature turned, but it was not a skeleton. The banshee's piercing screech knocked Karp off her feet, and she writhed in pain as the shouts battered her body. Wili threw his spear and impaled the banshee on a beam.

Karp rebound to her feet. A stampede of seven devils poured down the stairs followed by a smaller group of 5 skeletons. Karp let loose four knives, and three struck devils, but one devil's iron broadsword deflected a knife that struck down a skeleton instead. Momentum carried all four dead bodies to the bottom of the stairs. Wili took the head of the first arriving devil as he drew his blade. Karp tripped the second devil and followed through her attack by hitting another in the face with her staff.

Wili stabbed the tripped devil through the back of its head and bent down to retrieve its iron sword. Karp continued her flurry of blows. She hit the stunned devil in the hand, forcing it to drop its greatsword. She landed another shot to its ribs and finally took out the back of its knee. In one fluid motion, she unsheathed her dagger, planted it in the devil's neck, removed the dagger, and returned it to the sheath. The devil's eyes rolled into the back of its head and it slumped.

The last devil and the four skeletons arrived together. The devil attacked Karp, and the four skeletons attacked Wili. The devil dodged or blocked every strike. The devil countered Karp's blows with its short sword, but she stayed out of its reach thanks

to her staff. Dust fell from the ceiling. Crashes boomed from the landing on the second floor. The booming closed in but then stopped. The devil froze with both arms extended overhead for a downward strike. The devil lowered its arms while it looked up the stairs out of the corner of its eye. A blade shot from its chest. The devil's arms gently lowered and its sword rang out when it struck the ground. The devil collapsed.

Karp looked to the other side of the staircase where Wili fought four skeletons. Dual wielding short swords, Wili blocked the incoming attacks but was too busy to counter. Karp recovered a dropped short sword and flung it at the closest skeleton. The sword met its mark and the skeleton flew to the ground. Wili cut down a skeleton that was distracted by the flying sword. Wili blocked an incoming strike, stabbed the attacker through the chest with an iron sword, spun and decapitated the last skeleton with his steel sword.

Karp looked over the corpses at the bottom of the stairs for one of her throwing knives. She surveyed the dark staircase. A trail of fire lead from the top to the blade protruding from the devil's corpse. The blade slid free and jerked up the stairs. Karp found a knife, slid it into her buckler, and motioned for Wili to copy her. Karp laid down and mixed in with the corpses near the end of the stairs on the right side. Wili mimicked her but laid near the left side of the stairs. The blade reached the top of the stairs and the booming steps continued.

A jet black, seven-foot-tall two-legged, winged monster

broached the darkness. The monster's wings were draped with translucent veiny skin pulled over thin bones much like a bat. A thick layer of hardened muscle armored the monster, and it gripped a bladed whip. Every step down the stairs ended in a booming thud. Karp counted the time between the monster lifting its foot and descending the next step. She slowly removed a throwing knife from her buckler and waited. The monster raised its foot and hovered over the next step. Karp gently lobbed the knife. The blade arced upside down in time for the monstrous foot to come crashing down. The creature howled, tumbled down the last few steps, and sprawled out on its stomach facing Wili. Wili bounded up and rushed the creature sword in hand.

“NO! STOP!”

The asaghi peered up and shot fire from its mouth. Wili stopped in his tracks. Karp desperately sprinted to the asaghi, drew her water dagger, and chopped at its neck. She screamed and slashed, but it continued to blast fire as she damaged the tough neck muscles. She hacked again, and the head fell limp. With a third scream, the head severed. Dead yellow eyes stared up at Karp. She looked toward Wili in disbelief.

“How?”

“I guess your master was wrong about its fire breath. It's just for show.”

The corpses at his feet burnt to cinders and any iron and steel weapons melted and charred. Despite being engulfed by the

flames, Wili wasn't even singed.

“no... you should be dead... but aren't.”

The floor behind him wasn't burnt like his body shielded the ground from the flames.

“maybe you used a force shield.... as an uh reflex.... kind of like what I did before, but way more powerful.”

Karp turned her attention to the asaghi. She picked up the whip's handle. Sunshine steel reinforcements ran from the handle's top to a blade affixed at the tip. The loose handle felt as though it was meant to turn, but how initially remained unclear. Strange lettering on the back of the handle acted as a grip. Depressing the loose center letter and turning the handle clockwise, made the end of the whip slide across the floor and turning the handle counter clockwise made the blade slide the opposite direction.

Karp tried the whip. Initially, the blade moved slowly through the air but accelerated as the whip straightened. The blade moved incredibly fast at the whip's apex. Karp spun the whip overhead and adjusted the angle to watch the blade ascend and descend. She tried recoiling the whip, but missed catching it and almost hit Wili. She reeled in the end, picked up the blade, threw it behind her, and then swung it forward with full force. As the whip moved forward, Karp twisted the handle, and the blade shot downward and lodged in a corpse. Karp pulled out the blade, removed it from the whip, and replaced it with her water dagger. She

reforged the sunshine blade into a dagger and sheathed it.

Karp rolled the whip and carried it by hand as she and Wili cleared the first floor. The second floor was living quarters. Karp found a little case with an iron latch in one of the bedrooms. Karp used her dagger to cut a small circular hole in the top of the case where the two halves connect. Next, she removed a strip from bottom to top. Finally, she put two small cuts in the side, and removed her belt and fed it through the slits, so the case rested on her right hip. Karp replaced the belt, opened the case, and inserted the rolled part of her whip. The blade hung down through the slit in the bottom, and the handle protruded from the hole in the top. Karp hit the latch, pulled away the handle and the blade fell to the ground. She rolled the whip, returned it to the case, and went to walk, but the blade hit her thigh as she stepped. She fashioned a makeshift sheath for the whip's blade from an extra piece of leather and attached it to her thigh.

After clearing the rest of the dungeon Karp and Wili returned to a large chest in one of the towers. They opened it and found a sunshine steel short sword, small shield, and gauntlets. Karp took the gauntlets, put them at her feet, removed her old gauntlets, stopped, and thought. Karp removed her seashell buckler.

“here, take this.”

Wili seemed confused.

“You sure? I mean you've never given me anything better than what you have.”

Karp was a little embarrassed by her selfishness and the realization that Wili hadn't said anything until then.

“well... i need the better gear to fight some people when i go back. i figured you need the buckler more than me because you fight close up and need more protection.”

Wili removed his buckler and gave it to Karp. She removed the knives from her old buckler and placed them in her new one.

“Actually.....could you make me a shield?”

“it's going to be kind of small.”

“Can you combine these two?”

Karp put her hands around the sunshine steel shield and seashell steel buckler. The buckler melted and swirled around the small kite shield. After seashell steel surrounded sunshine steel, Karp streaked the yellow steel into the white steel.

“i don't think this has been done before, but here. i put those streaks just in case the metals don't combine perfectly. hopefully, the shield doesn't fall apart.”

The shield resembled a sun on a white background. Wili took the shield and slung it across his back.

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After a full year of traveling between ruins, looking for better equipment and training, Karp and Wili returned to Karp's

storehouse for the last time. In the six months since killing the asaghi, they only found a pair of sunshine greaves.

“it's been a year and we don't have any idea where that tower is, our training plateaued, and we're almost out of supplies.”

Karp and Wili hadn't faced any opponents stronger than a devil since killing the asaghi. Within a few months Karp learned the whip well enough to clear a room full of skeletons without taking a step. At the last dungeon, she cleared a dozen devils rushing down stairs without Wili doing anything. There were only a few weeks of food left, which wasn't even enough to reach an area they hadn't explored.

“That's why you took off the last few days...”

“yeah, you had to figure this day was coming soon.”

“I did, but I'm just worried that if you leave, I go back to getting crushed.”

“i don't know what will happen to you, but if you survive, as you did with the asaghi, be careful with that shield.”

Karp's words didn't comfort him, but he chuckled thinking back to all the grief she gave him over that shield. He mastered using it right away. Within weeks, he fought like he used a shield for years, maybe decades. He was proficient, and not only defensively blocking with honed instincts, but also with incorporating offensive shield strikes. Despite all his skill he always damaged the shield for some reason. The outer seashell

ring should have been practically impervious to iron and steel but the edges splintered and the shield's face gauged after every dungeon. Karp always fixed the damage, but also always complained.

Karp inventoried her large cabinet one last time. She didn't need to know its contents as much as it gave her an excuse not to face Wili. She didn't have a particular affinity for him, but after a year training together she felt guilty leaving not knowing if he would be alright. Karp knew what she had to do.

“i'm sorry. i want to save everyone, but i just can't..”

Karp shifted.

Chapter 6

Karp shifted back to the town square in a full set of sunshine armor with her whip on her side. She faced the figure and The Sunflower, who stood aghast and exchanged looks in between staring in Karp's direction. The Sunflower dropped his riding cloak and drew his sword. Karp's eyes never left her opponents, assessing every move they made. Karp spoke too low for her enemies to hear but loud enough for Nort.

“listen. the moment i start toward them, run away.”

Nort went to speak, but Karp interrupted him before he could even finish his first word.

“just do it.”

Karp darted forward, drew her whip, and squared off with the figure and The Sunflower. The pair separated and strafed in opposite directions to flank Karp, but she shot the whip's blade at The Sunflower's outside shoulder, and he dodged toward the figure. The whip's blade lashed at the figure's chest. He raised his hand to catch the incoming blow, but with a twist of Karp's wrist the water dagger drove down and connected with the figure's thigh. The blade couldn't penetrate the water steel plates and slid off only leaving a scratch. The whip continued along the ground toward The Sunflower's legs, and he jumped toward the incoming whip and rolled. The whip shot skyward and cleaved a section of chainmail on his back. The Sunflower retreated from the whip's

range.

Karp continued assaulting the figure. He was not agile enough to dodge the blade, and Karp landed blows on his legs and upper body, but the dagger couldn't penetrate the plate. The Sunflower sheathed his sword, removed a gauntlet and raised his left palm. His face twisted into a scowl and his arm tensed in the air as he concentrated.

The Sunflower was distracted by crowds that gathered around the square again to watch the fight, and he relaxed. Karp swapped the whip's handle to her other hand, drew a knife from her buckler and threw it at the outstretched hand. He noticed the incoming blade a second too late to completely dodge without injury. The blade cut along his palm as he withdrew his hand. Karp switched the whip back to her right hand, but the figure was now too close for Karp to effectively attack with the whip's blade. Karp wrapped the whip around the figure's legs and pulled. She dropped the handle as the figure fell and ran for The Whitecoat's quad-helix staff.

The figure reached between his legs, and the whip snapped in his glowing clutch. Karp looked at the store's entrance and was relieved to see Nort fled. There were two store guards standing with a noble's child. She knew it was a noble's child because they wore mismatching armor which was too big. Karp shouted to the guards.

“Find Nort! Protect Him!”

The figure ran to Karp. His movements were sluggish, and he was fatigued. She swung the quad-helix staff at his thigh, and the plate armor bent in under the blow. The figure fell to the ground, screamed and clutched his thigh. Although any individual whip strike didn't produce much damage, the constant barrage of little gouges severely weakened the metal. Karp looked around for The Sunflower. He headed toward the general store.

The guards at the store ignored her order to find Nort and protected the lordling. Karp didn't know what reward they expected, but she knew their defiance was going to cost their lives. Karp ran to intercept The Sunflower, and when he noticed, he ran as well. In a last ditch effort, Karp hurled the quad-helix staff. The staff slid between The Sunflower's legs, and he tumbled. He froze on his back with the staff stuck between his legs. The Sunflower still hadn't moved when Karp arrived. She cautiously clasped the quad-helix staff with both hands. The Sunflower came to life and grabbed her left gauntlet. Karp pulled her hand free of the gauntlet and pulled away the staff with her other hand. The Sunflower sat up and crumbled the gauntlet in his clutch.

The Sunflower rose and drew his sword. Karp was on the defensive, blocking his incoming sword strikes, and waiting for an opening. The figure finished fixing the plate on his thigh and ran by Karp with a slight limp. The figure approached the guards, but Karp was helpless until she dealt with The Sunflower. She parried flawless blow after flawless blow. The previous champion of the emperor's tournament showed how he won that title. The

figure already reached the guards by the time Karp had an opening. The Sunflower hesitated to steady himself after a slight misstep. In that instant, Karp swung her staff upward to his chin. The Sunflower left his feet, spat blood, and lost two teeth when the staff connected. Karp threw the quad-helix staff at the figure but missed, and it slid past the guards.

The first guard leaped forward, and in one smooth motion, the figure cut through his spear and his chest. The second guard forced the figure on the defensive. The guard swung and swung. The figure blocked every blow and soon just cut the head of the spear clean off. The guard turned to flee, but a sword flew past Karp and into the guard's back the moment he turned away. The Sunflower cursed and punched the ground. Karp threw a knife that ineffectively bounced off the figure's water steel plate.

One last desperate idea came to Karp.

if they can use powers, why can't i?

Karp raised her hand as she ran. She willed the heat of her body into her palm, but nothing happened. The figure was near the lordling. Karp concentrated and ran harder. The figure lifted his arm. Karp closed her eyes, her breath stopped, and she felt a powerful shock wave leave her hand. An explosion louder than anything she's ever experienced deafened Karp. Fatigue took out her legs, and she dropped to her knees. She felt guilty that she probably killed the lordling with the figure, but relieved that at least Nort would be safe.

- - -

Karp panted in a cold sweat. A cacophony of debris crashing to the ground drowned out all other sounds in the world. She never created such a large shock wave, and the burden was immense. Her entire arm shook when she moved her hand. After the sound of falling debris finished, footsteps approached. They were barely audible and seemed so silent compared to the explosion. Karp tried to stand, but faltered and crashed to the ground. The ground felt strange in her bare hand. Smooth grainy sand replaced the road's packed dirt. Karp opened her eyes but the world blurred. A man wearing armor approached her. In her current state, she couldn't recognize him. Soon she lost the energy to continue raising her head. The world spun, and Karp gently lowered her head and slept.

- - -

Karp woke several hours later and felt hungry, thirsty, and sore all over. Her head pounded, and she was nauseous while sitting upright. She laid in a ring of stone and Wili sat at her side intensely staring in a book.

“so, is the book worth all the trouble?”

“It's hard to read, but the more I look at it, the more I understand...”

“what are you talking about?”

Wili handed Karp the tattered journal. She didn't recognize any of the writing as she flipped the pages. The more she looked at it, the stranger the writing appeared.

“it's almost like that book is written in 2 dozen languages.”

“I get the same feeling when I look at it. I kind of understand this writing, the one that appears most in the text.”

“what's it say?”

“This section talks about what you called shifters, but you never told me there are three types.”

“three types?”

“This book calls them angels, demons, and scholars. Angels go to a world, and they don't have magic.... as far as I can tell magic is what you call powers. Although they don't have powers, they tend to 'be blessed' with long lives. Demons are the opposite of angels, they have powers, and those powers seem to vary considerably between shifters of different worlds. They can be something as simple as increased speed or strength, to something as grand as shockwaves or fireballs. Each world is connected to only two others. One world that accepts demons and one world that accepts angels. So for your

world, the Shift World is the world that accepts demons, and if this place ever had living humans, then this world would send angels to your world.”

“does that mean there is a world out there somewhere that sends shifters to our world?”

“yeah... according to this. And your world would send angels to their world.”

“that explains how the sunflower and that other man can use powers.”

“They are probably demons from another world.”

“can you not call them demons. in my world, the royal family is referred to as demons, and it will be confusing to call them both demons.”

“uh..... OK? How about..... since angels fly we call them 'up-shifters' and demons are underground, so we'll call them 'down-shifters'.”

Wili looked truly pleased with himself, but Karp didn't have the heart to tell him that those names were stupid.

“i guess that's interesting, but none of this will help me beat those two... ugh.. down-shifters. are you an up-shifter from another world? since you don't have powers?”

“No. I'm a scholar, they are very different from other shifters. Other shifters exist in 2 worlds, one world where they are just normal people and one world where they have

powers. They transfer between worlds and have the same bodies, injuries, and memories. They are the exact same person but in two worlds. Scholars can travel between all worlds. At any given time I could travel to one of the two worlds connected to this one, but there's a catch. When I travel to a new world, I don't have any memories of the old world. My body also doesn't have any of the damage or aging that occurred in the previous world. On some level, I do remember skills and abilities, and through gaining experience, I quickly relearn them. That's how I improved so quickly at drawing maps and using the shield. I can explicitly remember short phrases, but there's a price, I age about five years for each word."

"great and all, but that doesn't help me does it?"

"This might. If a scholar shifts near a shifter, they force the shifter to the world they're going to and vice versa."

"so if you stood really close to me, and i shifted, you would join me at the battle?"

"Exactly and there's one more thing, do you remember the asaghi, the banshee, and my shield..."

- - -

Karp shifted back to the square and stood in her position

before destroying the wall. She watched and waited to confirm what she thought. A white kite shield with an embedded sun smashed across the figure's face, and he flew backward. Karp's gamble paid off. Wili stood in place of the lordling and drew his sword. Karp spun to find her broken whip and ran. The Sunflower moved to block her path, but she slid a knife from her buckler and threw it at his face. He flinched, covered his head, and the knife bounced off his chainmail. Karp was long past by the time he moved his hands down.

The Sunflower stepped in pursuit, but Wili bowled him over from behind. The Sunflower rebound and swung at Wili. The two traded blows until the figure slashed Wili's back with his dragon fire sword. Wili stumbled forward and spun to keep both opponents in front of him. The figure hacked at Wili, but he blocked every slash with his shield. The figure tried stabbing through the shield's soft sunshine steel center, but the sword merely slid off, leaving a small scratch.

Karp reached the whip, picked up both halves and then the whip was whole again. Karp ran toward Wili faster than she moved before. The Sunflower attacked Wili alongside the figure. Most blows bounced off the shield or landed on Wili's armor. Wili ineffectually swung his sword around, but rarely connected with his targets. The figure and The Sunflower slowed, and their sluggish attacks became even less effective. The figure tried one desperate gambit and put his full body into a downward swing that connected with Wili's shield. The dragon fire sword cracked up the center, and the figure stared incredulously at the blade.

The Sunflower stopped hacking mid-swing. He coughed, and blood trickled from his mouth. He crept forward but started arcing down until he fell to the road. Fire trailed from his upper back, just left of his spine. The figure used the momentary confusion to grab Wili's arm, but nothing happened. Wili swung the shield at the figure, but he ducked the blow and ran off. The crowds gathered to watch the fight scattered as the figure approached. Karp lost him in the masses and didn't want to pursue such a formidable opponent.

Karp walked over to The Sunflower's body. Karp not only pierced his back, but she threw the whip's blade with such force that it exited his chest. In order to recover her weapon, she had to pull her whip through his chest and out his back. Blood covered the blade, which was an uncomfortable sight for Karp since monsters didn't bleed. She walked over to The Sunflower's riding cloak and wiped the blade clean. She rolled and holstered the whip.

Karp moved over to The Whitecoat's body and rolled it on its back. She gently removed his helm. A dried out husk was all that remained of his face. Karp's stomach sank, but she had over a year to accept this reality, so the conformation gave her closure. Wili dropped to his knees near The Whitecoat and reached a shaking hand to his face.

“i guess you're not used to death in this world.”

Wili looked up at her and then back down at the corpse. Karp walked to the store's entrance and retrieved Wili's book. Slart

arrived from the east, with an entourage of guards from The Whitecoat's compound. Slart panicked when she saw the dead bodies littering the village square. She cried when she saw Korg and ran to Karp.

“Where..... uh..... Nort?”

“i told him to run; i'm sure he got away.”

Wili got up from The Whitecoat's body and walked over to Karp and Slart.

“wili, thank you for saving me.”

“Who's Wili? My name is Nort.”

Nort removed his helm, and even after aging ten years, he still looked more like Nort than like Wili.

Slart fainted.

- - -

“you know... i didn't see that coming.”

“See what coming?”

“that you were wili. though when i think back on it, it's kind of obvious.”

“Who is this Wili guy?”

“here, this will explain everything.”

“ugh! A book? I don't want that.”

“then again, the confusion is a little understandable.”

“The inside is gibberish.”

“if you try to read it for a while, it will come back to you.”

Slart stirred from her bed, opened her eyes, and sat up. Karp moved her to her bedroom after she fainted and set the guards to clearing the damage in the village square. Slart swung her legs out of bed and put her feet on the ground.

“I uh had the weirdest dream. Nort was an adult, The Whitecoat was uh dead, and there were bodies in front of the store.”

Slart looked over at Nort and Karp.

“Oh....what happened?”

“well... do you remember that strange person from the shift world?”

A knock came from the downstairs door. Karp descended the stairs and returned with a bloodied messenger.

“What happened?”

“ah..... there's a..... riot..... at the compound....”

“calm down.”

"right.... one of the convoy leaders..... came back and.... gathered all the people still at the compound... they started fighting about what to do... some wanted to take all the valuables, and some wanted to wait for you. I ran when the fighting started."

“We need to go!”

Slart stood up straight with one foot forward and pointed at the door. The four headed down the stairs. Slart called over the guards.

"There's a riot at the compound; we need people to come with us!"

“Things are bad, like really bad HERE. The fight in the town square was just the start. There are corpses piled in the town hall...”

That news stunned Slart.

“O-ok five people come with us. The rest clean up here.”

Five guards quickly stepped forward and the group of nine departed. The tent cities in the convoy staging areas were in a tizzy. People shouted laments about missing weapons and armor. Servants frantically searched for their lords and other servants amidst heralds calling reports of death and dying. Many lords abandoned their property and valuables to seize the opportunity to leave while they still could. They even wore leathers, so if they were robbed, the thieves wouldn't kill them for their armor.

The group entered The Whitecoat's compound through an open

and unmanned pedestrian gate. According to the messenger, there were about 20 people left in the compound after Slart left with the guards. Half wanted to loot, and half felt loyal to The Whitecoat. After the fight broke out, the rioters raided the weapon cache in the barracks, and the loyalists fled to the warehouse and locked themselves inside. Karp's group was met by ten people carrying spears and banging on the warehouse door. The rioters stopped and faced Karp's group. Slart stepped forward.

“Drop your weapons!”

A woman in the group rushed at Slart with a spear. Slart drew a knife from her pouch and threw it into the woman's shoulder. Her advance halted when she dropped her spear and clutched her wound. Three more rioters stepped forward. Karp freed her whip, threw it forward and shot the blade into the air, cutting one spear in two. She swung the blade through the air and cut the heads off the other two spears and caught the blade on the rebound. Another rioter stabbed at Nort who disinterestedly grabbed the incoming spear and thrust the butt back into his attacker's face. The remaining rioters threw down their weapons and surrendered. The guards escorted them to the barracks and locked them in two rooms. Slart, Nort, Karp, and the messenger proceeded to the warehouse door.

“This is Slart, the manager of the general store and Karp, The Whitecoat's apprentice. Open the warehouse door.”

The bar securing the warehouse door scraped and the door crept open. Injured workers filed out, followed by a few uninjured

workers.

“What happened here?”

An older gentleman stepped forward.

“Well, uh, one of them convoy bosses came here after you left. He gathered all us workers and said The Whitecoat's dead, the inn's destroyed, the general store's destroyed, and all the lords that supplied The Whitecoat was dead. He said w' all should talk about what to do after Korg's business crumbles. Sure 'nough the whole crowd was riled up, and a melee broke out. That convoy boss tried to calm everyone, but it was too late. Durn fool tells everyone we'll be starving in the streets come winter, but stay calm! Those traitors ransacked the barracks, so we ran to get weapons from the warehouse, but uh....”

A large hole was blown in the side of the warehouse's weapons vault. Crates plugged a matching hole in a side wall.

"We couldn't do nothin but watch 'em ransack the manor. After they looted there, they came poundin' this door, and you came save us."

- - -

Given the amount of deaths of prestigious guests, there was never another Founder's Day Festival in the Village of the Traitor's Tavern. Eventually, the day of the incident was named

the Last Festival. After several days of quelling the aftermath of the Last Festival; Karp, Nort, and Slart finally sat together for a meal and discussed what happened. Slart carried two mugs of ale.

“The next round for Karp the Scorpion!”

“the scorpion?”

"That's what the uh traders going through the store call you. They say 'we heard The Scorpion that fought Jorn the Betrayer and The Mandrake works here.'"

Slart whipped her hand and made a swooshing sound.

“mandrake? why mandrake? they aren't even supposed to be blue. they're supposed to be an ugly brown.”

“I think it's because he looks like The uh Manta and is a herald of death. Man-ta, Man-drake, get it?”

“yea.... i bet whoever thought of that thinks they're so clever.”

“Do they say anything about me?”

“Sure do! They say 'that Morning Shield sure could take a beating'!!”

Nort put his head on the table, too depressed to look up. Karp and Slart patted his shoulders to comfort him. Nort's childish mannerisms clashed with his adult sound and appearance. A man walked by and felt the need to comment.

“Some guys have all the luck!”

Karp pushed back her chair so that she could put a hand on both of Nort's shoulders. The man tripped on Karp's chair and crashed into a table of men drinking and spilled all of their mugs. The group picked him up and hurled him out the front door.

“Karp!”

Karp just shrugged, sat in her chair, and pulled it under the table. Karp fingered her whip's handle while she thought about everything that's happened since the Last Festival. The biggest change was that Karp and Nort wore armor around town since they didn't know the enemies' identity or numbers and didn't want to be ambushed.

“It's been uh kind of tough for you with Korg gone huh?”

“i had a year to digest what happened, but you must still have a lot of feelings.”

"Oh... yeah... for sure. Though I'm more in shock about what happened to Nort, I know they say kids grow up fast but..."

Slart faked a big smile. Karp explained everything they learned in the Shift World.

“Ha! So Nort is called a scholar? It's weird how the same person could be so different.... but, uh, why exactly is he older?”

“well, we learned that if i shifted near him, he would follow me to this world, but he wouldn't have any memory of me. then i got to thinking, what if he was there when i shifted to find supplies? then i remembered the little lordling outside the store

who wore armor similar to wili. it's hard to tell outright that was him since his armor was so generic, so we decided that he'd try and memorize 'protect the woman.' you see he could remember a small phrase when he shifted, but he'd age about five years for each word he remembered.

this came with its own risks, though. if i was wrong and wili was never in our world, he'd still be adolescent when we shifted back, but it would be worse if he were already middle-aged in our world because if we put on too many years, he'd be a little old man. i was betting that he was the lordling that was near the general store, and the gamble paid off."

“uh, but weren't you worried that he was just going to be some confused guy who didn't know how to fight?”

Nort lifted his head and wiped around his eyes.

“I'd have to admit that it was pretty confusing at first. One moment I was standing behind Karp and the next moment I was standing there in armor, and she's telling me to run. From then on I tried concentrating on shifting but nothing was happening until The Mandrake was getting ready to kill me and then suddenly I was taller, I felt much stronger, I was holding the shield and the phrase 'protect the woman' was running through my mind, so I fought back.”

Nort cracked a little smile and felt proud to contribute.

“well slart, that idea had occurred to me too, but there were two last things written about scholars i could take advantage of:

1. things that aren't natural to the world effect and are effected by a scholar like something that did exist in the world.

2. a shifter's powers don't effect scholars

in the shift world, all of the metals had the same effect on his seashell shield. so it seemed like everything worked like iron. there is no metal in this world, so we figured it must be as strong as wood or something and given how the mandrake's sword broke on his shield, it seems we were right."

"What if, uh, they aimed for exposed skin?"

Karp chuckled nervously.

"good thing they didn't... as far as the powers go, one time a banshee shouted and knocked me off my feet. wili was standing next to me, but he was unaffected. he also got directly hit by an asaghi's fire and wasn't affected, so it seemed like that was right. it was a risk that i could get my whip, repair it, and kill the sunflower without them realizing their attacks were futile, but it worked out."

"I've been reading the journal, and it looks like I've had 32 lives. In those lives, it has nothing about someone being able to use powers in their home world, so I think they were down-shifters from another world."

Nort seemed very proud of himself.

"yeah, we figured that out a while ago."

Nort put his head on his arm and sobbed. Karp and Slart

rubbed his shoulders and neck to comfort him. A man walked by followed by the stench of booze.

“How do I get in on that action?”

Slart reached over and flicked a steak knife sitting on the table. After a few steps, the man shrieked, and the steak knife juttred from his foot. The man tried hobbling away but fell onto a table of men drinking ale and spilled all their mugs.

“AGAIN!!!”

The men grabbed him, dragged him to the front door and hurled him out.

“Slart!? no never mind, he deserved it.”

“So what do we do now? Pretend like none of this ever happened?”

“we need more information.”

“What about the bog djinn?”

“that's just a legend.”

“What if it's not? What if it's a 300-year-old up-shifter and just parts of the tale are exaggerated or wrong?”

“Well... maybe... we could ask Trolt, one of Korg's ollllllllld business partners, I mean he's old, but more like 90. We need to talk to him any way if we want to keep the store open.”

“good. we'll leave in a month. it will give us time to set things

straight here. until then we train everyday!”

Nort gave an uneasy smile.

- - -

One month later Karp, Nort, and Slart visited the general store for supplies before leaving the Village of the Traitor's Tavern. An assistant manager was running the store until Slart returned, which wouldn't be difficult because without most of the supply chain available, there was not much to manage.

“Oh, Scorpion, there's a package here for you.”

The assistant manager walked to the vault and returned with a small wooden box similar to the one that housed the water dagger. Karp opened the box and was dumbfounded at the dragon fire dagger accompanied by a small note.

“You've grown a lot over the years, see you soon.”

“Wow... looks like we're set now.”

Karp looked at Slart who was grinning.

“Who do you know who can give a gift like that? Can I meet them?”

“i don't know. only korg had that kind of coin, and he's...”

After looking over the dagger for a few more minutes, Karp

closed the box.

“can you add a sheath to the order?”

“Of course.”

The trio completed their purchase, packed enough food and supplies to last a few days, and Karp brought the remaining supplies to her storehouse. When she finished, there was a water steel dagger on her left side, and the dragon fire dagger was attached to her whip. After preparations had been complete, Nort and Karp shifted into the store in large travel cloaks which hid their armor. Slart traveled only in leathers.

Slart, Nort, and Karp departed the village through the northern gate. They gave the blue and red gate one last look and headed north until dark. They made camp before entering the Rocky Valley. Karp, Nort, and Slart all spent the night wondering what waited for them up the road.

Chapter 7

Karp, Slart, and Nort prepared to enter the Rocky Valley as the sun rose. Karp placed her hand on the tent where they spent the night, and it disappeared. She put her hand on the side of a supply jar, and it disappeared. The trio headed into the mouth of the valley which was an old river bed cutting through a medium sized hill. The walls were layered clay spotted with black lichen. The steep hill was covered with loose dirt and rocks which made crossing over treacherous. Circumventing the hill could take several days, and so Karp decided to risk crossing through the valley.

500 years ago the valley was only approximately 10 feet wide, but after metals were discovered, local lords quarried clay from the hill's walls and doubled the valley's width. The local lords' hopes to become self-reliant on clay goods were dashed when the valley walls became unstable. Operations eventually stopped after frequent collapses cost more than imports. Every year small sections of the valley wall collapsed, and so locals frequently checked the walls for signs of weakness or change while traversing the valley. Karp, Nort, and Slart entered the valley and Karp surveyed the valley walls. Every step Karp kicked up dust and pebbles.

“this almost feels like being in the arid desert.”

Nort and Slart gazed around the walls and river bed. Neither

had ever seen the Arid Desert since the entrance to the Crossroads was heavily controlled by the royal family and only a privileged few crossed between the world's regions. Dirt and rocks fell from atop the valley wall. Karp stopped and inspected the wall where the rocks fell, but there were no cracks or changes. The air in the valley was still, and the wind wasn't blowing the dirt and rocks off the wall.

“What?”

“it's probably nothing. let's go.”

A man in seashell steel armor ate a handful of dried food near the valley's exit. He drank from a small gourd, wiped a drop of water from his mouth and attached the gourd to his belt. He turned and marched off at the sight of strangers approaching. Just outside the valley, the man met a beggar. The beggar clutched his arm, raised her hand, and placed it on the man's face. The man said something to the woman, and she glanced back at Karp and the others. He reached for her hand, but she pulled away and descended into the valley. The man continued up the road.

The beggar met Karp, Slart, and Nort at the mouth of the valley. She approached Karp, drew her hand from her long travel cloak, and reached out. Nort jumped between Karp and the beggar and grabbed the woman's wrist.

“i know what it's like to be desperate.”

Nort eased and released the woman's wrist. The beggar smiled and reached past Nort, but he kept her from moving any farther

forward. Karp fished around under her travel cloak where she kept her coin purse. Karp looked up the road, and the man in white stood watching the interaction. The woman slowly turned her hand toward Karp, and a slight yellow gleam emanated from under the beggar's cloak.

“Thank you for everything, Scorpion.”

The woman straightened her back and raised her eyes. Karp reached her right hand from under her cloak, and her whip shot forward, wrapped around the woman's neck and its blade sunk into her right shoulder. The woman clawed at the whip digging into her throat with her left hand, and her right arm hung limp. The man in white, Nort, and Slart stood in shock, but then the merchant sprinted toward the valley. Nort rushed out of the valley to meet him. A third person wearing leathers jumped down from the valley wall and headed for Karp. Slart drew a steel knife and threw it into the man's thigh. The man initially dropped to the ground but rose again. Slart threw another knife into his other thigh, and he fell to his back and weakly pushed himself to a nearby boulder.

“who are you people?”

The woman clawed at the whip, but couldn't get under the leather and steel. Nort met the merchant near the valley entrance and butted him in the face with his shield. The man tumbled and rolled around clutching his head. His open helmet didn't protect his exposed face and Nort's strike broke his nose. He rolled onto his stomach and watched the beggar. His eyes teared and

reddened.

The beggar jerked, and the whip fell from Karp's hand. The woman stared past Karp and shouted.

“NO.....NO.....STOP.....”

The man cautiously found his feet and stared down to Karp and the beggar. A bloodless hole gaped from the woman's chest, and she slipped to her knees. She checked her wound and eyed Karp one more time before collapsing. The trader looked over to the man in leathers propped against a boulder. Tears and blood freely flowed down his cheeks, and he turned and fled. Nort went to pursue but decided to check on Slart and Karp.

Slart investigated the man in leathers. She cut a major artery in his left leg when she attempted to disable him, and he died from the wounds. Karp recovered her whip from the body and removed the corpse's travel cloak. The beggar wore a sunshine steel hauberk. A large hole despoiled the center, and a gash cut into the right shoulder.

The group traveled until dusk and made camp in a small cave on the edge of a forest. They built a fire, cooked dinner and discussed the events at the Rocky Valley.

“So, uh, how did you know? About the ambush I mean.”

“i didn't. i just often kill random vagrants.”

Slart didn't appreciate that answer.

“i spent years begging for coin so i could eat or stay at an inn.”

that cloak she had could have fed her for a month. even if it had some sentimental value, that sunshine steel she wore could feed and shelter her for years. plus there was that merchant; he clearly was interested in our meeting. i had the feeling we were being followed from the valley wall since something kept knocking dirt and rocks off the ledge. the clincher, though, is when she called me 'scorpion.' there's no way she could have seen the whip under the cloak, which means either the merchant told her, or she knew in advance."

“What did you do to her?”

“do to her?”

Slart put her palms on her chest and fanned out her fingers.

“i didn't do that. i don't know why that happened.”

“well... at least it didn't uh, ruin the armor.”

Nort shuttered.

“Did you really have to loot the bodies?”

“It's not like they need it.”

“just like i told wili when he had the same complaint, every piece of armor or weapon you use has come from a corpse, one way or the other.”

- - -

The next day Karp, Nort, and Slart traveled along the main trade route. Traveling was relaxed when the road snaked along open fields, but the group tensed when enclosed by woods. The specter of another ambush haunted them from tree to tree. Karp especially tensed when a bush rustled, or the wind blew, but no one appeared. By evening the group reached an off shoot road. Two brown pillars with white stripes rolling down the outside edges held aloft a navy blue crossbeam covered in gold stars. The large gate spanning the road symbolized the Village of the Bog Djinn. The sun was setting, and the travelers searched for a place to spend the night.

Night fell by the time the group made camp in a clearing in the woods just off the main road. The clearing was just large enough to build a small fire and set up Karp's tent. Slart killed a rabbit with one of her throwing knives, and it roasted on a spit. The whole group felt the strain of a day spent on constant guard.

“What do you think we'll find there?”

“i don't know, but we'll find out tomorrow.”

“Why don't we just go there tonight?”

“we don't want to walk around a destroyed village in the dark.”

“But we could stay in the inn or something.”

“Look. If we showed up in the middle of the night and started

breaking into buildings, then any survivors would probably attack us. Plus if any of those shifters were around..."

“Yeah, but...”

“Enough!”

Nort and Karp sat glaring at each other. Singing cracked the tension.

“Broken light, The Scorpion's sting
Couldn't save the merchant king
No maul hit
No sword slit
Fell in a comrade's clutch
Killed by a betrayer's touch

Mandrake killed an envoy
Next up was just a boy
There he ran
With a plan
That The Whitecoat came close to foil
Until The Sunflower did spoil

While two enemies assail
Apprentice almost did fail
Times to blame
An ally came
The Morning Shield rose to meet
Bringing in the enemies' defeat

Broken light, The Scorpion's sting
Couldn't save the merchant king
No maul hit
No sword slit
Fell in a comrade's clutch
Killed by a betrayer's touch.”

Slart generally only sang when she was drunk or depressed, and so frustration turned to guilt since Karp knew that Slart was worn out from spending the last month putting on a brave face for Nort.

“I uh was thinking about making a song about what happened.”

Nort got up and walked behind Slart and the bushes behind her rustled.

“be careful nort.”

Nort turned around as a devil flew from behind the bush and tackled him over Slart. Nort and the devil rolled over the fire and landed near the tent. The devil clawed and tore at Nort's hauberk with its bare hands. Links in the armor snapped and twisted. Karp jumped up, unsheathed her water dagger and thrust the blade into the side of the devil's head. Blood shot from the wound and the devil's corpse dropped to the dirt. Karp rolled the corpse over, and a small red crystal fell from its mouth. The oblong crystal was half as long as Karp's little finger. After examining it, she placed it in her coin pouch.

Blood covered Nort's chainmail, and several links were broken. The blood was from the devil's scratched fingers, which were cut and bleeding from tearing at Nort's armor. Karp grabbed the bloody dagger, placed her hand on the devil's temple, and pulled the dagger free with a wet crunch. The devil's head was not only moist from blood, but the black scales felt softer than the ones in Shift World. Slart moved Nort away from the corpse.

“how is this possible?”

- - -

Shortly after daybreak the next morning, Karp, Slart, and Nort headed into the Village of the Bog Djinn. The village was constructed around a large warehouse, and the group checked there first. The warehouse's heavy main doors were ajar. Smashed crates littered the work floor. A stone vault in the rear had a large hole in the face and was empty except for racks designed to hold weapons and armor.

Houses sprawled in all directions from the warehouse. Almost every house had fire damage ranging from singed walls and roofs to being burnt to the foundation. The local inn's roof burned and collapsed into the second floor, but the first floor still had several usable rooms. The general store didn't fare as well; the entire structure collapsed into a heap of rotting wood and ash. The houses were looted, and there were no signs of life.

“if anyone survived, they left a long time ago.”

“Yeah. Uh, which way do you want to go?”

“what are the options?”

“Well, uh, we can continue up the trade route and then head south through a little swamp, or we can just head north from here and cut through the big swamp.”

Something in a burned out house reacted to the sound of their voices. A wooden beam crashed through the darkness. Karp freed her whip. Nort dropped his riding cloak and swung his shield off his back.

“Get out here!”

An emaciated girl walked out of the building with a jerky unsteady gait. Her skin stretched over her bones like a skeleton, but her complexion was pale and not gray. Slart pushed her way between Karp and Nort, approached the girl and wrapped her arms around the child.

“What's, uh, wrong sweetie?”

The child pulled away and looked into Slart's eyes. Slart placed her hand on the girl's face, and the girl flinched and turned from the contact but eventually gave up resisting and buried her face into Slart's blouse.

“what's your name?”

The child peaked out at Karp who tried to force a smile. The

child buried her face deeper into Slart's blouse and cried.

“do you think she's been here since the village was destroyed?”

“Just look at her! I'd say that's a safe bet.”

Slart gently rubbed the back of the child's head.

“how old do you think she is? she's too tall to be a little kid, but she doesn't act like a teenager...”

“She's been through a lot, that's all...”

“What are we going to do with her? We can't bring her with us, and we can't leave her here.”

“Well.... maybe I should bring her back to the, uh, Traitor's Tavern Inn.”

“don't you need to talk to trolt?”

“I guess you have to do it. Just find out if he still plans on sending his convoys through town and supplying the general store.”

The idea of running the business daunted Karp, but she thought this task would be easy enough.

“which way should we go?”

“Well... since I'm not going to be there, take the main route, but the main route goes all the way around the swamp, and you're going to need to travel for two days to even get there.”

“what exactly is the time difference?”

“Hmmm... through the swamp about a day and a half, around the swamp about six days.”

“i think we'll take the swamp trail, do we need to know anything?”

"Just take the path and uh if it forks, just head north. Eventually, you'll see a tall stone spire. That's your destination."

Karp and Nort escorted Slart and the little girl to the main gate at the edge of the forest. Slart and the girl returned to the Village of the Traitor's Tavern. Slart and the girl carried food but didn't have a tent for their return to the Village of the Traitor's Tavern. More than likely they would spend the next night at a stranger's farm house.

Karp and Nort returned to the village and searched for signs of the villagers' fates, but the burnt out houses yielded no clues. They spent the night in a mostly undamaged room on the first floor of the inn after a fruitless search.

- - -

Within a few hours of traveling through the swamp, Karp and Nort were completely, helplessly lost. Slart failed to mention that some trails forked northwest and northeast and she never indicated which was a better north. Karp and Nort trudged

through a quagmire. Every step sucked their boots into the mud and their greaves released with a pop. Trudging through the mud became exhausting, and Karp rested when the bog intersected another path. Karp surveyed the northern skyline, but there wasn't a stone tower. Nort finally caught up, and they had a quick drink of water before continuing.

After following a dirt path for a few minutes, the pair reached an opening. A field with bushes replaced the swamp and trees. They stood under open skies for the first time in hours. Karp breathed in deep, choked and wrinkled her nose.

“ack... why do swamps smell this bad?”

“I don't know, but it's not natural.”

Karp and Nort followed the path but stopped dead in their tracks after some shrubbery. Bodies were piled practically to the top of a 25 foot long by 12-foot wide trench dug just off the side of the road. Skin and flesh partially slid off a few of the decomposing corpses. The pristine bodies of skeletons and devils mixed in with the rotting people.

“the villagers...”

“What.... what are... tho....those things?”

“the ones with bright gray skin pulled tight and bulged eyes are skeletons, the ones with dark skin and what looks like scales are devils.”

“Why are they here?”

“i don't know. maybe they attacked that village.”

“but then why are they HERE?”

“that's much harder to explain.”

Karp put her hands on Nort's shoulders and turned him away from the pit. They unsteadily walked away and continued down the path. Eventually, it thinned to a few feet wide and was again surrounded by trees and swamp. Something disturbed the bushes behind them.

“RUN.”

Karp pushed Nort, and they sprinted down the path. A rustling sound followed and drew closer; Karp heard a strange shrieking and whining. Once Karp and Nort passed the trees, they dived and rolled off the path into an open field. Karp spun mid-tumble, drew her dagger and finished the roll crouched on her feet ready to strike. A wild boar bolted from the end of the path and ran across the field.

“There goes dinner.”

Karp and Nort laughed. Karp's eyes moved up from the boar crossing the field to the horizon. Dark brown stones circled stories above the treeline to make a guard tower. Barely visible soldiers in white stood sentry on landings. The tower's roof was covered in dark blue tiles speckled with gold that glowed ominously against the orange sky.

“that's where we're going. i'm guessing it's about 2 or 3 hours

from here. we'll make camp in this field and head there at first light."

Nort marveled at the large stone building.

"this is the first time you've seen a building like that, huh?"

"Yeah, I've only ever seen the vaults at the general store and The Whitecoat's compound."

"they're all over the place in shift world."

"Really? How?"

"well, we only have them now after we discovered metal, but only the really rich have them. i guess since shift world had always had metal, they just built a bunch."

"if there are no people there, who built everything?"

"there must have been people there at some point, but they all disappeared 1000 years ago. i mean in the conqueror's time there was just monsters, so at least that long ago..."

- - -

The next morning Karp and Nort emerged from the tree line and faced a 50-foot wide chasm between them and the three-story stone castle. Nort's eyes darted between parapets on the wall and stone towers that rose another three stories over the main keep.

Karp tapped his shoulder and pointed to a small wood and rope bridge. The pair skirted the chasm until they reached the dilapidated bridge.

Karp took her first step, and the bridge swayed unevenly. The boards creaked and cracked under the weight of Nort's steps. Every few paces the wind blew, and Karp and Nort stopped advancing and threw their arms around the bridge's suspension ropes. Guards on the wall's walkways notched arrows and followed the pair's every move. Nort's leg broke through a rotted plank and sunk to the knee. Karp wanted to help but was afraid the bridge couldn't support them both in the same spot. Nort carefully removed his leg and continued.

The bridge led to a small tunnel filled with holes barely large enough to fit an arrow. People moved behind the murder holes. The heavy door at the end of the hall opened as Karp and Nort arrived. A young man wearing a steel helmet and carrying a spear addressed them.

“Come with me.”

The guard turned and scurried into the castle. Karp and Nort followed, and two guards closed the heavy door behind them.

“You caused quite a stir.”

“*us? why?*”

“We expected three people coming through the main gate, not two people coming through the back gate.”

“there's another gate?”

“Of course! Do you think house guests normally cross a rickety bridge over a deep chasm that only connects to a swamp? No one's used that bridge in years! Do you have any clue how dangerous that was? The servants have a dance troupe and band too, and they were waiting at the main gate for you! They're going to be so disappointed!”

“... ”

“ummm....Sorry?”

The trio stopped at a large door to a grand hall. The doors swung open to a mostly empty room. A withered old man hunched over a large wooden chair at the end of the hall. Six guards clad in seashell armor lined with yellow steel stood sentry. The old man perked up when the visitors approached.

“Sir! The Morning Shield and The Scorpion have arrived without Slart... they entered through the rear door.”

“Ohhh he he. The rear door you say? Ohhh the servants are going to be so disappointed.”

TroIt dismissed the guard with a wave. Karp stood straight, met eyes with TroIt and bowed.

“i'm karp the scorpion, app...”

“ha ha ha ha oh cut it out eh? I'm too old to waste my life with formalities. I already know who you are and you know who I am. Why isn't Slart with you?”

"we were checking out the village of the bog djinn, and we found a starving little girl in the wreckage. we didn't think she could survive the trip here and we didn't want to leave her, so slart brought her back to the traitor's tavern."

"he he ohhhh was that all? no other reasons aye?"

"we were attacked on the road by a group of shifters. we foiled their ambush, but one escaped. i know you might find this hard to believe, but someone found a way to bring skeletons and devils back from the shift world, so i sent her back, so she wouldn't be in the way if we fought someone or something stronger."

"Phhhhh....Oh, come on! That's not possible."

"it is. we were attacked by a devil outside the village, and we found the villager's bodies in the woods mixed in with skeletons and devils."

"Why are you so sure? Psshhhh... what do you know of skeletons anyway?"

Trolt moved around in his seat. Karp realized there was something more to his words, but Nort was still clueless.

"They are monsters from the Shift World. They clearly destroyed whatever civilization built the ruins. Probably thousands of years ago. They are soulless killers that look vaguely human, but can only destroy and kill. Shifters need to destroy these monsters to win prizes and fame."

Trolt lacked any hint of playfulness.

“Is that what they teach you in school, boy? They are monsters. Monsters created by shifters! They aren't created with dirt and soil. Oh no! They are made by exposing people to shifter magic. All shifter magic radiates power, an energy that corrupts the life of everything that's not a shifter. The more powerful and destructive the magic, the more energy that radiates. So these 'monsters' are those who survived fireballs and shock waves and changed. The more energy they were exposed to, the stronger the monster they became. This didn't happen thousands of years ago or even 1,000 years ago. It started 500 years ago with the arrival of The Conqueror.”

The guards reacted to Trolt's emotions until he raised his hand and they returned to their posts. Trolt calmed a little.

“The Conqueror lived in my world for many years, and then one day he destroyed the Crossroads. Poof! Blighted the whole area. Blighted the whole area. There is no record as to why he did it, but it happened. Soon more and more shifters began to appear. Those shifters became warlords, bandits, and kings. They pillaged whatever they wanted. Changed people into monsters just to set an example, or used them as weapons, but these creatures can't be controlled, so often as not these shifters destroyed whole villages or towns, but didn't gain a thing. The Demon Reborn tried to stop the destruction, but after 100 years it was too late. My world was completely ravaged.”

Nort was so amazed at the difference between Trolt's version of history and what he learned at school that his thoughts just

slipped out.

“Are you The Bog Djinn?”

Trolt's mood lightened.

“he he, you mean you came here and didn't even know that much? What DID The Whitecoat tell you?”

Karp was stupefied by Nort's directness.

“Well... nothing. We just knew the legend of The Bog Djinn and figured he must be a shifter.”

“Oh? What is the legend these days? Hmmm? It seems to get worse every year!”

“Uh, let's see. The Bog Djinn is 300 years old and grants wishes. If he grants your wish, he takes everything you love when you die.”

“uh, what a hoot! It's actually not that far off, but a little bit, hmmm exaggerated. I am close to 300 years old, but I don't grant wishes. By the time I was 100, I had more than I knew what to do with, so I started investing it. People kept control of their businesses, and once they died, it was all mine. I won half of the largest businesses in the world, wu ha ha ha ah.”

“do you now own the whitecoat's trade business?”

“I always have my dear. Don't worry Slart will take over the store and you will take over running the warehouse.”

“...but the whitecoat never taught me how to make cloth.”

“Wow wow wow, you really don't know anything. Korg couldn't make cloth; he was just a middle man. He would bring iron and steel to the other Shift World and trade it for cloth. He would then sell the cloth here for about ten times what it cost him there. You look confused... I'm telling you he's an angel and he would trade for it. These shifters you've been facing are demons from that world. They also act as middlemen.”

“you said demon, angel, and magic. where did you learn these terms?”

“He he, do you think The Morning Shield is the first scholar I've met? People show up, read their books and seek out the 300-year-old. Though people who come through the Shift World tend to call everything angels, demons, scholars, and magic. People who come the other way tend to say djinn, fury, planes-walker, and abilities.”

“that's quite a coincidence.”

“oh- not really at some point someone got the idea to carry a book that explains everything and they started convincing others to carry books and told them what to write.”

“how would you know if someone is a scholar?”

“It's actually really easy. You look for someone who randomly shows up with no memory, wearing armor that doesn't fit.”

Troлт looked squarely at Nort.

“You mean The Whitecoat knew all along??”

“Sure did! Probably would of told you too, maybe, but how do you tell a kid they are something that doesn't exist?”

There was awkward silence as the words sank in.

“why are the down-shifters attacking?”

“I don't know... we set up this trading racket to prevent this. We were hoping that if we introduced metals to the other world and taught them about powers and the genocide that comes with it that they wouldn't attack. It did work for a while, oh... maybe 30 years, but then one day the shifters disappeared and started killing, stealing, and destroying towns.”

The Bog Djinn sighed, like the weight of the conversation squeezed the air out of him.

“Unfortunately human nature probably just won out. Why live like lords when you can live like kings? Or gods?”

“i guess we are going to have to go to the shift world and get better gear.”

Trolt's knuckles turned white as he grabbed the arm on his chair.

“Did you hear nothing I said? Your people committed genocide for baubles and trinkets! You can stay for tonight, but tomorrow you leave.”

Guards approached Karp and Nort to escort them from the room.

“Wait.”

Trolt gestured to an attendant on the edge of the room. The attendant left and returned with a scroll. Trolt took and unrolled the scroll.

“This is the written system of my people. Although we speak the same language, the writing systems are different. Our writing is sound based, so if you use the scroll, you can decode what books say. If you insist on going back to the Shift World, bring back any books you might come across that look important.”

Trolt offered the scroll, Karp walked up, and her riding cloak parted as she extended her hand. Trolt read the writing on the whip's handle.

"Do you remember where you got that whip? It reads 'Morgoth.' That was a medium lord who lived around three months south-east of the provincial capital. The capital was one of the last places that still had humans. If there is anything left in the region stronger than that dragon fire knife, it will be there.”

"thank you for that. also, thank you for the dagger but what do you mean 'i've grown'?"

"he he one slip of the tongue is all it took aye? Well, a few years ago I got reports that a young woman shifted and stole something. Soon caravans reported losing money at the throwing board to a young woman who seemed to know the answer to everything. Then there were sightings of a woman who doesn't sleep, but practices in the woods at night and seems to have

access to armor. Finally, it all came together after you ended up in the Traitor's Tavern. Now you're getting ready to take over The Whitecoat's business. Quite a distance you traveled I'd say."

- - -

Karp and Nort left the Bog Djinn's castle the next day. In order to have an easier return, they decided to travel the main road instead of traversing the swamp, even though it would take several more days. The road leading around the swamp headed north to a milling town before turning east and finally south. Karp and Nort departed The Bog Djinn's castle's main gate. The path was a solid stone walkway spanning the chasm on stone pillars. Two horse drawn carts could travel abreast on the walkway. Karp and Nort crossed the bridge after being sent off with a special performance by Trolt's servants.

"So... do you think they practiced that?"

"i....don't.....think.....so."

"Have you ever seen anything like that?"

"no."

"I think next time we come we risk the back door."

"agreed."

"What do you think about what The Bog Djinn said?"

“i knew korg was keeping something from us, but i didn't know it was this much.”

“Well, that much didn't even phase me. I mean what he said about devils and skeletons. Do you think it's OK to kill them?”

“i don't think that changed. they are mindless and will kill us if they get the chance.”

“Do you think they can change or be fixed?”

“i doubt it; they are probably at least 250 to 300 years old. even if we 'fixed' them, they'd be dead anyway.”

“You said 'if they get the chance.' What if we just didn't give them a chance?”

“what? like sneak around them?”

“Yeah.”

“what would that serve? if there is any humanity left in them, they must be in agony.”

“...but how do you know that? You just kill them on sight!”

Karp and Nort walked the road each peering off into the distance on either side. A doe walked into an open field near an old destroyed farm house and ate wild wheat stalks. A calf stumbled through bushes on the way to its mother. Every leap the calf tripped and its front legs buckled under the rest of the body. Each time it fell, the calf clumsily rose to its feet and leaped

again. The calf tried and failed until it joined the doe and feasted on the succulent plants. Karp smiled and turned to Nort to show him the wild deer, but he instinctually turned from her gaze as she tried to get his attention.

Karp and Nort walked in silence for the next several hours until they reached the inn at the milling village. Karp was unsure what to say since Nort was right that she never tried to understand the creatures in the Shift World, but she also didn't believe change was possible. Once they were at the inn though, Karp booked two rooms, and they headed to the tavern.

“two ales.”

Karp and Nort took the beers to a nearby table, sat down, and drank in silence. Karp spoke after drinking a few rounds and eating a warm seasoned dinner.

“why don't we just go back to the village of the traitor's tavern and live out our days there?”

“What are you going on about?”

“i mean we talk about getting weapons to fight some opponent that probably doesn't even care about us. why don't we just go back to the traitor's tavern? me, you, and your mom can live in peace. one day you can meet a nice girl and settle down. there'll be a wedding. slart will have grandkids to chase after, and in 50 years we'll all die in our sleep, and your children and grandchildren will mourn our passing.”

“How can you be drunk already?”

"i'm not; i'm serious. you know that one barmaid likes you. especially since you.... uhhmmmmm grew up."

Nort blushed.

“I doubt you could stay still that long. We're going back to the Village of the Traitor's Tavern anyway.”

Nort's voice carried further than Karp's and those around them hushed. A man turned and spoke.

“You haven't heard yet?”

“heard what?”

“The village square has been attacked.”

“we already know about the festival.”

“No, a few days ago... they burned the village hall and killed any witnesses...”

“Did they destroy the general store?!”

Karp grabbed the man by the collar. Her cloak parted, and people saw her armor and whip.

“Scorpion... I don't know.... The news today is bleak. The Mandrake spreads around the roads, heading toward the capital. People are disappearing, dying. The Traitor's Tavern is just one thing and not all that clear...”

Karp released the man.

“We need to go back to the tavern and check on Slart. Maybe we can get information from the girl.”

Chapter 8

Karp and Nort returned to the Village of the Traitor's Tavern in four days by changing into leathers and running from sunup to sundown. After sunset, they erected a tent by the side of the road and slept for a few hours before walking the road by moonlight. Karp wanted to move the whole time, but Nort couldn't handle the stress. Even if Wili slept in the Shift World, Nort would still be tired, and so they had no choice but to sleep in their world.

They arrived at the village square in early afternoon. The village hall was razed. Karp walked toward the charred remains and shifted into armor. Ash covered workers moved burnt wood and clay debris from the pile of rubble.

“We've found another.”

The workers backed away from the rubble, and others numbly approached with a leather sheet. They laid the sheet over a small section of the pile and worked it around a six-foot oblong object. They carried the blanket and object to a barracks size tent in the rear field.

Karp turned to the Traitor's Tavern Inn. One side of the inn's main door was missing, and the remaining hinges were bent and stretched. Smashed tables dotted the floor inside, bar men removed splintered kegs from the walls, and serving girls cleaned blood stains from the wooden plank flooring. Karp and Nort approached one of the young women cleaning the floor.

“what happened here?”

The woman balked at Karp's words but then continued to clean faster.

“A few nights ago someone came, burned the village hall and killed every witness. They broke in here and.... and....”

The girl stopped for a moment to wipe away tears.

“so there are no witnesses?”

“Just one. Some graybeard from the village hall. He died shortly after talking to the manager of the store, Slart.”

Karp and Nort both sunk a little at hearing the news that Slart was alright. The young woman noticed their sudden change and looked up from her task.

“Scorpion? Nort?

The girl jumped up, threw her arms around Nort and cried.

"I was so worried... Slart told me about the attacks, and this happened."

Nort didn't know how to handle a sudden outpour of emotion.

“I was worried too, Malis. I was worried too. I heard everyone near the village square died, and we couldn't find out anything more, so we rushed back.”

“If it wasn't a slow night, I'd be dead too! The graybeards met to talk about saving the festival and merchants haven't really come back much since the last festival and workers haven't gotten paid much, so they weren't here either.”

“I'm going to check out the general store. remember what I said a few days ago...”

Karp put her hand on Nort who turned a light red. She exited through the alley and entered the side door of the general store. The display fixtures were returned to their original positions, but most were empty. The attackers smashed clay jars lining the wall and broke down the vault door. Small stone chips littered the ground, and deep gouges crisscrossed the door's face. The vault was empty.

“They even, uh, took The Whitecoat and The Sunflower's bodies.”

Karp embraced Slart.

“I was so worried about you.”

“Luck was on my side.”

Karp let go, and Slart winked.

“all the merchandise is either broken, stolen, or soiled. what's lucky?”

“Well, uh, I originally brought Lark to my apartment here, but all the people moving around made her really nervous, sooooo I moved her to a guest room at The Whitecoat's manor.”

Slart pointed toward The Whitecoat's compound.

“so you were with her when all this happened?”

“Yeah. Crazy, huh? First night in years I'm in the village, but

don't spend a night here.”

“one of the serving girls said that you talked to a survivor?”

“One of the graybeards was near the wreckage with a huge gash over his stomach. I talked to him, but he wasn't making ANY sense!”

“what he say?”

“Demons came to avenge one of their own.”

“demons? do you think he meant down-shifters? i'd bet people that can shoot fireballs, shockwaves, and move quickly probably seem like demons to someone who's delirious from blood loss.”

“Yeah, ummmm, maybe. Why did they take the bodies though?”

“where were the bodies?”

“In caskets in the cemetery waiting to be buried.”

“maybe they took the bodies looking for korg's armor. maybe since they are from a different world, bodies have some special meaning for them.”

Slart pouted and shrugged.

“I mean people have sentiment here too, remember? Otherwise, why haven't you started wearing Korg's old armor?”

“Well.... I.... Uh.... Just didn't want the attention, that's all.”

Slart giggled, smiled, placed her hand on Karp's cheek and

gave her a couple of light slaps.

“You're so, uh, cute when you get all upset.”

Karp growled at Slart, lowly out of the side of her mouth.

“so i talked to trolt.”

“hmmmm..... what did he say?”

“that you would run the store and i would run the warehouse.”

“That's great! I'm glad he took my suggestion.”

“your suggestion? you weren't even there.”

“It's what I suggested in the letter I sent him after we decided to go.”

“i was wondering how he knew we were coming.”

“Yeah, I figured he'd go for it when he sent you that dagger!”

Karp put her hand over her face.

“you knew who sent the dagger and why? the whole time?”

“Yeah.... but I wanted to surprise you!”

Karp put both hands over her face and started shaking her head.

“Sooooo.... Lark started talking.”

“who's lark?”

- - -

A week later Karp, Slart, Nort, and the little girl from the Village of the Bog Djinn ate dinner at the tavern. For the first time since Nort and Karp saw her, the little girl wore leathers that weren't in tatters, had a haircut, and bathed. She was still emaciated but didn't look like she might die. Every move the girl made during dinner was slow and deliberate, almost like she was afraid if she moved too quickly her meal would run away. Karp already finished by the girl's second bite.

"lark, so you're 14?"

"Yes."

She was timid and withdrawn. She spoke in fear of her listener angering and hurting her.

"so you were 13 when this all started?"

"12."

"I was 14 when this all started."

Nort smiled but his attempt to cheer her up only caused her to shrink away from his voice. Lark became fidgety and distraught over the tavern's growing crowd.

"Why don't you go to, uh, my apartment and I'll come get you in a little OK?"

"OK."

Lark ran over to the side exit and left.

"do you think she'll ever be normal again?"

"I don't know... Lark's been through a lot."

"has she told you about what happened?"

"Bits and uh, pieces. She said that one day a man came to talk to The Manta and they started fighting. The man grabbed The Manta, but he broke free and ran into the woods. Some of the villagers followed. There were explosions, and most of the villagers who were in town went into the streets. Devils flooded the town and started killing everyone. Some of the houses caught fire, and the fires spread. During all the chaos The Manta returned, but he was much worse for the wear. The devils attacked him, and he killed them with that dragon fire sword. It was too late though, all the other villagers were dead, or they locked themselves in the warehouse. The next day The Sunflower and a few of his lackeys showed up. The Manta took off his armor so his friends could treat his wounds and she says it wasn't The Manta!"

Slart took her finger and drew a line down her chest and stomach to symbolize the wound Lark described.

"the mandrake?"

"I think so.... anyway, so after The Mandrake had put his armor back on, they turned their attention to the warehouse. They

banged on the door and shouted. After a minute The Sunflower blew the door open, and inside the warehouse, skeletons started tearing people apart.”

Slart snarled, bared her teeth, and swiped her hands with spread fingers, imitating a clawing wolf.

“Well, the group then went in and cleared out the skeletons.”

“but why did they do all that?”

"According to Lark, there was another big explosion in the warehouse, and one of the men with The Sunflower walked out of the warehouse with someone wearing white armor.”

“the man who attacked us?”

“Probably. There's more.... the group started breaking into the crates at the warehouse and bringing things to one of the other people. He would touch the goods, and they'd disappear. Soon they did the same thing with anything they could salvage from the houses."

“what kind of stuff?”

“Metals and food mostly.”

“Why did only the one guy take anything?”

Slart and Karp looked at him.

“Well, I mean at least The Sunflower and The Mandrake were shifters, why didn't they take anything?”

“i don't know. maybe the other guy was just in a better position in the upper world. like he was in a warehouse, or lived near a place that could sell the merchandise.”

“What were they all doing there anyway?”

“since it was a hub of cross-world trade, they probably lived near by. slart, how did the girl survive all this?”

“She hid in her house, until it caught on fire and then she laid in mud behind some bushes. That's where she saw The Mandrake kill all the devils and loot the town.”

“so she laid in the mud for two days?”

“More like a week according to her.”

“they didn't find her while they got rid of the bodies?”

“She says a much larger group came a few weeks later and did that.”

“why didn't she join them?”

“She said The Mandrake was with them, so she hid.”

Karp sighed because she didn't want to say what she thought.

“given what just happened, i don't think they are going to leave us alone, and they clearly don't mind killing to get what they want.”

Slart was sure she wasn't going to like what Karp was going to say.

“What are you getting at?”

“we need to find that man in white or the mandrake. they are the only two we know by sight, and we need better gear, weapons, and armor if we are going to face them. so, we are going to spend a week gathering supplies, training, and resting. then we are going to the provincial capital in the shift world.”

- - -

One week later Karp arranged Korg's armor on a table in her storehouse in the Shift World. Wili stood by quietly watching, contemplating everything Karp explained before adjusting the armor. Karp picked up the seashell steel hauberk and slid it on. The sleeves were too long, the chest was too tight, and it hung too low. Karp struggled a little to remove the hauberk and placed it on the table. She removed strips by rubbing a glowing hand on the sleeves and lower section. She expanded the chest section by integrating strips into the hauberk's chainmail. She redawned the armor piece and made further adjustments until it was comfortable. She did the same for the leggings.

Karp slid on the finger tipless gloves, and they could have worked, but she didn't want any exposed skin while fighting enemies who could kill with a touch. She carefully removed the gloves' little seashell steel plates and fastened them to a full pair of gloves. Karp also transferred the boots' metal plates. Karp

practically couldn't breathe while wearing the cuirass and the shoulder flaps made swinging her arms uncomfortable. She removed the shoulder flaps and redistributed the metal into the chest. She shortened the stomach and back areas until she maintained a full range of motion while wearing both the cuirass and hauberk. She also molded the sides high enough to wear her belt with an attached whip and dagger.

Karp placed her hand over the right breast and embossed a little scorpion symbol. She turned the cuirass over and stared at the blank canvas, thinking about the best way to honor her master. Finally, she brought forth a symbol of an open coat which spanned the width of her shoulder blades. Karp donned the cuirass, her buckler, and The Whitecoat's helmet.

She exited the storehouse and practiced basic fighting techniques. Wearing gloves instead of gauntlets gave her more precise control of her whip. The leather boots and seashell steel leggings made her footwork twice as fast. In a seashell steel cuirass and hauberk, her upper body feints felt more nuanced and fluid than when she wore sunshine steel.

Compared to The Whitecoat's white cloth under-armor, Karp's brown leather mixed with the seashell steel to make her arms and legs look dingy. The cuirass and helmet's matte white enamel blended into the desert more than a polished enamel, but still stood out because of the uniform color.

“Does this mean I get your old armor?”

"why would i give that to you? it would do you no better than iron but costs much more. i'm just going to keep it here as a spare."

Karp took Korg's old boots off the counter and handed them to Wili.

"try these on."

The old boots fit, and he handed them back to Karp. She removed an iron kettle from a cabinet and used the material to reform the boot's plates.

"wear these from now on."

"Why?"

"we're trying a new kind of training. we are going to sneak around what we can."

"Huh? Anything we can sneak around we could probably kill just as easy. Anything we can't sneak around.... well we might want to get a jump on those."

"remember what i told you about these creatures? well, learning how to avoid them might give me insight into how to avoid regular people. the real danger i face is those shifters back in my world. i need to avoid them if i'm going to survive. learning from these creatures will help with that."

"Why these boots though?"

"we'll get trapped if you are clanking from room to room."

“They won't notice your bright white armor?”

“i'll think of something for that...”

Wili sighed in resignation.

“OK, so what's the plan?”

“the provincial capital is three months northeast of where that asaghi was.”

Karp unfolded Wili's hand drawn map and circled an area northeast of the asaghi's dungeon.

“this is probably our destination. on the way there we are going to stop at the safe houses and return any stored goods to my world. once we get to the asaghi's keep, we are going to follow whatever road travels northeast. we will stop at dungeons we find along the way and try to explore them without being discovered.”

“No training along the way this time?”

“for now every step will be training until we walk side by side and are so silent that we forget the other person is there.”

“What are we going to do for food? If we travel that far from the mountains, will we have access to water?”

“we'll carry a couple days worth of food and water on us, but when we run out, i'll just shift back to my world and get more. any other questions? no? good. we'll leave tomorrow.”

- - -

Progress in their training was slow. On the first day, Karp and Wili ran for an hour to reach the first safe house before sunset. Even though they departed at first light on the second day, they rushed in the last hours of daytime to make the second safe house by sunset. By the time they reached the asaghi's castle a month later, they walked silently in the sand, but their first step onto the stone floor rang through the hallways. After a week of searching the dungeon for important books to give The Bog Djinn, they settled on a tome describing local history and the asaghi's journal. The journal chronicled the life of the lord Morgoth and ominously ended with the description of bandits coming in his direction.

Karp and Wili spent another week traveling northeast on an offshoot of the main highway because the main road traveled east. The pair spent two nights on the side of the road in Karp's tent. Tensions were high, but nothing approached or made a sound. Five days into the travel they arrived at a little village on the offshoot road. They set up a safe house in an empty home with an intact roof and front door. Creatures stirred at night, but there were no signs in the skies of an asaghi or dragon.

They spent two days exploring the unremarkable village. The town's centerpiece was a two story stone dungeon surrounded by a dozen smaller clay buildings. The little village was arranged like a way station in Karp's world. The stone dungeon was most likely an inn, tavern, and general store that sold supplies to

travelers.

Two months after setting out from her storehouse Karp and Wili stood before a dungeon they've never explored and were poised to test their new training. They crept into the front door and waited for their eyes to adjust. The hall had three doors and a staircase leading to the second floor. The first door was directly to the left of the main entrance. The second door sat next to a large hearth in the center of the left-hand wall. The third door was near a counter in the rear of the right wall. The staircase was in the center of the rear wall and branched both left and right. Luckily the three doors were already ajar. A single skeleton wandered the rear of the main hall. Karp drew her dagger and headed for the door on her immediate left.

She stepped off the stoop, placing the ball of her foot in contact with the stone floor. She walked on the balls of her feet to let the leather soles of her boots absorb the shock. The skeleton stood in the center of the room, staring at an empty table. Karp entered the doorway and halted. The room was a store room only slightly larger than a closet. Wire brushes, wooden buckets, and other cleaning supplies littered floor and shelves. Karp crept out of the room after assessing that nothing was valuable but stopped mid-stride because the skeleton wandered right outside the doorway.

The skeleton stared straight at Karp but didn't regard her any more than it did a chair or bench. Karp sidestepped to a nearby table with a small clay cup sitting on top. The skeleton watched

her the whole time but made no effort to approach, let alone attack. Karp reached down, lifted the cup with her free hand and tossed it into the empty room. The creature followed the cup with its eyes and pounced at the crashing sound. The skeleton clawed at the clay fragments, and Karp shut the door and secured it with a chair. Something upstairs moved at the commotion but settled down after the noise stopped.

The door near the hearth led to a small food preparation room. Iron knives sat on a scratched up wooden board. Smashed jars and dried animal excrement were scattered everywhere on shelves. Karp removed the knives and placed them on a table in the main hall. Wooden shutters covered a window on an outside wall. Karp decided to verify something she was curious about for a long time. She tapped her toe on the ground and the creature on the second floor moved. She picked up the knives, moved to the window, and threw a knife at the wall outside the second door. The knife connected with a ringing clank and the creature on the second floor headed for the staircase.

She hurled two more knives at the wall. A devil barreled down the stairs and jerked to a stop outside the door. It initially examined the knives laying on the ground and then gazed around the hall. Karp raised her foot to tap her toe, but the devil fixated on her and sprinted across the dinning hall. It was less than ten feet from Karp when she tore down the shutter, and the devil was hit by outside light and screamed and covered its eyes. Karp leaped forward and buried the heel of her boot into the devil's face, and it flew back and fell through a table. The devil was

unconscious, but not dead. Wili hurried into the hall at the sound of the table breaking. Karp waved him over.

“help me with this.”

The skeleton in the closet banged on the door but was too weak to break through.

“Are you insane?”

“what? no. i actually learned several important things.”

Karp and Wili threw the devil into the small prep room.

“Like what?”

They barricaded the door.

“well, 1. skeletons attack things that make noise. if you are quiet, they ignore you. 2. devils attack on sight and are drawn to sound. 3. direct sunlight blinds and disorients them, and finally, they can be knocked out.”

“Still, wouldn't it just be easier to kill them?”

“shhh... we should finish up before that devil wakes up.”

They cleared the last room on the first floor, which turned out to be the general store's storage room. There were empty jars and jars with dirt. Cracked, hardened leather remained on shelves, but there wasn't a single piece of metal in the shop. Karp and Wili cleared the second floor. There were no skeletons or devils left in any of the rooms. The only notable find was a set of steel armor, a steel mace, and a small seashell steel shield. Wili picked up the

mace and started swinging it while Karp used the shield to make a buckler.

“This will do nicely.”

Karp just put her finger on her lips and glared at him. She returned the steel armor and Wili's steel sword to her world. They left the inn and headed to the safe house.

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One week later Karp and Wili arrived at the ruins of a small two story castle with a tower in the northeast corner. The castle was roughly twice the area of a normal dungeon and had a large open courtyard in the center. Several wells dotted the courtyard with small bushes mixed in with plants growing at the base. Berry yielding bushes and gourd producing vines grew near the courtyard walls. Flowers bloomed with a rich orange hue that at a distance blended into the desert's sand.

During generations of deterioration, sand invaded the courtyard and covered most objects. Periodically there were long rectangular wooden table tops suspended by stone pillars. Benches encircled the tables with a single large chair broke the line of benches on one of the table's long sides.

Karp and Wili snuck through the dungeon's main door into an antechamber with long hallways of doors stretching from the

sides. Karp and Wili entered a large hall with several rows of chairs and tables.

Two skeletons sat on chairs at the side of the room. Karp and Wili quietly walked to a large black slate with white cubes laid at the base. Papers were strewn about the floor. Karp picked up a piece, but it was illegible from the decay of time. Karp rose back to standing, and both skeletons stared at her and Wili. Karp skulked to the exit and didn't breath until she left.

Karp and Wili casually strolled to a bend in the eastern hallway since none of the doors before that corner were open. Karp peaked out from around the corner, and three devils ambled from room to room. Karp raised her hand to stop Wili from turning the corner. When the three devils cleared the hall, Karp motioned for Wili to run. They couldn't run as quietly as they could walk but were silent enough not to alert the devils. Karp slowed when she passed a room that a devil had entered and walked by without a sound. Karp ran by what she thought was an empty room but a fourth devil jumped out, missed her, and smashed into the wall with a loud crash.

Even more devils flooded the hall, and even though Karp had passed three already, two more blocked her way. Karp slid under the grasp of one devil, popped up and ran behind another that couldn't turn fast enough to catch her. The devil reached for Karp and took a step when Wili shield butted it to the floor.

“classy.”

They turned the corner, reached the entrance of the northern tower and jumped into the stairwell. Karp closed the eastern door, and Wili rushed to the other side and secured the western door. Karp ascended to the second floor, and Wili continued to the third floor. On the second floor, two rooms sat on the eastern and western flanks of an open landing. A skeleton sat near the far wall staring into stone.

A few jars of powder and some dried gourds sat in the western room. Karp picked up a gourd, and it fit snugly in her palm. Karp returned the gourd to the table and picked up a small spiraling piece of sharpened steel. She returned to the main room and moved behind the skeleton. Karp threw the piece of metal into the small western room. The skeleton turned and rose to its feet. The skeleton lurched toward the door but stopped at the empty room.

The skeleton turned until it gazed Karp and then knocked her to the ground with a shriek. Karp writhed as the shrieking continued. Wili ran down the stairs as the banshee approached. The screaming banshee moved slowly, but Karp was completely incapacitated. Wili drew his mace and hurried to save his friend. The creature stopped screaming and pounced. Karp took the momentary respite to thrust up her hands and catch the banshee's wrists. The banshee kicked, snarled, lowered its head to bite, and shrieked again but Wili brought his mace across its head, killing it in one shot. Karp threw aside the lifeless body.

"Why did you do that?"

"You're kidding, right? If I didn't do that you'd be dead!"

“I could have figured something out.”

“No, you couldn't! Sometimes you just have to kill or be killed.”

“But these things are innocent. They didn't want this! They are just kind of defending themselves.”

“That doesn't matter!”

Devils and skeletons piled on the first floor doors as Karp and Wili fought. The doors broke, and devils filed up the stairs. Wili slammed the door to the stairwell and barricaded it with furniture.

“Great..... what do we do now?”

“let's look around; maybe there is another way out.”

Karp returned to the little room where she threw the piece of metal and Wili went to the other room. A small scroll sat next to about a half dozen sealed gourds. Karp read the scroll, scooped up the gourds and waved Wili to meet her in the main room.

“did you find anything in the next room?”

“Nothing important, you?”

Karp held up a gourd.

“Great! Now we have something to snack on.”

“according to this scroll, it's called a pop-gourd. if you throw it hard enough to break it, it explodes with a flash of light.”

“What like with powers or something?”

“no, you take a small lightning gourd, drill through the stem, hollow out the inside and fill it with crushed light raven feathers, flour, and breathing powder.”

“Lightning gourd?”

“yeah, it's a vegetable that gives a little shock when something bites into it. the whitecoat planted them to protect his starry night bushes from rabbits.”

“So we are gardening? Those aren't rabbits if you haven't noticed.”

Wili was still perturbed by being scolded instead of thanked for saving Karp.

“according to the scroll when the gourd breaks, the powders inside light on fire and the gourd pops with a bright flash. we can probably blind them.”

“Aren't these like 300 years old? How do we even know if they'll...”

Karp threw a gourd toward the wall and Wili mindlessly followed it with his eyes. The gourd hit, the skin cracked, and it ripped apart with a tearing sound. A blinding light shot forth which forced Karp and Wili to cover their eyes and lose balance. Wili stumbled into a table and crashed to the floor. Karp fell to her knees dizzy and dry heaving. They lost their composure and eyesight for several minutes.

“Well, they work.”

The creatures pounded the door more violently. Wili walked over and cleared away some of the furniture. The door cracked open, and an arm came through. Wili let the door fly open. Karp launched a gourd at the incoming monsters' feet, and she and Wili covered their eyes. The gourd burst into flames and blinded the creatures. They fell over each other, tripped over furniture and ran through the room wildly swinging. When the last of the creatures entered, Wili and Karp ran out, slammed the door shut and barricaded it with furniture from the third floor. Wili and Karp spent a week searching the building but didn't find any other tools as useful as the pop-gourd. Karp harvested lightning gourds growing in the courtyard and returned them to her world. She also found a large jar of crushed light raven feathers, but nothing else of value in the whole building.

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Six months later Karp and Wili stood before the provincial palace. The provincial capital was at a scale that Karp had never seen before. Several stone dungeons lay nestled between clay houses that sprawled out in all directions from the sides of a large lake. Countless stores and shops serviced the many lords and peasants, but previous shifters pillaged all the valuables in these obvious targets. Burnt doors, shattered walls, and monsters were the only signs of these ancient shifters. At night puffs of fire filled the sky and occasional devils roamed the streets. Karp and Wili

spent several months moving between safe houses and exploring emptied houses, shops, and dungeons. Devils and skeletons hid themselves in the empty buildings and became unwanted surprises. They found all types of metal tools, weapons, and armor, but nothing stronger than Karp's seashell steel.

The provincial palace was built on a small island just off the western bank of the lake. A stone bridge led to the stronghold. A wooden drawbridge controlled access to the stone bridge and a barracks held access to the drawbridge. Karp used a rowboat to cross a narrow channel and docked on a little pier. The barracks' main door was already opened, and Karp entered.

Karp silently ran through the antechamber dodging skeletons and confused devils. She learned that if she obscured herself with a large hooded cloak, then devils wouldn't recognize her as a person. A banshee noticed her approach a wooden staircase leading to a platform and reacted to the momentary sight of her face. Karp threw a pop-gourd at the banshee and set it off with her whip's blade. The banshee clutched its eyes and thrashed about. Karp ran to the top of the stairs and kicked a lever with the heel of her boot. Chains outside the barracks made a clinking sound. Karp ran to a boarded up window and without breaking her stride, jumped through the shudders and grabbed onto a pillar. Karp slid down as the bridge fell open. The drawbridge crashed to the road and Karp dropped to the deck where Wili waited just as bells rang to signal the opening of the drawbridge.

“Show off.”

Karp and Wili crossed the lowered drawbridge and entered the palace courtyard. In stark contrast to most holds in the region where vegetation was scarce; weeds, vegetables, and flowers sprouted everywhere in the provincial courtyard. The heart of the building was three stories, and the main tower loomed another four stories above that. The door to the keep was destroyed. Karp and Wili snuck past devils loitering in the antechamber, and closed and latched the doors to the main hall. The hall had several large stone benches along the walls, and a pair of stairwells occupied the rear.

The left stairwell ascended and the right stairwell descended. The room's floor was cracked but stable, and Karp and Wili crossed. A rumbling clattered down the stairs, and Wili jumped in between Karp and an asaghi that emerged from the stairwell. He parried the asaghi's whip. Karp rolled on the ground and disappeared under benches on the side of the hall. The asaghi lashed Wili's shield, but to its surprise, there was no damage. Wili drew his mace, but the asaghi's whip wrapped around its handle. The mace flew from Wili's hand and landed near the descending stairs.

The asaghi fruitlessly lashed Wili's shield, so it started whipping at his feet. The stone rumbled and collapsed. Wili fell into the basement. The asaghi walked to the edge of the hole, looked down, and shot fire into the dark abyss. Karp took this opportunity to sneak behind the asaghi. She unholstered her whip, jumped on its back and wrapped the whip around its neck. The asaghi pulled its head back and shot fire into the ceiling. It flailed

but wasn't flexible enough to reach Karp. It stopped flailing and charged backward toward the wall between the stairwells. Wili rushed up the stairs, reached for his mace and smashed the asaghi in the chest just before it reached the wall. Blood shot from its mouth, and it fell forward to its knees. Karp released the center portion of the whip and stabbed the blade through the asaghi's back and into its heart. It dropped to the floor dead.

“Not going to save this one?”

Even after all these months, Wili felt sparing the creatures was a waste of time.

“I don't think we could have let this one live.”

“Why's that?”

“It's too powerful.”

Karp took a dragon fire whip from the asaghi's hand.

“Yeah... it's powerful.”

Karp switched the dragon fire blade from her whip and the seashell steel dagger from the asaghi's whip. Karp tried the new whip, and as she expected, it was lighter, faster, more maneuverable, and stronger. Karp put the new whip in her holder and brought her old whip to her world.

“how did you survive that fall? at least uninjured.”

“I fell into some kind of stable and landed in a pile of grass or something.”

“you seem to get lucky pretty often.”

“Hmmm... I exist in a world of monsters, where I couldn't survive without the supplies you bring from your world and almost die on a constant basis really for no reason. I live a charmed life.”

Karp always thought of Wili and Nort as the same person, but she never really considered that Wili has never known anything but training, fighting, and running for his life. Karp started to understand his increasing dependence, but since she didn't know what to say, she said nothing.

They searched the rest of the dungeon and found no other signs of life. Almost anything left in the keep was broken, battered, and burnt. There were several pieces of armor torn to shreds with partial skeletons in the remains.

Karp and Wili checked the tower, but there were no creatures or metal. The stairwell continued past the tower's seventh floor, and Karp opened the hatch at the top and was blinded by the surge of sunlight. A few moments later Karp and Wili walked onto the roof. Wili drew his shield and jumped between Karp and a stirring beast. A bolt of fire shot at Wili and forked around his shield. The two smaller flames hit the retaining wall on top of the tower and blew two holes. Karp got close to Wili to avoid the flames. The dragon stopped breathing fire to inhale, and Karp peeked out and threw a pop-gourd. The dragon bit the incoming gourd and reared in surprise at the sudden burst and flash of light. Karp used that moment to send her whip into the creature's chest.

She withdrew the blade, and the dragon fell to the ground. Karp shot the whip forward again and lodged the blade in the dragon's eye when it looked up. The dragon's head fell to the floor, but Karp and Wili didn't relax until the dragon didn't move for a few minutes. Karp walked to the corpse, removed her dagger, and looked over the slain dragon.

Its head and neck were long and thin. The body thickened at the base of the neck but still looked sleek. Its legs were skinny compared to the rest. Red/purple scales covered its skin, and dark purple scales ran from the back of its head down its back and over a long sweeping tail. The dragon's wings were tucked on its side. Karp stretched out a wing and at full length must have been 30 feet from tip to shoulder. Something strange stuck into the wing's base. She examined the trunk and pulled out a water dragon steel dagger.

“Wow... that thing was injured. Can you imagine if it was at full strength?”

“We'd probably have to run away...”

“i guess dragons aren't shy of sunlight like the other things.”

“Doesn't seem that way.”

“don't you find something weird about the dragon?”

“Like: how did it get that dagger in it?”

“that is a good question, but i mean look at those purple scales and look at its neck, head, and legs. when the pop-gourd

went off, it reared on its hind legs. does it remind you of anything?"

“Like a horse?”

“yeah.... exactly....”

Karp attached the dagger to her whip. She blinked, and the dragon fire dagger was sheathed on her left side.

“i think we will finish up here, return to my storehouse, and then go back to find the man in white...”

Wili seemed indifferent to the announcement.

Chapter 9

Karp and Nort returned to the world. Karp didn't plan on spending any significant amount of time in the Shift World for the foreseeable future. Although the journey to the provincial capital took close to 8 months in the Shift World, Karp only spent about two weeks in her world. Karp and Nort headed to the general store to talk to Slart.

“so, it's been about two months since the festival?”

“About that.”

“i think we take a few weeks here and head off.”

“Where?”

“well, the mandrake deaths have been happening north of here, so that's where we'll go and ask around.”

Slart was looking under the counter when Nort and Karp arrived. She recoiled in surprise when she looked up, and two people stood before her.

“can you order about six months worth of food for me?”

“Sure, we, uh, have plenty of money now.”

Slart giggled.

“open up the vault.”

Slart walked to the end of the counter, unlocked the stone vault door with a small steel key and dragged open the door. Karp

rounded the corner, and something scurried in one of the under counter cabinets. A pair of eyes peered from a cracked open door.

“she still does that?”

“uh, yeah.... she's still doing that since you saw her do it yesterday.”

“right.... what a funny paradox. she's afraid to be without you, but hides when any other person comes near.”

“You said that yesterday too.”

Karp's heart sank a little. Trying to remember every joke or comment from months ago was impossible, but she was worried Slart found her trite. Karp entered the vault and returned her spare whip to the Shift World.

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Two weeks later, Karp and Nort stood under the northern gate wearing long hooded cloaks. Slart and Lark saw them off on their journey. Lark was warming to Karp and Nort and behaved a little more like a young woman and less like a scared child.

“you take care of her now.”

Karp addressed Lark, but she just gave a quizzical look since Karp's even tone and lack of inflection made telling when she was joking difficult.

“You take care of him now hmmm?”

Slart stood with her hands on her hips, bobbing her head. Nort turned red.

“Hey! I can take care of myself now!”

Slart and Karp traded glances, and Nort turned even redder. Lark giggled. She grew fond of teasing Nort and watching him react to others' gibes. Slart looked down at Lark.

“Looks like that, uh, serving girl might have some competition in a few years.”

Slart moved her gaze from Lark to Nort and gave him a wink. Nort was annoyed, not embarrassed. He placed his hand on his temple and shook his head. Lark turned away and occasionally moved to face the three of them, but quickly turned away because she was afraid her emotions were too transparent. Karp faced Slart.

“well, we've managed to embarrass the kids. i think it's time to go.”

Nort and Karp turned up the road and waved over their shoulders as they traveled the main highway back to the milling town north of the Bog Djinn's castle. While on the road they camped in covered clearings whenever possible, but were forced to camp on the side of the road several times. On those days Karp slept in the Shift World and stood vigil until Nort woke the next morning. Nort practiced sneaking during the two weeks Karp was

in the village during her prolonged shift, the weeks Karp prepared for the journey, and the week they spent traveling to the mill town. Nort was as proficient as Wili by the time they reached the inn. Nort's ability to learn amazed Karp again.

Nort and Karp entered the inn and tavern behind a large man. They silently shadowed him until he turned to join a table. Karp and Nort slipped forward to the tavern's counter, but the bartender faced away stacking mugs at the base of a large keg. Karp tapped the counter with the metal plate attached to the back of her hand. The wood made a cracking sound like from the tip of a whip, and the bartender jumped back, spun around, and clutched the table with the mugs. One mug fell to the ground. All conversation in the tavern stopped as the patrons watched the spectacle in the front.

“i need two rooms, two dinners, and two mugs of ale.”

The bartender eased, and the patrons continued their conversations once they realized the banality of the situation.

“You scared me something awful.”

The bartender pulled a small book from under the counter, opened to a marker, and glanced over the pages.

“We have two empty rooms, but they are the last two, so it will cost extra.”

Karp removed her hood.

“the last two rooms? what number customer are we to get the

last ones today?"

The bartender chuckled.

"I was so surprised by the near heart attack; I didn't even recognize you Scor...."

Karp raised her hand to stop him and glanced around to see if anyone reacted. The bartender recalled the attacks and felt a little foolish.

"Of course... I'm so sorry... here are two rooms for you at the standard rates for friends of the boss. Tonight we have mutton slow cooking on the brazier and potatoes. We also have a spiced pumpkin ale."

Nort perked up at hearing the pumpkin ale was ready.

"Why don't we stay at inns more often?"

Karp didn't dignify the question with a response. She hunched over the counter and spoke in a low voice.

"have you heard anything about the mandrake recently."

"There have been strange rumors going around. I haven't heard anything about husks appearing, but people have been talking about abandoned and empty keeps. They say the lords and all their servants just pack up and leave. Then they trade all their valuables for weapons, armor, and food."

"why would they do that?"

"I think a storm's coming and one far worse than what

happened at the first council!”

“do you think they are scared and running away?”

“The Lion? Lord of The Grain Fort is no coward! If he left his keep empty, it was to fight.”

The Lion was a minor lord whose manor was two weeks north of the milling town. He became known as The Lion because of his yellow armor and belligerent disposition. The area surrounding the Grain Fort was rich farmland, and most taxes were paid in harvested food. The Lion was responsible for storing taxes and distributing them to governmental bodies. Karp finished her ale while contemplating Sodil's words. She motioned for the next round.

“we'll be sitting near the throwing board. please bring the food and another round of drinks there in about 30 minutes.”

The bartender nodded, and Karp and Nort headed to an empty table near the board. Karp knew the board well because every year Slart and her traveled to the milling town for a throwing board competition. The throwing board was monster themed and had drawings of both real and imaginary monsters. There were pictures of snakes, wolves, spiders, cartoonish devils, asaghi, and even a pair of large dragons breathing fire at each other in the center. There were also chimeric animals, like an animal with the head of a lion, but the body of a bear and the stinger of a scorpion.

“nort, does that book of yours say anything about animals?”

“I haven't read it in a few days, but I think there is some mention of animals. I don't have it here though.”

“sit perfectly still.”

Karp reached a hand out from under her hooded cloak and handed the book to Nort. He flipped through the pages.

“This page says 'bestiary' and has the description of weird or dangerous animals. What do you want to know?”

“check to see if there is a description of that.”

Karp pointed to the bear-like chimera. Nort was still slow and clumsy at reading the various scripts in the tome. Several minutes later he looked up from the book.

“Here is something, it says in world #10 there is a creature with the head of a lion, body of a bear, and the stinger of a scorpion. There are notes after it. In world 14 these creatures don't have a stinger. In world 16 they don't have manes, and in world 18 their heads are the same color as the bodies.”

Karp sipped her beer.

“i wonder how much of the fiction of this world is really just a record of another world. what about that one?”

Karp pointed to a picture of a hydra. The beast had a gray scaled body with four necks. Each neck had a head with fangs that dripped a green liquid.

“There actually is one in world four, and by world ten they

are just big snakes."

"what about plain animals? i don't know, like sheep?"

"They are ugly with hairless, drooping skin, why would I write about them?"

A stranger in steel chainmail with four steel daggers attached to his belt approached Karp. Nort leaped up and grabbed the man's shoulder.

"Hold on! I just want to challenge the lady to a game. Isn't that why you sat near the throwing board!?!?"

Nort looked over at Karp who was just amused by the whole situation. Karp rose to her feet, but stumbled a little and steadied herself on the table. That accidental misstep brought out old bad habits that took hold of Karp.

"luks like yu might hab an adbantage in dis round."

"ha ha, I'll go easy on you."

Karp and the man moved to the throwing board.

"wut kind ob gaime, due yu wantta pleigh?"

"How about we do riddles?"

"ah.....k..... how bout.... we.... bet.... I stil peis for phun?"

"How about 10 steel pieces?"

"hmmmm... I dun't hab thet much!"

“Well, I have the money right here. If you lose, you can pay me back in a different way...”

Karp was a little taken aback by the uncouth man but found her mouth responding against her will.

“how bout fitty?”

“I don't think you can afford that.”

“i no it lot ob werk... hic... but I be hir al week.”

The man thought and grinned. He looked back at Nort who watched everything with his feet on the table sipping ale. Nort raised his mug and motioned for the bartender to bring another.

“I don't think your husband would like this bet very much...”

“shhh..... shhhhh... no secret.”

The bartender brought a fresh mug to Nort who pointed to Karp and the man standing at the board.

“Fine, but you better not renege.”

The bartender walked up to Karp and the man.

“What are you betting?”

Karp swayed and held up five fingers on one hand and zero fingers on the other. The man looked uncomfortable.

“Everyone quiet! QUIET! We have a high stakes game!”

The tavern hushed and everyone turned their attention to the

throwing board, but the man didn't want the attention. He nervously looked at Nort who raised his mug, laughed, and took another drink.

“What's the game?”

“widdles!”

“Who's first?”

Karp looked over at the man who suddenly seemed shy. The man went over to the bartender and whispered a riddle.

“First Riddle: 'Stop the friends from fighting in a fair way.'”

“oh... nose... dat's too tuff!”

Karp stumbled over to the throwing line and drew a yellow knife from her buckler and threw it in one fluid motion. The knife flew out from under her cloak and stuck in the throwing board between the two dragons at the exact point where their flames touched.

“Is that right?”

The man's head sunk and he shook 'yes.' Karp stumbled over to the bartender, wrapped herself on his shoulders, and whispered in his ear.

“The second riddle: 'Whenever you kill one, there's always more.’”

The man walked over to the throwing line and surveyed the board. He removed one of his four daggers and stood at the line

rocking back and forth. He slightly bent his knees, continued to rock and moved the dagger back and forth. The crowd booed. The man threw the dagger. It landed, barely touching the little hydra. The man released his breath.

"Oh look, a tie! Well, it was fun, but we'll end here."

"Nope! You're wrong!"

The man looked at her, looked at the board, and didn't understand what was happening. Karp calmly walked to the throwing line. A dagger flew from under her cloak and hit an ant crossing the board.

"ants."

The crowd laughed and cheered.

"What? No! You tricked me!"

The man pulled one of his daggers. Nort laughed and took another sip. Karp walked up, drew her dragon fire dagger, looped it up, and cut his dagger's blade off at the handle.

"you better not renege..."

The man stared at the handle perplexed.

"I don't have that much."

Karp removed her two daggers from the board and put them back in her buckler. She took his steel dagger from the board and held it up.

“i'll take this then.”

The dagger disappeared.

“now leave.”

The man turned to go but was stopped by several of the patrons and Sodil holding a long piece of rope.

“Oh no. You'll see what we do to people that don't carry out their bets!”

The mob grabbed the man, hog tied him and hung him from the rafters. Sodil sauntered over to Karp and Nort's table.

“I don't think that guy had any clue who he was facing. I also don't get why he bet so much if he was so bad!”

“he assumed way too much.”

“I'm surprised you bet so much, normally you only take an iron or two from people...”

“he deserved it.”

“Considering Slart has taken first, and you've taken second every single year, it's not surprising it only took one round.”

“i was surprised that he used my own riddle against me, so i beat him with one of slart's.”

The challenger struggled from the rafters. Muffled words and grunts were distorted in his muzzled mouth. The man's eyes reddened, and he glanced in Karp's direction before giving up

fighting. The man slacked and resigned himself to his punishment.

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Karp and Nort traveled east by northeast along the main trade route. After two days the road wound through a dense forest of massive oak trees. Residents of the milling town felled these trees for a living and so for the last two days workers consistently traversed the road. Most wood cutters either disappeared into the woods with axes and saws or large groups of men stood massive wagons on the sides of the road and worked in unison to drag logs out of the woods. The logs were brought back to the milling town to be finished and sawed into usable pieces. The boards, planks, and pillars were then transported northeast along the main trade route to the lumber depot. There the wood was further divided into shipments for construction, manufacturing, and royal consumption.

By the fourth day of travel, the lumber workers and log transports disappeared, but Karp and Nort passed a lumber convoy. On the 5th day, there was only a man carrying an ax and wearing a long riding coat that covered his entire body. By day six even the man disappeared. Karp and Nort reached an intersection on the seventh day. The main trade route continued east and a large yellow gate painted with brown stalks of wheat straddled the road heading north toward the Grain Fort. The gate represented The Lion, but the Grain Fort was still another week's

travel.

Shortly up the road from The Lion's Gate was a village built around a convoy way station much like the Village of the Traitor's Tavern, but the Village of the Lion's Gate was far less impressive. The inn was a bog standard building and lacked the grandeur of the converted keep that was the Traitor's Tavern Inn. There was no trading compound near the village, and so the whole area only had a small general store, a few convoy staging areas, and a half dozen food stalls.

Karp and Nort arrived in the evening and immediately went to the general store. The store was packed to the brim with furniture, clothing, embroidery, and other non-metallic valuables. Karp pushed her way to the front and addressed a worker at the counter.

“are you the owner?”

“That's right.”

The man had a big smile on his face. Karp couldn't help but wonder if he was simple.

“where did all this come from?”

The man's smile drained at Karp's accusatory tone.

“I traded for it of course! Luck sure smiled on me that day!”

“traded with who?”

“The Lion. He came here two weeks ago and offered to trade for all the weapons and food I had.”

“what exactly did you trade for all this?”

“Well... a few yellow daggers, some iron chainmail, steel shield and a few years worth of preserves, nuts, fruit... umm... nothing else of note really.”

“you spoke to the lion?”

“Of course not! He wouldn't speak to someone like me! He was sitting on his horse outside. I spoke to one of his traders. Are you interested in buying anything? Come look at this desk.”

The man ushered them over to a medium sized oak writing desk sitting in the corner. The desk had one large sliding drawer filled with paper and charcoal. The table top was scratched and dented, and there were no etchings or embellishments of any kind.

“This was the lord's private desk. He'd sit here during important meetings and conduct business with other lords! If you went to the capital to purchase one of these, it would cost you 500 steel pieces, but I'll sell it to you for 200!”

Nort and Karp looked at each other and back to the store owner.

“Oh honey, wouldn't this picture just look amazing in our son's room?”

Nort lifted the end of an old embroidered scroll that depicted a lion pouncing on a gazelle in an open field dotted with wheat stalks. The owner wasn't pleased with the turn of the conversation.

“Well, if you purchase the desk, I'll throw in the scroll for your son!”

“i don't know, dear; it's all old and tattered, it looks like garbage.”

“I know sweetie, but little Korg will probably just tear it up anyway... How about I give you one steel piece for this?”

The owner would rather have had the 200 for the desk, but a sale is a sale.

"Tell you what, give me two steel pieces, and it's yours."

Karp put her hand on his upper arm and shook her head, Nort put his hand on his chin and sighed deeply.

“You can't go any lower?”

"Sorry, I can't."

Nort sighed and lowered his head.

“Alright, I'll take it. We'll just have to skip meals for a few days. That's all.”

Karp put her hand on her forehead and gave an exacerbated sigh and threw her head and body back. Nort picked up the scroll, reached into his coin purse, removed two steel pieces and gave them to the shop owner. Karp and Nort exited the store and lost control of their laughter the moment the door shut behind them. They walked to the side of the building, and Nort handed the scroll to Karp, and it disappeared.

They headed over to the tavern and inn. They secured two rooms for the evening, entered the tavern, bought two mugs of an orange wheat lager and sat at a table near the throwing board.

"so, 'honey,' what was that all about?"

"That guy had no clue what anything was worth."

"oh?"

"Yeah, when he said that desk was the lord's desk and worth 500 steel, I wasn't sure if he was trying to scam us or didn't know what it was."

"what was it?"

"Probably a child's writing desk, maybe it even belonged to a servant. It would sell new for 100 pieces, let alone an old beat up one like that. So I wanted to test him. That scroll is made of fabric and has enough thread to stitch 100 pairs of clothing. So that alone makes it the most expensive thing in there, but since someone with a lot of skill must have made it; to the right collector, it would be worth more than everything else combined. I'm a little surprised that the shop owner didn't know that. I'm shocked that The Lion didn't know what it was worth."

"maybe he was just really desperate... it's nice to see you did learn something from slart!"

Karp and Nort finished their round of drinks and then had a few more. The night was young when they retired to their rooms

and Karp initially had trouble sleeping but eventually drifted to slumber. A floor board creaked outside her room, and she awoke. Footsteps continued for a moment, stopped, and then exited the hallway. Karp tried to sleep again after that, but she was wide awake. Someone paced by her room a few more times before morning. Something felt off, but Karp couldn't quite put her finger on what was wrong.

- - -

Karp and Nort stood in front of the inn and discussed their next move from the Village of the Lion's Gate.

"i need you to do something important for me."

Nort perked up.

"i'm going to the lumber depot and checking for information on the grain fort and looking around the general store. in the mean time, i want you to make your way to the village at the grain fort, check for information, and check on the store there."

Nort looked proud because he has never been asked to do anything so important. Karp reached over and grabbed his arm. A small package appeared in her hand. She reached out from under her cloak and handed it to him. He took the package and slung its leather strap over his shoulder.

"here's a single person tent that you can use on the side of the

road. i don't want you to use it unless it's absolutely necessary. around nightfall look for a nearby farmhouse and offer them a few iron pieces to put you up for the night. i'm going to run to the lumber depot and meet you at the grain fort later. i'll sleep in the shift world, but you will still probably have a few days in the village even if you walk. you don't need to hurry."

“OK! See you in a few days.”

Karp pivoted and ran. She could run nearly at full speed without making a sound. She ran fast enough that chimes hanging on a nearby pillar rang. In order to figure out how many days he would have at the Grain Fort, Nort silently counted on his fingers but started speaking to himself when thinking everything became confusing.

"Let's see, it will take her three days to get to the lumber depot if she spends two days there, three days back here, and three days to the Grain Fort, that will give me four days at the village if I walk.”

People watched Nort as he mumbled to himself and stared at his hands. Nort looked up the road, and Karp was already gone. He turned to leave, but someone put their hand on his shoulder. Nort stopped and turned to see who was touching him.

“Don't forget your ax.”

Nort's gaze stopped at the ax leaning on a pillar at the end of the patio.

"That's not mine; I don't know whose it is."

The hand let go. While looking at the ax, Nort only saw the cloaked figure from the corner of his eye. The man turned toward the inn's entrance.

"Sorry about that."

The man walked into the inn. Nort shuddered at the encounter but started up the road. In a few hours, Nort was surrounded by farmland. He stopped next to a small apple tree and bent over to examine a honeysuckle bush that grew at its base. He lowered his nose to the bush's red and orange flowers and breathed in the sweet aroma. The smell reminded him of cookies baking at the Traitor's Tavern Inn. Nort felt a thump on his back, and something flew into the bush.

He moved his eyes around the rustling bush, and a bloody sparrow leaped out. The sparrow's rust colored wings were stained crimson from an open fracture along the edge of its wing. The bird fluttered around the ground until it stopped moving and took deep slow breaths. Nort thought about what to do and reached down to pick it up. An arrow pierced the bird. Nort stood up straight and looked around, but couldn't see anyone.

"Who's there?"

No answer came. Nort didn't understand why someone hid just because they killed a bird.

"It's OK. The bird was dying; it's not like you did anything"

wrong."

Still no answer came. Nort assumed a child shot the bird and hid in shame since that seemed like something a child would do. He continued up the road. The stench of manure told him that he just passed a cattle grazing field. Although he wasn't trying to get to the Village of the Grain Fort too quickly; he decided to run until he no longer smelled manure. He ran for nearly an hour before realizing he stepped in manure, and the smell came from his boot. Hooves stampeded down the road behind him. He turned around, and a farm hand wearing a long riding cloak herded bovine and turned the stampede south along the road.

"What a dangerous thing to do."

The words just slipped out even though there was no one to hear him. Nort figured the man was embarrassed at losing control of his herd because when he saw Nort, he jumped off his horse, threw down his helmet and kicked the dirt. Nort waved. The man regained himself, scooped up his helmet, jumped on his horse and followed after his cows.

Nort continued up the road for another few hours, and the sun was starting to set. He walked to a nearby house and knocked on the door. A little old lady answered with her granddaughter clinging to the back of her knee.

"I was wondering if I could stay the night if you got the room."

The request didn't surprise the graymane.

"For five iron you can spend the night in the barn."

Nort reached in his coin purse, took out five small iron pieces and gave them to the woman. She shoed the little girl inside and walked toward the barn. The barn was large for a personal building, but given its simple design and hollow interior, it probably was relatively inexpensive to build. The side panels were their natural shade, but the doors were lined with a bright yellow paint. A nearly round boulder that sat half way up Nort's shin lay near the entrance. Nort was relieved to see a bed sitting in the corner.

"I thought I was going to have to sleep on a pile of straw or something."

"You do."

Nort couldn't tell if she was joking.

"You can use the bed."

The woman laughed and walked away. The moon had just rose, and Nort felt drained from staying out in the sun all day. He removed his riding coat and paused at a slash across its back.

"When did that happen?"

He flipped the cloak around like that would somehow answer the question. He took off his armor and covered it with his travel cloak to hide it from prying eyes. He laid on the bed and was fast asleep.

Someone crept to the barn door and quietly pulled it open.

The man put an ax to the side, took off his riding cloak, and hung it on the handle. The man bent down and lifted the boulder sitting near the entrance. He laboriously walked into the barn and stood at the foot of the bed with the boulder suspended over his head. The man shouted.

“HEY!”

Nort stirred in the small bed. Blood shot from the man's right upper arm and the boulder slipped from his hands crashing down on his back. He laid on the ground with both legs and right arm hanging limp. Nort jumped out of bed.

“Get out of here!”

Nort ran toward the exit, but his shield caught on his foot. He bent down, picked it up, and continued running. Karp rolled her whip. Nort barely exited the door and ran another 20 yards when the man started seizing.

“Who are you?”

The man coughed up blood.

“St.... stay.... a....way...”

He seized until his neck cracked and then he was quiet. Karp waved Nort over. She turned the body onto its back with her foot. He was the man who lost to her at the throwing board.

“How did you make it to the lumber town already?”

“obviously i didn't go... i knew we were being followed, and so

i decided if we split up they would be more likely to chase you, so i doubled back after about 30 minutes and kept an eye on you."

"How did you know?"

"well, it started when i saw that axeman with the travel cloak. he was too far to do any logging, and if he were traveling, he wouldn't bring an ax with him. if he was just some local person, he wouldn't have bothered wearing a cloak. it was good camouflage when we were near the milling town, but it made him stick out later. then i was pretty sure we were being followed when someone kept pacing on our floor and stopping at our doors. when did you figure it out? i was impressed that you foiled two attempts at your life like that."

Nort mumbled to himself to try and stall while he figured out her meaning.

"Maybe that's why that guy put his hand on my shoulder...."

"oh, i see, they tried to kill you before and so you were on to him. i was impressed how you blocked that one arrow with the shield on your back and dodged the other one. but how did you know he was going to try and run a stampede on you?"

"uh.... the smell?"

Karp looked down and noticed Nort had his shield.

"oh... you were going to jump up at the last minute and get him with your shield, very nice. maybe i shouldn't have

interfered.”

“huh...huh... it's OK.”

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In six days time, Karp and Nort arrived at the Village of the Grain Fort. The village had an ominous feeling, and each villager showed the foreboding on their face. They numbly went about their routines as if they believed that if they continued their lives as nothing happened, whatever misfortune that loomed over them would stay suspended a little longer. Some of The Lion's servants drank in the tavern all day and night. They tried to understand why their lord didn't trust them enough to ask their help in whatever maneuvers he planned.

Karp and Nort entered the general store which was packed full, just like the one in the Village of the Lion's Gate. This store, however, still had steel armor and weapons. Karp and Nort approached the storekeeper who was busy checking inventory.

“where did all this come from?”

The man jumped back and dropped his clipboard. He caught his composure and retrieved the clipboard and papers. He looked them over once before he spoke.

“If you came through the Lion's Gate, then you already know! Why are you bothering to ask me?”

The man was way savvier than the owner from the other village.

“were they not interested in the steel?”

The owner raised his eyebrow.

“No. They just wanted the rare metals and food, and they were willing to pay for it.”

“strange, they wanted everything from the other village.”

The store owner laughed.

“They probably got what they wanted for a price they wanted and got all the steel the man owned for free.”

“what did you end up trading for all this?”

“A yellow helm, dagger, gauntlets, and a white short sword.”

“sounds like he got the better deal...”

"Not really. I took everything I could see of value; he took a lot of scraps."

Karp was surprised by how bluntly the shopkeeper spoke. He weakened his trading position by telling her everything, and he seemed too shrewd to make that mistake.

“Don't be so surprised. I could tell from the moment I saw you that you weren't going to buy anything, Scorpion.”

Karp wore her surprise on her sleeve. Nort put his hand on his mace and stepped between the owner and Karp.

“Wow, down boy! I'm no threat to you. You'd have to figure people knew you were coming after what happened last week!”

“what happened last week?”

The man scoffed.

“Well, a little old lady awoke to shouts and screams from her barn, so she went outside to see her porter standing in the field carrying a shield with a sun. A strange woman with a whip was in her barn standing over a crushed dead body. Plus your hands gave you away. The only person I've seen with gloves like that was The Whitecoat, so it would stand to reason that you are The Whitecoat's apprentice, The Scorpion and you must be The Morning Shield.”

Nort's hand slid off his mace, and he closed his riding cloak again. The man breathed a sigh of relief.

“Please don't tell anyone, even if they heard rumors we were coming, we don't want them to know it's us...”

“Of course.”

The man clearly regretted taking the opportunity to show off.

“have you seen the fort? since it happened?”

“No, everyone around here stays away from the fort. Some of the old servants drinking in the tavern have seen the empty keep, but they will never go back... but, well, there is one person who will go back to the keep, for a price...”

“how can we find them?”

“He will probably be in the bar. He's a boisterous young man who likes drinking, throwing, and talking very, very loudly. Just go into the tavern and ask for a courier.”

Karp and Nort left the general store and crossed a wide road. They followed smaller streets and alleys until they reached the inn. The inn was only four stories tall but still loomed over the rest of the buildings. Nort and Karp entered the tavern and looked for a boisterous young man. No one with a mug of ale could be considered anything but somber. The drinkers stared in their drinks and slowly sipped. Some of the patrons sat discussing their pasts and futures. Karp and Nort walked up to the bartender.

“i need a courier.”

The man jumped, almost as if he watched them approach but didn't even notice them appear.

“He's in the back. People were getting upset that he's getting rich bringing tourists to the Grain Fort, so don't mention it... to anyone.”

The man pointed to the door on the far wall. Two men and a woman sat inside drinking, joking, and laughing. The loudest one sat in the center with his feet on the table, leaning back in his chair, holding a mug, and telling a probably fictitious story.

“... and so I said to her 'I have a dragon in the back if you want to see it!’”

His cronies laughed, but all three fell silent at the sight of the strangers.

“Tourists aye?”

Karp walked up and lowered her hood.

“i've heard you've been to the grain fort.”

“We all have.”

The courier winked at Karp. She kicked his foot off the table, and his foot hit the ground. He winced and grabbed his knee.

“do i have your attention?”

“If you wanted to see my dragon too..”

Karp's whip snaked through the courier's legs, and the blade cut off the chair's back right leg. The whip shot around and took out the left two legs. The whip rebounded into Karp's hand, and the man slowly fell to the ground. The friends turned white, and the woman at the table spoke.

“Do you know who that is? She killed The Sunflower and forced The Mandrake to flee... she's killed a half dozen people since.”

The courier quickly sobered. He sat up and looked at Karp.

“What do you want?”

“tell me about the grain fort.”

"What's there to tell, one day it was business as usual, and the

next day everybody disappeared. Within a few days, almost everything in the fort was gone, and it started to appear in stores."

"why are you bringing people there?"

"Just because people want to go. I make up stories about what happened, like the story about the dragon I joked about earlier. I'm just doing it for the money, that's all!"

"i'm going there tomorrow, don't bring any customers, you can start again in two days, got it?"

The courier nodded. Karp and Nort went to the bartender, paid for the broken chair and lodge and board for two days.

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Karp and Nort arrived at the Grain Fort early in the morning. A tall wooden wall anchored in a rock bed encircled the compound. Nort and Karp entered The Grain Fort's main gate which was left ajar. Small guard sheds stood just inside. The fort's four-story wooden keep was standard for the area except its wood siding was painted yellow with brown wheat stalks near the base. A small stable sat adjacent to the keep.

The fort's most notable features were the two large grain silos. One silo stood near the northern wall, and one silo stood near the eastern wall. The silos were four stories tall with spiraling stairs that almost reached the top. Small hatches dotted along the

staircase to give people access to the stores without draining the whole silo. Pulleys allowed workers easy access to the hatches without needing to lug grain up the staircase. Karp felt around the ground outside the eastern silo and pulled a handful of wheat from the dirt.

“nort, try to open that little door.”

Karp pointed to a door at the base of the grain silo. Nort walked over and pulled it open. His eyes darted around inside. He stuck in his head and shouted.

“ECHO!”

The cry rang throughout the empty silo and soon a cacophony of cries shouting 'echo' returned to the door. Nort was surprised by the echo's intensity.

“It's empty.”

Karp chuckled.

“i thought it would be, and it would have been obvious if it wasn't.”

Nort didn't understand.

“you'd be covered in an avalanche of wheat if it wasn't empty.”

Nort was upset at being tricked, again.

“don't be mad, you'd have been fine. probably.”

Karp and Nort passed the keep on their way to the northern grain silo. Something inside the stables stirred around hay laying on the floor. Karp and Nort moved onto the balls of their feet. Karp drew her dragon fire dagger and snuck to the stable entrance. They flanked the door. Karp relayed her plan to Nort with hand signals. Nort nodded and rolled into the doorway with his shield drawn. Karp jumped behind him with her dagger in her left hand and a throwing knife in her right. A malnourished mare stood before them. Its skin was gaunt across its face. The mare didn't recognize them but wasn't bothered by people.

“How do you think it got here?”

“i don't know. it probably just returned here on instincts.”

“How did it even survive?”

“i guess it ate whatever grain it found on the ground.”

Karp sheathed her dagger and knife. Nort swung his shield onto his back. They continued to the second silo which was nearly identical to the eastern silo except there was dried rice sitting in the dirt instead of wheat. Karp opened the door this time, and the silo was also empty. Karp and Nort proceeded to the keep.

Looking in from the front door, there was no sign that anyone ever lived inside. The antechamber was stripped of every ornament and fixture except for a pair of wooden benches affixed to the wall. Every room on the first floor was similarly empty. The only piece of furniture that remained was an oversized wardrobe in the kitchen.

Karp and Nort moved on to the second floor which housed the lord and his family's bedrooms. Each room was completely empty. Every fixture, piece of clothing, and valuable were removed. Only dust sat in corners and lined some of the walls. The third floor was storage. Dust covered all the rooms and spider webs hung in every corner. The third floor acted as a buffer between the servant's quarters on the fourth floor and the lord's family on the second floor. The servants quarters still had several beds, but straw mattresses on light wooden frames were practically worthless. Nort and Karp headed to the basement.

The basement was full of a chalky white dust. Karp put her hand on the ground and examined her fingertips. A bright white powder coated her hand and not a dull gray dust like she expected. Three sides of the basement had a plaster with small cracks. Several sections of those walls had been resurfaced at different times, and they were several different shades of gray. The fourth wall, however, was unblemished. There were no cracks. It was a uniform color and brighter than the other three walls. Karp walked over and placed her hand. The wall was smooth.

Explosions rang from the first floor. Karp jumped back and turned to face the booms. Another burst rang out from her right and then another from her left. Explosions continued in three directions. They grew louder and fiercer. There was a loud crack behind Karp, and everything went black.

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Something wiggled on top of Karp as she regained consciousness. She was pinned to the ground. No matter how hard she pushed, she couldn't budge an inch. She screamed for Nort but heard no response. The movement around her increased and so she shouted louder. Soon the crushing weight eased, and she stood. Debris fell as she rose.

“Are you all right?”

Karp recognized Nort's voice in the pitch black basement.

“hold on a minute.”

A lit torch appeared in Karp's hand and the basement filled with light. Karp looked to the stairwell which had filled with debris and was impassable. Karp looked down, and her heart sank. She was pinned to the ground by dried husks of bodies that now strewn around the floor. Karp was sure she knew what happened but asked anyway.

“what happened here?”

“You were looking at that suspicious wall when there were explosions all around the first floor. The plaster cracked and then came down. Bodies spilled out all over you. The explosions continued until the manor started collapsing and when that happened the stairwell filled with debris, and it became pitch black. I've been moving around bodies trying to

find you, but it was hard in the dark."

"how long was i out for?"

"I don't know. Could have been 20 minutes, could have been an hour."

"we need to find an exit."

A second torch appeared in Karp's hand, and they searched the perimeter of the basement. There were no windows, doors, or stairs. Karp waded through the hundred corpses stacked in the middle of the floor. A slight breeze emanated from the center of the room where some of the bodies sank into the floor. The pair cleared the husks and found a smashed grate. The grate led into a drainage channel. Karp felt taking the passage was worth any risk and dropped into the ditch landing about five feet under the basement floor.

Wooden planks supported the walls and prevented cave-ins. The pair walked through the tunnel for 100 yards until the walls turned from wood to stone.

"we must be at the fort's main wall."

Nort nodded. In 20 yards, Karp and Nort walked through ankle deep water. In another 30 yards, the water was shin deep, but they reached the entrance. The iron bars at the mouth of the tunnel were snapped and gnarled. Karp and Nort easily walked through and stood in a small river where the fort's drainage system fed. They snuck up the fort's main wall and hugged it until they

reached the road. The large gate leading into the fort remained ajar. Karp risked walking in the open to enter. She reached a small guard shack and jumped inside. She peered out of a window in the rear of the shack. The keep had completely collapsed between when they entered the tunnel and arrived at the shack.

“if they kept attacking, we'd be goners.”

Nort smirked and shrugged. Karp focused on the open fields, but no one lingered. Karp and Nort finally moved from the shack and approached the ruins. Karp stopped at a pair of dismembered legs, drew her whip and stalked around the ruins. The courier's body from the chest up laid on the other side. Two other corpses dotted the field behind the keep. The grass was scorched, and the remaining body parts were burnt beyond recognition. Karp was numb to the sight of corpses, but Nort was effected by all the death he saw. He turned to say something, but stopped and gazed skyward. He weakly raised his arm and limply pointed to the horizon.

Karp faced toward the village and scanned the landscape. Pillars of smoke waved in the sky. Karp sprinted toward the village and Nort followed. Even at full gallop, it took half an hour to reach the first house in the outskirts. A dragon sat atop the inn breathing fire down onto the roofs of nearby houses. Karp and Nort darted between burning houses. Smoke concealed their movements from the raging dragon. They hid next to one of the few unburnt houses near the inn. The dragon took flight and landed on the roof of the one-story house sheltering Karp and

Nort.

Nort rushed into the road, and the dragon whipped its head toward him. Nort stopped and spread his arms and legs. The dragon immolated the whole area. Flames broke around Nort and fanned out behind. Karp jumped from the side of the building and threw the whip's blade into the air, and it stuck in the dragon's left front upper thigh. The dragon reared and crashed through the house's roof. Karp ran in front of the building. Nort recovered and looked behind him.

“Run!”

A young mother and father clutched the arms of a seven-year-old. The father took the child in his arms and ran. Karp turned and yelled after them.

“Use the smoke and buildings for cover.”

As she yelled, the dragon thrust its head through the wall and flames leaped between its nostrils. Nort charged and smashed the side of the dragon's face with his shield and drove it into the ground using his back and shoulders. The dragon shot flames, but they only burnt and splintered the earth. The dragon bucked to free itself from the house and threw Nort through the air. Karp threw a yellow knife at the dragon's face. The knife slashed across the dragon's forehead but didn't do enough damage to draw blood. It took to the air again, and the force of the dragon's wings collapsed the house.

Karp hurried to Nort who gingerly rose. He wasn't bleeding,

but a large section of chainmail ripped from his hauberk. The dragon looped through the air and swooped down to make a pass at Nort and Karp. Nort pushed Karp away, and she ran. The dragon shot fire at her while it swooped. Karp barely dived out of the way in time and disappeared behind a building. The dragon came back around and flew toward Nort.

The fire breath struck him square on, but instead of burning him to cinders, the flames momentarily immolated his armor, and then gently dissipated. The next time the dragon dive bombed, Nort threw a piece of rubble at the dragon's face. The dragon snapped at the debris. On the next round, Nort threw another piece of debris exactly like the first. The dragon caught the debris with its mouth, bit down and spat out the splintered wood and iron.

The dragon made another pass, but this time Nort threw a pop-gourd. As the dragon opened its mouth, a yellow streak came from the side and struck the gourd. The gourd cracked, then shattered and released a bright flash. The dragon flew into the ground, skidded, and rolled into a nearby burning house. The dragon thrashed until it regained its senses and found its footing. The dragon staggered forward. The Scorpion's whip bit the top of the dragon's neck, just below the jaw. The dragon jumped, spread its wings and shot into the air. The water dragon steel dagger didn't rise with the beast, but instead, the blade cut down the neck until it finally dislodged. The dragon continued to fly but lost strength and fell, even as its wings beat.

Blood and fire leaked from the creature's neck, and it smashed into the road one last time. The reign of destruction ended with the beast whimpering alone on the ground and quietly closing its eyes.

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Luckily the only building that served warmed seasoned food was mostly spared and so Karp and Nort sat in the tavern eating a meager meal. The mood in the tavern was somber before but now was dire. Most villagers that lived near the inn were homeless after the dragon razed their cottages. Dozens of families now stayed at the inn. The fourth floor was unusable because the dragon collapsed the roof and the first floor had no beds, so all the families tried to squeeze into two floors. The inn's owner turned no one away for lack of coin, but would probably be rich by the time the village recovered. The shop owner also avoided serious loss and villagers already approached him for loans. Karp had her doubts that he wouldn't charge usurious rates. He would likely be rich enough to become the new lord by the end of everything.

All the eyes in the room stared at Karp and Nort while they sat and ate. Some eyes held gratitude for saving the majority of the village. Some eyes held fear and wonder about the people who were strong enough to kill a dragon. Some eyes held suspicion over the coincidental appearance of these strangers and the

destruction of the fort and village. Most eyes, however, just appeared in a stupor from the presence of all these emotions at once.

Nort spoke to Karp in a low voice, but Karp was sure the villagers wouldn't understand the conversation even if they heard every word.

“So, what do you think happened at the fort?”

“i don't know. the most likely scenario is that the courier and his cronies are down-shifters. they used powers to try and bring down the keep around us but in doing so changed that horse into a dragon. they stopped bringing down the keep when the dragon attacked, but they were outmatched and killed in the struggle. the dragon flew off after the fight and wanted to make its home in the inn.”

“That's what I think. Kind of funny, being saved by a dragon like that and then having to kill it. What do you mean 'most likely'?”

“i can think of a few possibilities. at least one where we weren't even the targets.”

“Really? How so?”

“well, it's possible that someone didn't want people poking around the keep, so they hired the courier and his friends to bring them there, murdered them in horrible ways to make an example, and damaged the keep beyond repair. they left unaware that we

were even in there and possibly even unaware they created a dragon, or maybe the dragon was a diversion for something else.”

It never occurred to Nort that all this destruction had nothing to do with them. The implication that the real perpetrators were still alive and possibly one of the people in the tavern was far more worrisome.

Chapter 10

One year passed since the dragon incident at the Grain Fort which became known as the Dragon's Roost. In that time Karp and Nort continued searching for answers along the trade route. They investigated several more emptied medium lord's keeps but found no signs of the previous occupants. There were no mass graves, hidden walls, dragons, or assassins laying in wait. Karp appreciated not having to kill anything in a while but was frustrated at her stagnant investigation. Karp and Nort visited The Bog Djinn before returning to the Village of the Traitor's Tavern. Now that Karp was home, she returned to the banality of her everyday life and met with Slart to review the store's ledgers.

The swirl of numbers and coded shorthand was too much for Karp. She gave an exaggerated sigh, loudly shut the ledger she was reading, threw her feet on the edge of the table and leaned back in her chair.

“want to go to the tavern instead?”

Slart giggled, placed her pencil in the ledger's binding and leaned back in her chair.

“You know we can't do that...”

Slart was only ever this serious if something was on her mind.

“is the new council still dogging you about selling off our rare items?”

“They don't realize the market is about to ugh...implode.”

“implode?”

“Yeah. The market has been flooded by normally expensive niche goods in exchange for normally relatively inexpensive items. This made those inexpensive items expensive in comparison, but luxury goods are becoming increasingly insolvent. On top of these missing forts, most lords have become scared by the threat of whatever caused the other lords to flee and have been buying up steel, wood, clay, and iron. Right now food has only slightly raised in price, but the first bad harvest or harsh winter and a tomato will cost more than a steel helm.”

“so wouldn't now be the time to trade?”

"I have been secretly trading steel and iron for food, and if the market collapses, the Traitor's Tavern will have food for years, but that's not what the council wants. The fools think I should liquidate everything and build a village hall that rivals a provincial palace."

“shouldn't that be cheap and easy right now?”

Slart thought about how she could relate the problem to Karp.

“OK, so right now I could trade a sunshine steel helm for about a dozen highly ornamental desks.”

Karp nodded.

“Lords all around the Lush Forest have been buying up lumber to fortify their keeps and barracks. They've done this with extra furniture and the like, so the lumber depots have warehouses full

of desks nobody wants. So if I go to them with a dozen desks, how much lumber do you think they'll give me? Enough to frame and build one room? Before this started, you could have probably rebuilt the whole village hall with that same helm!"

"why not directly trade the helm for the lumber?"

"You might get a better deal I guess, but then maybe we'll get enough for two rooms? Three rooms?"

"but why wait?"

"The only way this steel will become valuable again is waiting. Either there really is a war coming, and when it starts, there will be an arms race. During that arms race, we can trade these weapons for keeps, lordships, land, or something of real value. Similarly, if the market does implode because of a food shortage, we can trade for metal weapons. For example, I got 12 barrels of rice for a steel dagger, if the market bottoms out, I might be able to get two yellow daggers for that. If we snatch up other rare items in the same way, we can control the supply when prices on metal rebound! So, why trade everything we own for a silly building when we could be the next Bog Djinn?"

Karp was always a little scared of Slart's business sense.

"what if neither of those happens?"

Slart laughed maniacally.

"Just kidding! I'd definitely sleep easier, that's for sure! It might be too late to stop it though... It's not that I want either to

happen, I'm just preparing because it probably will."

"we haven't given up trying to stop it; we just don't know what to do. i mean nort still trains every day."

"Really? What's he do?"

"well, we practice with stave, do a lot of sparring, i know he's always trying to figure out new ways to use his mace and shield. he sneaks around everywhere surprising people."

Slart grimaced.

"Is that going to be enough to stop all this?"

"we spoke to trolt before coming back to the village, and there might be something else we can do. according to him that crumbling tower that almost crushed wili is probably the sun spire. he said it's only a month north of the crossroads and if we travel south along the mountains, we'll run into factories. those factories made all kinds of tools, equipment, and other goods. it's possible we'll find something useful since we're looking for tools and not just the rarest metals."

after a month we should arrive at the clay gate, or whatever it's called in shift world. shortly within the crossroads is a building made of 3 tall towers connected by one story buildings. that place is some kind of academy where people researched all kinds of things. they might have something that can help us fight or find the shifters."

Karp left out Trolt's warning. He told her that the Crossroads

was overrun by monsters, and not just devils and skeletons, but asaghi and dragons perched everywhere at night.

“Will it take, uh, long?”

Slart was worried for her friend, but Karp lightly put her hand on Slart's shoulder.

“we'll only be there, a month? a month and a half? it will be like I didn't even go anywhere at all.”

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Karp and Wili appeared next to the Sun Spire. Wili was uncomfortable at the sight of the building that almost killed him but relaxed once Karp explained her plan to travel to the Crossroads and find new technology. Wili and Karp had never explored the Sun Spire, but even seeing the building pained them and so they traveled south instead.

The next day Karp and Wili found a small village, which likely belonged to the people who maintained the Sun Spire. The village hall was an unremarkable two-story clay structure flanked by one-story houses. The roof had mostly collapsed, and one wall caved in centuries ago. Karp motioned for Wili to wait outside and entered. Small wooden benches lined the front of a clay stoop. No creatures or corpses were anywhere in the building, but no metal either. Karp and Wili moved on without checking the surrounding

houses.

Two days later Karp and Wili continued down the main highway. The sky turned gray and the wind intensified. Within 30 minutes, every step became agonizing. Sand blew around and between Karp's arms as she tried to block the blinding swirling wind. No building or structure was close enough to see, and Karp's three person tent wasn't strong enough to stop the gales, so they had no choice but to continue. Thirty minutes later a little house with a wooden fence sat about 50 yards into the desert. Karp needed to decide to either travel the road with sand blowing in from her side or turn into the wind and push for the house.

Karp opted for the house since she didn't know if there was another shelter in the area. Karp raised her arms to block the gales but the wind scratched her face, and she could barely breathe without choking. She walked toward the house with her head turned down and eyes closed. She occasionally opened her eyes to correct course but every time she did, intense pain shot from her cornea. Wili and Karp spent 20 minutes traveling 50 yards to the house. She struggled to open the side door and crashed inside. The windward wall had partially collapsed, and Karp hid behind the remaining portion. Although freed from the wind directly striking their faces, Wili and Karp wheezed and coughed breathing in the circling dirt and sand.

Karp and Wili endured the wind until morning. Karp struggled to open the door but it wouldn't budge, and she eventually climbed through the collapsed section of the wall. Sand covered

the side door up to the handle. Wili coughed, and chunks of sand and mucus evacuated his lungs. Dirt covered Wili from head to toe and Karp's white armor was so dirty that it was indistinguishable from the leathers she wore underneath.

Karp and Wili traveled the road another four days and needed more supplies. Wili had only ever willingly shifted once and needed instruction. Karp explained Nort's description of imagining the desert and feeling the sun. She suggested that he imagine a forest and the feeling of shade on a warm day. That didn't work, and so Karp punched him until he shifted. They returned with the supplies and Wili could shift on demand in the future.

Three days later they spotted a building twice the size of Karp's warehouse but lacked any fortifications that usually adorned a dungeon, castle, or fort. They entered and made sure they were alone before examining its contents. There were several benches at each of a dozen large tables with small wooden handles scattered about the counter tops. Most of the handles were cracked and splintered with a hole drilled in the end which likely housed a metal instrument. Karp and Wili looked around the rest of the building, but there wasn't a single scrap of metal or any useful tools. Wili moved a large beam to check underneath, and a small section of the warehouse roof collapsed. Wili jumped back from a falling beam, but it clipped his side and tore several links in his mail.

Blood trickled down Wili's stomach, but his ribs weren't

fractured. Karp bandaged the flesh wound and fixed Wili's hauberk once he was treated. They departed the warehouse after risking their lives for nothing.

They returned to Karp's world for supplies after traveling down the road another five days. Five days after that, Wili and Karp came across a new warehouse, which from the outside was a similar size and construction to the last building but the interior was vastly different.

Two large stone ovens lined the northern wall, and one oven was centered on the eastern wall. There was a strange machine in the center of the room. The base of the machine was made of clay bricks that held a stone table top. An inverted log sat atop the table suspended by two pulleys. A large wooden wheel connected to a series of stone gears. The wheel spun gears, and the series of gears lifted the log using ropes on pulleys. When the log was high enough, the gears disengaged and the log dropped to the table.

Karp spun the wheel, and when she noticed a small red gleam, she stopped the log around a foot off the table. She waved Wili over to hold the wheel and moved to the strange contraption. She reached out and felt around the log's face. The support ropes creaked and frayed.

“Karp!”

“just hold it.”

A light glow shone from the log's face, and Karp reached farther. The pulleys themselves began to crack under the pressure.

A clank sounded under the log and Karp slid out a plate of dragon fire steel. Wili lowered the log and breathed a little easier. The red steel plate was about the size of a small shield. Karp molded the metal into a new buckler which was smaller than her seashell buckler, but the increased strength was worth the trade off.

Karp and Wili checked the rest of the facility and found several corpses, but no devils, banshees, or any other creatures. One corpse wore steel chainmail which dulled and stiffened over time. There were no other valuables in the factory. Wili returned the chainmail and seashell buckler to Karp's world and obtained supplies during the trip. Nothing else in the building was significant, and so the pair left. Shortly after exiting a snap cried from the factory followed by a heavy crash and shattering clay. Wili looked at Karp who nervously chuckled and turned a light shade of red.

Three days later they started to see a second mountain range intersect with the chain they followed. The intersection was their destination, and Karp was relieved that The Bog Djinn was correct about the spire. Five days later, just before reaching the Clay Gate, they found another factory. Daylight faded by the time they arrived but Karp and Wili decided to check for valuables before securing a safe house and heading for the Crossroads in the morning.

The factory's exterior was almost identical to the others, but on the inside, it processed leather goods. Tables dotted with sewing kits cluttered the center of the main production floor. Tanning

racks lined the outer walls. Most racks were empty, but a few had large sections of leather still hanging.

The pair eased when they looked inside, and no creatures despoiled the wide open space. Karp started picking up packs of sewing needles, and Wili searched the room's perimeter. He tore down a dry, cracked sheet of leather from a rack in the corner, but there were no valuables. Wili did it again and again until he found one rack hiding a steel sword. He wasn't pleased to see the sword because the devil holding it screeched at the influx of sunlight. The devil's first swing tore Wili's riding cloak and grazed his arm, but the chainmail prevented the glancing blow from inflicting serious damage. The shock of the sudden attack caused Wili to trip and fall back to the ground.

The devil stood over him swinging its sword. Wili rolled around to dodge the blade, but his luck ran out, and the devil's slash landed squarely enough to cleave through chainmail and draw blood from his left forearm. Wili grabbed his wound, and the devil stood, poised to land a killing blow. A yellow knife landed in its eye, and it dropped to the ground dead. Karp hurried to Wili and grabbed his arm. She pulled up the sleeve of his hauberk and blood pulsed from a gaping wound. She frantically pulled bandages from her bag and put pressure over the cut. The wound bled for close to an hour and night was almost upon them.

Karp threw Wili's undamaged arm over her shoulder and dragged him to a nearby house. She made sure a bedroom was empty and threw him on the bed. She shouted and banged her feet

to draw out any monsters hiding in the shadows. Nothing came. Karp barricaded the doors and windows. She returned to Wili, who laid on the bed, passed out from blood loss.

A few hours later Wili shook and trembled. Karp tried to wake him, but his eyes wouldn't open. The trembling continued for a few more seconds and then stopped. Karp felt Wili's forehead, and it was moist and hot. The bandages on his arm held, but each movement risked reopening the wound. Karp paced the room to consider how to save her friend, but he offered no help while he was unconscious. Karp needed fresh air, so she cracked open a window but then just stared at the Crossroads. The room was silent since Wili stopped trembling or even moving. Karp rushed back to the bedroom and placed her hand on Wili's neck. He was breathing and had just stopped moving in his sleep. She slumped into the chair next to the bed and sat there for the rest of the night, waiting for him to wake, but he lay still until morning. Wili woke to Karp half sitting on a chair and half laying on the bed. She sat up and wiped her eyes before speaking.

“we got careless.”

“Yeah.”

Wili didn't have the energy to elaborate or argue. Karp stared into space for a long time before addressing him again.

“you didn't see what i saw last night or hear what i heard. if you did, you might not want to go through with this, but you did almost die yesterday, so maybe you have your own hang ups. so

i'll ask you this anyway. do you want to go on or do you want to go back?"

Wili didn't answer her for three days.

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Karp and Wili stood outside of the final safe house before entering the Clay Gate. Wili adjusted a strap so he could sling his shield to his right arm in an emergency because his left arm was now incapable of blocking. The devil cleaved Wili's arm to the bone. The wound would completely heal as long as it didn't open, so his left forearm was covered in bandages. Karp carried a large sack of supplies, and Wili carried none.

“I'm not an invalid! I can carry a bag too!”

“no. i'm not going to risk it. you should even have that arm immobile.”

“I can't. What if I need to flee? Or there's an emergency.”

“well... we'll compromise. you don't have to wear a sling, but i'll carry everything.”

Wili ground his teeth and fetched his traveler's cloak, dawned the hood, and started walking. Karp hurried to catch up, but Wili pretended not to notice.

The Clay Gate in the Shift World was over 20 feet tall and

consisted of a long stone wall spanning the length between mountain ranges. A 30-foot gate allowed access to the Crossroads, and the gate was made of iron and steel but was now missing and most likely scrapped by shifters long ago. Holes pockmarked the stone wall's face around the gap in the Clay Gate. Little steel spikes glistening several inches down into the holes were the only remnant of the metal gate. The two strolled through the missing section and traveled into the Crossroads.

They reached buildings after several hundred yards. Unlike the buildings in the Arid Desert that were almost all clay or buildings in the Lush Forest that were mostly wood, the buildings in Shift World's Crossroads were all carved stone. Most buildings were made of stone blocks mortared together, but some were hammered into the sides of mountains. Even the roads and roofs of houses were stone. Every aspect of the Crossroads felt as though it was made an eternity ago and has endured a solitary existence.

Karp was amazed by the structures that sprawled in front of her. The roads were wide, and towers stood prominently around the skyline, but no one walked the streets. No voices echoed around the stone halls. No curious children peaked out of their houses' windows to check on the strangers walking through town. Karp thought back to Slart's fear that one bad harvest was enough for panic or her worry that all out war was inevitable. Karp was afraid that Slart wasn't over reacting, but instead one day their world could be doomed like the Shift World. The Traitor's Tavern Inn would be devoid of revelers enjoying a drink. Empty crates

would fill The Whitecoat's warehouses, and there would be no workers to replace the goods. Fields and towns would show the scars of battles fought over the last morsels of food. Corpses would linger where they died because the living departed the world and no one was left to bury the dead.

Karp's realization that she wasn't alone dragged her from her thoughts. She felt the presence of everything lurking just inside the stone houses and dungeons. The Crossroads waited to come alive at night, and the emptiness of day felt kind in comparison. After several hours of traversing the main street, Karp saw three tall towers that made a triangle. Karp and Wili cautiously followed a side street which was much larger than the thin alleys that jetted between houses and dungeons but smaller than the main road. Karp felt uncomfortable being so close to buildings. A sign at the end of the road read "Academy." Wili and Karp were relieved to arrive at their destination and for a brief moment felt that everything was going to be all right. They approached the closest tower. The wooden door was still completely intact. Karp looked over to Wili and whispered.

"can we really be this lucky?"

"Ugh, don't say that."

They pushed the heavy wooden door, and it scraped across the floor leaving a streak in the dust and dirt. They entered the tower and Karp drew her water steel dagger and placed it in Wili's good hand.

“if anything comes.”

He turned away to watch for stray creatures. Karp put her back on the door and pushed. The door scraped the floor and closed with a pop as it seated in the door jam. Karp drew a throwing knife and readied herself for anything drawn by the noise but nothing showed, and she returned the knife to her buckler. She and Wili walked to the closest room and stepped inside. The room had small desks strewn about and one medium sized window. The sun would set soon, and Karp and Wili needed a safe place to spend the night. They cleared the room, then closed and barricaded the door.

“we'll spend the night here, and we'll begin looking tomorrow.”

“What's this?”

Wili reached out Karp's knife. The flat of the blade near the handle had three words written, and a 4th word was written near the tip of the blade.

“that's a long story.”

“Don't want to tell me?”

Karp was embarrassed and thought for a minute.

“the short version is that i once had a dagger i treasured. the first time i went to the traitor's tavern, i wanted to buy these clothes, but i didn't have any money. i went to the shift world to find something to trade and was attacked and almost killed, but i

managed to kill the skeleton with that knife. well about a year later i returned to the shift world to face my fears.

the skeleton was dead, and i took my dagger back. that dagger kind of became a symbol that i survived and moved on. the more time i spent in the traitor's tavern, the more i felt like i didn't just survive one attack, but i only survived my whole life before that. one day though, i traded that dagger to get this dagger. i never really felt right about it, but it seemed ok at the time. this is the dagger that i killed the sunflower with. if i never traded for this dagger, it's likely i'd be dead now.

so i guess you could say the dagger is a little bit murkier of a symbol for me. well, after you were attacked and i didn't know if you were going to live through the night or die, i stayed awake the whole time thinking. i was wondering: is all this worth the trouble? was all this worth the risk? and i thought. i looked out the window and saw the skyline, and i thought some more. i finally came up with an answer and etched it into the blade. now, if i'm not sure or start to waver, i'm going to look at the blade.”

Wili was shocked by Karp's outpour of sincerity and contemplated her words.

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The next morning Karp and Wili unbarred the door and quietly

pushed it open. They crept into the hall. Karp carried a yellow throwing knife and Wili branded his shield on his right forearm. Even though the city came alive at night, nothing managed its way into the first floor of the tower. Karp and Wili quickly cleared the empty halls and classrooms. Only one room showed signs of life.

Unlike the light wooden doors of the tower's classrooms, this door was made of heavy oak. Three locked bolts secured it shut. Karp put her hands over the locks and the metal melted away. Karp slid open the first bolt and something inside stirred. Creatures crashed against metal and frenzied when Karp removed the second bolt. Wili positioned himself directly to Karp's right so that he could block any incoming attacks. Karp drew her dragon fire dagger and reached for the final bolt. She opened the final bolt and pulled the door. The clattering became a cacophony by the time the door opened.

Karp jumped in front of the opening. Wili stepped between her and the windowless room. They were ready to take anything that came, but nothing approached. Observing the pitch black from outside was futile. A lit torch appeared in Karp's hand. The clattering intensified as they first entered but slowly died away as they explored. Tables lined the left-hand wall. Scrolls, fine cutting instruments, and diagrams filled shelves. Straps adorned the tabletops and periodically bins filled with soil and bone fragments sat under the tables. They didn't find monsters hiding in the darkness, so they focused on the noise's source.

Cages lined the right side of the room. The cages varied from ones small enough to hold mice to one large enough to hold a tiger. Most held skeletons from animals that were still confined when The Conqueror blighted the Crossroads. Others, however, held creatures, but not humanoid creatures like skeletons or devils, but mutated animals, like dragons. One cage held a rat that grew to monstrous proportions but the massive rodent was pinned by the small stone walls and iron bars. Its nose and teeth protruded from metal bars, and its lower body was completely immobilized. Karp felt sorry for the rat and made sure it wouldn't hurt anymore.

Another cage held a snarling dog that shed its silken fur. Scales replaced its soft skin and blackened eyes sunk into its gaunt face. Green liquid drooled from a mouth of pointed teeth. Another cage held a disfigured bird. The bird's scarlet eyes sometimes appeared to flicker. Wings of jet black feathers spread as Wili approached. Fanciful shapes and spirals decorated under the wings. Karp's head swam, and she lost perspective on the bird's size and distance when she looked at the patterns. Karp forced herself to turn away, and they continued searching. There were five dogs and four birds in the 100's of cages that lined the room. Karp and Wili headed for the second floor.

The second floor was libraries and laboratories. Books on animal husbandry, anatomy, and physiology filled the library. After several hours of searching, they didn't find anything useful for fighting shifters or anything historical for The Bog Djinn. The fourth floor was mostly empty bedrooms. Karp and Wili spent the

rest of the evening searching through scrolls and books in the offices on the third floor. Night fell and the city resurrected.

Karp peeked out of a window. Lines of devils, skeletons, and banshees marched the roads in a grisly parade. The skeletons ambled from place to place, sometimes resting on the street and sometimes entering buildings. Devils and banshees ran about the street. If a devil collided with a banshee, the banshee screamed and all nearby creatures frenzied. Asaghi perched on the roofs of houses and two-story buildings. When another asaghi landed on a rival's roof, they'd fight until one left. At least one dragon sat atop every tower, but many had two or three. Fire lit the entire night sky; dragons burnt the higher regions and asaghi flew around the lower regions. An asaghi ascended and shot fire skyward and skimmed a nearby dragon, and it shrieked in pain.

Other dragons rose in response to the cries. A dragon circled beneath the asaghi and shot its leg with a fire blast. The asaghi dodged to pull its seared flesh from the line of fire. Another dragon flew by and bit off an arm and landed on a nearby tower to feast. A large male tore the asaghi's right wing, and it plummeted four stories to the ground into a mob of devils. The mobs screeched, hacked at the asaghi, and carried off the pieces. Karp shuddered and curled up under the window and fell asleep.

Karp dreamed that she was back in the Village of the Traitor's Tavern. Slart sat crying over the Whitecoat's husk outside of the Traitor's Tavern Inn. Karp approached, and Slart turned to face her friend, but Karp recoiled instead of embracing her at their

reunion. Slart's skin pulled taut over her bones and aged like a husk. Slart's fingers crumbled into sand, and the destruction continued up her hand. Her face twisted into a caricature of fear until her head also crumbled away. Korg's body also disappeared. Karp rushed into the Traitor's Tavern Inn to find someone to help, but the inn was devoid of people.

Karp opened her eyes and stared at the ceiling. Her left hand rested on her water-steel dagger's sheath. Karp breathed in and out until she calmed. She closed her eyes and tried to sleep again.

Karp was now at the Grain Fort after the dragon attacked. The partially collapsed keep burned with an acrid smoke. Karp stared at the burning ruins, and the pile of rubble morphed into the general store at the Village of the Traitor's Tavern. Karp searched Village Square Road for any survivors. A charred dismembered body littered the road but it wasn't the courier. Nort's scorched face stared up at Karp. His eyes followed her as she circled to check it was really him.

Karp woke again. She stared at the ceiling, tapping the dagger at her side. Karp tried to sleep once more.

Karp marched with Wili down the alleys of the Crossroads. The streets were empty in the daylight. Wili walked ahead of Karp and passed a bend. Karp arrived at the turn in the road, but Wili was gone. Karp continued up the road, but there was no academy, and she realized that she was in her world, not Shift World. The streets should have been crowded, but the only signs of people were her footsteps echoing between buildings. Karp

rounded another bend and was transported to the Founder's Day Festival.

Food stalls, ale carts, and exhibitions were erected in Village Square Road, but no workers sold food or drinks. Pots of oil sat atop a cart, but the jugglers were gone. Karp ran past the village hall and arrived at The Whitecoat's staff fighting competition. The rink was deserted, and the crowd had evacuated.

Karp opened her eyes, sat up, and looked at Wili sleeping at a table. She laid back down, drew her water steel dagger, and held it to her chest. She didn't try sleeping again.

- - -

The next morning Karp looked out the window while she ate breakfast and the city slept again. There were no dragons in the air, asaghi perched on buildings, or other monsters marching around the road. A dark spot on the stone street where the asaghi fell was the only sign that anything moved at night. Karp finished her meal and packed her gear.

Karp unbarred the stairwell door after Wili finished readying. Karp drew a throwing knife, and the pair descended to the first floor. They breathed a little easier since nothing disturbed the hallways that led to the second tower. They stalked a hall lined with empty classrooms. There was still no sign of creatures or danger as they entered the second tower. They closed off the hall to the first tower and the hall to the third tower. Every classroom,

lecture hall, and storage room was conspicuously empty. The second tower had a heavy oak door like the first tower, except this door only had one closed bolt.

Karp rapped on the door with the back of her hand. Nothing moved inside. She placed her hands on the lock, and it melted away. She slid open the bolt, and still, nothing stirred within the room. She pushed the door, and it sluggishly swung open with a loud creak.

Small cubbies honeycombed the left wall. A different plant name labeled each crevice. The names ranged from the mundane like wheat to the exotic, like starfire bush. Karp counted the rows and columns and estimated 500 holes, which the vast majority housed at least one jar. Some jars held pollen, others housed seeds, and others still held extracts particular to that type of plant. A series of large tables rested against the right wall. Each table held a set of pestles and mortars, scrolls and textbooks. Nothing hid within the room and Karp, and Wili moved to the second floor.

The second floor housed libraries and offices. Most of the library's books weren't useful, like tomes that chronicled the history of growing wheat in the Shift World or treatises that contemplated and speculated on why plants produce food or how they became that way. Karp found useful encyclopedias that described poisons, medicines, and culturing plants. Sunset was only an hour away by the time Karp and Wili ascended to the third floor.

Scrolls discussing plants and flowers filled the third floor's offices. The scrolls were so full of technical jargon that neither Wili nor Karp understood much of their content. They returned to the second-floor libraries, sealed the doors, and covered the windows with layers of paper. Karp read by candlelight to prevent illuminating the room with too much light. She spent hours cataloging useful ingredients or plants from the books on poisons and medicines and then searched the library stacks for information on some of those ingredients. Karp stopped working by midnight, and by then Wili slept with his head on a stack of papers.

Karp picked up her candle, removed a blanket from her pack, moved to Wili, and draped the woolen cloth over him. She bent down and blew out the candle sitting near his head. She moved to a two-foot wide window in the northern corner. She blew out her candle and peeled off the paper covering a diamond shaped window.

Karp watched fire dance in the sky as her eyes adjusted to the darkness. The sky swirled, popped, and disappeared. She watched the pageant for minutes. The dancing started shortly after sunset and would continue until sunrise. She looked to the road after her eyes adjusted. The nightly carnival was in full swing. Rivers of monsters flowed and crashed. Karp still felt uneasy watching everything, but it was beautiful if she emotionally distanced herself from the danger. Karp tore herself from the spectacle, and laid between the library stacks, away from all the windows, but she still couldn't fall asleep for the night.

- - -

Karp hadn't slept well for the last several days and spent most of the last night laying between the stacks thinking about returning to the world. Since she couldn't sleep in the Shift World, after Wili woke, she asked him to bring her home. She returned to the Shift World after sleeping and now Wili and her prepared to reenter the second tower. Karp unbarred the library door and headed into the second floor. Nothing on the second floor was disturbed, but Karp drew a throwing knife and snuck to the stairwell. Karp's usually stiff gait was more fluid, but each step was less precise. Her body moved like each motion was part of a series of dances.

She descended the stairs and entered the first floor. Once again nothing was disturbed. Karp crept to the heavy oak door that secured the storage room. The door remained shut, so Karp lowered her shoulder and pushed. Wili stood by with his mace in his right hand in case anything trespassed during the night. Karp fluttered into the room, found the plants she cataloged and Wili returned them to her world. Karp and Wili headed for the third tower after collecting the last of the seeds. The hall to the third tower housed empty classrooms and lecture halls. Karp and Wili were both relieved that no creatures lurked but were stifled by the lack of valuables.

The door to the third tower was different than the ones in the first two towers. It was also heavy oak and bolted shut but was flanked by a pair of windows. The windows were likely used by guards to control access. A sign read 'biological weaponization, ' and Karp and Wili exchanged glances.

“i guess this is why the bog djinn sent us here.”

Wili didn't acknowledge her words. Karp put her hands over the locks, melted them away and slid open the bolts. The door creaked open. A single large sliding bolt was riveted to the rear of the door and a metal latch attached to the wall. If the bolt was latched, Karp and Wili couldn't have entered the tower without waking half of the Crossroads.

Karp and Wili pushed open the door and stepped into the blackened room. Karp waved an empty hand toward Wili and a torch appeared. She reflexively recoiled at the sight of two robed figures and readied her dagger, but the figures never moved. She crept toward her adversaries, but they didn't react to her presence. The torchlight illuminated the faces of a pair of mannequins. The riding coats were like nothing Karp had ever seen. Instead of the dark brown tanned leather common to the lush forest, these coats took on a light yellow-tan hue.

Most riding coats were designed to keep riders clean and to protect them from the elements. These coats, however, had several hidden pouches and compartments. The compartments were designed to hold scrolls or documents, and the pouches were shaped like little jars. Small sheaths also adorned the inside.

These coats likely provisioned scouts or spies for several days. The coats themselves were well crafted and would be useful in the future, but the leather was truly remarkable. It was hard and sturdy but flowed like regular leather.

“Yeti skin.”

Karp stopped examining the cloaks, and Wili pointed to a small plaque on one of the mannequins.

“no wonder i've never seen these before”

Yeti lived in the Creeping Ice, and few accounts of these creatures existed because most people didn't survive a yeti encounter. They were twice the size of bears and lived in the most inhospitable tundra. They survived on creatures unfortunate enough to wander into blizzards. Sometimes yeti ravaged communities near lakes and entire encampments of Nomads died defending their homes. Only those who fled were spared as their friends and family were devoured.

“these two coats probably came from one beast and likely at a high cost.”

Karp removed the coats from the mannequins and looked at Wili. He rolled his eyes, and the coats disappeared. Karp and Wili continued to scour the room and most articles were useless but Wili eventually waved Karp over to a desk located in the corner.

“Give me a thick piece of leather.”

Karp reached out from under her cloak and handed Wili a

small sheet of soft leather. Wili folded the sheet until it was two inches thick. He reached into an open desk drawer, took out his hand, and violently slammed his fist onto the counter. A strange object stuck out of the small leather swatch, and a liquid oozed from the leather folds.

“what is that?”

"There is some kind of metal coil inside the tube that pushes out this thing's tip, but when the tip receives enough pressure, it retracts, which causes anything on the inside to leak out into the target. According to that scroll, these ones have a sleeping liquid inside."

Karp unfurled the scroll which diagrammed tubes, feathers, wound metal, and had a description of how to make the darts.

“maybe we can figure out how to make these later.”

Wili shrugged indifferently at the prospect. The pair scoured the room until Karp came across a series of small bowls sitting on a little table. She called Wili, and he sauntered over. Karp returned the scroll to the table.

“if this works, we could have a big advantage over both people and monsters. if we take these crushed shimmerfish scales soaked in linseed oil and mix it with a reagent made from the starfire bush, we can create a mirror. so if we try that in mid air, maybe we can camouflage ourselves.”

Wili looked a little skeptical and confused. Karp reached over

and took a pinch of powdered scales in her left hand and a pinch of starfire reagent in her right and threw both in the air. Some of the powder sparked midair, but most fell to the ground. Wili laughed at the failure, but Karp smiled and looked down. Wili followed her gaze, and a reflection of themselves stared up.

"i think i just need to work on the timing."

They stared at themselves, and after half a minute, the images began to fade. Within a minute only a fine ash covered the ground near their feet. Karp and Wili spent the rest of the afternoon scouring the tower for something useful, but they only found untested hypotheses regarding ways to use plants and animals for weapons.

Karp and Wili sealed a small room on the second floor as night began to fall. Karp outfitted the new travel cloaks with weapons and provisions. She attempted to make a dart of her own using a small steel plate. She melded the materials into the correct shapes but failed to get the darts to properly function. When she stabbed leather, the tip never retracted, so she was simply banging her fist on the ground.

Wili laid sleeping again, but this time didn't even attempt the pretext of reading. Karp decided to quit for the night and try to sleep.

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The next day Karp and Wili finished looking through the third tower. Although they didn't find any more useful prototypes, they found a few books that might interest Trolt and a book on weapons. Most of the weapons were standard fair in Karp's world, but she hoped she might find some unique variations. She spent that evening perfecting darts and cataloging any items they might want to collect before departing the Crossroads. In the morning Karp and Wili unbarred the door to the third tower's library.

“we need to go to the other towers and retrieve some items before we leave.”

“Like what?”

“for example we need the plants to make paralyzing potion. if you make the potion with one dose of nightshade and one dose of poppy extract, you can paralyze a person, two doses of nightshade and one dose of poppy and they die. two doses of poppy and one dose of nightshade and they will pass out. if we can get the plants, i can grow those materials myself.”

“Fine, and then let's get out of the Crossroads.”

“i have to get things from the first tower too.”

“Fine, but then we go.”

Karp and Wili slowly cleared each hall and room before entering and collecting the goods they needed. Wili was ready to leave after Karp collected crushed mud crab shells and

shimmerfish scales.

"i have an idea."

"What?"

"i think we should stay here for the night and leave in the morning. this way we can make sure we aren't missing anything and might lose the chance to get later."

"Do you really want to press your luck?"

"nothing has gone wrong; we aren't pressing anything."

"Yeah, but one mistake and it's all over."

"Just be careful then! Go ahead without me if you want."

Anger flashed in Wili's eyes. He stormed up the first tower's stairwell. Karp and Wili sealed up the second-floor library and covered the windows after dusk fell. Wili couldn't sleep well and lifted his head off the desk to find Karp pouring over the books and scrolls that remained intact. Karp looked up at him when he stirred but returned to the scrolls.

"Look Karp.... I'm just tired."

"so sleep now. i know you can't sleep in my world, so here is fine."

"You don't... Look, what do you plan on doing after we are done here?"

"well, we're going to find a safe house on the outskirts of the

crossroads and leave some supplies there, and we're going to return to my world."

"I meant after that."

"oh, i guess nort and i are going to figure out how to use these new weapons we found and slart is going to try and get lark out of her shell. i'll probably have two beers with every dinner for a while."

Karp tried a smile, but her generally even affect always made them seem fake, even if she felt happy or genuinely wanted to comfort someone.

"Why are you doing all this?"

Karp sat uncomfortably since the answer involved a level of vulnerability that she didn't like to display.

"I know you do it for the future. You hope to save those you love and want a happy ending. Each time you go home, I see it in your face. You come back energized and willing to take on anything. I don't have that. This is my life. The killing, the violence are all I know and will never get to know anything else, and I'm just tired."

"is this why you've been so upset recently?"

Wili scoffed at the question.

"I swear for how smart you are, in some ways you are just so naive. After this, I'm done. If Nort needs something from your warehouse or armor or something, fine, but I'm tired of

this world and don't want to come back.”

The weight of Wili's words fell heavily on Karp. The implications of his declaration cut her, but he obviously knew full well what his request meant. She sat in shock trying to think of a way to convince him that existence was worthwhile despite everything he said being true.

The candle in front of her flickered. There was a slight draft in the room, but all the windows were covered, and there wasn't much wind in the Crossroads. Karp looked around the room, and a sheet hung off a nearby window. She blew out the candle and skulked over. She reached down to steady the sheet that was blowing back and forth. The breeze stopped after Karp grabbed the sheet. Karp peeled it up and was confused when she couldn't see fire in the sky. She pulled the sheet back further and stopped at two eyes with a dull yellow hue in their whites and a bright yellow iris. The eyes narrowed.

“Wili...”

Karp stumbled from the shock of the asaghi pounding on the side of the wall. Wili jumped up with his shield and rushed to Karp. The wall weakened and cracked. Karp gathered her materials, and Wili returned them to her world just as the wall caved in, and the asaghi entered. Karp and Wili made their way to the barricaded door, and Wili shifted them into the yeti skin cloaks. Karp removed a pop gourd and hurled it at the asaghi. She threw a steel dagger at the gourd, and it popped in the asaghi's face. The creature shot fire all around the tower, burning the

nearby books and scrolls. Wili grabbed one of the tables and charged the asaghi, pushing it out of the tower.

The asaghi flew erratically, sporadically rising and falling. Wili looked down from the hole in the wall, and the monsters near the tower converged on the academy. Wili looked around the alleys surrounding the tower, but there wasn't a safe escape route. An idea hit him, and he rushed to the stairs and grabbed Karp's arm. The pair moved to the third floor and pushed open a balcony. Wili climbed the railing and jumped onto the roof of a nearby house. Karp followed, and the two ran across rooftops. Loose stones and shingles fell into the mobs as they ran. The devils below threw trash at the pair.

Karp jumped a particularly large gap and continued to run, but Wili cried for help. He hung off the edge, Karp released her whip and threw the end. Wili grabbed the whip and pulled himself onto the roof. Karp rushed over to help him to his feet and looked back. Most of the tower was aflame. Asaghi and dragons circled the flames, occasionally skirmishing. Karp and Wili continued along the rooftops until there were no longer monsters on the ground and jumped down to the road and continued toward the Clay Gate.

The monsters on the ground stopped pursuit a while ago, and monsters no longer wandered ahead. Karp and Wili felt at ease for the first time in an hour, but near the Clay Gate two devils stepped out from behind a building. One devil carried a water steel short sword. Karp stabbed its neck on the way by and took

its sword. Wili bowled over the other devil, and they exited the Clay Gate.

Karp and Wili peered back to ensure that nothing followed.

“the fire must have drawn them.”

Wili just nodded in agreement. The two turned away and headed toward shacks on the outskirts of the Crossroads. Wings beat from above, and the pair looked up just in time. An asaghi crashed down in front of them. Karp threw a pop gourd at its face and set it off with her whip, but the asaghi turned and covered its eyes. After the gourd had exploded, the beast thrust its head toward Karp and shot a fire blast. Wili jumped between the two and diverted the fire.

The blast dug into the ground and cut a divot. Karp flung a dart at the beast, but the dart had no effect, and she unleashed several more. That much poison would kill most people, but the asaghi seemed mostly unaffected. The asaghi tried to hit Karp with a yellow whip but misjudged her body due to the riding cloak. The blade pierced the yeti skin and was caught. Karp removed the coat to avoid getting pulled in when the asaghi retracted its whip. The asaghi removed the coat and flung it back toward Karp. Wili tried to flank the asaghi, but it jumped back and ineffectually shot fire at him.

The asaghi's movements became sluggish as the poison began to seep in. Karp used the opportunity to embed her whip's blade into the creature's shoulder, and it dropped its weapon. The asaghi

grabbed Karp's whip with its good arm and attempted to pull her closer. Wili jumped between them and smashed the asaghi in the face with his shield.

The asaghi staggered backward and fell. Karp pulled her whip from its shoulder and caught the blade in one motion. Wili walked to the asaghi and nudged it with his foot.

“It's passed out.”

“tie it up.”

Wili bound the asaghi with the sunshine steel whip. Karp removed her darts. The steel tips only slightly penetrated the asaghi's tough skin. The pair walked to the nearest house, barricaded the door, and quietly sat until dawn.

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Karp and Wili left the shack after sunrise and headed for the bound asaghi. They arrived several minutes later, but the asaghi died during the last few hours.

“they look more human in daylight.”

Wili nodded. Dungeons were shadowy, even during the day and most of an object's fine details were obscured in the darkness. In the sunlight, the asaghi had a unique face, not like any person that Karp knew but she could imagine meeting a stranger with its

features. Karp found that idea unsettling.

“let's go.”

Karp and Wili spent the remaining daylight traveling north along the mountains to distance themselves from the Crossroads. They spent the night at a house in the shadow of a burnt down factory. In the morning, Wili shifted away from Shift World.

Chapter 11

Karp and Nort shifted back to the store room in The Whitecoat's compound. Nort reached for more supplies, but Karp put her hand on his and lowered them. Slart wanted to be near her friend for when she returned to the world.

"i'm back... for good."

Slart sensed something was different about that announcement.

"You, uh, mean for now?"

"for good, probably. well, i'll go back, just not like i have been. no more long trips."

Slart was dazed by the declaration, but also a little happy.

"Why? Did, umm, something happen?"

"kind of. wili doesn't want to do it anymore, and it's probably too dangerous to go by myself."

"What happened?"

Slart gently placed her hand on Karp's arm.

"well, he was finally crushed by the weight of the world."

"Oh?"

Slart genuinely had no idea what Karp meant.

"wili finally gave into the despair of his situation. he only eats the food i bring him. he doesn't do anything but train and fight"

and worse of all, he will never be free from the violence and death. every day he relives the danger, fear, and anxiety but there's no hope tomorrow will be better. he can't leave the fight and just gave up.”

Slart had never met Wili but felt the loss none the less. Nort couldn't understand since he still had the mentality of a child enamored with the idea of adventuring in Shift World, even though he never experienced that life.

“Was it worth the trip at least?”

Karp had mixed feelings about the answer.

“well, these cloaks will be useful, and so will the darts. i'm not sure about this mirror powder though, it might work, but i'll have to figure it out.”

“Will this really be enough to, ugh, change anything?”

“i don't know, but it's better than nothing.”

“What.... ugh.... are you going to do then?”

“first, we'll try and get the timing down for the mirror powder. it might work, it might not, but it will give us time, time enough to learn something new i hope.”

Clank Clank Clank

Nort walked the road in a set of full plate armor. Walking silently in chainmail armor was easy as long as he didn't stomp

his feet, but in a set of full plate, the individual plates clapped together almost every time Nort moved. Karp insisted he learned to move and fight in full plate because the plate would be almost impenetrable to slashing and stabbing weapons. Nort was confused by the sudden insistence since he's never had a problem wearing light armor, but he knew better than arguing with Karp.

Nort escorted Malis, the barmaid from the Traitor's Tavern Inn, to her house on his way to training at the Whitecoat's Compound.

Clank Clank Clank

“Are you going to train with The Scorpion?”

“Yeah, she's got some idea for how to learn the mirror powder.”

“The what?”

Clank Clank Clank

Nort adjusted his balance and stiffened his upper body to stop the armor from making noise.

“Some new weapon. She said it heats the air and causes a mirror. I don't know why it would work, but she says it could.”

“Where does she get these ideas?”

“Shift World.”

Clank Clank Clank

A squirrel darted from bushes on the side of the road and startled Malis. She yelped and laughs echoed under Nort's armor. Malis recovered from the surprise but was angry at Nort. Her shoulders tensed, she threw her arms to her side and went to storm off, but turned and hit his arm instead.

“Owe”

Malis withdrew her hand and started laughing. Her exaggerated display of rancor backfired, and now she shook the pain from her hand. Nort continued laughing but stopped when Malis tensed.

“Is your mom alright?”

"Yeah, mostly. She got sick in the field a couple days ago. She fainted, but she's doing better now."

Nort stared at the ground as he walked to think and to watch his steps.

“Are you going to stay in the Traitor's Tavern? For good?”

“Probably when this is all over. I'll probably work with mom at the store.”

Malis was relieved. They arrived at her house, and she faced Nort.

“Well, if you decided to leave, you wouldn't have to go alone...”

Nort blushed under his armor, but Malis couldn't tell because of his faceplate. She ran up the covered path to her house before

he could reply.

Clank Clank Clank

Nort continued up the road thinking about a future outside of the Traitor's Tavern.

I'd work for some great lordship, probably a royal envoy, maybe even the royal family. The capital would be on the side of a great lake where I'd have a large villa. No, a large stone villa. My chef would make steamed buns whenever I wanted. I'd walk along the beach with Malis, eating steamed buns and drinking mugs of pumpkin spiced ale. I'd go and fight in all of the regional championships. I'd be a victor of the Lush Forest, Arid Desert, Creeping Ice and even a victor of the royal tournament. Everywhere I went people would say 'there goes The Morning Shield, savior of the empire, champion of the people, hero'!

Clank Clank Clank

A light raven flew from the trees and circled Nort. The bird's feathers glowed a dull yellow and Nort's eyes followed its flight. He was momentarily blinded by the light shot from under the light raven's wings, and it disappeared by the time he recovered.

Nort could see The Whitecoat's compound and concentrated on sneaking. He almost reached the gate when he was spotted by the guard. In light armor, he could have reached the gate undetected, but he already felt his improvement in heavy armor. Nort raised his faceplate to identify himself and proceeded inside.

Nort arrived at the center of a training field between the Pavilion of the Three Rings and the main warehouse. Karp waited near a large vat of flour and a large vat of salt. Karp handed him a set of leathers. Nort waited, but he still wore armor.

“go change in that pavilion.”

A week later Karp, Slart, and Nort sat in the Traitor's Tavern Inn sipping a bitter brown ale and eating day old bread, cheeses, and fruit for lunch. Karp and Nort wore plain brown leathers which turned white from the flour and salt that covered them from head to toe. Every time Karp reached for a morsel to eat, powder ground into her skin and she grimaced.

The main door to the inn creaked open, and a tall woman clad head to toe in sunshine steel armor strode in and peered around. The full plate armor bore rough, jagged angles which made the sunshine steel glow from certain directions. Small scrapes in the enamel meant the armor was more than just ornamental, but the armor was so luminescent that the enamel must have been recoated recently. Since the armor was both well maintained and well worn, Karp deduced the woman to be a vassal of a high lord. A flash of disappointment and worry crossed her face as she approached Karp and Nort. Nort didn't register her presence until she stood directly behind the table.

"Excuse me, bakers, where is The Scorpion?"

All three at the table chortled, and the woman's face wore a tinge of embarrassment, disdain, and confusion.

"what do you want?"

"I want to converse with The Scorpion. Tell me her location or you've likely baked your last loaf of bread."

The woman drew her sword. She took a posture of desperation and frustration and not the menacing posture of a person intent on killing. Karp, Nort, and Slart fell quiet just the same. Karp rose from her seat and stepped away from the dining hall table. In a flash, Karp was clad in seashell steel, and the blade of her whip snapped the woman's sword at the hilt. Instead of fear or anger, the woman's face read relief. She bent down, picked up the blade and instantly stood erect. The sword was whole again, and she calmly sheathed it.

"An extremely confused Wili says hello."

Karp felt that the woman had more questions, but she never asked them.

"Karp the Scorpion, apprentice to Korg the Whitecoat, Avenger of the Betrayed, Slayer of Dragons, I'm Tark the Silverfish, first steward to The Grand, Victor of the Lush Forest's Tournament."

Tark placed her right hand on her breast, straightened her back, and then bowed. Karp chuckled as she realized just how foolish

she had been for worrying about these formalities. Karp struggled back and forth deciding if she should return the salute, but eventually, she just moved on.

“so what is it you want?”

“My lord is worried. Scared really.”

Karp and Slart were surprised by her directness, and Nort once again picked up on his mother's and Karp's reaction but had no clue of the implications.

“What is he afraid of?”

“He believes The Mandrake is coming for him. The keeps from the Dragon's Roost to the Crossroads have been ransacked. Our keep is the final way station or warehouse prior to the Crossroads. We've dispatched workers and guards to protect lesser lords, but they have disappeared alongside the people they were sent to protect. My lord fears his keep will be emptied next.”

“Why is...uh...he so sure they didn't just leave?”

“Some of those lords were malcontents and might have been plotting or scheming, but other lords would die before betraying the empire. My lord is one, and that is why I need your assistance.”

“if your lord is who he says he is, then why does he need my help?”

“Don't play coy. You are the sole warrior to have dispatched a dragon. You struck down The Sunflower, and no other has

survived an encounter with the followers of The Mandrake. Even if the rumors are exaggerated, your presence might entice The Mandrake to pass over the keep.”

“that would take us three months to walk out there. if what you say is true, we probably won't make it in time to help.”

“We have made arrangements to arrive at the Grand's Meadow in approximately three weeks. It should be possible to avert disaster, but we need to depart soon. Tomorrow morning if possible.”

“This might be the only chance we have.”

Karp reluctantly agreed.

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The next morning Karp, Nort, and Tark approached the stables near the convoy staging area. Nort was excited.

“This is my first time on a horse.”

Karp smirked. Tark was put off by Nort's childish mannerisms. Three thin black mares whinnied as stable hands fastened leather saddles. Nort reached toward the largest horse, but it snapped at him, and he quickly withdrew his hand. Karp's smirk turned to a smile, and she motioned for Tark to join her.

“get on him nort.”

Nort slid his foot into a hanging leather strap, swung his leg above the horse and sat squarely in the saddle. A stable hand led the horse out of the barn door, Karp's eyes widened in anticipation. Karp nudged Tark.

“start going forward.”

Nort tapped the horse's flanks, and the mare slowly walked forward and stopped. Karp looked disappointed.

“harder.”

Nort kicked the side of the horse, and it broke into a full gallop, ran to the edge of the convoy staging area, and reared and kicked before calming. Nort slowly turned the horse toward Karp and Tark and waved. Karp sighed in disappointment.

“let's go.”

Karp and Tark mounted the other two horses and trotted out to meet Nort.

“where did you learn to ride a horse?”

“I don't know.”

“of course.”

The three brought their horses to a full trot and maintained pace. Riding the horses was unusual for Karp and Nort. Although The Whitecoat taught Karp equestrianism, they've avoided riding because horses were too conspicuous. Walking required more effort and took longer, but most people didn't think twice about

cloaked figures walking the road, everyone noticed people on horseback. Between the high stakes and the quick travel, Karp wasn't worried about being spotted traveling on this journey.

They rode until nightfall. The group slowed when it was too dark to continue at a full pace and stopped at midnight. Karp and Tark rested in the Shift World, but Nort was forced to rest in the world. Tark wasn't bothered since the horses needed rest anyway. Nort slept until sunrise when Tark raised him with a kick to the side. The group roused the horses, reattached the saddles, and rode again.

The group continued this way until they arrived at the mill town on the evening of the third day. They put their horses in the stables and walked into the tavern. Karp ordered three rounds of the spit-fire garlic mutton, potatoes, and star-berry mead. Out of habit Karp and Nort walked toward the throwing board and Tark just sort of followed.

“those horses aren't going to last.”

Tark understood the implicit question.

“We are provisioning new horses in every town we rest.”

“Are we going to stay at the inns?”

“We must.”

Tark felt a little annoyed that she had to change her plans to accommodate Nort, but she also felt a pang of guilt. Karp and Tark rested in the Shift World when they tired, but Nort was

forced to endure.

"you'll be glad he's here... if you're right."

The barkeep arrived with Karp's order and eyed her when he noticed the tension at the table. She gave him a dismissing nod, and he left the food and drinks. Karp felt a soft wad under her plate when she moved the dish closer. Karp tensed. Tark looked toward the throwing board, and Karp shifted to remove the small leather parchment that was attached to the rim of the plate.

"tell me about your lord."

Karp sipped the star-berry mead and swooshed the liquid around her mouth. The star-berry fruit didn't add much to the taste of the mead, but added a bitter aroma that reminded her of the pavilion in The Whitecoat's compound.

"Torp the Grand administers the last hub of the caravan trail. He warehouses goods from all around the Lush Forest that are destined for the Crossroads. He also warehouses goods from the Arid Desert and the Creeping Ice. Those goods are, of course, distributed through the Lush Forest."

"the grand? i've heard a different name."

Karp smirked, Tark scowled.

"His stature matches a man of immense importance. I'd refer to him as The Grand if you wish to live long enough to catch The Mandrake."

"why is he so sure someone is targeting him? the crossroads"

have been closed for the last month. shouldn't the warehouse be empty?"

Tark squirmed a little uncomfortably.

“Sometimes merchandise accumulates more than it should. There is more than enough goods for thieves to target our keep.”

Karp finished her drink in silence. She turned to order another but saw Nort sleeping at the table. She roused him and motioned toward the guest rooms. Nort rose but stayed slightly hunched and shuffled toward the rooms.

“I'll fetch you at first light, and we'll depart after breakfast.”

“ok.”

Karp opened the door to Nort's room and slipped in after him.

“What?”

“i'm going to sleep in the shift world and watch over you here.”

Nort was still too tired to understand her meaning. Karp handed Nort the letter from under her plate.

-Be careful; your real enemies are in the Crossroads.

-The Bog Djinn

- - -

Karp followed the sounds of footsteps until they stopped outside of Nort's room. A pounding on the door woke Nort so violently that he almost fell out of bed. Karp walked over to the door and opened it to a surprised Tark.

“Breakfast is ready.”

Karp nodded and shut the door. Nort donned his armor, and the two headed for breakfast. They ate grilled duck with mixed fruit. After the meal, the three rode out northeast toward the Grand's Meadow on fresh horses. For two weeks they rode horses to exhaustion and replaced old horses with new every 3 to 4 days. Even though the horses stayed fresh, the journey took its toll on Nort.

They stopped at a small village about one week south of the Grand's Meadow. This village was different though. All the towns they stopped at previously were somber due to the rumors circulating about an upcoming war or crisis, but this town was deserted. They passed a small barracks surrounded by a log post wall. The barracks' main gate was red with black stripes. Karp waved to Tark to get her attention and then motioned to the strange building.

“It's a training post for the Royal Guard.”

“shouldn't they be with the royal family in the crossroads?”

“They do more for the royal family than ensure their safety

and they need bases of operation.”

“what could they need elite guards for that they can't just send regular troops?”

Tark adjusted herself in her saddle. She looked around uncomfortably and moved her horse closer to Karp.

“They work to seek revenge, sometimes against a lord or lady whose becoming powerful but won't yield to the emperor or sometimes they are even used for petty grievances or slights, just to demonstrate the emperor's power to local lords.”

Karp looked up to an open window in the barracks, and a red shadow moved from view.

“well, they are still here. so where is everyone else?”

Normally people peeked out windows to check on the strangers entering town, but each house was empty on the way to the inn.

“do you think they have been trained to ignore everyone that passes through?”

As Karp turned forward, a slight blur of red moved between houses.

“i guess we aren't completely unwelcome.”

“What?”

“nothing.”

They arrived at the inn and dismounted. Tark led everyone into the stables and tied the horses to a post. A boy no older than 12 years old stepped out from an empty stall.

“House these horses and prepare the three left by The Grand. We'll return at first light tomorrow.”

The boy nodded to Tark. He looked as though he was going to speak, but something stopped him. Karp, Nort, and Tark entered the inn and paced around while they waited for an employee to show up.

A man quietly stepped from a back room and waited behind a counter. Karp approached the man, and The Silverfish went to speak, but the man interrupted, and The Silverfish puckered her lips.

“We heard of your coming Silverfish, is this The Scorpion and The Morning Shield?”

“Yes, she is Karp the Scorpion, and he is The Morning Shield.”

“How sure are you they are who they say?”

Tark hesitated and thought of an answer.

“why is this town shut-up and why are we being followed?”

The man smirked.

“The royal guard asked me to relay a message. The keeps north of here have been cleared, and they are unsure of the location of the missing lords. They don't know your real identity

or your intentions, but if you are guests of The Silverfish and she represents The Grand, you will not be disturbed if you remain in the inn until tomorrow morning and immediately depart town again.”

“what happens if we leave the inn?”

"You are surrounded by the royal guard; likely you won't leave town at all."

“i see they are everywhere.”

The man smirked again and waved over a young woman.

"I'll be taking stock and preparing the inn's ledgers. This is Nald; she will procure everything you need during your stay.”

- - -

Karp, Nort, and Tark rode from the inn. The silence that fell between each hoof beat was eerie. Karp looked around every corner into the little alleyways between houses. Flashes of red vanished as they passed. The horses slowly trotted. All three riders wanted to sprint down the road, but they feared their pursuers would lash out in response.

The horse's hooves made a clapping sound on a bridge over a small stream in the middle of town. Every step rung out as shapes jumped around the spaces between shops. Despite the occasional blurs in the shops' windows, there were no signs that commerce even flowed through the town.

When Karp left the inn, the innkeeper paid her one last visit. He gave her specific instructions on the route to take, and Tark had no objections. Karp was now mortified that their trail crossed the main town square. In this case, the square was actually a circle ringed by different stores and stables. Karp didn't want to be surrounded but was unsure if her fears were justified. If she was wrong and left the path, she might insight the nearby guard to attack. If her instincts were right though, the three of them might have to defend themselves from all sides.

“are you sure you can trust them.”

“Of course! No one would cross.... an envoy of The Grand.”

The Silverfish glistened at this pronouncement, but Karp had doubts.

“either these are the royal guard, and take orders from the emperor, or they are mass murderers intent on who-knows-what. either way, i doubt they fear the grand.”

“I think I see both how you've survived some of your encounters and also why so many fear you.”

Karp was slightly insulted. She was also unsure if Tark knew more than she was letting on or if she was really just that confident in her master. As usual, Nort didn't have a problem in the world. Karp sighed in deep and continued down the road. They entered the town square. Glints of steel moved along the shadows.

“there is about 50 yards to the left and 30 to the right. nort you stay to the right.”

The trio reached the center of the square. Movement behind the stores increased. A crack came from behind the goods store. Someone else stirred behind the leather worker. For the first time, Tark seemed worried, and Nort picked up on the others' emotions. As Nort, Karp, and Tark became more concerned, the people in the square became more agitated. Noises stirred from almost every building. They nearly left the square when Tark put her heels into her horse and sprinted toward the edge of town. Karp dug in her heels and followed. In a few minutes, the three stopped in a field. They circled and looked up the road, but no one followed. One of the training garrison's watch towers loomed above the trees. Someone clad all in red was barely visible atop the tower. He waved.

“Well, it seems they just wanted to drive us off.”

“Yes, but I don't know why the guard was so dramatic about it.”

“i think they wanted to test themselves and us. see how far they could push us before we broke.”

“You think we passed or failed?”

Tark tried breaking a smile to lighten the mood.

“we failed.”

“I always fail.”

Nort seemed legitimately sad. They headed off toward The Grand's keep which was still a week's ride away. They rode faster now, to both put distance between them and the training camp, and also to make The Grand's keep on time. The scenery in this section was bleak. Centuries of logging to feed the Empire's need for wood deforested most of the area. Despite the lack of trees, the grass was green and overgrown. Various bushes and saplings grew between rotting stumps.

The empire successfully planted saplings outside the Crossroads to make the scenery more pleasant. Returning the forests become so popular that every year the line of saplings moved further south. In a few days ride normal woods and forests had already returned.

The Grand's keep was still four days northeast, but the line of abandoned keeps was only one day north. The trio arrived at a small town. There was no gate, no local lord, or anything of note in the unnamed village. They brought their horses to the inn's stables and left them with a stable boy. The town itself was dead, just like the town with the training camp, but the unnamed village felt scared, not menacing. Karp entered the tavern, and everyone fell silent.

Karp's footsteps were inaudible on the wooden plank floor, but Tark's footsteps rang out. The patrons were mostly farmers and caravan workers, but three people at one table wore white stripes on their leathers, indicating they were poor merchants. Karp walked up to the graymane at the counter. Once again, The Grand

had arranged everything. Karp ordered dinner for the three and headed to a nearby table.

Karp eyed the throwing board. It was nothing fancy, just various shapes of different sizes dotted around. After playing against Slart for all those years, most people didn't present a challenge, and so there was no real point in looking for a game anyway.

“they are being irrational.”

“Who?”

“the people of town.”

“They are afraid.”

“that's why it's irrational.”

“We are one day south of a decamped keep. The inhabitants are missing. There could be an army amassed nearby, or monsters or The Mandrake. So far the empire has failed to stop the crisis. Seems like no fear would be irrational.”

“look at what we know. someone, something is going to lords' keeps, making everything disappear. there is nothing like that here. they have nothing to fear.”

Tark raised an eyebrow.

“What about the festival? Or the attack on the Grain Fort? The Village of the Bog Djinn? All those places were full of innocent people that were massacred.”

“the attack on the grain fort was a long time ago. everything was contained to keeps since then.”

"It's only been a few months. You also have to remember that they are unaware of what we know. It all just appears like random violence to them, and they don't yet know who their saviors will be."

“what do you know about these attacks?”

“I know what you know. Someone or something is clearing out keeps, stealing the weapons and food, and using everything else to purchase more food and weapons. They are supplying an army.”

“do you know who the army is fighting?”

“There is only one enemy that requires that type of force to combat. You've seen their retribution.”

Tark adjusted her posture since she found the direction of the conversation distasteful.

“have you fought this enemy before? they don't need a standing army to take down the empire. it only took three people to destroy the grain fort.”

“How many enemies are there?”

“i don't know.”

- - -

Four days later Karp, Nort, and Tark rode through a gate outside a massive wooden fort. The gate was three stories tall, made of ancient lumber and painted a luminescent gold that shined and glistened in the sun. Small green people reaching toward the sky were painted near the base.

The compound was two or three times the size of The Whitecoat's. The Grand's keep was in the northeast corner, past a winding labyrinth of warehouses and storerooms. Some of the warehouses were made of one 30 foot loft. Others were several stories tall and circled by ramps. The whole compound was quiet, even though during peaceful times it was abuzz.

A keep made entirely of quarried stone, with a straw roof held down by wooden planks loomed over the warehouses. The main section was three stories tall, but each corner had a spire which rose another two floors. Tark led them to the main entrance, and no one waited either outside the door or just inside.

“another warm welcome.”

“The Grand will be on the third floor in his main hall.”

“are you sure?”

“Yes, I'll escort you through the remainder of the keep after introducing you to The Grand.”

Karp followed Tark through a small hallway eastward into the southeastern spire.

“All the stairs are in the spires. The soldier's barracks are on the 4th and 5th floor of this spire and the other three spires house all of the keep's servants.”

They exited the stairs on the third floor and left the spire. They walked west and passed two intersecting hallways. Tark stopped in front of a large ornate door half-way across the length of the main keep.

“There are courtesies you should observe before entering. Firstly, make eye contact, but don't stare. Secondly, speak concisely and on topic. Thirdly, please don't be rude, you'll understand.”

Tark slowly pushed open the door, and Nort peeked inside. There was a bed in the far corner twice the size of the largest bed Nort had ever seen. The fabric spreads rolled on with a scene of flowers and fields. Curtains hung by the windows were held back by metal hooks. An ornate square table large enough for 20 people sat on a rug. A candelabra was stamped with the images of dancing flames accented with ruby studs.

A large man sat on a spruce throne at the end of the room. The man was so obese that he likely could do little more than be escorted from his bed to his throne and his throne to his table. The bed was so large to accommodate his girth. The table housed extravagant meals several times a day. Karp tried to look at him but not stare, per Tark's instructions, but Nort stood agape, staring at the large man. The man's jowls shook and wobbled as he spoke.

“Shilver fishhhh ishth that the shhhhhhhcorpion?”

Karp now fought the urge to gape and Nort turned beet red from trying not to laugh.

“Yes my lord, this is The Scorpion and that... uh that is The Morning Shield.”

“Morning shhhhield? I've never heard of him.”

“Yes my lord, he accompanies The Scorpion on her adventures.”

“I'm sorry the grand, but why have you called us here?”

"Lord."

Tark was stern.

“Lord the Grand?”

“My lord!”

“My lord the Grand?”

The Grand let out a laugh that shook his whole body.

“I shheee why shhheeee keepsh him around.”

Tark was glad the fickle lord was in a good mood.

“We will probably shhhooon be under shhhiege, you have ekshhhhperienshh fighting thosse thingsh?”

“why my lord?”

“Why what?”

“My lord the Grand, no one was near the warehouses. There has been no traffic from the Crossroads for months, why would thieves target you now?”

“wow, that was really well said for you.”

Nort beamed.

“Don't ask...”

The Grand raised his hand to silence Tark who now looked furious.

“Not everything hash shtopped, and there ish inventory shaved up, there ish lesh people for shecurity.”

“what could they be after?”

“We have weaponsh, jusht like every other keep, plush sshome of the royal family'sh extra shtoresh. I can't shay more.”

Tark was beet red and glared at The Grand.

“i'll see what I can do, but i'm not sure anyone will come.”

“Thank you Shkorpion. Pleash show them to the barracksh.”

Tark nodded and escorted Nort and Karp to the fifth floor of the southeastern tower.

- - -

Karp had expected to only have a single bed while sharing a room full of the keep's soldiers but instead she was alone in what Tark called a stateroom. Visiting officers and dignitaries often occupied the room on the 5th floor of the southeast spire. There was a large stained oak bed in the corner with wolf pelt blankets separating the sleeper from the itchy bed of straw beneath. The soft pelts were smooth and silky, and Karp smiled as she ran her hand over the sheets. The pelts were common in the Lush Forest compared to The Grand's cloth sheets, but Karp couldn't imagine that fabric felt better.

There was a fireplace on the far wall. In winter the fire was a refuge for many weary travelers who needed protection from the harsh northern cold. Today there was only soot lining the ember pit. A large iron kettle sat outside the fireplace. This kettle wasn't for making tea or soup, but heated water that filled a large stone bathing tub in the corner nearest the fireplace. Only the wall opposite the room's door was an outside wall, and there were three small windows with wooden shutters.

Karp sat at a plain wooden desk near the foot of the bed. Scrolls describing techniques and tools obtained in the Shift World sprawled out over the desk's surface. Some of the scrolls consisted of weapons she mastered like the mirror powder or pop gourd, but others contained ideas that Karp couldn't perfect.

Tark escorted Nort and Karp to their rooms and gave them time to settle in, but Karp was getting bored. Nort probably

unpacked and napped, but Karp stored everything in the Shift World, so she had nothing to unpack and was well rested.

Karp gathered the papers and they disappeared. She pushed her chair back and rose to her feet. She picked up her riding cloak and started donning it, but returned it to the Shift World instead. Karp decided that there was no point hiding her appearance since everyone in the keep knew her identity anyway. Karp opened the stateroom door and crossed the hallway to Nort's room and pounded on the door. A loud crash came from inside, followed by the sound of stumbling and someone muttering. The door flew open, and a shirtless Nort stood wearing soft brown leather pants and raising his shield.

“What?”

“let's look around.”

“OK.”

Nort shut the door, and a minute later he re-emerged in full steel plate with the morning shield slung on his back. Karp and Nort descended the stairs and were met with surprised expressions.

“Scorpion.”

“Afternoon Scorpion.”

The off-duty soldiers were informed of her arrival and were probably ordered to be polite. Their eyes drifted between her left arm and whip but then darted back to her face.

“what do you think we should look for?”

“The Mandrake?”

“true, but i know his face and everyone knows we're here, he would leave.”

Karp and Nort exited the spire and walked into the main hallway on the first floor. The furniture was intact, people walked the halls, and everything was clean.

“it's weird; normally these keeps are empty.”

Dungeons in the Shift World only held death, and they only visited the ransacked remains of fled keeps in this world.

“we have to figure out how they are going to break in.”

“Is that why we are on the first floor?”

Karp nodded. They inspected the windows and walls in the main hallway, but there was nothing unusual. They arrived at a kitchen in the northeastern spire. One corner had an oven where bakers made rolls for that night's dinner. One baker was a short woman who was only slightly taller than the counter they worked on. The other baker was a man about a foot taller than her. They chatted as they worked, the woman laughed occasionally, and the two's bodies drifted back and forth and sometimes touched.

On another table, chefs and sous chefs cut vegetables and prepared meats for the keep's workers. Karp and Nort began to look around the floor for any signs of a trap door or cellar, but there were none. The windows and walls were intact, and there

were no signs of anything broken. There were no outside doors, and the windows were too small for someone to enter.

“Afternoon Scorpion.”

One of the chefs noticed Karp and Nort after stopping work for a moment to pick up a different knife. Everyone fell silent and stared at The Scorpion. The bakers turned from their rolls and looked especially surprised. Karp nodded. Everyone returned to their tasks. Karp and Nort finished inspecting the kitchen and moved through the western hallway on their search.

“**They seemed surprised.**”

“i think we are so used to being silent that we appear like ghosts.”

“**Dinner smelled good.**”

“i'm not sure if we are going to find anything searching, but we'll search the first floor and then talk to the silverfish at dinner.”

- - -

“I'm sorry for The Grand's absence, but he has been unwell recently.”

Tark, Karp, and Nort sat in a small dining room in the center of the second floor. The room was large enough to house 15 people

and felt empty with only three eating.

“it's alright; we need to talk about security anyway.”

They ate a beef and potato stew in a creamy milk sauce. The rolls had a perfect balance of salt and garlic, but the flavors popped when dipped in the stew. In all her travels around the Lush Forest, Karp never ate that type of bread.

“Those bakers really are excellent. Wouldn't you agree? They mastered baking breads and cakes from exotic lands. This will probably be your only chance to dine on such elegant fare.”

“You eat these all the time?”

“I've only had the pleasure for two months. They were recommended by friends from the Crossroads.”

“do you have a lot of friends in the crossroads?”

“We are the largest trading hub near the Crossroads. We trade with most noteworthy people.”

“Do you know the royal family?”

Tark was a little surprised by the question, but also pretty amused. She waved over a serving girl.

“Bring three stouts.”

“Yes, my lady.”

“I do not. The Grand may know the royal family, but I certainly do not.”

“we've searched the first floor, but I don't see any security problems.”

“That's good.”

“i guess. are there drainage pipes? under the keep?”

“Nothing larger than a human head. Why?”

“that is how they infiltrated the grain fort.”

The serving girl returned with the three stouts and handed the glasses to Tark, then Karp, and then Nort.

“Thank you.”

“Yes, my lady.”

A crease lined The Silverfish's mouth.

“Why does she call you 'my lady'?”

Tark picked up her glass of stout and gulped a few mouthfuls. She took a roll, dipped it in her stew, bit it, chewed and savored the flavor.

“I'm a cousin of the Grand. 3rd or 4th removed, or something similar. Some of the older families refer to me as 'my lady.'”

“are there any secret routes or passages?”

“No. This keep was constructed long after the previous war. There was no need.”

“tomorrow, show us the perimeter. we need to see if it can be

infiltrated.”

“Alright. How did they infiltrate the other places? Besides the Grain Fort?”

“i don't know; we've only seen it after they were emptied and they became much better at hiding their tracks.”

- - -

Karp, Nort, and Tark sat in the second-floor dining room. They were eating at night because they spent all day searching warehouses.

“In three days we've found nothing.”

“so?”

“If we can't ascertain how they've entered, how can we stop them?”

“why are you so sure they've already broken in? that they will even try?”

"You saw the armory on the first floor; someone could use those armaments to outfit a garrison."

“yeah, but most of the storehouses are empty, the ones that aren't are full of worthless junk. if they wanted to clear out the stores here, they should have done it right away, not after the

crossroads were shut down.”

“Maybe there is something else they are after?”

Tark fingered the handle of her mug, took another drink, and placed it down again.

“Like what?”

“Well, we are near the Crossroads, so maybe there is someone important here.”

It never occurred to Karp that all the trouble was to protect someone and not something. Tark didn't say anything, and the room fell into an awkward silence.

“well, is there something we should know?”

Tark moved her hand away from her plate. Suddenly Nort knocked over his drink, and it spilled onto The Silverfish's hand. She calmly wiped the drink off her glove with a small square of soft leather.

“The Grand is immensely important. He is a distant relation to the royal family. Most people are unaware of that, except for some of the lords who disappeared. That is one of the reasons I'm sure they will attack, to attack the royal family.”

Karp heard a faint scream.

“did you hear that?”

“What?”

“No.”

Karp rose to her feet, hurried to the door, and wrenched it open. Guards rushed through the halls.

“you.”

One of the guards stopped.

“what happened.”

“There was an accident in the kitchen.”

Karp, Nort, and Tark followed the guards to the northeastern spire. A body laid on the ground, thin and charred. Skin melted around bones and took on a moist texture. The woman baker was on her hands and knees weeping near the corpse.

“What happened?”

The baker turned toward Karp and started raising. Nort stepped forward to the stumbling woman. Her hands moved around his armor. Her face twisted in surprise and she fainted in his arms. Nort carried her to the 4th floor of the spire and placed her on an empty bed.

“stay with her. let us know when she wakes.”

The guard nodded. Karp, Nort, and Tark went to The Grand's chambers to report the situation. The Grand was confused by their presence.

“It seems that there was an accident in the kitchen.”

“Shoo what happened?”

“We don't know for sure. It appears that the bakers were working late and the husband fell into the oven. She removed him, but he was beyond rescue. She was hysterical when we found her, so she's resting.”

“What do you think shhkorpion?”

“i think we should search the keep. something is off here.”

“Why do you say that?”

“one, there is no reason to cook this late and two, the baker would probably have been soiled and burned if she pulled someone out of an oven. i think she came across the body.”

Tark ran her fingers through her hair as she listened.

“I agree, what are you planning?”

“take a small squad of soldiers that you trust and watch the grand. nort and i will search for the enemies.”

Someone banged on the door. Karp drew her water steel dagger and approached. Nort joined her with his shield drawn and positioned himself near the entrance as the door slowly opened. The guard went to enter but balked at the sight of weapons. Tark circled around Nort and peered over his shoulder.

“It's alright.”

Karp and Nort eased, and the guard slipped in.

“Born was found dead near the armory. He was gaunt and lifeless.”

“was born's skin tight over his bones? did he look like he's been dead for years?”

“Yes.”

“then it's started.”

"Retrieve Baln, Rong, Boric, and Tan. Also, disseminate to all guards that they are to follow The Scorpion's orders as if they are mine."

The guard saluted Tark and fled the room. A few minutes later, there was another bang on the door.

“who is it?”

"It's Baln; I'm with The Turtle, The Wyvern, and The Fox.”

Karp gave Tark a confused look, and she nodded. Karp opened the door and four soldiers clad head to toe in sunshine steel armor filed into the room.

“I'm Rong the Turtle.”

Rong was well over six feet tall and clad in full sunshine steel plate. An extra ring of steel looped around his neck which gave him the look of a turtle.

“I'm Tan the Wyvern.”

The Wyvern wore all sunshine steel chainmail. Her sunshine steel sword was held in scabbard adorned by a yellow wyvern with a long circling tail.

“I'm Boric the Fox.”

The Fox also wore sunshine steel chainmail. He was only slightly larger than a child, but had a wily look.

“I'm Baln the Coral Snake.”

Baln mostly wore leather with large sunshine steel plates on her biceps, forearms, and thighs. She also wore a cuirass. Likely her name came from the two daggers she wore on her hips.

“karp the scorpion.”

“Nort the Morning Shield.”

A new bang came from the entrance, and everyone inside stirred. Nort moved his shield from his back to his left arm and answered the door. A guard stood dumbfounded at the seven warriors standing inside staring at him.

“There....there was another murder, on the first floor.”

“show the morning shield where you found the body. i'm going to check the body near the armory. you five protect the grand. don't open the door for anyone. if they defy you, kill them without hesitation.”

Nort and the guard walked to the body in the western hallway of the first floor. The body was gaunt and dried, just like those killed by The Mandrake. There were no signs of a struggle, so the murderer must have surprised his victim. According to the guard, the woman was a maid who cleaned The Grand's keep. They left the body and searched nearby rooms. Most of which were empty,

except one near the northwestern spire was filled with crates containing furniture, clay pots, and other goods held in reserve for seasonal needs.

Nort examined some of the pots lining the wall and someone grabbed his arm. As Nort turned, he surprised the guard who recoiled and stumbled back.

“What?”

“Ummm... there is something over here.”

Three bodies identical to the maid in the hallway were stacked in the corner.

“Make your way to the other guards, and be careful.”

The guard headed south through the hall and turned east toward the main barracks. Nort shadowed him silently from a distance, but no one came. When they reached the spire, Nort slipped past the guards and headed up the hallway to find Karp outside of the armory.

“There were three more bodies in a storeroom. All killed by The Mandrake. Did you find anything here?”

“they melted an outside lock, but the door is still bolted shut on the inside. someone is in there, but they said they will only open the door for the silverfish.”

“What do we do now?”

“let's see how they got in.”

Karp and Nort exited the main door on the first floor. They walked along the perimeter of the keep. There were no signs of forced entry. They rounded the southeastern corner when Karp thought she saw lightning. It flashed again, but came from the northeastern tower and not the sky. Karp and Nort ran back inside, down the long halls, and into the kitchen where they heard a noise and stopped. Karp picked up a dish and threw it to the ground. The sound drew something from the stairwell, which entered the room in a blur and leaped at Karp who was cleaning up the dish.

The person flew through the image of Karp and rolled. They rose, and a whip's blade pierced her back straight into her heart. She dropped to her knees and fell forward, dead. Nort walked over, dislodged Karp's blade and flipped over her body.

“It's the baker.”

Nort rose and had soot from mirror powder on his knees. Karp walked to the burnt corpse that was still laying on the kitchen floor.

“bring her body over here.”

Nort picked up the corpse and laid it down next to her husband. Something was off, even though the husband's corpse was just a burnt out shell, he was still at least two feet taller than his wife.

“this isn't right. that isn't the other baker. then where is he? take me to the bodies you found.”

Karp and Nort headed west and in a few minutes they were in the storage room with the three bodies. The top body was from a steward wearing an embroidered leather tunic. Karp pulled that body off the stack. The second body was a guard wearing studded hard leather common to the rest of the garrison. Karp and Nort dragged the body off the pile. The third body was naked, except for a pair of heavy studded boots.

Karp silently ran to the makeshift headquarters for the remaining garrison soldiers in the southeastern spire. Karp shouted to the sentry on duty, and he jumped.

"Hey! get everyone in the garrison lined up in this hallway."

"Yes, Scorpion!"

The sentry rushed into the spire, and one by one the garrison lined up on the wall. After 10 minutes the initial sentry joined the line. Karp and Nort walked the length of the soldiers inspecting their boots. Nort walked between Karp and the soldiers, but everyone matched. All 50 soldiers eased one by one after The Scorpion passed and now they only seemed confused. Karp reached the first sentry.

"Who are your best fighters?"

"Tark and her four guards."

"out of the people here."

He hesitated, and Karp became impatient.

"The fire squad."

“call them forward and have everyone else fall back to the spire. they are to hold up there and don't let anyone leave or enter.”

The guard straightened and barked his orders.

“Fire hold here. Body and Talons set a perimeter in the barracks; no one enters, no one leaves.”

Everyone except for ten people and the original sentry departed.

“perfect. you five with me, you five with the morning shield. nort's team is going to sweep the west part of the first floor, stay behind him. you are going to tell the grand that we are sweeping the first floor and spires for someone in a guard's uniform with baker's shoes.”

The guard momentarily broke military bearing, and a small smile twisted the corner of his lips but then he stopped.

“don't enter the door; or they'll kill you.”

The guard didn't seem moved by the declaration. He saluted and headed through the southeast spire. Karp headed north through the hall and Nort headed west. She broke the guards into a group of 3 and 2 but didn't trust any of them enough to let them linger nearby. She and the guards checked each of the rooms but didn't find any signs of life. They continued until they reached the northwest spire. The female baker's body was missing from the kitchen.

“you three, check this floor, you two check the second floor, and i’ll check the third floor.”

Karp removed her whip from its holder, and the soldiers' moods changed. They became sanguine, focused, and readied their weapons. Karp ascended the stairs. As soon as she passed the entrance of the third floor, a guard raised a glowing hand. Karp dodged back into the stairwell and ran upstairs just in time for a fireball to crash into the spire's outer wall. The shock wave blew Karp into the 4th floor's doorway. She came to rest under a barracks bunk.

The explosion sent debris from both the wall and stairs falling to the ground outside. The baker walked into the stairwell and sidestepped the hole in the stairs. The baker looked up to the fifth floor and then into the fourth floor and decided to enter the fourth floor. A small pair of legs stuck out from under an overturned bunk. Tears formed in his eyes as he reached down to move the bed.

“Why? Why did you kill my wife? She didn't want any of this! I didn't want any of this! You don't care; you kill us all the same.”

He moved the overturned bed and found his wife's body clutching a strange object. He bent back down for a better look when it was struck by a small yellow dagger. A bright flash burst forth, and the man fished for something solid to lean on. He stumbled and tripped to the wall of the stairwell. Karp lashed his leg, and to her surprise, he fell through the doorway, down the stairs, and out the large hole in the wall.

Karp rushed down the stairs and peered out the hole. The baker laid with his upper body on a large piece of fallen wall and his legs dangled off the edge. There were sounds of a struggle on the second floor and Karp hurried to meet the trouble. She entered just in time to see The Turtle crush a devil with his large war-hammer. There were five dead devils at his feet. The Fox and The Coral Snake were with him. The Fox picked up a small red crystal from one of the corpses.

“What is this?”

Karp only shrugged. Nort climbed the stairs and saw the slain devils and went next to Karp.

“how is the rest of the keep?”

“Fine, we heard the explosion, and I ran here. The others disappeared though.”

Karp sent The Fox, The Turtle, and The Coral Snake to look for more devils. Karp and Nort went to inspect the baker's body since he died in the fall. Karp searched his belt and pockets and found a pouch with five red crystals. She placed the pouch in one of her belt's containers. Karp and Nort returned to The Grand's chambers where everyone else had already returned.

There were no more devils, no more murders, and no more clues for the rest of the night.

Chapter 12

Two days later Karp, Nort, and Tark ate breakfast in the second-floor dining room. There hadn't been any signs of an attack since the bakers died.

“Did you ever ascertain their intentions?”

“not really, they obviously thought there was something valuable, or they wouldn't have attacked.”

“What about the crystals?”

Karp was visibly annoyed by Nort mentioning the crystals and showed one to Tark.

“i doubt these were the main goal. they come from new devils and husks, but why get them from a keep full of guards? wouldn't a town be easier?”

“So what, these are a bonus? Maybe a consolation prize?”

“They were already here and said 'why not'?”

Tark gave a little shrug. A bell rung three times from atop the northeast spire. Tark waved over a steward, whispered in his ear, and he hurried out of the room.

“Three rings means a courier approaches. Since they hail from that direction, they probably departed the Crossroads.”

Karp pushed her chair back and was half standing when Tark put her hand up.

“We'll just wait here. When the guard verifies the courier's identity, they will send him up.”

Karp returned to her seat and finished her pheasant eggs. 15 minutes later there was a knock on the door. A serving girl answered, and a courier entered. Mud and dirt spattered his riding cloak, but his boots, gloves, and greaves were unblemished. Karp slowly lowered her hands under the table, removed and palmed a throwing knife. The rider addressed The Silverfish.

“I have a dispatch from the Crossroads.”

The courier handed Tark a sealed envelope. She broke the seal, read the message, and placed the envelope on the table.

“The Crossroads is under siege.”

Karp and Nort were both shocked, even though Tark revealed the information stoically.

“An unknown enemy has seized the citadel at the imperial palace. Do you think you can assist me one more time?”

Karp looked at Nort, and he nodded, so Karp also nodded. Tark quietly rose and left the room. A few minutes later she returned with a sealed envelope. Karp couldn't tell if the seal showed a large gate with people rising out of flames or perhaps just a clumsy drawing of people standing at the base of a shining gate.

“Remit this to the guards at the Crossroads; they will grant you access. I will follow, but I need to settle my affairs here first.”

Karp took the envelope.

- - -

Three days later Karp and Nort arrived at the Iron Gate on horseback. Karp imagined the Clay Gate in the Shift World looked like this gate, except in this world the stones were made of cleanly cut and laid squares. In the Shift World, the Clay Gate's stones were piled boulders. The Iron Gate itself was made of crossing iron bars. The gate could be climbed, but guards could easily shoot any trespassers from a small secondary guard post 30 yards behind the gate. Two armed guards stood behind a second smaller entrance similar in design to the main gate, but only high enough for a person or horse to walk through.

Karp dismounted and approached the guards.

“Stop.”

“we need to enter the crossroads.”

“No one enters the Crossroads until further notice.”

“we are representatives of the grand, here to help...”

“NO ONE enters.”

Karp reached out the envelope from Tark. The guard snatched it and went to tear it to pieces, but stopped. He examined the seal and the rest of the envelope and then ran to the secondary guard post. A few minutes later the guard returned with a soldier wearing a studded hard leather tunic and open-faced dragon fire steel helm. A black and red stripe rolled down the length of his left arm.

“Open the gate. Leave the horses with the guard. We'll walk from here.”

Nort dismounted, and the two lesser guards pushed open the small gate. Karp and Nort entered. One of the guards left, collected the horses, and returned. The heavy gate screeched closed with a crash as Karp, Nort, and the guards' officer walked into the city.

“I'm Long, 3rd captain of the Crossroad's guard. I'm taking you directly to the royal family's citadel. What do you know of the situation?”

“just that someone attacked a citadel.”

The trio walked past houses made of carved stone with straw thatched roofs. Unlike the Shift World, there were fairly few towers or large buildings with spires. Most buildings were only two stories tall. Long pointed to one of the few visible towers.

“That's the citadel.”

The all stone citadel rose four stories with each floor more

narrow than the floor underneath.

“what is it?”

“It's a meeting place and storage facility.”

“does it hold anything we should know about?”

Long became uncomfortable. He moved a little closer to Karp and whispered.

“It has the royal armor. Likely at least one person is going to be unstoppable.”

“where is the royal family?”

“The emperor saw this coming and took an extended vacation to the Creeping Ice. The prince and princess also left the Crossroads. The family is not in danger.”

“have you tried to stop them?”

“Yes, but each time we tried, they killed or captured the soldiers. We'd probably have no problems with the Dragon Guard here, but they left with the royal family. I've sent them requests for help.”

They arrived at the guards' barricade outside of the citadel. There were a few dozen men wearing studded leather armor hiding behind overturned carts and makeshift walls built with small wooden fences. The men were harried. Bags hung dark under their eyes, and many looked as though they were crying. A stone wall encircled the citadel. The wall was high enough to stop

intruders from trespassing but was missing spikes or other reinforcements designed for prolonged sieges.

The second floor of the citadel was visible over the wall. Small stone gargoyles lined the roof of the first floor, peering down into the open courtyard. The third and fourth floors had spiked peaks that gave the building an overall menacing look. A small straw roof was barely visible just right of the main structure.

“how many are there?”

A guard looked up at Karp but was disappointed only to see two people waiting.

“At least 4. There is someone in the building. Two in the courtyard and one waiting near the entrance.”

Karp noticed the man near the entrance but thought he was a remnant of the royal guard. He wore a dragon fire steel cuirass, greaves, and chainmail hauberk but he didn't wear gauntlets, which for Karp should have been a giveaway.

“Were any of them wearing water steel with white piping and a manta ray on the back?”

"The Mandrake? No. No one like that. One was in merchant's armor though, and we didn't see the other three until after they were in the royal guard's armor."

Nort and Karp shared a glance but went back to the guard.

“you sure that there is no one else?”

“No. We didn't even know they were here until the citadel was lost. There might be more.”

“alright, the morning shield and i are going to clear out the followers of the mandrake, you need to back up further.”

The guard captain nodded.

“You've heard The Scorpion, back off, but be ready.”

Karp and Nort approached the man waiting at the entrance of the wall. He stepped out and drew his sword. Karp moved to flank him right, and Nort moved left. His eyes followed Nort but shot back when Karp returned directly in front of him. The man rushed Karp and swung his sword. Karp turned into Nort who instinctually lifted his arms to block. The attacker's sword went through Nort. There was no blood and Nort disappeared. The man looked closer at where Nort had just been and saw himself. He placed his hand through the image, and it rippled like a reflection in a pond.

A sharp pain shot through the left side of his neck. He winced, and there was a second bite. He turned toward Karp, and a third dart breezed by. Two darts stuck in his neck between the links in his chainmail. He dropped to his knees, and the world circled.

“just give up.”

“no, there is something we need...”

Nort bashed him in the face with his shield, and he dropped unconscious to the ground. Karp and Nort ran into the break in

the wall, but to her dismay, both of the inner guards were waiting. Karp hoped to get the drop on her enemies, but it was clear that she would need to fight. One guard wore full plate armor and carried a great battle hammer. There were no defining characteristics of the armor, which was strange for dragon fire steel. The other guard wore a dragon fire cuirass with chainmail and greaves. She carried a dragon fire spear, which gave her a significant advantage over Karp.

Karp moved to engage the warrior in full plate, and Nort moved to engage the spear-woman. As Karp predicted, his moves were slow and lumbering. Karp unleashed her whip, but only gouged his full plate. The water dragon dagger on the end of her whip scored his armor, but likely would take several minutes to scratch through and do actual damage. Nort fought the spear-woman and held his own, but it was only a matter of time until the spear-woman grew bored of the stalemate and the enemies tried to double team Karp.

The man charged and swung the mighty war hammer. She dodged and rolled. Karp backed against the wall of the citadel. She had nowhere to go, and the warrior charged straight toward her. Karp froze in place as he gained speed. When the man committed to swinging at her, she threw a pop-gourd at his helm, and it exploded on contact. Karp dodged as the gourd exploded and he blindly swung his war hammer. The first swing found air. The second swing landed on the ground. Karp picked up a clump of dirt and threw it at the citadel wall. The man swung at the sound near the wall and connected. The force of the blow shook

the wall and lodged the hammer's head in stone. A gargoyle gently swayed from the impact. Karp threw her whip around its neck and pulled down. The loose statue wobbled and fell from the ledge. The warrior didn't even look up as the statue fell on him and crushed his armor into his body.

During Karp's fight, the spear-woman tried skewering Nort by stabbing through his shield and armor with the superior dragon fire spear. After failing to leave more than a scratch, she stopped attempting to stab though Nort's shield and violently smashed it with her spear instead. She knocked the shield from his hand but fractured the spear's shaft in two. She stood over Nort, and a dart bounced off the side of her helmet. She reached down, picked it up, and slashed at Nort. The dart's tip slid off of his armor, so she slashed at his neck under the helmet as he reached toward the ground. He found his shield, brought it up, and crushed her hand as she stabbed downward. The bones in her hand broke, the dart splintered, and her gauntlet shattered and cut her skin all over. The dart's poison seeped into her wounds.

The dart left a small scratch on Nort's neck, and he slouched a little from the effects of the poison, but the spear-woman stumbled back. Her eyes bulged red, and tears rolled down her cheeks. She slipped off her other gauntlet and raised her palm toward Nort. It slowly swayed back and forth as she tried to aim. A fireball shot from her hand but missed Nort and sailed out of the opening in the outer wall. Two more fireballs shot out as Nort rose, but they also sailed wide of her target. The spear-woman turned to Karp as she ran to join them and shot a fireball. Nort

jumped between Karp and the spear-woman. The ball exploded, but Karp was shielded behind Nort. The spear-woman staggered away toward a small wooden structure next to the citadel.

"It's true; I can't believe it's true. Please just go already!"

Succumbing to the poison, the raving woman staggered to the entrance of the small stable next to the citadel. Something stirred inside. The spear-woman gasped and stumbled away from the door. A dragon's head flew out of the stable and clasped around her neck. Her eyes went dead, and she slacked. A dragon emerged and thrust its prey to the ground. The dragon's talons peeled back her armor and its head rooted around inside, eating the soft flesh underneath. It looked up from its meal and Karp's water dragon steel dagger penetrated its skull, and it sprawled dead. Karp slid her dagger from the dragon's skull.

"i'm beginning to hate horses."

Karp and Nort walked to the citadel's main entrance. Explosions and crashes came from inside. Karp looked away from the door to speak to Nort but stopped talking before the first sounds came out. Devils charged the citadel from the city guard's ruined barricades. Some devils wore studded leather armor like the city guard, and others wore cloth outfits. Karp and Nort pushed the door, slid inside, and closed it again. They held the door shut using a nearby board. A few moments later, devils crashed on the outer doors.

The citadel's first floor was an open space with scattered

benches. Windows encircled the room. A large fire pit sat in the center, and a well was in the far corner. Karp stopped in her tracks at the sight of two bodies hanging off a cross beam over the fire pit. One body was a husk, and the other was a man with a gash in his chest.

A figure in black armor walked away from the well, stepping over the bodies of slain devils. He wore angular, jagged full plate armor, but with the palms of his gauntlets removed. A crown of red steel lined the brow of his helm. The figure adjusted his demon steel sword.

“You see what they think of us, so why do you help them? Why do you get in our way?”

The figure didn't wait for a response but leaped toward Karp swinging his sword. Karp gracefully dodged but the onslaught continued. Karp couldn't counter-attack while the figure was so close. Nort jumped as the figure swung down toward Karp and he deflected the figure's shots with his shield. Karp jumped back and let her whip fly. The water dragon steel slid off the angular demon steel without even a scratch. The whip's blade continued its strikes, but there was no damage.

Nort continued taking the figure's blows. The figure broke the stalemate by releasing fireballs. Instead of a quick moving fire bolt like the other shifters threw, these bolts moved slowly. Karp easily dodged them, but they hit the outer walls with such force that the entire citadel shook. By the third bolt, Nort fell back to intercept the shots. The shots hit his shield and the energy

harmlessly disappointed around him.

The figure let out a low growl and reached for a small pouch on his side. He removed a small crystal like the ones dropped by devils. He lifted his visor and threw it in his mouth. His eyes glowed red under his helm. In a blink, the figure was next to Nort and followed through with a punch to his face. Nort fell to the ground and rolled away. Karp whipped toward the figure, but he cut off the whip's blade. The figure bolted forward, and Karp lifted her left arm on instinct. The figure's sword hit Karp's buckler dead center and the demon steel cleaved the dragon fire steel in half, along with Karp's arm.

Blood shot from her forearm and stained her seashell armor a bright red. Karp dropped to her knees at the shock of losing her left hand. The figure grabbed her by the back of the neck and whispered.

“You should have quit after the Founder's Day Festival.”

Karp waited for the killing blow, but instead, the figure dragged her toward the well. He stopped and looked back to find Nort. As he turned, Nort reached him at full speed and dug his shield into the figure's stomach. The shield shattered the demon steel armor but cracked down its center. The figure used Nort's momentum to throw him into the well. Nort had picked up Karp's broken whip as he ran and looped it over the figure's helm as he fell. Nort almost dragged the figure into the well, but the figure stopped himself on the well's outer wall. The whip was still caught on the back of the figure's head, and he was pinned. The

figure unhooked his helm, and it flew off. The whip was dragged into the well, and the figure turned away.

His awkward smile twisted when Karp's water steel dagger plunged through the hole in his armor and into his ribs. The blade snapped, and the figure dropped to the ground.

“At least it's finally over. I can be with my wife and son again.”

Karp looked at the dying man and was a little surprised. She was fighting the person who ambushed her, Slart, and Nort outside of the box canyon and not The Mandrake. She ignored him and looked into the well, but couldn't see the bottom.

“Nort! Nort! Are you there?”

“I'm sorry it came to this.”

Karp continued to ignore the merchant until he grabbed her leg and she froze. He let go.

“If I wanted to kill you, I would have. I actually didn't want to kill anyone, none of us did, but we had to. We were all merchants who worked with The Whitecoat. We worked out of the Village of the Bog Djinn here and out of a trading post in the Crossroads in our world. The way The Whitecoat puts it, having so many people working together in both worlds was a miracle. He was a strange one, always talked about the Shift World and how shifters destroyed it, turned people into monsters. That all seemed so impossible, but in my world heavy wood and iron were really the

miracles, so we ignored his eccentricity. Clothing is easy to get; it comes from plants, sheep, even bugs and so when he said he wanted to trade. Of course, we agreed. We were happy, food became easy to make, and people stopped starving. We could build houses, and people stopped freezing. It was paradise until THEY came."

"why are you telling me this?"

"I need you to understand, please...."

Banging on the outer door intensified. Karp's head swam from blood loss. She looked around for a source of light.

"We were working and these savages attacked. They looked human, but they weren't, they were furies. They came to the Crossroads and started murdering everyone they found. They barely spoke and used weapons made of bone and teeth. They wore furs instead of cloth. They... they ate the dead. They used abilities without a care. Eventually, they made skeletons and devils for fun. All the shifters ended up here. I came here with my wife and two sons.... you've met them all.

My eldest son, the one you call The Mandrake, went to The Manta and begged for help. The Manta refused. He didn't care that our people were being massacred. In the heat of arguing he accidentally used a shock wave and The Manta fled. He followed, trying to apologize, but The Manta just lashed out instead. He had to use more powers to defend himself. Eventually, he defeated the Manta and took his armor. I mean one way or the other, all armor

comes from dead people, so what's it matter? Unfortunately when Ti...The Mandrake returned to the village it was overrun with devils. It was on fire, and all the villagers were dead. He had to clear out the devils. He didn't eat for a week after that, and he still doesn't really talk about it.

We decided after that to never use our powers like that again, and we tried but... at first, we just targeted shifters. We tried to get their stores or at least their best gear. Triled was in the Creeping Ice to see his betrothed when the savages attacked. He would bring the gear to a resistance, but it wasn't enough. People could fight, but the powers gave the savages too much of an advantage. We had heard the legends of the conqueror and his glowing eyes and blade. We thought the crystals might be the berries in the story, so I tried one. I went berserk and destroyed a house. We also vowed never to use them.”

Karp started making a torch from spare parts, but it was difficult with only one hand.

“if you speak so highly of korg, why did you kill him?”

"It was an accident. We came in numbers to the festival to steal more armor. The Mandrake was distracted when he left the inn and forgot his cloak, and everyone saw his armor. That envoy went to talk to him, and he thought about the Village of the Bog Djinn. He could only see the devils dancing around, and everyone's eyes stared like corpses, and that pain caused him to accidentally kill her. Then he had to defend himself from her guards.

He saw the boy and wanted to explain what happened. He knew he was an associate of The Whitecoat, but when Korg saw the bodies, he attacked The Mandrake. The Sunflower wanted ... more aggressive action, he thought that Korg was too powerful to keep alive and so he used that misunderstanding. The Sunflower was a great warrior, and we are just traders, we couldn't have stopped him but luckily you could. My son fled and told us what happened."

"if it's all one big misunderstanding, why did you try and kill me?"

The merchant teared as he recalled the story.

"M-m-my wife was a very kind and loving person. She thought we could explain to you what happened, so we watched you leave the Village of the Traitor's Tavern. We watched, and you seemed OK, I didn't want her to, but she could be.... persistent, and she approached you, and you stabbed her. You made her go back to the slaughter, and the savages killed her, but she shifted back here just as she died. I can't imagine the fear and pain she felt watching two deaths at once. My son tried to stop you and your friend killed him."

"she didn't mean to, but... people can be surprisingly fragile."

"Then you can understand a little."

"what about the grain fort then?"

"We left people there to see how others reacted to keeps

clearing out and people kept showing up. It was fine until you came intent on exploring, so they tried to get there before you, but it was too late. You were inside.... well, you saw what happened.”

“why did you change and start clearing out keeps?”

The merchant was becoming weaker with each answer. Karp didn't know how much longer she could last either.

“Because we kept losing every fight, every battle. We collected gear, but it wasn't enough. We got desperate again and harvested the Grain Fort for crystals. It seems petty now, but we said 'they prospered on the death of Shift World, so it's OK if their lives save our world.' We won our first battle because of that. We made sure their ends were quick, painless, but we never really felt right about it. That is why we hid the bodies, seeing them made us sick.”

“did you win the war?”

The merchant scoffed.

“No, more shifters came. We started harvesting more, but the savages just became more ruthless. Right now there is an unbeatable army, so we needed a special weapon.”

“is that why you wanted the demon steel?”

"I'm sorry Scorpion, I know you've given so much for a war you have no stake in. I hated you when you killed my son and wife but eventually from the things I've done to survive, I understood. We were a threat, and you protected them, I hope that

one day you forgive me and my people for taking Korg and also..."

Karp's heart raced, and she was already dizzy from blood loss.

"We learned his secret and had to make sure you found us...I know you'll never forgive us but..."

Her head pounded worse, and the world began to swirl. Karp finished her torch and dropped it into the well. It landed, but there was no water. It was empty, except for footprints and a series of spears sticking up in the mud.

"Where is the Mandrake? Where is he now?"

Karp fell to the ground, unable to stand. The merchant was rambling.

"One day we might need your help. We don't know how to fight, you do. I wanted to save everyone, but I couldn't. Only a few had to die and then we'd have peace. If they come to you, please remember how we tried."

Karp forgot about the devils pounding on the main door, but now the board holding the door closed splintered and broke. Two dozen devils raided the room. Karp prepared to die, but the devils stopped. A demon shrouded by flames entered the room. She was tall and slender. All the pieces of her armor were jagged and glistened with an onyx luster. A halo of fire surrounded her crown. The devils rushed to her, but the flames danced. The

flames to her left sent devils flying into the wall. The flames to her right shot out and cut devils in half. The flames in front of her danced in circles and the devils fell to their knees before the demon. The demon pointed toward Karp, and the flames shot toward her and she remembered something out of place for what was happening:

“Demons came to avenge one of their own.”

- - -

Drums beat in the distance. Bells rang, and people cheered. Karp stirred in an unfamiliar bed lined with cloth sheets. Karp went to scratch behind her left ear but kept missing her head. She looked at the stump on her left arm. She could still feel her hand, but it was gone. Karp started to remember what happened in the citadel. She went to stand and noticed that her armor was replaced with a light green cloth embroidered with red flowers stitched into the breast.

As she rose, she banged her hip into a nightstand. She placed her hand on the table to steady both it and herself. She used her right hand to move along her bed and to the window. There was a sea of green waving back and forth in the streets. It was almost impossible to make out individuals, but everyone's movements made the sea ebb and flow between various stalls and buildings. Two black banners hung in the distance under a tall tower. It was

too far away to recognize the symbols embroidered on the cloth or see those standing under it, but clearly, that was the main set piece of the whole festival.

A latch unbolted outside the door, and a man entered wearing full dragon fire plate armor. He removed his helm and Karp recognized the man as the innkeeper from the small training village.

“Good to see you awake again Scorpion.”

Karp moved back to the bed and laid down.

“where am i?”

“You're in a tower of one of the Dragon Guards.”

“how did i get here?”

“The princess and her guards rescued you from the citadel.”

“how long have i been here?”

“Three days. You've just slept and mumbled about The Morning Shield.”

Karp sat up at hearing Nort's name. The guard put up his hand.

“We've been looking for him; he's gone. We've searched all of the Crossroads. He's not here.”

“why is there a festival?”

The man felt awkward at the question and began to answer tentatively.

“Well... they are celebrating the death of The Mandrake and the people who brought him to justice.”

“the mandrake isn't dead.”

“YES... he is.”

“get my armor; i need to find nort.”

“I can't do that.”

The guard pulled out a sheathed knife and approached Karp.

“Your armor is being repaired and cleaned. You have to stay until at least then.”

The guard handed her the dagger.

“You were clutching this in the citadel, so I guess it must be important to you. You should think about it before trying to leave.”

The guard left, and the door bolted behind him. Karp unsheathed her water steel dagger. In order to remember what she lived for, she wrote four names into the blade. When the blade snapped, the lower two names broke off, and all that was left near the dagger's handle were the words 'Karp Slart'.

Four days ago Karp was sure that she was the hero of her story and she was going to defeat The Mandrake and finally return to her little family. Three days ago her confidence was shaken. The merchant and Mandrake saw her as a villain hunting them even though she had nothing to gain by their deaths. Now she found

that she was just a pawn waiting to be moved off the board.

now i have to tell slart her son's gone. my left hand is gone. i killed so many for nothing. i wanted to save my family, but ended up just hunting innocent people. i found the enemy, defeated them, saved the world, but i... should have just stayed in the traitor's tavern....

Post Script

I'm glad to see you've made it to the end. I hope you enjoyed the story. If you didn't, I'm sorry to hear that.

I've eschewed the traditional distribution model where a reader pays first and risks not liking the book. I've assumed that risk myself by freely distributing Shift World and asking those who enjoyed the title to give a tip instead of paying upfront. If you read the book and you think it would be worth paying for, then I encourage you to go to: <http://www.traitorstavern.com/tip-jar.html> and tip me for the price you'd pay to buy Shift World. If you did enjoy the novel, but you don't feel like you'd pay for a book like this or can't afford to pay anything, then please go to social media and recommend Shift World to any friends you think might be interested or leave a review online.

The Horse Thief (Shift World book II) should be available starting September, 2017. If you enjoyed this book, then please consider purchasing the second book. You can find more information on current, and any future work at www.traitorstavern.com .

If you'd prefer to purchase a hard copy of the book instead, you can buy an official copy at the link I provided above.

Once again thank you for taking the time to read through Shift World.

Christopher W Gamsby