

AARON

CHORRIER'S RISE



loatsi

This is the tale of an errand boy in the continent of Japheth, and his gradual change from a passive peasant, to a capable ruler...or that was the plan.

Follow his adventures as he faces ruffians, dragons, the wrath of the Clergy, the intrigue of the nobles and fend off invading armies as he tries to win the heart of a girl he never had the courage to speak to.

Aaron

Book 1: Chorrier's Rise

Script by: Petros Asteriou Malousis

roriconfan@yahoo.com

Editing by: Ifeanyi Igbinijesu

monotone_briggs@hotmail.com

Illustration by: Ioatsi

giannischil@gmail.com

site: <https://www.facebook.com/IoaTsiJT/>

<https://ioatsi.artstation.com/>

Author's note: In order to minimize the infordumps and maximize the mystery, the story uses In Media Res. For your convenience, every chapter has a number that designates the chronological order instead of the chapter order. Also, the Glossary at the end provides a brief explanation for every weird sounding name you encounter.



-//- Prologue: Agathon -//-

*You stay alive, as long as you run, do not look back, they cover the sun.
Hundreds of you, running amok, leapfrogging as much as they can.
The offspring of you, rushing the dock, jumping on boats is the plan.
Disputes forgotten, enemies pardoned, collectively trying to escape.
A dreadful danger, cannot be avoided, approaches like a dark drape.
-Unnamed bard-*

The northern fog swept the land, turning everything in its path to cinder and smoke. Countless growls were heard, coming from the undefined anthropomorphic silhouettes lurking in the mist. The resulting cloud of death marked the claimed territory, a horrifying flag soaring over the evening sky, threatening the very heavens themselves.

What was this mass? Nobody knew. Ghosts, demons, or angels of vengeance? It was a veil nobody was willing to look under, for its face was that of a swift death, certain to befall those who tried. Away with the truth; fleeing is the true option and hoping the mist with everything that lurked into it would stop its expansion. Indeed, everybody south of the expanding dread rushed towards the central lagoon, aiming to get on a ship, and start a new life on the other side. All based on the assumption that the fog couldn't hover over the sea, or would at least be carried away by the western winds, if the gods willed it.

Religions were the bastion of hope with a representative god for every gust and breeze imaginable. Even those who were not firm believers or had neglected to pay their respects to their deities, now desperately looked for mercy anywhere they could.

It had become a common occurrence to see once disbelievers joining one of the countless orisons and offerings that were being performed around improvised altars, all day long. Whether it was about the divinity of the surrounding mountains or the distant skies, their priests had all reached the heights of glory only legendary heroes had earned in the past.

Delegating with unseen forces for the promise of salvation became vital, for divine interventions were very rare. So rare that nobody was sure if the gods would bother to appear in front of them and stop this horror. After all, if they really cared about this new crisis, they would have dealt with it the moment it appeared, as some naysayers would claim. Perhaps the gods were displeased with their believers, others would counter, and that this disaster was their punishment. Maybe, as some ardent disbelievers would claim, the gods didn't exist at all and that expecting a miracle was the height of folly.

Whatever the case was, mortals couldn't stay idle; the gods save those who save themselves, as they say. Even if it was a fruitless endeavor, everybody agreed that it at least helped to maintain order in this most dark hour. Without something to hold on, man would turn to savagery every time a new threat was appearing. Despite their disagreements, all parties accepted faith as a vital element of every society.

Preparations were progressing smoothly, and they were half-done loading the provisions in the ships' holds. It was then that the fog was spotted by scouts on the horizon. Panic erupted in the ranks of the vanguard, and quickly spread like wildfire throughout the makeshift refugee camp. So much for the aforementioned order through faith; the altars were trampled and the offerings looted, as everybody was yelling, cursing, pushing, pressing, even hair-pulling in their attempt to get closer to the docks. From chieftains to beggars, they all wanted to be the first onboard and the last buried

underground. Their fear of being left behind was constantly growing, as the fleet captain was contemplating the risk of letting the dread outrun the speed of the winds.

It was amidst this chaos, in which Seven Braves descended from the sky, aboard a huge bird made of irradiating blue metal. Seen as godsend angels, everybody immediately fell to their knees and began to pray for salvation.

“Stop what you are doing and rise, people of Hydoria*.” the leader of the divine company said. “Though we are not gods, we are here to help.”

Everybody did so. Since they were standing up, they could now see him as clearly as they could listen. Dressed in white clothes decorated with golden embroidery, and with the presence of a king, even though he was not one.

“Why are you so quick to abandon your land and belongings? How long can you keep running away from the inevitable before you reach the world’s edge? Stand firm and protect what is yours!”

A local general stepped forward, on behalf of everybody present, excluding the Seven.

“I reckon you know the difference between foolishness and heroism, sir Agathon*. How can we fight what we cannot kill? I tried it with hundreds of my best men, only to fail miserably.”

“I do not question your efforts Ehmis*, old friend. This fog is indeed impossible to defeat with conventional means.”

Indeed it was. Appearing out of nowhere during nightfall, vanishing just as easily when the sun came up, passed through walls and spears like they were nothing, yet still shred any flesh engulfed by it to pieces, as if eaten by locust.

“My lord, recall your companion!” one of the guards at the back yelled. “He is heading towards his imminent doom.”

If the stories were true, he was one of the Seven, the largest of them all, the barbarian king of the southwestern tribes was marching towards the north.

“He’s doing his part, as instructed.” Agathon said, before unsheathing a silver sword decorated with red jewels. “So should the rest of us. If I offer you a way to disperse the mist, will you stand and fight for your land?”

“I will, just to avenge those whose lives were lost for naught!” the general yelled.

A minor priest was heard from the front of the crowd saying “We will gladly offer our lives if that will change things. Unless one of those you arrived with is a god, it is not going to.”

“There is more to heaven and earth than deities my friend, and this happens to be one of them.”

He raised his sword, which radiated like the sun, blinding everyone that looked at it. Kneeling, gasping and whimpering accompanied those few moments of brilliance, and far more to shake off the blur from their startled eyes. All the chattering that followed was of course about the meaning behind what just happened.

“Are you trying to scare us even more than we already are?” the general groaned, ready to release his own weapon.

Many peasants and soldiers behind him began yelling, drawing his attention to the distance.

“Look, the fog, I see shapes! It changes, I can see them!”

And behold, the black cloud took a form, and revealed pairs of red dots surrounded by bipedal masses of hair. The true shape of the menace was now clear before them. A sea of bloodthirsty, human-like creatures, ravaging the soils of Japheth*.

“So that is why we couldn’t hit the damn things.” some of the soldiers said.

“Remember our granny’s stories about the Beastoids?”

If only one could trust these fairy tales, then he’d know why the fog moved only from dusk till dawn, and disappeared during daytime. The crimson eyes of these fiends could spot a needle in the moonless night but were as blind as bats when it came to a simple candle. They possessed unnatural powers that allowed them to transform into fog when threatened, and able to pass through walls like they weren’t there. Well, not anymore in this particular case.

“Now your swords can cut them, and your arrows can pierce them, like a common hunter’s game.” Agathon said as he was lowering his sword.

“I see what you mean, even though I do not comprehend how you achieved it. Yet, our situation remains grim.” the general assured, as nothing had seemingly turned the tides to their favor. “Even when stripped of their enchantments, they are still formidable. They cannot be reasoned with, as they know nothing of mercy and are driven by murderous intent.”

“Negotiation was never an option to begin with. They treat victims as prey, and the works of Man as something that needs to be desecrated.”

“Then what is there left to do? There is no time for warfare preparations; they are right before us.”

“This is where my other friend, Vulka*, comes into play.” Agathon explained. “He will save us some time; but not too much, so pay attention. First advice, cover your ears immediately.”

A tremendous sound sprung forth from the barbarian’s lungs, a legendary war cry that struck fear into the hearts of anyone within its range. All at once, tens of thousands of Beastoids stopped, causing those who were right behind them to bump into each other, and causing chaos amongst their ranks. This would keep them busy for a few minutes. But only a few.

“Forgive my remarks if they sound like cowardice when they are not, but what is the plan?” the general asked, after he took his hands away from his ears. “Are you perhaps asking us to storm them, when we are unable to see the end of them on the horizon?”

It seemed reckless indeed. There were hundreds of thousands of them, with fur as black as tar that could take quite the beating, pointy nails and sharp teeth that could rip through cattle like a knife through bread.

“My strategy is simple, and to victory it shall lead.” Agathon replied with certainty emanating from his words. “Take out the leader, the rest will scatter like leaves in the wind.”

The enemy acted disorderly but still possessed a basic intellect, much higher than that of any other beast. They were separated into packs of hundreds, each one led by an alpha leader at the back. Those were bigger than the rest, barking at anyone that was walking away or lagging behind. They were armed with what appeared to be curved and blunt swords, waving them in the air as they tried to bring their teams back into shape. Many of them were even throwing sticks and stones at the barbarian, who

wasn't moving an inch or attempting to avoid them. They bounced off his hardened skin without so much as leaving a scratch.

“Beat the leaders you say? There are too many, and they're all protected by their kin. How does that differ from expecting us to kill all of them?”

“Trust me when I say that there is a mastermind behind all of this, and this warchief is who we target.”

“Is he at the very rear of this horde?”

“It is so.”

“There is no way to get to him without passing through all of his troops. Which I assume you realize it is not possible with our numbers, especially when most of us are holding sickles and pitchforks. Adding torches to the mix won't last long enough to cut down all of them.”

More crushing honesty, coming from a man who all this time was more concerned with saving the lives of his men, than to head for a diminutive possibility of a triumph. Who can blame him? Most of them were terrified at the mere idea of storming this immeasurable mass of brute force. Fleeing by boarding the ships with their women and children seemed like a vastly better option.

“None shall engage in close quarters, if possible. The only ones performing this task are my team.”

The general let out a short but loud laugh.

“The seven of you against that? Does the sword's light have side effects, such as relieving you of common sense?”

“You are right to be doubtful; the seven of us are not enough.” He turned to the troops around him, and raised his voice. “We also need support from you all, with cover fire. And we also want you all to stand your ground as we make our way through

this accursed army. Victory is in your hands as much as it is in our own, for both requirements must be met.”

“So be it; many strange things have happened today already, why wouldn’t there be room for another?” the general shrugged, unwilling to continue his argument. Everybody was instantly in favor of this plan since they didn’t have to fight directly.

“Are you done chatting back there?” the barbarian yelled from a distance. “My intimidation is fading away, faster than they are running out of things to throw.” At this point, he was covered up to his knees by crude projectiles. Yet he still stood there, as steady as a mountain.

The Beastoids were slowly regaining their confidence too, motivated by the growls of their alpha to keep marching, preferably in a curved line around this screaming horror.

Agathon and the other five Braves were on the metallic bird once more.

“Then the operation begins immediately. Kendron*, fly us over the horde.”

“Keep in mind that it won’t be high enough to avoid being boarded.” the old wizard said in a hoarse voice.

“We will not have to fight any monsters besides those managing to grab and climb.” Iris* the priest added, with his distinctive feminine voice.

“Still, we expect you to hold them off, until we deal with their warchief.”

Anaklai* the archer reminded the rest.

“And time we shall save!” the general confirmed, as his commands began to fly around like a volley of arrows. “Those with pitchforks! You are now spearmen, get in front. Those with hunting bows or slingshots, you are now bowmen providing cover fire. Those who can fight, you are the infantry, those who cannot, you are not out of the loop, for you are reserves. Light torches too, for it makes them blind and easy to hit.

Now make lines and show those blasted beasts who the smartest creatures are under the gods! Nobody heads for the ships, until I allow it.”

.....

And thus, in the span of a few minutes, a mob of fleeing hopeless men had turned into a fighting unit, ready to fight, if not to the death then until the loss of a limb, for defending the lands taken by the horde.

“Drink.”

The sun was about to set and the killing was about to begin, as the armies of the Beastoids began marching once more. The time when blades speak and bloodshed resolves disputes is nigh.

“Drink!”

The Braves flew towards the enemy, picking up their barbarian companion, who grabbed the head of the bird as they passed by him.

“I said drink!”

Sickles were raised, bowstrings were stretched, pitchforks aimed forward. And then, by the general’s command...

“Are you deaf?” nagged the Brute, as an empty wooden cup hit the absorbed-in-reading tawny head. “Bring me beer before I smack you a hard one.” he interrupted the cylinder’s* events, while sitting on an armless chair.

“Y-yes! Right away!” the surprised youth replied, dropping the cylinder that contained the epic of Agathon, and rushing to the kitchen.

-//- 1. Ilis -//-

22nd day of Mushroom Month (POV: Chorrier)

My trembling knees were not cooperating well with my frail hands, as they were desperately trying to prevent a single drop to spill. Those evil-looking eyes that zeroed in on my back as I was filling the cup, could make your heart freeze from the mere thought of what would follow a simplest of errors.

“Stop slacking or I’ll break that thick skull of yours.” he barked from the dining room.

“Go to Depthole*, boar face!” I yelled. “You have me two years straight as an errand boy of your kind, while I am doing everybody else’s chores since birth. All this time not a single thanks in return! This life is miserable enough, go find someone else to pest!”

That is what I yelled... in my mind. As if I would dare say it out loud and spend the following month* stuck in a bed, waiting for my bones to mend. The first thing that all impoverished children realize, is that you don’t express your beliefs unless you can uphold them. This counts doubly for me, ranked lower than farmers, yet higher than slaves. Free to have any thought that I want, but also forced to remain mute when it comes to expressing them. A myriad miles of rope keep my anger tethered, permitting only words of cowardice to come out of my pitiful mouth.

“Yes sir, right away, won’t happen again, I am really sorry, please don’t punish me!”

“You! Get over here!” he ordered once more.

“In a moment, sir, just making sure the beer is cool enough!”

“Shut up, I am not talking to you. You over there!”

I peeked out of the kitchen door only to dreadfully realize he was pointing his giant finger towards poor Ria. What’s his problem; she wasn’t doing anything, other than sitting on the doorstep of her family’s hut, across the tavern.

“When I speak, you obey! Get here!” he moved his finger downwards.

Fear is a double-edged sword; you never know if it makes someone obedient or intractable. In this case for example, she got up and ran inside the hut, yelling for her mother’s help.

“Why you little…” the Brute hissed as it got up from the chair, taking the big sack he had brought with him, and began striding towards Ria’s general direction.

Oh dear, oh dear, why her of all people in the hamlet? If it was anyone else, I wouldn’t care what he’d do to them. I would even find some pleasure in seeing him hurt the ones that annoy me. But not her! She is the only other soul in this godforsaken place that is as miserable as me. Even if we never spoke much, I can’t help but feel intimacy for a person sharing the same plight.

“Leave her alone, you bastard!” is what I would have yelled if I had the power to keep my skull in one piece.

He clumsily went up the narrow, for his feet, logs serving as stairs in front of the huts. He pushed aside the drape that was substituting for a front door, while kneeling a bit to fit through the opening.

“Out, the both of you!” he began barking as soon as he went in. “No, she stays! Out I say! And you, don’t you dare start crying!”

Her parents jumped out barefoot, having no time to wear the sabots lying next to the entrance. They took a few steps on the muddy soil and stopped there, shaken but otherwise unharmed and even relieved for some reason.

Many villagers began to gather because of the commotion, one of them being me. The drape blocked the sight of what was taking place inside; maybe for the best, since the words that could be heard coming from inside were very suggestive.

“Take off the clothes. Take them off I say!”

Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear, he wants to have his way with her, and nobody’s doing a thing to stop him. They are all just standing there inactive, equally scared of his size and physical prowess as as I am.

“Sh-shouldn’t we do something…” I dared whisper before being interrupted by her father.

“Quiet, gamin! Don’t ruin this.”

Ruin??? What is there to… Ohhh dear, is he honestly thinking what I think he is thinking? Smirking instead of whimpering on the ground confirms his dark intentions. He *wants* this to happen, a convenient way to get rid of his extra baggage.

So be it, I understand what needs to be done, and I am the only one who cares enough to do it. So off I go, running up the logs, rushing into the hut, and punching the ruffian with all I’ve got, as he starts to scream in pain and trying to make a run for it. Not yet, you won’t! I lift the small table from the room and swing it with force at his face, breaking his jaw simultaneously sending a few of his teeth flying. He cries and begs for mercy, as he cowers in the corner with his hands covering his head. I am not done with you yet, you fiend! I will first take poor Ria out of your sight, so she won’t have to witness the horrible things I have in store for you! I lift her into my arms and carry her outside, as she kisses me passionately while the villagers applaud and cheer for their brave new hero.

... Yeah, that is totally what will happen if I storm the hut. Definitely not going to end with me drinking soup for the rest of my life, while paralyzed from the neck down. Why does everything seem so easy in your imagination? The moment you try to take the first step in reality, is the moment you realize it is not possible. I would gladly stay true to my thoughts if I had the necessary strength, and the rest of the villagers helped out. Neither of which are feasible any time soon. On the contrary, there are some who want it to happen and would be spared the dowry they can't afford to give! Thus, all I can do is watch as the inevitable comes to pass.

And right when everything seemed lost, the village elder's voice was heard from the left of the crowd of human statues.

"Gain way, folks, aid is here. Come on, don't cumber his fair task. You too, little ones."

What is this I hear? Did a miracle happen, exactly when I needed one? And did it have the form of a tall old man in rusty half armor, accompanied by a blond boy dressed in weirdly bright and colorful clothes, carrying a huge rucksack? Both unfamiliar faces, definitely not from around here. I am sure about that, it's hard to forget a face in a hamlet.

"Wait, hold on, who are these strangers?" Ria's father asked in a now worried voice. "What do they plan to do?"

"Isn't it obvious?" the elder explained. "He is a paladin, sent to take care of that troublemaker. Now stop being the village fool and step out of the way."

"No, wait, let's think this through!" the father spread his hands, doing the exact opposite thing of what he was told. "The Brute is too powerful for anyone to take on alone. Paladin or not he is just one man. An old man too, and I don't even count the kid next to him."

That bastard, he doesn't want his own offspring to be saved. What kind of a monster are you; you make the Brute seem like a puppy in comparison! Why, I should just kick you between the legs as hard as I can, sparing harm to any possible children you would foster.

... Too bad I won't, for I am powerless.

The old paladin stood right before him, passing him three heads in height, and spoke the following in a calm manner.

“If you are under the impression that my services are inadequate then I am more than willing to accept your assistance, and that of everybody else present in the upcoming brawl. What say you?”

Nobody said a word for several seconds. Ria's scream from inside the hut, reminded the villagers of the time they couldn't waste, thus beginning the protests.

“Come on Tailorson, let the man pass.”

“Your own daughter is being defiled in there, stop this nonsense.”

“Let's find rest from him already.”

Under the pressure of these peeves, he lowered his hands and stepped aside, not less annoyed than when he first saw this alleged savior.

“So be it, have it your way. Good luck beating that beast.”

“Anyone willing to give a hand?” the paladin asked while looking around. Not even a cough in reply. Even I didn't flinch a finger. I wanted to, but I just couldn't find the vigor to do so.

“I thought so. At least keep a distance in case we have to settle this outside.”

Many found this advice to be wise and began back stepping, but not to the point where they would lose sight of the event. You don't get to witness such excitement in a hamlet every day. Chances are, it will be the most amazing thing you will experience in your life.

As for me, I stayed where I was. I am so pathetic, my fear even preventing me from moving a bit further away as a precaution.

Our little play began to unroll as the paladin, brandishing a sword, no less rusty than his armor, went up the logs and stood in front of the entrance. He said a few words that were hard to hear and most likely were a warning. Such polite fellows these paladins are, always courteous enough to warn their opponents instead of jumping out of the shadows. It would also be nice if the crooks they faced were returning the favor by not being so ungrateful about it.

The criminal kicked the poor paladin under the cover the drape provided. Despite his tall stature and the extra weight provided by his armor, he flew backwards all the way to where I was, landing next to me and splashing mud all over my stiffened body. As expected, I just stood there, without even bothering to wipe my face clean with the sleeves.

“I have never seen this man.” the elder said with a serious composure, before turning around and staggering away as fast as his frail body would allow.

His example was followed by everybody else, who suddenly found the show too exciting for their fragile bones to handle. Just in case the Brute wanted to make it clear how much that kick hurt, everybody but myself scurried like mice into their huts, or in the case of Ria’s parents inside their friendly neighbors’ hut. Some found the time to take along with them any water barrels residing nearby. The crook was fond of throwing around barrels.

The Brute was now going after the blond kid, as the paladin was unable to get up, because of the pain and the encumbrance of the metallic protection. He began to crawl towards me, while looking at something next to my feet. What was there beside the

same thing that covers the whole area for most of the year? Oh, it was his sword. It must have flown out of his hand during the fall, and he was now heading for that.

Isn't this the part where I am supposed to do something, besides staring like an oaf? Like, run to help the paladin get up? Or pick up the sword and hand it over to him? Or rush the Brute with all my might, in order to give the paladin time to counterattack? Why am I not doing any of that? Move feet, move!

No such luck. The image of the Brute threatening to do terrible things to me prevented me from doing something as simple as moving my feet. All these years of being a powerless gamin who had to be obedient and do all sorts of chores or not being fed as punishment, really took its toll on my motivation.

Hey, what is going on here? While I was lost in my thoughts, the paladin had thrown a silver chain around the Brute's right thigh. Where did that come from? Oh Chorrier, you fool, you failed to pay attention even to that. I am so pathetic! I don't deserve the air that I breathe or the space that I occupy, and the mud surrounding my feet has more value as fertilizer than my whole life thus far. I should just lay down on the ground and stay there until I die.

I am sure that I didn't really mean that last part, and fully aware that it didn't actually happen voluntarily. And yet here I am falling on the ground because of the paladin using my leg as a foothold, while the Brute was pulling the chain towards him. Good job sucking even at that.

Also, I must be the unluckiest man in the world, as my head landed on one of the very few rocks that were hidden under the mud. I fell unconscious instantly.

-//- 10. Usurper -//-

3rd day of Fallen Leaf Month (POV: Kardamos)

One of the purple-clad guards noticed someone approaching, as he leisurely chopped a piece of wood with his knife while kneeling on the battlements. It was a single man on a mount, riding hastily under the sun setting behind him. His similarly dressed colleague, whilst picking his nose in a bored state, noticed the rider was coming from the same direction as the carriage from a few hours ago.

“Wanna bet it’s just to tell us that everything’s been sorted out?”

“Not much of a challenge if it’s that obvious.”, the first guard said as he waved his knife whilst pointing upwards. “What if he found enough suckers to redo the whole thing again tomorrow?”

“Three days’ pay and it’ll take him a Pendatha.”

“I say four and he will be ready in a day.”

“Deal.”

The two of them eagerly awaited the messenger’s arrival to let them know which of the two had gotten it right. It took a few minutes until they could see him clearly, due to the amount of dust his mount was lifting and the light’s haze behind him. Once those factors were no longer an issue, their excitement was replaced with shock as they both realized how wrong their predictions were. The messenger dressed in neither purple nor red was also too fat. In fact, he wasn’t even a messenger.

“Open the gate! The master has returned!”

The nobleman attempted to dismount his horse and, in his indignant fury, nearly fell over. The stable master, taking the initiative, was quick to help him out, which was out of the ordinary as commoners normally do not take action out of step with protocol, especially in the presence of a man of his standing and especially if they have not been ordered to. Normally, the stable master would be punished for stepping out of line, regardless of the relatively minor nature of his infraction, but this wasn't a normal day. The obese master merely pushed away the stable master's hand as soon as he'd landed safely on his feet. He then quickly hurried away from there, without cussing or thanking him. He did though give a small nod, as close to a gesture of thanks that a commoner could hope from most nobles.

Holding something small that wasn't his, at least for those who would be in the know, he sped past the butlers bowing at the entrance awaiting their orders, even pushing aside one of the maids that was taking a tray with tea to their still shaken guest. He began mumbling as he was climbing the stairs, leaving behind a frightened woman to clear the broken teapot and the rest of the staff wondering what had happened out there.

“-First the prince, now this? -Why is he alone? -Where is the rest of his escort?”

Crossing the beautifully decorated corridors he'd seen countless times, he completely ignored the portraits of his ancestors; the polished swords, the shining porcelain, and the mahogany that countless commoners had spent years designing and keeping in perfect condition for decades. Fixated on getting to his brother by crossing the final doors at the end of this floor, he was ready to kick them open if necessary. He didn't have to, since they were already wide open, as if the doors themselves were informed of his arrival. In reality, it was one of the several servants inside who, just like the rest of his colleagues, was standing still at every corner of the room, waiting for orders.

The current ruler of this land showed no interest as he sat bored on his throne with one hand holding his tilted head. He didn't even bother to advise his exhausted sibling to sit on one of the numerous silk armchairs near the walls. He looked at him, sweating and missing his every step as he thrust his hand out at him, presenting what appeared to be the source of his anger.

“This! I got it from a peasant! A strrranger to boot.”

Over the years, the servants had gotten used to the rather distracting Kanelonian accent their masters were using, stretching the “R” unnecessarily. It was being filtered out in their minds, as they were silently listening to his rant and the reveal of a metallic plate on the palm of his hand.

“I take it he claimed that he passed the challenge?” asked the duke, with an air of certainty.

“Yes, and the fools at Dreadview believed him.” The plate seemed to be changing colors as his brother was shaking it violently.

“Feimz* said the beast was twice as large as we'd expected.”

“It was. Further proof of the stranger's lies. The man wasn't even armed. He was so frail he needed a stick to walk.”

“Did you get his name? Where he came from?”

“No...Maybe, I'm not sure, it all happened so fast. What matters is that I've taken the flake from him.”

At this, the ruler sighed. “You know full well how worthless it'd be if we weren't the ones that had found it.”

The fat man finally took notice of his trembling feet and sat in a chair next to the throne. He took a few deep breaths and wiped his sweating forehead with a dusty satin sleeve before continuing. His face was now red and partially soiled with mud.

“At least that scoundrel cannot use it any further as proof of authority.”

“That was a prudent move on your part, brother.” he said while standing up, as if he were determined to have his brother’s full, undivided attention for what he was about to say. “You minimized the damage to only the people of a single village.”

“He can still convert more dolts to his scheme. Quick, brother, waste no time. You must order our cavalry to apprehend him. If they go now they might be able to capture him by dinner time tomorrow.”

The duke placed his hands behind his back and walked towards the window facing the direction of the village in question. Nothing could be seen from there as the night was creeping in.

“Trust is the backbone of any government. It’s too late to earn it back through force in this case.”

“What are you talking about? He’s nothing but a mere con artist.” He clapped twice, signaling a butler to come in, as his throat begged for a drink. He was even willing to drink water.

“This con artist even managed to convince some that he is the messiah. You seriously wish to turn him into a martyr by having him arrested and executed?”

“Wine, beer, water, bring anything you can immediately.” he told a tall and skinny old servant before turning to his brother. “You think it will only worsen the situation? What if we don’t do anything as he spreads his lies?”

The duke smirked as he fondled his tiny mustache.

“If he is indeed a peasant then he has no means to establish his rule.”

“What if there's a revolt...”

“No half-hearted mob can breach our walls with pitchforks. Especially now with the added regiment from the prince’s forces.” He made a hand gesture to a maiden waiting nearby who knew that it meant to prepare hot water for a bath. “This malarkey of a crisis will be resolved without me having to lift a finger.”

“I’m not sure it will be that easy.”

“Most good ideas rarely are. Go have a sponge bath and allow this nonsense to die out on its own.”

The fat noble arose and even though he was skeptical, he nodded. “As you wish. I hope you are right or we’ll all be looking for our heads.”

He left the room, with the servants following close and the doors shutting behind him, leaving the ruler alone in the center of his power. He looked around at all the wealth he’d acquired which, for all its splendor, meant so little to him. A wide smirk appeared on his mouth at the thought of facing a challenge after all these years of boredom.

Even with the crisis seemingly averted, that man would always be a threat as long as he lived. This was the chance the duke was waiting for; an opportunity to prove to the other lords that he wasn’t some weak dullard who relied on its inheritance, a man to be pushed aside once everything is annexed through the marriage of his daughter. He now had a chance to prove everyone wrong and, by the gods, he had no intention of letting it slip by. He could finally make a move towards grander goals.

“Finally, something to make me feel alive again. Come, usurper. Through your fall I shall prove to the rest how much better than them I really am.”

-//- 2. Errand -//-

22nd day of Mushroom Month (POV: Chorrier)

Curse you, world for treating me like a bug, never giving me the chance to be anything more. And damn you mother, wherever you are, for bringing me into it and then leaving like a thief in the night. I am no longer a child that blindly accepts the upbringing adults provide it with, and not a teen content with weeding gardens and gathering worms as bait for a living. I am also not a man, since I lack the spine to do anything about it, to stand up for something more than seeing my future be eaten away by apathy, one day at a time.

Like a decorating hat to all that, now came the guilt of those I failed to aid, kicking away my single chance of making a difference. It's one thing to deprecate yourself, and a whole other having to live with the disappointment others feel about you. All the apologies in the world won't be enough for Ria to forgive me, the paladin who came to help us, or even that boy he brought with him.

I was beginning to awaken, but even with full consciousness I had no motivation to get up. What was there to expect besides sorrow, disgrace, and more humiliating chores by villagers and the Brute alike?

“Quick, bring the thickest rope you can find.”

“Let's carry him to Fisherson's willow. It's nearby and sturdy enough to hold him.”

“Careful now, he's as heavy as a fully loaded wagon.”

That's strange, those voices that I heard didn't sound sad or scared at all. On the contrary, they were cheery and uplifting. I reluctantly raised my head to peek at the occurrence that caused it. Gosh, why does everything look so strange? The ruffian looking all cranky whilst tied, hands and feet to a tree, the old hero soaking in grey mud but otherwise up and well, and the villagers have crawled out of their little holes, laughing and hopping merrily.

Well I'll be, this gives me a reason to get up after all. That and considering I am currently being stepped on by passersby who are too caught up in this event to take notice of me, lying half buried in the soil. The lump on my head hurts a bit but it will be an afterthought if a foot lands on my groin.

“This is deserving of a celebration! Bring out the powdered mush-purples!”

“Beer for everyone! It's on the house!”

“But first let's lynch the bastard for what he did.”

“Until his skin is darker than that of the Cursed Ones”

“Yes, let's do it now. And then hang him too.”

Curse you Chorrier, for falling unconscious and missing the epic battle between him and the Brute. It had to be amazing, if the stories are true about how these brave warriors fight.

“Listen... Listen to me... Quiet please!” the paladin began to speak loudly, while waving with his hands for everyone to calm down.

“Be quiet, you guys.” the elder assisted. “Our hero wants to give a speech.”

“Speech-speech-speech!” they all began to chant in unison, while clapping their hands.

“It's not what you think.” he finally began to explain. “Taking the law to your hands shan't be allowed.” The paladin gestured to the crowd, his posture somewhat

uncomfortable and out of place. “He is my captive and justice demands a fair trial in the closest court.”

The cheering fizzled out like ember coal in water and turned into a soft sigh of disappointment, with everyone looking as mopey as Ria’s parents, the only ones not happy with how things turned out since the very beginning. But it’s not like they could go against the one who delivered them from this evil, either. They had to swallow the bitter root and be done with it, as the saying goes in these parts.

Wait a moment, why am I bringing old sayings to mind and neglect to check out what takes place right now? What about Ria? Is she ok? As the crowd began to disperse, I turned my head towards her hut, while standing on my toes so I could see above the heads of the passing villagers. A sigh of relief was expressed once I saw her sitting on the porch, laughing next to a boy. My precious girl was fine; thank whatever gods out there listen to my pleas.

Hold no, who was that boy talking to her? It’s not like there are many in the hamlet or Ria is talkative. This is really suspicious; let me take a closer look... Oh, it’s the blond assistant who came with the paladin. He looks completely different with his hair and clothes all dyed grey from the mud.

Why am I wondering about who he is or how he looks at this hour? I approached them hastily and expressed my worst fears.

“R... Ria... Is... Is she... well? I mean... did he...” Words didn’t know how to come out properly. How can you ask such a thing.

“False alarm, fellow.” said the boy, while also having a hard time speaking properly from his own laughing. “The clothes haha... the clothes were not... were not hers ohoho!”

“He wanted me to take out the dirty clothes from his sack and do the laundry.” explained Ria.

“And they... they were very stinky... so she screamedahaha!”

“The worst thing he did, was making my house stink of sourness.”

Oh... so she is still untouched. That’s one awkward misunderstanding I can put behind as somewhat funny.

“Chorrier! Stop the idling and fetch clean rainwater.” yelled the village elder behind me. “Help the women prepare a bath, so our saviors can refresh themselves.”

How considerate of you elder, saying that to me when I also happen to be in need of a bath as much as them. But then again they are saviors while I am a worthless fool. Why should I deserve a bath or anything else for that matter? Washing my face at a water pond is all that I deserved.

I found myself carrying a couple of water barrels to the open bathtub, proceeded by fetching timber for the fire and bringing the towels to the heroes. They needed something to wear, while their freshly washed clothes and armament were drying in the evening sun. Not so much to avoid a cold; the weather was too warm for that to happen. They needed to be somewhat dressed so they wouldn’t catch the interest of an unsatisfied housewife. I was sort of put there as a guard, since they are known for jumping on newcomers to get some rare excitement. The sight of a naked paladin was something major, like the prize of the decade.

Under the evening sun, their freshly washed clothes and armory swayed gently to the rhythm of the dancing breeze as the bathhouse began to fill with wisps of steam and the sweat of bravery and courage. Concurrently, the heat whisked around me, who was fidgeting around due to the uncomfortable itch on my back.

The blonde boy left the tub early, as if he didn't appreciate such privilege in a small hamlet such as this. It was also like he mocked the time and work I invested into heating the water. Not even a copper piece of pittance for a pleasure I wasn't able to experience, yet had to constantly stare at, like a starving dog on a leash staring at a cat eating a bowl full of chums nearby.

I left him to impatiently wander around the area, as if waiting for something to happen. The man on the other hand was taking his time frolicking with the water until it got really cold. I still find it hard to believe this grandpa is one of the few who still protect the countryside from crooks. He didn't have a handsome face like the ones I was hearing about, his body was full of scars, and his ears were strangely pointy. His armor, worn by the elements, was only adding fuel to my doubts.

"You want to say something?" asked the paladin, while looking at me with half-open eyes.

"Me? Er, well, maybe." I stuttered momentarily, trying to make eye contact.

"Go on. I have time to waste."

Oh dear, I better pick my words carefully, or he might be offended. Don't say anything about his face, Chorrier, go for his sudden appearance.

"Um, yes, you see... I wanted to remark how story-like your coming was. It felt like what happens in the old epics, when the hero appears exactly when the villains are about to harm someone. I almost felt like I was a minor character in a cylinder."

"How do you know you are not?" smirked the paladin.

"Um... what do you mean, sir?"

"If it happened in such an ideal way, how are you sure you aren't fictional?"

A deafening silence enclosed on the both of us, with the only element standing out being the mental echoing of his adamant tone. What is there that can be used as a reply to such a question? As much as I cherish his arrival for changing things for the better, it really did feel quite convenient. My eyes were constantly looking around the room, as I was feeling uneasy at that thought, while remaining mute in response. Is it possible that I am indeed not real, and that my life is nothing but a small part in someone else's story? His story?

“Relax my boy, I speak in jest.” laughed the paladin. “I didn't really appear as if by magic at that particular moment.”

Oh, what a relief. For a few seconds there, I really did believe I was imaginary. It was making me feel like all the suffering of my life was inconsequential. So, if that was not the case then what was?

“Um... You were godsend?”

“I wish, but no.”

“It was... accidental?”

“Strike three, you are out.”

My eyebrow furrowed in confusion by his weird phrasing. What was he talking about? Did he wanted me to leave or he will hit me?

“I can leave if...?”

“It's a game term; I guess it was too much to expect you to know of it in these parts.”

“We mostly play with cards and marbles, sir.”

“So do most villages. But seriously now, the truth is that I had arrived early in the morning, and was hiding behind an oak outside the hamlet.”

“Um... why?”

“Gathering evidence. Just because I had a report about a criminal roaming around this area, doesn’t mean it is so.”

“It doesn’t?”

“Of course not, it could be a rumor, or a mistake, or even worse a scheme by someone who wants to malign a person he dislikes.”

“Oh. I guess a lot of things could be misunderstood.”

“And they do, all the time if we paladins are careless. This is why we usually wait until we witness firsthand the accuser’s crimes before we go in to arrest him.”

“Ah, I see. So THAT is why paladins always appear in the nick of time.”

“Exactly. Knowing that demystifies us, but I prefer honesty than letting you believe I am some sort of a divine entity.”

“I don’t think any less of you now, sir, I really don’t. If anything, I now respect you more for double checking peoples’ claims before you arrest someone.”

“Glad to know that.” A smile lit up behind his beard.

The bathwater was freezing cold now, steadily the paladin got up and headed to retrieve his night cloak which was draped on the wooden pole outside the bathhouse. I had enough of standing still for one day, but as I was about to ask him if there was anything else he would need before I go to bed, instead he did so on his own initiative.

“So, I spoke with the elder some hours ago and he said you are everybody’s errant boy.”

“Indeed, that is true Sir. Being an orphan nobody wanted to adopt sort of had that effect.”

“As sad as it is, I happen to need an extra pair of hands and feet tomorrow. How about you being the aid?”

“Well, I guess if the elder is ok with it.”

“He is. In fact, you were the only person he could think of.”

“Me? Of all other men in the hamlet? I am not even the strongest or the brightest.”

“Oh, you see, it’s not something as simple as that. I need someone to be pulling a hand wagon.”

“Um, so?”

“The load will be the criminal. And the destination is Petalo.”

The sudden delight made the towel drop from my hands. The thought of venturing into Petalo bridged out to infinitely many other ideas, some including making merry, free from the hectic chores that never ended. Gone will be the days of torturous ordeals, as the paladin delivers me from this greater evil, the shame of facing my old, misplaced self will merely be a façade of reality.

“Oh dear, I’ve never been to the city.” My voice grew with anticipation, awaiting the near future, a future too surreal to even be realistic.

“Same goes for most others in the village. They are also preoccupied with the mushroom cultivation; that is why you were the elder’s only option.” The paladin paced about, completing a revolution before arriving to a halt. “So, how about it?”

“Why are you asking me? I can refuse if I want to?” I was starting to enjoy the attention he was giving me, but I could tell he was growing impatient with my impertinent hesitance, which thrilled me even more for whichever reason.

“Of course you can, in which case I would need to deprive your hamlet of a valuable worker tomorrow.”

That would definitely anger the elder and the worker’s family. What am I supposed to do now? My inner thoughts seemed to be pretty clear about it.

Come on Chorrier, why not be the one to go? You are given another chance to offer the help you failed to provide during the battle. Come on fool, why are you

hesitating again? The answer is obvious. Speak dammit, speak! Open your mouth already! All you need to say is...

“Yes...” I whispered lifelessly.

“What was that?”

After further deliberation and setting aside the deranged fantasies I conjured up earlier, my inner thoughts cleared up, revealing a concise and urgent response.

“Yes.” I repeated, this time a bit louder. Maybe owls standing next to me would be able to hear it.”

“Speak normally son. You sound like you say yes, but you don’t seem to mean it.”

Damn you stupid piece of animal droppings, you are an embarrassment to Creation, you have a hot steamy roast beef waiting for you to eat it right under your nose, and you are afraid to take a single bite. You worthless carcass that not even worms would bother to feed on, why are you doing this to yourself? How hard is it to take a deep breath and yell...

“Yes dammit, yes, I agree, to Depthole and beyond, I agree!”

“That is far louder than normal, but it will do.”

“What? ... Did I scream? Oh, I didn’t mean to...”

“All it matters is that you agree to be pulling the wagon.”

“Yes! Yes, it does.”

“Good, go get some rest. We will leave early tomorrow.”

“So... I can leave now?”

“Dismissed.”

“Thank you, sir! Goodnight, sir! See you tomorrow, sir!”

I immediately turned around and ran as fast as I could. I was so excited, I felt like I could fly! Boy, that scream was so rejuvenating, I never felt this happy, even when I finally managed to finish Agathon's Chronicle for the first time. Yuppie indeed! So what if I simply said yes to another chore? This small outburst of guts was like jumping over a mountain. A feat bigger than Agathon's triumph over the Beastoids!

How can I go to sleep? I am so excited, I feel like running around the swamp a few dozen times until sunrise!

Cut the nonsense fool. You need to save up your strength for the pulling, remember? It will take hours to get to the city.

Yes, but I can't calm down! I can't even wait for morning! Sun? Where are you sun? Do me a favor and rise faster, will you?

Stop you idiot, the laws of nature won't make an exception for the likes of you. Go to bed and get some rest already.

I will try, but I don't think I even have the willpower to pull down my eyelids.

You don't have to. Just restrain your body from hopping over the hills and far away.

I think I can at least do that.

Good. Don't lie to yourself there, you hear?

I won't.

The light at the end of the tunnel was approaching. Bustling with elation, I skipped back to my lodge as I envisaged a future so possibly filled with promise, and regret. Wait, Regret?! No way would I regret anything tomorrow. So go to sleep Chorrier, you are going to have a long day.

The hamlet fell in a deep slumber under the dazzling skyline. The countless stars in the night twinkled vividly, each one of them competing, attempting to outshine one

another. But together as an entire galaxy, painted an extraordinary scenery one could only elucidate in their wildest dreams. The worthless, insignificant individual glanced over the horizon, patiently anticipating the bright future that lay ahead as he too, gratefully took refuge in the comfort of his nest, immersing himself in the engulfing darkness.

-//- 11. Priest -//-

4th day of Fallen Leaf Month (POV: Netelis)

“I was informed of the uproar during the morning prayer. A villager arrived and burst right into your holy place as I sorted the offerings, whilst telling a strange tale of a man that came from the beast’s lair with proof of his victory. He made quite the impression as he was the cause of Dreadview’s turn against the duke’s brother. The villager is now waiting outside, offering to take me to him immediately. What do you recommend I do, oh great Goddess?”

“Meow” replied her avatar, a small and hairy critter lying on a white pillow in front of him.

“I figured as much; he could be the one that we’ve been waiting for all these years.”

The fat and bald man left the small brick temple and boarded the farmers’ open carriage, not minding the foul smell of animal droppings and moldy hay. He took nothing but the clothes that he wore with him; the Man of Prophecy wouldn’t require holy scripts or blessed golden plates as proof of his validity. He would be as clear as this chilly but otherwise sunny morning.

“How fast can I go?” the farmer asked, whose name I had forgotten to take note of. “The dirt road is pretty rough this month.”

“You have my approval to run like the wind, if possible.” I replied. My stomach’s well-being means very little compared to the fulfillment of the prophecy.

The village seemed to be the same from a distance; no smoke or lamenting of women could be heard. Whatever happened during yesterday's brawl wasn't significant as there were no casualties.

"Anoint us, father." one of the injured men said as he kneeled, whilst I got off the carriage, smelling like a pig and wanting to throw up. "We shed our blood to shield the Chosen One."

There were a few men with bruises and scratches on their arms waiting for the Goddess' blessing, so that their wounds could be healed. With not a lot of herbs available for medicine-men to do their work properly, praying was the only thing they could turn to for aid. I prayed hurriedly, because I was supposed to meet the newcomer as soon as possible.

"What shall we do with the traitors, father?" another one pointed at about a dozen of the duke's men tied up in the village piazza. Nobody was guarding or cursing them for whatever they had done in his name.

"Did they repent for their sins?"

"They say they did. One of them is my second cousin, he's a good man, he truly means no harm."

"The one to the right is my wife's brother." said a second, followed by the rest pointing out their own distant relation with them. Small populations tend to have everyone get to know each other and are often inbred.

"By Her Black Fur, why are you even asking me if they deserve to be punished? It's like you're begging me to forgive them."

"Well... they did fight and injure us." They explained. "They protected that damned noble. –He got away because of them. –They even gathered our youth for the damn dragon hunt."

“Is that all? They were just following their masters’ orders; just to feed their families. Untie them and let bygones be bygones.”

“Thank you, father, thank you!” they all bowed and softly rubbed my robe in relief. Having to hurt or kill their kin would leave us with guilt we could never overcome.

“Enough, let the holy man go meet the one we’ve been waiting for.” an old man ordered them to stop.

Once he finally managed to get past them, the village elder brought him before a large hovel, the one that the man everybody was so excited about was inside. Maidens came in and out constantly, carrying fabrics and clay jars of food. The unexpected visitor was already being treated better than a messenger of the Goddess was. The priest instantly felt envy of someone he hadn’t even met yet.

“The priest! The priest is here!” a little boy announced my arrival then everybody stopped immediately.

“Excuse me, young ladies, may I pass? Thank you.”

The inside was stuffed with items and resembled a makeshift lord’s private chambers. Nothing was of high value, polished, or even very clean, but it was fairly remarkable for something they had put together in less than a day.

In the middle of the room and on top of several mattresses, laid a young man dressed in gray peasant clothes that looked like they were from a foreign land. Gangling, with large cheekbones, tawny hair, and a very pale complexion. He had a face that was devoid of emotion, and his eyes were very watery. Was he crying or was he sleepy? Their white part wasn’t even that white either. How peculiar.

“Is this the one you told me about?”

“Yes, father Netelis*.” the village elder nodded in anticipation. “He’s the one we’ve been waiting for, correct? The ruler who will deliver us from this cursed land and spread joy to its people?”

“I am not a seer who can tell with a glance; these things take a bit more time. Now leave us alone.” He kept looking at the young man, as he laid comfortably, before finally asking his first question. “So, stranger... did the dragon test give you brains instead of only bravery?”

“You doubt me. Can’t blame you.” There wasn’t any liveliness in the way he spoke.

“Excuse me for being cautious, but we’ve had several impostors over the years. What you managed to pull off back there doesn’t sound like something a common man could accomplish whilst limping in a desert.”

“I genuinely got the flake by defeating the dragon.”

“I don’t mean that; I mean turning these people against their rulers. Are you really a peasant or do you have some sort of supernatural charisma?”

“You can thank Agathon for that.” he replied whilst turning sideways, as if he was about to take a nap.

“Who? Agathon, as in the founder of the Bloom Empire?”

“The one and only. My speech was a rearrangement of the chapter he asks to unite all the city-states.”

It was? Netelis hadn’t touched that story in decades, since it was nothing more than a heavily edited version of what had actually happened. His memory of it was unclear but he was sure that it went somewhat like this:

-//- passage from the Agathon Chronicles -//-

Twenty-five lords had answered his call and were present at the round oak table, outside the once small village of boatmen that had now been turned into a mighty fort.

All of them were displeased, even insulted by his proposal of handing over their power to him. One of them, the mighty warrior king of Sparmeni*, punched the table, sending vibrations through it and towards the rulers sitting around him.

“Accept you as my emperor? I have a dozen victories under my belt while you barely even have one! It should be you that bows to me.”

“Mind your tongue!” Ehmis stood up, “Your petty skirmishes do not compete with dissolving the black horde.”

“All he did was wave that fancy sword of his.” he rudely pointed at Astrovolos*. “Any one of us would have been able to gather the Braves and fend off the Bestoids, had we found that artifact first.”

One by one, the other chieftains added more concerns to this decision, unwilling to lower their status below that of a commoner from a few years back.

“Varvatos* speaks the truth.” said Kaneloni*, lord of the boatmen of Sinameni*. “We are descendants of long lines of kings. You, the son of a peasant, had nothing before finding it, and you *will be* nothing once it leaves you.”

“Why not hand it over to one of us?” Kerma*, the representative of the Praiza* merchants, rubbed his hands. “Our armies dwarf yours. By the Four Winds, we could buy them if we wished to.”

“What is this talk about buying?” chieftain Aspros*, leader of the northern Ivorian tribes, protested. “Let’s resolve this with a battle, like always. May the strongest rule, as it’s always been.”

Without losing his composure, the hero of heroes removed his jeweled sheath then threw it into the middle of the bickering mob of petty rulers.

“If you honestly believe anything can be achieved by swinging this trinket, be my guest and fight each other to the death. I’ll gladly hand it over to the last man standing.”

Nobody reached out to grab it, since everybody knew that they would be the next one to be attacked by everyone else if they did so. Only unanimity would prevent that, something that nobody would admit to. Thus, all they did was make fun of Agathon's remark.

“And who would that be? - The longest genealogy? - The mightiest army? - The greatest treasury?”

“How about the will of the Gods?” replied a young man with long blond hair, who had just returned to the small altar that later grew to be one of the largest temples of Japheth.

That man was Iris, one of the Seven Braves, and a powerful oracle that had foreseen the creation of the empire. The nobles, though, were in no hurry to submit to this, as it would signal the end of their era. That is why they hated Iris and were constantly accusing him of acting idiotically like a woman; further fueled by his feminine looks.

“The Gods have already favored us.” smirked Varvatos. “That is why they made us kings to begin with.”

“I am sure that the forefathers of your tribes did not come into existence as rulers.” the oracle pointed out, as he picked up the fabled divine weapon from the table. “They were hunters and peasants, who united the people, fought its enemies, and began the ancestry that you've descended from.”

“What is your point? Be snappy about it, woman.”

“Why can't Agathon be the first of his own dynasty, as the latest favorable mortal?”

“Being a leader is not all it takes. You need proof of your ability to rule.”

He unsheathed the sword. Astrovolos seemed like a normal silver-colored blade at this point.

“Then why was he the one who found it? Why didn’t it fall from the sky, right into any of your laps?” He pointed it at each of their faces, as he continued. “Or perhaps it was luck that made him find it, gather the braves, and head against the horde? Would any of you have done the exact same thing, or would you have sold it for a fortune? Perhaps even join the warchief against the other kings?” He pointed the blade downwards and thrust it forcefully into the oak table, forcing the tip through the other side. “Is it because of luck that I haven’t beheaded you yet, and taken control?”

Sweating from fear, and finding it hard to swallow his spit, Varvatos made one last excuse to save his throne, and perhaps his neck.

“You won’t do it, because you know our people would not accept a forced position in power.”

“And is there anyone who does not praise Agathon as the hero of heroes at this point?”

“None I know of.”

“Then what seems to be the problem?”

“It’s just that, well, many of us believe it’s the sword doing all the work. I can’t speak for anyone else but in the hands of a wise leader it would indeed perform miracles.

“If I give it to you, will you automatically be the savior of Japheth, who gathered the Braves and defeated the warchief?”

“No, I won’t be.”

“Then do not speak of what could be and focus on what has been done.”

Leadership can be passed around as easily as finding something that was thrown away into the wilderness. It can be inherited, bought, or even fabricated. The will of the Gods on the other hand is absolute, especially that of Adam, and with Agathon chosen by Him, no mortal has the right to oppose him without committing hubris.

Unwilling to anger the divine order, one by one the lords took turns kneeling before the hero of heroes. Varvatos was the last, but he too realized that he was dealing with forces far beyond what decades of warfare and a huge army could deal with.

-//- end of passage -//-

Netelis ended his recollection of the Agathon chronicles, and returned to the epic that was currently being written in front of him, of which he had the pleasure of partaking in. He still had his doubts though.

“Sounds to me like you were more lucky than smart, if that is all you did.”

“It does, doesn’t it? If the villagers hadn’t protected me, I would be a bloody corpse by now.”

“Why did you even present the flake? Why didn’t you throw it away or sell it for a hefty price?”

The young man frowned, showing hints of emotion for the first time.

“That... I cannot reply. I am not feeling like myself these days. My mouth is also constantly dry and bitter.”

“Oh? How does the usual you behave?”

“Like a coward who runs away or freezes at the sight of danger.” He looked at the priest with goggled eyes. “Do you believe it’s the Goddess’ doing? Were my doubts taken away by her? Am I supposed to be doing all this as part of Her will?”

After the statement, the bald man figured it out. “Yes!”, he thought. It all made sense to him, everything was falling into place, just as the plan was described. It was painted all over his face. Literally.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” The young man was acting very confused. “Is it to see if I am lying? I am not. I really had the flake and it was taken by...”

“You have the favor of the Goddess; I am sure of it now.”

“You think so?”

“By Her wiggly tail, I know so. We can begin preparations for the campaign immediately.”

“What campaign?”

“Why, for our march to the mansion of course! There you will claim your rightful place as our lord, and make everyone happy.”

“What if I tell you that I have no idea how to do any of that?”

“Trust the Goddess. If you are indeed the Man of Prophecy, it will all work out.”

“My intentions were never aimed that high. What if I am not?”

“Well... I guess we will all die.”

-//- 3. Sepalo -//-

23rd day of Mushroom Month (POV: Thrassos)

What usually wakes me up every morning is the “cocoo doodle do” coming from the wild roosters in the swamp. As a change of pace, today began with a loud “Wake up, we are about to get started.” It came from a blonde head popping in from the barn’s window, right next to my bed made of hay. My eyes were still too foggy to distinguish its features, but since there were no other blonds in the hamlet it could only be the assistant.

Waking up is an overstatement, since I spent most of the night rolling around in my sleep, worriedly. Ironically enough, now that the time has arrived I don’t want to move an inch from all the dizziness. If there was a mirror nearby then I’m sure that my reflection would show distinctive black circles under my eyes right now. That was a very silly assumption by the way, since I took the existence of a world where barns have mirrors for granted and even if there was such a thing, a world where my sand-infested eyes would be able to see my reflection.

“Couldn’t sleep either, hm?” he asked me as I tried to get up. He looked like he had a rough night too.

“I couldn’t rest for a minute.”

“Me too. By the stormy clouds, I hate this place.”

Did I share his sentiment, along with the lack of rest? Hard to say. I’m not all that amused with the way I’ve been treated by other people my entire life, but it’s not like I’ve ever seen other places to know if things work differently there. Logically, they have to be; the entire world can’t possibly be hamlets and swamps occupied by orphans

and mushroom cultivators. The Agathon cylinder alone described things like large towns, built next to an enormous mass of water called a lagoon. I could visualize their vastness even if I'd never seen them before.

And it's not like everything's bad here; there's always Ria. I can't help but feel pity, for her sort of sharing a miserable fate. I have no parents but hers treat their offspring like needless baggage; something worse than being orphan. Maybe I should bid her farewell before I leave. Maybe she'll say "I will pray every day for your safe return!" or maybe she will just snore a bit.

Come on Chorrier, it's too early for her to be out of her bed. And even in the slightest chance she is up, she won't be at the porch waving a handkerchief. We barely spoke to each other despite being in a small hamlet all our lives for Sun's sake! Even the very few occasions we exchanged a few words, she never laughed or paid much attention to me.

On the other hand, she was having a lot of fun talking to blondie over here despite them meeting for the first time. Why? Why did he gain her interest instantly? That little thief, stealing the only person I care for from me! Grim thoughts crossed my mind.

Oh my, he is looking at me suspiciously. Was he able to see through those tired eyes that I don't like him? Quick! Chorrier, look the other way and pretend it has nothing to do with him. Don't worry blondie, you are our hero's sidekick and you have my gratitude. Now go on, do your duty as I curse you behind your back for crimes you're not aware of. There, see, I'm just following you as you take me to your master.

Outside the hamlet, we met with the paladin, now clean and fully dressed, and the elder, still wearing his silly grey pajamas. Both looked far more refreshed than the

two of us, despite having spent five times as many years as us here. Next to them was Mister Netwaverson's wheelbarrow, with its cargo being the assistant's rucksack and a Brute tied up and gagged with thick rope from head to toe. Ha, you don't look so tough now, do you? I couldn't help but smile at the sight of him looking all powerless and surly, while thinking of punishments that are ten times worse I gave blondie.

"What is this, didn't I tell you to get some rest?" the paladin said, frowning at us. "How are you going to last this journey looking like that?"

"It's not that bad." the assistant said with less conviction emanating from his words.

Now it's my turn to be scolded by the elder.

"I knew I couldn't trust you Chorrier." he waved his fist at me. "You are making all of us look bad."

Look who's talking, you are still in your pajamas! I was thinking of something else to reply with, but the blondie was quicker to respond.

"We are fine and ready to go; go eat a mushroom or something." he shoed the elder away. "We can do this, can't we buddy?"

I nodded. There is no turning back from this, black circles, or any other color.

"So be it." the paladin sighed, as he began walking further away from the hamlet. "Grab a handle each, and follow close behind me.

"I will take the right side. I always like being on the right!" the blondie said and rushed to grab the appropriate handle without waiting for my approval reply.

Oh well, it's not like I have a preference in the way I do chores. I am always on the left anyway. Left behind by my very parents, and always living off the leftovers of a family's supper.

It seemed that today would be sunny, with a slightly chill breeze coming down from the northern mountains. Good, it will keep me cool as I pull the wagon. Let the adventure commence! Goodbye mushroom gardens and mud pools! So long moldy

walls and worm infested soils! It's time for this nobody to experience brand new sights and learn about brand new things, such as... um, no idea what, as I don't know about them yet. And how was I supposed to learn, anyways? Observing is not enough; maybe asking them about... Why did we stop moving?

“Darn, wait grampa, it got stuck.” groaned the assistant.

A little bit before crossing the last cluster of willows, signaling the end of the swamp, the right wheel rolled over some thin sand and almost sank to the bottom, forcing the wagon to lean to the right. A very common occurrence for any traveler who doesn't follow the common dry paths, small hills consisting of clay and gravel built by some much more caring forefathers, during the last war.

“This is bad.” the paladin shook his head as he checked the wheel. “It wouldn't have happened if your people had bothered to make a paved road.”

“But they did. Just... not here.”

The paths were meant to be used as an easy way to get provisions to the canyon nearby, in case the hamlet gets cut off by an enemy army from the plains while the enemy would try to cross the deep mud pools, the villagers would have a head start towards caves they would use as shelters.

An invasion never happened but the paths were still used to this day. Unfortunately, they were beginning from the northern part of the swamp, making the side they were right now very hard to traverse if you had a vehicle or heavy load of any kind. That was the point.

“There was no need for one here.” I explained. “Nobody comes and goes in the swamp with so much weight... Well, besides the tax collector, once a year.”

“And you. And us. And the Brute.” added the assistant, as he kept pulling with all his might.

“I’m afraid we never considered the possibility of criminals and paladins strolling around.”

“And because of your oversight, we are now stuck here. Let’s push it from behind. You will need to put some muscle in it too.” he looked at the paladin.

“Hm, so be it. But keep some distance from the prisoner. Just in case.”

It would be most helpful if we could lighten the wagon by unloading the cargo, but only the fairly light rucksack could be safely removed.

“Want some help there, deadbeats?” smirked the Brute as I was carefully removing the rucksack. We all ignored him.

It took us several minutes to free the vehicle and by the time we managed it, sweat and heavy breathing had taken us over. This could be most disheartening if it keeps happening every few feet down the path. Though the assistant believed otherwise, as he was leaning across a trunk.

“I don’t -huff- I don’t think it’s going to happen again. We -puff- are almost at the farthest road of Sepalo.*”

“What is -huff- that?”

“Never heard of a road before? -puff- It makes traveling easier.”

“No, I meant -huff- that Sepalo thing.”

“What? You don’t know? -puff”

“I’ve never been outside the swamp. -huff- So, no.”

“What a bunch of dolts you bogfolk are.”

“Mind your language.” the paladin said commandingly. “Don’t act like you knew any better before leaving your own village and don’t even think about it.”

That last part was addressing the Brute who was looking around, with his body leaning over the edge of the wagon. After that remark, he frowned and then stopped leaning over the edge.

“Can I explain to this... less experienced fellow what Sepalo is?” the assistant proposed.

“You can if it makes the journey less dull for you. Also, I will get to see if you remember everything I taught you over the past year.”

“Pf, I remember it all pretty well!”

“Prove it.”

I almost regretted asking. I felt conflicted internally, triggered by my ignorance.

“Sir, you don’t need to tell me if it makes you uncomfortable.”

“No, I will do this just to make him swallow his words.” the assistant.

Boy, he sure was rude to his master. If I had spoken like that to any of the adults, I would be spending the rest of the night hungry.

“Fine, we have a deal.” the paladin nodded and continued marching on. “But do so as you pull. We lost enough time already.”

For the following infodump, which I will keep short as to not bore you, I learned that Sepalo was the name of the grassland extending before me all the way to the horizon and beyond. It was nowhere near as small as I’d imagined it, it turns out the hills were hiding its true size and the swamp, like all swamps, was at much lower ground. From the hamlet, even when you climb the tallest willow, your view is limited to the northern mountains, the river coming from the east canyon, and everything up to the southern hills. What lies behind them was up until now closer to a fairy tale, since I only heard about the cities from the other peasants, who in turn had learned about them from travelers over the years. Very few of us had been beyond what we could see from the treetops of our backwater homeland.

It turns out that the grassy plains were big enough to envelop a third of the continent that was stopped from spreading further only by the world's end in three sides, and the Sierra Kotsani* to the north. What is this Kotsani you may ask? Why, it's those mountains behind me, which up until now were only called as such. Mountains. That is the first thing that I'd learned about the world outside the hamlet. Everything has a name and people use mostly those than simple nouns, such as swamp, mountain, or grasslands. The reason for that is, well, because there is more than one of each and you need to set them apart somehow when talking about them. This is not an issue if you never travel and see the same things all the time. Just like in my case up until this day.

So here we are, crossing plains of tall grass and solid earth, nothing but green fields on all sides, occasionally interrupted by touches of brick red and pale brown, coming from villages and dirt roads. They too had a specific name, and each one dwarfed my hamlet. I didn't even need to get close to realize it; they weren't hidden in the foliage of willows and turf, making it pretty easy to tell their size even from a distance. The blondie said there were hundreds of them in the plains alone, and that there were dozens of more places with even more people in faraway lands. I was filled with awe, since it was impossible to imagine the sheer amount of them.

The sun began to set when Petalo appeared on the horizon. It couldn't have come at a better time, since I could barely feel my arms, my feet were begging for rest, and my bladder was in serious need of relief. I had refused to take a rest during the journey, as much as the boy next to me refused to stop talking for all these hours. He was not perfect, making a mistake here, mispronouncing a name there, or misplacing events somewhere in all this mess of sociopolitical fanfare I had long stopped paying much attention to. My mind was ready to explode from the sudden surge of knowledge before it was even midday, and having to constantly revise what I struggled to memorize from what his master corrected, was simply not worth it. I don't think he

was doing it for me anyways, he just wanted to prove how much he knew as he shoved events and dates and people, usually in no particular order, like he was in a hurry to recite the entirety of man's knowledge before we reached the city gates.

Well, I guess he failed, since by the time we did so he didn't seem to be anywhere close to done.

"Darn, I barely mentioned half of what I wanted." he concluded prematurely, in a tired, hoarse voice.

"You did well, overall." the paladin said before giving him a pat on the back. "Maybe you will get to mention the other half on our next northward assignment."

"Too bad I will miss it." the Brute said mockingly, clearly annoyed by the endless talking.

What more could one expect from a barbarian such as him, who only knows of bullying people and stealing their food? I hope they sentence you to a death, far slower and painful than the simple lynching back at the hamlet could provide. You fiend!

Anyway, here we are before Petalo, largest urban center in the north region of Rodia*. That, by the way, is the name of the kingdom most lands south of the sierra belong to. Never knew that either, and the tax collector coming to the hamlet once a year never bothered to tell me. Either because he had no reason to, or because I never asked. Oh well, it made no difference.

Needless to say, there are far more cities out there, each one belonging to different regions, which in turn belong to different kingdoms, which are located on different parts of Japheth. That is the name of the continent that I am standing on right now, by the way. They say that there are more continents beyond ours, and that there is an equally large world on the reverse side of plate, but no one can get to them because the air dome stops a few miles around the surrounding area.

It's too much of a fuss to comprehend right now; maybe I will try later on. It's not as if I would go to any of those places, anyway. In fact, nobody will anytime soon, since the countryside is filled with ruffians these past years, an example of which was what had happened to the hamlet. Nowadays, there is more need for paladins to roam the land, than there is for explorers or even merchants. So, for the time being let's focus on what lies in front of me. A closed gate; the most basic precaution any city would take to prevent raids, as well as double checking curfew after nightfall. Such as in our case.

"Who goes there?" a male voice was heard from atop the battlements. The light was dim but I could still tell he was dressed in white, with a grey hood.

"Diamandi*, returning from yesterday's assignment." the paladin yelled while looking up at the man.

"Oh, Longears." He chuckled, as if he heard a joke. "Hold on, the guys downstairs will lift the bar."

While we waited, I took the liberty of asking the assistant one last thing.

"You know what, you told me so many things, except for the most basic of them all."

"Really? What's that?"

"Your names. It never crossed my mind until I heard his name right now."

"Oh... Right."

"His is sir Diamandi Longears, right?"

"It's plain Diamandi, the other one is a nickname. Because of his ears, get it?"

Why, yes, they are kind of long and pointy.

"And he is no sir; he has no royal title." he added. "Thus the rusty armor; a proper knight wouldn't go about looking like that.

"I see. And yours?"

“For now, it’s just Damazis* the unknown squire. But mark my words, one day I will be a living legend!”

“That’s nice.”

It was hard to take his promise seriously because of the way his voice croaked after the hour-long talk.

“So, don’t forget my name any time soon. You will have something to brag about to others in some years, like, how you got to meet me around the debut of my own epic tale.”

“Do not worry, I will not forget your name, oh brave Damazis.”

How could I, you might return to the hamlet in the future and snatch away Ria with your charm.

One of the two wooden gates opened with a crackle by a guard, giving enough space only for us and the wagon to pass through. If both were wide open, there was enough room for three large carriages to pass in a line.

“A bit more patience lads, and you will enjoy the pleasures of a warm bath and a clean mattress.” said the paladin, as he was walking inside. We followed closely behind, pulling the cargo with our last remaining strength.

“So, um, would you like to... um, know my name?”

“I will probably not remember it by tomorrow. For now, I still do; I heard the elder calling you yesterday.”

“Let me guess, you heard him calling me Chorrier.”

“Yes, that’s it, isn’t it?”

“No, it’s a nickname, like Longears.”

“Really?”

“Since I do chores all day, they made a joke out of it, by calling me their little warrior of things nobody likes to do.”

“So?”

“Well, chore, plus warrior, got shortened to Chorrier somehow.”

“Ha! That’s funny enough to actually bother remembering it.”

“It’s not my real name, though.”

“Ok then, what is it?”

“Thrassos, the hamlet orphan.”

“Does anyone care to find out what I am normally called?” the captive nagged from behind us.

He was the only one amongst us with an unknown name at this point. Brute was a nickname we came up with, since we were too scared to ask him. I doubt he would have told us even if we did, anyway.

“Who cares about you? You will be hanged or worse by tomorrow.” replied Damazis, without even bothering to turn his head.

“Wish it is so kid, otherwise the next time I see you, I will break both your legs and leave you in the wilderness to be devoured by the beasts.” he groaned and sounded like he really meant it.

“Don’t talk with the targets son, how many times have I told you that?” the paladin yelled at us, as he talked to the garrison lieutenant.

“Yeah, ok, I stop.” Damazis sighed.

“Leave the wagon and go book us some rooms at the usual place. I will arrive shortly.”

“Sure, why not, I can barely stand and I really need to drink something warm. Follow me, Traksos.”

“Thrassos.”

“Whatever, just follow me.”

-//- 12. Tihi -//-

5th day of Fallen Leaf Month (POV: Orgonis)

“What do you mean he’s dead?” the wrinkly elder gasped, revealing his extremely decayed teeth.

“It means what it means. He’s gone forever.” the white-haired old man with the rusty armor replied, while nonchalantly sipping ale from a wooden mug.

“I knew that something bad would happen to him if he left.” The elder tapped his grey-haired head. “He should have stayed here.”

“It was not the life that he wanted.”

“At least he would still have a life. Does the family know?”

“No, I’ll leave that to you. Can you spare me some more beer?”

“The jar is all yours.”

The elder left his cottage and headed for the deceased boy’s former house, but froze on the spot when he spotted a man in a pitch-black cassock standing still right outside the gate of his fence. Paladins were always welcomed with joy and excitement, even the decadent ones such as the drunkard inside. They were the defenders of justice, regardless of their personal flaws.

Inquisitors on the other hand, like the one that came on the same carriage as the paladin and was now blocking his way, were boogiemens. Going around the countryside and burning down any place that didn’t follow their strict definitions of proper conduct.

“Calm down, there’s nothing to worry about, it’s just a routine inspection.” he kept telling himself while trying to act as calmly as possible. “Good day, oh radiant

holy man. Do you by any chance perform the rites for a funeral? We lost a boy recently and...”

“My ceremonies mean nothing to pagans.” he interrupted him coldly.

He would have normally replied with something like “By the Rainbow” to such indirect accusations. He couldn’t say it to this man, though; for he was supposed to worship the Sun god and not the elements of nature. No paladin could protect his village from the absolute divine law of the Clergy; they were on their own and had to get out of this snare with cunningness. Just keep telling this guy what he wishes to hear.

“Eh, yes they do. How fortunate we are all moral around here.”

“Yet here I am investigating the reports concerning the semi-invisible fiends, half-naked witches flying on broomsticks, and hairy beasts dressed in human clothes living in this area.”

The elder knew that the trick is to act like you are mentally impaired. If you sound smart, the priests will not deem you as incapable of doing anything without their guidance. They adored extremely high maintenance.

“Hohoho, it’s the first time that I’ve heard of such silly things, father. Do you know of any other jokes like this?”

“It is no joke. The evidence is right before my eyes.”

“Where? I see no altar decorated with skulls and the stains of virgin blood.”

“There is also no Sun temple.”

The only things that were worshiped around these parts were the forces of nature, and even that was done mostly through verbal reference. There were no ceremonies or

offerings. With his thoughts moving through his mind faster than a spinning top, he found a way to justify it.

“Just like you won’t in most small villages. Not enough of us to deserve such a privilege.”

“And those castle ruins over there look suspiciously haunted.” he pointed to the east. “I will give them a thorough investigation in a while.” He looked the elder straight in the eyes. “Unless you have something to confess? Ease your conscience? Soften the punishment?”

The word investigation was a misnomer, because they’ve never bothered to do a proper one, fully equipped with magnifying glasses and notepads. They also weren’t carrying stakes and holy fire for cosmetic purposes. Looking into something was the same as turning houses to toothpicks, and sin removal left the suspect eviscerated. A single misdemeanor would also be enough to render pagan every single living soul in a whole town.

“A false assumption, father; we are all simple God-fearing farmers.”

“A servant of the Lord makes no mistakes, sinner! If you were truly faithful, you would’ve known that.”

Ah, right, the Clergy constantly bragged about their infallible conclusions, that more than likely confirmed that they were intolerant towards whomever they didn’t fancy. Even when they made a mistake, all they had to say to justify it was, “*Adam sorts those who deserve to go straight to Depthole and those who deserve to be by His side.*”

“Oh, excuse my ignorance, father. I am too stupid to comprehend such things. In fact, we all are. We are all too ignorant of sin for the idea to even cross our minds.”

“Your houses and clothes are unusually colorful. Very unfitting for the frugal life of a proper Adamist.”

He bit his lips and cooked up an excuse on the fly.

“Ah, yes, want to know why? It’s to ensure that we can look like jesters that entertain travelers with our silly antics. We are stupid, remember?”

“You mean that it’s a local tradition?”

“Exactly! Nothing more than that.”

“Based on which sacrament?”

“... Um. What?” Caught off-guard. He didn’t even know what the word meant.

“Even traditions derive from a saint or a miracle. From whom or which one is this based on?”

Not only was his knowledge of Adamism close to zero, but also that the origin of this custom was something that he couldn’t use to his defense. His grandfathers initiated it when they found a chest full of jewels and colorful fabrics in the ruins. Some began to decorate their cottages with them, making the rest envious. Soon everybody was trying to show off by decorating their houses and clothes with as many antithetic colors as they possibly could. Despite knowing all that, he couldn’t outright mention them, since they were all about vanity and nothing about the inquisitor’s religion.

“It’s so we can, um, exorcise evil, while feasting for a week every year before winter, as saint Theolikos commanded my ancestors to do centuries ago.”

“There is no such saint.”

“Really? Well... Maybe you don’t know of him. There are thousands of them, and he was a rather minor one from Kanelonia, and...”

“I’ve heard enough.” he said raising his palm to make him stop. “Our records state that the castle was once a den of monsters where unholy rituals took place. After

your ludicrous lies I am now convinced that you founded your village here so you can continue its demonic acts.”

“No, that is...”

“...I shall return with aids in a couple of days to cleanse this unholy place. You better start praying to Adam in the meantime for all the sins that you have committed.”

The elder dropped on all fours, grabbed the priest’s foot, and began to kiss it like it was a sexy lass willing to go all the way.

“Smooch-smooch! Wait, oh purest of hearts. You visiting our humble village is a blessing in itself. Smooch-smooch!”

“Let go of me, you filthy sinner. Pleading won’t do you any good.”

“Please reconsider; we are not evil if you get to know us better.”

“Only Adam can save you now. He will handle you as you deserve.” He pushed aside the elder’s hand and walked away in disgust.

That is the same as telling the elder that they will all die. Staying here eventually became the same as being good as dead.

“Grampa Orgonis*, I heard everything.” the head of a farmer who during the conversation hid behind a large bush had popped up. “Please don’t tell me that this means...”

“Yes it does!” he slapped the grass before him a couple of times in frustration. “We have to abandon our hometown and make a new start elsewhere... again!”

It was hard to accept but this village was doomed. No matter how much its folks are attached to their homes, the power of love is not going to magically make them fireproof.

“Where will we go? Winter is coming up. Nobody in the plains will accept us once the rumor spreads.”

“Gather as many belongings as you can. We will head for the mountains as soon as possible.”

“What will we do there?” He helped the elder get up.

“I don’t know, Spernis* my boy. It’s the only safe place to go to for now. Tell the others about it. Don’t yell about it; the priest is still roaming about.”

“What about Damazis’ family? Will you tell them he is...?”

“I won’t. No need to burden them with more sadness than the one we face. Now go.”

Orgonis realized that he would have to be the one to repeat history and lead his people away from harm, as his grandfather had done during the River Wars. He could barely remember the fields of Kanelonia and never thought that he would need to get used to yet another view in his old age. Would he even manage to survive another ordeal? It was devastating enough the first time and his heart had become frail.

How will the rest accept it as his generation did so many years back? None of the young ones were around when it happened to remember how it felt. All they know of is Sepalo and they aren’t ready to abandon it for an unknown place. They are all raised to believe that they are to spend their lives tending to the land that their fathers gave them, and to eventually be buried in it, right next to them.

But if they stay, there will be no future; it will end by sword and fire in a few days. No fields, no graves, no children to continue the circle of life. How is staying the better option? It isn’t. They had to become refugees once again, so that they could still have a future.

With great distain and amongst endless cursing, once the carriage had departed and the boogiemán was no longer inspecting them, everybody began to pack their

things. There were many who attempted to take many items of sentimental value with little use. Orgonis slapped the items out of their hands.

“Leave those behind; they are worthless where we are going.”

“They’re family heirlooms; they must be preserved.” a villager tried to excuse it.

“No, they are extra baggage that will slow us down.”

“But I paid a sack of Blein for every one of them.” another one of them complained. “They will be worth a fortune if I sell them as a collection.”

“You won’t get more than a handful of coppers.” the paladin said in a semi-stupor state. “The innkeeper was selling them to you at a hundred times more than what they are worth in Petalo.” Everybody froze at the sight of the man in the rusty armor, as he went on. “They only have the value that you want them to have.” They assumed that he was inside the carriage. “Can anyone spare some more ale?... Why are you all just standing there? I won’t bite.”

“Sir... are you here to make sure... we won’t leave?” the elder asked on behalf of everybody else.

“What? No, you haven’t done anything illegal as far as I’m concerned. And I sure hope that nobody is going to give me anymore beer. I might fall asleep under a tree and become unable to stop any possible transgressions.” He winked with his left eye a few times to indicate his subtle irreverence towards his duty in favor of the villagers, causing everyone to sigh in relief.

“We will leave a whole barrel in that cottage.” Orgonis said whilst smirking. “It’s too much to take with us. If you don’t want to fall asleep, don’t go there and drink any further.” He winked back at the old man in a similar fashion.

Early next morning, most of the trinkets and decorations were left where they stood, while everything else in the rooms were stripped. Carriages were stuffed with

clothes, sustainable food, cooking and farming tools. With the paladin sleeping comfortably in the cottage, the journey into the unknown had begun anew.

-//- 4. Petalo -//-

23rd day of Mushroom Month (POV: Thrassos)

This was my first stroll in the city. Actually, it was the first in any city, and boy, was I amazed with what stretched out before me. Despite my extreme drowsiness, I could still see thousands of multistoried houses and shops, all made mostly of sturdy beige-colored stone and dark-brown timber. Every room was illuminated by chandeliers, as they could be seen through glass windows. An oil lamp hanging from a wooden post revealed wide paved roads every twenty steps. Around this time, my hamlet would be like a graveyard, devoid of light and human voices, only the buzzing sounds of insects and the croaking sounds of critters keeping you company. But not here; the city was bustling even when the moon was up. Not that I could see it well. Or the starlight, as it was never seen under the blanket of smoke coming out from the chimneys.

“My goodness, is everybody here rich?” I asked with eyes ogling the sight.

“Of course not, this is the poor man’s district.” the blond helper explained.

“What? Are you joking?”

“I am not.”

“The lowliest of houses looks bigger and more luxurious than even the elder’s hut!”

“Anything not made of reeds would seem that way to you. Try not to get a heart attack if you catch a glimpse of a noble’s mansion.”

“Why, what are those made of? Solid gold?”

“You love to think in extremes, don’t you?”

Although there were still people in the streets, almost all of them were soldiers on patrol, or guards stationed on every major junction and gate, constantly looking for

suspicious movement. They were taking security really seriously here; not sure why. However, nobody bothered to ask us where we were going, probably because they knew the assistant. They never exchanged greetings though, and he seemed really angry every time he passed by one of them.

“Did something happen between you and the guards?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.” This was the first time that he wasn’t willing to explain himself. It had to be something really serious. “Anyway, this is where we will spend the night.”

We were outside a two-story building. Singing and laughter were heard coming from inside. Judging from the sausage painted on a sign hanging above the entrance, I figured it must have been an inn. It looked dirtier and more run down than the other buildings around it, but it was still a palace next to the small and wooden guests’ lodge back home.

As soon as the door was pushed aside, I took two steps in and a suffocating atmosphere invaded my senses; a combination of stagnate air, smoke, sweat, farts and booze, enough to make flies drop dead in seconds. The screeching laughter of denizens and the cacophonous singing of entertainers could keep small animals at bay, at a radius of several miles. The temperature was so high, it could easily fool you into thinking that it was summer even if outside was the dead of winter.

By every table there were gangs of unshaven and unwashed men, their faces screaming bloody murder at a glance. Pouches of silver coins gambled through cards and dice, accompanied by constant swearing, and spitting. Smoking pipes like funnels, drinking straight from bottles, and throwing mugs to vent their frustrations every time they lost a match. There were some women too, scandalously dressed and privates

partially showing. Some served plates of sausages and mugs of ale, while others sat on men's laps and petted their heads.

“Dear almighty, we bumped into the Brute's buddies!” I yelled to Damazis, while pulling him by his sleeve back outside.

“What are you talking about? Let go of me.”

“And let you move a step further into this den of thugs?”

“What thugs? These guys? Most of them are paladins.”

“Stop pulling my leg, let's get away from here.”

“It's you who is supposed to stop pulling my arm. They really are associates of my master.”

“But look at them! They are the type of people who mug you in back alleys.”

“That's probably because they used to do such activities before changing professions.”

“Seriously?”

“Seriously. Now unhand me, or you will suffer even more than you already have in that miserable hamlet of yours.”

I did so.

“I am very sorry; it's just that... they... don't look anywhere close to what I'd expected.”

“Their parents are not proud of their decadence and I am not fond of any of these dolts, but they are what they are and my throat is killing me. Sit down and stop making things harder.”

Letting go of his sleeve is one thing, following him deeper inside is a whole other. I refused to comply and soon lost sight of him as he got enveloped by a veil of smoke. I stayed there, shocked and shaken, until I saw Diamandi walking towards me.

“Why ain’t you inside taking a rest and filling your belly? I have plenty enough to afford a meal and a bed.”

“Sir, are those people inside really paladins, such as you?”

“If they are the usual customers I see every time I am in, then sure. Why do you ask?”

“Well... How should I put this?... They don’t seem like the protectors of the countryside that I’ve been hearing stories about.”

“Ah, yes, that is to be expected, my helper only got midway through his explanation and this part was not covered.” I am not sure that I would remember it, even if it was, because I stopped paying attention early on. “Come inside and worry not, they don’t bite. Not in this stupor state at least.”

“So it’s completely safe?”

“Safe? Hardly. They will smash your head open with a jug or start a brawl over a loaf of bread.”

“Oh, my!”

“But trust me; nobody died in here all these years I’ve been a regular... *Wait*, there was one who got so drunk that he fell over and impaled himself with his own knife. And another whose heart stopped after eating a whole boar. As well as there being this other time when one died of old age, although some suspected the quality of the beer. In any case, nobody’s gotten killed during all these years; accidents aside.”

“I trust you sir, but my feet have a will of their own and refuse to budge.”

“So be it, you can stay outside, hungry and tired. In the meantime, my feet have a different opinion.”

That was the last thing he said before going inside, and soon I lost the sight of him, as a bearded man decided to flirt with a half-naked woman right in front of me.

That place was scary, but come to think of it, it was even scarier outside. What if one of them came out and saw me standing alone and defenseless? This made me feel uncomfortable and it didn’t help that my bladder was already full. I’d best go relieve

myself in that alley over there and hope the sound will not lure someone willing to gut me before frisking my pockets. It will be most unpleasant for both of us, me dying while soaked in my own bodily fluids, and him leaving empty-handed.

Oh come on Chorrier, you and your wild imagination! Why would you assume such a thing without any evidence? It's not like you've witnessed a beggar be mistreated by a fat drunk guy in half-plate armor.

Actually, you are. In the alley right across the street. He is kicking him and cursing at him for no apparent reason, as he lies defenseless on the ground. Quick you fool, finish doing your business in that corner and run inside!

"Hey, over here!" waved Damazis, as he could barely be seen through all the boorish men and a mist of tobacco. He was sitting by a round table with three chairs in the middle of the room.

The paladin had untied the strips on the side of his plate, and was facing the corner to my right. Several sets of armor already laid in small piles on the floor. Despite all of them being in bad shape, one could still tell they all had the same structure and were all made of the same light grayish metal. It was only now that I noticed that all of them had the symbol of a black horseshoe on their fronts, usually worn out and covered by reddish layers of rust. Was that the city's insignia? With that name it had to be. It also reaffirmed the previous claims of them being warriors of justice; assuming that there was a law for lynching beggars without a reason.

The paladin had finished taking off the armor, so I glued myself to the seat next to him like a shy little girl clinging to her mother.

"A change of heart?"

"I found the outside to be worse."

We headed towards the center, passing through colleagues, none of which was friendly enough to welcome us or to start a chat. It didn't take much time to get to where Damazis's voice was coming from, yet just in case, I tried my best to be as close as possible to Diamandi.

Once we sat at the table, we found that it had already been served with tin plates, containing the same type of sausages, as well as wooden mugs with that brownish ale that everybody else was having. Not much variety on the menu I guess. Not that I should be complaining, since I wasn't the one paying, and eating meat at the hamlet was something that's reserved only for special events, like a wedding. Almost every other day it's just mushrooms, cooked in one out of a dozen slightly different ways.

As I was gobbling up my share, I overheard those sitting around me describing their past feats, how they had apprehended their targets, in usually very unsettling ways. If a wanted poster had "dead or alive" on it, there would be no qualms in bringing someone half-beaten to death or missing an eye. I listened in silence while not looking in anyone's direction, afraid of the possible consequences in case of offending anyone. I could be labeled a beggar and lynched just for the heck of it.

It was only after we were all done and had moved to the back room, where bathtubs full of hot water awaited us, that I found the strength to speak again. There were only two available, so Diamandi would get in after us. This gave me a chance to clarify things that I could not while he was there.

"So, um, where are the rich paladins at?" I asked as I undressed. My hands were still partially numb from the pulling and made it hard to perform even the most trivial of activities.

“Rich? Nobody manages to get rich.” Damazis replied as he slowly immersed himself into the bathtub, trying to get used to the heat. “Whatever they make, gets wasted on booze, women, gambling, or all three at the same time.”

“That’s weird. Where are the marble palaces full of majestic mounts galloping in the courtyard and the maidens they saved from dragons?” I checked the temperature of the water with my left palm.

“Oh, you are talking about the old stories. Those are long gone, went down along with the empire eons* ago.” He had laid down, trying to make himself comfortable. “The sorry excuses you see in there are essentially bounty hunters with a fancy name. Most of them used to be crooks themselves, until the royals agreed to pay them for throwing their own kin in prison.”

Well, there goes the nice image I had about them. The world tends to leave you behind when you live in isolated places.

“I see.” I began pouring water over my feet. Damn, I felt so tired that it actually took a lot of effort not to lose my balance. “So sir Diamandi is also...”

“He is sort of an exception. He drinks a lot and tends to be uncaring, but he is still way better than the rest of those creeps. And don’t ask me what he did during his youth because he hasn’t even told me yet. I can’t imagine it being something too bad.”

This was not a pleasant topic of discussion, so I stopped myself from delving any further. After a few minutes of thinking, I came up with a different topic.

“I’m having a hard time breathing in here. Are the rooms we will sleep in the same?”

“Eh, you’ll get used to it. If not...” he pointed at the back door “the barn is over there. Plenty of hay to lie down, along with fleas to keep you company and freshly dropped manure to keep you warm.”

Despite all its prestige, hygiene was not the city’s first priority. Plus, I wanted to avoid getting dirty as soon as I got out of a good bath.

“Ew... room it is.”

After we had finished refreshing ourselves and got dressed, we let Diamandi have his turn. I waited near the staircase while Damazis was getting the keys for the room from the innkeeper. I made sure to avoid eye contact. Better safe than to assume none of them will feel nostalgic about the good ol' days when it was fun to treat weak people as punching bags. I still peeked at the innkeeper, a chubby old fellow with a big moustache. He seemed to be Damazis' old acquaintance, as he was the only person in this establishment who spoke to my companion in a friendly manner, instead of groaning like a dog whose bone you had tried to take away.

We went up the stairs and unlocked the first door on the right, revealing a thrifty room with two wooden beds and a candle. Preparations before naptime were not necessary, since the only luggage that we carried all day long was a moribund criminal and an old man's camping gear. At the end of the day, what we had to do was simple: let our bodies collapse onto our mattresses, and pass out. Neither the weird smells coming from the hall below nor my roommate's loud snoring were enough to bring me back from where I was headed, a place far beyond this city, a journey far longer than the pitiful thirty five miles that I travelled today.

It's that sensation when after a day of many unusual occurrences, your dreams tend to be bizarre. What my dreams usually consist of, is me chasing after talking mushrooms, who for some reason have legs and like to kick over furniture in peoples' huts. I try to grab and throw them away, while the villagers are yelling stuff at me like:

“-Hurry up you gamin! -They are ruining everything, do something right! -It's all your fault!”

Other times it is I who is running away from things that scare me, like the Brute or a spring flood. And almost always I can't run; my feet are either stuck in the mud or I have the speed of a turtle or I am an old man who gets tired after one step.

Not this time. In this particular dream, I am atop a tall fortified building; I think it's a castle. I am wearing black armor full of spikes, and there are hundreds of people below the ramparts I am standing on. It is a very bright day, and the ground beyond the walls is brown and barren. I can see something massive approaching from the horizon, lifting dust in its wake. As it gets closer, I can tell that it's an army of thousands of Beastoids, brandishing swords and spears while yelling:

“-Grrr! Kill Thrassos! -Bark! Kill him, there he is, after him! -Auuu!”

Goodness gracious; what are these monsters doing here and why do they want to do that? What did I do to them? I can't even remember what I am doing here, dressed like that. And yet, even the people below yell at me, asking what to do.

“They are coming Thrassos! What shall we do? Do something! Save us!”

Me? Why should I save you? Who are you people? Why do I even care? I don't even want to be standing here. I turn around and try to walk away as far as I can, only to come face to face with dozens of elegant looking men and women, drinking wine and eating fruit. They giggle as they look at me.

“All yours to do as you please. Power, wealth, the ability to change the world.”

Impossible! I am a nobody! I have no power! I have no idea of what you say! I don't want any of this. I don't even want this scary metalwork that I am wearing. I must take it off now.

At once, the armor breaks and falls off my body, leaving me with the clothes I almost always wear. The environment around me gets dark and moist in a second, now resembling a swamp. The people in front of me turn into walking mushrooms, kicking furniture around, while the people behind me are now a huge tsunami heading right at me. And there I am at the center with my feet stuck in mud.

Ah, that's more like it, now I can enjoy a normal dream...

-//- 22. Conspiracy -//-

17th day of Fallen Leaf Month (POV: Netelis)

A small and humble temple stood in the middle of the wasteland, with weathered bricks revealing its age. It was windy, a small sandstorm raged and occasionally shook the wooden belfry causing small rings to come out. The minimalistic decorations of wicker tapestries were of no importance to its few believers, yet were still required to give a feel of majesty to the goddess worshipped inside. Although at this moment; the torches were not lit and only one person was inside. The priest, a fat and bald man with a beard, dressed in a brown robe. He wasn't having a discussion with or chanting to the goddess in her animal form. He was just taking a nap on a silk bed, snoring with his robe loosened and his privates showing, during the remaining warm hours of sundown.

Suddenly, a different kind of sound was heard. It wasn't caused by the wind; it was a line of knocks at the front door, done in a specific order. They had to be repeated four times, progressively louder, until the priest shook off his slumber and took notice of them.

“Hrmf! Wha- The Taks* do you... I am coming, dammit!” He jumped up and tightened his belt.

Answering the door was not the unexpected arrival of a believer, seeking aid at this most unconventional moment. It was his spy from the mansion, returning from an important mission.

“Bless you my child, may the Goddess be with you.” he said in a hurry, still half-asleep.

“She better be.” answered a skinny man, dressed as a butler, as he entered the temple while looking behind him.

“You’re safe here, my son; there is nothing to be afraid of while in Her care. Did... anyone see you?” he cleared the bed from leftovers.”

“I was wearing a hood all the way here. Not that it was needed; there was nobody outside with this weather.”

“I can make you some space to sit down and warm you up with some wine if you'd like.

“I might as well enjoy some of the fruits of your labors.” He checked the white pillow in front of an altar decorated by lit candles. There was a black critter laying on it. “Her avatar seems angry.”

“Hence the weather outside. You need to appease Her with an offering.” He kneeled forward. “Did you bring it?” His gaze was fixed on his hands, that were placed deep inside his purple dinner jacket in order to conceal something.

“Yes, and it better be worth it. I had to make up a dozen excuses to keep it hidden from the dragoons.”

He pulled out a cylinder from the sack he was carrying with him. It was very long and worn out, bits of which had stuck to his white shirt, leaving beige-colored stains on it.

“Her rewards will be immense; I assure you.” said the priest as he grabbed it carefully, trying to not damage it any further.

“If these chronicles are so dangerous, why didn’t you have me destroy them and be done with it?”

“Because that wouldn’t be much of a test of faith; would it now? Also, because knowledge is power and must be wielded by those who are capable of comprehending it.”

“Those like you?”

“Agreeing to that is blasphemy, you know. She’s standing right behind me.”

Indeed, the little black furred critter was staring at them with its large yellow eyes.

“Could you give me a vague idea of what my reward consists of?”

“I’m afraid that I can’t. But you will magically find a big bag of gold next to your bed by the new year.”

“Can... the Goddess... make it appear there any sooner? I’m not sure that I will still be at the mansion in the following month.”

“Oh? Urgent trip?”

“Staff rearrangement. It happens all the time when a noble dies.”

“Dies? Is someone on their deathbed? I was not summoned for their last rites.”

“It’s because you weren’t supposed to know. There will be an assassination. And the target will be the duke.”

The priest stood silent for a few seconds, as a gust of wind blew causing the bell to chime in the process, shifting the mood to a saddened one.

“Which one? The former or the current?”

“The current. The former is the employer.”

“By Her Divine whiskers! You should have told me earlier!”

“I only accidentally overheard it myself two days ago. As I said, I made a journey through Depthole to keep it hidden.”

“If he was in the dungeon then how did you find out? Are you sure it’s not a rumor?”

“The duchess is not a person who makes empty threats. It was when I exited her bedroom, after preparing the bathtub. She was talking to my counterpart agent from their faction.

“This changes everything. I am not sure if there is still time to do anything about it.”

“Anything I can do to help? Maybe that will... result in the appearance of more bags?”

“I will let you know. For now, go back to your duties and keep me informed.”

“I can tip the duke, if you’d like.”

“That will expose far more than this sinister plot. He must never know, even at the risk of his own life.”

“So be it. I will take my leave then. Blessed be Her name.”

“Go with Dimitra, my son.”

As soon as the wooden door was shut, the priest ran towards the pillow that the deity laid on.

“Did you hear that? She’s finally making her move in order to bring her father back into power. The timing couldn’t have been better, since her husband has his guard down, looking for what I am currently in possession of.”

“Mear!” the critter said squeakily.

“I know, I have to ride like the wind and bring that person down from the mountains as soon as possible. Let’s hope she will be enough to make a difference.”

“Mear!”

“What? This?” He threw the cylinder away. “There’s no time to study different versions of history. Agathon and what he did will have to wait.”

“Mear!”

“Yes, even the location of his sword. Now, where can I find a healthy mount at this hour and weather?”

-//- 7. Ksera -//-

1st day of Fallen Leaf Month (POV: Thrassos)

“Family, our plates will be a bit empty today,” the bearded farmer said as he opened the worn down door of his hovel with one hand; in the other, he held his bow and game. “We have a guest.”

A sigh of disappointment came from a dozen mouths inside, followed by the many verbal complaints of a middle aged woman.

“Oh, not again!”

“Quiet, all of you.” He extended his free palm forward. “Not another word unless you’re talking with him.” The farmer gave them all a stern look, “Do I make myself clear?”

Some nodded, others bowed their heads, and a few more let out a lifeless ‘yes’. Nobody was pleased.

“Come in, my friend, there is still room for the two of us. Petra*, take Halikis* to your lap. Zvolis*, move to the side a bit.”

I entered their crowded house while receiving a lukewarm welcoming. As expected, there was a bitter animosity that came from having to share an already frugal meal with a complete stranger. It was a big family as well, with many children and an elderly woman, all dressed in the same tattered rags. It’s hard to imagine how they find enough space to sleep at night without piling on top of each other.

His wife opened a clay jar and filled up half of a wooden bowl with some sort of viscid puree. She handed it over to me without so much as a glance or a spoon. I sat down, squeezing in between two boys to make room for myself, and had a taste with my fingers. To my surprise, it was cold and mashed Balltatoes, that had no distinctive

flavor aside from being rather salty. I was too hungry and grateful to complain, so I just dug in.

“So, where did you find this one?” the granny asked, as she lay down on a stretcher. She looked really old and unable to walk properly on her own.

“Literally in the middle of nowhere,” the farmer replied, while leaving a small, brown dead rabbit on a low table. “Limping next to a dead tree, just a few minutes after I got this one.” He pointed to the dead rabbit. “In one hit too; you had to be there to see it. I spotted it while returning from...”

“What was he doing there?” Now it was the wife’s turn. “Are you sure he is not a fugitive?”

“I highly doubt it. Just look at the guy, his eyes are so innocent.”

Everybody’s eyes were suddenly locked on me, making me feel very uncomfortable. My lips were all greasy from feasting too quickly, and my freezing at their gaze made half the children sneer and laugh at me.

“Does he have any stories to tell us?” the little boy named Halikis asked, as he sat on his teenage sister, Petra’s lap.

“Don’t rush things, son; when he feels like it, he will tell us. Let’s not pressure the fellow; let him enjoy his food.”

I swallowed immediately, almost choking on it in the process, as I hurried to address this issue.

“Hum, well, I would like to explain. But please believe me, it will be the truth.”

“Why would we assume it’s not?” the friendly farmer chuckled.

“Well... It’s sort of melodramatic. Too much so to take seriously. You might think that I’m making it up.”

“Even if it is, we love hearing stories about other places. Real or fictional, it makes no difference.”

“Really?”

“We never travel, so it’s how we entertain ourselves.”

“I don’t travel either, well, up until a few months ago. And boy, what an adventure it was!”

“Then please, whenever you are ready.”

I was ready. It was just that the way everybody was looking at me with fevered anticipation made it difficult to concentrate on what I was supposed to say. I felt uncomfortable, as if they would laugh and throw their puree at me if I messed up. I took a deep breath, closed my eyes, focused, and let everything I felt flow out of me. I began by explaining everything that transpired at the inn, from then until yesterday, when I became a visitor in my own hamlet.

-//- 5. Sausages -//-

24th day of Mushroom Month (POV: Thrassos)

I had no idea how much time had passed when I finally shook off the lethargy. The light coming from the barred window was quite dim, making it hard to tell if it was morning or evening. When I found the strength to get up, with limbs still numbed and aching, I looked outside for a clearer picture. I got none, at least as far as the weather was concerned. Tall buildings were blocking most of the sky, and the rest of it seemed too dark to be cloudy. Lots of people were walking and talking in the street, so I assumed that it was still daytime.

It was unsettling to see my roommate's bed empty. On one hand it was quite nice of him not to wake me up when he did, on the other, he'd left me alone in a den of cutthroats. I didn't know whether to wait for him to return or go look for him downstairs, where I risked bumping into some drunk looking for a fight.

Normally, I would have chosen the former but there was another factor in play: I badly needed to relieve myself, and in order to do that I needed to go outside and find a nice quiet corner, or a big tree. Judging from the crowd outside, that would've taken a lot of effort.

Tipping on my toes, I slowly opened the door. No soul in sight, but just to be certain I took a step outside and double checked. Still nothing. I peeked downstairs, only to find it empty aside from the innkeeper sitting behind the bar, gaze fixed downwards into his hands. He was very friendly with Damazis; I could probably trust him. I walked midway down the stairs and allowed an uncertain "Good morning" to

escape my mouth. All I got in response was a silent “Hm.” Better than chasing me with a hatchet yet nowhere close to what I was aiming for.

I took a few slow steps further down. The lobby was a mess, with half empty mugs and dirty tin dishes abandoned on tables, or thrown besides them. The air smelled fresher and cooler than before, but was still not completely free of what took place last night. It was a stench that would be powerful enough to penetrate and nest in the stone walls. Even if the same thing happened every night, I bet it would take years of disuse with all the windows wide open for it to become odorless again.

“So where do people, you know, relieve themselves around here?” was what I dared ask first. Not the best topic starter, I admit, but it managed to serve its purpose by turning his gaze towards me.

“First time in a town, hm?”

“Yes sir. First time leaving my hamlet in general.”

“You are just like my nephew when he first arrived in the city.” He shook his head and went back to looking at the parchment. “There is a bowl in every room.”

“What about it?”

“You fill it. With urine.”

“Um... Why would I do that?”

“Because that is what it’s there for.”

“Oh... I see. I will be back shortly.”

“May your aim be just and true.”

That is what hunters say before releasing the arrow. Was it a joke? I think it was a joke. I can barely hold myself, so I will ask later.

I returned triumphant and a couple of pounds lighter minutes later. Once I stopped at the same safe distance as before, I proceed to the next crucial question:

“So... Where is everybody?”

“Sleeping or working; where else?” he replied monotonously.

The way I phrased it didn't exactly leave room for anything besides the obvious answer. Good job at making bad first and second impressions, Chorrier. Be glad the man is too busy reading a parchment, or he might have realized that he was addressing an idiot. Okay, let's clarify this a bit better.

“I meant Damazis and Diamandi. The boy you were talking to last...”

“At the palladium,” he interrupted without even taking his attention away from the parchment.

“That is what people call the headquarters of the paladins, correct? Are they reporting their successful mission?”

“And cashing the bounty in.”

“Oh, I see.”

Profit. The whole world is driven by it, paladins being no exception.

“They will need every copper piece they can get their hands on after this morning's announcement.” He stretched the hand that was holding the parchment towards me. “Can you read this nonsense?”

“No sir.”

“I thought so.” He lowered his hand in disappointment.

“But I probably can if I come closer. My eyesight is not that keen.”

“What in the thousand wine barrels are you playing there boy?” he sounded very annoyed all of a sudden. “Can you read or not?”

“Well, um, yes. If the symbols are not too complex or old style, that is.”

“They are not, come here.”

Seeing that I was hesitant to comply, he mellowed down.

“I am not going to bite you. You know my nephew for Sun's sakes, now get your feet rolling.”

“I ... do?”

“It's Damazis you dolt; stop wasting my time.”

He was annoyed again. Better not unearth the hatchet chase from earlier any further, by being the usual me. I rushed to his side, hoping that he is indeed Damazis' uncle.

“Prove to me that you speak the truth.” he thrust the parchment a few inches right in front of my face.

Yes, I did recognize most of the symbols. It was far more helpful when they roll in a cylinder but they were still fairly legible.

“By order... of his majesty... king Ana... Anaksa... goras...”

“Skip the formalities, move to the next paragraph.”

“Ok. In order... to cover... the grain shortage... there will be... a pledge of... a tenth of total income... per business... This comes... into effect... from...”

“Enough, I believe you.” he took the text away. “Do you understand what that means?”

“I am not sure, sir. I do not have my own property, nor had I ever the need to pay the tax collector.”

“That is mighty convenient.” he smirked. “Well, I can't have you just standing here doing nothing. Do you plan on going out?”

“No sir, it's too risky.”

“I see... Did they have you working in that village of yours, or are you one of those pampered ones who can't even put on its own shoes?”

“I was given various tasks since the day I could walk, sir. But what exactly was conven...?”

“Oh, don't mind that.” he shook his other hand a bit before using it to show what state the tables were in. “Since my nephew will be late, and we have nothing better to do, how about chatting for a while?”

“Sure thing. But what is there to talk about? I'm afraid I do not know many things outside of the swamp to the north.”

“I am certain that you can explain how a bumpkin, such as you, gained the asset of reading.”

“Oh, that’s easy. You see, there was this…”

“Mind picking up those mugs while you talk? My back hurts a bit.”

“Sure, sir. My hands hurt a bit too but I can do as much. So, you see…”

“The only visitor my place ever regularly has is the tax collector and he only comes once a year. Every other outsider is a wanderer, ending up in the hamlet while trying to get to the mountains. You know, by crossing the swamp without following the main road around it. It’s what you do when you don’t want to be found on the main trail by angry relatives, people you owe money to, or anything of that nature. Most of them leave after a meal at the tavern, but some decide to stay for Pendathes there, hiding until whatever the uproar of a mischief they caused has cooled down.”

“Thanks, now those plates over there if you don’t mind.”

“So, some winters ago, four I think, a scholar sought refuge and asked to spend a whole year in the guests’ lodge. He never revealed why but it had to be something big. Anyway, we had no problem letting him stay since it wasn’t in our business to care, but we also couldn’t let this guy stay there for so long without contributing somehow. I mean, you wouldn’t feed someone if he didn’t deserve it, right? So, the elder asked him, ‘Is there any manual work you can do, while you stay here?’ And he said ‘I am a man of arts and wisdom; I do not associate myself with such trivial activities.’ And the elder told him ‘Then good luck surviving the year by eating your parchments, we are not going to give you a single mushroom to munch on.’ The scholar became frustrated so he said ‘How about I train you in my craft of reading and writing? That will make you the smartest boors in this side of the kingdom.’ And the elder liking the idea said ‘Sure, we have a deal.’”

“Can you wipe the tables with this towel while you are at it?”

“Sure. So the scholar, Lavrakis was his name, turned the guest lodge into a school, teaching anyone interested on the art of symology... or how it’s called. You know, how to make sense of scribbles.”

“Symbology. And they are not scribbles.”

“Well, they were for us since we couldn’t read. Most of the inhabitants were interested, and ordered me to join in as well. We had to be separated into groups, since the scholar could only handle twenty or so of us at the same time. So, we were divided into morning, midday, and evening classes. We were thinking of a nighttime class too, but there was not enough light to see the blackboard.”

“Now take this broom and sweep the corners. Mind the crumbs; they tend to get stuck in crevices.”

“Anyway, it was a fun pastime while winter was raging on outside, but as soon as spring kicked in, most of us began to lose interest. The mushroom fields needed to be prepared and no amount of readable scribbles would magically make animals jump into the cooking pot. Having to take care of the daily house routine and the family business means not having enough free time to study for school. The reason that I didn’t follow in their footsteps is because the chores that I had to do were never that time consuming. Plus, I could do them at any time of the day if I wanted to. I was also interested in learning more, not just for being able to read, but also to know more about the world outside the swamp. Up until my scholar friend arrived, I had no idea what was going on out there. Also, by being the best reader in the hamlet, I hoped to get a better position later on. No more chores.”

“Take the plates to the washbasin. Use this to scrub the grease off.”

“So within one year, I learned not only all the basic symbols, but also the history of Agathon and the empire he created. Turns out it wasn’t very helpful though, the empire is no more and paladins are not what they used to be. Eventually Lavrakis left the village and nobody but me mourned his loss, since by then they considered reading and writing to be less useful than weeding a backyard. Most housewives even regretted spending all those months preparing mushroom soup for him, comparing the knowledge and wisdom that he brought them, to hot air that does not fill your belly. It only gives you gas, if you know what I mean.”

“That’s it, put the barrel right there. Good, now let’s go prepare the meat.”

“I wish I could prove them wrong somehow, but it was true for the backwater place we were living in. I mean, what use was there for writing when the Brute came in the following spring? What could I do, scare him away by reciting poetry? It didn’t protect us from him, it didn’t save poor Ria from being assaulted -that’s the girl I like by the way- and it didn’t give me courage when sir Diamandi was fighting him. For Sun’s sake, it didn’t even prevent Ria from being charmed by your nephew afterwards. I tell you, that was most frustrating; he just snuggles in and takes away the one and only thing I like in that damn place. If he dares to do more, I swear that I will...”

“I really wanna hear this.” Damazis’ voice came from behind.

I was so caught up in stuffing minced meat inside pig intestines that I didn’t even notice him creep up from behind the counter. Wait, what am I doing here, making sausages? And look at this place, I was talking about my life and before I realized it, now it’s sparkling.

“So, what do you swear you will do if I talk to her again?” He was grinning, almost as if he knew I would have no substantial threats.

I mean, seriously, what could I do to blondie? I am cleaning a tavern while he is out there apprehending criminals. What could I possibly use against him while doing chores; the only thing that I am good for? Splash him with a piss pot and call it an accident?

Cold sweat began to appear on my forehead as he was patiently waiting for a reply. Thankfully, the innkeeper unknowingly changed the subject.

“Have you read this crap?” He waved the parchment towards the paladin. “Third time this year. This is an outrage!”

“There is nothing that I can do about it,” he replied while filling a mug with beer from the fresh barrel I personally placed there an hour ago. “It’s the law and everybody must obey it.”

“Theft with the pretext of the law, is what it is!” The innkeeper violently threw the parchment towards Damazis. It barely made it halfway before it landed on the floor I personally cleaned an hour ago.

“See uncle, that is why I refuse to get a normal job,” Damazis laughed, now completely uninterested in me. “I make money by stopping crime; you lose money by upholding crime.”

“We all have a role to play!” yelled Diamandi, after a big sip. “This counts for you too, Lukanikis*.” Lukanikis... So that was the innkeeper name. “I may be indebted to you, but you better stick to your guns if you don’t want to face my intervention.”

Speaking of roles, what was mine at this point? I fulfilled my duty to help carry the Brute, so now what? I needed to clarify this immediately.

“What about me?” I raised my arm.

“What? You’re still here?” He looked at me with a furrowed brow. “Just get the wagon from the garrison and go back the way you came from.”

“Um... Alone? No escort?”

He continued after emptying the mug. “Straight route, good weather, only thirty-something miles, nothing worth being robbed for. So yes, alone.”

That’s much easier said than done. I only got here because I had these two keep me company, while doing a chore. How exactly could I do something on my own? That would require enthusiasm, which defines me only by pronouncing my name backwards.

“Ah, that’s right, mind telling me that oath of yours?” Damazis asked again.

Rats! Why did I take the initiative and speak? It’s like I am punishing myself by doing so.

“Hold it, why waste this lad like that?” the innkeeper interrupted. “Have him stay here instead. Look how helpful he was to me today.” He pointed at the clean room.

His nephew posed the obvious question before I got the chance. “What are you talking about? He is needed back at his place.”

“The boy has been talking about his poor excuse of a life for the past two hours.” his uncle expalined. “He is a burden to the hamlet, and has no means to make an income for himself despite being literate.” He placed his palm on my right shoulder while looking downwards, “But if you stayed here, you could earn a few coppers a day. If you don’t waste them like the poor excuses of businessmen I have as clients, you could even get your own shop one day. Right here in the city; not in that god forsaken place.”

“The salary of a waiter is a silver a day,” Damazis pointed out before Lukanikis jumped between him and me.

“Plus, you will get your own property and make your own fortune, thus one day you can even propose to that lass you are in love with.”

Oh dear, that was so sudden. I have a chance to win her over by simply staying here? What a great chance to make a difference!

Damazis' head popped to the right side of the innkeeper.

“Speaking of her, what about that oath?”

“What say you, lad? Wanna stay or not?” Lukanikis pressed on whilst taking a step to the right.

“He is cheating you; the salary is a silver!” his nephew yelled from behind.

“Hush!” the innkeeper kicked backwards. “He is inexperienced and this is a free market. Your master does the same.”

“Hm, yes, whatever.” he replied with his back turned to us.

The answer was obvious, wasn't it? So why was I hesitating again? Was I really that afraid of change? Come on Chorrier, take the risk! What was the worst thing that could happen? You were in the city now, a place of culture and civil rights, not a backwater swamp, there was nothing to actually be afraid of! ... Well, actually there was since the paladins are a very violent bunch. As long as I served them and stayed quiet, there would be no reason to turn against me. Hell, they would, theoretically, protect me if an actual crook attacked me.

Yes, I knew what to do. All I had to do was open my mouth and let out the fateful word. All I needed was a few seconds to mentally prepare myself. Aside from this miniscule amount of time, nothing would stop me from finally taking back control of my own life! So, here it came! There, it was almost there! My answer! Which was...

“Fiends!”

What? That is not what I wanted to say. In fact, it wasn't even me saying it! It was someone's scream from outside, followed by “Dragons! Witches! Run for your lives!”

Oh, come on! Did this really need to happen in this exact moment of my glory? I only needed one more second... maybe two... no more than five... definitely not ten...

“By the Sun, they wasted no time, did they?” the paladin nagged as he tightened the straps of his breastplate.

“I love my job!” his assistant chuckled as he ran towards the exit.

“Third time this year! Each one immediately after getting one of these!” the innkeeper yelled in frustration, while pointing at the dropped parchment. “Quick, get outside and let me lock up before the monsters barge in.”

I had no idea what was going on, beside how everyone had lost interest in my reply. Not that I blamed them; what worth was my reply if we were apparently under a monster invasion?

Wait a second, did I just say a monster invasion? Oh dear, and here I thought thugs and their former colleagues were the worst thing this place had in store. I miss the days when I believed a single Brute was too much.

“Don’t just stand there lad.” Lukanikis snapped me out of my trance. “Quick, help me bar the windows before it’s too late.”

“If your inn survives, I expect a free meal when I get back!” was the last thing the paladin was heard saying while he hurried outside.

It was also the last I saw of his assistant, as the door closed behind him and was locked twice by his uncle.

“Come with me to the cellar,” he commanded as he ran to the cuisine and downstairs from there.

I managed to get halfway to the stairs before he came up holding wooden planks.

“There are metal hooks on the sides of every window. Slide two of these on each one. Go, now!”

He threw them into my hands and pushed me upwards, before going downstairs again, probably for bringing more planks.

He seemed to be well prepared for such occasions. Didn't he say it was the third time this year? If the building still stood, it meant that he knew what he was doing. Unlike me, whose heart was pounding like crazy and who was now acting on orders rather than critical thinking. Bar windows with planks, don't ask why or how they withstand fiery breaths or huge tail swings, just do it!

While doing so, I couldn't help but notice the commotion raging outside, a few scenes per window. For a monster invasion, there were none in sight; maybe it was because they hadn't reached this part of the city yet. People were still running in the opposite direction instead of hiding in their homes, while holding as much as they could. And I had to say, for being in the poor side of Petalo, where mansions weren't made of diamonds, they were all pretty wealthy. Despite being dressed in mostly dirty patched rugs, they were all carrying lots of jewelry and silverware. And how noble of them, being willing to save the precious items of other households as well. Look how they risk their lives by not heading for the walls and instead spend their precious time stashing necklaces into their pockets and carrying fur with wheelbarrows.

“Stop looking outside you idiot!” the innkeeper yelled from behind me.

Oh dear, he was brandishing a hatchet, my worst fears have come to life!

“Are you done?”

“I'm done for!”

“Cut that out. Was that the last window?”

“What? Last? Yeah, it was.” I showed my empty hands.

“Good, take this.” He handed over the hatchet. “You know what to do with it?”

“Not prepare more minced meat, I assume.”

“In case you hear someone trying to break a window, scare him away with it. I'll be on the upper floor, doing the same. Many of those buggers have learned that I am waiting for them at the ground floor. Don't disappoint me!”

He ran away from me without giving me the time to ask what he meant by “scare him away”. I was pretty terrified myself and I wasn’t even sure if dragons and fiends could be damaged by such a small tool. Why did Damazis even tell me to walk back home alone? I would have been some giant’s snack before managing to set my foot outside. And how was I supposed to make my own business in a place attacked by monsters multiple times every year? How was everybody still living in this place? Oh, what a nuthouse that I’ve dragged myself into! That’s what I got for wanting to be more than the errand boy of a relatively safe hamlet. I cowered in a corner and prayed no thumping would be heard from any of the windows.

I wasn’t sure how much time passed before the screams stopped outside. It must have been hours, but the sun was still up, and my trembling knees ached. At least everything was quiet. Yet, it was too quiet for a city. Was everybody else dead? Eaten by monsters waiting to jump at me the second I tried to take a peak outside? Were they gone or were they going to start searching every store? And did they knock on doors before entering? Because that was exactly what I heard right then!

“It’s me.” I recognized the voice of Diamandi.

“Oh, thank the Sun! Is it over?”

“Yes it is. Open up, I’m getting hungry.”

I did so, and he entered, face all sweaty and the rusty armor now coated with grime. He was alone.

“I got five,” he began explaining while looking for another mug to fill. He sure liked beer. And what was that number; his kill count?

“Two of them were even frequent customers here.”

What did he mean by that? The monsters were disguised as normal people? Oh dear, did I just spend the night in a place working as a front for some sinister invasion?

“I’m better off without them,” Lukanikis said while running downstairs. He carefully looked outside before closing the door. “How did it look? Will everything be settled by tonight, or is the day wasted?”

“Nothing a few quick hangings won’t fix.” He sat on the same table as last night. “Can’t say the same for what was taken.”

“Money goes around, not a problem for me.” The innkeeper was now talking from the kitchen, while preparing a dish on the run. “Where’s the kid?”

“Don’t know, I lost him in the frenzy. He disobeyed me and ran ahead on his own again.”

“Curse that lad; I told him so many times!”

“I am sending him back home; he is beyond hope.”

Damazis was definitely my polar opposite. Always quick to act and not obedient at all. No wonder. He was also the closest thing that I had to an arch-nemesis. Speaking of which, I had to deal with the bigger issue here, so I went to the kitchen too.

“Sir, if I stay and help you, will this sort of thing... keep happening?”

“Depends on whether they finally stop trying to suck our blood down to the last drop.”

“Oh dear, I don’t think I can take this! Goodbye sir!”

“Hey, where are you going?”

To hell with making my own fortune! What good would it have been if I got eaten alive? The outside world was too much for me; I needed to get away from that place before the next attack began!

“Goodbye to you too, sir!” was the only thing that I’d bothered to say to the paladin, as I passed by him on my way out.

“Take care.”

I needed to return to the hamlet! This place was way more dangerous than a hundred Brutes! Where was the main gate? There it was; luckily I was on the main road, it wasn't that far, and could be seen through the tall buildings. I ran towards it, not paying much attention to the place that I never got the chance to explore, nor had the interest in doing so anymore. Above me, the sky was ash-grey and smoke could be seen rising from all sides. Around me, I was showered by yelling and cursing from people trying to recover from the event. Some were crying on their doorsteps, others swept broken glass, some looked around guardedly as they pulled out big chests. But none of them seemed to be willing to leave this place. Were they all mad? Why spend another minute in such a place?

I reached the main gates, which, despite being daytime, were closed and surrounded by guards. A few carriages were trying to get in, nobody but me tried to do the opposite.

“Where do you think you're going?” one of them asked, as he turned his halberd towards me.

“Home; a place in the swamp to the north; please let me pass!”

“Sure, sure you do. Search him.” commanded an unarmed boy, around my age. “And you! Keep your hands where I can see them.”

He patted my body down, while something similar happened to the carriages in front of me. Cargo, driver, and even mount were going through the same procedure.

“I'm no monster, sir! I am a normal person! Please let me go.”

“Clean.” the boy said. “Not even a single copper.”

The guard lowered his weapon and smirked.

“On the losing side I see. Better luck next time.”

“Can I go now?”

“Godspeed.”

I began to run as fast as I could and did not stop until I was breathless. The walls were still pretty close behind me but any progress was welcomed at this point. I was already feeling a bit safer, so I laid down to rest a bit. And only then did my brain begin to ask things that I was too terrified to take into account before. Such as, how am I so sure there are no monsters roaming the countryside? Or what about the wagon I was supposed to take back? What am I supposed to do now? Backtrack to get it and ask if the coast is clear?

I looked around and saw nothing out of the ordinary. Unless every bush and flowerbed in sight was a troll in disguise, everything looked calm, unlike the city and its still visible uproar behind me. Oh, to hell with it, what good would a wagon do? If there were fiends out there, I would be attacked regardless of whether I had it with me or not. And even if the guards told me it was dangerous out here, it would only result in me losing the specks of courage I had right now, and in turn begging Lukanikis to take me back in. The point of this endeavor is to stay away from that Depthhole; not seek excuses to go back in it.

Once I regained my stamina, I took my chances by heading forward, driven by the fear of what's behind me rather than the unknown before me, without neglecting Ria as the foremost spot on my mind. Turns out the journey back home was uneventful to the point that I was bored. No monster jumped out from behind a tree to eat me, nothing happened in general to make the march any less dull.

When I was travelling yesterday, I had Damazis' monologues to keep me company. When I was in the hamlet, I was preoccupied all the time with some chore, or with my studies. But it felt like time was standing still and making me realize how empty it felt to not be doing anything. I meant, yes, the destination was important, but I was not enjoying the journey at all. Shouldn't it have been the other way around?

How do travelers and merchants perform this activity every day without dying of boredom? Do they play cards along the way, or is the desire for profit such a powerful driving force? Even during the invasion, people were trying to save material goods, not one another. I missed the chance to gather enough for a dowry and I can imagine myself being the first thing to protect if some monster attacked the inn. Not the paladin, not the innkeeper, it would be me and the money I slowly amassed through hard work.

I guess that gospel that I was given to read was true after all. The archdemon Tax was really controlling the lives of mortals, tempting them to do anything for the prospect of wealth. Even I was lured by it mere hours ago. Wealth is indeed the plague that tortures people who lack it and dehumanizes them when they obtain it.

By the time the city was behind the southern horizon, the sun had set. I could still see well thanks to the starlight; at a full moon I would have no problem strolling merrily down the road. Come to think of it, Petalo was well lit but the sky was permanently cloudy. Is this how they compensated for the darkness that enveloped them? Not that I would have said no to an oil lamp right now, but it was too scary of a thought.

It must have been midnight by the time I reached the swamp. The moisture there made the air far chillier than it was outside, and the familiar muddy soil felt like ice beneath my sabots. Rubbing my hands for heat, I pressed forward. I knew well where all the big water ponds lay, and it was easy to avoid them by following the high ground; something I would have been unable to do if I had the wagon with me. Running nose and exhaustion be damned, all that mattered right then was reaching the huts and crashing at the guests' lodge. There was no other place to spend the night without waking up stiff and soaking wet.

And finally, there they were, barely visible through the foliage. Those familiar, crude wooden huts I had spent my life in thus far, minus yesterday. This was an achievement worthy of being recounted for eons to come. Now to quickly find some dry hay and get some rest while it was still night. I couldn't wait to see Ria's face once more, and who knew, maybe this time I would find the courage to speak to her. It couldn't be any scarier than a whole monster invasion.

-//- 1st day of Fallen Leaf Month -//-

The farmer clapped to signal the end of my storytelling.

“Ok children, I think that's enough for today, time to get some rest now.”

“Aw! - Come on! - A bit more!” many of them began complaining, with the rest having already fallen asleep on each other's laps and shoulders.

“I can barely keep my eyes open and the same goes for you. What use is our friend telling us stories if you won't be awake to hear them, hm?”

“Your father is right, children, listen to him,” the mother agreed, stretching as she got up.

“It's not because you are a boring teller, no offense.” he looked at me and placed his hand on my back softly.

“None taken,” I replied, only to realize that I too felt very tired.

“We can continue tomorrow night if you wish to stay with us a bit longer.”

“Really? I don't want to be a bother.”

“You won't be. Right children?”

“Right! - He won't! - We want to know how you married Ria!”

“I'm afraid that didn't happen because—” I tried to explain before the farmer placed his other hand over my mouth.

“Leave us with something to look forward to tomorrow. For now, let's rest, just like you did in your story.”

Only then did I realize how stiff my body really was after sitting down for so long.

“Fine, but where do I fit in here?”

“You don’t. We barely do, even when we set up hammocks for the little ones. You’ll have to pass the night outside for now. We don’t have a guests’ lodge, like your place does. Maybe we can arrange for something better tomorrow.”

“Will it be okay? It’s autumn after all.”

“Don’t worry, we don’t have the humidity of the swamp up here. Unless it’s midwinter, or there’s a southern breeze, you won’t get cold.” He tapped his foot, looking downwards. “The soil is dry enough to remain warm for most of the night.”

“Just to be sure, give the lass my blanket,” the granny said while smiling and revealing her decaying dentures.

“Oh, no I couldn’t—”

“Go on, take it, it’s not like it’s chilly with so many people in here.”

“How I can repay such wonderful hospitality?” I asked while walking outside. “Do you by any chance have a backyard that needs weeding?”

“Things are much different here my friend.” he laughed. “We don’t have back alleys or soil that is fertile enough for weeds to get out of control. In fact, there are days in which we boil nettles when the porridge is not enough to feed the family.”

“How awful.”

“We’re used to it. Now go get some rest, tomorrow is going to be a joyous day!”

“Oh? Why?”

“You’ll see. Good night.”

-//- 23. Bard -//-

1st day of Rain Month (POV: Hous)

“I see no point in this.” the frustrated boy thought as he let the firewood drop from his hands.

The thumping noise, followed by the formation of a small cloud of dust above the dry soil, attracted the attention of a man picking up dry leaves nearby.

“What is wrong with you?” the man scolded, in a surprised manner rather than an angry one, “I told you several times how important these orders are.”

“No you didn’t father; you just repeated strange words that you heard from someone else. You don’t even know what they mean.”

“I don’t need to, and neither do you. Now pick them up and carry on.”

The boy didn’t share the servitude that settles in with years. He was of the age when everything felt wrong and needed to be challenged. What did this morning order mean, anyways? The messenger announcing it to us, stuffed it with so much prose that it became impossible to understand:

“Turmoil prevails amidst our rising duchy. Despite the great heat wave and its accompanying drought ruling this land for most of us, those omnipresent forces are not the cause of our plight. Mortal men are facing a danger of a far more earthly manner, though the cause behind the uproar isn’t strife amongst us, but the dread of impending doom in the form of the invaders. The furthering of glory and dreams of grandeur is not less crucial, yet unreachable whilst the sharp axe of the Clergy hovers over our lives, homes, and every rock still left unturned after the events of the past month.”

“Whatever the meaning of this weirdly scripted text is, look at the response,” The man pointed to the horizon, “It led to a great mobilization and the incessant stirring of dust, as it mixes with the air, hasty shuffling of feet and worried voices.”

“Father, please stop talking like that.”

“But I am so good at it. Check what else I thought of: A cacophony of yaps and curses amidst commands and the pointing out of oversights, leaving souls restless under the rejected sun-god.”

“It is still awful. And nobody out there seems to notice how little it all matters”.

“In the grand scheme of things, and deep inside, everybody is aware of the dragoons being our actual one and only line of defense. If they are, everything else will be...”

“Oh no, please don’t use that metaphor again.”

“... like a cracked egg next to an ant nest.”

The boy did not obey and turned his head to face the knight. Despite his attempts to sound educated, his father believed in the most ridiculous of superstitions.

“Forgive me, oh mighty protector. We lowly farmers have trouble staying focused when what you order us to do feels pointless.”

“Pointless? It is not pointless; it is basic group psychology.”

“What does that mean?”

The dragoon was as willing as the boy’s father to admit that he had no clue what the true purpose behind these activities was. His superior explained the situation well enough alright, but this didn’t make things any clearer. Too many pretty words he had never heard of before, patched together in long sentences that made him forget the beginning by the time he heard the ending. His mind wandered to what the advisor had told him that morning:

“Call it a diversion, a means of keeping the mind busy from allowing lamentation of impending demise. Once the body is left to rest late at night, it doesn’t take long to

realize the pointlessness of these talks. This is why motion is essential for preventing the thought of desertion.”

“Um... Yes sir. I guess I will start issuing the commands now... Keep carrying wooden pikes near the trenches, men! Raise the ramparts with more clay! Reinforce the haystack barrier with more gravel!”

Orders issued, he turned to the advisor.

“Did I do well, sir?”

“Splendid! Keep stirring the soil and filling the air with dust. Keep it as high as our spirits! Motion is life, and the single required proof of victory. All must comply, from the one who just began to walk, all the way to the one who is about to croak. All for the glory of our little army of misfits.”

Memory completed, the dragoon settled for a simple command.

“I am not sure what it means but the lord says it’s very important and everybody must obey. Now do so, or face the penalty!”

“Do as he says son.” the father patted his son reassuringly, “It’s too early to have our souls taken from our bodies. If the Goddess is feeling generous, she will curse these foreigners with a harsh Father Winter.”

“What did you just say?!” the dragoon hissed. In reply, the wannabe poet made up a prosy passage full of honey dripping flattery.

“Oh, stout defenders, forced to remain in full armor all day. Ill thoughts of you are improbable in the rough times we are marching through. The hot spring of sweat under all that metalwork and under this sun surely requires the tolerance fortitude of a saint. Blessed be our ruler for wisely allowing you not to wear a helmet, or it would lead to a faint from a stroke, ironically handing over the flag to the enemy without a single drop of blood.”

The dragoon didn't fully understand what he said, but it sounded pretty and made him feel good; instantly vaporizing his anger. He was not fully mesmerized though, for he did understand the last part, and it wasn't very reassuring.

"There will be plenty of drops if the worst comes to be. It is not going to be sweat, but blood and tears. The kind of men we are facing are not known for taking prisoners, mercy is beyond their concern. Get back to your work if you do not want this nightmare to come true."

"And what a waste it would be if such a dreadful scenario were not averted," The artist continued as he kept on gathering dry branches, "Being dead, unable to witness in action those eerie tools of triumph you don. Gifted by the gods themselves seemingly, products of a dragon's skin apparently, given to our charismatic leader presumably. Hard to tell what they are or what they can do; everything happened too fast to chew down the feast of merry changes they brought."

"Um... Yeah. You don't need to say more." The dragoon scratched his head. But the poet did not comply.

"Too prestigious to ask direct questions, too reassuring in combat prowess to ruin the optimism by snooping around. And on top of that, too busy carrying pikes, stashing mud, and putting rocks on hay to even find enough time to attempt any of the aforementioned options. Motion is life indeed."

"Dad! Enough is enough!" his son kicked his knee, in hopes of making the muse go find some other poor fellow to possess.

"I almost feel like clapping." the dragoon nodded. As confident as he wanted to sound but in reality he was equally as frustrated with these orders as the kid, and wished them no harm for something he himself didn't have a clear picture of.

The wannabe bard remained silent afterwards but his mind was still cooking up more fancies for the next time that he happened upon such an occasion. He would once again be able to express his wonderful talent of repeating unintelligible sentences to

people who only possess basic vocabulary. For the time being, he would find solitude in his thoughts, a place nobody could be annoyed by. A place where his voice was here to hear and shape in any way he pleased.

“I can’t refute the interesting times my life is blessed with, which hopefully won’t be cut short any time soon. If the Goddess wills it, this body of mine will keep going long enough to get the opportunity to recount all present events around a campfire, stuffed with enough eloquence to make the audience chew their fingernails in excitement.”

While sailing in his own thoughts, his son had reached the end of his patience’s limits.

“There, we have gathered enough for a dozen fireplaces,” the boy puffed, an armful of firewood in his hands, “What now?”

The dragoon placed his forefinger on his chin and looked around. Seeing how idle hands were multiplying, he used the prepared order all team leaders were given as a last resort for keeping everyone busy.

“Um... Make a stash and begin pulling the wagon to the mansion’s cellar.”

“You had us gathering sticks for hours, only to have us abandon them in the middle of nowhere?”

“Stop doubting your lord and heed his words.”

“There is truly no point to all this.” he grumbled as he dropped everything he held a second time. “Dad, stop thinking of more stupid words and come help me with this next meaningless thing that we have to do.”

The boy hated the changes that the new leadership brought. The ones bossing them around were not even from their land; they had come from the south with less than a poor man’s possessions. Overnight, the new duke gave the dragoons their strange black armor and stormed the unsuspecting mansion, taking over the throne and

plunging their barren homeland into a never-ending conflict with the surrounding provinces. A thousand of their compatriots died in the first battle alone for no reason at all. The boy couldn't help but resonate with those lost in the battle; the efforts of his countrymen were futile, be they in life or death.

This is not how his father perceived this situation. In his eyes, he would no *longer* spend his remaining days in a miserable routine of simply plowing fields in this accursed wasteland of constant hunger and thirst. He was not fond of simply sustaining his family whilst stuffing the bellies of the nobles. He was rather looking forward to exchanging this lack of substance with the prospect of becoming a bard, reciting chronicles of their rise to power; and doing so in a far more poetic manner than any other story teller did before.

As for the casualties they had so far, those were seen as a necessary component of any proper saga. Where would the tragedy lie if there was no death; and how would victory feel rewarding if there were no losses? This is what put his mind to rest during nighttime, when recalling the mourning of widows and the dying screams of his friends. They suffered so the epic tale will sound more thrilling; they died so the struggle would be more sensational. He would take this bad memory of his and turn it into an ode to inspire future generations.

“You know,” he began in a cheery tone while he pulled the empty wooden hand wagon, “Once we fulfill this little quest, we might in return get to see him. Or who knows; even have a short audience.”

“You honestly think he still remembers or cares?” the son replied, trailing behind with his hands behind his back. “He is royalty now.”

“Come on, do you think the person we lodged not that long ago would show contempt?”

“He didn’t seem like a bad person, and I loved his stories. But now that he’s risen to power, we’re not important to him, unlike when he had nothing.”

“Shame on you, thinking he is anything like the cruel dynasty he dethroned - may they boil in oil. If we meet his majesty, I will request a public spanking for your questioning loyalty, you ungrateful child!”

“Will you stop embarrassing me? People are listening.”

And there were indeed lots of people, mostly women and children coming from the side of the dirt road they were traveling on. They were dropping in the wagon any Balltatoes* they had scavenged in the wilderness, as ordered by their taskmasters.

“What a nice batch of war provisions we are getting. The duke will be pleased.”

“They are just Balltatoes, dad.”

“People can’t fight with empty stomachs, thus they are war provisions. Now, less talking, more pushing.” the father commanded, as he pulled the wagon.

“There, see?” the son puffed. “These things are not only petty, they are also heavy. And they are going to be just one of, what, a hundred other loads going there today. They won’t notice the difference even if we don’t take them there.”

“Would you prefer an army of cutthroats waltzing in on the starving dragons because a certain someone was not motivated?”

“Of course not. I am just saying we are not going to be the ones doing the fighting or the eating.”

“If everybody thought like you, we would all be running to place our heads on a trunk, so the clergy’s executioner could sever them more easily.”

“We are not important and nobody will care even if we kept the Balltatoes for ourselves. They are nothing compared to the leverage they constantly bring from the neighboring nation.”

“May they encounter trip-stones and fall off a cliff for all they did to us!” the father waved his fist in the air, not having forgotten the deaths that occurred between their territories in the past days.

The truth is, none of them really meant what they were saying; at least not to such extremes. They wouldn't really request a spanking, or sit idly all day nagging about the futility of life. It was more of a friendly argument to color the dullness of activities such as field plowing or wagon pulling. It wasn't even something they were doing every day; it sort of started after they had the duke at their place for a couple of days and loved the way he spoke.

The talk helped pass the time until they arrived at the mansion an hour later, after a heated debate that covered all sorts of topics, from bizarre words, to politics, to war, to the meaning of life. Did they come to a single conclusion out of the dozens of issues they went over? Of course not; they were just a duo of uncultured peasants, pretending to know more than they actually did. Without realizing it, they were under the influence of that “means of keeping the mind busy from allowing lamentation of impending demise” the advisor was aiming for.

“Look at that dad, the wagon is now fully loaded with enough veggies to feed a dozen peasants for a pendatha*”

“Or a single noble for a day; may he choke in his sleep.”

Before them lay the one and only official storing space in the whole duchy. There were a plethora of other barns and granaries scattered around the land, but because of recent developments, they were stripped for materials. All that is left now is this, the renovated treasury of the rich, a place once existing solely for them to stash jewelry and any accompanying assortments they didn't feel like wearing at the time. Not

anymore; by order of the new duke, this had turned into their lifeline, the most fortified place in times of siege.

There were a few workers in here, separating whatever is brought into crates or big clay jars by type, and then piling them up, one atop the other. I also noticed some sort of an accountant in a corner, with unkempt hair and dirty clothes, trying to save as much space as he could, by measuring the existing quantities with mathematical procedures, of which, no one else present had the slightest idea of how they were done.

“Because I am a peasant, get it?” The man chuckled while thinking about it. “If I knew how to write and read and count, I wouldn’t be just another Balltato farmer, would I now? I would be a butler to some ass noble. I wouldn’t say no to the prospect of having three meals a day for dusting vases under a ceiling that keeps everything cool over my head. But having to constantly bow, be gentle and obedient to some fat dolt, is beyond my tolerance. I would rather be a traveling bard and share porridge with my fellow farmers as I travel the wasteland.”

“But first things first.” He looked around and spoke his mind. “Is our duke anywhere to be seen? My eyesight is not how it used to be.”

“No dad. It was a foolish hope, anyways.” he shook his head. “Did you really expect him to be out of the mansion?”

“Well, unlike his predecessors, he is not looking after his own skin, treating the rest of us all like cattle. Why wouldn’t he be out checking how his people are doing?”

“Specifically in the cellar, at this exact moment?”

“Well... You never know. It’s a small world.”

“Dad. Please.”

“Oh well, even if he is inside, he is most likely planning his next move against our southern foes.”

“What about those rumors that say he is using the very nobles he kicked out as his advisors?”

“Bah! I find it hard to believe. I imagine them hiding under their silk beds, firmly holding the precious silverware they gained from our toil over the decades, scheming ways to bribe the invaders if they bang at their gates, demanding royal heads to be displayed upon tall pikes throughout the Grand Highway.”

“If only they could be satisfied with their royal necks. What about us poor folk?”

“If I get to see those bastards getting what they deserve, before my last, I almost don’t mind losing this war.”

“I personally don’t mind the new duke using those bastards to his benefit.”

“May those silky beds they find solace in and hide under collapse on their powdered heads!”

“Oh look, at least we get a glimpse of his wife, her highness the bitch.” The boy pointed at the balcony above them.

“Ah, yes, look at her elegant walk, fan at hand, as she gazes down on us, as if we were no different from putrid animal droppings.”

“You know what, I will let you go on with your pretentious poems this time. I hate that bitch.”

“Watch out my fair lady, for you might step on one of us, as you gallop in that fancy dress of yours.”

“Let me join in. Are you discontent enough with having to look at us insects, miss high and mighty?”

“Ready to leave now, and return to pester our duke with some trivial meandering about ‘wanting a new ebony cupboard for those porcelain tree figurines’ you like to collect?”

“And there she goes, waltzing away to her duke. I sincerely hope he is at least having a lot of fun with her every night. Free of those ‘I am too noble to NOT have a headache’ excuses.”

“Hey, Hous!* Will you ever unload that damn thing and get out of the way?” grumbled another farmer behind them. There were three more wagons waiting for them to stop their quarrel.

“Right, right, sorry about that. Help me turn it over, son.”

It didn't take more than a few seconds for that to happen, before they were done and ready to take their leave in a hurry.

“Excuse the inconvenience; we shall be on our way now, praying for victory as we return back to gathering logs for pikes, rocks for ramparts, and mud for cover.”

“Leave the stage, dad; you've overstayed your welcome.”

“If I do that, to whom will the chronicle pass onto?”

“The bitch is on a balcony; why not her? She can sing and then the curtains can roll.”

“Why not? We are off to do chores, as she does her nobly nonsense, like looking at her dresses or drinking herbal tea.”

-//- 8. Ritual -//-

2nd day of Fallen Leaf Month (POV: Thrassos)

I was woken up early in the next morning by the sound of galloping hooves and rolling wheels. I lifted the blanket that was used to protect my eyes from the flying bits of sand, in order to see a caravan of several open carriages entering the village. They were being pulled by dark brown Hippopedini*, those large pachyderm mammals nobody sane would bring to the swamp unless to drown oneself. The reins were held by long haired men, dressed in crudely patched together animal pelts. I have seen their kin before; they occasionally pass through the hamlet. They are mountainfolk, boorish and not very talkative. For a while I believed that the Brute was one of them, but no, he was immensely larger, less hairy, and his tongue could form sentences more than three words each.

Several villagers seemed to be waiting for them, with sacks and jars laying next to them. Hous was there too.

“One.” he said when they reached him and pointed at a sack of Balltatoes and three jars laying next to the door.

Without saying a word, two men from the first wagon unloaded three large clay jars, similar to the ones by the door, as two others from the wagon behind, placed the sack and the other three jars on it. From the effort it took to perform their tasks, I could tell that the ones they reloaded were empty, while the ones brought down were full. The same thing was happening with other people, with slight differences in the quantities.

“Good morning. What is going on here?” I stood up and stretched. “Anything I can do to help?”

“Good morning and you don’t have to. My lads can carry them to the shack.”

“Please, is there any way I can aid?”

“Well, you can if you like, by carrying the buckets and breaking the salty crust.”

“Is this the joyful event you were talking about?”

“No, that one takes place in the evening. Take your time; it’s still awhile until we go to the field.”

Once the caravan finished doing the exchange, it began to move away, presumably towards another village. Two rather big buckets were filled with water, poured from the jars through the use of dippers. With one bucket on each hand, we needed to walk a couple of miles outside the village to get to the field. We passed through a scenery almost stripped of greenery and painted with warm ochre and sand, which was constantly making your throat to seek relief from thirst. No doubt the contents of these buckets was a resource of great importance in this depressing land.

He explained, all problems can be narrowed down to rivers and lakes having dried up since his grandfather’s time, forcing a constant resupply from the mountains.

“It is a blessing when it rains but that rarely happens; especially during summer. There are many wells but whatever water comes from them makes you sick. We use it only for watering the fields.”

“Doesn’t the sickness seep into the crops?” I asked as I was softening the soil with a hoe.

“No, the salt inside them kills it. I do not know, I am not an educated man, I just see it works.”

“Ballatoes are salty and a source of jokes because of their shape, but their beauty lies in how they grow in large quantities, even in barren lands. As long as you fertilize

the soil after each harvest with Hippopedinos manure, you are guaranteed a harvest every year.”

“Is this field only enough to sustain your family?” I looked at its large size.

“It is. There are only a few thousand of us around here, each one with a big area to pay for taxes, and even be left with enough to trade a third for water.”

That much just for water? I had to make a silly question once I stopped to take a small break.

“So, why are you still living here?”

“What do you mean by that? If I weren’t living, I would be dead.”

“No, not that. Why do you live in this barren land? Why don’t you just... take your family and move to a better place or something?”

Hous seemed skeptical, as if he had never put much thought into that before. He finally replied.

“We are surrounded by danger. Bandits roam the mountains, and man-eating birds lurk in the valley between them. There are even dragons in a cave not far from here.”

“Oh dear, that is indeed intimidating. Do they attack you all the time just like they do in Petalo?”

“Never in my lifetime did I see a single one. I was told that there are a lot.”

“The people bringing water from the mountains seem friendly, so it can’t be that bad out there.”

“Well, they are probably strong enough to fend for themselves. Did you see how easily they lifted fully filled jars? And many of them probably make a living as bandits, robbing and killing anyone passing through their turf.”

“Ok, the sierra is a dangerous place. What about the other three directions?”

“They also have their dangers. Trust me, we are safer here. There is nothing to worry about anyways, since there is this prophecy where... Oh, I will tell you later, time to catch a job.”

He ran to the side of the rudimentary dirt road, that stretched out in a straight line no more than a few meters away from his field. Followed by neighboring farmers, they spotted a second caravan passing slowly through the road. This one was not driven by grumpy mountainfolk, nor was it comprised of open carriages. On the contrary, it had several men dressed in fancy reddish attire, riding Hippopedini, grey with dappled black in color, escorting a closed crimson carriage, pulled by snow white Hippopedini. It was the most lavish construct I had ever seen; with all its edges rounded, decorated with brocade and painted flowers of all sorts. Once they came close enough, I could see through the dust that they left in their wake, tailed by a dozen porters on foot, with huge chests and barrels on their backs.

“At your service my lords.” Hous said with his head lowered. The other farmers were doing the same; two of them even took off their straw hats.

“Company, halt!” the foremost rider yelled, and the rest complied. “You there, to the back.” he pointed at us.

“Want to come?” Hous looked at me. “You won’t get another chance for pendathes.”

“What about the field?”

“Eh, one day won’t do any harm; Balltatoes grow with minimal effort.”

Oh, so that is why we took our time to get here. Mushrooms are the same, as long as the water level is kept high. But I still had no idea what is going on.

“What I am supposed to do?”

“You just carry stuff and get food; that is all. Brings something more to the table than what we have every day.”

“Oh well, why not.”

We relieved the previous porters by taking their place. The poor souls were covered in dust but once they shook most of it off, I could tell that they were dressed like Hous. They were peasants, not fancy ones like those in front.

One of the riders threw a half full sack at the previous porters and yelled at us, “Come on, hurry up and form lines.”

As soon as I took one barrel on my back, we began moving northeast. Once again I had no idea where I was headed, and this time I couldn’t even tell what is going on. Besides my clothes, eyes, and nostrils, the dust was covering my line of sight.

“Say, Hous.” I called for him, not sure where he was or how to recognize him.

“What?” was heard from my left.

“Why don’t you leave this place? Look what we are going through; I can’t see beyond my nose and there isn’t water to waste on a bath.”

I could tell despite the dust that his eyebrows had lowered considerably.

“Oh, this again. Listen, it’s our homeland. Stuck to it for so long, we just accept it for what it is.”

“No offense but I don’t like what I see so far. Isn’t there any other place you would rather be?”

“These guys came from the west. From what I heard the principality there is far more fertile, but you need a lot of silver to start a life.”

“So money is the only reason you are still here?”

“That, and my hovel. It has sheltered my lineage since my dear old great-grandfather built it; goddess bless his soul. I have strong roots in my little barren Tulipia.”

I didn’t, and the same counts for my hamlet. I don’t consider it my homeland, since I am not descended from there; I was just born in it. Actually, I don’t even know which is my real homeland; my mother was not from that place. I have no attachment to any area, which is probably why I abandon everything so easily. The only place I

want to go to right now is that chapel where Ria was taken, and even then, only for taking her away from it.

“Quiet!” a rider yelled next to me. “Pipe down or get kicked out with empty hands!”

Immediately everybody silenced. Only Hous dared to whisper in my ear one last thing.

“Problems will solve themselves; trust me.”

After a few hours of marching, another “Company, halt!” was heard. Was it time to be replaced by others? The dust began to settle and nobody came to relieve us, because it was not necessary. The caravan had reached its destination, before an open castle gate. It was nowhere near as large as the one in Petalo, but the building it enveloped seemed to be a most luxurious mansion, dwarfing in prestige the two store buildings I encountered in the poor peoples’ district. Could this be the residence of a noble?

Servants dressed in deep purple appeared and began taking our load inside without saying a word.

“Would it kill them to say a simple ‘thank you’ for all our trouble?” I complained and everybody around me chuckled. I wasn’t trying to be funny though.

“They never do; they don’t have to.” Hous whispered. “Now stay silent until we are rewarded.”

I stood there, watching the servants enter the main gates. It was as if magic was at hand, since the yard in front of the mansion was like a completely different world compared to the barren surroundings. An oasis of vivid green, flourishing flowers, trees bearing fruit and bushes trimmed to resemble animals. There were daintily dressed people, sitting on pink porches, laughing and drinking under the escort of harps. I had

to rub my eyes to make sure it wasn't some sort of mirage caused by the heat, an act which almost resulted in me dropping the barrel.

The others must have been accustomed to the sight, since they were just patting themselves the whole time, to get rid of as much dirt as possible, most of which was refusing to budge after having mixed with sweat. I began doing the same as a distraction from the dream-like scenery, and managed to shake off enough to form a small hill. Seriously, why were these people putting up with this?

My question was quickly answered by a sack thrown my way, which was immediately grabbed by the rest. Their eyes were goggled, as if there were precious metals or a naked beauty inside. Once opened, its content revealed a most disappointing payment, comprised of leftovers. Bones of steaks, hard bread, half eaten fruit, and peals of vegetables. Some were beginning to gather mold too, but these guys didn't seem to mind and were cheerfully splitting them into small piles, with some bargaining going on for who gets to take what.

Dear Sun; the menu was always fairly limited in the hamlet, but even during bad harvests nobody was forced to eat rotten mushrooms and picked bones. This reward was almost an insult, even for an errand boy like me. Yet they seemed to be fine with it! Life must be much harsher here.

I kindly refused my share; I'd rather have more cold puree than this rotten luxury.

"You have much different needs at your age. Not the same for an aging man with a family that he needs to take care of." Hous smiled as he was accepting my portion.

Eventually, some nicely dressed people came outside to welcome other nicely dressed people who came out of the carriage, while the riders' body language indicated

that we should go away. I guess porters do not count as visitors but rather as walking wagons that are put aside once their usage is over.

Hous was looking upwards to the cloudless sky with a smile on his face, satisfied with his earnings, held tightly in his arms, as the odor seeps into his clothes.

“So, what now?” I asked Hous. “Back to the field?”

“Nah, it’s too late to continue today. The monthly gathering’s beginning very soon.”

“The what?”

“The mass at the temple. I told you about a happy event last night, didn’t I?”

Oh, a temple. I’ve never been inside one but I have heard of them. It’s where people go and pray to Adam, the Sun god, for a good harvest. I am not sure how helpful such a thing is, but I guess it’s better than nothing.

“Want to come? It’s one hour’s walk that way.” he pointed westwards.

What kind of a question is that? I was free to go anywhere I like, and do as I please, dance and sing on a rooftop if I felt like it. I had no masters over my shoulder, nor was I obligated to follow anyone’s commands. Yet chores are all I do to feel useful, and excuse whatever I fill my stomach with. What good is this privilege with no idea of how to make good use of it? I would be standing like a rock until someone tells me what to do. In other words, this was a most rhetorical question, since all I could possibly answer, based on my character is...

“Sure!”

“Ok then, let’s begin our little pilgrimage.” He took a few steps before suddenly stopping and looking at me with a troubled eye. “Wait, you have no ties with the Archdiocese, right?”

“I don’t even know what that is.”

“Good, no need to find out either.”

A bell was heard, with several seconds between each one, giving off a feel of mournful atmosphere to the setting sun. We were walking towards the source of the sound, in the opposite direction of where the fields lay compared to the village. Soon, others began doing the same, forming small processions in all directions. Slowly but steadily we all met around a small domed building, Hous’ wife and four of his eldest offspring included.

I was expecting something more majestic to be honest; polished marble, carved with the symbol of the Exalted One. The picture in my mind was not that of weathered bricks, decorated with a few wicker tapestries, lit torches, and a ramshackle wooden belfry next to it. And then it’s the size; you could barely fit ten people inside; maybe 15 if they were cramped and skinny. At least the usage of the building was the same, as many of the villagers were indeed bowing before the entrance, quietly praying and lamenting.

“Bless, oh Goddess, your faithful servants.”

Wait, when did god change his gender all of a sudden?

“Make water pour down, oh mistress of nature.”

What nature? Adam is up in the heavens.

“Keep the evil eye of the sun away from us.”

Oh dear, they are pagans!

“Keep my Balltatoes big and unsalted, oh lady of fertile lands.”

And Hous is into it as well. Of course he is. Is this why he asked me about that Archdiocese thing earlier? In case I had anything to do with the official faith and informed them about it?

Someone is coming out of the temple, instantly turning grieving into cheerful gasping. It's a fat bearded man, bald and dressed in a brown robe, holding a white pillow with a small hairy black animal on it. Is he a cleric?

“She is ready to accept your offerings.” he said in an imposing tone, lifting the pillow high in the air.

Three women with lowered heads stepped forward. One offered a needlecraft blanket with the shape of the animal on it, another offered a big porringer full of boiled Ballatoes, and the third one offered... herself.

“The Goddess is pleased. Now let us chant in unison the psalm of calm winds.”

“When is the Day of Plenty, sir?” yelled a scrawny boy, before its mother gagged its mouth and several others silenced it in disapproval.

“Shame! Please forgive his sacrilege, oh mighty pillow-carrier.”

“No need for tears!” he smiled “The Goddess spoke to me and said that soon your fields will be sinking from too much harvest, the sick shall be cured, and a new lord will in turn give you all wealth and happiness. A modest man will soon arrive from beyond the desert, bringing nothing but hope with him. Have faith, and be patient until the fulfillment of Her prophecy.”

Everybody immediately bowed their heads and began saying things like “We shalt; blessed be the patient ones; praised be Her name!”

Some were kissing his feet, others were touching the pillow, and some were slapping the boy who dared to ask.

I didn't know the lyrics of the mournful psalm so I sat there silent until they were finished. It was nighttime when the show was done and everybody began to disperse with an expression of satisfaction painted all over their faces. Hous and his family came together and we all began to head back to the village. Bonfires were lit in various locations away from us, one in every village, so that people could find their way in the dark.

“Will you tell us more stories?” the children began requesting.

“Yes I will tell you.”

“Was it hard to work in the field? Did you go to the duke’s mansion today? Were the nobles scary?”

“No in all three.”

“Is this the first time you saw the avatar?”

“The what? You mean that black animal?”

“It’s the Goddess! She will make us happy if we do nothing.”

“How does that work?”

“We give Her offerings and stay idle. And then She will reward us.”

“The Balltatoes you give her? If she is a god, she can make as many as she likes; right? Why does she even need offerings?”

The children didn’t know the answer to that and turned to their father. All he said was:

“Problems will solve themselves. Do not worry about it.”

“Children!” Hous’ wife interrupted. “Let’s not talk about the divine any further. Do you want to be punished like that boy back there?”

“No, we don’t!”

“Then stay silent. Our guest does not understand and he has been kindly asked to not say a word about all that when he leaves us.”

“Oh, of course, I will say nothing!” I nodded. “Your faith is not my concern.”

I wasn’t sure if they were blinded by despair, willing to believe anything, or if there was indeed a greater force behind all that. Without knowing more myself, I decided to let it go.

“It will take a while to reach the village.” Hous changed the subject. “Why don’t you continue your story while we walk?”

“Right here? What about the rest of your family?”

“They are too young or too old to get it and will probably be fast asleep by the time we find them.”

“Oh, ok then. If all of you want to.”

“We do! Yes we want to! Please tell us what you said to Ria!” the children replied with excitement.

“Fine, I will. I stopped at when I slept at the guest lodge, right?”

“Yes, it was there!”

“I will skip the night, since all I did was... well, sleep.”

“Ok, continue from when you woke up.”

-//- 6. Wine -//-

25th day of Mushroom Month (POV: Thrassos)

“My, we have a visitor... Oh, it’s Chorrier. Back so soon my boy?”

There stood Miss Lumberjackson at the entrance of the rugged doorway, to which the sound of her footsteps brought me out of my deep slumber. “*Since when did she even...*” I struggled to recall if I had shut the door the night before, or whether I was simply too exhausted and left it hanging ajar. “*Whatever.*” I mumbled to myself, slightly annoyed by her intrusion. After all, Miss Lumberjackson was the housekeeper of this lodge, so it would be logical for her to come and check on me.

“Hum... Yes... What time is it?”

“Around midday. Still tired from the trip? Was the city an exciting place? What was your experience like? What were the people like? Were they nice people? Any new friends?!”

I was bombarded by a dizzying string of never ending questions coming from the hamlet’s most notorious gossip.

“Please... Not now.”

“Oh, it’s ok, I understand.” she smiled and gave a polite gesture, before proceeding to survey the dormitory.

She scanned around to make sure everything was still clean before leaving. But I knew she was still lingering in my vicinity. Determined to eke out something out of me until she had fresh information to gossip with the other housewives. Out of the blue, her head emerged from the window on my left.

“Just to let you know, it will be a rather slow day, so don’t worry about missing a few chores.”

“Don’t startle me like that... Wait what was that about slugs?” I questioned, while my right palm sheltered my eyes from the glaring sunlight emanating from the window.

“Well... After you left, half the men wasted their time drinking at the tavern. They were so determined to celebrate the Brute’s departure by squandering all the ale. By the way, did they have ale in the city?”

“I see, so I guess I will get some more rest then.” The irresistible allure of the comfy mattress subtly beckoned me to retract back into its warm and snugly arms. Turning sideways, my eyelids drooped like a pair of sandbags as I inevitably lost consciousness.

“They have to tend to the fields soon.” she kept pressing for a scoop, “If they don’t, the mushrooms will begin to age. Do they eat mushrooms at the city?”

“Hum, leave me alone please.”

What a joke. I was chosen to go to Petalo so that I won’t deprive any of the men from harvesting. The crops were ready and in dire need of drying under the sun, yet it made no difference, since none of them did anything productive during my absence.

She probed further, as the act of being rejected only motivates her nosy nature.

“Everything is lagging behind; I was supposed to have my sweater mended today. Do they have such problems in the city?”

Silence ensued. The only known method to temporarily stop the patter was to completely ignore her. After a few more failed attempts, she finally gave up. I wondered in my slumber why her sweater would not have been mended. Tailorson, that is Ria’s father by the way, was the only person in the hamlet in charge of such tasks,

and also the only one unhappy with the Brute's premature departure. Was he perhaps mourning the missed chance of getting rid of Ria?

I got enough sleep when the light outside began to dim in the afternoon. Only then I felt ready to see Ria, even if they would probably shower me with more duties the moment they see me walking outside. So be it, it was unavoidable and anticipated; if I didn't want it then I would have stayed in the monster infested city. Which I don't.

On my way to the hut, the air smelled different than usual. It was not the usual aroma of decaying plantation but rather the pungent scent of fermented drinks and the sight of drunken beard necks. The coast was clear, in which the males that departed the tavern a short while ago were smirking and humming some sort of gibberish, red-faced. Unable to walk in a straight line, the women were also too preoccupied with helping them to even recognize me. This meant that I managed to reach Tailorson's place completely unhinged. The arrest of the crook was important but it didn't strike me as *that* important. Such a prolonged celebration seemed undeserved and quite puzzling.

I knew something was wrong the moment I didn't see her on the porch or anywhere around the hut. She was always outside at this hour and was never allowed to roam around the hamlet. Even when helping out with housework, doing the laundry or wool threading, her allowed walking space was limited to whatever could be done on their narrow porch. I prayed to Adam that she was in bed with a cold, or perhaps tipsy from secretly drinking a couple of mugs. Anything of that caliber, nothing worse.

Oh dear, what excuse can I use to get closer and peek inside? Maybe offer to mend that sweater? What am I saying; I am terrible at that. Come on Chorrier, think of something worthy of walking up those logs serving as a staircase, knocking on those planks serving as a wall, and pulling aside that drape serving as a door.

“Why if it isn’t Chorrier. When did you return?”

Once again, I didn’t have to do anything, as her father appeared on the left window, with red cheeks and tired eyes.

“Some hours ago, sir.”

“Was it fun?”

“Is there anything I can do to help? I see most men are currently unavailable.”

“Bah, you barely had the time and you already want to work? That can wait; today is a day of celebration. Here, take a sip.”

He lifted his hand, revealing a glass half full containing a crimson red liquid, swirling around the chalice freely under the silhouette of the lodge. Was that wine? How could he even afford such prized goods? I stared in disbelief and awe. At this moment, my suspicion grew. I was certain that he didn’t have any glasses nor red wine before I left; and the same can be said about those living in the swamp. Those things were way too expensive for peasants, not even Lukanikis was serving them to anyone with less than a pouch full of gold.

“So where’s Ria?” I did as he wanted, and drank the rest of the alcohol. I couldn’t enjoy it though, as my fears were confirmed. Aside from him and his wife who were doing the dishes quietly in the corner, sighing with a grimace, there didn’t seem to be anyone else in that clustered shack of his. Night fell.

“First class stuff.” he boasted. “From the legendary monk vineyards of Margaritia*, not that sour stuff they make in our plains.”

“Now, where’s Ria?” I asked him in an increasingly serious tone, only to be greeted with another burst of dry laughter.

“What kind of a stupid question is that?” he laughed heartily. Beads of perspiration trickled down my temples, but I hastily wiped them away.

This won’t do. I have to take a longer route. Not a smooth transition at all. Quick, ask something else.

“Err... I meant, how did you get hold of the wine? Was Publicanson hiding it from the Brute or something?”

“What? You really don’t know?” he looked at me puzzled. “Oh, that’s right you were not here.” he slapped his forehead. “This you see, is payment for the indoctrination.”

“The... what?”

“It’s the thing priests do to teach newcomers.”

“Priests? There were priests here?”

“Even the tax collector passed by this morning. The bastard hasn’t missed a single day to fill the vacancy left behind by the Brute. He mentioned something about an emergency payment by the king and...”

“Yes, yes, what about that indocri-thing you spoke of?”

My voice was loud and full of anticipation.

“Um, yes, a priest had a few bottles of this wonderful thing you see here. He said his order was looking for candidates, and I was glad to contribute.”

“Contribute... how?”

My feet were trembling at the rather obvious answer.

“How else? I gave them Ria.”

“You... wha...” my heart sank.

“Lucky for me, they weren’t accepting only men. What would I do with her if they were? Nobody would ask her hand, not after having to marry three others before her. We are broke, you know.”

“She... is gone...” my fists clenched, I was on the verge of crying.

“And now we are finally free! Free from working just to marry off our daughters! Let’s drink to salvation! Hey... Where are you going?”

Leaving the chalice on the window pane, I trudged away with inconsolable grief. Head drooped low as I kicked away the pebbles on the pavement in frustration. My time here was up. Why should I stay here any longer? Is there even a single difference

in this place from the city? They are nothing but monsters, driven by greed and lust! Who are they to satisfy their insignificant desires at the expense of others' lives? Rage began to build up in me like a thunderstorm as I picked up my pace, storming off, crestfallen.

I passed by familiar faces once again, with none of them caring to say hi. I bet most won't even notice my absence; some will even be relieved by having finally gotten rid of me. I was always a burden to them, just like poor Ria. Fine, let me do you a favor and get myself out of your sight, just like I will never see her again.

Oh, poor girl, whose life was worth no more than a couple of wine bottles, where would you be now? I didn't even ask which chapel took you; not even towards which direction you were last seen. Did anyone even care to find out, or were they content with just not having you around anymore?

I feel empty inside, like that glass bottle I left on the window... Metaphors aside, my growling stomach is also empty. I didn't have anything for a whole day and yet I don't have the will to seek food. I got sick of living just to fill my belly and to have a roof over my head. I had one thing to look forward to in life and now even that has been taken away from me! Nothing but weeding and sweeping remains for me here, which is not what fills my soul in the least.

Where am I walking towards? I do not know; my feet don't want to stop. Be damned the mud that splashes all over my clothes; to Depthole this entire horrible place of stench and misery. I must get away from it. Back to the south? No, that is equally bad, not there. Anywhere but there. Run! Run away from these open space torture chambers! To the north! That will do for now.

The full moon and crystal clear night sky offered no consolation for the loss was too heavy. The swaying trees rustled, expressing their reluctance towards my departure. “Goodbye Chorrier.” they said, as I headed into the abyss of darkness.

The night resonated within me.

-//- 9. Porridge -//-

2nd day of Fallen Leaf Month (POV: Thrassos)

... And before I knew it, I was wandering through the wilderness all day and night in a torpid state, until I took a rest near some dead trees. It's only then when I realized I was in unfamiliar territories and begun questioning my actions. I've never been so close to the sierra, which was now standing before me more brown than blue, even more enormous than it did above the swamp's foliage.

Somewhere within me, I had regretted my impulsiveness. My whole body was lethargic as it took an excruciating amount of effort to lumber onto the morass a few feet away. I wanted to head back but the fatigue prevented me from doing the slightest thing. No trees bearing fruit, or berries waiting to be picked off bushes either.

"This is where I come in." said the bearded man, slapping his own chest with pride. "I asked him, hey lad, what are you doing here? Nowhere to go? Come to my place for the night. What is your name? I see, mine's Hous."

"You know there rest; it's when I came into your house for the first time."

"Ay, such a sad story, almost brought a tear to my eye." Hous said, as he wiped the tears from one of his eyes.

Everybody was walking silently all this time, absorbed by my tale, which had just come to its end in a displeasing way. His sons looked at me intensely, instead of loathing and distrusting me they were now more curious and angry.

"What, that's it? No happy ending?" one of them exclaimed.

"None in sight."

"Tell us another story that has one!" another one demanded.

“Yes, tell us more about the city.”

“What did the monsters look like?”

“Is there really so much water in a swamp?”

“Hush, all of you!” their father yelled. “Who said all stories must end well?” He looked at me with his still watery eyes. “Forgive them, they are too young to understand that this is the fate of us commoners.”

“We get no say in how we will be treated.” his wife added while nodding slowly.

“It is fine; I hold no grudge. I find it hard to continue though; these past few days were by far the most exciting ones in my life so far.”

“They were still far more exciting than whatever I did in my lifetime.” Hous patted me on the back. “And furthermore I am trice your age. You should feel proud for achieving something I never did. Almost worthy of writing a poem about it.” His hoarse voice always attempted to console.

“He always says that.” the wife chuckled. “Never did it once.”

“Oh, I mean it this time, I really do!” Hous patted his chest. “Your tales inspired me like none else. I give you my word to start cooking up rhymes first thing in the morning.” We all chuckled away.

Drawn by the bonfire as if we were moths, we reached the village a few minutes later, only to be greeted by ill news from Hous’ other four younger children.

“Daddy, daddy, the man for the scary cave quest came again!”

“Who? That fatass, Kardamos*?”

“Don’t go dad! - The monster will eat you! - We don’t need their silver!”

Oh dear, what more horrifying surprises do these people have for me? This place is crazier than I had originally imagined; first they are pagans, now they have caves with monsters. I took a few steps back and addressed Hous.

“For an otherwise quiet life as you claim, I see you have your own share of monsters to deal with.”

“My children love to exaggerate; the dragon never leaves its cave.” he replied, as he was trying to calm them down.

“Dragon? You have a dragon?”

“It’s a stupid tradition that the nobles perform every time they want to choose their heir. The luggage that we carried was most likely theirs.”

“He eats anyone who goes inside!” the children explained further. “Nobody wants to go, so the duke drags us there - It’s been three times already this year - They will come again tomorrow; hide in the caves daddy!”

“We won’t do a thing.” Hous rubbed their heads while smiling. “Do you want to anger the duke? Where would petty nobodies like us hide from his men? We were born here, we are destined to die in it. Such is the fate of peasants.”

“Oh dear, does this happen a lot here?” I began looking around in fear, expecting a giant flying lizard to appear out of the shadows at any moment. “I am getting uneasy flashbacks from my time in the city.”

“It doesn’t. What are the odds of picking me from the whole duchy, anyways? I am nobody.”

He keeps saying that, which makes me wonder if fate was the thing that was keeping him chained up here, or his fear of losing the scraps that these nobles throw at him.

“Would the nobles really send men after you, if you ever try to leave?”

“I think they will. Never attempted it though. Nor do I know anyone that ever did.”

“Well, you said you were nobodies, so why would they care what they do?”

“You can’t be sure about that.”

“I left my hamlet and nobody even noticed it. Maybe the same can be...”

“Can be what?”

“You know what? Forget everything that I said. It was stupid.”

“It was?”

“Yes, forget it.”

My fears got the best of me once again. I was unable to help myself; much less anyone else with my advice. I wasn't Diamandi or Damazis, brave and strong able to make a stand and help people. I too, am a slave to puniness.

“Stop talking outside in the cold and come in to have a bite!” the voice of an elderly woman was heard. It was the kind granny that gave me her blanket, standing at the entrance of the hovel. Up until now, I wasn't sure if she could still walk. “I prepared some porridge just for you.” Her haggard body signaled for me to enter, in which I gratefully accepted.

“Made with the special Blein, I presume?” the wife asked in a derogatory manner, as if the poor lady had done something wrong.

“Oh, but of course. I even added the special herb.” She generously scooped up a bowl of thick brown gruel from the pot.

I walked between them, trying to prevent further squabbling.

“Thank you mam, but you didn't have to do all that just for me. I mean, I might not be here tomorrow.”

“And maybe you will be.” Hous responded by pushing me inside his hovel. “We won't know until the time comes and there is nothing we can do in the meantime.”

“I guess that is true.”

“So, come inside and taste my mother's special dish. It is quite rare to eat anything but puree in our parts, so it counts as a local delicacy.”

“I might as well do that.”

“Look at it this way. If it tastes that bad, you will have another reason to leave us as soon as the dawn arises.”

“It has to be really awful for that to happen. I did grew up eating mostly mushrooms, you know.”

Without these benefactors, my options are limited to either staying in this awful place, being eaten by monsters on the mountains or in the city, and returning to the swamp. None sounded good enough, and rescuing Ria is still of the highest priority. For now, I will assess the current situation and decide what's best for me. The moon is especially bright tonight, radiating a feeling of hope. Perhaps I will find her in no time. Maybe even tomorrow.

-//- 24. Duchess -//-

1st day of Rain Month (POV: Kannavia)

“Your tea, my lady.” the chambermaid said in a wryly manner, as she placed the silver tray on the table.

As if struggling to find a dress that is not burned, soiled, or stolen wasn't hard enough, now I must deal with this poorly prepared breakfast. Confirming the condition of the tea was unnecessary. The cup's lack of steam was indicative of its lack of temperature. Evidence to this point was provided through a mere glance, which easily exposed other oversights, like the absence of cream biscuits, marmalade, butter, and fruit. Even the dried crumbs around the slices of bread looked as if they were yelling the age of the old loaf they came from.

“Will that be all, my lady?” this inappropriate staff member asked, who if not for our current circumstances would have been whipped in public for this insolence.

“How exactly is that all, you dimwit? Most of it is missing.”

“Orders from your husband, my lady. Only the bare minimum whilst the crisis is at large.”

Why, that sorry excuse of a duke! What does he think he'll accomplish by giving away the breakfast I don't get to enjoy anymore to a bunch of foreign scum? “We must ensure they are well fed” he'd say, “so they will be in the shape needed to protect us when the enemy arrives.” What good is marmalade, if you no longer have a head to chew it with?

“Should I feel grateful for these barebones that I am left with?”

“Please try being more positive; it could’ve been far worse.”

She’s consoling me. The nerve!

“Of course it could. Here. Take the spoon, the teacup, the tray, and pour the cold tea all over me. Take the table, the chair, the carpet and let me sit on the floor where I can peacefully eat my own flesh.”

“Is that sarcasm or an actual order?”

“It’s a measurement of your idiocy, you incompetent harlot.”

“I see. If there’s no more cussing in store for me, may I please leave?”

“Get out of my sight! Go fornicate with those decadent beggars out there.”

“As you wish.”

She turned around then started walking towards the door but before she managed to get to the hallway I called her back, noticing her negligence.

“Didn’t you forget something, you fat cowgirl?”

She turned around with the utmost contempt emanating from her face. Pretending to remember the oversight, she bowed her head and went on her way.

By the gods, you know you’ve hit rock bottom when you need to remind your own servants of simple gestures. Paying respect is the most basic thing they should do. Although in this case it was most likely guile; she will probably repeat it next time just to celebrate her newfound liberties. Nothing’s been the same after the rebellion, with her deliberately absent-minded behavior being the least significant.

“Even if the whole world turns upside down, you must cling firmly to your status!”, my father’s past advice rung clearly in my head. For some reason, my mind

filters his Kanelonian accent, so the words come off far more imposing than they normally would.

I'm trying, father, but it's not easy. It wasn't long ago that I could roam the world with pride, with everyone bowing their heads as I passed by. The lounge filled with relatives and possible suitors, chatting, laughing, and planning the evening events. The room around me would still be filled with the paintings and statues and furniture father acquired over the years. Now it's all gone, like dust carried away by the wind, leaving behind barren walls, mute halls, and a maid that is as cold as this tea before me.

“Glamour comes and goes, but one's title always remains.”

Of course it does, father. Even if I lose everything, I will still be a duchess. This is why I still bother to drink this mockery, and eat the crunchy bread. Not for pleasure as I used to, but out of necessity. Sweets and cream and chocolate are all but gone now, the only reason I have for stuffing food in my mouth is for not getting hungry and thirsty, like the filthy peasants beyond the walls. They can steal from me all they want but I will still be a noble!

“Every time you believe someone looks down on you, stare him back from a position of authority and fill his heart with fear.”

And I shall do exactly that. I'm constantly waving my fan as I exit the room and cross the hallway. It's not very good at clearing away the stench of burned fabric or hiding the smoke stains on the wooden floor and doors. It served as nothing more than a tool to vent for my anger, since my nerves were in dire need of calming. Oh, how things have changed; now they get to decorate their cockroach-infested hovels with father's tapestries, while I get to experience what it's like to be powerless. I can no longer get what I want, exactly the way I want it. I've even begun to wonder if I need

to give up on my dream of getting that ebony cupboard for my porcelain tree figurine collection. Most of them were looted, anyway.

“Stand your ground! They will trample you the moment you show weakness.”

You’re correct, father! Off to the balcony, stressed body of mine. The air is clean there, no walls to remind me of the nightmare I cannot escape from, even railings that are not vandalized. From there I can observe you, my supposed subjects, as you order each other and gather any disgusting vegetable you can dig out from the holes you crawled out of. I look down at all you fools who think you are now in charge, as you use my treasury like some lowly barn.

... My wonderful treasury. Gone are my furs and rings, now replaced by the world’s largest pile of hairballs. Gone are the gardeners and the courtiers, now replaced by cussing farmers who are constantly fetching with hand wagons any dirty and greasy piece of junk they think can aid them.

“Didn’t I just tell you to stand your ground?”

Oh, yes, you did. It’s too easy for me to lose my composure, father. Even when standing above everyone else, the scenery refuses to let my mind at ease. The traitors that did this to us used to reside far away from the mansion’s ramparts, wasting away their lives in scum-filled hovels. And now they are right beneath my feet, chewing away my dignity and making it impossible to settle in blissfully.

“You’re not listening, sweetie.”

I’m listening, father; I just have nothing to look forward to. Despite all these rigorous activities, the future seems hopeless. No matter how much they struggle or my

benedict duke believes we stand a chance; we are facing the might of an army that dwarfs us more than I do, when I hold my favorite palm tree figurine.

“That was a most inelegant comparison.”

There is little motivation for prose, when the fear of death looms over you. They too feel it; they just fool themselves with these nonsensical preparations that have the same usage as the sand a common housewife sweeps outside the doorstep every day. What do you think now, you hoodlums? Is this new order better than the laid back lives you had when my family was in charge?

“Your Highness?” went the distinctive voice of the maid behind me. It sounded unnaturally worried for someone who just a minute ago was secure in her ego. “Our lord requires your presence.”

That’s a first, he never needed me for anything so far; not even for producing an heir.

“Did he state the reason for my summoning?”

“Not exactly ma’am; he did not *actually* call for you. He just... needs your assistance. Please head that way, apace.”

What foolishness did that usurper come up with this time? Did he run off to the mountains, find rocks that talk, or pretend to have killed some huge monster again? I swear, I will never understand the games gods play with us if they favor this imbecile into being betrothed to me.

“When you see an opportunity, take full advantage of it before anyone else gets to it.”

Yes father, I will. Most of them think that I am nothing more than a woman in a world ruled by men, and a relic of a fallen dynasty. I may be confined in this haven-turned prison, but I am not going to stand idle and let the events unfold in whatever way those intoxicated and unworthy privileged cunts want. Those mongrels had their fun and now it's time to reclaim what is rightfully ours. Move precious feet of mine, to his Highness' private quarters. And you, my fan, do your thing as I cross the floors full of vandalized childhood memories and vilification of nobility.

“Show them who's boss!”

What is this? My destination is blocked by well fed leeches and white powered carrion birds. Why, if it isn't my former staff, turncoats who are buzzing around their new master. More specifically, they are gathered outside the open door to his room and are peeking inside with heightened interest. They are so absorbed that they failed to notice my presence until I was a few steps away, and even then, I was only noticed because the fat chambermaid escorting me clapped her hands.

Once their enchantment was broken, they get startled, cough, fix their frilly tuxes, and straighten their service hats. They all made way, with some bowing heads, others pretending dust themselves off, and a few others not even attempting to hide their discontent and lack of veneration towards the once fair maiden of this land. There's no time to unleash my fury; what takes priority right now are the ills of my so-called husband and lord of Tulipia.*

I was aware that the impending invasion had an effect on his behavior, as it did for all of us, but to such a degree was alarming. Did he lose his mind and decide to make his room seem like it was visited by a twister? Open drawers, turned over closets, their contents fiercely thrown away. Carefully folded velvet handkerchiefs, and perfectly balanced tapestries were scattered all over the place, with him amidst this

chaos, lying on the floor, while still wearing his white night shirt. The expression on his face was that of a man who had given up on everything; something quite inappropriate with the war around the corner and his subjects right next to him. Even I who never took part in my father's meetings knew of the basics of good publicity; the first and foremost being a good image before those he rules over.

“Do you require any assistance or do you plan to spend the day pretending to be a carpet?” I dared to ask.

“My lady is it wise to talk like that?” the chambermaid whispered to me.

“Hush, you sow!” I patted her chest with the fan. “Don't patronize me!”

Normally, it was indeed not wise at all; but this husk of a man is the least normal. He was a lot softer than the stories make him seem and doesn't get offended by the slightest remark like your typical descendant of royal blood. Most likely because he wasn't one until last month. In fact, I doubt he's received more education than any of the staff here. And yet he rules over us all, leaving me, the smartest, with not enough power to command even a beggar.

His eyes were red and looking upwards, at nothing, not caring to turn towards me.

“Unless you know the whereabouts of the cylinder, no assistance can be provided.”

Not a clue of what he was referring to, but at least the calmness of his voice revealed no violent intentions, making it safe to press on my indirect inquisition.

“I'm sure it will not be found where you are standing, nor on the ceiling where your gaze is fixed. If on the other hand you would so kindly get up, the probabilities of acquiring it will drastically increase.”

“I really need to go look around some more, don't I?”

“If you are properly dressed. Our impending doom is enough of a plight for now; gossip of the duke running around in his undergarments is quite frankly an unnecessary addition.”

“Your words speak the truth, as they always do. This is not the mentality my subjects expect of me.” His upper body stood up while speaking those words. “Nothing is gained by idling; the search must go on.” “Bring sledgehammers and pickaxes! I will turn this whole place to rubble, if needed for ferreting it.”

Everybody gasped at this command. This madness must be stopped immediately, through a simple judgment that only I was fit to provide.

“Goodness gracious; you wish to repeat the very vandalisms you swore to prevent from happening again? Didn’t our residence suffer enough already?”

“Never hurts to be sure.” At this point he was fully stood up.

“I truly wish to know how you plan to turn our sterile little territory into a luscious empire of the likes of which we haven’t seen since the days of the Bloom dynasty, when the center of command is in tatters.”

“Don’t care; acquiring the cylinder takes precedence. Now where is what I just asked for?” He was smirking like there was nothing to lose from what he planned to do.

If property was of no value to him at this point, I had to think of something that would matter more.

“What about the provisions? Where will they be stored? Your underlings will starve!”

It worked; his expression instantly became serious, smirk gone and eyes wider.”

“Right. That’s right. What was I thinking?”

He was now looking at the floor, as we all stood there, not saying or doing a thing for about a minute. I didn’t want to say another thing until his next move became clear. He finally rubbed his eyes; with newfound determination. Hopefully, less destructive.

“Keramis?* Is Keramis here?”

“Yes my lord.” the chambermaid replied.

That was her name? She’s been in my service for pendathes and I never bothered to learn, much less remember it. Nicknames like sow and fat cow were more appropriate for nobodies of her kind, who became obese thanks to the riches of my family.

“Fetch me a bowl of water.”

“Immediately, my lord.”

“Oh, and I am sorry for the extra you will go through today.”

“Hm?”

“The room.”

“Oh, that. It’s ok, my lord, no worries.”

She walks away smiling, as if she was the center of the world. Just another victim of his dazzling flattery; the one and only ability that got him all the way here. Treating the commoners as almost equal while handing around privileges as if they are colorful pebbles for children, is what got the peasants on his side, after his dragoons took over. I tried to warn him that messing with the natural order of things has left us with this price to pay. He didn’t listen, and kept pretending that my subjects deserved more. That is why we are now about to be put under by forces who defend stability to the death, and want our heads to decorate the Main Highway.

“Ok my dear people, we must find it as soon as possible.” he yapped, full of excitement. “I won’t be able to sleep until I do. Tuvlinos*, are you out there?”

An almost rhetorical question, as it was impossible not to be there. This ruckus had attracted pretty much everyone in the mansion.

“I am here, sire.” replied a skinny old man with snow-white hair, wrinkles, and a serious expression on his face. As before, I knew him by appearance and nicknames. Not by his actual name.

“Help me dress.”

“Which suit do you desire?”

“Any will do, I shall let you choose.”

“I am afraid your attire is currently wrinkled.” he looked at the thrown around clothes. “Victims of your... zealous search.”

“I do not care, pick one. The rest of you, please return to your posts, and await further orders. There is no more aid you can provide for now.”

Everyone but Tuvlinos dispersed while whispering to each other. I need to order those fools not to let this incident be known outside, as soon as possible. It won't look good for the morale of the troops. But for now, I need to gather more information. What was he so desperately looking for?

“So, what about that cylinder you are so willing to shake heaven and earth to find?”

“The Kaliniki* chronicles; I had it with me when I first moved here. Remember me holding that big very old wooden case?”

He was talking as fast as he was undressing. I walked outside while hiding my face with the fan. Husband or not, I still feel uncomfortable seeing men stripping. We are not even sleeping together, for Dimitra's* sake!

“I do not.”

But I do remember very well how you have my family sleeping inside moldy dungeons ever since.

“Well, I am not sure where it ended up since then.”

“What are the cylinder's contents about? Do they contain crucial information about the war?”

“Nothing of the sort, the world was completely different when it was written.”

“Then why do you need it so much? And why now?”

“It was full of advice on how to be just to people. I haven’t fully read it so far and I feel now is the proper time. I only hope that someone didn’t throw it away because it was old and dirty.”

Is he saying that he learned his sappy one-liners by reading them in that cylinder? What that his secret weapon that got my subjects to accept him as their leader?

“My lord, I brought the water.” said Keramis, arriving with a bowl in her hands.

“In a minute dear, still dressing.”

“I do not know of this Kaliniki.” I continued. “Was he an old scholar?”

“He was a she. A queen. She wrote a lot about Agathon.”

“Agathon? Even children know his feats and a copy of those chronicles can be found anywhere. I even have one in my room.”

“Not the version she wrote. Thanks Tuvlinos.”

“No problem sire.”

“You may come in now, Keramis.”

She did so, leaving me alone outside the bedroom wondering why any of that mattered. Our days are counted with a single hand and he simply wants it to feed the peasants with more pretty words of liberty? Just because he tricked my minions by having them do that nonsense outside, it will not make his enemies mellow down and come over for a friendly feast.

“By the way” he was heard saying from inside, while his voice was being mixed in with the sound of splashing water “do you happen to know someone who can read the old tongue? The reason I gave up on it the first time was because I couldn’t understand half of the symbols.”

Oh my new duke, your desire to treat common folk nicely is your biggest strength, as it is your greatest weakness.

“Why, yes, I do know of someone. But he is not available at the moment.”

“Why, what happened to him?”

“He is a relative of mine, so he is at the dungeon right now.”

“I will send someone to inform him that if he agrees to read it, I will give him an extra meal a day.”

You can be so easily manipulated through this. Just keep washing your face as I weave my trap.

“I am sure he will say that he needs proper lighting and space to do that. A cold cell and an extra plate will not satisfy him. Will you consider freeing him if he tells you of its contents?”

“Why not? I am looking for some reason to let a few of them out, and this sounds like a fine one.”

Splendid! If I get my hands on what you seek, I can demand favors you cannot refuse. Such as freeing my father and family, and striking a bargain with the invaders, before it's too late. Now, what more would a different version offer you, if not a distraction from the unavoidable? I bring to mind as many details as I can, so I can pinpoint the change if the cylinder is ever found. What were the first lines of the epic? Ah, yes, that very prosy poem that sounds almost silly ... You stay alive...

Ah, what use is there trying to remember it? All that matters is finding it. And even if I don't, there is still the other plan that I'm slowly webbing around my foolish husband.

-//- 13. Dragonmount -//-

7th day of Fallen Leaf Month (POV: Thrassos)

Despite what Thrassos said, he disappeared the very next morning. 5 days have passed since then, and life went back to usual for Hous, with the whole dragon issue having been solved quietly and nothing to be known about its outcome as of yet. Little did he care about any of that as he plowed through the crusty surface of his small Balltato field, with his only concern being a good harvest of which a thousand words could not describe.

He was struggling with the poem he promised to write about the tragic love of two peasants who were torn apart by the cruelty of poverty and social status, one becoming a wanderer in the Ksera* wasteland, and the other locked inside a dreadful monastery somewhere, probably tortured as she was forced to accept a menacing god who scorched the land and made people sweaty and thirsty.

He realized this tale was far from over, when the singing reached his ears. He turned and saw hundreds of his countrymen coming his way, led by a man on a brown Hippopedinos. From the songs' lyrics and the cheering, he comprehended the situation.

“Hail to our new duke! – The suffering has ended! – The Day of Plenty is nigh!”

By Her black fur, what could this possibly mean? Did someone finally manage to kill the beast, succeed the duke, and bring the promised salvation? He dropped his plow and run towards the approaching celebration, only to be greeted by a rider with a familiar voice.

“Ah, he's the one I was telling you about.”

“Blessed be Hous!” the crowd began to salute. “He accommodated our savior! – May you have a long happy life! – And may his Balltatoes be the largest and hairiest of the land!”

“Yes, yes, all that. Please leave me; I have important things to speak with him about. Go lay under those trees and rocks while I’m chatting with him. And no eavesdropping; I mean it!”

“Yes sir! – We shall cover our ears if needed. – Be kind to the lord, Hous, or we will personally, lynch you.”

“Thrassos, is that really you?” Hous gasped, as the rider was dismounting and his company was walking away.

“It is, my friend.” From up close, he still wore the same clothes, but his curly brown hair was decorated with flowers and his skin was covered in fragrant oils. “Just wait a bit for my dear subjects to give us some space.”

Once everybody was at a safe distance, their private chat began.

“What in Her divine Whiskers happened to you after you left? I assumed that you were on your way to find a better place to live in, but instead you came back as my new ruler. I better start paying my respects.”

He bowed his upper body whilst smiling; unable to hide his sarcasm.

“Stop that; there’s no time to waste on flattery.”

The new duke’s tone was so serious and almost demanding that Hous was forced to immediately stand up and erase his smirk.

“You even... behave differently.”

“Anyone changes after facing a dragon. It’s just that I’ve changed a bit more, into the Man of Prophecy.”

“Beats becoming a firefighter. So... did you really kill the beast?”

“Yes and no. I definitely achieved more than killing it as proof of authority.”

“Oh, please, let me hear everything about the cause of this miraculous transformation; I can add your feats to the poem that I’m currently working on... slowly but steadily.”

“I’m fine with telling you what happened, but, before I continue, I need you to promise me that whatever I reveal, stays between us.”

“I won’t tell a soul, if that is what you wish, though I don’t see why I shouldn’t. Such feats are meant to be shared with everyone.”

“Some details will make it hard for me to be taken seriously.”

“Come on, I can already picture the words that I’ll use to describe the rise of a young man from a sorrowful errand boy to a majestic duke.”

“Well, that’s the thing you see...” Thrassos looked around, as if he was ashamed of something. “I’m not really a noble and most of your fellow men don’t know it yet.”

“Ay... right. You didn’t inherit nobility. So how did you... Perhaps you mean...”

“I sort of lied... Kinda.”

“But you do have proof of killing the dragon, yes?”

“I had one... but not anymore.”

Hous shook his head in confusion. “I will ask no more. Please explain what happened as simply as possible.”

“You better sit down; it’s going to take awhile.”

“This is going to be good; you have a gift for telling stories.”

-// 3rd day of Fallen Leaf Month -//

Something else came up during that fateful morning... Exactly 5 days ago, as I was being pulled up, tied, and dragged outside the village by men dressed in red. I was too sleepy to do anything about it, my mouth unusually dry and bitter, and my mind feeling hazy. By the time it began to clear, I was covered in dust once more, as I marched through the wasteland. My right wrist was cuffed with a chain hanging off it,

which was linked to other cuffs in front of me. I was the last in a line of a dozen more men, wimping, praying to the goddess, or straight-up begging our captors for mercy.

“I’m a very good cook!”

“Don’t care.”

“I can lift three barrels at once!”

“Shut up.”

“I can run like the wind; I can be an excellent messenger. But I need my feet for that.”

“Don’t bother.”

“I have three gorgeous daughters, who are willing to fulfill your wildest desires.”

“Tempting, but I love my wife.”

The scarlet-clad riders, I remember them, they were the same ones that escorted that nobles’ carriage, as I carried a barrel on their behalf. This time things were very different; the ones being escorted were peasants like us and there was nothing to carry. In fact, we were the cargo.

Hous was right; the odds of picking him for the monster hunt were close to zero. The bad luck that tormented me on the other hand, made it almost certain that a convoy would pass by and I’d be amongst the ones that’d be thrown into this ordeal. After all, I was the only idiot sleeping outside, with a dark-blue blanket that made me stand out in the beige scenery. It’s as if I’d invited them into drafting me against my will.

So, there I was, headed towards the monster’s lair, with no point trying to explain I wasn’t from these parts. If those who were, couldn’t strike a bargain, a foreigner who’s afraid of everything and didn’t even understand this weird custom, may as well run into the mouth of the dragon. Anyway, as I mentioned before my mouth was too

dry and bitter to attempt speaking. That porridge I had was terrible. I'll make sure to kindly refuse even a single spoonful of soup coming from this land.

A few hours of misery-filled marching had passed, until we'd reached the roots of a mountain, isolated from the rest of the sierra. There were two more lines of men in chains present, sitting on the ground while several other scarlet-clad riders served as bailiffs. An open carriage full of weapons and provisions was being unloaded, while a closed carriage was approaching from the east. It looked oddly familiar with the one I was a porter along with Hous yesterday.

Once it stopped, and the dust settled, the door opened and two men came out. By the way, you may have not noticed it, but I rarely bother to describe the people I met on my travels. They all look and behave very plainly, so there is little reason to go into detail. Nobles on the other hand demand detailed descriptions. That is exactly what the two men who were screaming from miles away looked like, they were so memorable that I simply had to spare some words for them alone.

There are two ways to spot a noble, I was once told. One is by the smug expression on his face, a combination of both arrogance and boredom. The other being their eccentric attire, of which these two would probably win a prize if there was ever a competition regarding that. The one on the right was very fat, and wore a huge feathered hat that leaned sideways over his long and curly blond hair. A white frilled shirt, inside a long purple tuxedo full of silver embroidery. His voice was slightly impaired, with him stretching out his Rs for no apparent reason.

“Cheerrr up me frriend. Ye arrre thy thirrrd trrrrying thy drrragonslay. Ye know what they say; thirrrd time's a charrm.”

The one on the left was very tall and skinny, with a small moustache, a slightly beak-shaped nose, and short black hair that somehow bent upwards at their ends. His costume was that of a warrior, or what nobles believe a warrior wears when he goes to a masque party. His vest and gauntlets had so many decorations and colorful images on them, that they'd make someone dizzy if they stared at them for too long. He had a sheathed sword, more like a rapier, that hung by his belt like an oversized toothpick. He too spoke strangely, as if he was buzzing.

“Ow, sutz a dreadful pleiz, my skin crawlz az butterfliez dancz a wild ballet in my ztomach.”

If I wasn't so worried about never seeing another sunrise right now, I'd be amused by such a sight. The problem was, I was worried; make that worried and angry at them both, for dragging me and all these other innocent people into their silly little game for... who knows what reason exactly.

“You are a subject of the land you are currently in.” one of riders said, attempting to lift our spirits. “Man up, do your best, and there will be silver waiting for you at the end.”

“But I don't even know what I am supposed to do.”

He pointed at a stash of spears, laying a few feet away.

“You will receive one of those as you stand next to the cave. Once the dragon comes out, you shall stab him. If *he* dies and *you* are still alive, you will receive coins. Simple as that.”

“Are they magical or metallic spears?”

“You're not that special; plain ol' wooden ones is what you'll get.”

“How can I kill a dragon with such a weapon? Ain't his skin made of hard scales?”

“It is, but you're not supposed to kill him. Our lord is.”

“Then what does he need me for?”

“A diversion; what else?”

“What... do you mean by diversion?”

“Make a wild guess.”

Grim thoughts past through my mind.

“Oh, dear... Why are you doing this to me? What did we ever do to you? I don't even know you!”

“Just following orders; nothing personal.”

In a way, the riders were predisposed like Hous, inclined to do as they're told as if chained by invisible shackles. I couldn't hate them despite everything they did. So what if they're gathering human shields for their masters' glory? They too are imprisoned by their fear of the nobles.

Forget the dragon; the real monsters are those pampered jerks who demand that everyone bow their heads as they passed by. I was the only one who didn't comply. Plus, I know it sounds weird coming from a coward like me, but for some reason I didn't like myself that day. I still can't explain why I didn't drop down on all fours and lick their boots in desperation, yet that is exactly what happened.

“Why should I bow my head or any other limb for them” I remember thinking. “I have nothing to lose at this point.” Sadly my little transgression went unnoticed, as once again nobody paid attention to it; like I wasn't even there. Typical.

The two nobles were busy gazing at the large opening of a cave close by, scattered with bones of varying sizes. Black smoke came out from a lot of crannies on the upper part of the mountain, and faint percussionist sounds were heard coming from deep inside. They signaled the riders with a small gesture of their hands, who then immediately began pulling everyone's chains.

“On your feet, all of you. We will begin handing around the spears. Form lines in front of the opening and start yelling to lure out the beast.”

A large pillar of fire came out from the mountaintop, interrupting his briefing, and making everybody yell much sooner than was expected.

“Ow, you never zed it would be zis enormouz!” exclaimed the supposed armored noble.

“Goodness, it wasn’t supposed to be.” replied the fat one, while wiping his forehead with a handkerchief. “I swearr it was half the size in the prrrevious attempts.”

“How am I even zupposez to stab zis foul creature in its zoft spot if I can’t even reatz itz belly by jumping?”

“Perrrhaps by awaiting above thee opening?”

“You jest, I prezume. Der iz no way fur me to climb up zear.”

“Sir, maybe you should give us permission to retreat.” said one of the riders, with his feet shaking like a cripple trying to show off.

“Neveerrr again!” the fat one slapped him softly with the back of his gloved palm. “Someone needs to finally pass thee challenge.”

“I don’t think the dragon shares your concerns, sir.”

“You brrrought twice as many lurrres as beforrrre, yes?”

“I did as you ordered, sir, but with the size doubled I do not believe...”

“They have to be enough. Now do as I say so the prrrince can...”

An earth-shaking roar burst forth from the cave, making everyone’s hairs stand up on end and their blood freeze. After a few seconds of silence, hell broke loose in the ranks.

“He’s here!”

“We’re doomed!”

“Every man for himself!”

“Wait, this is not overrr yet!” the fat noble yelled.

“Out of my way!”

“Wherrre arrre you going? Stay; I command thou to stay!”

“I have a family to take care of!”

“Stay and kill the drrragon; damn you! My prrrince, not you too!”

“Maybe next year if he shrinkz.” He lunged into the carriage as he issued his next order. “Driver, whip doz steedz to run like ze vind!”

“No, wait forrr me to get in firrst!” the fat noble begged, as he was struggling to get in as the wheels began moving.

Everyone was trying to run away, the riders on their Hippopedini, and the rest on foot by pushing those in front and dragging those behind, as they were chained together. Getting injured in the chaos would be very easy; and guess what, that’s exactly what happened to me. I was tossed around, pushed down, rolled over a few times, and then trampled by a dozen panicked men. Seeing how I was impeding their escape by because I was being dragged along, the first in line raised the spear he was given and was ready to cut my wrists with it. Luckily, the second in line proposed a much less painful alternative.

“Not that; it will take too long to saw through bone. Break the edge instead.”

And indeed, the first link at the end of the chain that held us together was just a small copper wedge. It didn’t take more than a few hits and stomps to deform them enough so that the cuffs could roll through it. Everyone was now free to run on their own... Everyone besides me, who was dizzy from the trampling and with a kneecap injured by a sharp stone.

I was now alone, with only deserted spears and a dragon’s hunger surrounding me. I couldn’t run properly because of my foot, screaming would do me no good, and

the dragon was about to rear its gigantic head. Is this the end, the only thing remaining being a devouring by the beast? Yet, I still did not feel fear. What was wrong with me; had I finally snapped and stopped caring?

This must be what serenity feels like, a state of mind I read about once, achieved through meditation or when you fully devote yourself to God. That still does not explain how I was feeling it, since there was neither meditation nor faith to excuse its presence at this very moment. True to its purpose though, I didn't care to think any further. Everything became meaningless and my mind was free of its burdens. I had literally nothing to lose and nobody to miss me, nowhere to go and no regrets for not accomplishing goals I was never very motivated about. My life found perfect tranquility in the moments before its end. The hatred of the nobles, the pain in my foot, the sadness of losing Ria, all gone. I stood up, accepting the inevitable with an expressionless face. I then closed my eyes and waited for this ordeal to end. Come on dragon; do your worst and end my meaningless existence.

...

...

...

“Congrats, my brave lord. You earned a duchy!”

I must say, that's one curious way for a dragon to speak before showering his victim with its fiery breath. And what a high-pitched voice for a mountain sized beast. You would almost think there is a completely different creature in front of me. Which there was. I opened my eyes to see a stocky, bearded man, almost half my size. He wasn't even dressed, unless his very long brown-yellow facial hair wrapping around his crotch like a baby's washcloth counts. He seemed like a gentle fellow, so I took the risk of talking a bit.

“I... didn't know dragons could change into midgets.”

“Your fear was the beast, and standing your ground is what passed the test.”

“But... the smoke... and the roaring.”

“That would be me with a torch, the cave’s echo, and a few trinkets that are beyond your understanding.”

“The bones around this place?”

“Remains of beasts that died eons ago and got buried in dirt. I throw them out as I dig more tunnels in there.”

What tha- it was all an elaborate hoax? By the sun; I now actually feel bad for not being dead. If my feet would allow it, I would rush to choke this little bugger. But because of my injury, scold him was all I could do.

“Ain’t you ashamed of yourself for terrorizing all these poor people?”

“Oh, trust me my lord, I take no pride in this.” He took a bow. “It is but a necessity for finding the worthy ones. Can’t have cowards as leaders, can we now? Very few don’t run or beg for their lives.”

Oh, I see, so this is the result of being injured *and* having accepted my fate. Speaking of injured...

“Many of them got hurt, you know. I’m a victim too; look at my foot.”

“Still much less bloodless and far more effective than civil wars every time the ruler’s throne becomes vacant. Now take this.” He lifted his arm as high as he could and handed over a rough looking piece of black metal, the size of his palm. “This is what you people call a dragonflake. Use it as proof of your triumph when you return.”

“Me? Use this?”

“Yes. That is why you were here, remember?”

“Actually, I am ... Wait... You said I can have my own duchy with this little thing?”

“I did.”

“Oh dear. I... can... become...”

“Just tell them there was indeed a dragon and you killed it. Not the truth; it will ruin it for those who passed and everyone brave enough to deserve it in the future. Any questions?”

“I... can... become...” I was in a trance.

“Hello? Still with us, my lord?” he snapped me out of it. “I need to head back inside soon; there are more important things I need to look after than your trivial little power struggle.”

It’s easy to realize how, in retrospect, I should have asked for a ton of things; like do dragons exist or are they just figments of peoples’ twisted imagination? Who are you and what are you doing in that mountain? As well as, would I be accepted as a noble when I wasn’t born as one? Unfortunately, at that specific moment I was too confused to think of any of that. I settled for the most self-evident and unimportant of things.

“Um... Yes, that would be all... No, wait, I just show this thing to the nobles, right?”

The midget had already turned to the other side and was about to enter the cave.

“Of course, who else is there? The nobodies at the villages?”

As you know very well, I am a nobody too. Does that statement mean he didn’t realize I was the prince? Was it all a misunderstanding? Did I do not deserve this flake? Should I return it and apologize for the inconvenience? If I was thinking straight that day, I probably would have done just that, but I didn’t. I remained silent and began to descend from the grim mountain, with my goal to show the flake to someone as soon as possible.

Finding the nearest village wasn't hard; you could tell it apart from the rest of the barren scenery; a dark brown hazing pebble surrounded by a beige sea of pebbles and dust. Slowly limping my way there, I used one of the numerous neglected spears as a walking stick, while following the tracks of the carriage and of the people who ran behind it.

It was evening by the time I got to the village I later on learned was called Nearfear, because of its position close to the Dragonmount. I could see the carriage tracks going from one side and coming out the other. It passed through it, made a stop, and continued its way to the mansion. What was left behind was the fat noble, who I later found out was Kardamos, the Duke's younger brother, serving as his envoy and mouthpiece whenever possible. As for the other one, he was Feimz, the prince of a neighboring domain, recovering after being semi-unconscious from fear.

Surrounded by purple-clad men, the background color of Tulipia's banner, he stood atop a stone altar and addressed the population of the area. He sounded very disappointed by the lack of backbone his underlings were showing in the test.

“... In two days the prrince shall trrry anew, this time with even morrrre men to aid him. And since it is getting rrreally harrrd to find some who arrre not chickens amongst you, this time everry capable man in thy village is orrrdered to be rrrready for marrrch.”

Many sighed and others began to cry.

“Silence! If thy fellow men had done theirrr duty rrrright, this wouldn't have happened. Now do yourrr parrrt, so the drrragon can be offed, and a successorr can be found. Therre will also be silverrr at the end forrr those who make it.”

They kept mentioning the silver although nobody seemed to be swayed by it. What could they do with it, anyways? They were balltato farmers, stuck in a wasteland.

This was the moment of truth. Still not feeling like my cowardly self, I approached the crowd and yelled for everybody to turn towards me.

“That won’t be necessary, I’ve killed the dragon!” I raised my hand and allowed everyone to see what I was holding, causing them to gasp in astonishment.

“What is that you got therre, you crripple?” frowned the noble. “Is it supposed to be the drrragonflake?”

“It is.”

“Impossible! You can’t even move.”

“And yet here I have it.”

“This betterr not be a jest.”

“It is not.”

“Then come close and let me see it. Everrryone, let him pass.”

I did so. Peasants and guards alike stood back as I approached them, as if I was a leper, with their eyes fixated on my hand rather than my face or clothes. It took a while because I was still limping, but once I was close enough, I stopped, extended my palm, making sure it was still not within arm’s reach of where he was standing. He looked at it in confusion.

“Come closerr, you currr. The light is too dim.”

“This is close enough.”

“How darrre you disobeying me?”

“I got the flake. I should be the one asking you that.”

Despite the twilight, it was still easy to see his face getting deformed with anger.

“Give it to me peacefully, orrr I shall have you whipped to death forrr thy insult.”

“You did nothing to earn it.” There was no emotion or doubt in my voice.

Whispers were heard all around me, as those present didn’t believe there was someone sane enough to disobey a noble.

“Guarrds! Arrest this filth!”

Nobody moved. They were looking at the flake, unable to see something wrong with it.

“It seems to be the genuine thing, sir.” said the captain of the guard.

I didn’t know it yet, but back at the mansion there was a display of 3 other flakes, brought there by the previous rulers of this land, after passing the test in a similar fashion. Its shape and iridescent colors were very specific and known only to those that have seen them. It wasn’t something a peasant could have forged so well out of normal metals.

“What arrre you saying, you dolt?” Kardamos swunged his foot at him, failing to land a kick. “It does not belong to the likes of his ilk. He is but a crrriple peasant!”

“Not anymore.” I waved the prize in my palm, causing the whispers to increase in volume.

“That is no prrroof! You could have found it in the deserrrt.”

Expecting him to say that, I used the reply I had prepared in advance. Everything followed an almost predetermined path.

“Are you saying the rulers of this land are decided by chance instead of skill? Then the dragon hunt has no real value. You can have it if you like; it is worthless.”

I threw the token at his feet, which as I expected he did not pick up. He instead kicked the flake in a fit of rage.

“You werre allowed to defy my authorrity long enough. Someone, rip his shirrret and whip this scoundrrrel to death. Rrrright here, beforrrre everrryone!”

Just like before, none present were willing to anger the gods, and remained still. The only part still moving was their mouths, and they were uttering words such as sacrilege, hubris, and the coming of the Day of Plenty.

“Come forrrth orrr join him in death!” was his last attempt to persuade them, only to reach deaf ears.

It appears that there was this prophecy that the priest at the temple foretold for a very long time. It also happens that the people of this land were beginning to get really fed up with their masters yanking them away from their families every time there was a carriage or a hunt that needed to be taken care of. It didn't take long to start cursing and throwing anything available at the noble.

“Sacrilige! – Release the new duke, he has the flake! – He is the man of the prophesy!”

Having lost control, and seeing how sticking around would result only in the dirtying his clothes even further by projectile mud and rotten leftovers, Kardamos did the wise thing and mounted a Hippopedinos stationed nearby as fast as he could.

“Help me, fools! And don't let them get any closerrr!”

It was difficult for him considering his mass, and luckily for him a few of his purple-clad guards still had the decency to help him out, while restraining themselves from lynching him. They may have refused to obey his last order but remained loyal when it came to keeping him from harm. One of them even grabbed the discarded dragon flake and placed it into one of his satin pockets.

“Here my lord.”

“What good will that do to me, idiot? Out of my way!”

He managed to escape, mudded but unharmed, leaving behind a large number of former minions pushing, and kicking each other. By the time the uproar had settled down, there were dozens of injured men with broken limbs and blackened eyes; mostly from the guards' side. Praise the Sun, or whatever god you worship, that there were no

casualties, and that none of us were in a mood for public executions. In fact, the population of this territory was rather small and a few of the soldiers were distant relatives of a family living in that very village.

As for me, they had shielded me and taken me away from there as soon as the brawling began. They brought me into a large hovel, filled it with fabrics to make it comfortable, and gave me everything they had in store to eat; although most of it was predictably more puree. An herbalist woman was even brought to make sure my leg won't worsen any further.

Suddenly, I was being treated like a king, and everybody was willing to obey my commands.

"Would that be enough food, sir?" a young man leaned forward.

"More than enough, thank you."

"Maybe another pillow for your back?"

"Not needed."

"My lord, did you by any chance eat any sort of medicine plant lately?" asked the medicine woman as she was massaging my swollen ankle.

"None that I am aware of."

"Your eyes look a bit yellowish, so..."

"The priest! The priest is here!" yelled a little boy that came running through the door.

It was early in the morning when the bald and bearded representative of the Goddess Dimitra returned with the wagon of a farmer who was dispatched to fetch him as fast as possible. He was even fatter than Kardamos. After a long chat with me, he was convinced that I was the real thing and pledged his allegiance to me. He went on motivating the surrounding villages, promising the end of suffering and years of great

harvest, yet the only one losing his courage more and more was the very head of the whole movement. Me.

The more I thought about it, the less I understood why I let it happen in the first place. Oh dear, I was causing such a big uproar and regretting it when it was too late to back up. I had willingly fallen into a river and was pulled away. That's how I was brought before you three days later, as we're slowly reaching the mansion.

Things escalated far too quickly and violently. This wasn't what I wanted to happen when I originally decided to show the flake. And yet for some reason I couldn't manage to care about whatever was going on. It's as if Dimitra had removed all my emotions, but only as a temporary blessing because by the evening of the second day, I returned to being my spineless old self.

-//- 7th day of Fallen Leaf Month -//-

Hous, mesmerized by everything that had transpired in such a short amount of time, bowed sarcastically.

“What else can I say besides best of luck on your endeavors, my lord”

“Oh please, not you too. The mere sound of that word terrifies me.”

“But there's nothing you can do besides to play along and hope for the best.”

“Yes, and if by some miracle everything works out well, I'll do my best to help you, your family, your village, and the whole duchy. If not...”

“Don't think that, my friend Thrassos, you will make a much better ruler than the ones we have now.” he patted my back. “Since you were raised as one of us, you understand what it means to be powerless. You won't be as abusive as they were to us.”

As he finished his motivational speech, the priest, Netalis, walked towards us and stopped at a distance where it'd be hard to hear what we were saying. He spoke loudly, so that his words would be heard clearly.

“Sorry for the intrusion, oh chosen one, but your followers are getting restless.”

“You may come closer, we are done here.”

He did so, and continued to express his worries, this time at a normal volume.

“I am afraid there is little point in continuing our march. Besides getting tired, the closer we get to the mansion the less willing the villagers become. We are unarmed and face a large army of armed and trained soldiers.”

“Oh dear, and the duke is probably well prepared for us after all these days as well.”

“The fact that we haven't been attacked already is in itself a miracle. Do you wish to continue or camp here for the rest of the day?”

If I had the choice, I'd order everyone to return to their homes. We were nothing more than a rabble of defenseless farmers; that would be mowed down if we're attacked by anymore of those riders. Why is Dimitra not using her powers to give us weapons? That's what we need the most right now. Or at least something to lift the spirits once again. What could I do to even protect us from the wretched duke's counterattack?

... The midget! I will go back to the mountain and beg for another flake from the... er... dragon's corpse.

“Netalis, I'm returning to the mountain, where the Goddess will give me further advice. In the meantime, stay here and keep everyone's spirits high.”

“I shall do my best, oh bringer of the Day of Plenty.”

“Let me hold you no more; please be on your way.” said Hous. “Thank you for all you shared with me, but now it's time to go and fulfill your destiny.”

Thrassos was alone again, riding a grey Hipopedinos heading for Dragonmount. It doesn't take a lot of skill, learning how to ride these huge beasts; if you keep your legs wide and hold the reins firmly you will be safe. He waved goodbye to his followers, promising to return soon; words he was not sure he could uphold. What shall prevent him from running away, as he did so many times in the past? The usual doubts he constantly felt were back, bringing with them ill thoughts that tormented him, as he strived to remember why he even agreed to be a part of this mess. What was he thinking when he first got ahold of the flake?

“I do not deserve this token; I am nothing more than a coward. The proper course of action would be to return it and apologize.”

Why would I do that?

That was the other me, the one who rarely speaks unless I'm truly excited. What a good time to come out as I looked at this piece of dark metal, petting it with my thumb and smirking as if I had sniffed a bag of mush-purple.

“It's not nice to lie to people. I almost never did it in my whole life so far, and even when I did, it was over something trivial. Maybe I should just...”

It makes no difference once I'm a part of nobility!

That's right, nobody cares about an orphaned peasant. But with riches and authority, respect follows close by.

By the gods, I was beginning to remember why I didn't tell the midget the truth. The moment I touched the token, ambition possessed my body; or whatever the name of the deity that represents it. That was the cause of my transformation into a cynical opportunist.

Wait, something's not right. I was feeling weird even before the flake. Or even before being captured and dragged by the riders. Was it the Goddess all along? Were the gods rewarding me for all the suffering I've been through?

...Oh, no time's left to figure that out; I was already near the cave's entrance within a few hours, something that would've taken a whole day if I was carrying a load or was on foot.

Speaking of which, my limb was still in pain, which made getting off the mount far more difficult than expected, especially without a ledge or someone to help me. One good foot proved inadequate to maintain balance, so down I went. Luckily, there was nobody around to laugh at me.

"Damn it all! Some savior I am; I can't even do such a simple thing. How can I end my misery in, help to improve the lives of the people on this land...?"

...Live in that heavenly mansion!

"Y-Yes, that too. Eat delicious food all day, instead of rotten leftovers. Oh, and of course find Ria! I can now save her from the curse of being bought and sold for wine as if she is merchandise."

And marry her.

"P-Perhaps. If she is ok with it, I mean."

Get up and make it happen.

"Yes, enough self-loathing, I should do that immediately!"

I patted my clothes in order to remove the dust then I limped towards a very different scenery from what I remembered seeing yesterday. No smoke, pillars of fire, or roaring coming from inside. Apart from the scattered bones, it seemed like a normal rocky mountain. Or, I assumed it was, since I hadn't been in any other mountain thus far.

I was thinking of yelling so the midget could hear me, and if that didn't work then I'd go inside and start looking for him. Neither was necessary, since I heard the tapping of tiny feet echoing towards me before a small silhouette appeared before me.

“A visit so soon? Did I leave such a big impression on you?”

“H-Hello again. Is there any chance you have a spare flake?”

“Excuse me?”

“I promise I will be far more careful this time and won't ask for a third.”

He seemed more amused than annoyed.

“It got that serious, hm? Not even a dozen flakes will do you any good now.”

“Oh dear, so there is nothing to be done anymore?”

“There is, but instead of singular ones, you need them patched together.”

“A... dragon blanket?”

“You are not very bright, are you? I mean suits of armor!”

“Made of flakes?”

“Scales to be more precise.”

-//- 26. Bogville -//-

3rd day of Rain Month (POV: Themis)

The invaders didn't seem to target backwater areas like this one, it seemed, as if this little neck of the woods wasn't worth their time. While this could be seen as either a sign of good fortune or proof of how worthless our own existence is in the grand scheme of things, depending on who's perspective you're looking at, it did lead to one side effect that really seemed to get on people's nerves here. That side effect, of course, was exodus from the more settled areas as tens of thousands of refugees were pouring out of the major cities, and crawling into isolated settlements, even those far beyond the outskirts of Sepalo.

Of course, it was just as much an annoyance for the city-dwellers, most of whom were seemingly oblivious to the reasons for their exodus, as it was for the locals. For the city-dwellers, this was mainly because they could only bring the bare minimum of belongings with them as they were fleeing, both to be able to get their wagons moving and to be able to do so before the marauders could catch them. This abandonment of apparently precious goods must've hit some of the city-dwellers hard as it often triggered a sort of withdrawal syndrome a few hours after they were gone. I pondered all this and assumed it had to be the explanation for the conversation I was listening to, from a respectful distance of course, being had by this couple in the wagon next to me who happen to be seeking refuge in the exact same area I was heading.

"I really liked that cupboard," the wife said despondently.

"We couldn't fit it on the carriage, dear," the husband said with clear resignation in his voice, as if he hoped his wife would drop the matter.

Naturally, what he wanted and what he got had no acquaintance with each other at the moment.

“And you gave away all our silverware.”

“I had to; there was no other way he would have given us the carriage, dear.”

“And you even damaged mother’s portrait when you dropped that chair on it.”

“We were in a hurry to outrun the horde if you recall, dear.”

“And you abandoned most of my dresses!”

“You don’t need more than two where we are going, dear.”

“And of all places on Japheth, you chose a stinking swamp!”

“It’s the only place I could find, dear. Now please shut up and let me drive, or I will smack you a big one... dear.”

As the argument went back-on-forth with no ending in sight, no one bothered to call them out on it, not as if anyone was in the mood to do so. In any case, who can blame them for being irritated or, for more vulnerable people? Losing everything in a matter of days and needing to rebuild afterwards, knowing full well how many of the things that were lost, will never be replaced. Gone were the statues, monuments, jewelry, and fineries of the capital, fine artistry that was the result of decades in toil. All being reduced to rubble behind us, and we had no idea where the road ahead would take us. For many, it was as if destiny itself decided to play a twisted game and the once proud people of Rodia would be the pieces to be sacrificed for its fleeting amusement.

While destiny seemed to have the biggest bone to pick with the city-dwellers, it was not the only one with such a grudge, as the people who already lived the small settlements in country seemed to be resentful about the new burdens that they had to carry. The local populations had to somehow deal with the sudden crowding of places that were normally never meant to house thousands of people in such short notice. Every shed and hut in every village was now overflowing with families trying to

somehow secure a roof over their heads for the night. Furthermore, all of these needed to be fed, resulting in many a field and home being raided by starving women and children... or even former merchants, like the one I noticed off to my right who found himself confronting a farmer in front of the latter's home.

“Hey! Hands off my harvest!”

“Watch your mouth, peasant! You're speaking to one whose family controls most of the countryside's trading.”

“Watch my mouth...?! A bold thing to say in between trying to stuffs yours with my belongings!”

“I will pay you for your pitiful fungus after the crisis is over.”

“That guarantees nothing; for all I know your whole enterprise is now in shambles! And, in case you didn't notice, I have my own family to feed!”

“A nobody like you has no right to oppose me. Now let me take these provisions or else...!”

“Or else what?! In case you didn't notice, this nobody holds a pointy enough pitchfork to skewer your fat behind. Now drop them or sit on pillows for the rest of your life, if I'm in a merciful mood.”

The ones who had it the worst were the beggars, cripples and lepers who, despite being able to garner sympathy from the farmers and, therefore, could expect far more in the way of philanthropy, simply did not have the means to last much longer without such handouts which, as one could imagine, couldn't last forever. With winter coming up, they will be the ones who will kick the bucket first. Rich folks and pick pockets will follow close by, as coins are not food and, with everything falling apart, how could they be exchanged for food when it was now being consumed much faster than it could be produced? Gold, once the symbol of wealth, now had very little value, though some farmers and merchants had yet to figure that out, as another conversation being had by two other men proved, as merchant tried to trade his jewelry for crumbs as I passed by.

“Come on, a single sack of Ballatoes for this ring? That’s essentially theft!”

“Well, excuse me if I don’t feel tempted. My wife has already got a dozen rings from passing merchants. She has no more fingers to fit one without looking like a jeweler’s display; there is no lack of those.”

“Ok then, how about two sacks for this pendant. Look at those rubies.”

“I am old enough to tell glass from crystal, pal.”

“Oh... well... How about this wonderful feathered hat, made of...”

“Hey! That’s mine!”

“What?”

“It got snatched from my stand two days ago!”

“I know nothing about that sir, I traded it yesterday for half a sack of Blein* and...”

“You lying, thief! Give it back!”

I never got to see the end of that exciting serial as I had to move on. I eventually arrived at the outskirts of the Ilis* swamp, where all vehicles had to stop and where, for anyone wanting to go further, people had to walk for the rest of the way. It’s a place that up until recently, nobody with any sense would ever want to set foot in, because it would sink into the mud before a swarm of mosquitoes would descend to suck him dry. The only ones crossing it before the crisis were hunters, criminals trying to hide, usually from the hunters. Or perhaps those who had already made the hamlet within the quagmire their home, possibly because they can scrape by, living in a place where the tax collector does not count how much he is going to take away. Minus those who were honest enough to not trick them into paying less than required.

This nice little pocket of isolation, like so many other things, has now fallen to the wayside as half the population in the kingdom is now on the move, as they flee

from barbarian hordes to places like this swamp or wherever they could find some semblance of safety.

The place in question is an ancient hamlet that managed to survive within this gutter-smelling, disease-inducing, bleak-looking area. A small dwelling, which had been nameless for its entire history as the inhabitants never found a need for something to refer it as, was now being called Bogville by the newcomers for convenience.

The inhabitants were not very pleased by the sight of all these city folks just marching in like they owned the place and clearly wanted nothing else but for the refugees to get out as soon as possible. It's not like city folk were a problem in and of themselves, as the people in this hamlet had been perfectly ok having a couple of daintily dressed and educated people visiting their place even now and then. They usually came out of unintended necessity, didn't plan on staying for long and, while waiting to go on to greener pastures, were willing to share knowledge and loaded pockets with them.

Now, however, the city folk were seen as a possible threat, with the locals finding that they couldn't even reach the door step to their homes without having to get through a dozen of them scavenging your yard for food. Even the local staple of the area, known as mush-browns, that nobody in the city would've ever touched before, were now becoming a rare delicacy. It reached the point where mush-browns were seen as something worth poaching from local's small field like vultures going at a corpse in a country filled with immortals.

At least some of the locals are having fun at watching the ignorant pampered boys of Petalo become a mess since they do not know how to distinguish the various types of mushrooms by color. Not all of them were for consumption, and as I've discovered the locals had the darkest sense of humor I'd ever seen in a community.

They loved to get a few jollies from the ignorant outsiders learning that the hard way. The ones who ate the red variety could be recognized by watery eyes and swollen heads. The giveaway for mush-purples is wandering around like drunkards for hours. I even saw a few youths making bets as a way time, while I walked towards the hamlet's single tavern.

“One copper for that guy with the monocle immersing his head in the water feeder.”

“Three coppers for that middle-aged man with the silk shirt, doing the river dance any moment now.”

The situation wasn't always so morbidly humorous for, though, a fact I was quickly reminded of as I was walking through the village when I saw two youths, a refugee and a local, in the middle of an argument that had gotten ugly.

“Keep your hands away from my garden, or I'm planting your teeth in it!”

“There is nothing but weeds in there; take it easy.”

“Why you... First you try to rob me, then you have the gall to mock my property?!”

A sad sight, but once again I did not have the time to intervene. I managed to pass through all the people that were struggling for a spot on the streets to call their home, even if it was one without even a roof over their heads, and I finally manage to enter the tavern... only to find it, while untouched by the overcrowding outside, mostly filled with local peasants dressed in plain, dull grey farmer clothes. They seemed to compliment the sour mood, as they reminisced about the good old days, as they knew it, of peaceful, isolated, spacey bliss.

“...when nights were quiet, with the soft sounds of crickets and frogs putting you to sleep like a lullaby.”

“Yeah... and now you can't close your eyelids without hearing someone coughing, or babies crying right outside your window. And no frogs or crickets either; they ate them all.”

“Forget night strolls too, you'll only end up tripping over someone's leg or belongings. Did you see how they crudely stashed themselves atop one another?”

I approached a table where I spotted the distinctive red canes all village elders are demanded by rural tradition to use. They were three such men who occupied the seats, all of them old, none carrying said canes at the moment as they set them on the edges of the table. I waved at them and greeted them once they took notice of me.

“Greetings, my fellow men. Could I have a few minutes of your time?”

They clearly took note of my clothes, a black woolen robe, decorated with small precious stones of various colors, certainly very luxurious in their eyes... and definitely a sign that I was an outsider.

I am unaware of whether they held any resentment towards the lords and artisans of the cities but, whether or not they did, the current situation was apparently enough to engender a feeling of hostility that, if their facial expressions were an indication, would give even the violent barbarians nightmares. This became even more obvious when they spoke, the elders wasting no time spitting a toxic bile that was amassing in their hearts for some time.

“Look at this fat guy and his small moustache. Have you come to grace us with your enlightened presence? If so, let me be blunt; you are not welcome here! Damn you, damn your overbuilt obscenities that you call home, and damn those fancy arts

you learn there; the only thing they are good for is scamming poor people like us, it seems.” One of them spat out.

“Agreed. If that’s not what you’re here to do, then are you here to ask us not to be harsh to your compatriots in need? If so, don’t even bother; they keep leeching off us, I say our behavior is more than just. What are they doing in return for us? How are we supposed to live if you gobble up everything?” another hissed.

“Indeed. My grandfather would be rolling in his grave if he knew about how you’re treating his land. Assuming you have not been unearthed and eaten his remains as well.” The third elder said, clearly leveling that unfounded charge as if he had seen me do such a thing himself.

After they finished their verbal assault on me, they realized that I had remained unmoved by their provocative rants and this, thankfully, was enough to get them to stay silent long enough for me to speak

“I am Themis*, a magistrate of Petalo. On behalf of myself and my lord, I apologize for the recent troubles and, while it is scarcely enough to compensate for your costs, we thank you for allowing these lost souls into your village in these dark times. I have come on official business and would like to speak to your head elder.”

Two of them stay quiet and simply get up, leaving me alone with an old skinny man who wore a woolly dark-green shirt and grey tights.

“Here I am. Before you say anything, you better deal with the situation outside.”

“There is no time for that.”

“There won’t be any time if we start killing each other either. I can’t control them anymore, so if you want any info from me, deal with them first. It is your job after all.”

“Understood.” I snorted. “Please wait for me here.”

The people outside formed a circle around them, and were able to encourage the two to escalate the argument to a fist fight, the brutality of which was fueled by the electrified atmosphere. It was clear that nobody seemed interested in peacefully coexisting anymore, for it seemed only bloodshed could ease the people's frustration from being cramped like sardines in the can that was their now meager existence. While not the purpose of my journey to this place, it's obvious that I have to stop it. The elder was right; if I don't intervene, the violence will spread throughout the community and end up causing more damage than the barbarians would.

“Cut it out, you two! Keep this up and I'll have you both sentenced to three days of forced labor for disturbing the peace.” I raised my voice and addressed the rest. “The same applies to everybody else present. Whether you're a spectator or participant, I swear I won't go easy on any of you, understand?!”

“You haven't the power to do anything!” a boy yelled. “You can't even send a dead rat to a summer camp. Not with the barbarians roaming the plains.”

He was more right than I wished, though I would never admit it. My power, once a benefit of my status as a magistrate, was but another casualty created by this time of unrest and, as my inability to even intimidate a few commoners showed, the people knew this as well as I did. Determined to preserve the peace, weak as it was, I kept the pretense, regardless.

“I can do plenty once a paladin passes by. Now listen carefully or...”

“A pala-what? We can't hear you, fat-ass!” someone in the crowd heckled.

“We are not able to see you, despite that tummy of yours.” boasted another voice from a different location.

“Disobedient brats!” I hissed. “If that's your problem, then bring me a stool so you can see me, and I can see you.”

“Why should I waste a man’s efforts for such a doomed enterprise?! No matter the craftsmanship, that stool will break!” the first voice yelled and many in the crowd began to laugh.

It was a most embarrassing scene, one that would never happen at any other time and place, especially with a few enforcers standing next to me. I only find solace in that their mocking lifted the spirits a bit, as it meant everybody finally stopped fighting amongst them and began joking around.

Once that incident came and went, I walked back into the tavern. It wasn’t how I had hoped to end the violence, and I knew it wouldn’t last for long, but I did manage to quell the tensions and provide myself with the time that I need for fulfilling the mission that brought me here in the first place. For, unlike the refugees, I did not come here seeking asylum nor am I here to stay.

-//- 14. Armor -//-

7th day of Fallen Leaf Month (POV: Thrassos)

The good thing about this wasteland is that you can easily spot whatever appears on the horizon. There aren't any hills or foliage blocking your view, and the dust that stirs about makes it even clearer when a group of people are moving. The only downside is that said dust hides them behind a screen, and you are not sure who they are or how they are dressed until they are only a few feet away from you. That's why despite seeing a convoy of what seems to be hundreds of people on foot, heading towards the sierra, I am uncertain about whether they are the refugees that the midget somehow knew were coming, or the nobles' army that was sent out to end the rebellion.

Just go there and find out.

What if it's the latter? My life will be over then.

How will they know who you are?

Good point, how will they? It's a bit too soon for them to have already made a wanted poster of me with a precise sketched face on it. They are also coming from the southwest, which is almost in the opposite direction of the mansion. Even that Papparunia place that the prince came from is straight to the west, according to what the Tulipians told me. It appears safe enough for me to go take a closer look.

It turns out that they were refugees after all. As I made my approach, none of them brandished their weapons, or looked like a soldier. Many amongst them were also elderly, women and children, carrying hand wagons full of tools for farming, and rustic

furniture. They appeared to be normal farmers, baring their oddly colored clothes; far more extravagantly than the plain grey and brown peasants normally wear.

That's no reason to suspect ill intentions though, so I proceeded to salute them. A few men at the front saw me, then spoke to an old man on a wagon next to them, before splitting off from the rest to talk with me. The rest kept heading for the mountains, as the old man addressed me. He was full of wrinkles, had unkempt grey hair, and very yellow teeth.

"Thank the winds for someone that doesn't run away." If only he knew that I normally do that myself; under different circumstances I wouldn't be standing here.

"Greetings, fellow. We are just passing by, we seek no harm."

"I have, um, no intention of, err, attacking you either."

"That is good, that is good. Do you by any chance know if the ruler of this land has been alerted of our coming?"

They said the ruler of this land. That's you.

No, I am not. Not yet at least.

"Did he perhaps set up a blockade further on?"

"I-I am not sure."

"Please, do not be afraid to tell us; our lives depend on that."

Do it, lie as you were told.

I am not sure I can do such a nasty thing.

Use them to your benefit; you don't have a choice.

"Y-Yes! Yes there is! Do not go that way!"

“As I feared! Quickly lads, tell them to stop.” he orders the two men, who immediately run towards their kin.

“The... The mountain there.” I point behind me. “It has a cave and... and you can hide until... um...”

“Good idea, we will do so. Thank you; thank you so much my good man.”

Thus, the sinister plan begins and I already feel awful. Exploiting these poor people for my cause. My only consolation being that this way I can save the poor farmers who consider me a savior. All for the sole reason of increasing the people following my cause. Or even saving lives.

“Hey, fellow.” The old man asks. “Is this the Dragonmount I heard so many bad things about? Black and sticking out from the rest?”

“Yes. Yes it is.”

“You are not sending us out to be eaten by some dragon, are you?”

“Oh, that. No, don’t worry, there is no dragon.”

“There isn’t?”

“Not a literal one. I mean, there was one, but he- he is dead now. I am the one who- who killed him.”

“You?” He looks at my clothes and the sweat that is forming on my forehead. “Rubbish, you are trying to get us burn to a crisp.”

“No! It’s the truth!”

“You were sent by our pursuers to kill us!”

“I was not, believe me! The only thing up there is a smith and his forge.”

“What? What is a forge doing out here in the middle of nowhere?”

“It’s a hidden one, run by someone who is willing to arm you.”

“Arm us?”

“Against the noble.”

“Sorry if I am being a bit suspecting of you, fellow, but you sound like you’re talking complete nonsense.”

And I didn’t even get to the part where I tell him that I am the messiah of a pagan land that worships a cat. I will also never get to the part where I admit that I am using them as foot soldiers in a rebellion they have no reason to be part of. I just keep stacking one lie atop another.

“Please, take his armor or you will all be killed by the duke.”

“You speak as if you give us no choice.”

I wish I could simply say that the coast is clear. That option would unfortunately mean that when the duke makes his move, I, Hous, his family, and everyone else who followed me from Nearfear will have our heads decorate the villages. I’ve saved everyone’s lives this way. Or at least I think I have.

“Ah, here you are.” the midget welcomes them from outside the cave. “Try them out; they are sorted out by size.”

Reasonably puzzled by the sight of around a hundred eerie looking sets of armor lying across the opening, everybody was unaware of what was going on. A midget wrapped in his own facial hair wasn’t making things any easier to understand.

“What? What is it? Why are you all just standing there? Sir Thrassos, didn’t you explain the situation to them?”

“I didn’t have enough time, ok?!” I yelled in frustration.

“Be a bit more creative.”

“How do you expect me to convince hundreds of farmers I never spoke to before, in less than an hour?”

“Stop, stop. I’m doing the asking now.” the old man pointed rudely at him. “Are you the blacksmith that is handing out weapons?”

“Do you see anyone else telling you to try them out? Of course and I am.” He bowed clumsily, almost falling over from the weight of his oversized head. “Schistolithis*, at your service.”

“Why are you giving us these creepy looking weapons? We are not soldiers, nor do we seek to harm anyone.”

“And how will you defend yourselves from the Crude-Sayers?”

Everybody gasped at the sound of a name I had no idea about.

“Th-They are coming here?”

“Very soon; from atop my mountain I see them gathering in Petalo, as clear as I saw you leaving your village to escape their wrath.”

“You see that far away from up there?”

“Yes, please don’t ask why and begin the preparations.”

“What preparations; we don’t know how to fight; we are simple Blein farmers.”

“You don’t have to be; anything made of dragon skin makes the wearer impervious to all mundane weapons.”

“You mean it repels swords and arrows? How?”

“Well, the science behind it is rather hard to explain, especially when it’s technically not skin and what you people imagine a dragon to be, is far from the actual thing.”

“Great, not only you can’t help us understand, but we also have nobody to lead us. Someone who knows of such things. Not me; I am too old to even walk.”

“Why, that is why we have sir Thrassos here.” He patted my butt, since that is as high as his hands could go without stretching. “He killed a dragon, and is blessed by the cat goddess to be the next ruler of this land.”

Sun, that sounded so awkward. I place my hands on my head and closed my eyes, waiting for the ordeal of humiliation to begin.

To my surprise, instead of laughing and cursing what I heard were pleas.

“-Save us, dragon slayer! -Lead the way, chosen one! -Tell us what to do, oh favored one of the gods!”

Desperate to get away from those Crude-whatevers, they instantly stopped questioning what exactly was going on here. They are now at my disposal, part of the scheme I led myself into, the full picture of which eludes me. Instead of accepting these sets of armor and be done with it?

While each person was trying out the smith’s craft, I addressed him, by using a shortened version of his name, no pun intended.

“What are we doing, Schis?”

“Writing history. Not the first time for me.” He looked up at the sky, as if he was worried that something would fall.

“Is it, really? It’s all too far-fetched.”

“I don’t think you should be questioning things. Just go with the flow.” His expression became that of an irritable person in an instant, as if he was looking at something up in the heavens.

“I do it only because I am desperate, and so are they.”

“That is what destiny is all about; not really having a choice.”

“Yes, but... why are you really doing all that?”

He patted my behind again.

“Just fulfilling my duty. One day you will understand.”

“One day? Why not now?”

“Because you are desperate; you will do this regardless of what I tell you.”

“But...”

“Why burden your mind with meaningless extras?”

“I don’t want that, but...”

“Right when you are about to embark on the greatest achievement of your life.”

“That would be nice, but...”

“You are too ignorant to understand, and this is not the right time. Go forge the future and come back once you are done.” He began making small steps towards the cave, reminding me of one last thing as his voice echoed inside. “And as we said, nobody is to come inside or ask anything more about the forge. Its contents are to remain a secret.”

What a strange fellow. Maybe one day he will tell me everything, but for now all I can do is make the best out of his gifts. Let’s concentrate on what I will do next with these people, who are willing to do anything to save their lives and find a new place to stay.

None had ever donned a set of armor, and there was no instruction manual lying around, yet it didn’t take them long to figure it all out. Each part of them is made up of many smaller parts, bending and stretching enough to fit any adult man who is not too skinny or fat. They are also rather light and don’t impede movement much; your body won’t become stiff even if you sleep in them.

Oh, and the best part is of course how they somehow deflect attacks. If you hit them with a stick or worse, they absorb most of the force. You really feel invincible whilst inside them.

“So, what are we going to do now, sir Thrassos?” the elder asked as he inspected his village’s readied men. “We have provisions for only a couple of days and the soil around here is barren. We can’t barricade ourselves in this place and hope our enemies will leave us alone.”

“Well, hm, I could ride all the way to where my followers are stationed, around a priest named Netelis. They could gather food and water for your people.”

“Do they have enough to spare for us though? They do live in a wasteland after all.”

“Oh dear, didn’t think of that. There are days they live off nettles.”

“That option is out of the question then.”

“Why beg?” said one of the armored men. “We can take anything we want with this armor.”

“Woah now, stop there.” I said with my palms positioned as if I were pleading for something. “Sacking these poor people is awful; they didn’t do anything to you.”

“So what do you expect us to do then? Starve while doing nothing? What good is this armor to us if we don’t do anything with them?”

Oh dear, what am I supposed to tell them; nothing’s coming to mind.

“We can always plunder some fancy residence.” the elder proposed “The rich usually have enough to feed a village in their cellars.”

“Um, the only rich around these parts are the nobles.” I explained. “And they all live gathered in the... duke’s mansion...”

It was so obvious now.

“Excellent! We will feed our people while getting rid of those who want us dead!”

“Oh, well, I am not sure. Maybe?”

“Why are you in doubt? It’s your destiny to rule the land and we are now dragoons.”

“Dra-what?”

“Dragoons. You know, that’s the word for warriors who have dragon-related assets.”

“Oh... I see.”

“So, do we attack that mansion or is there something better that we can do?”

“I have no idea. Not sure how many soldiers are inside.”

“Numbers do not matter.” the armored man, now a dragoon said. “What can they do against the dragon scales?”

“Spernis, don’t forget we have no weapons.” the elder corrected him. “You cannot be harmed, but neither can they.”

“What’s this talk about harming people?” I raised my palms again. “Can’t we just threaten them or something?”

“They are our enemies!” Spernis puffed. “We were driven out of our homes twice because of their kind and they’ll put us all to death on a whim. They don’t deserve any mercy.”

Oh, so that’s the reason they were coming here.

“Woah, now hold on there!” I was now waving my palms like crazy. “This is too much; we just need food.”

“Why are you so hesitant about murder? You killed a huge dragon, and got this armor so that you can equip your rebellion.”

“Well, um, yes, but for protecting people, not killing them.”

“Will you make up your mind already?” another man complained. “We’re sweating like pigs here.” He was right. You are still losing precious fluids under the sun, despite the protection of the armor. “Are we marching towards somewhere or not?”

Everybody was now looking at me, expecting the decisive order. My heart was pounding like crazy as I knew that I didn’t have many options. Staying silent was not one of them.

Then say what suits you the most. Your enemy is the duke, remember?

Yes. Yes I do.

“We deserve more than this. Say no to this misery, onwards to a land of fair government. We will strike the nobles quickly and decisively!”

Everybody cheered. Everybody, but the elder, as I had discovered later. For the time being, we were all too exhilarated to notice or care as our little army began its march. I randomly picked three of them to be my generals, Spernis being one of them, and then we divided ourselves into four groups. We then formed rows and followed the main road that was heading towards the mansion.

-//- 27. Profile -//-

3rd day of Rain Month (POV: Themis)

“There, happy now?” I sat in the chair opposite of the elder. I was agitated, but I still had a duty to fulfill.

“Not much, but I feel much better than before.” he replied while scratching his beard. “It’s not going to last for long, you know?”

“I am aware of that.”

“Any info about when this mess of a situation is going to end?”

“These people will stay here for as long as it takes until the invaders get tired of vandalizing their great cities, or get routed by the paladin order. Whichever comes first.” The elder frowned in discomfort. “I truly am sorry, sir, but it is simply out of my hands. If this situation hadn’t gone so horribly wrong, I guarantee you this night would have been as tranquil as those prior to the crisis.”

“Not very soothing, though I suppose it can’t be helped. I have to ask, though, how did these barbarians break the defense line, anyway?”

“You honestly don’t know?”

“I know very little about the world outside this hamlet, for I have lived here my entire life. But I have working ears and I know of the great strongholds that you have such great pride in. How did they fall; were the guards caught while they were asleep?”

I was taken aback by his ignorance, as I have often forgotten how news doesn’t travel as fast here as it does in the countryside, or how simple farmers have little to no interest in what happens beyond the few acres of land that they cultivate around their houses. If it weren’t for the refugees, chances are these villagers wouldn’t have even known about the invasion. I proceeded to explain what is otherwise common knowledge by now to every major city.

“Oldfort* is the main stronghold against attacks from Ham*... or it had been before it fell. It wasn’t because the fort wasn’t adequate; it did its job properly, as were the men garrisoned there as they fought to the last man and beat the enemy within an inch of their lives. There just weren’t enough troops stationed there at that moment to stop the horde when it attacked, especially when the horde consisted of thousands of Tromara*. Once Oldfort fell, the rest of the line was untenable and it fell thereafter, which allowed those savages, damn them, to pour right into the heart of our kingdom with no way to stop them.”

“Ok... and if the Oldfort was so important, why did it have so few men? Where in the Depthole did the other troops go?”

“They had to be dispatched to the area near the borders of Paparunia and Tulipia to deal with another issue. Somehow the Tromaras got wind of it and pulled a fast one on us. That’s about as much as I will say on that matter. Oh and, by the way, I would ask that you please show more respect in how you address our soldiers, since your hamlet is partially responsible for this disaster.”

“We?” The elder jolted. “What did we do? We’re just a small village that keeps to ourselves. None of us even leave this place; how in the Depthole can you point the finger at us?”

“That’s where you’re mistaken. One of your people apparently did leave this village and, as it turns out, he is the cause of this mess and everything that led to it. I believe you know of a young boy named Thrassos?”

“Lil’ Chorrier, the errand boy?” The elder jumped up from his seat, grabbing the attention of everyone around him. “The lad vanished a few months back without a single copper in his pockets.”

“Well, he has more than that now. He is the tyrant of Paparunia and Margaritia, a worshipper of false gods, and possessor of demonic armor.”

The likelihood that this village was part of a conspiracy alongside whom they called ‘Chorrier’ seems less likely when the elder’s face clearly showed an expression of disbelief at this information, the same expression shared by everyone in the bar. Having shook off his stupor, the elder turned to the rest of the people in the bar.

“What are you looking at? Go back to your chatting.” he told his fellow men before sitting down and, turning his attention back to me, began whispering. “Are you sure it’s not some silly rumor? You know, housewives talking nonsense while doing the laundry? Chorrier was a bit strange but he couldn’t be the monster that you’re talking about.”

“This information came from people of that land, exiled for standing up to him. Then it was verified by scouts we sent to his lands, before they were discovered. I’m sorry, but the boy that you knew has become a very real threat.”

“By the Sun... I suppose that this is the reason you came here?”

“It definitely wasn’t a sudden feel of spending my day surrounded by the stench of decaying flora. I need information about him and, unfortunately, time is of the essence. I start by asking for his relatives; I must restrain them for questioning.”

“Good luck finding them; he is an orphan... Stop staring Ms. Countermanson!” he yelled at the woman who was the village’s biggest gossiper.

“They are all dead?” I asked, getting the man’s attention yet again.

“Possibly. If nothing else, they are not here and nobody knows where they are, assuming they live...” He groaned in annoyance and turns his attention elsewhere. “I still see you, seeing me Ms. Countermanson!”

Again, the woman turned around. As I took this all in, I began tapping my forefinger slowly on the wooden table.

Tap... Tap... Tap...

“Then you can tell me all you know about him. Was he born here? If not, how did he end up here? Why was he brought here and by whom?”

“There is nothing special about him in that regard. About fifteen years ago, a homeless woman came to our hamlet. She said her man was a womanizer who abandoned her once he found out that she was pregnant. Driven out by her family out of shame, she wandered all the way here. We treated her properly, as we do with all our guests, giving her roasted mush-greys, water, and medical herbs. We even had a midwife to change her sheets and to look after her, once she was ready to deliver.”

“How generous of you. Too generous I must say; I find it hard to believe there was nothing to gain from this.”

“Well... the truth is that we planned to ask her, or her kin, to repay us for our hospitality. Even an exiled city woman had more than us peasants.”

“I see. So what did she repay you with?”

“Not what we hoped for. She gave birth, and snuck away two nights later without saying a word, abandoning her baby in the process. We have no idea which direction that foul wench went, nobody went to look for her, and we never saw her again, period. If she had ever returned, I’d have personally kicked her out and I would’ve never let her near the boy, since she has no right to be considered a mother. Luckily, there was another new-mother who could breastfeed it, or the poor thing would have died.”

“Was that baby Thrassos?”

“Of course he was. Did you think I was telling you an irrelevant tale all this time?”

“Just checking. Who gave it this name?”

“She did, before she ran out on us. It stands for courage in the old tongue; it was the only thing she ever gave him, for what it’s worth. Anyways, we were kind folks and raised the child as our own.”

“Which family adopted it?”

“Um... Nobody really, he was taken from one hut to another. We are not the kind of people who have the luxury to fully focus on raising someone that is not of our blood. He couldn't even be used to fetch dowry through marriage. And, in any case, we have a law around here that states that a child must be raised by his birth parents, so no one here could raise him themselves even if they were capable of doing so.”

“Any particular reason that woman chose your hamlet and not any other?”

“Isolated and close to the sierra, the same for everybody that comes here.”

“I see... and, during his time here, did he act strangely? Was there anything that would be cause for alarm?”

“No. He looked different than the rest of us but he was otherwise a normal child. Usually.”

“What do you mean by usually?”

“Well, you know, his build was a bit different for not being from around here.”

Although the elder didn't go into further details, Thrassos indeed stood out next to the other peasants. His build was different; a result of not being an offspring of an isolated community that was content to marry amongst themselves for eons. Everybody was a cousin or an uncle in the hamlet, and shared features, such as dark brown hair, short stature, big rosy cheeks, fat thighs, and dry skin.

He must have seemed like a monster in the finite differences he had compared to them. Gangling, big cheekbones, tawny hair, soft skin that would swell easily when bitten by a mosquito, and a slightly frail constitution for a lack of immunity against the local diseases.

“Were these differences enough to turn him into an evil person?”

“Listen, your honor, or however you like being addressed, we fed him for fourteen years, barely scolding or punishing him for his mistakes. It's true that we never treated him like he was one of us, but we loved him as much as we could afford,

or we wouldn't bother with a nickname. He was our errand boy, so he had to contribute somehow, as all of us do. Having him do some work isn't mistreatment, it's normal."

"There is something you're leaving out; I can sense it in the way you talk. I know this is difficult for you, but I need you to tell me everything that you know about him."

"...Well, over the past few years, Chorrier grew more distant. There wasn't anything obvious to show it but I noticed a few changes. He spent more time alone, often gazing into the ether, and he seemed a bit more unwilling to interact with us, although it was such a slight difference that most of the people didn't seem to notice. I only did because I've been observing the boy since the day he was born. I didn't think it was something to worry about, though, and I thought that he was going through something he'd get over quickly."

It didn't take long for me to see the signs. This Chorrier clearly felt more and more alienated while growing up. What made him leave, though?

"Did he ever speak with a noble or anyone who had military status whilst living here?"

"Not really. As you can imagine, nobody of that status ever came here, aside from those who were always coming and going while on some business elsewhere. Well, besides you of course... Oh, and there was that paladin."

"A Paladin came to this village? Why would he come here?"

"We had a crook, stealing our food and ale for a year. We called him Brute, for that was what he was, and was using Thrassos as almost his personal slave to do his errands. We eventually told the tax collector, when he finally showed up, to inform the authorities about him. Once the paladin arrived and arrested the criminal, it was Chorrier who pulled the cart to Petalo."

"Anything else?"

"Nobody else of importance, sir. He is a typical peasant like us... Well, except that he can read and write."

“How is that possible?”

“A scholar named Lavrakis stayed here for a year and took enough of a liking to the led that he taught him over the course of a year. This was about four years ago.”

“I see. And did he give a reason as to why he didn’t stay in the hamlet after he returned?”

“If I am to believe Ms. Lumberjackson, it’s because we sent a girl he liked to become a nun.”

“Was this the last time he was here?”

“No, it was the time after that, when he was dressed in a nobleman’s attire and was spouting nonsense about being a ruler to the north and being chased by his generals. I wasn’t there but, from what I heard, everybody had one big laugh and thought he was just spinning tales.”

The tapping began increasing in speed.

Tap-tap-tap-tap

“Do you know how suspicious all of this sounds?”

“They sound pretty normal to me. If Thrassos is somehow this tyrant you speak of, it has nothing to do with our little place. The fact that you would dare say that he was capable of such vile things is, frankly, the more suspicious thing here.”

He was unable to see what’s in front of him. If I recapitulate everything he told me, it comes down to the following: Thrassos grew up with no parental figures, he was nothing more than an errand boy his entire life, he was taught how to read and write, something most peasants aren’t capable of doing, was abused by a crook during his last year in this village, which had to have scarred the boy mentally, he was then taken by a paladin and then traveled to other places, for it doesn’t take more than a few days to walk from here to Petalo unless he’s been elsewhere, he was then driven over the edge when he learned that the one person he liked the most was taken from him by the

church, meaning there was nothing keeping him here, leading to a grudge that he no doubt held before this point boiling over to full on hatred, especially since they made fun of him.”

As I continued with my summation, I could see the elder losing his patience with me. Ignoring his growing resentment, I decided to tell him what this story led to.

“After all that he had seen and experienced, do you know what your dear Chorrier did? He went off to the sierra, a place crawling with pagans who are desperate for someone to lead them. He somehow found dragon armor that would give him authority and means to get revenge on those who wronged him... and after what you did, he set his mind on that dark course. Everything that has befallen us, was because of the misery he suffered. He needed help from you and this village... and you failed him, leaving us all in great peril.”

The elder looked like he was about to pull out a sword from thin air and lash out at me half-way through this explanation. It was too much for him to bear and, even when he did pull himself together, he was clearly angry.

“With all due respect, your honor, you are jumping to vile conclusions. Chorrier is but a normal boy of a mundane hamlet and he is no monster.”

“He better not be because, on the off chance that my assumptions are right, as far as the Church is concerned you and your hamlet will be guilty of fostering a demon-worshipping warlord.”

“Everything you said was convenient coincidences, and I am frankly insulted that you would use such lies to put blame on the people here for the army’s failure to stop some savages.”

The tapping was now in overdrive, as I was piercing the elder with suspicion.

Taptaptaptap!

“From what I heard that pagan is on a quest to spread false religions that will end the peace the Archbishop worked hard to establish. As it stands, I do not believe this hamlet is part of a conspiracy. Aside from the fact that this place is geographically unimportant, and neglected by the rest of the world, you clearly prefer things that way, and it’s obvious you have not even had any contact with this boy in months nor were you able to see the warning signs as to what he might have become. The fact that you refuse to believe any of this and your faith in this Chorrier boy shows you had no dark intentions in regards to his upbringing. Be that as it may, if the campaign fails and the tyrant is not disposed of, the ones in charge, in their desperation will seek someone to blame ... you will be the first on their list.”

The only response the representative of the hamlet could give, is to grit his teeth in an indignant rage as he continues to glare.

“What can we do?” The elder’s voice was filled with suspicion and unease as I get up from my seat.

“At this point? Hope this Chorrier boy shows up in your village soon and that he was off doing something else entirely or, if he is the tyrant running amok, that he doesn’t annex more territories or make a move on Rodia. Oh, and try not to lose your temper when I’m gone.”

“Why would I?”

“People tend to lose trust in their leaders if they are not constantly being kept at bay with paladins and Crude-Sayers*. However, that can’t be helped under these circumstances. Besides, it’s obvious that you wish I was dead for speaking ill of that boy and this village.”

To the elder’s credit, he didn’t deny my last accusation.

“You’re accusing a boy that we raised, as close as we could, as one our own to be some villainous demon trying to destroy this kingdom. You’re threatening to wipe us out if it turns out to be true, as unlikely as it is. Why wouldn’t I wish for you to experience such a fate?”

“Why indeed?”

-//- 15. Duke -//-

7th day of Fallen Leaf Month (POV: Tulipios)

“Ow, a most unpleasant journey.” the agitated prince said, as he boarded his carriage. “I want to cut ties with this horrible place, until the duke cleans his mess.”

“That could take years my liege.” his advisor replied, an old man with a small, white moustache and a red, cone-shaped hat. “By then his daughter will most likely have been taken by someone else.”

“I shall wait, it’s not like anyone can kill that enormous beast.” He popped his head outside the window. “What’s the holdup? Guards, open the gate so that we can be on our way.”

“That wouldn’t be wise, my liege.” a scarlet-clad rider exhaled from the front of the carriage. “There’s a sandstorm approaching. We should wait until it passes.”

“Excuse me, chump, but that’s no storm.” a purple-clad guard corrected him. “It’s easy to fool people that do not live in this wasteland.”

“Then what in the Depthole is it?”

“Feet. Lots and lots of feet are walking this way.”

“What for; is it tribute day or something?”

“No such thing exists here, nor are we expecting any guests today.”

“Well, to what creatures do those feet belong to?”

“We will only know when they are very close. The smokescreen is making it impossible to tell from here.”

“The trip is canceled nonetheless; this is all too suspicious. My superiors, please go back inside immediately and someone inform the duke about this.”

“Aww, first that beast, now this.” the prince complained. “It’s as if I am detested by the whole territory.”

The advisor took his hand, as if he was a little boy.

“Please, my prince, hurry before your clothes get dusty.”

The small army of intimidating men, dressed in spiky black and partially red armor encountered the main gate. It wasn't shut as they'd expected, but rather open enough for a single man to walk out. More specifically, a tall and well-built soldier dressed in red, enough to block their way inside.

“I am Vazos*, master of the guard.” he introduced himself, with his hand holding a longsword firmly. “I do not know who you are and quite frankly I don't care enough to find out.” The index of his free hand pointed behind him. “Here resides the ruler of this land. Unless you want to fight with him and the lords of the surrounding territories, I'd suggest that you turn around this instant.”

A rather skinny man amongst them was pushed forward. He was the only one with a helmet on to hide his head, which usually indicates who the leader is. Yet they were whispering his lines to him, as if he was uncertain, or didn't want to be the one doing the talking. Eventually, he spoke up.

“I-If your masters surrender, we will end... end this peacefully... Hm, what?... Yes. We will not hurt those who come out unarmed.”

“You're a terrible jester.” Vazos smirked. “If you are the impostor that I've heard about, you'll need more than empty words.” He pointed his sword forward. “Last warning, usurper. Turn around or I'll be forced to put an end to your puny little rebellion right here.”

“Can't we s-settle this like... civilized men?”

“Have it your way!”

Seeing how none of the invaders were holding weapons, he was certain that he could finish off their sorry excuse for a leader, before his archers could take out the rest of the enemy. He sprinted toward the enemy whilst performing a vertical slash that was aimed at the head. His cowardly opponent tried to protect his face with his gauntlets, foolishly expecting to block the attack. Surprisingly enough, they did, as the force of the blade sent him to the ground but didn't cut through the armor or his flesh. The men atop the wall gasped in amazement, the men around the two on the ground floor began laughing.

“What sorcery is this?” Vazos stepped back hurriedly. “Shoot them; don't just stand idly!” he yelled at his men, passing through the open door, shutting it behind him. The invaders didn't even attempt to rush forward. They took their time helping their leader to his feet and wearing helmets of their own, before calmly walking forward.

Tulipios, completely uninterested in the ruckus outside and ignoring the warnings of his master of the guard, was preoccupied in the dressing room, looking through which gown should he wear during supper. There was nothing to fear from the impostor as he had no means of spreading his demoralized uprising, and with the neighboring nobles being unable to pass the dragon hunt, there was still nothing that could garner his interest.

It was a delight to discover from the balcony of his private quarters, that the insurrection had not only ended but that a small army of armored men were already surrounding the mansion's walls.

“So much for your reassurance!” his brother yelled after barging in the room, with his accent removed for your convenience. “They are yelling about the Man of Prophecy and are wearing armor.”

“Are these really our minions? Where did they find those spiky monstrosities?” he pondered in amusement.

“Who cares? Focus on figuring out how we can repel these invaders.”

“Relax, Kardamos.” he chuckled softly. “The combined forces of ours and the prince’s are about equal from what I gather. With the gate bolted and our men at the ramparts, we clearly have the advantage.”

The duke quickly became disappointed with the usurper’s amateurish strategy. How could he expect to win in a head-on battle? If he had half the brain that the duke had, then stealth and sabotage would’ve been the way to go. Even if he plans to siege the fort, winter is close and everything in this territory is barren. His men will starve and freeze long before the stored provisions in the mansion’s cellar are depleted. What a dolt this impostor is; not even nearly as worthy as Tulipios. Oh well, it was to be expected of anyone who did not have proper education in war and government, like he did. The chronicles he was translating in particular had made him a formidable tactician.

What the noble and everyone else inside the walls didn’t know about however, was the special power that their armor possessed. Despite the rain of arrows the invaders had taken head on, none of them had gotten killed or even injured. The arrowheads bounced off as if they were up against solid rock, enraging their owners while banging on the gates.

“This is hopeless. Boss, it’s the Man of Prophecy we are up against.” a fellow soldier addressed the master of the guard. “We can’t kill them because they are fated to win.”

“I don’t believe in that nonsense. What I care about is how we are wasting our arrows.”

“They’re not worth the money that they were paid for. I propose that we surrender.”

“Are the rest of you lads ok with that?” Everyone who heard him on the ramparts replied acceptingly of his proposal in unison and ceased fire. “What about you down there?” he looked at the scarlet-clad riders, the prince’s men on standby in case the walls were breached.

“-It is foolish to mess with fate. -He had the flake with him; I saw it. -If you are destined to rule this land, who are we to question it?”

Realizing the futility of this struggle, he spread the decision to the rest.

“Everyone stop! The battle has already been lost.”

“Well, that was faster than I thought.” one of the attackers commented, causing a burst of laughter from the rest.

“You down there!”

“Us?”

“Yes, you. What are your demands?”

“You expect a deal?”

“Yes, it’s just a job we were having here, not worth dying over it. What can we do to get out of this alive?”

“Death to them all! They do not deserve to be bargained with!” one of them shouted.

“We are not the Royal Guard variant, ok?” the master of guard explained. “No pledge of honor weighs heavily on our souls. Make the bloody deal.”

“-Justice! -Retribution! -Punishment!” the attackers began shouting, before one of them, who appeared to be their leader, came forward.

“They are more terrified of the magic our armor possesses rather than not getting their next salary.” More laughing broke out in their ranks before he continued. “That wasn’t supposed to be funny, you guys; accept their surrender.”

“-No! -It’s a trick! -They want to ambush us inside!”

“I give you my word, there is no trickery at play here!” the master of the defenders said trying to calm them down.

“Those are just the words of a filthy mercenary!” they were quick to reply.

“Ok, enough, let them prove that they mean it.” the leader calmed them down.

“-So be it! -The nobles! -Bring out those soft-bottomed bastards!” they agreed in their frenzied little way.

With that in mind, the mercenary went to update his superiors on a few sudden changes.

“What do you mean you surrendered?” Kardamos gasped. “We gave no such order.”

“If you can’t beat them, join them.”

“It’s been less than an hour.”

“The outcome is already clear, and we don’t want to be on this sinking ship any longer.”

“What is this insolence? Do you realize you are betraying a noble house?”

“Maybe you’ve forgotten that we’re hired swords, sir. We’re here for the money; not you.”

“This means death for you all!”

“Actually it doesn’t. The new lord will pardon us if I hand you over to him.”

“The new lord? You don’t mean...”

“Yes, that one. Now follow me peacefully, unless you prefer to be roughed up by your former men standing outside, before being tossed aside.”

“Cowards! You will be hanged for this. After a Pendatha of unspeakable torture.”

The duke, still unfazed by the situation placed his right hand on his brother’s shoulder.

“Stop wasting your breath on him. Let’s try to negotiate with the usurper.”

Some cooperated, most had to be dragged out, but eventually after hours of threatening and an occasional punch or kick, all the nobles were in the courtyard with their hands tied in a fashion similar to the peasants they drafted for the dragon hunt. Amongst them the one standing out was the prince of Paparunia, crying like a little girl. The rest were mostly trying to intimidate their captors.

“Our families will avenge us, turning their entire armies against you!”

Then the large wooden doors receded for the conquerors to enjoy the spoils of victory. The first thing they witnessed was the center of their hatred, dressed in satin and silk, tied up and immobilized like cattle ready to be slaughtered.

“-Off with their heads! -Take the gold! -Burn this place!”

“Wait you fools, we are more useful to you alive.” the duke spoke up. “Where is he, the Man of Prophecy? I demand that you bring him to me.”

“Um... Here I am.” one of them spoke in a rather worried voice.

Tulipios was still unimpressed. How did this scrawny boy manage to pull this off? His legs are shaking and are giving off an air of uncertainty.

“Is this really him?” he looked at a pale and sweating Kardamos, trembling next to him.

“Alas, it is. I am doomed brother; he will have my head for all I said in Nearfear.”

“Don’t look at him and stay silent; I will try to salvage all I can from this... sinking ship.” He turned back to the Chosen One. “You passed the test and took over my house. How about we settle this by giving you my daughter, as tradition demands?”

“Your... what?”

“You can be a legal successor to the throne this way, it won’t turn the other houses against you for this vile takeover, and everyone gets to keep their heads. What say you?”

He stood there, unable to give a decisive answer. What a buffoon! At least this makes him easier to control if you pander to him enough.

“I will... think about it. For now let's house your family somewhere safe. Not in the mansion; that's for sure.”

“Then, the dungeon it is!” the traitorous Vazos jumped to propose. “The place they were... convincing their less cooperative minions.”

Many nobles protested his suggestion but were silenced once the duke raised his left palm.

“This is no place for us but I must agree that it is safer than any hovel. It will prevent us from escaping or any of your men killing us in a moment of passion.”

“Then... let's take you there.” the new duke nodded. “Where is this dungeon you speak of?”

“A few miles eastward.” the master of the guard said whilst directing them. “Nobody is guarding it at the moment; we haven't had any mishaps in a long time. Not anymore, though.”

“So be it. Spernis? Are you here?” he looked around.

“Yes?” he replied, coming out of the mansion with several colorful dresses in his lap.

“Drop those. You and your closest buddies will escort me to the dungeon, where you will stay as guards.”

“Guarding what?”

“Them. The nobles.”

“Weren't we supposed to execute them for what they did?”

“No, they must be protected.”

“As what? Hostages? Do we need a ransom despite all of these riches?”

“We're prisoners of war, you twat!” the duke explained in a not so polite manner. “To bargain with the other noble houses.”

Spernis went into a fit of rage as he let his loot fall onto the grass before his feet, getting ready to choke the duke. He was stopped in time by his so-called leader.

“Don’t do that; we need them alive to achieve peace!”

“Didn’t you hear how he spoke even when he is at our mercy? I tell you, we need to execute a few, as a warning to the rest.”

“No. Now obey or... or the wrath of the goddess shall fall upon you!”

“Fine, ok.” he grumbled and kicked the ground a few times to cool down.

“So, that’s how he was controlling them.” thought the duke. *“Not with talent nor might but through their fear of the gods. Interesting.”*

“Are there any carriages that can take them there?”

“Four of them, including the prince’s.” Vazos kept orienting his new master.

“They are all currently in the stable.”

“Good. Ok, all of you, start walking towards there.” he clapped at the Tulipians, as if it was bed time for children.

“All but me.” exclaimed a young woman with curly hair and a fan in her hand, residing amongst the nobility.

“You don’t get to choose where you will go, my dear. Follow the rest to the carriages.”

“That is not the way to talk to your new wife.”

“My new... what?”

“That is Kannavia*, my only child.” explained the duke. “She is to be betrothed to you.”

“Oh, in that case she can stay. Everyone treat her nicely; you hear?” he yelled at his scary looking men, who agreed in a hurry, as they hurried like starving wolves at the riches of the mansion. “Good. The rest of you, head for the stables.”

“Aren’t you forgetting something?” said his new wife. “Father, if you may.”

The duke half-heartedly removed his wide leathered and mostly gold-plated belt and stretched his hand out towards me.

“I am in no need of belts; my pants are holding up just fine.”

“This is no ordinary belt, duke. Just like the dragon flake is proof of passing the test, this is the proof that you rule over this land. It is a duke’s equivalent to a king’s crown.”

“Oh, I guess I will take it then, along with you.”

“Like any true noble would.”

“B-But of course. What else... would I be?”

“Remember everything I told you. Stay strong.” Tulipios said to his daughter, while giving her a rudimentary hug. His tied hands were not the reason.

“I will, father.” she whispered while her head was next to his ears. “I will get all of you out soon; just wait.”

-//- 28. Tolmi -//-

4th day of Rain Month (POV: Damazis)

The name of the little tavern the three of them went to was called the Fearless Mussel. Unsurprisingly to everyone, the menu was all about fish as its main ingredient; not that different from the nameless swamp hamlet where everything had to do with mushrooms. The blond boy was in no mood to taste any of them, since he was sick of the smell of salt and iodine, so he only ordered bread, hoping they hadn't yet invented a formula for making loafs out of fish flour.

“So, you see, our grandparents were refugees from Kanelonia* and...” The blond man's historical analysis of the origins of their village was interrupted violently by the boy, which was much more eager to be informed about other things.

“You can tell her about all that later; where is everybody now? Dad, mother, Plinda*? Are they...”

“Relax, we are all fine.” He patted the boy on the head. “We headed for the mountains where we found refuge with our new lord.”

“That Thrassos guy, right? Where have I heard that name before?” he gazed upwards, trying to remember. “Ria, does it remind you of anyone?”

The girl with the dark brown hair next to him didn't reply, but seemed really worried by everything she was hearing.

“There are many going by that name” the man continued “but none is like him. He killed a huge dragon and shared with us his treasure hoard, a stash of dragon armors.”

“Like the one you don right now?” the boy looked at the black metal covering the man's body.

“Exactly. Dragon skin is magical in a way; it reflect arrows and sword slashes without leaving a dent. It’s thanks to them that we managed to take over Tulipia and Paparunia in less than a month.”

“Ha, who would have guessed that all you boring villagers would become conquerors. I almost regret leaving that place.”

“This man” Ria spoke for the first time “how did he find you or why did he help you out?”

“Not sure; something to do with fulfilling a prophecy. What matters is that we are now unstoppable.”

“I want to meet him.”

“He is a noble, he can’t waste time talking to every commoner he comes across.”

“I am sure he will want to see me.”

“Man, is she full of herself or what?” the boy chuckled.

“Laugh all you want, Damazis, but once we are done here, his mansion is the first place I plan to go to.”

-//- 19. Hermit -//-

10th day of Fallen Leaf Month (POV: Depo)

As soon as he heard the cheerful tweeting of birds, signaling the coming of first light, the old man slowly got up from his reed bed. The Tsiuniz* wakeup call was the old-fashioned way, used by his forefathers since antiquity, countless years before those mechanical Timalfian contraptions reached his musty valley to change everything. No need to change that which was never bothersome, unlike so many others who were moving further away from tradition with each passing season.

What followed was his usual routine, which had been perfected by repetition. Some could brag about their swordsmanship, their craftsmanship, or their adventures as they roamed the world, to gather artifacts from far off civilizations. He asked for none of those things and was content with his daily cultivation schedule. Stretching, washing, dressing, wrapping a big slice of cheese and a loaf of bread in an extra tablecloth, before donning his weathered woolen overcoat, getting out of his aged little hut and heading for his corral, up in the hills.

Try to find any of those snotty foreigners willing to do that for a decade without being bored in a few days. If he could bet his cheese supply on this, he was sure to have enough to go through ten winters. Of course there wasn't anyone around to bet anything, but in theory, if there was, there would surely be none able to mimic his lifestyle without losing his sanity. He was the only one with this talent, able to perform it even blindfolded if needed, and he was pleased with it.

And there was more to it. He was proud enough to refuse help in his advanced age. His eyes had lost their clarity, his feet were struggling to maintain the body

weight, his back had lost its straightness. Others would have retired a long time ago, or at least they would have sought the aid of glow-orbs in order to avoid the nasty trip-stones. Not him though. Who needs pesky machines when he himself was a living contraption, moving mechanically in whatever he was doing?

Having memorized every inch of his valley, he was safe not only from trip-stones, but also from push-rocks, slip-slopes, bump-holes, even pull-pits. He could tell every trick in the book those pranksters were using, from messaging him to go the wrong way, to faking a cry for help, to even filling his heart with doubt. Not even this cloudy day that promised a downpour would be enough to make him change his routine.

He reached his corral, safe as always, and watered the Mutan* before gathering their pink milk in the grey pot, and sweeping the ground around their roots from sick-fallen leaves. Afterwards, he sat next to the fence and began chewing some of his lunch, until Grampa-Tim arrived with his carriage to take the pot, in exchange for tomorrow's lunch of cheese, bread, and sometimes sausages, along with a freshly clean pot to put in the next batch.

After yet another successful salary, the old man finished up the tiding of his little place and headed back to the hut early in the evening. The dark clouds hiding the sun loomed threatening above him, but it didn't seem like they would start crying before nightfall. He was in no hurry to get home.

Once there, he felt like frying a few sausages, followed by a bowl of yogurt, made from excess milk he kept for curdling. Fed and content, he would then wear his night garment and hit the bed at the crack of night. He would have done this, as he had done countless times before, if it wasn't for a sudden realization, as he was taking the

frying pan from the stone sink. There was a young short-eared boy dressed in fancy beige-colored clothes, sitting on his stool.

Struggling not to get into a fit of rage for going out of his way by having a visitor after who knows how many decades, he made the obvious question.

“What the...? From where did you appear from?”

“I’ve been standing here for hours, actually. You just didn’t notice me all this time.”

No surprise there; he was doing everything so mechanically, it was hard to take notice of anything that did not fit into his procedure. This intruder was breaking eons of tradition, and the old man didn’t like changes.

“Please forgive my intrusion but I was in dire need of a shelter.” begged the unwanted youth. “It will rain soon, and my Hippopedinos hurt its foot. It is unable to carry me any further.”

“Hrmf, you got pe-trolled*; didn’t you?” asked the Old-him, as he fueled the stove with more firewood, while trying his best not to change what he was supposed to be doing.

“I don’t know what that means, but I lost my way as it was getting dark. Some rocks in this valley began messing with my head and...”

“That is what pe-trolled means.” he interrupted him, while trying to lit some lay with the flint. “And that is why you do not use mounts and trust nobody but your own feet.”

“Oh, I am only familiar with the mundane stone variant from below the mountains.”

“Hm, whatever, so why are you still here, ruining my peace and quiet?” He began moving the sausage around, so it would be cooked properly on both sides. The pan wasn’t even heated yet, but he was really nervous and couldn’t stop his automatic actions.

“It was not intentional; I will be on my way in the morning, as long as I find my way to Kanelonia. Maybe you can help me; I have a map with me.”

“I never use such contraptions.” He put the barely cooked sausage on a tin plate, and sprinkled some grated dry herb on it for flavor. “I take pride in not using anything other than a broom and a shovel, and I do not plan to make any exceptions for you.”

“Oh, I see. Then can you point the way for crossing the northern mountains?”

“There is only one path, the one you came from.” he pointed southwards as he took the first bite. “Unless you have a flying carpet or are an expert climber, forget it.”

“Oh dear, so it’s a dead end.”

“I am very much alive, you know!” he bumped his fist on the wooden table in distain.

“I didn’t mean it that way. It’s just...”

“I know what you meant; anything that doesn’t serve you spoiled foreigners, is immediately labeled death.” He ended his meal after a few bites of raw sausage and got up in a hurry.

The youth looked outside the window, as a flash appeared in the sky.

“It is too late to backtrack at this hour. Can you please give me a blanket to keep myself warm?”

“Are you implying that you wish to spend the night here?” He dipped the plate and the fry into a bucket of water.

“Yes, and please share some of your food as well? I have coins; I can pay for it.”

“Coins, bah, you foreigners think you can use those pieces of metal for everything.” He left them to soak and took his night garment at hand. “We deal only with barter around here, and if it’s not edible it’s useless.”

“I see. Can you then treat me some for free? I will repay you somehow in the future.”

Old-him didn’t like surprises. He didn’t perfect his routine by letting chaos dictate his life. Spring branch trimming at the Mutans, and autumn repairs at the hut’s

roof was as far as he would allow his daily activities to diverge; and even those he would gladly skip if he had control over Father-Weather. Sadly, he did not, so when Tsiunez were sucking up his precious milk, or Grampa-Tim was late in his pot exchange, Old-him was getting angry at the whole world. This fellow appearing out of nowhere unexpectedly, was no exception. In his mind, the schedule was scrambled, endangering everything he had accomplished after countless repetitions. It was insufferable, and needed to be dealt with immediately, so that things could return to their normal flow.

“No, I do not share my stuff. Now get out before I kick you out.”

In response, a crack of thunder was heard from outside, followed by the sound of raindrops hitting the wooden rooftop.

“You wouldn’t chase away a fellow man in this weather, would you?”

Curse you Father-Weather; couldn’t you find a more worse time to be quirky? As apathetic as Old-him was, he still had a sense of guilt, and he sure didn’t want to be responsible for this young man dying of cold at his doorstep. Where would he bury him and how would he explain the delay to Tim?

“I am not that heartless; you can stay. But do not touch anything; I don’t like people touching my stuff.”

“Don’t worry; it’s not like I find anything worthy in here. In my eyes it’s like a dumpster.”

Little comfort did that claim have for Old-him. In his mind, this boy was willing to lift the whole hut and run off with it in the middle of the night, the moment that he closed his eyes. And what is this dumpster he spoke of, anyways? Some place around here he didn’t know its proper name?

“What are you talking about?”

The boy became very awkward all of a sudden.

“Well... Excuse my rudeness, but I would prefer to be honest with you. I grew up in a swamp and nothing there had such a stench.”

“You are just a rude, spoiled brat. My hut is no palace but I smell nothing bad about it.”

“Maybe because you are used to it. For me, it’s worse than a stable.”

It’s true that he rarely opened the door or the windows to aerate the inside. He also didn’t wash his clothes until they had turned from grey to brown, from lots of grime and dirt. He didn’t even bother to take down the spider webs hanging from the ceiling, which had with time turned into grey cords, dancing at the slightest breeze of hot air coming from the stove. It’s not like there was anyone around to be annoyed, and Grampa-Tim never stayed long enough to notice it.

“Don’t test the short-tempered.” he frowned while looking for an extra blanket in the trunk, to hand over to this intruder. “Here!” he threw a dark brown woolen blanket at him. “You can lay down in that corner and you will be glad for it. Unless you pampered rich folk are beyond such concepts as sleeping on the floor.”

That was actually a trap-remark to force him on the defense. He wanted to know more about him; whether he was a con artist with ill intentions, or a regular fool who couldn’t tell which way the road goes.

“Oh, but I am very accustomed to such things.”

“You are? Your clothes imply otherwise.”

“Ah, you see, I wasn’t rich, much less a noble, up until a couple of days ago. My name is Thrassos by the way, what is yours?” he extended his hand, expecting a handshake.

“My name is none of your business.” he looked the other way. “Now lay down and stop messing with my schedule. I need to get up early and I am not sure whether the sun or the birds will help me tell the time if it keeps raining like that.”

“You don’t like surprises, I assume?” he lowered his hand.

“You should apply somewhere for the position of an oracle.” He was half-finished in changing for the night.

“I didn’t like them either; in fact, I was terrified of them. Then before I knew it, one thing led to another and I ended up running away from everything I accomplished.”

“What the Depthole are you referring to? I am not a mind reader like you.” He laid down on his reed bed.

“I can explain if you like. It’s a long and complicated tale, though.”

Another thunderclap was heard from outside, much louder than the previous one.

“This should be amusing.” Old-him chuckled without ever turning to face this Thrassos. “Tell me the basics; they might help me fall asleep faster.”

And figure out if he is a thief; a thought he, of course, kept hidden.

“I will if you like. I am good at telling stories; or so they tell me.”

“A storyteller on top of an oracle! We have ourselves a jack of all trades!” he exclaimed in an obviously sarcastic tone.

“Well, I guess I can skip everything, up until the point my army took over the duchy. That’s where I came from you know; it’s a territory southwards from here.”

“Don’t care about geography; stick to the damn tale!”

“Ok, fine, I will.”

-//- 16. New Ruler -//-

8th day of Fallen Leaf Month (POV: Thrassos)

The decisions that I had to make on the first day of my ruling were easy. I allowed any of the hired swords and staff members to leave if they wished to, with no punishment for serving the former dynasty. Most were puzzled since the only thing they knew how to do so far was to be of servitude to nobles. One of them even said: “Quick, someone tell me what to do with my freedom!”

The dozens of servants, butlers, chambermaids and musicians chatted amongst themselves for a couple of minutes, before a cook with an apron and hands full of dried up dough said: “We decided to stay and be of service to you.”

“Um... ok. If that is what you want.”

None of the purple and red soldiers followed their example. They quickly left their weapons and mounts behind them, and began walking east and southwards, to neighboring territories in the opposite direction of Paparunia. They knew this conflict was far from over and no number of armors would be enough to keep them on the winning side forever.

But I didn't know that yet, and I did nothing to stop them, as promised.

Then I focused on stopping the plundering of the mansion, as the village youths were craving for spoils of war. Many in their mania couldn't be stopped from breaking and shredding anything they didn't fancy. By the time I came back from the stables, a big part of it was already in shambles. Small fires caused from overturned lit candles,

and incandescent firewood had burned several tapestries as well as some pieces of furniture, and the smell of smoke would stick around for Pendathes.

“Whoa, hey, stop! Why are you vandalizing my new home, you guys? Didn’t we come here for something to feed our families with?”

Eventually, everybody calmed down and began distributing food and clothing equally to every family.

We were pleased to find much more than loafs of bread amongst the provisions in the cellar, enough to last us for several months. We were also shocked with the amount of opulence the nobles had stashed there, in the form of jewelry filled with precious stones, as well as velvet fabrics, sensational perfumery, and at least sixty sets of silverware. All of which were enjoyed by roughly two dozen people for who knows how many decades. Vanity in its mightiest form.

After that came the spreading of the news amongst the population. Messengers were sent immediately to every village, informing them about the change in command. Of course, I had to play along and include in the message that it was the Man of Prophecy who rules them now.

“Rejoice Tulipians, as the Day of Plenty is upon us!” many of them heard from a traveling priest.

Netelis did a good job in preventing panic and uprising with his preaching.

“Do not believe the lies of those treacherous nobles. Our lord and savior Thrassos will make our crops grow and our land prosper. Be glad and thankful to the Goddess for her long-awaited gift.”

By nightfall, everybody in Tulipia was celebrating as they were looking forward to an era of prosperity.

That era never came. But I didn’t know that yet.

Many of the men had taken off their armors and were running around, laughing and singing around a huge campfire, fueled by the mansion's excess of woodwork. Some had even decorated their peasant clothes with jewelry, crudely sewn on their blouses, describing it as a bad habit of their former homeland, which I had no qualms about. I couldn't even order them to put them back where they found them since they deserved their reward for aiding me. Also, I was feeling really tired because of everything that transpired today, so I retired for the night rather early.

The mattress of the bed I slept on that night, in the duke's private quarters no less, was enough to make a peasant feel like he died and went to heaven. Yet these people were living like that all their lives like it was a normal thing. I can only imagine how hellish the dungeon will feel to them. Ironically, the place where, in the past, they threw in anyone who was refusing to pay his taxes, or hand over one of his daughters as a plaything.

Handing over daughters... Just like they did with my Ria. Where is she now, I wonder?

As I was lying and waiting to fall asleep, I noticed a pretty beaten up cylinder on the commode to my right. Its status made me curious of what such an old thing would be doing here. Its wooden case is plain punk and the codex is not made of parchment; it's some sort of reed or mat. It is worn out, easy to rip, with many of its symbols faded by the evaporated ink, making it hardly readable. They even seemed to be in the old tongue, using a type of symbology from when speech and writing were much more different. I can barely make out a few scattered words, and patch together the meaning of the sentences. There is no way I can read any of this; I might as well throw it away and...

Wait, what is this I see under it? A much newer parchment, full of notes and corrections. Was it a translation? I checked the two first lines in the two texts and I could see similar iconography. It had to be a translation, but by whom? Was it the duke or someone else?

I feel too tired to look into it any further; I might check it later. For now, my body needs rest. I let sweet dreams of me and Ria running merrily in a flowery meadow preoccupy my thoughts, with the reassurance that for a while, I'm leaving behind a barren land where everything worked out fine in the end.

-//- 9th day of Fallen Leaf Month -//-

... Or so I thought. Sadly, my life does not end like a fairy tale where everybody lived happily ever after. This was evident, from the very first moment I rose from the bed, late in the morning. I was feeling light as a feather, ready to take on the whole world.

But first, I had to look at those notes from yesterday a bit more, as I was really curious of their importance. With proper light, I could clearly read the title as the Kaliniki's chronicles. I had never heard of that name before, but luckily the duke has left a parenthesis to the side: "A queen of old with some unconventional opinions."

Really, about whom I wonder? I look through the first page and stumbled upon a mention of Agathon. Is this from his time? Was this queen one of the city-states that pledged loyalty? Close to it, I see some wise advice for how one should rule his people.

"The act of theft is not rooted in thieves but in the causes of their creation. Mercy is unrewarded aid. Proper charity, free from demands, is an obligation. Freedom is not limited by any binds but extends beyond one's dynasts."

Nice quotes I can use later on. It won't even be the first time I will be mimicking others to have it my way.

“Ahem!” I stopped reading when a feminine voice faked a cough at the door. It was Kannavia, my alleged wife. She seemed to have been standing there for some time.

“Oh, good morning. Is there something that I can do for you? Is it about the marriage ceremony or something of that nature?”

“Something along those lines. But you cannot address me without at least looking proper first.”

I was still getting accustomed to the way these people stretched the R in whatever they say. It wasn't hard to filter it out as the chat went on.

“My clothes are not dirty.”

She brought her fan to her face and looked at me with contempt.

“It's not filth that is improper. It's the attire.”

“The what? ... Oh, you mean... I look like a peasant?”

“You catch on fast.”

“I will be wearing the Belt of Ruling. Won't that be enough?”

“It takes more than that for you to resemble a duke of Tulipia instead of a Balltato farmer, my dear.”

“I see. Can you wait for me in the dining hall? I will be there shortly.”

She refused to say anything else and began walking away slowly. Fine, I will make her take me more seriously if I don't look like a country bumpkin... Even though I am. I personally don't see what all the fuss is about in needing to look proper. For me, all clothes up until then were no more than pieces of cloth to protect yourself from the elements. These nobles are really picky.

I opened the duke's wardrobe only to be stunned by the number of colors and shapes. I am getting dizzy just by looking at them; how am I supposed to choose? As I turned around, I spotted a butler passing by, a skinny old man with snow-white hair and a very wrinkled serious face. I called for him to come in.

“How may I serve you, my... new duke?”

That last part oozed with disbelief. Clothes do make the man to these people. I gradually understood more as to why it's so important to them.

“I have trouble choosing what to wear. Can you help me? Something rather plain if possible.”

He checked me out, looked at the wardrobe and exclaimed without lifting a finger.

“Third from the left, sir. The beige fits your skin complexion and is close to the clothes you already wear.”

“Why, that's a wonderful suggestion. Thank you... um... your name?”

“I am but a servant, sir. No need to know it.”

“I insist!”

“Fine, sir. I am called Tuvlinos, and up until now I have been the master of ceremonies for twelve years.”

“I do not know much of that, but could you be my fashion critic, if it's not much of a bother?”

“It is not my choice to decline, sir. I am under your command.”

“Right, I guess you are. So, can you help me wear it? Never had one before and it looks more complicating than a simple shirt and trousers.”

“As you wish, sir.”

The door closed, and the dressing procedure began. It was indeed something I couldn't do alone. Many frills needed stretching, several buttons needed bucking in my

side and back. Not to mention the leather boots that needed knotting to stay in place, instead of slipping your feet inside as I did with my clogs. The only thing I could manage by myself was wearing the Belt of Ruling, and only because I needed to place one ring inside another, at the end of each side.

“It fits you well, sir.”

“Thank you, Tuvlinos. Do you think I look better in crimson?”

He didn’t get to answer, as a knock at the door was heard, followed by a familiar voice.

“My lord, can I talk with you in person?”

I recognized the voice; it was the elder of the refugees.

“Sure, you may come in. And cut the lord; simply call me Thrassos. This counts for you too, Tuvlinos.”

“Very well... Thrassos. Will that be all for now?”

“Yes, you may leave.”

“Thrassos, can we talk in private for a few minutes?” said the elder as he was coming in.

“Sure... um... your name?”

“Orgonis*.”

“Sure, Orgonis. Tuvlinos, close the door on your way out.”

“May I take your old clothes away?”

“Sure, but only for washing. Do not throw them away.”

“As you wish, Thrassos.”

He used my name as a synonym for ‘lord’, instead of speaking in a more personal way. I will explain that to him later; for now, I have more people I need to talk with.

“Make it snappy; I have the duchess waiting for me.”

“Can I be... frank with you?”

“But of course, there is nothing to be afraid of...”

“I don’t like you.”

“... Excuse me?”

“I hate what you are doing to my countrymen. We were supposed to start a new settlement in the mountains, not establish our own duchy.”

“Well, as you see, we were all forced to take part in this...”

“No, we were not,” he shook his head. “You threw us into your power play by filling our youths’ minds with hatred and glory.”

“I did no such...”

“I asked around. There was no ambush set by the duke.” He pointed his finger at me. “Or was there, since *you* are the new duke and it was all your idea?”

“Now hold on there...”

“You played us well and we fell for it so easily. Good job.”

“We have the armor; there is nothing to be afraid of...”

“How will a hundred sets of armor stop the several thousands of slayers coming this way? We are out in the open; they can overrun all the villages easily.”

By Her tail; I never thought of that. The dragoons will be safe against any army, but they will be unable to defend the peasants, in case of an invasion from another territory.

“I... will discuss this with the others.”

“Whom are you talking about? The four lads you anointed as your generals? I have known them since they were babies; brave but know nothing of warfare. Just like you.”

My mind was going blank while my heart was racing. Nothing I could say would make a difference.

“Please... I need to go see my wife. Don’t hold me here any longer.”

“Do as you like, oh mighty Thrassos. It is not in my power to control the slightest thing. I only want you to know how you made my people enemies of the surrounding noble houses, instead of letting us be on our way.”

I was walking fast toward the dining room, with cold sweat forming on my forehead. What bag of worms did I open with my silly little plan? Was it even my plan, or was it Schis'? I followed his idea of bringing the refugees there. And was he really the one who was pushing me to do it, or was it the gods all along? Am I just a plaything to them? I don't know. I am not sure about anything anymore.

There she is, sitting in the first chair on the right of the duke's spot. She is eating some sort of red fruit I have never seen before, and not by holding it with her hands. It's on a plate and she cuts it in little pieces with cutlery. A lot of fuss for something so simple.

"Here I am. Are you content with how I look?"

"It's... serviceable."

"Good. Can we start by making it clear that you don't have to marry me?"

"It's not about what I want; it's about what needs to be done. A line of succession."

She sounded really serious about it.

"I mean, I can't force you..."

"Force is what being a ruler is all about. To the people and amongst us."

"Not true; I made my people follow me without forcing them."

"You have the privilege of being the Man of Prophecy. Not all of us are favored by the gods; legitimacy through marriage and fear is what we are left with."

"Treating everyone equally sounds better."

"You cannot rule those who are your equal. Speaking of which, we need to talk about your ruling, my lord and husband." she eats a small piece of the fruit.

"What about it?"

“I presume you spoke with that old man?” she continues to cut the rest of it into small pieces. “We exchanged some very interesting information. Some of it involves you.”

Oh dear, so that is how Orgonis discovered my little scheme. How am I going to get out of this? I stay silent as she continues what appears to be an indoctrination into the ways of a noble.

“Did it ever cross your mind why we use porters and not wagons for transporting our baggage?”

“No, it didn’t.”

“It would definitely make it faster and less troublesome for everyone. Why do you think we still move around like that?”

“Not enough carriages?”

“Vassalage!”

“Vas-what?”

“This is how we remind them of their place. By making them eat the dust off our carriages, as well as the scraps off our tables. After that, they have no complaints when they pay a tenth of their harvest to us.”

“Is that fruit part of it?”

“Of course not, the soil here is too barren to sustain any sort of fruit trees. The only thing they can pay us with are Ballatoes, which are then used like currency for getting anything we like from Rodia or Kanelonia. This is where this Happyle* came from.”

“Regardless of its origin, you got it through very mean ways.” This finally brought something to mind I could use to make my stand. “I plan to give everyone his own land, by the way. The people who helped me.”

“Rewarding peasants will be the undoing of your brand new dynasty. You should never treat them nicely. Did that elder speak harshly to you in your quarters?”

“Yes. I am not angry, though; he was honest and truthful.”

“Irrelevant. You should have him executed for talking badly of his lord.”

“I would never do that.”

“Of course you won’t; you don’t have it in you. That is what will get you killed, along with me for standing next to you.”

“So, what do you propose? Not your father’s release I hope.”

“Of course I do. You need an actual advisor, not those ... pitiful excuses for generals. With no actual combat experience, much less knowledge of politics, they are worthless to you.”

“Why not you? You seem cunning enough.”

“I am but a woman. I barely know the basics compared to the old duke. And there is also the issue of public relations with the other territories. They surely won’t allow a tyrant as their neighbor.”

“I have the armor...”

“They are giants before us; your small cache of weapons means nothing to the likes of Rodia and Kanelonia.”

I lost all faith in my capabilities as a leader. What she was saying was essentially to become what I had just demolished; another exploiting noble who abuses his people.

“Excuse me, I need to go somewhere.”

“If it’s not the dungeon, it’s the wrong place.”

Schistolithis must have something else to give me for this occasion. He has to! I walk hastily outside the mansion, heading for a Hippopedinos in the stable, only to come across some sort of commotion going on. In the middle of it is Spernis, talking loudly in the run-down refugee camp that had formed on top of what used to be a beautiful garden. All that’s left of it is cut-down trees and stepped on flowers.

“Hey, look! Our lord is here, tell him about it,” said some of the—now former—refugees.

“Tell me what? Why are you not guarding the dungeon? Be quick about it; I need to go somewhere.”

“I was, my lord. But early in the morning a dozen Papparuni riders charged towards us, and demanded the liberation of their prince.”

“Oh dear, and what did you do?”

“We refused of course. And since we were armed with swords from Tulipios’ men, we even fought back.”

“Oh dear, oh dear. Did anyone got hurt?”

“None, sir; the dragon armors made us invincible and Feimz is still in his cell, safe and sound.”

“Thank the Goddess, for a moment I thought you...”

“We even drove the riders away, with their numbers halved.”

“You what?! But you just said nobody got hurt!”

“Nobody amongst us. We killed half of the enemy.”

“You ... ki...”

“Killed. Cut down like they were nothing.” He unsheathed his sword; revealing a reddish-brown blade. “There, evidence of our victory. You can go see their corpses if you don’t believe me.”

“Goddess dammit, Spernis!” I slapped the blade downwards.

“Why are you angry, sir?”

“We were doing fine so far, why did you ruin it?”

“We only defended ourselves and prevented the hostages from being taken. Just as you ordered.”

“You murdered people! I said so many times, no bloodshed.”

“It couldn’t be helped, sir. We were defending ourselves.”

“It was also inevitable,” added Orgonis, who was smiling wryly next to him. “I reckon they will return with greater forces, soon.”

“Let them come; we will kill them all, for the glory of our duke.” Spernis laughed, and made many around him cheer.

“My... glory... You kill people... for my...” I stumbled backwards.

Oh my, what have I been doing all this time? Was I really helping myself and this land, or was I hastening everybody’s demise with my delusions of grandeur? I never expected it to be so hard when this whole crazy idea came to me the second I got the flake. I have a million of them now, stitched together into a formidable armory, and I am still not making anyone safe or happy.

“Where are you going, sir? To bring us more men?”

“I need to go back to the cave... speak with the midget... get answers. Do not do anything until I return.”

“What if the Paparunis attack in the meantime?”

“Do not engage them! Give them the prince if you must, but do not unsheathe a single sword. Understood?”

“But sir, you said he is an important pri...”

“Forget what I said! Obey my command or face the wrath of the goddess!”

“...Yes my lord.”

-//- 10th day of Fallen Leaf Month -//-

“You haven’t told me who this midget is,” said Depo, firmly wreathed in his blanket. He hadn’t fallen asleep as he was expecting; the story was very intriguing.

“Oh, I need to backtrack a bit to explain that part. Although it comes down to him being the one who gave me the flake and armor.”

“Ah, so he is the one who broke the natural order of things.”

“You could say that.”

“It’s not a good thing.”

“What thing?”

“Change. Change only causes trouble.”

“Well, it didn’t seem like that at first. I only wanted to help people.”

“It’s always bad. Always.”

Depo recalled the time of the River War when borders were constantly changing. Then the constant influx of machines from Timalfia* made most of the people he grew up with leave or alter their way of living. Then the valley’s shape was altered, from bushes and tree branches withering and sprouting, to trip-stones moving a few inches every few years, forcing him to make slight alterations in his program.

As much as he was trying to maintain his solitary way of living intact, the world around him was slowly but steadily changing. Nothing was exactly the same every time he opened up his eyes and he hated that. What more did this boy do to make things worse? It was too late to ignore it, so he might as well learn more about it.

“Go on with your damn story. I am still far from asleep.”

-//- 17. Midget -//-

9th day of Fallen Leaf Month (POV: Thrassos)

Why did this need to happen? Right when everything seemed to be going smoothly, harmony popped like a soap bubble. Why now? I slept for a few hours only to see what I strived for, in shambles. I rode alone and as fast as I could all the way to the mountain, reassuring my generals that I did not need an escort. No enemies have remained that want to harm me, is what I said to excuse it. An obvious lie.

When I arrived, Schistolithis was laying sideways on a rock outside the cave, almost as if he was expecting me. He was munching on some sort of huge root. Is that what sustained him in this barren place?

Oh, focus Thrassos, these are not the answers you seek at this time.

“So, it’s you after all. Took me awhile to recognize you with those new vegetal products you have.”

“My what?” I looked at my body. “Oh, you mean... my clothes?”

“Yes, those. They are different from last time.”

Of course they were; I was now in the duke’s attire instead of a peasant’s. Strange how he never questioned my nobility so far, dressed like that. Are clothes an alien concept to someone wearing nothing but his own beard for who knows how long?

Let’s not get into that either.

“Yes, I felt like I needed a change. But I didn’t come all the way here to ask for your opinion on my new clothing.”

“Wouldn’t know a thing about it even if you had.”

“I came to find out if the Papparunis or the Rodians are preparing an invasion.”

“That is something I can confirm without having to check from the mountaintop.”

“By Her Divine whiskers, what will I do? Tell me, did anyone else use the armor before us?”

“Of course, this is not the first time I intervene in history. They were far from the brightest fellows.”

“They did it to defend themselves?”

“Yes, just like you. But caused a huge and bloody war because of it.”

“...And they won, right?”

“No, they lost. Pretty badly I must say.”

“By Her black fur, are you implying you knew all along that we were doomed?”

“I imply nothing; the armor is just a tool. They do not assure victory or defeat; it’s all up to how their owners use them.”

“Then tell me, what should I do to make sure I am on the winning side?”

He wasn’t looking at me anymore. He was staring south at the horizon, almost expressionless.

“I cannot help you. I am not a strategist, not aware of the Plan’s trappings.”

“Plan, what plan?”

“Something beyond you and me; we are just peons in a bigger scheme, doing our part.”

“Does this plan include me and everybody else in this land dying horribly?”

“I do not know the outcome. I am just doing my part.”

“Then who does?”

“That is none of your concern, Thrassos. Or do you prefer to be called Chorrier?” I almost had a heart attack when he said that. How did he know my nickname? “Don’t sound so surprised. I didn’t give you the flake at random. I did my research and based on the profiling we made of you, you were a fine agent for the Plan.”

“We? Who is we; what is going on here; I don’t understand.”

“You wouldn’t even if I explained; just be happy at the thought that you were the first to get this far.” He took a few steps back, raised his arms in the air, and continued. “Do you know how many flakes I gave over the years? Lots! All the others threw it away, got scared and did nothing with it, sold it to peddlers for pottery, or got killed the second they went up against the nobles.” Both his hands were now pointing at me. “Only you didn’t repeat any of their mistakes. Be proud.”

“But... it wasn’t me! I wasn’t myself that day; the Goddess was controlling me!”

“Blame anyone you like; the Plan is in motion and you are a vital part of it. What you do next is not up to me, for I gave you all the aid I could.”

“No... no, you cannot abandon me now; tell me what to do!”

I rush at him, aiming to grab him by the neck and shake him like a rattle. Alas, I was prevented from doing so by a black metallic wand he pulled out from his beard. What else does he store in that thing? I never found out.

The way that wand sparkled and made cracking noises a lot like lightning was clear proof of danger and not something meant to be approached.

“Don’t make me hurt you, Thrassos. What I am holding can kill you, if I so wish it. But I don’t. Now leave and go protect your people. They are already being attacked, see?”

I look towards this barren land that is supposed to be my domain. I see smoke coming out from the direction of Dreadview. It’s too far to tell the reason but my mind is telling me what it must be.

Your enemies are here. Your subjects are being attacked. Fight back.

I can’t! I don’t want to order the death of people.

They are already dying. Better them than you. Go there, and order the attack before it's too late!

No... I can't... I won't!

I run towards my mount, as the midget continues his lecture.

“The whole world is about to change; you need to protect your turf. And by doing so, you protect me too.”

I get on as fast as I can, tripping twice on the stirrup.

“If I could do it alone, I would. But I can't. Why do you think I am making a pact with every new duke? If he rules well, I live well.”

I slap the pachyderm, so it can start galloping as fast as it can, without bothering to look back at Schistolithis' shouting.

“Don't ruin this for us! We expect a lot from you!”

The last thing my so-called subjects saw me doing, was stuffing a bag with food, coins, and a map from the cellar. They also saw I no longer wore the Belt of Ruling; I had taken it off and left it on the table of the main hall. When I rode a fresh Hippopedinos from the stable without saying a word, some of them dared to ask.

“-Duke, are the Paparunis attacking us? -What will we do my lord? -Where are you going? -When will you return?”

I ignored all of them and continued past them like they weren't even there. What was there to say? That I no longer wanted to be their ruler? Leave me be already; I do not want to harm you; find a different lord or free your older ones. Whatever you do, it won't be a decision coming from this poor fool. I wanted the burden off my back.

-//- 10th day of Fallen Leaf Month -//-

“What the... you abandoned your people?” Depo turned around to face Thrassos for the first time. He seemed more angry than annoyed.

“What was I supposed to do? I was being used.”

“Ironic, coming from someone who is supposed to be part of a prophesy. You are being used by default.”

“That’s not the same. Schistolithis was not fate; he was a living being.”

“Irrelevant. You allowed yourself to be used because it suits you.”

“I had no other options! I was dragged into this!”

“You could have said no when he gave you the flake. You could have refused to bring those refugees or take this weird armor. You could have done anything you wanted to, but didn’t.”

“Anyone would have done the same. It was the only logical course of action.”

“Then why are you complaining about doing the logical thing?”

“I am not a plaything!” Thrassos sounded like he was about to cry. “I was tricked by that evil midget...”

“From what you told me, he wasn’t evil. He told you the truth.”

“I think so.”

“Also, he let you keep the armor, correct? His toils of decades; something you don’t part with so easily.”

“I... don’t know.”

“Why would he do that, you fooling short-eared? I don’t even want to share my stock of cheese with you, and he gave you his decades-worth craft!”

“Well... it doesn’t matter anymore. I returned to my hamlet, in a futile attempt to go back to my old lifestyle. It didn’t work. Too much had changed.”

-//- 18. Homecoming -//-

9th day of Fallen Leaf Month (POV: Thrassos)

I rode there, dismounted, then tied the Hippopedinos to a trunk as soon as I reached the outskirts of the swamp. The poor thing was certain to sink into the mud because of its weight. I hadn't managed to get far ahead, when Fisherson and his eldest sons who were fishing in a large pond, saw me approaching.

“Look guys, Chorrier is back.”

“Hello my friends. I need your help.”

“What happened? Why are you dressed so fancy?”

“You have to hide me! The generals are probably looking for me!”

“The what? -Are pagans after you? -There are some Crude-Sayers passing by on the other side.”

“No! Not them! Hide me in the guests' lodge and tell no one that I am there.”

“What did you do? And where did you get that Hippopedinos; did you rob someone?”

“It's a long story; I will explain later.”

“Chorrier, have you lost your mind?!” Fisherson blocked my path. “This is not a case of a common poacher that we're talking about.”

“He's right.” his first son nodded. “If the Archbishops' killers come to ask questions, we won't be able to pretend that we don't know anything.”

“If they find out that we lied, they'll slaughter us all.” his other son added.

“Oh dear, you're right.” I covered my face with both hands. “You cannot deny the presence of petty fugitives as you do with a leader of a whole duchy.”

The three of them laughed, thinking I was joking.

“Cut that out and go wear something plain. My back yard is brimming with weeds.”

“I shouldn’t have come here. I am sorry.”

“Hey, are you leaving already? Trying to skip out on the chores, eh?”

“Yes. Yes, I am. Goodbye.”

“When will you be back again, oh mighty duke?”

“If I can help it, never.”

I would have endangered everyone if I had remained there, so I got on my mount, and turned to the northeast. It was the only direction that had remained safe, so I aimed to find the Papia* Highway leading to Timalfia. Its economy is based on trading, so I hoped to find a job as an assistant in a tavern. I seemed to be good at it, judging from Lukaniki’s impressions. If not, there was still the option of Kanelonia beyond the mountain range.

I rode for the rest of the day, spent the night in a grove, and continued the next morning. I somehow managed to get myself lost. I must have taken a wrong turn somewhere because all I found was a narrow mountain path, covered in foliage that didn’t show on the map. No landmarks to help me understand where I was and the mountaintops all looked the same from where I stood.

My mount was exhausted from the long time it had spent galloping, and I didn’t find much to forage in the barren lands of the duchy, so by the time I reached the end of the path I felt very weak. It was then when a sensation I could not explain had taken over me. As if someone placed thoughts into my mind without me being aware of it, I pulled the reins to the left, towards a very steep grassy slope. As expected, the Hippopedinos couldn’t maintain its balance, despite trying to change its course. My persistence led to it tripping, and sliding all the way down. It was only then that the

sensation had left me, and I'd taken notice of how dumb that move was. What was I thinking? Or not thinking?

Lucky for me, I hadn't fallen off the saddle but the animal neighed in pain, as it landed on its front feet with all its weight. Without having any clue of what I was supposed to do in such cases, I dismounted, and looked around, trying to find someone to help me.

At first, all I could see was grass and rocks, which for some reason I wanted to trip on, but held back. There were some houses, but they were all in shambles, abandoned decades ago and half-collapsed by negligence. Then I saw a single hut on top of a hill, which seemed to be in rather good condition. Still not well preserved, since the wood was all cracked, and the roof had a hundred patches of poorly added clay and reed.

It was getting dark and there were rainclouds forming, so even if nobody was there, I would at least have a roof over my head for the night. So, I headed that way, hoping to find a friendly denizen, or sturdy walls. As soon as I opened the door, an awful odor blew right at me. It was not as powerful as the one in Petalo because it lacked the extra boost from alcohol and stagnating meat. It was still a distinctive combination of sweat, piss, and carcass; as if someone never bothered to open a window in years.

There were dozens of spider webs on the ceiling but nothing was dusty. I saw lots of tools, battered but not rusty, and small chunks of pink cheese on the table, dry but not rotten. Someone was definitely living here, that didn't care much about hygiene. I sat on a stool, got used to the stench, and waited for the housekeeper, if one could call him that, to return, hoping he was a gentle fellow.

“And that’s the end of my story. A few hours later you came in and you know the rest. And from the looks of it, there would have been no point in continuing even if I had more to say. Good night old-man.”

-//- 20. Schedule -//-

11th day of Fallen Leaf Month (POV: Depo)

Old-Depo had finally managed to fall asleep but his dreams were far from well. They were a distortion of his memories, along with the fears of someone living in solitude for far longer than a social creature should be allowed to. He was reminiscing over his prime, being alone, shoveling mud inside his corral, covered in dirt and sweat. Suddenly, several children appeared on the fence, Thrassos being amongst them. They were playing and enjoying their carefree youth, until they stopped, pointed at him and began laughing, as if he was a jester.

“What’s so funny you damn brats? Let me work!” he yelled but they didn’t comply.

Then some of them raised their hands and revealed tools from his hut. One was holding his broomstick, another his shovel, a third his blanket. Thrassos went as far as to eat his cheese and sausages.

“Thieves, those are mine! Put them down!” he screamed and tried to chase them, but couldn’t because he was stuck in the mud.

They continued running away with his possessions, laughing and mocking him.

“They are ours now! You won’t need them anymore, dead meat! Old fart! Ours!”

As he struggled to free himself, soldiers appeared behind him and began setting the corral on fire, burning his Mutan while screaming “Traitor! Traitor! You are not with us!”

“Stop! You’re killing me!”

Old-Depo finally woke up from his nightmare, trying to scare away the nightmare imp that was probably invisible above his bed with his hands. He was

sweating, his heart raced as if he'd ran for an hour. He could see a faint light coming from outside, signaling the crack of dawn. The rain had stopped but he could still hear an annoying sound. It was snoring, coming from the invader, sleeping in the corner. He cursed a few times, got up, walked next to him, and checked if he was holding anything. He looked around nervously, to see if anything was stolen or eaten. Once he was certain that everything was in order, he pulled the invader's blanket from him then kicked his back.

"It's morning! Time to leave!"

"Hrm, what?"

"I said, time to leave!"

"It's too early."

"No it's not; off you go before I start hitting you with the crook."

"Why are you so irritated?"

"Just get out; I need to go to my corral."

"I can come help..."

"No, leave my sausages alone!"

"What?"

"Don't ask; leave now. And make sure never to come back."

"I wanted to stay here for a few more days."

"Not going to happen."

"They are looking for me. They will find me if I move backwards."

"Better to be caught than to catch a cold or starve over a tantrum."

"They will expect from me to do terrible things."

"As long as they don't involve my valley, I do not care. Out!"

Thrassos seemed almost impressed by the geezer's oddities. He didn't attempt to reason with him any further; he would have had better results with the weird mind-controlling rocks out there. He went outside, and headed back to where he came from.

A path Depo never bothered to take. The Road not Taken is what he was always calling the mouth of the musty valley. Although thousands have traversed it over the eons, it was still an unexplored region for him.

The last he saw of the invader was him hugging his own torso in a desperate attempt to keep himself warm in the cold of the morning. There was nothing he could do about it, he did his part, he couldn't be blamed for being ungrateful. He neither killed, nor stole, nor slandered anyone; he was a man of clear conscience now. It probably had something to do with how he was the only one in these parts, but nonetheless, the deed was done.

But enough with that; he needed to prepare for today's very important activities, which were the exact same as in any other day, for the past eon and a half. Yesterday's sunshine was replaced with a dull purple mantle of grumpy-looking clouds. Father-Weather must have been in a bad mood. While his earthly father was alive and kicking, he occasionally tried to appease the divine ones with offering at a local altar, by burning Mutan leaves and quenching the fire with milk. Old-Depo never saw any point in that, so he didn't follow in his father's footsteps. Sisters Rain and Drought were as quirky as always, and didn't force bad harvest regardless of how many goods people wasted on their mood swings.

Was being neglected the reason they forced their cousin Storm to dance over the valley at night? Well, too bad my divinities, it is too late to rekindle this old man's faith. By now, the altar nothing but crumbled rocks; some of which trip-stones. And don't expect a renovation any time soon. Especially today, since he's still tired due to waking up continuously from last night's nightmares. Don't expect any favors after what your uncle Sandman did to poor Old-Depo.

Stubborn as always, he pressed on with his daily schedule, milking the fruits, and having lunch over the smell of wet grass. Grampa-Tim did not appear in his usual time though. This was unlike him; although it could have been mud pools along the pathway, slowing down the wheels.

He waited patiently for hours, until Tim's carriage eventually appeared through the foliage, at the valley's mouth. Tim, besides hairy and bulky like all his kin, looked worried and was constantly checking the dirt road him.

"You're late." he grumbled, with his hand akimbo.

"So would you, Old-Depo*, if you had to deal with what I do."

"What happened? Bandits?"

"I wish it was that. It's something far worse."

"By the Heavens; what is it then? Speak up."

"Monstrous knights along the path, and there is talk about Crude-Sayers leveling Tulipia in a few days."

Ah, so that boy was telling the truth.

"I tell you, this is not the time to be distributing milk. I don't think I will come tomorrow, or any other day after that, until this crisis is over."

Depo was shocked, as if his life had just lost its meaning.

"Are you serious? What about the milk?"

"Even if I take it, what am I supposed to do with it? You think people will care about their daily milk if they're slaughtering each other?"

"Curses. We are back to another River War."

Tim was short-eared, so he wasn't born at that time. Depo was, back when the valley was full of dens and stables, and pointy-eared people working in them with their

families. There were lots of children around his age to call friends and play with when his daily chores were done. They were carefree times, passing quickly and joyfully with games, chasing, and dancing.

Eventually those times ended when his father became too old to take care of the Mutans, so he handed over the responsibility to his eldest son. His other siblings could not be supported by his little business, so they married off quickly and left the valley. Along with them, departed most of his friends and relatives, seeking a better life in the cities, or refuge from the war.

And there was war, with the surrounding territories constantly attacking each other and exchanging ownership of the northern side of the sierra. Every time they did, people were hurt, houses were damaged, and cellars were looted during winter. He still remembers his father passing away when he had nothing to eat. The woman he loved burning alive along with her family in their hut, when they were accused of being supporters of the current landowners.

There were many times when he thought about leaving, and joining his relatives in the cities. But he couldn't; he had sworn before his father's deathbed that he would continue the family business, no matter what happened. It was a tradition that needed to continue, and ending it would be a shame not only to him but to all our ancestors that'd worked on the Mutan before him. He had to stay. There was no other choice.

By the time the clergy intervened and restored peace, he was the only remaining permanent denizen of the musty valley, gathering pink milk for Tom, the short-eared milkman who was distributing it amongst the surrounding hamlets. The two of them were what kept the business going for several decades, until Tom's grandson Tim, and Depo were both old. Old but too proud to give it up, even after the Mutan milk was not as favorable as the Happyle juice.

Both Tim and Depo were wifeless and childless, with nobody to inherit their business. No woman or lad would agree to carry on this dying profession even if they had a family. But they went on, fully dedicated to their job, without hesitation. They forgot what it was like to be young, to have fun, listening to the singing of women, and watching the dancing of children. Such things were distractions at this point, taking them off a schedule that required full commitment every day all year. Because of this, they went on repeating their daily routines, going as far as labelling children and women as annoyances and wastes of precious time.

This was about to change when Tim broke the schedule.

“This is the last time you will see me for a while. I will head for Papparunia; I suggest you do the same.”

“Leave? Me? Are you joking?”

“I’m dead serious.”

“Who will take care of the Mutans?”

“They are just bushes; you can always grow more at the plains.”

“That won’t happen.”

“Suit yourself; don’t blame me if something bad happens to you.” is what he said as he left in a hurry, with the pot beside him.

Good riddance! What kind of crazy talk was this? Leave the valley. Ludicrous! What about his hut? And the cheese? And his stuff? He can’t leave his belongings behind; they’re what he was holding on to for countless winters. At this point, *they were* his life. He would be nothing without them. Even if he wanted to leave, how would he take them? And where could he go? He’s never left the musty valley; he only knows of other places just by name.

No, he'll stay. He survived one war, he will surely survive another. Even if they drag him away, he'll be clinging onto the piles of his fence. If they try to pull him away, he will bite and kick. The only thing that could end all of this is old age, and he didn't feel like he was anywhere near his last.

It was sundown by the time he returned. He was in a hurry to reach his home, and count how much cheese and sausages he'd stored. This would be a long winter.

Unthinkable! He fell, slipping on some wet grass, something that hasn't happened in decades. This wasn't the result of some lucky trip-stone; his procedure was infallible; this shouldn't have happened! And it wouldn't have if Tim wasn't late, he wasn't rushing himself, he had a glow-orb to light the way, and there wasn't any rain the previous night. This is why he hated surprises; they lead to nothing but trouble. He cursed and struggled to get up, as his buttocks were in great pain. He would need to use his crook and sleep prone for who knows how many days.

In the distance, another clap of thunder was heard, as dark green clouds were forming over the mountaintops. Father Weather was far from done.

-//- 21. Unrest -//-

11th day of Fallen Leaf Month (POV: Thrassos)

Ah, those weird voices are coming back to confuse me once again. Are they really coming from those trip-stones as he called them? Nasty things, drive you nuts if you aren't aware of their tricks. Constantly suggesting that I walk towards dangerous cliffs, climb on trees and then jump down, and generally putting my life in danger for no good reason. Are they what Depo became like that or did they just expose the already existing uncertainty in his heart?

Enough with him; where do I go from here? Left? Right? Up? Down? Jump off a cliff? No, not that last one; that was a trick. Do my choices even matter or are they like a thousand roads? All having the same destination, ultimately making it pointless to pick one.

How am I going to walk all the way to Timalfia or any other place? It would take days, and the map wasn't of any help. Has my mount recovered yet or did it run away because of last night's squall? What if it starts raining or even snowing? Winter is not that far away. Will I die of pneumonia in the middle of nowhere with my carcass eaten by carrion birds? The rest of the world will never find out what happened to me. Good job, Chorrier; instead of trying to stay in that comfy mansion and ruling over thousands of people, you will now be a nameless and forgotten corpse.

Where would I find shelter in the wilderness? Would I bump into another hut in the middle of nowhere? Would it have another Depo inside? Would I become a cranky hermit like him? Or am I already like him in more ways than one, as someone who will

never manage to change his life and become a self-absorbed old man? Someone who wouldn't even like people coming near him or his meager property until the bitter end?

Come to think of it, I always assumed peasants like me could never be as possessive and selfish as the nobles. Yet even here I found exceptions, as that old man was devoid of humanity and sympathy, and on top of that, he was stingy over what was essentially nothing. Was he even an exception, or were my beliefs that far off from reality? The citizens of Petalo and the Paladins I came in contact with were also a far cry from the ideals that I had imagined. Why was I running away from a lifestyle that was just as awful as any other out there? The fresh start I had hoped for could never be attained. Heck, chances are the war would reach me no matter how far I managed to stay away from it.

Oh great, now I don't even need to make a pointless choice, as I saw one of the mounted dragoons spotting me the second I reached the valley's mouth. I could recognize his face as he approached but not his name, although I could at least tell that he was one of Spernis' friends.

"My lord, please don't run away!" he yelled, spurring his mount in a rush towards me.

"I no longer wish that. Take me back." He seemed surprised, and justifiably so, after I had abandoned everyone. "I've changed my mind. Let's return."

The dragoon offered his hand and the saddle's stirrup to help me get behind him. Once mounted, he turned the Hippopedinos southwards - back to my precious little wasteland of a territory. The journey back would take much longer than when I was running away, since I was not wearing armor, nor had a second person on my mount. I wonder what the poor animal is doing now; it was harsh of me to abandon it as soon as it was not helpful anymore.

“So, how did you find me?” I asked the rider.

“I followed some fresh Hippopedinos footprints, and when the rain washed them away I found your mount ruminating in the distance,” the rider said. “It was limping, so I assumed you didn’t leave it on purpose and were close by.”

“Smart thinking.”

“The musty valley is known for its snares and trip-stones, so I was hesitating to go any further. I was patrolling in case you would appear; which you did.”

“Very good, you passed the test.”

“The what?” he asked with a look of confusion on his face. “Your leaving... was a test?”

It wasn’t.

“I wanted to make that sure none of the men I appointed as generals would try to rule in my absence.” I said, deceiving him.

“No my lord; none of us wore the belt of ruling. How could we? We lack the brains and the blue blood.” Just like Kannavia said, they knew nothing of such things. “Even Orgonis, the wisest of our village, wants us to free the nobles and beg them to let us go if we leave everything behind.”

“But you didn’t?”

“Not me sir,” he replied, “but others did. Spernis is the only reason they haven’t packed up and left already. He insisted that we should stay and fight. He is also the one who sent a dozen of us to scour the land in search of you. And... to bring you back, by force if necessary. Thank the Rainbow that I didn’t need to resort to that.”

“Yes, thank whatever that is... Tell me, um...”

“Name’s Kladevis*, sir.”

“Tell me, Kladevis. Did the Paparuni attack within the past two days?”

“They did, burning two villages along the borders.”

“Did many... die?” I asked hesitantly.

“None, sir.”

“Thank the Rainbow.”

“A lot of Tulipian citizens were cut down though,” he remarked nonchalantly.

“Eh?” I said in confusion. “You said *none*.”

“None amongst the dragoons. I didn’t think any others mattered.”

He thinks just like Spernis: only the casualties amongst their kin are significant to them.

“Erm, ok, did you at least drive them away?”

“We did, and we even escorted many of the villagers outside the mansion.”

“Are they fed properly?”

“After our families have their portion, we give them what they need,” he replied.

“However, I do not know how long the provisions will last at this rate.”

They will definitely be running out fast. It’s the first thing I need to take care of once I return to the now huge camp.

That evening when we arrived, a small uproar was taking place. The people were split into two groups; those who support Orgonis...

“Your lord has abandoned you!” they yelled.

...and those who believe in Netelis and Spernis.

“Shut your blasphemous mouths!” they yelled back. “Thrassos is the man who will bring the Day of Plenty.”

Nobody noticed me, in part, because I was hidden by the rider in front of me, and, in part, because they were preoccupied with yelling at each other. Many were holding improvised weapons, and they looked ready to use them.

“There is no point in being here any longer; we must leave before the Crude-Sayers slaughter us all,” those Orgonis’s side warned.

“How could he have possibly fled when he is meant to lead us to victory?” the believers retorted. “The prophecy foretold it!”

“Enough with that destiny nonsense. He is no chosen one; he is a simple, petty ruffian who has fooled you all. Flee before it is too late!”

For the third time, my wife was right. The only thing that was keeping them together was their faith and trust in a leader. I could not allow myself to remain concealed any further.

“I am here, reconsider your beliefs!” I yelled with the purpose of ending this conflict. Everybody rejoiced upon recognizing my voice.

“The duke! The duke is back! The scriptures were right! The Gods favor us after all!”

Within the span of a few seconds, Orgonis lost most of his followers, with the few remaining ones questioning whether or not to support him any further.

“What are you doing, you fools!” Orgonis grumbled “Why are you returning to the one who abandoned you? What is his reasoning for doing it in the first place?”

Everybody looked at me, expecting an answer. Fortunately, the rider had asked the same thing when he found me, giving me more than enough time to think of something.

“It was a test of your loyalty!” I boldly declared.

“What does that even mean?” they asked not without a hint of skepticism.

“I left you alone to make sure you were obedient and just to my subjects. Cursed will follow those whose trust failed them.”

“Blessed are those who believed!” exclaimed Netelis, and everybody on his side cheered, or fell on their knees and began an obeisance.

“Oh thank you, thank you, my lord! Bless us for our faith!” they exclaimed joyously.

“And what about the blasphemers, oh Chosen One?” said Netelis as he pointed at Orgonis’ group.

There was only one thing I could do, so my story would add up: they had to be punished.

You have finally learned!

Yes, I have, dark thoughts of mine. Yes, I have. Let’s talk in first person from here on, OK?

Fine by me.

“They are hereby banished from my land, and deprived of the right to reap the fruits of my gifts,” I said. “Send them away immediately!”

Immediately a mob formed. They jumped onto the minority and began dragging the unworthy away. Any who resisted were beaten into submission.

Oh dear, they are begging for forgiveness and a second chance. Should I intervene?

No, it would seem like I was going against what I just said.

Right, we can’t have that. The promises of prophecies work in absolutes.

And it’s not like I didn’t give them the choice to remain loyal to me.

That’s right; they refused to obey on their own! They condemned themselves.

And it could have been worse.

Indeed; I could have ordered them to be executed. Now they still have a choice to start a new life elsewhere.

“Tell us, oh Great One.” Netelis raised his arms. “What shall we do to defeat our enemies; the Paparunis and the Crude-Sayers?”

I can't say I don't have a clue.

Indeed I can't. But I can say I know someone who does have a clue... probably.

I have to go to my private quarters, rest, and consolidate the Kaliniki chronicles.

Not that, fool! Those just provide theoretical lessons. I need to be in cahoots with the former duke and seek his advice.

No, not yet. First the cylinder in my room.

I need to hurry up. The Crude-Sayers are on their way.

I do not wish them harm.

I have no choice. It's either them or me.

True. It's not like I planned for any of this. It just happened.

“My generals, wait for me in the main hall. We have a war council to organize.”

“Is there something that can still be done, my lord?”

Without having better advice to give, I just repeated the quotes I remembered from the chronicles.

“The act of theft is not rooted in thieves but in the causes of their creation. Mercy is unrewarded aid. Proper charity, free from demands, is an obligation. Freedom is not limited by any binds but extends beyond one's dynasts.”

Everyone nodded in unison, considering what I said true, despite being out of context. They needed something to comfort them, and I had found it.

Before I go to the council, I need to settle a score with my supposed wife. She is in her private quarters, eating, again. This time, it is a steak.

Very well.

“Welcome back,” she said, greeting me as I entered the quarters.

“Glad to see you are doing fine and have kept your appetite.” I said sarcastically. “Enjoying the goods my subjects will soon run out of?”

“We are nobles,” she said. “We are meant to have more than them.”

“Well, not anymore. Forget all your family’s gains after countless years of taxation.” I gently pushed the fork away from her mouth. “I wouldn’t be surprised if I was told the land is barren because you squeezed out all its riches and stuffed them into your manor.”

“What has gotten in you?” she frowned. “You are acting like a different person.”

“Be silent. I hereby limit your liberty to order anything whenever you fancy. Food must be used to keep our men healthy and ready for battle.”

“You can’t do that!” she bumped her fist on the dining table.”

“Watch me.” In an act of disobedience, I picked the whole steak off the plate and took a big bite; no fork was used. “Also, despite the plundering, there are still enough costumes in the duke’s room to have something new to wear every day for months. They will all be shared amongst the people who lost their houses, to keep them warm.”

“Didn’t I tell you,” she said with desperation in her voice, “it’s a grave mistake to give them power?”

“I said, ‘quiet!’”

That felt nice!

But no time to enjoy it. I rushed for the grand hall, where the handful of people I had chosen as my commanders were shifting uncomfortably on their feet.

“Please be seated so we can begin,” I urged the commanders.

They immediately did so in the furthest chairs, at the opposite end of the long rectangular table of which I was at the head.

“I am not going to bite, you know,” I said. “And it’s a bit weird to yell all the time in what is supposed to be a secret meeting. Please come closer.”

Reluctant at first, they eventually complied while still uneasy by the surrounding abundance. They were whispering to each other, refusing to look at me. I clapped my hands to attract their attention.

“Ok, people, focus. Who here is familiar with the lay of this land?”

There was anxious rubbing of necks, shaking of fingers, nervous tapping of feet, but no replies. None of them was from around here, so how could they know?

Speaking of which, what kind of a war meeting am I having right now, when none of them know anything about war or the battlefield? We need someone with personal knowledge of the duchy. Should I summon Netelis, or perhaps Hous? Nah, they still wouldn’t know much about warfare.

“Let’s move on to a different subject for now. What weapons do we have?”

After the counting, aside from our armor, we had gathered about two hundred swords and a hundred bows, which had been left behind by Tulipios’ mercenaries. There were also about a dozen Hippopedini in the stables, and two dozen shields in the cellar - not even enough to arm all the men in my hamlet; much less the combined populations of the Tulipians and the Rodian refugees. Furthermore, with no smiths to make more, nor much time left to find forgers or sellers. We were essentially a poorly armed rabble with no means to fend off a proper army.

“How about food and water?” I asked hoping to find at least some silver lining. “Are we at least doing well there?”

Alas, it was the same desperate situation. Many of the farmers were driven from their homes, winter was preventing more crops from being prepared immediately, and the mountain folk were getting too worried to keep trading water. I was supposed to bring the Day of Plenty, but all I could see ahead of me was the Winter of Famine.

“We clearly need another advisor.” I said after a prolonged silence. “The four of you is not enough.”

Their silence was a sign of mutual agreement. No matter how hard I was trying to keep my ideals of a promising future soaring high in the council, they were constantly being shot down by negativity, rooted firmly in harsh reality.

“I have no choice. I have to talk to *him*.”

An hour later, I was standing before the entrance of the dungeon, with the Belt of Ruling firmly showing around my waist once again. Accompanying me was a wary Alonizis*, the last of the peasants I had chosen as a general.

“Are you sure about this, my lord?”

“Don’t question my judgment, or you will be punished in the name of the Goddess.” I replied in a peremptory tone.

“As you wish.” he bowed, slightly scared, and turned the key on the barred lock.

“Now leave us. And no eavesdropping.”

Despite the perfume, the air inside smelled of sweat and piss. It was to be expected of that cramped place with no one changing the sheets or letting him have a bath for several days. The once prideful nobles stared at me while sitting on small beds, with their colorful clothes being unbuttoned and full of hay, and their hair uncombed

and messy. Nobody was awaiting me with open arms; no, their eyes stabbed me with hatred and contempt as I walked past them, looking for someone in particular.

I found amongst them the necessary evil I came to unleash, the former ruler of the land. I was expecting a volley of complaints regarding a myriad of unimportant things, such as better treatment, separate rooms, warm food, and more fancy clothes, yet he just stood there, smirking as if he already knew why I was before him.

“I did you a favor by putting you in here, you know. You would be dead otherwise, lynched for all the harm you did over the years.”

“Of which harrm do you speak of?”

That accent again. Must filter it out.

“Well, you know, being rich and cruel to your people, feasting on their sweat and blood. All the pretty stuff.”

“You hear that, my dears? He considers *us* the bad guys,” he said, addressing everyone. “This wannabe blue blood still does not see the value of a ruler resting in his ability to prove his unquestionable superiority over his vassals.”

“You speak in fancy words but that didn’t help you from ending up on a hay bed.”

“Because of the prophecy? That fairy tale we allowed to travel, so it would give the peasants some hope?”

“It was... a fabrication?”

“More like a white lie that served our purpose; at least up until you arrived. And since you are here, it can only mean that said lies are no longer enough. Am I correct?”

“You are. I plan to give you all a second chance, if you prove your usefulness in this latest crisis.”

Everybody turned towards Tulipios. Apparently, besides their leader, he was also considered the brains amongst them.

“I see my daughter managed to put some sense into that skull of yours. Maybe you are a good successor material after all.” he chuckled, and this was followed by a cough.

“Never forget that your lives are at my mercy.” I pointed my finger at his forehead. “The moment I suspect you are plotting something, I won’t think twice before throwing you into the middle of a frenzied mob.”

“It’s a deal, oh Man of Prophecy. Let the game begin.”

-//- 25. The Day of Plenty -//-

2nd day of Rain Month (POV: Thrassos)

“Forgive me father, for I have sinned.”

The internal of the small temple of the Goddess looked far more luxurious than the run down condition I remembered it. There were piles of jewelry and well-weaved fabrics, as if this is where a big part of the plundered goods of the mansion ended up.

I was kneeling before Netelis and the avatar of Dimitra, while it was taking a nap on its pillow. There was nobody else around, as this was a private confession. Nobody but the divine must witness the Chosen One, a being commoners are not even worthy of breathing the same air as him, finding it impossible to stop his tears from constantly leaving his eyes, like a frail woman.

“I do not understand, my son.” Netelis shook his head. “What evil could someone like you could have possibly done? You have Her favor, and proved it by leading us to victory twice. You drove away our enemies and gave prosperity to the people; all within one pendatha.”

“I led thousands to their death.”

“Every war has its casualties. We all knew that when we marched to war.”

“All those people were sent to die; not to fight.”

“And it worked out fine in the end. Some were sacrificed for the well-being of the many.”

“It didn’t need to be that way. I should have thought of a better plan.”

“But you didn’t. There was the pressure of time; remember?”

I was refusing to accept that the former duke was right when he told me the same thing, five days ago. Desperate for a quick resolution with the Papparunis before the even bigger threat of the Crude-Sayers arrives, I had no choice but to accept his proposal, as shocking as it was.

“This has to be a cruel joke; stop fooling around and mention the real plan.”

“I was being serious, my duke. It’s vicious but also effective.”

In order to decrease our food consumption and increase our water reserves, we had to turn against the very people who were providing it to us. Half of dragoons marched to the camps of the mountain folk, up in the Sierra Kotsani. Those poor people who had done no harm to us, nor had any part in this conflict, were chased away from their houses, to starve in the wilderness. Hundreds of defenseless women and children were lamenting their loss, while the men who tried to defend the wells were mercilessly cut down.

“You feel guilt, right?” I asked Spernis once it was all over. “You must feel horrible for what we had to do.”

I wanted him to say yes, so I could at least feel some relief in knowing I wasn’t alone in this self-inflicting mental punishment.

But alas, all he said was “It had to be done to protect our people. I feel proud for what I did.”

How? How can you feel proud of such a thing? You did to others what the Crude-Sayers did to you. Twice you were driven away from your homeland. How do you find content in such a heinous act? How!

“It had to be done to protect my people.” he repeated and looked the other way.

By taking control of the mountain camps, we eradicated the need to get spring water through an exchange with Balltatoes. We could now keep both for free, a thing which the Tulipian population saw as the first step towards the Day of Plenty.

“Bless you, duke Thrassos!” they were cheering from all four corners of the domain. “You cured our thirst and hunger. You are indeed the Chosen One!”

Again, nobody seemed to be bothered by all those we doomed for such a thing to be achieved. It’s as if anything that didn’t involve their personal plight was invisible.

Then we turned our gaze towards the Paparuni, where Tulipios initiated the second phase of his dreadful but otherwise ingenious scheme. He had me going from village to village, rallying the population.

“Faithful servants of the Goddess! Your lord needs brave men to march against the dreaded invaders of the west. Do not expect miracles when you can prove your resolve by joining our glorious campaign. Take up arms and follow me to victory in the name of the favored of Dimitra!”

In just one day, I had amassed a militia of roughly a thousand men at the western border, waving mostly pitchforks and hammers, and provoking the invaders to face their wrath. Which they did; all two-thousand of them. Well-armed and far more experienced in warfare than us. It was a slaughter.

But a direct victory was never the intention. Knowing the attitude of the enemy nobles, Tulipios predicted they wouldn’t miss the chance to crush their enemies with everything they had, by sending forth most of their soldiers. Falling for the former duke’s trap, they left their forts almost empty, making it easy for a band of dragoons to descend from the mountains, posing as mountainfolk traders. The Paparunis were not yet informed of the takeover of the camps, nor did the few patrols bother to inspect two dozen men wearing animal pelts over their armor, as they were riding all the way to their royalty’s headquarters.

Thus, while my poor subjects were being butchered, used as nothing more than a decoy, the infiltration team was capturing the Paparuni leadership, killing in the

process dozens of men who were trying to defend their nobles. At the end of the third day, my militia was decimated but the enemy army was forced to surrender, once they were informed that we held their leaders hostage.

During the fourth day, wagons were constantly bringing food and water from Paparuni storages to the mansion's cellar, as leverage so we will not execute their leaders. We managed this way to gather enough provisions to withstand a siege and the upcoming winter. Even the catastrophic massacre of the peasants was seen as a positive event in the sinister eyes of Tulipios, since this way we had a thousand less worthless mouths to feed. Who needs these barely efficient Balltato farmers when we now have far more fertile to sustain us with grain and vegetables?

And it was the fifth day when the Crude-Sayers' army arrived, three times bigger than that of the Paparunis, and if the rumors were true, ten times more deadly. They began setting up a camp alongside the edge of the northern wasteland, cutting off most of our trading and escape routes in the process. This was far worse than we anticipated, and even Tulipios was struggling to find a strategy that would work against them. They would not be tricked as easily as Feimz' kin did, and even if they did, they had more than enough men to withstand several defeats in a row.

This following battle seemed impossible to win and everybody was still recovering from the first battle. In fact, there were widows and orphans everywhere in the duchy crying over the loss of their loved ones; people I allowed to be used as decoys for military purposes. The only thing I could do for them, was to leave them mourn their dead.

“No, you shall not!” Tulipios protested. “Have them doing something all day instead.”

“Like what?”

“Minor things. Like, carrying wooden pikes in trenches, raising ramparts with clay. Maybe reinforcing haystack barriers with more gravel.”

“All that won’t make much difference if the enemy attacks.”

“Does not matter. It will keep them busy, so they won’t run away or revolt against you. Basic military psychology.”

“Vicious as always. It will still take a miracle to save us.”

“And a miracle did happen!” Netelis interrupted me. “Their weak sun god was nothing before the radiance of our goddess. The Archbishop’s killers lost their will to fight and retreated without a fight the evening of the same day.”

“That is a very fairy tale-ish way to interpret what happened.”

“Well, yes, of course, but it happened so conveniently that it might as well have been divine intervention!”

A barbarian horde invaded Rodia from the far south, forcing them to deal with someone that posed a bigger threat than us. I do not know if it was part of the big plan the midget was talking about, but it saved our lives regardless.

“The Goddess sent those savages to aid your cause, oh Man of Destiny. Why are you spitting on the gifts she is constantly offering you? I mean, look at her, is this the face of someone who would want to harm you?” he pointed at the small black animal, which was now awake and staring at us with wide, curious eyes.

“No amount of cute eyes can make me get over the sadness for all the harm I caused.”

“But it was your fate! It was meant to happen this way.”

“If only I could find consolidation in this. My faith is weak when I am supposed to be the living proof of the divine.”

Netelis looked up at the low ceiling and then spoke in a soft voice.

“Then maybe all you need to do, my son, is to simply stop thinking so selfishly. You are not doing all that for your glory; others do it for you. You are here to help us. No matter the cost.”

“Maybe that is the best answer anyone could have given me. Maybe not. I am too confused.”

The priest remained silent and very skeptical for a while. Eventually, he got up and looked at me with eyes that were screaming shame.

“My son, I too have to make a small confession. That cylinder you seem to have lost...”

“The Kaliniki chronicles?”

“Yes, those. I... sort of have them.”

“You?” I jumped up from my praying position. “You are the ones who stole them from me?”

“Not stolen... kept safe from your benefit. It wasn’t the right time.”

“Right time for what?”

“For what Agathon had done.”

“What do you mean?”

“If you hadn’t experienced the loss you feel right now, I doubt you would understand.” Netelis walked towards the altar. “Tulipios never did. He found and translated them, while treating those beneath him as tools for his whole life.” Lifting gently the pillow with the Goddess still on it, a small stash of parchments was revealed. “He used the advice for a good ruler he found in them for increasing his cunningness instead of his kindness.” One hand picked up the stash, and the other slowly placed back the pillow. “The true meaning of these memoires was lost to him, made him worse instead of better.”

“You are scaring me, Netelis. What am I supposed to...”

“Read the fifth page. The one where she goes to see Agathon.”

“I am not sure I want to.”

“You have to. It is the only way to understand you were not the first.”

“The first... what?”

“Read!”

With my hands shaking, I browse the pages, take a deep gulp and begin reading Tulipios' translation.

-/- from the Kaliniki Chronicles -/-

... and I found him next to his six comrades, resting under the trees of his holy grove. They looked sad, but also in no hurry to ride their golden bird and carry on with their campaign against the Beastoids.

“What is this I hear about not going to see the kings?”

“There was a change of plans.”

“We still have time to warn the city-states about the warchief.”

“There will be no warning. Consider it the lesser of two evils.”

“You will let countless people die by the unexpected attack? All of you?”

“Those who survive will form an alliance to fight the common enemy.”

“Alliance... You mean be desperate to accept you as their leader.”

“Please understand, your highness. It will never happen if they are fully prepared when the Horde arrives.”

“I cannot be a part of this. It's a massacre you will let happen! For your glory!”

“Some must die, so the rest can live in peace; it is the only way this era of constant civil wars can finally come to an end.”

“What about my piece of mind? Do you expect me to live with the guilt?”

“Yes I do, my queen. As all of us will.”

“I cannot be part of this. I have to let them know.”

“Someone escort her highness to the chapel. And make sure that she cannot leave in the next few days.”

“You are all insane! All of you!”

“No, Kaliniki. We are not the ones who wanted to see the world burn as soon as they got their hands on the dragon armor. That was your husband! Take her away.”

-//- end of the Kaliniki Chronicles -//-

The notes drop from my hands before my legs can no longer support my body. What the Depthole did I just read? Was any of that real or some fairy tale? Agathon could have prevented the onslaught? Kaliniki was the wife of the leader of the Horde? And the armors... the same dragon armors... were once used by the Horde?!

“This... is a joke, right? A sick joke.”

“I checked the original text. The translation appears to be correct.”

“It is not true. It’s fabricated history.”

“I cannot speak about how real it is. Only of what the text said.”

“Agathon... sacrificed a lot of people... for his glory.”

“As means to bring them together in peace.”

“And the warchief used the armor...”

“... Just like you do now.”

“I am... repeating history.”

“Not in the exact same way, but you do. For the greater good.”

“So... what follows after that?”

“Something equally sad. I wish I could reveal it to you, but it’s another one of those things you are not supposed to be aware of until it’s over.”

“Then do I stay idle?”

“You can start by getting up.” He brought forward his hand. “Rise my son; your sins are forgiven. I will let you go when you step outside, but the Goddess will always be by your side.”

I did so. It would take time for my soul to heal but thanks to him my heart would not break or turn to stone in order to cope with the grief. I need to become a strong leader. For the greater good.

-//- 30. Funeral -//-

8th day of Rain Month (POV: Spernis)

The bell rang slowly, as the burial fire consumed the remains of the new duke. Around it stood the dragoons, preventing any of the hundreds of mourning peasants from getting any closer.

“Our fair lord left us much sooner than expected.” Netelis told the people, between two of his funeral psalms. “Bless the Goddess for giving us the Day of Plenty through him. May a thousand plagues befall those who went against her protégé.”

A wooden platform nearby was hosting the re-established Tulipian nobles. They pretended to be sad, but everyone knew they were laughing inside for being back in power after the loss of the man who threw them in the dungeon. They knew how to reply to all those crying intensely out there, wondering who would lead them now that the Man of Prophecy was gone. It would be them. Just like the good ol’ days.

“I went away for a Pendatha and I return to find this.” Spernis shook his head. He rushed to return from patrolling the seaside of Papparunia the moment he learned of the bad news. “How in Depthole are these vultures back in charge?” he screamed at a confused Kladevis, sitting on a corner chair inside the throne room.

“It was on Kannavia’s orders. Someone had to keep the order after Thrassos’ passing.”

“And where were you? How did you let it happen? You were supposed to be his bodyguard.”

“It was my shift at the battlements; Alonizis took over as soon as I left the room.”

“And how did *he* let it happen?”

“He is not sure either.”

“Are you two pulling my leg? What is wrong with you?”

“I can only tell you what I know.”

“Well, what *do* you know?”

-//- 7th day of Rain Month -//-

A carriage full of hay had arrived from Paparunia that fateful day. It was parked right below the balcony, instead of being taken to the stable. I assumed that there was no room to put it in, thus I didn't question the storekeeper.

By the time I heard Alonizis call me from the balcony to come help him, it was too late to do anything about it. When I ran into the mansion, the assassin had jumped atop the hay. He escaped by grabbing the reins as I stood powerless before a pool of blood.

“It was a Paparuni assassin!” Alonizis yelled. “They did this to our lovable lord!”

“We must avenge his death immediately!” the duchess screamed, as she let out a few crocodilian tears over her husband's corpse. “I will have them all executed for this!”

“I am going after that bastard; I promise you he won't escape!” I vowed as I went for my mount.

“No, forget him!” Alonizis grabbed my arm. “We know who did it, it will make no difference if you catch his agent.”

“Go! Go to their damned princeton!” Kannavia pointed at me. “I want their heads. All of them!”

“We will bring them to you soon, my lady.” I assured her. “Wait for Spernis to return and all three of us will sharpen our blades and go after their necks.”

“Shall I summon the priest for the last rites, my lords?” a skinny butler asked, as he stood emotionless next to the grieving duchess.

“Yes, do that. He deserves at least that.”

-//- 8th day of Rain Month -//-

“Wait-wait-wait.” Spernis interrupted him. “You actually believed all that about the assassin?”

“Why shouldn’t I? The carriage was from Paparunia; I am sure of it.”

“Kladevis, I know you are not the brightest but think about it. Why would the employers of the assassin give him a carriage that would incriminate them?”

“Um... I don’t know.”

“How did he do it in front of Alonizis?”

“I said I don’t know.”

“How did he let the assassin go past him on the balcony?”

“I don’t...”

“He opened the windows for him to escape, and even called you to come upstairs, leaving your post.”

“Are you saying... he was in it?”

“Yes, and he wasn’t alone. Look at the nobles back in power so soon.”

“Oh... so it was them.” He rubbed his forehead to ease the headache that had suddenly appeared.

“We will sharpen our blades alright.” Spernis placed his hand firmly on his friend’s left shoulder. But the ones who will lose their heads will be the Tulipians.”

“That will be a mistake.” Alonizis’ voice was heard coming from behind them.

“You dare to show your face, you double-crossing snake?” Spernis hissed then grabbed the pommel of his sword.

“We will miss our chance to take care of the Paparuni.”

“I don’t like them any more than I like any other stinking noble. But what you did is...”

“I am bringing us peace!”

“My arse you do!”

“Hear me out! I had nothing against Thrassos; he was a good fellow. But he was the source of all our problems.”

All three of them understood that. The Tulipians were blaming him for what he did to so many of their relatives. The Paparuni wanted him dead for what he did to their prince. So did the Clergy for spreading a pagan religion. With him out of the way and the old regime back in power, the balance will be restored... for the most part.

Tulipios wanted to rise stronger out of this ordeal. By blaming it all on the Paparuni, and with the dragoons in charge of keeping an eye on them, he would throw all the blame on Feimz’s house and then take his territory without needing to marry his daughter off. The people get their vengeance, his house is back in charge more powerful than before, the usurper and a rivaling faction are taken out. Everybody wins.

A young girl dressed in a grey robe passed by the door to the throne room. She stared at them with bitter eyes before turning her angry face forward. The three of them took notice of it but did nothing about it.

“I think she knows.” Alonizis explained. “She is Netelis’ new aid and is a bit too quick on the uptake. Maybe we should kill her as well.”

“Stop it with the killings!” Kladevis punched his fist on the table. “I’ve had enough of this; I am going outside. And don’t any of you dare lay a finger on her.”

“What have we become, man?” Spernis began scratching his hair intensely with both hands. “We are stabbing each other in the back. Even talk about killing little girls to keep secrets hidden.”

“We became rulers.” Alonizis lowered his head. He kept telling himself it was for everyone’s best interest, yet it was hard to not shed a tear whenever he was alone.

-//- 29. Assassin -//-

7th day of Rain Month (POV: Thrassos)

“Civil unrest? Seriously?”

This was the topic of the day, just a Pendatha after the Kaliniki chronicles had been revealed to him. It all began when Tsapizis*, a Rodian farmer and former refugee, was hammering pickets at the borders of his newly given field. Suddenly, Homas*, a Tulipian farmer and his neighbor, kicked the timber that would form the borders of their territory.

“You thief! You keep taking more than your share from my land.”

“What are you nagging about? I walked exactly fifty paces.”

“Those were not feet; they were strides!”

“I took exactly as much as your lord promised me.”

“You stole more than half of what my family’s owned for generations.”

“You should be glad I didn’t take all of it. My son is a Dragoon, if you didn’t know.”

“So what, anyone could have donned that armor, you are not that special.”

“What are you implying, champ? We could have easily taken everything for ourselves, yet we are generous enough to share it with you.”

“Share what? I’ve lived here all my life, until you foreigners came and stole it from my dead cousin.”

The Rodian pushed him away gently.

“Get off my land or I will call the Dragoons.”

“It was never yours and I won’t let you starve my children.”

He pushed him back a bit roughly.

“I too have a family to feed. Now go away before things get ugly.”

He pushed him hard enough to knock him off his feet.

There was no more talking. The two of them began punching and kicking each other, rolling around on the sandy ground, lifting up a cloud of dust, big enough for everybody in the surrounding area to spot and join the fight. A few tried to reason with them, saying they were allies, but the majority were just waiting for an excuse to violently unleash its frustration, built up from having to coexist with strangers.

The pickets had their usage changed from setting borders to clubbing heads, and several acres of fields were trampled and ruined. The crops had been ~~were~~ gathered several days earlier but whoever was ~~had~~ to seed them in spring would have his hands full.

The cloud of discord was growing at an exponential rate, forcing a few Dragoons to intervene and stop the brawl. They tried to be impartial, although it was easy to tell they were being gentle with their fellow villagers, and very violent towards the Tulipians.

“These conflicts are getting uglier by the day.” Kladevis reported to me. “We can break them up for now but eventually someone will get killed.

“Why is this happening?” I clenched my fists while looking outside the balcony window. “I gave them peace and food and got rid of their tyrants.”

“The natives believe we are stealing their land.”

“I only gave the fields of the fallen farmers to the Tihis who needed it.”

“That is not how they see it. Many suspect... ill tidings.”

“What tidings?”

“I don’t dare say.”

“Come on, spill it out.”

“They... say you had their relatives killed unjustly during the Margaritia takeover, so we could pilfer their land.”

“Wha... Preposterous!”

Ah, the charges may differ, but I will always stand accused. Things have gotten a lot more complicated since I first arrived. What used to be a simple separation between farmers and nobles has now turned into a messy group of various tribes.

“Do you know if... ‘that person’ recommend something from inside those moist headquarters of his?”

“He did. He even gave me this piece of parchment to show you.”

“What are these names? Why are they in this order?”

“I am not sure; he used the word ‘haieraki’.”

Tulipios had proposed a hierarchy, with me on top and those with gradually less power below me. My frown grew as I read the parchment:

1. Thrassian dynasty (me and Kannavia)
2. Tulipian dynasty (Tulipios and the rest of his family)
3. Paparuni dynasty (prince Feimz and his family)
4. Clergy (Netelis and any possible priests he anoints as his followers)
5. Dragoon generals (Spernis, Kladevis, Alonizis)
6. Dragoons (military)
7. Peasants with inherited property (Tulipian habitants)
8. Peasants with newly gained property (Tihi refugees)
9. Serfs (forced labor workers, mainly the annexed Paparuni peasants)
10. Slaves (none present so far, but mentioned just in case we take over more territories)

The nerve of him to still think he deserves to be right below me. But then again where would I be without his counseling?

“What exactly is this supposed to accomplish?”

“Share the spoils? Make it easier to decide who is right in every dispute?”

“How does having more power make you right? Isn’t it better if we are all equal in the eyes of the law?”

“I don’t know, Thrassos.” He addressed me informally, as I had requested.

“Doesn’t the Goddess’ favor mark you as special?”

“I am but... that doesn’t mean I am always right. Or better than you. Or... I don’t know what to make of this.”

Respect... Privileges... Slaves... Is there nothing else? Could those be the reasons for following me up until now, and now I am to be discarded as useless fodder?

Oh goddess, if you really exist and are listening to me right now, why are you torturing me like this? For every alleged gift you throw at me, two calamities fly along with it. The more I accomplish, the heavier the burden becomes. Why couldn’t the Day of Plenty end with a “happily ever after” instead of opening up more problems? Why can’t we just get along like a big happy family?

... A happy family. How ironic coming from a person whose father doesn’t not know he exists, a mother who abandoned him, and the only person he loved having been sold away to some chapel. Why can’t I ever have some actual piece of mind for a change? Why is everything conspiring to keep me locked in the midst of despair?

If there was a scripture of words to describe my life, fair wouldn’t be a very fitting description. For my existence, my mother was to blame, leaving me in the lurch and disappearing without a trace. I never missed her or longed for a picture of her wretched face. For everything else, I had nobody to blame but my self-deprecation.

“You don’t look very well, fella.” Kladevis remarked. “Maybe you should take the rest of the day off.”

“I wish I could. There is no time for rest, nor means to relax.”

“Not even your lady?” he smirked. “You know, during the nights?”

“We... do not share beds. There is nothing between us.”

“Oh, I see, it’s just for the formalities.”

“I know I need an heir eventually. There is plenty of time for that.”

“I am talking about pleasure right now. Something to relax.”

“Ah, that.”

“Any mistresses I should know about amongst the staff?”

“None. I won’t start bedding as many people as I can just because I have power, it is not a must to be sleeping around with as many people as I can.”

“Of course it’s not. It’s still carnal desires. If I could, I would have a different girl every night.”

“I am not you. So much for my equality talk.”

“You are not. You are the Chosen One.”

Shall I tell him that I generally haven’t felt excited in a long time?

Of course not, dark ego.

It is sort of serious; maybe he can help me. Where did those mornings go when I would wake up with a log in my pants?

They were replaced with anxiety and constant disappointment with taking up this role and constantly dealing with all sorts of problems.

“Kladevis, your shift is up.” Alonizis said, as he barged into the throne room, fully armored.

“In a while; I am in the middle of a spicy chat about the duke’s non-existent sex life.”

“Not funny.” I commented, slightly annoyed.

“It can’t wait, you have to go now.” Alonizis said, as he was pushing his childhood friend outside.

“What is wrong with you? I said I am going; no reason to rush.”

He made sure the door was closed and turned towards me with a very worried face.

“I have something important to tell you, Thrassos.”

“By the way you act, it has to be really important. And personal too.”

“It is. A cloaked man is in the guest room with some vital information. He demands an audience, as soon as possible.”

“What does he want?”

“It has something to do with a conspiracy... against your life.”

As if I hadn’t enough to worry about already.

“My life? Really?”

“There is a traitor amongst us who wants to harm you.”

Tulipios? Kannavia? Feimz?

“Who?”

“I say no more. That man has crucial information for you.”

The mystery alone is killing me.

“Let’s head there immediately.”

“I shall be your guard. Do not call for anyone else as escort; anyone could be a possible traitor.”

“I wasn’t planning to, you and the armor are more than enough. Did you search his clothes just in case?”

“He carries nothing.”

“Curious. Let’s see what he has to say.”

-//- 31. Release -//-

Unknown time (POV: Thrassos)

I know I am dreaming. I also know I should be dead. Maybe death is like a sleep you cannot awake from. Does this mean I will not wake up again, and spend eternity in this dream? I hope not; it's not a pleasing one. Here I am once again, stuck in mud as mushrooms with legs run around and smash furniture, while people are yelling at me, calling me incompetent.

This time the place that I am standing in looks like a dungeon cell, similar to the one that I had kept all the nobles in. The floor was like that of the swamp, covered in backwater and decaying flora. The furnishings getting smashed, visible through a crack in the door, are all items I had seen in the lounge and the cellar of the mansion, from crates filled with Ballatoes, to Kannavia's porcelain figurines. The people mocking me are covered in blood and resemble the Tulipian peasants I had sent to die. And the strangest of them all, are the faces of the mushrooms. One looks like the Brute. Another like Schistolithis. Two more like Tulipios and Kannavia.

I slowly shift my stance, terrified, towards a cracked mirror on the wall. The reflection staring back has nothing in common with how I am dressed. Instead of simple peasant's clothes, the reflection is dressed in dragoon armor. The helmet's faceguard is down, hiding its wearer. It also has a will of its own, since it keeps pointing at me with one hand, while brandishing a black sword in the other.

“You had your chance. Now it's my turn.”

“What do you mean? Who are you? Dark Me, is that you?” I raised my arms, a gesture not mimicked by my counterpart.

“There is no dark. Only what was always there but never allowed to come out. But not anymore. Now I am free.”

Unlike me, his feet are not stuck in the mud, and he holds a sword that he uses for banging the wooden cell door.

“Even if you manage to get out, it is too late, my alter ego. If I am dead, so are you.”

“You are not dead yet. You soon will be, weak as you are. Let me out so I can save us both.”

“I don’t know what to do. I don’t even remember how I got here.”

“Just do what you always do. Stay idle and let me have my way.”

His sword manages to smash the lock and the door is violently pushed open with a kick.

“Wait, where are you going? What do you plan to do? Don’t leave me here!”

I try to free my feet but unlike my dark self, I can’t budge an inch. I am trapped and powerless to do anything.

“Someone! Help! Get me out of here! I don’t deserve this! Does anyone hear me?”

My voice echoed through, with no reply. The mob on my side of the mirror has gone silent. Their counterparts on the other side are screaming in agony, as my dark ego slashes through them, unfazed.

“Get me... out... I don’t... anyone hear...” my hands flail above me as I slowly wake up. Someone grabs them and speaks softly. It took me awhile to figure out who he was.

“He awoke! He’s awake, people! Bless the Goddess!”

“Kladevis... Where... is this... So dark... I can’t see...”

I feel so weak. My voice struggles to be heard, my hands get tired just by waving, and my head feels so heavy.

“Someone, lit the lamp! Relax, oh Chosen One, you are safe now.”

“Safe?... From what?...”

A dim light slowly revealed a cavern. I was covered in several layers of animal pelts, and I could see everyone’s breath. It was really cold in here. No, it looked cold even outside. Was that... snow?

“Do not get up, my friend. I will go bring Netelis.”

“No, don’t leave... me.”

“I will be back as soon as possible. These farmers will take care of you in the meantime.”

An old lady approached, with a clay bowl in hand.

“You probably don’t remember me, my lord, but I was the one who looked over your wounded leg back at Dreadview.”

“Ah... I think I remember. Am I... injured again?”

“Your memory is still fuzzy, I see. Maybe for the best. Best to get stronger first.”

“No... I want to... know...”

After some effort, I managed to remove the pelts. I was naked underneath. Dear gods, my body was pale and skinny. There were several wide cuts on my chest and belly, carefully stitched together with what appeared to be gold crewel thread. It’s as if

someone tried to turn me into a human tapestry. I touched them and felt almost no pain. In fact, I was feeling nothing outside of a dry and bitter taste.

Oh no, not that again. The same taste I had on the day of the dragon hunt. Did the goddess mess with my body again? Was this also part of the plan everyone had been talking about?

“You... did you... do this?” I pointed at the stitches.

“No, my lord, it was someone far more talented than me.” She mixed the contents of the bowl. “I was only easing your pain with my herbs. The treatment, the falsified death, and your secret transport over here were done by Netelis and his aid.” She brought a spoonful of green puree close to my mouth. “I was mostly force feeding you soup for over a month and...”

“A month? I’ve been... asleep... for that long?”

“Yes, and it’s a miracle you managed to recover at all. That girl’s powder was really something.”

“What... girl?”

“I will tell you when you get better. Now have some of this, you need strength.”

The second my tongue touched that puree, I immediately recognized the bitter taste. The same awful one the family of Hous gave me, times ten. I spat it out immediately.

“No! Not this again... I don’t want it...”

“Please, my lord, if you don’t have it the pain will return soon.”

“The pain... This takes it away?”

“Yes, it’s made from Blankwort, a powerful sedative.”

It's a drug? Why did Hous' family give me such a thing? By mistake or was it to make me sleep easier? Or perhaps...

... Wait, I'm beginning to remember. That fateful day a month ago. The day I died.

-//- 7th day of Rain Month -//-

The cloaked man was standing up when I entered the room, nervous, constantly looking around him.

"I am Thrassos, duke of Tulipia. You can speak freely and name your price, if you have one."

"I am Homas, your Excellency...please come closer, as I am afraid that the walls could have ears." He was shaking more than he was stuttering.

"I have seen rocks that indirectly talk to you, but not walls that can hear you."

"I don't trust the former duke. I am sure he has a spy hearing us... right now."

"What do you mean? Do these secrets concern him?"

"Yes they do... Can I... whisper them to your ears? Just to be sure."

"Sure, why not. Come closer."

I had no reason to be afraid of him, since Alonizis was by my side and had found nothing on him. Or so he said.

"This is for exiling my father!" he yelled, as the dagger was thrust into my guts.

"Wha... a trap! Assassin!"

Why am I only yelling instead of punching this guy?

"This is for stealing my land!" a second stab, landing on my back as I turn around to run.

"Alonizis, I am being attacked!"

I should really fight back instead of running away.

"This is for sending my brother to die for nothing!" the third slash finds the side of my neck as I try to open the windows to the balcony.

“Kladevis! Spernis! Anyone!”

Why am I trying to get to the balcony instead of taking a mounted sword and facing my killer?

Because I am an idiot who trusts others to do everything for him and cowers at the first snag. The shock and blood loss making me dizzy, my eyesight beginning to blur, I can't even raise my voice. Alonizis is facing the wall, doing nothing to save me. I fall to the ground, a thud marking the end of the “Epic of Thrassos”.

-//- 9th day of Nuts Month -//-

At least, if Netelis hadn't found out about it in time. He arrived on the evening of the same day, full of blessings for the protection the Goddess had shown me. I don't believe it was that black animal who tipped him.

It took several Pendathes until I could eat solid food again, and many more until I was able to stand up and walk, albeit with the aid of a crutch. All this time I had to tolerate the terrible bitter taste of that herb that was keeping the pain away. But only the physical, for swallowing it was making me feel like throwing up. How I wish it wasn't winter, so I could mitigate the flavor with sweet Happyles.

I was sitting by a bonfire, day after day, allowing my body to slowly gain strength and weight. Though the pale complexity was there to stay. How mortifying it was, being able to see my veins under the skin, more black than red.

“I will never look at a mirror again in my life. And I will ask someone to bring me a helmet. I don't want anyone to see my terrible face anymore.”

“It is not that bad, my little Thrassos.” the medicine woman said as she was soothing me. By now, I had learned her name and she had become my main source of emotional comfort.

“Look at me, Kritharia*, I am a freak!”

“Age hasn’t been too kind to me either, but do you see me complaining?” she chuckled and made her wrinkle-filled cheeks look even more like parchment that had been crudely folded like a hand fan. “Still, it was a small fee for staying alive.”

It wasn’t making me feel any less like a grotesque monster, whose reflection terrified him more than holy water.

“By the way,” she asked in a serious tone “once the wounds have turned into ugly red scars, and you are in as close to normal condition as possible, what do you plan to do?”

“I am not sure yet. I haven’t really thought about it.” I looked downwards. “Hous didn’t save me just to let me be a cripple hereon. I bet his Goddess has more in store for me.”

“If you’re going to try reclaiming your throne, are you determined to pay back your enemies in earnest?”

“You mean... kill them?”

“What else do they deserve after what they did to you?”

“I don’t know, Kritharia. What do I deserve for failing to protect your village?”

She had told me how she was one of the few survivors of Dreadview, escaping the fate of her family by being called to a faraway village that fateful day.

“While I was saving the life of a sick girl, I was accidentally saving my own as well. Hard to call it a blessing since I am now alone in this world.”

“Do you hate the Paparuni for what they did? Do you wish them harm?”

“No.” she shook her head. “And I don’t say that because it’s my job to save lives instead of taking them.” Her faded brown eyes locked onto mine. “Hate only generates more hate, Thrassos. It perpetuates a cycle of death that can break only by letting it go.”

“How? How can I forgive them after what they did to me?” I raised my arms, once again looking at how bony and white they had become.

“Just... let it go. There is nothing else to it.”

I lowered my hands and turned my eyes on the weather outside. A snowstorm was raging, and several icicles had formed on the ceiling next to the entrance. It's as if the weather mirrored my feelings, kept at bay only by the fire of her soothing words.

“Kladevis? Can you hear me?”

“Yes, my lord?” his voice came echoing from the outside. He was responsible for restocking the cave with food and firewood every few days.

“Prepare me a mount.”

“No, my Thrassos, you must continue your recovery.” Kritharia persisted.

“I can't wait any longer.”

“I can't let you leave my lord.” Kritharis joined her. “You are too weak to ride; especially in this weather.”

“I won't go alone; you will take me there.”

“Well... Actually I can't. Netelis ordered me to keep you safe and hidden from everyone, or he will cast Dimitra's worst curse upon me and my family for ten generations.”

“Who is higher on the hierarchy? Him or me?”

“You sir.”

“Then my orders supersede his. Do not worry about curses; I will make sure Her divine claws will stay away from you. After all, I am Her chosen one.”

“As you wish.”

“Same goes for you Kritharia. Thank you for all your help, but please, let me get up and let me go. It is something I have to do.

The medicine woman did not try to persuade me any further. She helped me get up and dress as warm as possible. She seemed more worried for my soul than my body, as she was aware that I was going out there to face my enemies, as well as my demons.

The poor woman did not know how I had already allowed them to take over.

“You might want to keep your eyes closed. We are close to that thing I told you about.”

“No, I need to see it. My carelessness is part of its cause.”

The air was getting colder as the sun was setting, and the sight in front of the mansion was only magnifying the effect by making your blood freeze from the horror. There were dozens of gallows set up in each side of the road leading there, and a corpse was moving softly by the wind in each one.

It was as if the mount was walking on a graveyard, only each grave was above ground and showed no respect for the departed. They were of all ages and genders, shapes and cloths. It's as if none was spared the wrath of the return of the old duke. I didn't want to recognize any of them, but unconsciously I did for one of them. That corpse of a very fat woman in a maid outfit. Oh poor Keramis; the duchess was always talking about punishing you for your boldness. The moment she got her power back, you were most likely her first victim.

Kladevis helped me dismount and then held my hand as we were slowly walking towards the gates of the mansion. My feet were freezing from the cold. Or was it fear? Did I worry I would be soon joining the dead, dancing in the winter wind?

“There is still time to head back, you know. Your feet are barely holding you. Maybe you can wait until spring when you will be stronger.”

“My feet were stuck in mud for most of my life. No more. Call the guards.”

“As you wish.” He faced upwards “Hey, up on the walls!”

“Come back tomorrow.” replied a fully armored guard. “The lord does not accept visitors after sundown.”

“The lord is here with me, and he says he does.”

“Are you drunk, Kladevis? He hasn’t left his room all day.” The tone of his voice was friendly; he was probably another one from his village.

“Come down and swear your loyalty to the real one.”

The guards near the wall were shocked to see me still with the living, and twice as happy to open the gates. The once green courtyard was all dead now, just black branches covered in snow. The tents had all been removed, and the soil was covered with gravel. Had all those people found a hovel to spend the winter in? Were they dying from the cold in the wilderness, or were they morbid decorations dangling on ropes, remnants of the once enormous camp that had formed during wartime?

Once in the main hallway, we were greeted by the staff. The one escorting us was the ever serious and colorless voiced Tuvlinos.

“I should normally inform him of your coming, and have your clothes and orifices searched extensively for inappropriate sharp objects.” He brought his hand next to his mouth and whispered the rest. “But after what he did to my dear Keramis, he gets no warning. I request no reward for this.”

For the first time, the butler had expressed his emotions. I will make sure to please him for his transgression.

Sunlight was scarce these days, so the chandelier in the throne room remained lit for most of the morning and evening. Tulipios was there, staring at it like a halo above his head, a crown of light to set him apart from all other mortals. He didn’t like it when a few of those inferior creatures approached him without asking for permission.

“Yourrr insolence betterr be worrrth it.” he grumbled without bothering to tell who they were.

“Were they searched properly?” asked a fully armored Alonizis by blocking our way. He was Tulipios’ new bodyguard.

Very careful that duke. He would be the world’s greatest fool if he fell for one of his own tricks. I looked at the dragoon straight in the eyes, as I was standing exactly over the spot I was left for dead not long ago. The pool of blood was fully gone, but there were still chalices with burning incense hanging from the wall next to it.

“What is this? A look-alike? Is this why you weren’t around all these days, ol’ pal?” he looked at Kladevis.

“I am the one and only Man of Prophecy.” I said as imposingly as my body would allow. “You honestly thought mundane weapons can hurt me?”

Despite his dragon armor, Alonizis felt no protection from divine wrath. He instantly stumbled backwards and cowered in the farthest corner, as the duke bothered to reply.

“Not keeping the Goddess company in the middle of herrr everrrgrreen forrest, I see. Why arrre you herrre for? Don’t tell me it’s forrr something as corrrny as paying forrr my sins.”

“Shut up, you pompous ass. You are going straight to Depthole, along with your irritating accent.”

It was far more taxing to filter that damn thing than usual.

“And who shall rule in my stead? Thou? Thou art but a shell of thy former self. Never will you be able to command my territories in that pitiful condition.”

“Nothing an armor and a portable throne won’t hide.”

“They will laugh just by looking at your face.”

“Faceguard.”

“And what will you do now, you silly little peasant?” he began stumbling backwards. “I have already freed my family and sent most to replace the Paparuni

nobles.” While saying those words, he had slowly reached the doors. “The second they learn about this, they shall stop sending you provisions and you shall all starve.” He turned around and quickly opened them, only to find Tuvlinos with his hands crossed, blocking his way.

“May I punch him, sir?”

All it took was a nod before that weasel in human skin was convulsing in pain on the floor.

“Kladevis! Help me you idiot! Alonizis! Anyone! Where are you, you stinking peasants!” he began screaming in frustration. The dragoons did nothing.

While that was happening, I had gone to the wall and picked up the sword that was decorating it. It was the same one I had the chance to use when I was attacked, but didn't. I walked towards the defenseless weasel, by passing over the spot of my alleged death.

“What art thou doing! You need me you mindless fool! You won't even survive the winter without me!” he was yelling in desperation as much as he could.

“Your cunningness served me well for a while, but I no longer need it.” I stabbed him in the left thigh, but it was a weak strike, because of my condition.

“Ah! Thou art mad! Help me! Someone!” he tried to get up and run away, only for Kladevis to grab him firmly by the waist.

“Go on my lord. He isn't going anywhere.”

“This time I won't send you to a dungeon.”

“Wait, there is so much I can offer to...”

His hopeless attempts were muted by the howling wind outside, and even if someone was staring at the window, he would only see the black caricature of something long going up and down. I do not know how many blows it took for that bastard to finally stop screaming and shaking; they were surely many, and all were weak. By the end of it, I found myself sexually aroused; a feeling long since foreign to me.

Covered in spilt blood and horny for all to see, I looked at my reflection in the mirror, on the other side of the room. It was the same one from my dream. I truly looked like a demon, a thing of nightmares, a depiction of what holy scriptures show to inspire fear to those who doubt. The beast inside me had finally taken over.

I finally became who I was meant to be.

Maybe it's effect of the sedative.

Or maybe this is who I really am without restraint.

-//- 32. Execution -//-

10th day of Nuts Month (POV: Thrassos)

“What do you plan to do now, my child?” asked Netelis, after I had woken up early in the morning.

My demonic form was hidden, after bathing late that night. Although the blood had washed away and the clothes I wore had changed, the memory of that event will be a permanent stain on my soul. And it will be the first of many.

“I was thinking of what to do with Alonizis, but that can wait. How about telling me about the way my wounds were treated so well. Was it you?”

“If my prayers could bring people back from the grave, I wouldn’t be a priest in a backwater duchy; would I?”

“You had an aid with you. Was it her?”

“Yes, indeed.”

“The way she knows how to stop the bleeding is beyond anything I have seen in my life.” The scars on my body, no matter how well they were stitched, they would forever leave their mark. “I heard something about a red powder she was using to speed up the healing. Where is she now?”

“She is gone.”

“Gone?”

“She left disgusted after witnessing what you did.”

Curses; her skills can keep me alive if this happens again.

“Bring her back; I will give her a hefty reward.”

“I do not know where she ran off towards. And even if I knew, I am certain she has no interest in material gains.”

“Nonsense! There has to be something she seeks.”

“Remember the teachings of Dimitra. Life is cheap in the world we live in, but money cannot pay for its salvation.”

“Ah, I guess I will settle with wearing dragoon armor all the time.”

“Even when... taking a bath?”

“Well... almost all the time.”

“Speaking of time, have you thought of what you will do next? You are the ruler once again.”

“Only one thing for now. And I will deal with it immediately.”

-//-

Hous was thinking of words that rhymed, as he sat along with his family around a small fireplace. The wind outside was howling, feeding his inspiration of horrific images that needed to be printed on parchment.

Everybody screamed as the door burst open, not by the weather but by the powerful kick of a dragoon.

“You are all under arrest for high treason against the duke!” he yelled. Soon, more like him began dragging everybody outside.

“What nonsense is this?” Hous protested. “I did nothing against Tulipios; I didn’t even speak to him.”

“You did to me.” said one of them.

His armor was different from the rest, decorated with golden embroidery, a large thick mantle at its back, and the Belt of Ruling showing off proudly at its waist. The faceguard was down but the voice could not be mistaken. But how could it be him?

“Thrassos? It can’t be you. Can it?”

“It is I.” he confirmed in a colorless voice. “It took me awhile but I realized your betrayal.”

“What betrayal? You believe I am the assassin? No, it wasn’t me or any of my sons. I swear my soul on the Goddess!”

“You are indeed not. But that is not what I speak of.” I pointed at him. “I refer to when you gave me Blankwort and left me to sleep outside your hovel, knowing Feimz was gathering people for the Dragon Slay.”

Hous remained speechless for a few seconds, shocked at how he was found out. By the time he tried to deny it, it was too late; guilt was written all over his pale face. He didn’t help me purely out of kindness. He also wanted a stranger to be taken in place of him or any of his fellow villagers.

“My lord...” his words were coming out of his mouth with great difficulty. “I was... writing a requiem about you. I also have a... a dozen odes, half ready. I can be your best bard; I can elevate your name to be equal to that of the gods. Please spare us and...”

“Hang them in the plaza for all to see.” my angry order interrupted him.

I stopped paying attention to their pleas for mercy, their cries, and eventually their death throes. I wasn’t here to spare them, him, or his elder son Zvolis who was helping him out every day, or his little son Halikis, or his elder daughter Petra, or any other in his family. Why do I even remember their names? I shouldn’t be doing that; I was here for an exemplification, proving to everybody how I was willing to be as cruel

as Tulipios against anyone who will not accept my orders hereon. I had to do it or another Homas will soon rise to go after my life once more.

And also because they were the only ones who know I am not really a godsend noble but just a scared peasant who got lucky. I couldn't afford to let Hous slip his tongue in one of his songs and reveal my true face. No, the real me is gone forever, now all that remains is this relentless armor and a faceguard to hide its face. I became a caricature; a savior and a boogiemán. I am no longer a person. I no longer can be.

I truly did want to help this land, but selflessness was not all that was driving me. Despite my rebirth, my thoughts were not that of a hero. They were dark and greedy, closer to that of a tyrant. When I was first given the flake, I was trying to convince myself that what I am doing is for the good of the people. The truth is, I would gladly trample honesty and justice for having Ria at my side forever.

I left my faceguard down. Not only so it can stop an arrow to the eye, but also to make me more intimidating. The less they see the human underneath, the less they believe I have feelings and weaknesses. No more of that. Especially now that Kannavia and most of her family are controlling the food storages over at Paparunia. There won't be another war until spring, but until then I need to be relentless and wear down her resolve.

I need to use trickery and viciousness, of the type the former duke did.

“Excuse me, my lord” one of the executioners looks at me while rubbing his hands. “May we have some fun with them before that?”

“Fun? What do you mean by that?” I ask emotionlessly.

“You know... fun.” his lustful eyes zeroed on trembling Petra. “Such a shame to not taste these rare goods before they spoil; if you catch my drift.”

“Do as you like; just make she joins the rest immediately afterwards.”

“I will; thank you, my lord.” he smiled sardonically, as I was walking away.

How strange. A few months ago I was considering Ria’s parents to be monsters for discarding their child for a few bottles of wine, yet here I am allowing far worse to happen to a girl about her age. And I feel nothing about her. Nor about Ria; my heart stopped yearning for her after my awakening. Be damned wherever she and the chapel she was sent to may be. I have other more important business to attend to, more lives I need to destroy, more power I need to secure. For I, am now a monster.

No, I am a proper ruler.

-//- Epilogue: The Plan -//-

While the dreaded execution was taking place, Tuvlinos was escorting Netelis to the mansion's exit, after he had stayed awake overnight to sanctify the area. It would be most unpleasant if the former duke or any of his victims stayed around to haunt them. Though what they were talking about didn't have to do with ghosts or anything supernatural. It involved the never ending schemes of the Plan and its agents.

“Make sure he gets lots of rest, and that his wounds are cleaned twice a day. We wouldn't want to lose him from fatigue or infection, after all the great pains we've been through to keep him hidden from his enemies.”

“Burning a corpse that was supposed to be him was the nastiest part. Pretending to mourn for his passing was vexing.”

“And I assume you understand how he is not to supposed to know about my healer aid.” the priest smirked. “Unless you prefer chasing him in the wilderness once again.”

“That is far from what I want. My mouth shall refrain from revealing it was the one he loved, that saved him.”

“Bless you, my child. Your reward shall be even bigger now.”

“I've had enough of that. And now I bid you farewell, father. I am leaving soon for a less exciting life.”

“Goddessspeed, my child.”

The doors closed and the priest began walking in the cold morning. He soon came across a set of glowing red eyes staring right at him from the shadow of a large rock. Without showing any fear, he spoke gently towards them.

“Ah, there you are, my little avatar. How is our little situation in the Flip Side going?”

“Is he ready?” spoke the little black critter with a heavy echoing voice.

“He finally is. We made our move, now it’s time to see how the Others will respond.”

The two of them continued their way towards the temple, with their silhouettes slowly fading by the distance and the ever increasing snowfall.

END OF BOOK 1

-//- Glossary -//-

Adam: The sun god who sheds light and truth upon the world. (*named after the first man in Abrahamic religions*)

Adamism: The official and only permitted religion of the continent.

Agathon: One of the Seven Braves, the hero who a millennia ago united all city-states of Japheth against the Horde, founded the Bloom dynasty, and became its first emperor. (*ancient Greek name, meaning benign*)

Alonizis: Peasant of Tihi. (*derived from the Greek verb for “you thresh”*)

Anaklai: Archer, one of the Seven Braves. (*derived from the Greek word for “reflect”*)

Aspros: Chieftain of the northern Ivorian tribes during the era of Agathon. (*derived from the Greek word for white*)

Astrovolos: Agathon’s sword that radiates when held high. It’s direct translation to English would be Starshine.

Ballatoes: Round hairy potatoes.

Blein: Blue grain, produced solely on plains.

Crude-Sayers: Elite warriors of the Clergy. (*wordplay on the word Crusaders*)

Cylinder: Codex with contents that can be visualized as an animated story when it rolls. The symbols on it move around and give the impression of a small cinema screen.

Damazis: Errant boy of Diamandi from Tihi village. *(derived from the Greek verb “you tame”)*

Diamandi: Old paladin from the city of Petalo. *(derived from the Greek word for diamond)*

Dimitra: Goddess of Nature, worshiped only by pagans. Her avatar is a small black furry animal. *(derived from the ancient Greek goddess of the same name)*

Depo: Farmer in Misty Valley. *(based on a surname of a real life cattleman the author knows)*

Depthole: The name for hell in this world, a place all sinners who can't pay for their crimes go to. *(a combination of the words dept and hole)*

Ehmis: General during the war against the Horde, childhood friend of Agathon. *(derived from the Greek word for pike, the edge of a spear)*

Eon: An eon in this world lasts 125 years.

Feimz: Prince of Paparunia. *(derived from the English word “fame”)*

Halikis: Peasant boy of Tulipia, son of Hous. *(derived from the Greek word for pebble)*

Ham: The name of the continent north of Japheth. (*taken from the name of one of Noah's sons*)

Happyle: Red and round fruit, sweet and filled with a substance which in large quantities gives euphoria. (*a combination of the words happy and apple*)

Hippopedini: Large pachyderm mammals people use as mounts in mostly rocky areas. (*a wordplay on the Greek word for hippopotamus – instead of “river horse” it means “plains horse”*)

Homias: Farmer of Tulipia. (*derived from the Greek word for “soil”*)

Hous: Farmer of Tulipia. (*derived from the ancient Greek word for ash*)

Hydoria: The name of the central parts of the continent of Japheth. (*derived from Idor, the ancient Greek word for water*)

Iis: Swamp, located at the southeast of Rodia and borders with Tulipia. (*derived from the ancient Greek word for mud*)

Iris: One of the Seven Braves, an oracle that guided Agathon into becoming an emperor. (*named after the Greek goddess of the rainbow*)

Japheth: The name of the continent the story takes place on. (*taken from the name of one of Noah's sons*)

Kaliniki: Princess during the war against the Horde. Wrote chronicles that expose the dark side of history. (*ancient Greek name, meaning good victory*)

Kaneloni: The noble house of Sinameni, rulers of the counties of Kanelonia.
(derived from Kanela, the Greek word for cinnamon)

Kanelonia: An alliance of counties, ruled under the noble house of Kaneloni.

Kannavia: Duchess of Tulipia, daughter of Tulipios the 3rd. *(derived from the Greek word for cannabis)*

Kardamos: Brother and envoy of Tulipios the 3rd. *(derived from the Greek word for cardamom)*

Kendron: Powerful wizard, and one of the Seven Braves. *(derived from the Greek word for center)*

Keramis: Chaimbermaid at the Tulipian mansion. *(derived from the word ceramic)*

Kerma: Powerful merchant during the days of Agathon. *(derived from the Greek word for coin)*

Kladevis: Peasant of Tihi. *(derived from the Greek word for “you trim”)*

Kotsani: Mountain range that separates the southern continent from the midlands. *(derived from the Greek word for stalk)*

Kritharia: Tulipian medicine woman. *(derived from the Greek word for barley)*

Ksera: Wasteland that covers most of Tulipia. (*derived from the Greek word for arid*)

Lukanikis: Innkeeper at Petalo. (*derived from lukaniko, the Greek word for sausage*)

Margaritia: Barony west of the sierra Kotsani, famous for its monk vineyards and experienced warriors. (*named after the Greek word for Daisy*)

Month: Months in this world have 25 days, and consist of 5 pendathes each. They are named differently from our own but follow the same pattern.

Snow Month (December)

Frost Month (January)

River Month (February)

Green Leaf Month (March)

Flower Month (April)

Fruit Month (May)

Heat Month (June)

Cattle Month (July)

Mushroom Month (August)

Fallen Leaf Month (September)

Rain Month (October)

Nuts Month (November)

Mutan: Bushes with a bark full of nutritious milk.

Netelis: Tulipian priest of the Goddess Dimitra. (*made up from the English word nettle*)

Oldfort: Fortress built between Rodia and Fovera, mainly for protecting the kingdom from barbarian invasions.

Orgonis: Elder of Tihi. *(derived from the Greek word for “you plow”)*

Paparunia: The principality northwest of Rodia, bordering the west ocean *(named after the Greek word for poppy)*

Papia: Highway that connects all the major territories of Japheth. *(an alteration of Apia Highway, made to sound like a duck in Greek)*

Pendatha: Five days, a measurement of time, similar to a week in our world. *(derived from the Greek word for quintet, as opposed to a normal week which is a septet)*

Petalo: Major city of Rodia. *(derived from the Greek word for horseshoe or flower petal)*

Petra: Peasant girl of Tulipia, daughter of Hous. *(derived from the Greek word for stone)*

Pe-trolled: When someone is fooled by a trip-stone, he is said to be pe-trolled, a combination of the words petra, aka stone, and trolled.

Plinda: Peasant girl from Tihi village. *(derived from the Greek verb for “you wash”)*

Praiza: Capital of the trade guilds of Timalfia. *(derived from the English word for prize)*

Ria: A peasant girl from the hamlet of the swamp. (*shortened name of Eleftheria, meaning freedom*)

Rodia: Kingdom that rules over the majority of the Sepalo plains. (*derived from Rodo, the Greek word for rose*)

Season: A season in this world consists of five months, and amounts to 125 days.

Sepalo: The plains that cover most of the southern part of the continent. (*derived from the Greek word for sepal*)

Schistolithis: Dwarven armorsmith, residing inside Dragonmount. Forger of the dragon armors. (*derived from the Greek word for shale*)

Sinameni: Capital of the Flower Empire, and later on of Kanelonia. (*derived from the English word cinnamon*)

Sparmeni: Capital of Margaritia, birthplace of mighty warriors. (*derived from the female tense of the Greek word for sown*)

Spernis: Peasant of Tihi. (*derived from the Greek word for “you seed”*)

Taks: The name of the devil in this world. (*a wordplay on the English word “Tax”*)

Timalfia: Mountain trade guilds of the east Japheth. (*derived from the Greek word for valuables*)

Themis: Magistrate of Petalo. (*derived from the ancient Greek name for divine law*)

Thrassos: Orphan peasant of Rodia. (*derived from the Greek word for courage or nerve*)

Tromara: Large desert that covers most of Ham, populated by ferocious barbarian tribes. (*derived from the Greek word for terror*)

Tsapizis: Farmer of Tihi. (*derived from the Greek word for “you use the hoe”*)

Tsiuniz: Canary-like yellow birds. (*a combo of the words tsiu, the equivalent of tweet in Greek, and Chinese*)

Tulipia: The duchy that rules over the Ksera wasteland (*named after tulip, the flower*)

Tulipios: The name of the ruler of Tulipia, passed to every successor.

Tuvlinos: Butler at the Tulipian mansion. (*derived from the Greek word for made of bricks*)

Varvatos: The warrior king of Sparmeni, during the days of Agathon. (*derived from a Greek name that came to mean manly*)

Vazos: Hired sword, master of the guard in the Tulipian mansion. (*derived from the Greek word for vase*)

Vulka: Warlord, leader of all the barbarian tribes in Thermes during the time of Agathon, one of the Seven Braves. (*derived from Vulcan*)

Zvolis: Peasant boy of Tulipia, son of Hous. (*derived from the Greek word for pellet*)