

Mirko Malessa

# Time Crusaders



## 01. Under Attack



**Note:** All of the following historical facts are taken from an alternate fictional timeline and present. Even if strangely familiar, they do not represent actual facts from our present day earth and its societies. However, similarities and historical references can be found, but are only meant for dramatizations and fictional reasons. The author does not reflect his own personal views within this book, except for satirical purposes alone.

## **Spacepunk®**

# **TIME CRUSADERS**

Written by: Mirko Malessa

### **FIVE HATEFUL THINGS**

A bishop without doctrine,  
a king without judgement,  
an imprudent young man,  
a foolish old man,  
a woman without shame –  
I swear by the King of heaven,  
those are five hateful things.

*Anglo-Irish poems of the Middle Ages – Author:unknown*

## **01. Under attack**

*20. June 1808. Southern Spain. The city of Gerona. The harbour. A fort under siege.*

The thundering of the guns shook the castle walls sending the next wave of cannonballs down towards the Commonwealth's ships. One quick glance of his revealed to Geraume how they shriekingly found their prey sending splintering masts and men alike into the air for the third time in a row now. The siege did not go well for them, it seemed. The whole french army group was desperately trying to gain a foothold upon the narrow pathway leading up to the castles garrison, but was mostly pinned down on the tight intertwined road leading up the harbour walls. It was a sheer miracle, or so he felt, that none of the spanish royalists had yet recognized his small group sneaking up another way around the

trenches thought the small back alleys. Somehow they had made it across the first trenches without any losses and now all the road leading up from the seaside to the fortress lay barren and empty before him and his comrades.

It had been a hard battle so far, but nothing compared to the resistance General Napoleon and Presidente Washington faced on the Eastern Front against the Royal Armies led by General Blücher and Tauentzin. Geraume had heard the Liberation Army faced great obstacles and was compelled to huge sacrifices, but the Polish could fight for four men each easily, as he himself had witnessed all alone with his regiment at Jena.

Now it was to him and his small contingent to claim their share on the fight for liberty, and even if they were only twelve men alone moving proudly forward up the road with the solemn sea gaping down below to one side and bellowing cannons up above them to the other, he could see no obstacles up ahead through all the smoke. If only Wellington's ships could make it in time to come to their aid up the river Ter, all could go well with the siege. Only a bit more time, that was all that was required now, a bit longer to hold out. To conquer the spaniards. To secure the West! To free Europe. To save the Union!

Finally they stepped out of the smoke. And yes, the road was still empty—

"Look out!"

What was this? There was a man sitting patiently on the road, right in front of them, his back leaning comfortably against the sandy castle wall. Holding a pair of sticks before his waist a flat broad-brimmed straw hat pulled deeply into his face he seemed to doze in the evening sun.

"What is it?!"

"A stranger. Dead ahead!"

"A man? What kind of man?"

"A Spaniard?"

"I can't say. How should I?"

"Kinpaginpa. Kirei desu."

The man had spoken. Geraume was sure even with all the siege's overshadowing noise had he heard the low voice of the man flowing over it all intensely like the wind over the ocean's waves. But his words had not been Spanish! Geraume was sure he had never heard any kind of tongue like that in his entire life. But of course, stupid him, this was an important harbour, the man just had to be a sailor from another nation far off. Well, if he was not from around here, he could possibly provide them with more information about the town. He did not seem very violent or to even care about all the fighting going on, but being careful about him could not hurt nevertheless. But after all, they were twelve with muskets and him only a single man, so the balance of power was clear.

"Hey! You! Back there!"

That seemed to have come to the attention of the straw-hat-man. As the stranger raised himself up Geraume could see he had not been mistaken. The man wasn't a Spaniard or an Englishman. Not at all. His unshaven face was a hard

worn young mans in his early twenties, with yellowish white skin, straight black hair done in a ponytail, and his one eye was big round and black, just like the larger eye patch covering his right one, with impressive eyebrows, and he had a strong jaw-line. This man was clearly not from around here, now that Geraume could see his clothes better this became even clearer to him. His dress was a strangely unfamiliar well-worn dark-brown garment looking almost like one single pice of cloth wrapped around his athletic stature with a pair of sandals under his feet. But what was even more impressive were the two sticks that appeared for a second look to be shed swords he wore loosely in his belt right before his waist. Both where rather slim and slightly curved with one being shorter than the other, and they both did not seem to offer a noteworthy guard.

" Sumimasen. Dozo yoroshiku. Anone... Chikujou irikuchi doko desu ka," asked the stranger, uprighting himself into a more impressive pose. "Misete kudasai."

Geraume did not understand one word the stranger had said, but maybe he hadn't heard his words clearly the first time and he still understood french. A try could not hurt.

" Hey! Be greeted! What is your name?"

" Iie, wakarimasen."

" What are you doing in this place?"

Ignoring his request the man touched his hat as if in in thoughts looking down onto the ground.

" Nante koto da. Sokka? Naruhodo."

What to do? The man obviously wasn't a Spaniard. Shooting him down like a dog didn't feel right. Even in war there were some things that should be avoided, or so Geraume felt. He hadn't joined the grand army to become a war criminal like the royalists. It was a matter of honour.

" Ask again," Brigaud urged him nervously from behing. "Again!"

" Pardon! What is your name? Do you know what lies ahead?"

" Souiukotoka ," said the stranger heaving a sigh. "Akinohihatsurubeotoshi."

" I don't understand!"

The man wasn't paying attention, wasn't he?! Now he shook his head slowly finally looking up at Geraume. "Hontouni zannen," the stranger exclaimed, with a somewhat sad expression in his eye, that turned harder all at once. "Shitsurei desu ga...."

Geraume had about enough. There wasn't enough time for this. They had to hurry, or it would be too late!

" Harawokukuru gojishin."

" Enough! I don't want to hear not anymore," complained Geraume angrily, taking another step forward.

This seemed to somewhat impress the stranger.

" Atamakakushiteshirikakusazu."

" Get out of here!"

The man was about fifteen feet away from them, and there was no way to avoid him, but there was no way he would try to fight—The man had now swiftly stepped forward right into the middle of the path blocking their way!

"Abunai!"

The stranger threw away his hat into the gentle breeze coming from the bay. And for a lone second the world seem to take a breath.

"Ikimasho!!"

In an blink of an eye the stranger was before Geraume. Terrified he stared into the hard intense eyes before him praying lone death.

"WHa---!!"

"Fusero!"

The strike came like lightning cutting from below percing his side slashing through his kidney riding forward through his lungs splintering the wood of his musket like dry trash slicing the iron barrel apart and severing his jugular. Cleaving onward the man shoved Geraume aside and as he turned and fell almost timelessly he could watch him move straight onward while wading through his doomed comrades like a god of death spraying blood and guts and terror all around with movements so clean that they clearly spoke the mans profound need to avoid any unnecessary excess. But even seeing all this Geraume could still not understand what had happened now.

Heavily he could feel how his body hit the ground like a wet sack. Something had hit him just now, didn't i....

The blood dripped down before his fading sight, as the light left his eyes, flowed towards the stones of the walkway, trickling between the cracks in the cobblestones, down into the ground, further into the darkness that continued on down below, leaving all the noise behind, only to awaken to the hollow sound of footsteps in the darkness.

"Do you have any idea where we are," said a voice, piercing thinly through the darkness.

"Oh my, I thought your god would lead us on! Or didn't you say so," said another voice, in a snappish reply.

"Jahwe helps those who help themselves."

"Yes, but of course he does. Silly me."

Rippling sand disturbed the silence following her remark.

"Y'know, if you wanted some light you could have said so from the beginning."

"Really? But well, why not. If your god could manage to provide some."

"I told you before, Jahwe is no god!"

"Then what else is he?"

"He's my ally!"

"Oho!"

"At least I have one."

"A god?"

A small ball of light lit up, so Shawarina could just make out Sophia's angry frown in time. Of course, she didn't really needed the light the blonde tousle-

haired Chihuahua<sup>1</sup> had magically lit on the top of her walking staff, for she had already cast a spell to see in the darkness onto herself earlier before they had entered the labyrinth below the fortress through the secret tunnels in the northern hills, but reminding her companion just who was in charge here she felt was sometimes necessary. It was bad enough already that the silly summoner standing next to her still thought about minor things like comradeship or such. But given some more time she would just accept the natural hack order. Looking down on her from time to time was not only physically easy, but it was reassuring nevertheless, too.

"Y'know, I would like it more if you would not make fun about Jahwe. That's never a good idea, you know?"

"Threatening me with your god... no, ally here..., aren't you?"

"Just a friendly reminder. Jahwe does how he pleases anyway."

Shawarina sighed. Oh well, why the hell not socialise a bit. It could help building useful structures somewhat.

"Well, he has good principles."

"You don't really mean that."

"But I do!"

"Really? Which one?"

"One above all! A fine principle. Why do follow the idiocy of the many in charge, if you could simply follow the principles of the single superior one. An agreeable point, really. Given that he does not claim to be a god, which is real honesty to the people. There is no god, after all."

"You know, I don't really think you got it."

"That's what you say."

"Sometimes I could just feed y...hey, what's that?!"

The monk who had just now appeared from around a corner, holding a candle and being clearly of the catholic profession, took a baffled glance at the two women he could barely make out in the candlelight, gave the worn leathery traveller's and the nightmarishly necromancer's outfit, he could make out in the darkness, a swift professional thought, and then quite the professional run for it.

The firelance springing from Shawarina's finger tip pierced the man's back easily burning his heart away.

"Oh great. Absolutely wonderful... You didn't have to kill him! Now we can't question him no more."

"I do not think he had anything to say of the least bit of interest. Really now, Catholic priests are the same everywhere and anytime."

"Hey, do you hear that?"

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<sup>1</sup> Shawarina herself wasn't sure if one could call all things walking and talking actually human. Especially not every girl. One did not consider every walking and talking turkey a person, too. Being a spellcaster actually did not help that matter. Being a necromancer not exactly either. Walking over a busy midday market's day watching the most meritorious parts of society reveling in groveling retirement did not offer the best outlooks in life perhaps. But it helped to enjoy the own profession. Old age was not for pussies. Especially if oneself was in their late eighties.

" Hmmm?"

" He wasn't alone, doofus!"

The hurried sound of running footsteps had already died off as Shawarina tried to seriously make anything out. "Too bad. Well, this has to do. Can't be helped. Beggars can't be choosers!"

" Hey, wait a minute! Wha...?!"

The sliding sound of a sharp knife coming out of a sheath did not promise anything good. The gleaming blade bathed in Jahwe's light gave Sophia the chill.

Shawarina took a step forward closer to her.

This look in her eyes. Always the same! Darn. Why was it always coming down to this!?

Meanwhile both fleeing priests had reached the chambers above the tunnels they had searched earlier before encountering the two women – wherein brother Miguel had sadly passed away – and now hurried up a flight of steps bursting through an off the latch heavy door into a room filled with countless scrolls and tomes and an old man in black robes sitting behind a heavy table.

" Signore!! Signore Reynoso!"

" Yes, what is it?! Did I not clearly state that I do not want to be disturbed?!"

" There is an emergency!!"

" What happened? Did the Unionists already storm the harbour?"

" No, signore! Worse!!"

" What?! Are they inside the fortress??"

" That is not the problem!"

" Then what is the problem, speak already!"

The two inquisitors fell silent.

" What now?! Did somebody cut out your tongue?! Couldn't have been me. My knife is at the questioning room. So?! Speak up!"

" There.... There are two women below in the secret tunnels to the north."

" Women? In the fortress...? I clearly forbade that. Women onto the holy lords grounds...! What a nuisance."

" The... there are further troubles."

" What?"

" Br... Brother Miguel isIsISIs... dead."

" Ah. And?"

" One... one of them seems to be a necromancer."

" ...and...? What is so strange about that? She's a woman as you have already said yourself. I thought I had already told you where black magic stems from. We will save her soul later, of course. And? What about the other one?! Speak."

" The,... the other one carries the staff of... O...o-of Jahwe and is apparently a... jew."

Signore Reynoso's gaping yaw fell down apparently being pulled by an incredible force – which by all means must have been the lords – then he jumped up like being struck by lightning, sending his chair flying back.

"A jew!?! Kill the jew!! KILL HER!!!"

" YeyeYESSIRE!!"

Still back in the tunnel Sophia had the sole hunch she was the only one with a lit brain standing in the stale darkness. For her so called partner in war, or at least crime – not that she saw so much of a difference in it – was rather busy stealing the dead priest's head lying before them. Again. As if they had nothing better to worry about right now.

" Do you mind not doing this to the local clergy, please?"

" Why?"

" Well, we might get into serious trouble."

" More than now?"

" Well... no, not really, but it is not the very best idea to provoke people, that's all I'm sayin' here, y'know?!"

" Tush, he will make himself more useful now like this than he ever did before in his sullen existence," said the ash blonde necrophiliac raising herself up on her feet again where she began to attach the priests dead head right next to the other four already dangling from her black belt. "Besides, there is no true difference when they find the dead body lying here or when we carry a piece of it with us ahead. Now,...," saying this she had finally finished attaching the head securely next to the others and with a darkling blue glow the skull's eyes and mouth came to life.

Just watching the head moving it's lips monotonously and soundlessly its new owner seemed not to be really surprised but rather solemnly disenchanted about it.

" Hmpf. As I'd already expected, it's empty. Too bad, really. I had hoped it could have provided us with more knowledge about these tunnels."

" So it's useless."

" No. Not really. It still holds most of the man's life force which I can channel into spells." She withheld a sigh. "Well, well, it is really too bad they burn out so fast all the time. I have to find a way to conserve them. Maybe there is a way to recharge them."

" Could you, like, professionally fantasise later 'bout that? Were kinda in a hurry here."

" Yes, yes." Somewhat already stressed Sophia watched how Shawarinas gaze wandered up to the tunnel's ceiling while tapping her white necrophilic chin with a lone finger, still muttering: "Hmmm. Hm."

" Mhm-Hm?"

" Hm."

" HmmMMM??"

" Hmhm."

" HmmmMMMM!"

" No, I don't have any frigglies."

" HmRM! I mean, fucky\*grrrMMBmm\*," biting in her shawl Sophia had to hold onto herself hard before bursting out in a more controlled way: "What the hell'S HMM?!?!"



The answer consisted only in a finger pointing upwards.

One of these days she would really kill this unnerving deadbeater. There was nothing wrong with the tunnel's ceiling. Really noth\*

Crashing rocks and debries bursted their way down inside the tunnel sending dust and stray rocks flying before them!

Choking hard Sophia could just barely make out the stature of a man standing tall inside the rubble laughing loud and triumphantly.

A swift swing of her staff and a mumbled incantation later a fresh gust of wind cleared the air before her and standing over large heaps of rocks and the dead bodys of soldiers she could make out the ronin shedding his swords. Sophia turned the glowing light on the top of her walkingstick brighter with a wave of her hand – she had not done so earlier, to avoid getting spotted right away, which was, well, right now, rather pointless anyway – and yes, it was Yubeij standing there folding his arms in satisfaction.

“ Yubeij?!”

“ Ah, Sophia,” said the ronin turning around to them. He took a small bow towards Shawarina. “Mylady.”

Ignoring how the idiot had greeted the bitch, Sophia asked him: “What are you doing down here?!”

“ I killed some of these frenchmen up there! They didn't pose a challenge. Haha! Not at all!”

“ You killed the french soldiers?”

“ Yes!”

“ Yubeij?”

“ Yes?”

“ Yubeij. We're here to help the french.”

“ I... I knew that, of course! Yes. Yes. Hrmnm. They... they couldn't resist to... to challenge me. Yes. That was it. Yes! Ha! Challenge me, yes! That was it. Ahaha. Ha.”

Sophia couldn't help but wonder for herself, if all ronin were this much in denial with their mistakes. Maybe it helped to avoid seppukku or such.

“ Shouldn't you be somewhere entirely else?!”

The ronin seemed to be uncomfortable with this question.

“ Well, but... I thought if I kill some soldiers why I'm on my way... and then I heard your voices coming from down below... and I got very worried....”

What kind of range had this guy's hearing? Apparently more than his brains had. He was way too stupid for a kind of lie like this, Sophia knew for a fact.

“ But not the french ones! The spanish!! The ones in the fortress....”

“ Oh.”

“ Oh my, and here I though we were here to help the english,” said Shawarina feigning innocent ignorance a bit too obvious as always.

“ Yes, we are.”

“ Please explain then to me why we are helping the french?”

“ Yes. Yes! Please explain,” said Yubeij.

" Again?" Sophia had the stale hunch that Shawarina wanted to pull her leg again, but why not. Yubeij had apparently forgotten everything already again – if he had ever understood it from the very beginning. "Oh, alright. Okay, listen good, because I'm only gonna say this once again, " saying this she took a necessary dramatic breath. Everyone was looking at her for a change. Good. "We're here in Gerona, in 1808, because someone has destroyed the timeline in the far away future, and we're hired to fix it. Okay? So far, so good. Too bad we've got no idea who did it. And when he did it. We've got some hints, but for now no target. Were here to find out who did it. So we can get back at him. So far, so clear?"

" Yes. Yes, of course, that is child's play to remember. Hah," said the ronin, who, actually, had as expected no idea about what was going on, but Sophia thought it always wiser to keep him safe in his self-declared non-idea space.<sup>2</sup>

Shawarina gave her a quick glance. "Oh, sure. Yes. I said yes, didn't I?"

" Hrmfgh. 'Kay. So. Were here because someone, whomever, has tampered with the flow of time, changing things. Now were changing things, too, to fix the original timeline, and getting...." Sophia could make out the concentrated puzzled frown on the ronins brow just in time. "We're looking for the bad guys to kill them. The enemy!"

" Oh. Yes! Right!! The enemy."

" Ahrmn. Yeah."

" We've killed a lot of enemys already."

" Uhm. Yeah. S'pose so. Not the, like, important ones, Yubeij."

" Not?! Then we'll go and find them!"

" Oh, 'kay. That we'll do. But first back to the plan." She pulled out a piece of paper. "We've pinned down their possible location to this town of Gerone – no, Gerona – where the young United States of Europe, mind, the old British Commonwealth and the French Revoluzers joined forces to get rid of the old monarchies across europe. This Union never came into being, so, we've figured so much as it seems to be that someone did tamper around with history here, at this place, for the Union lost the fight in Gerona. With devastating consequences and Washington's defeat at Waterloo later on. Okay so far?"

" Yes."

" Mhmn."

" Hrmn. Now. Someone from the future contacted us, to fix all of this mess, and now were here working for them. The magical academy agreed on this, too, so, here we are." Sophia let go of a dramatic cough. "Now. The five of us–"

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<sup>2</sup> No one could know or barely fathom the ideas idiots could come up with when they began having them all by themselves. The earth would be flat by now. So, Sophia had decided quite early in her life, that it was wiser to let people be people all for themselves and keep one's own ideas for oneself. At least one should better never ever be ashamed for letting loose an idea into the free world. Accidents always happened, of course. One could never know what other people would do with these ideas – and idiots. To protestanize rodenticide was, for example, no good. To religionize idolized omnicide neither. Peace was a fateful sleep. Or so Jahwe thought at times.

" Five," said Shawarina, seemingly absentminded.

" Yes, five."

" Oh. Five. Yes. Of course, silly me. Go on, please."

" Anyway. Zelmi, our teamleader – or so she calls herself – is currently out there in hiding and waits for what we'll do while we follow our... uhm...." Sophia gazed across the tiny letters on the paper trying to make out the word. "Where are the others anyway," she asked Shawarina to better fill the opening before anyone else could.

" Last time I heard Zelmi's voice on this... talking headband...," said Shawarina, her fingers briefly touching her temple.

" She called it headset."

" Whatever. Last time I heard her she said all the others are in position and are busy with their... objectives... or how she had called it."

" Uh, yeah, objectives!" That was the word. "Whatever that means. Now, Shawa's and my job is to sneak into the fortress from below the tunnels, to secure the intrusion, while yours, Yubeij, was –is– to draw the attention from the soldiers in the fortress above, so the others can...Wha... What are you doing, Shaw...?"

" Oh. I thought I ask one of these dead men," Shawarina replied, while straightening herself, and fastened another head onto her belt.

" You haven't listened to one word I've said, haven't you....?"

" Oh, look, this one seems to be a better quality. I'll tune his voice louder."

" I think, we could, like, seriously improve our teamwork here...," Sophia tried to protest, but apparently to no avail.

" See, it's got some brain functions left."

" Mo... Mondieu...! Ces'ce-cest'ce til vous?"

" Impressive. Now. Where was I...!?"

" Emparker, sil'vou'plais...."

" Hmmm. It's really not spanish."

" Excuse me?!"

" ...rhien neh vhha phlus..."

" I wasn't so sure. Oh, well. Still no guide through these halls for us, it seems."

Sophias moan could have brought down the roof, if they wouldn't already stand on it. For now she had clearly lost. For now.

" Okay. Allright. We just move on and find us an exit," said Sophia. "Yubeij, you go up ahead before us so we are shielded from anyone assaulting us."

" Yes. I will."

" Cehh crahyonNe...vaut rhien... "

The ronin turned around to move straight onwards. No way his pride would allow anything to happen to his comrades. His word stood like a rock in the... the.... He stopped in his tracks as he felt a sudden disturbance in the –he was never exactly sure how to name it– behind him coming from the two girls. A disturbance that always meant nothing good. He had learnt that early on.

Sophia had just now sent a hard gaze towards the ignorant Necromancer slut stepping over her bounds.

"We should be careful, by the way, or this, like, Commodore Marquardt may get, sort of, rather pissed, y'know?"

"Who cares? Military people overrate themselves all the time. That bitch is surely no different."

"If you say so...."

Shawarina sighed with contempt. Later. Not now. "Well. Let us continue on our way. Somebody will be waiting for us by now. We better get a move on."

"Çah neh prhomenth rien de bonhh...."

"I agree," Shawarina looked around: "This is not the best place for brunch."

"This place is –ah– sooo primitive," Sophia muttered in rare agreement.

"C'est à chier...!"

"Yes, I did also expect more from the future, to be hones\*"

"Over here! OVER HEEERe!! There they are! THERE are the IntrUDERS!!"

Both looked on their side past the ronin ahead into the darkness only to spot a hurried bunch of priests approaching together with armed soldiers altogether wielding torches and pikes and holy crosses and worse.

"Oh dreck," Sophia complained. "They've found us already!"

"Tsk."

"Il ne nous faut rien."

One of the agitated priests gesticulated into their direction yelling aloud: "THERE! There she is!!"

"Oh great," complained Sophia, who just couldn't resist a sarcastic comment.

"I told you, you shouldn't have killed the pr–!"

"Kill the jew! KILL HER!!"

"Oh my, oh my. Looks like your fans have arrived!"

"`ey!"

"Stand back," said Yubeij, with a firm demanding gesture. His left wandered up to his waist grabbing the hilt of his sword. "These warriors are my enemies. You! Before me! Yes, you! I challenge you here and n\*"

Shawarinas words coming from behind made him freeze on the spot: "We don't have time for this, don't we?"

"We don't."

"Agreed."

"Tu me les casses...."

The necromancer's hands made empty gestures over her head, and, all of a sudden, the head's mouths and eyes on her belt began to glow a darkly blue and the bodies of the dead soldiers below Yubeij's feet began to rise. In solemn silence they took their place next to the ronin.

The priests and the guards flinched away in horror.

"I see," said Yubeij, in agreement to the men he had previously killed. "Your spirit is still alive. Very well. These men were your enemies, and should they still

be in death, as they were in life, then I agree – let us fight together,” The sword in his hilt came willingly loose. “and find glory in a warrior’s spirits etern\*”

“ No! Oh, pleaA-HA-SE!! Shit! Dreh-HEEekKH! You-y\*Y-YOuCOW! That’s not quicker! That makes it even WORSE!! Here! THAT’s how YE dO IT! BiTch!!”

Feeling the sudden gust of heat rising up his back up to his sweating brow Yubeij suddenly remembered his master’s words, that there was – at certain times – nothing like a good and clean, swift and speedy retreat – forward towards the enemy!

Behind the large cloud of fire rolling through the tunnel Sophia and Shawarina had a hard time keeping pace with it, especially since there was now here and there a freshly roasted body blocking the way.

Jumping over the obstacles Shawarina managed to ask over the roaring noise: “What kind of spell is that?! I thougWHHoOuuUUUPpp–that you had no combat spell training –WhoHuUpp – and that’s no fireball.”

“ Ehehehe – Oh, that?! It is an idea for a spell that came to me earlier from watching Zelmi aHHHAaaAs-soon as I caught sight of it. From-WhuHuPHh– one of the weapons she used that day, remember? I call it Napalm cloud. Just like the original!”

“ Mhmn. I see. Hop!”

“ Ah, ‘kay, ‘kay. No prolem, no probl– ups! Hey. Have you seen Yubeij?!”

“ I believe he’s running ahead.”

“ J’ai tiré la mauvaise carte.”

Taking a hurried glance through the fiery cloud protruding ahead of them Sophia could just barely make out the ronin swiftly running in front of the burning priests.

“ Ah, I see him! He looks a bit stressed. Wha-WhatevvaaAAAAa-a-alright’right... do you think this passage here’s any longer? My legs’re getting more tired by the second from running here!”

“ Hmmm...? Sorry, did you say anything?”

“ Could you, please, at least fake some attention here?!”

“ Hm. Oh, well.”

“ C’est à chier....”

“ This is kinda serious here, right now!”

“ Hm, I can’t help myself but wonder.”

“ Wonder? Huh?! About what?”

“ How did this begin...?”

\*

*November 28, 2009. 21:26 PM. ARROW STATION. Circling above Africa. A woman in her bed in a room.*

The sheets were cold, so cold and lonely. Even the well temperatured room could not change that fact. She clasped her hands deeper into her pillow where a pair of hands just had to be. Had to be. But they were not there. Still not. She had waited for so long for them to return. Still he was not back. The place next to her was empty. She could feel it. It was so cold. He said he would return later on, but this had been so long ago. Was it one year, or already two? Time seemed to escape her. Somehow he kept his promise. He returned each morning, for her eyes could bleary see him, but the flowing waters did not allow her so see the more. She buried her face deeper into the pillow. It did not offer her more comfort, but it eased her view.

A simple test it was, he had said, nothing more than a run of the Phoenix's new engines. All new starships required such tests anyway, and the new battlecruiser was his personal enjoyment she knew that, even if he did not say it aloud. He was too grown for such boyish acts. The liar. There was always the possibility of something to go wrong. Accidental jumps with damaged engines to release the stored energies in them to avoid explosions were common, and finding the jumped lost spaceships was no big deal. The stored charges in the engines held not enough for long jumps. Usually. Before he left he had said it would be alright, there would be no problems, he would be back in half an hour. Liar. That stinking grinning fondly kissing asshole.

Something was wrong. Something just did not feel right.

This strange aching crawling over her ba—this tickling walking over her skin like sparkling frictions!

Abruptly she opened her eyes.

The other half of the bed was neatly done. Like he'd never been g\*

Something in her head clicked. She had always listened to that click, in all of her life, and this time it was no different.

"Seneca," she requested calmly. "Did I not order to keep the left side of my bed untouched by the cleaners by any means?!"

All the space station's rooms featured special cleaning robots hidden in the walls. These robots, controlled by the stations main Syntronic network system, would now and then timely and quietly keep everything in order, apply new bedsheets, or mop the floor, for example. Since the day of the incident, no, the day of his leave, had she ordered her room's syntronic to only make her side of the bed. Otherwise she feared she would have never found sleep again. And she wanted to find sleep somehow. There was to fulfill a need. People believed in her. The unwanted trust needed to be repaid. No easy way out. Life offered no such thing. A tired spirit was a stupid mind. Mind and matter giving up the ghost. A perfect dream. There was still a lot to be done. And there wasn't a soul to be seen.

" Negative. No such command recorded," said a clean voice, coming from invisible speakers positioned all throughout the room, modulated in such a way that it appeared to speak from just about over her head.

Her nerves felt like they were touched by lightning. She could not resist the need to ask this most stupid question she had now, as idiotic as it was.

" Please list all recorded names of personal residing in this room."

" Affirmative. One staff member listed: Commodore Marquardt, Miriam. Station Commander. Would you require mo..."

With a single move she lunged out of her bed for her uniform and boots on the floor.

" Connection! Zelmi," she called out aloud, so the room computer's always listening microphonic ears could pick up her voice – not because it would not hear her otherwise, it could pick up the cough coming from an ant – but the Syntronic would analyze her voice pattern now and prioritize her connection. Even military advisers like Zelmi were pretty busy at times, and she felt every split second would count. All her nerves were calling out for that. Maybe she was wrong, maybe it was all a crude wild mistake, but she never took chances. Never.

" Miri? What's wr...?"

" Somethings wrong! Jump!!"

She did not wait for the reply, as she yelled her next order: "Connection! Anniston!"

The uniform was nearly on, she could zip it later, now for the boots.

" Miriam, what's–," Doctor Aniston's bewildered voice tried to form a vain sentence.

" Claire! Get to the Emergency shelters, now!"

" What? Are you ser...?"

" Get a move on!!" With these words she stormed onwards towards the door, the sensors in the walls registering her approach opening the blastproof door-halves.

A punch, invisible, hitting her in the stomach, creeping upwards her spine, taking away her breath, stopping her where she stood. As she looked up, all the pictures next to the door were missing. No broken glass on the floor. Like they had never been there.

Now she was sure.

Taking a breath she stumbled through the opening doors out into the hallway. There was an emergency shelter not far ahead. She had to hurry, quickly!

" Katsu! KATSU," she yelled running down the hallways while passing by surprised staff. "I know you can hear me! Somethings wrong! You hear me?!"

Finally the sirens started to exclaim danger, too. Seneca seemed to have realized – or better analyzed – the possible danger through her voice patterns. A bit late perhaps, but better than never.

The station's personal knew the drill.

" Somethings really wrong," she allowed herself not to hide her fears, for this time only, while hurrying on.

Only a fifty feet to the emergency shelter's doors.

She felt ripples going through her body. Like something tearing on her bones, scratching on her muscles. Biting the pain away she moved on. She was not alone for some of the personnel breaking down on the floor yelling in pain meant again that she had not been wrong. Not at all. Something was off! Seeing her men wallowing in pain as she passed them by, for once she was happy about the cursed blood running through her veins. It pulsated in her ears, made her veins swell. It kept her moving.

There were barriers behind that door ahead, multilayered forcefields promising protection. Just to reach it in time.

Only ten feet left.

A hit in her neck, like from a big hammer, numbing her nerves. She grabbed for the door before her, only to feel it pass away, like being made from out of thin air it vanished, and she fell through it to the floor behind, but the floor below her now vanished, too!

Curse her, she had been too slow. Too slow at all!

Her mind began to fade, to dissolve into thin air.

She felt herself lifted up, carried forward. Was this death? Did it go like this? Would she now tread the path all the others she had sent onto the other side had taken before her? Were they all waiting for her? To take revenge for the killings she had done, to gloat, or to tear her apart?

A pair of hands grabbed her back, pulling her tightly.

Hopefully it would not hurt so much.

" ...nk goodness!"

" That was close!!"

" What's with her?"

Voices? She could make them out coming from some distance all around.

" Whoa, she was totally see through right now!"

" Mell, how's she?!"

" Is her brain working?"

" That would be new."

" Shhh! She's coming about!"

She wasn't dead, it dawned on her. So much for meeting the grim reaper. All her body did hurt so badly that she wouldn't have minded him coming amiss right now. Could words bleed? It felt like they could right now in her ears. Whatever had happened her nerves came back first to her. This pain was harsh payback for the price of life. But not as much payback as the one responsible for making her suffer right now would pay, she promised to herself.

Her view coming back she could blurriedly make out a sky blue symbol on an indigo uniform displaying a brain circled by two atoms with surrounding silver letters reading 'Mutant Brigade'.

" What` ... n... ells... name...?"



" Shhh, try not to speak right now, you're not fully back yet."

The athletic ebony haired girl in the uniform holding her in her arms right now smiled a warm smile at her Miriam could have killed her for. It made her feel old. That was what one got for adopting someone. Too late now. Nothing to regret.

" Welcome, Commodore," said a voice behind the girl. It was clearly the voice from Captain Craig Butler, the teleporter. He always held protocol high, the stiff bastard.

" How're you feeling," asked the girl.

" How come?"

" I've read your thoughts... Don't look like that, they were loud enough, so, I alarmed the others telepathically and we teleported into the room towards you've headed! Craig also took the liberty of taking Doctor Aniston and her assistant around. How're you feeling?"

" Like puke!"

Somehow she was able to get up – oh, how she hated getting helped like that – and finally managed to take a look around.

The space-station was gone. They were standing right in the midst of empty space. One and a half exa-tons of titanium-alloys and steel-plastics and twentytwothousand people had faded away into nothingness. Only planet earth turning as ever patiently in the eternal nothingness below.

They were alive. Miraculously. The reason for this was standing in their midsts, Miriam could see, for the man chanting verses in his glowing interlaced robes stood out from everyone else in their uniforms and white coats.

Katsu'Chon, the last magician alive.

" What's going on?," she asked him.

" ...Ní fhaca mé riamh, Aon chailín níos sciamhaí ná Mol Ní Mhaoileoin,..."

" Don't you speak gealic with me you spell wielding...", she considered her words. Swallowing hard she corrected herself, " No. Thank you."

The magician looked back into her eyes, and replied nothing.

" I really mean it. We wouldn't be here without you. So I guess some thanks are in order."

" I am currently trying to stabilize the surrounding waves of reality around us," he replied monotonously, "to synchronize our life force with some of the space station's interiors returning parts of it back into existence. Reality is fluctuating right now as we speak. Shaking like earth's tectonic plates following an earthquake, you must have felt the ripples coming from that event, right? Maybe you should ask the doctor over there for her scientific opinion while I try to get all our harmonies right in conjuncture with Jupiter's. The shockwave did not reach that planet up till now, and will not for a while," saying this he fell back into his mumbling chanting almost instantly ignoring her again.

Was that an agreement? She could never tell. Maybe it was some ignorant Irish response of a kind. It was hard to tell, him being the last irishman alive, as far as she knew.

Turning around she counted the people standing with her in the now empty void of space, where ARROW STATION had once before had been.

There was her, Doctor Aniston, one of her assistants, and Katsu. There were also seven of her mutants, all in all two teleportes, one telepath, a hypnosuggestor, the Nemiah-twins, and the detonator. Not enough, she summed solemnly up for herself, should the magic-using asshole chanting verses right next to her happen to have a stupid idea of sorts. But she could not be picky right now, and standing in the empty void of space threehundredfifty kilometers above earth's surface she had no real choice but to trust this man. The man who had single mindedly killed billions of people years ago and plunged the planet below her feet into chaos and destruction.

Miriam wiped her face in black despair. God, were they fucked right now!

The walls came back first blending out the outsides of existence returning solid ground under their feet. The collective sigh was not relaxing she felt for it sounded too—Something shoved her a few inches forward. She swirled around – only to painfully feel her elbow not smack into a stomach but onto the hard side of a table. Reflexes were good but sometimes really unhandy.

Emergency shelter Zero-four was one of the stations points of retreat in case some enemy force – may it be paranormal, mutated, immaterial, radioactive, extra-dimensional, or entirely different – had managed to succeed in infiltrating the station, so counterstrikes could be arranged and key personal kept safe at the same time. It was very useful to be paranoid about things, Miriam thought. After all, now they had a safe place. No one could know what prowled outside in space. The shelter had its own reactor units, as well as force field generators, a small but powerful syntronic, a typical tactical command center table, about a dozen chairs, and a small sanitarian compartment. The cold lights on the ceiling provided not much illumination, but it was enough.

" So." The magician seemed to be a bit pleased about his work. "There is no way to return all of the station, but this small chamber, I'm afraid, will have to do."

" Better than nothing.", said Felix, the detonator, throwing his backside right onto the next available chair. Not everyone was used to the flair of open space.

" All right. Thank you. Okay, everyone, now we...."

" Ah, crap," said Doctor Aniston, who had just begun to punch onto a keyboard.

" What is it, Claire?" Watching her friend grimacing like this never promised good news, as Miriam had learned right on the first day. It had all seemed too good anyway.

" No power. All systems are dead. Syntronics. Life support system. Dead."

" Katsu?"

The magician had found himself a corner of the room standing there like all this was not his business but rather amusing to watch.

" Of course not." Taking slow steps forward towards the table, he continued: "This room we are standing in is a magic-, well, you would call it a dimension, wherein all looks and feels like your station, but is not quite real. Reality was

altered, and all matter our original reality consisted out of is somewhere else in the universe by now. I managed to keep enough matter in this place, but only the outlines and the insides of this shelter. Including you. All these profane electrics are, sadly, not gone, but cannot work. Even I cannot return them to a working state."

Aniston darted the magician a glance. "Wasn't magic all powerful?"

"Blame physics. It defies magic all time." Katsu coughed slightly, and then added: "It seems we are all at a disadvantage here. I will try my best to work with you. But please, do not expect wonders from me. I am neither a holy man, nor a fayre monger. As you all know. Yes, Melanie, what is it?"

"Uhm."

"Yes?"

"What about the pot?"

"I'm sorry, but that's also electric, right? I can summon a vortex inside the pot leading to the sixth layer of hell. That should do it. But don't touch the vortex itself, that would be very...unfortunate. Plumbing is not my business."

Seeing how the silverhaired young man in his mostly blueish gleaming robes stood next to the blonde unkempt scientist in her well worn white coat had a certain kind of charm. Especially since Katsu was hundreds of years old. More than sixhundred was their estimate, for the magician had been silent about this matter, but since all of old Ire had been ravagly destroyed in the fourteenth century this time span had to be his minimum age. Magic had its uses Miriam thought. Him looking like being in his twenties had to be one of them. He could still use a haircut. She always wondered if this stupid staff made out of this silly marble-like material that vainly tried to resemble plain wood he carried around all day had any actual use. Now they had a good chance to find out.

"Say," said Katsu, looking intrigued. "Would a map help you? I remember an old spell for a wallpaper used in magical... places. I could try to synchronize it with this reality to provide a political overview over this earth."

That was actually a great idea, Miriam had to agree. Safer than sending someone down to the surface at this point.

"Yes. Please do this."

"How should this work," said Doctor Aniston throwing Katsu an accusing stare. "You just want to pull off one of your jokes. How do you want to magic the political landscape you do not know hell—" On this the magician released a slight caught in his cupped hand, which seemed to anger Claire even more. "—about onto a wall hanging?!"

"I'll harmonize it with an actual map hanging on a wall in a room somewhere down below on the surface, of course. Always think practical, is what my teacher's said to me."

"And, of course, you did."

"Yes. I did."

The scientist in Claire seemed to wave it off for now, so she seated herself giving Miriam a simple nod. That had been great work. Actually making the

magician explain just one single thing about what he was about to do to make anything happen with his magics was something entirely new. But that was not important right now. Magic had its limits. You couldn't just sing sham-sala-dabam alone and implausible things would happen because the universe had rules to obey. Reassuring. Miriam was not sure if Katsu knew what he had actually done right now. Done entirely to his own self for a change. Magic had limits. They had not known this before this point. There was a way to kill this bastard. Yes. This was the best news in years! Now only to get out of this room, returning everything back to normal. Finding out what specifically was needed to rightfully murder him would be no hurry later on.

"Allright," said Miriam, sending the magician a lovely smile. "We shouldn't waste any time, now, shouldn't we?"

"Of course not."

Katsu waved his hand in a half circle through the air in the general direction on the wall behind Miriam and as she turned around she could see an old looking map hanging on the wall where none had been before a moment ago. It looked very old, like a hand-made tapestry from the eighteenth century, but with a map of the world with all continents on it, and a closer look revealed a lot of nations marked with different colours.

It took her a moment until she realised that all people except the magician were all around her all at once.

"Wha-shit! Look at this 'ere!"

"Unreal!"

"Hey, what's all these colours here?!"

"That's all states, numbskull!"

"No way."

"Yeah, this looks different."

"`ey, there's a big state in Eurasia – China! ...China?!"

"Oy, look there!"

"What?!"

"...what in hell's name...?"

"U.S.A.? What's that 'sposed to be?"

"United States of... what?!"

"America!?"

"Oy, the Matztekan Confed's're gone?!"

"And... why is Europe looking like a weird puzzle?"

"Hey, you're right! What's it saying there? Eur... euro\*"

"European Union."

"Yeah, the Commonwealth's all gone...!"

"I can see that myself!"

"Then don't ask like th...!"

"Quiet!"

"Yes ma'am." The reply came back from everyone. Even Katsu! The bastard was smiling. Damn him!

"It seems... it's true," said Doctor Aniston, seemingly barely able in keeping her voice away from trembling. "Someone, somewhere, somehow, messed around with the timestream."

Seeing everyone's looks Aniston added: "Of our reality."

The silence following her words felt louder than the emptiness of space outside.

Melanie uneasily watched Miriam's teeth grinding together. Biting through the dead silence it was so loud everyone must have heard it by now. Her evil stare hung onto the map.

"Whoever did this... they fucked with the wrong."

\*

*Some time later. 1651. One hot summer evening. A mountain pass in Northern Florence. A shady bar on the road. A sign at the entrance reading 'NoH Khidz'.*

Bruno spat into the foul glass with utter contempt. Some customers did just not respect the common-law of fine establishments as his! Had he not nailed all the preferences<sup>3</sup> to enter his pub right at the door? Sure, he was not the best in handwriting there was, but surely a 'Noh Kihdz' should get the point around.

In thoughts he began to polish the glass with his old dishrag trying not to appear too nosy, as his glance wandered shily over to a small table covered mostly in the darkness at the end of the barroom.

Alright, in the end he had been mistaken somewhat, for the size of the hooded figure stroding into his bar about an hour ago was but somehow tempting since what other person than a kid would measure about three foot ten! But the arm the stranger had broken on Quick-handed-Jaques there with one swift handshake, well, there was no denying this stranger had the sand to face some challenges waiting on the road. The lousy over-the-hill pouchstealer had left still groaning, holding his broken arm swearing about revenge and stuff, not that Bruno cared much. As long as it was not his bar taking the heat, from that loosers loused gang, such trouble was just not his.

Another quick glance toward the table in the corner convinced Bruno about the whereabouts of his still present hooded guest. True, a child would not travel alone only in a simple grey robe, with only a broken-of stick as protection. All alone there, on those dangerous roads up ahead towards the french border, filled with robbers, bandits, and other monstrous abberations the wild uncivilised landscape held. These roads were not as friendly as his bar, that he was quite sure about. One traveling bard had once told him legends of evil spirits and ghastly monsters living in the mountains up the slopes, as well as scrupulous

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<sup>3</sup> Yes, he knew that word. A wayfaring stranger had once left it behind quite a while ago together with his belongings and his life. The sausages he'd gotten out of the man hadn't sold badly, either.

wizards wielding spells, and yes, the man had had some fine richly treasures for proof to show for his claims, right before they buried him behind One-legged-Willy's barnyard.

But he was convinced by the feeling in his guts alone that this small customer was neither wizard, nor monster, and surely no spirit. Ghosts could not break arms, right?!

But he was no fool, of course, since there was something catchy about that hooded figure in the shadows, as unobtrusively as it drank the lemonade it had ordered just before breaking Jaques's arm.

At least there would be no need to dig a very deep hole for a kid.

Bruno grunted for a second. The one thing that had bothered him mostly was that the stranger did not only order some kids drink – together with a straw of hay - but had also mumbled something about a thing called 'burger'. Whatever that was supposed to be!? Well, since the explanation sounded like something as a cow between a sliced loaf of bread garnished with some stuff out of a flowerpot, he had ordered Alessandra behind the kitchen to get some flesh with garlic put between last weeks remains of coarse bread. She was quite late. Maybe the rats had eaten the bread already. No, that couldn't be. Just this morning he was sure he remembered putting one of those rats into the oven and eating a chunk of that bread. The oven. He sniffed shortly, ah, yes, it smelled like Alessandra had found the rat. He knew it had had been a good idea to spare it for later.

Absentmindedly he wiped his grasy hands of his leather apron. Hopefully, not out of all the days, the sheriff would not take a short stay today. He wouldn't want to be in trouble by serving kids in his bar, and the usual amounts of money the damn lawman demanded wasn't getting smaller each month, too! Maybe he should, nevertheless, try to get the hooded gnome over there to loosen its tongue somewhat. Maybe if he could find out more about his whereabouts\*

With a jink the two creaking wings of the saloon's double door swung violently into the barroom disturbing his thought but the sight of customers entering was more than a welcome sight! Full coin pouches, that was what made the world go round! The world should be run by merchants, that was his sincere belief. It would make anywhere a much better place for everyone!

One swift professional look about his new guest stepping heavily into the bar assured him that he was just about right; That was the look of adventurers of the best of kind, carrying bags filled up to the brim, their heavy equipment marked with the scars of battle. Dungeoneers, their kind were called by the people of all kinds, and no matter what the last of their prey had been, may it have been a fair princess in distress, a ruthless bunch of pirates, or a fair trader's shipments, a notorious bandit's bounty, or an unfortunates lord's possessions, whatever the reasons, the coins flowed as quickly into their pockets as out again.

There naturally was, of course, no better place for the money to end up into any others than Bruno's own pockets.

"Fair Travellers," said Bruno, beckoning towards the entrance: "Be welcomed! Please step into these halls of rest and drink, and have a beer on my name for your pleasure!<sup>4</sup> We have the warmest beds, and cleanest sheets this side of the river! Step forward, please!! Don't be ashamed!!!"

Bruno was just about to pull three of the larger tankards from behind his bar, to fill the newly arrived fat cats a free round, as his gaze froze onto one of the stranger's breast.

His mood dropped considerably as he saw the tabbard the blonde stranger wore above his leather armor. It clearly displayed a holy symbol from some order, that of Bruno was deadly sure about. He could not tell what kind of order, hell, he had no idea about holy things or churches anyway, but, to his even more apparent dismay, the same tabbard was also worn by the second stranger, too, who carried an impressive longbow on his back. Some holy ranger? Well, nevertheless, these two were surely no good place for beer to end up with, he silently cursed to himself. Maybe there was more luck with the ebony haired woman that had kicked the door open earlier. Not only did she carry a few well placed extra pounds under her dark plate-mail, no, the enormous claymore on her back called for some serious amount of strength, which was a good thing. The sleep poisons should work quite well with her! But what to do with the two holy men? True, that woman wore a white tabbard, too, but in sharp contrast to the men's red for that blue-white coat of arms with the pair of balances and pair of swords was surely a warrior house's symbol, he knew that much, while that silver sword over a sunburst the men wore had to be, well, holy. No way that old beer-trick would work on those two divine contemners!

He quickly licked over his mustache. What to do about them? Quite fortunately for Bruno, having possibly seen his frown, the longhaired bowman stepped into the silent gap. "Greetings to you! Barman."

Barman...?! Ah, yeah, that meant him. Well, maybe the holy men were on a vacation. "Greetings, please step closer."

The invitation didn't seem necessary.

Creaking floor boards carried the armored adventurers to the bar where the woman threw her shapely arse right onto the one lone barstool. Heavy bags carelessly landed onto the floor challenging the worm-eaten wood which won.

"I'm sorry, we are only passing through here and don't have much time.", said the bowman.

"Oh, I see. Are you on an important mission, sirs?", said Bruno, beginning to fill the mugs with good thick beer just to be on the safe side.

"Yes, we are," said the blonde man with the flat haircut with shrewd eyes.

"Oh, I see. A-Haha. May one ask what kind of a mission?"

"Operation Enduring Inquisition."

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<sup>4</sup> Bruno was, in fact, quite proud about his skills of speech. There was no traveller not worn out enough not to fall upon the three magic words: Rest, drink, and beer. The combination of drink and beer was, in fact, the oldest trick in the book, but it always worked, everywhere in the world. No guest would leave his bar early. A knife administered in the sleep always helped things.

" Ha...ah-Ha-..., ha." Some of the beer seemed to be too yellow for the mug and preferred the bar table.

" Yeah," said the ebony haired woman in the black plate armour with glittering dark coal eyes grinning broadly: "We're lookin' for that 'ere!"

Bruno bowed down to look at that thing, the woman had just flung onto his bar, quite literally, into the eye.

The sight of a severed head wouldn't have usually disturbed him, but that wasn't the true problem. It just wasn't a human's head. This was a lizard's head. About the same size and form as a human one's! Its eyes even looked into different directions altogether with the as well hanging out tongue, just exactly as a chopped off human one did look like. Bruno knew about such facts quite well since his job usually was to do all the swinging business with the axe, while Stiffy-Silvius' job was to hold the frequently stray visitor's body down onto the pig-block behind the bar, but this head was neither a traveler's nor a pig's either.

Raising an eyebrow, he gazed up from the aberration's rests to look upon his intriguing visitors.

" What is," Bruno pointed at the head before him: "that?"

" That's a head."

" I can see that."

Uprighting himself he took another intrigued glance at the seriously grinning woman.

" Well, I don't sell lizards... And surely not their heads! Maybe you've got more luck with the sheriff downtown there..." He so hated to say that. But any other option seemed too much trouble anyway he put it. Well paying customers were one thing. Monsters another!

" Say," said the woman bowing herself forward. "We really weren't looking for the sheriff..."

Bruno relaxed somewhat. "Oh, good," he laughed. "Then how about a nice drink of good saxon beer that just came in yestd--"

" We were looking..." The warrior woman's voice suddenly became unnerving as she played absentmindedly with the lizard's head, rolling it around on the spot with her finger: "for more of these! Alive."

Out of his usual self, Bruno was stunned. "Well we've got none of such..." He fetched a look at the woman's claymore, then upon his few regular customers. Maybe because he caught a glimpse of the hooded lemonade-drinker still sitting near the window he did not manage to sound very convincing, as he replied: "...around... here."

" Please," The bowman stepped in again, smiling kindly: "it is nothing that should concern you too much, really." At least, this well mannered tall-grown man seemed more trustworthy than the claymore-woman. "We are only looking for a few... strange men. It is a cult! They call themselves the Black-Eyed-Elementals." He gesticulated, forming small objects into the thin air: "We only killed a few of them, in a small temple of theirs, and one of them pointed us into the direction of this,... small,... town."



Calling the four weather-worn shacks on this pass a town was more than flattery, but at last it sounded sane somehow. Nevertheless the bowman continued: "We are only looking for some...strange...people that passed through." He tried to alter his voice into something more like a hiss: "Mahhhbbeyy theeehhyy sphoookeh ahh biiith strahaaanng??!"

" Oh, yeah, right," said Bruno, shaking his head as a reply, while at the same time feeling it all too wiser to better bow back for some safe distance. After all, one could never know with madmen. No matter the coin they had. "Never heard of them."

His fingers played nervously on the bar, as he felt the three adventurers piercing stares.

" I cannot say, with a straight face, that I ever served lizards! At least not the scaly kind."

All three nodded with understanding, but Bruno did not feel relieved. Not at all. Nervously he watched the three not-so-profitable-customers as his thoughts raced. How to get them out of here? Then he suddenly remembered something! It was a long shot, but maybe it was worth it.

" But, well..., there's this old mill, near the goathouse on the hill down the road to the west. Some of me..., more regular customers complained 'bout some strangers holing up in there!"

Right now, Bruno had suddenly remembered Warthog-Scratcher-Bill telling about the old mill being home to some vandals, proposedly stealing some of his goats lately. When Bill stopping to complain all day and the unprofitable adventurers leaving could come together, the hell, why not?!

" They did some mysterious rituals..., " said Bruno insisting fervently: "or so I was told!! Never been near it, I couldn't dare, no!"

" Ah, thank you," said the tall ranger with sudden joy: "This will surely help." He tossed some coins on the bar. "Maybe we'll be back soon for some rest so some prepared baths would be very nice."

" Oh no, take your tim.. I mean, no problem there, but..., the baths will take some time, so, take your time, I mean...!"

" No, no. No problem! I think, we understood you fine."

" Good!!" Bruno laughed dutifully. Maybe now they would just go away quietly.

" But...!"

" Yes?"

" Should somebody strange come to this place asking for us..."

" Yeah...?!"

" Please tell them we will be back later shortly."

" Oh, yeah, right! Sure thing!" Hopefully the man was joking. Murder was one thing, talking lizards another. The latter was phenomenally bad for business.

Watching the three leave his bar Bruno could not resist a relived sigh, especially because the hooded kid had suddenly also decided to take a quick leave.

They had forgotten the head on his bar.

Well. Maybe it had a better taste than looks.

Outside, the hooded-one hurriedly approached the three adventurers short footed who where just about to ready their gear. "Oh please excuse me, fair travellers?!"

Looking up with bright blue eyes that shone clearly in the moonlight the small hooded figure mumbled under its shawl: "I am looking for some adventureres to help me in me perils! I have good coins to show!!" A hand with a small bag appered from under the robes. "If you would be interested, there is much more than this!"

With no apparent regrett the holy man replied: "Well, we have a lot to do, and not much time on our hands. I am afraid we cannot quite take your offe..."

" But I can!!!" The warrior woman lunged forward, grabbing for the bag, only to find it suddenly vanished, altogether with the hand that had held it a second before.

" Not so fast," said the small hooded person complaining: "You, or to say, we, have not signed any contract yet!"

" Whatever!!" said the warrior-woman impatiently: "Just give us the money and we will do whatever's necess...!"

" Wait, wait." The bowman stepped in appeasingly: "Let's not press our new contractor! How about,... we finish our small business that we still have around here, and then you meet up with us at a later time? You could even watch us, if you'd like to do so, and judge on our generell performance, if we are really worthy for your... proposal."

The hooded figure looked sceptical at the three for a moment, then it replied: "All right. I agree. I will watch and judge, if thee will be worthee of me quest!"

The three looked at each other, and the bowman nodded in agreement: "Fine. We'll be looking forward to do business with you. Well," saying this he grasped his bow. "Let's finish this job, then"

" `kay.", said the woman with a fretful reply. "...but who died an' made you boss?!"

" I'm sorry, mylady! Let's, of course, proceed as you wish."

" We'll go and kill these bastards and meet up with you later. Bye! And don't forget the coin!!"

With heavy steps the three left the tavern and the small one behind.

Watching them leave the hooded contractee suddenly remembered something. It hurriedly followed the three adventurers a few steps down the dusty road, calling: "Oh, but fair travelers, please forgive me once again, what would be thee name of thee three fair warriors of justice, if I may come to ask?!"

The three adventurers simply seemed to ignore the question.

" What the fuck is your name, you three?!"

Hearing the hooded-one jelling after them the three stopped. "I told you he meant us...", mumbled the holy adviser, while the bowman nodded in agreement.

They turned around.

" My name is Roderik, the ranger."

" Mine is Claus, holy ambassador of Aihlyn!"

" Katharina, the warrior of Kou'Reakhon."

As the three made their way down the road the hooded figure watched their leave with interest.

" Team Beta," said the hooded-one. Scratching it's head with presentiment it mumbled: "Let's see, how it fares. Hopefully this lot's a good pick, or Miri will be really pissed! Seriously."

A small sigh escaped from it's covered lips into the brilliant night sky.

" This would be so much easier, if the big idiot would be here..."

The stranger braced himself again.

" Now Team Gamma. But first le..."

An blink of an eye later, only an empty road remained.

\*

*Earlier. November 28, 2009. ARROW STATION's Emergency shelter 04.*

" So. Can you explain to me again what happened," Miriam's sonore voice cut through the stale air pressing on to complain: "Maybe this time so I can actually understand what you're saying?"

" That may be hard."

" Slut."

Doctor Claire Aniston glanzed at Miriam again. That woman sitting before her at the table was her colleague and a friend, but nevertheless a mystery to her all the way – not only in medical terms.

Her appearance – long, tumbling curls, flawless skin and wide aqua bleary-eyes resembling being touched with beautified encircling goopy mascara, wearing an always alert gaze – she fit the guarding angel theme. Her face radiated when she smiled, which she did seldomly enough. All that was missing was a pair of wings. But any of those must've been clipped long ago. Her swearing always proof of this when she scruffed up all the idiots talking to her, and there were always enough fools to pester her. Human nature made sure about that.

Too bad, she thought as she recounted professionally about all the hundreds of previous laboratory failures, that she still hadn't figured out how her friends extrordinarily strange blood worked. But this wasn't the time and place for such thoughts.

The stale air made the atmosphere even more unbearable and emotionally toxic, but she already had a good idea how to fix that problem once they would be allowed to teleport down to the planet's surface and back again. If that was possible in this magical pocket dimension, but she was damn sure it was. Magic also cooked with the universe's makings. But that was a problem for later. Her actual problem right now wasn't to explain what must have happened to them.

She remembered all too clear what Niven's Law stated: *'If the universe of discourse permits the possibility of time travel and of changing the past, then no time machine will be invented in that universe.'* Right now she hoped Niven would be proven right, somehow. No matter how. Best not tomorrow but right now.

Because, fact was, right here, right now, that they had no possibility to travel back in time and redo whatever what bastard must've made happen there to fuck all the timestream up. They were, in the truest sense, trapped in the here.

So the bastards had already won.

So the actual problem was more how she could explain it to Miriam in a way she would not run straight ahead killing someone until the problem was fixed in her own way, because Miriam probably would accept the fact that they all were trapped here, without any hope of fixing whatever happened in the past, so, what else to do then to go down to planet earth, kill a lot of politicians, and shape the world into something you liked more again. This would not work this time. Not until Claire knew for herself what the hell was going on for once. Any other approach was doomed to be futile in this situation they all were in now.

Time. Yes. Of course. That was maybe a good idea how to pull it off. It was maybe a cheesy way to do it, but whatever. Good truth had it, that no one not a scientist understood science talk well enough to separate the gibberish from the facts. Countless scientific honorifics for the most gibbering tongues could not lie. So, why not do what she was could do best for now? Confusing scientist's talk.

"Alright. We've analyzed the magical carpet here behind me, and we can sum up the following for now-"

"Didn't you explain this before?"

"Didn't you interrupt me before? Well. We can for now say that there is no dominant nation on this 'modified' earth. Overall there seem to exist many smaller nations divided into power constellations with a few larger ones. The largest we can see here are Canada, China, Russia, Brazil, and the United States of America – whatever that is – so these should be the biggest power players here, for at least three of these have access to the biggest resources on earth. As it seems, by this card here, that there is no Commonwealth, but a loose conglomerate of nations in Europe organizing themselves in some form of Union. Australia should be useless as always. China, on the other hand, seems to be a big player in the Pacrim, but given classic cantonese politics they should be busy with themselves. The rest of these threehundredsomething nations should be negligible for us. And, for all we can say, there is no serious space travel going on. The last part is rather fortunate for us, so no one should be able to find us out here. We should be able to tell more about this world once we gain access to some computers. So, that is the political part.

Now, for the scientific part. As far as I can tell, all of this change, all that has happened to us, is quite impossible.

As you all know, or maybe not, is, that time itself does not exist. Let me explain, please. Time is a human perception. All matter moves through the

universe according to the laws of the universe. So far, so good. We humans perceive the flow of time – or so we call it – because our senses have grown over the thousands of years adapting to the conditions on planet earth almost perfectly. But, all the laws of the universe do not work as on the earth's surface. What our eyes see must not be true, not at all. Gravity, light, it all moves but not necessarily always the same as on earth. This is what Einstein's relativity is all about.

Now.

Atomic theory, if we take it seriously, has it that a cat that jumps up from a table is not the same cat that lands.

Okay, okay, I explain.

Time is nothing but change. It is only a illusion in our heads. Our experiences are, at the very least, consistent with a timeless universe. The seething nebula of molecules of which we, the cats, and all matter are made of is ceaselessly rearranging at incomprehensibly fast speeds. The microcosm metamorphoses constantly, therefore one must deny there is any sense to say a cat or a person persists through time.

We have the impression that time flows, for our universe is composed of timeless instants in the sense of configurations of matter that do not endure. All these streams of consciousness and the sensation of the present, lasting about a second, is all in our heads. Literally. Our brain keeps information about the recent past, but not as a causal chain leading back to earlier instants, it is a property of thinking things, rather it is a necessary one to become thinking in the first place, that this information is present. Our brains are the only 'time-capsules' in existence. There is no evidence of the past other than our memory of it, and our belief in the future. What we call change merely creates an illusion of time, with each individual moment existing in its own right, completely and as a whole. All in all there is no motion and no change. Only all these moments we can call nows. The instant in configuration space, not matter in space-time, is the true frame of the universe.

Therefore there is no becoming only being, as creation is inherent in every instant.

A number of problems in old physical theories arose from the assumption that time does exist. We know of this since the days of fire, for all the alien hardware we found proved this true. Why? That is a different matter.

The only real use a concept like time has for us is to measure a distance. Like width, height, the length of a thing. It can vary, as well as any other distance, and, just like them, it can even become a negative value in its measurements.

For example, a photon particle could be fired through a special gravity field, and appear on the other side of the field two seconds before it is even fired off. While some people already call that an example for time travel, this in itself is no actual proof for this. Only that the universe itself does not care for any time distance. In the early eighties Alain Aspect famously made an experiment where he tried to find out how long it would take for two photons to communicate with

each other over a distance. He found that it takes no time for photons to exchange informations. No matter if they are, for example, one nanometer or one million light years apart. They don't even exchange any kind of signal whatsoever. Somehow each photon in the universe does always know what the other one is doing. This is a hint that the universe does not know time as we know it, how we conceive it.

Therefore, we can for now assume, for us right here and now, that time is a human concept and does not apply to the universe. It simply does not matter. Only for our calendars. Yes, Melanie?"

"Does that mean that there is no such thing as past or future, and only the here and now?"

"Yes. That is what it means."

"Then how come we call it Time travel. And how come..., why the hell are we in this situation right now?"

"We all have our place in the universe. We move as the universe moves in itself. But there is only distance and the place where we are right here and now. With time we measure where something had once been at what place inside of the universe."

"But is that not the past?"

"No, Rebecca, only our term for it. We draw a line while we walk through the universe. We call the distance for that line time. Now, if you would look back down the line you could always see where you've been in the universe before. That is all."

"But I could not go back."

"No, you could not. Only in a memorial way of your own, perhaps."

"So no going back," said Miriam. A strange look brightened her eyes with enlightenment: "Hold on a second, you're not wanting to tell us there is no way anyone could alter time?!"

"Yes. You can't alter what does not exist."

"Then, how...?!"

"Someone has altered our past, alright, the line we have left behind. Don't ask me how he – or they, or it – did it. If one could step from the outside onto the inside of the space-time, alright. Find the place you want to enter and et voilà. But you can't do that."

"I don't like what you are hinting there. Go on."

Of course you do not like that, thought Claire, and now I've got to push this unpleasant truth aside that only you and me know of. Why did you have to make me a part of that, stupid cow. I hate to keep secrets like that for me. Oh, whatever..., better to continue with the show: "Thanks to magic, however it works, we are conserved into this bubble here. We are outside of the organ of the universe. Partly. We are shunned out in here from the rest of it, outside of the law, as one could say. Our very private bubble-"

Miriam, of course, had to interrupt her: "BUT...Let me go on for a second, Claire. So, IF I would be the bad guy, and IF I could go back in time now..., back

to a previous state of the universe..., from wherever I may come from..., if I could manage to do so somehow, to go and kill the very first fish that crawled onto the shore, and then I shoot it and poof goes mank– What's so funny?"

" That does not work. Evolution says the survival of the fittest. Sorry. Not the single superior one. This has never worked before and never will. You can kill one fish crawling for the first time upon a shore but he is not alone. There are millions of fish. All doing the same crawl. Even killing all those does not work. Then another bunch of fish would do it, because they need to. It is a thing to do. It would not change a thing for us."

" Then, how in dreck's name, did our present time change?"

" Human behaviour has it, that we all move like big waves of fish through an ocean – from where we all originate from anyway – and once a single fish in the flow moves otherwise as he did before, the rest from the shoal also moves along, or, at the very least, a tiny bit at a different angle. This alters the whole wave of fish moving forward."

" Okay. I get it now. The universe hasn't changed a tiny little bit. And time neither. Should it exist. Humans have. The way we moved over the surface and did things. So, the armada is still out there, and...."

The horrified look in Miriam's eyes told Aniston that she had reached her goal.

The days of fire could come back, after all. Maybe.

" Alright. Thank you, Claire."

Great. The gibberish had worked. Time for another deep stale breath. Not that it had been untrue, in a way, not at all. Politicians spoke truth, too, after all.

An uneasy silence commenced.

" Alright," said Miriam, looking around: "I think anyone should empty their pockets or write down anything they noticed before all of this happened. Maybe we get a hint what happened. Craig? You and Rebecca have a look at the map and try to analyze it. Melanie. You and the twins try to find out more about the surface, what's going on down on earth. Locate some politician's brains..., yeah..., and get us more informations out of them. Get it done now."

As everyone seemed busy enough, Doctor Aniston stepped closer to Miriam and whispered in her ears: "How come you've noticed the change so fast?"

" They made a mistake, Claire. Just one mistake. And I'll make them pay for it."

" Okay, but please don't try to rush\*"

A discrete plop of displaced air usually common with the effect of teleportation disrupted her words.

" ...t's see how the others do. Oh, great! You're all here! Cool!" The small hooded figure which had appeared right now from out of nowhere looked around and lifted it's hood: "Well, not all I guess,... but most of you!"

" Zelmi!"

The white hair with the face of a child stood in hard contrast to the little massive body of yellow-black terkonium steel hidden away below the dirty cloak. Someone in the universe once must have thought designing a nuclear killer robot with a child's body was a great joke. But whomever it was who had designed this

stahlkamrad<sup>5</sup> had understood how society worked at it's core. Lovely enough, the droid standing right here and now was on their side, and one of these days Aniston would get a good scan of it's insides may hell and satan come riding all along with flaming horses and stuff.

"Zelmi, where've you been?", said Melanie, and she was, of course, right to wonder.

"Oh, I've been in the past."

"Past," said Miriam her voice coming from asking to acknowledging a fact.

"Yes. I've jumped back in time, and..., is..., is there something? Whats wrong? All?"

Claire was surprised that it was her own self finding who found back the ability to speak first. Maybe because she had some knowledge no one else did. Except for Miriam, who obviously knew more than anyone, her being the only person in the whole room currently not floored. Again. "Ohoho...sooo, t h a t was it...!"

"Doctor?" There was a reason Melanie was the leader of the Mutant brigade. Not family reasons as many suggested more or less in the open, but her ability to come back down to earth first before anyone else could try to gape. Being a telepath helped her for sure, since Melanie must've had picked up the images from the past popping up in her mind, Aniston was sure.

"In the days of fire we did not only find all this science fiction tech we're using now, but also a strange device that appeared to be a time machine..., or so I guessed it was supposed to resemble..., it could possibly not work for time travel is completely impossible as all the alien hardware told us." Doctor Anistons voice became as dangerously pressing in a friendly way as she could come to manage for suppressing herself being pissed to the hilt: "Miriam...?!"

"What?"

"That thing actually works?"

"Claire...!"

"You told me it never did."<sup>6</sup>

"Claire, please. This is not the time for anything like that."

"Sure, don't tell your personal top scientist anything important, like, I have a time machine hidden in a military robot standing right next to me... Sorry, Zelmi. Droid."

"Well I know how many loose screwdrivers you've got."

"Not as many as y\*"

"Uhm, doctor? I think we have more pressing matters right now," said Zelmi thinking it obviously the best to avoid another lengthy fight. Well, they had other things to worry about, so much was true.

---

<sup>5</sup> Claire couldn't quite get herself to accept all these modern terms for robot, or android. Both would have applied rather well. Or not. How to name a artificial bionic nuclear combat robot? Bureaucrats made horrible things possible, but language-nazis were even worse. Especiall when they worked for the state. Together they became a pest. All semed possible when you had the right stamp. Too bad if it wasn't you. Fortunately Zelmi prefered Droid, too. Branding her was not that easy, after all. Not only in a figuratively sense.

<sup>6</sup> "Thank you, Larry," Claire thought. So, the telepaths were all over her brains. The puzzled frowns told her.



" True. So, in light of this developmet, I'll say it's about time I'd better have another look at--"

" What've you done in the past, Zelmi," said Miriam interrupting her again. The slut knew always how to ask the more important question at the right time. She was the boss, after all.

The droid couldn't resist a charming cough. " Something really good. Really! No problem, Miri! I already figured out a plan, too."

" Plan?"

" Yes, at first I jumped a couple of years back analyzing all the data I managed to collect, figuring out a point in time from where the carnage possibly began. Then, immediately after jumping back two minutes later back into the present I saw the changes being caused with the world and analyzed a high possibility of the time stream being messed with. So I immediately jumped again further back in time to seek out some of the plausible causes for the change that took place and began to assemble strike teams to take care of them."

" You planned counter strikes?"

" Mhmm!"

" Back in our past to restore our true time line?"

" Yup!"

" That's good."

" Really?!"

" Yes. Really good work, Zelmi."

" Ho', cool," said the Droid being clearly happy about the compliment.

" I want you to report back to me regularly anytime before you make major jumps trough the different ages and try to change anything. Make it always in thirty minute intervalls from now on. Thirty. One hour. One thirty, and so on, as being practically available for you."

" Is that even possible? I thought no one can travel back or forward in time just like that," asked Melanie with an unsure voice.

" Don't worry, I'll take my own time with me back, and as I age – which even we droids do – our present local time here with you all goes on as well and I will be able to jump back to the here as whenever I want."

" I... Allright."

That was true. Thinking about it, all the matter the droid was composed out of came from this point in space, from the state in which the universe was as it was conserved inside of this bubble here in which they all were, so it would also age in the same way as all the matter inside the bubble, as long as the droid existed. Chaos theorie had it, whatever, that the droids own natural radioactivity would irradiate its surroundings in the past, too, but these few nuclear fission products should not take the cake. Obviously it helped to determine the one place in the universe to jump back to the correct here, or to some time before the here. This time machine seemed to follow an interesting concept, it seemed.

To remain at the helm Miriam continued: "What is your plan?"

" I planned to use strike teams and send these throughout the past to figure out the culprits and deal with them. I thought figuring out a few places where our own history and this alternate one diverge and then abruptly split are good ways to start. I thought you could help me from here, if anyone of you would still be left, that is."

" What've you got on teams?"

" I've got two teams so far. Team Alpha, and Team Beta for backup. The only team still missing right now is Team Gamma, and I have to give Team Beta some final orders."

Somewhat Miriam could not resist a frown: "A third team? What for?"

" You told me once, it is always best to have a diversion at hand! A team solely for the pupose for sacrifice."

" Sacrifice?"

" Mhm, yes doctor! Miri once told me you'll always need a few troops to sacrifice to the enemy."

" Oh really, did she?"

" Claire, please!"

" Sure! So you always have a few..., how did you call it..., uhm, yeah, pricks for the wolves to feed on, while your important troops deal the real deadly blow to the real bastards. But you'll need to keep these sacrificial lambs real close to you, you said, so all of them are always easily available...!"

Somewhat, the atmosphere in the room had changed into a cold momentum of mistrusting stares directed on only one person. Probably, Aniston recounted for herself, had the droid gone a bit too far with its remark, but Miriam clearly deserved that punch. If not for now than for countless past times. All of the people here in this room were friends, of course, but this would assure she did not get the wrong ideas, and now everyone else around her would have one or two looks at Miriams actions. She had to thank the droid later on, for now she didn't have to deal with this all by herself, after all.

Miriam, on the other side, seemed to ignore the stares with iron reserve.

" Team Gamma. Alright! Are you sure, you have a few fitting applicants?"

" Don't worry, I'm already about to pick some of the worst I can possibly find, the bad of the bad, horrible failures in life, no one will miss them, the crème de la crème of society's compost heap, the motley crew of the wicked nutballs, the\*"

" Zelmi...!"

" Mhm, don't worry, Miri! I mean..., " said the little Droid exclaiming cheerfully: "...what should go wrong after all?"

Professionally enough Miriam swallowed shortly and said: "Nothing more than now. I agree. Go back and assemble your last team and then report back."

" Roger," said Zelmi, and with two – and Aniston was damn sure she had just now heard two of them in rappid succession – plops inbetween her words, and without any apparend moves of hers except for, Aniston thought she could have just fantasized for a fraction of a second, a blur, the droid added a: "Done."

" Good. So, you fully assembled the other teams yet? I forgot to ask you before you jumped."

" Well, Alpha is ready and already on the go training together, Beta needs to finish something before their fully ready, and Gamma is nearly done, maybe I add a few more to Beta, I'm not sure yet. But so far it all looks fine."

" Training is a good idea. Let Beta and Gamma meet with Alpha at a point and do some work out for a bit. And see to it to get me a list whom you've got for Alpha. It's our main strike force, after all."

" I knew you would say that," Zelmi said handing Miriam a parchment with names on it. "I'll be gone finishing up and am back in three."

Impressed Miriam's voice hushed over the list. Even Doctor Aniston had to agree on the forgathered choices. These names were imposing. The droid had been busy so far. Very busy. And apparently very convincing, too.

" This could just really work," said Miriam concluding the list.

" Who's in Beta," asked Aniston.

These names were not so very conclusive as the others were.

" Good for backup," Miriam presumed mumbling: "No one will expect them. Really good."

Doctor Aniston could not help but to give her a smirk as she replied with a low voice: "Someones looking on the bright side again."

Miriam likewise answered: "This enlightens all this snafu here, alright."

With another pop of displaced air Zelmi was back.

" Okay, finished! Team Gamma is nearly ready and good to go, and will meet up with Beta soon. Anything I need to take back for orders, Miri?"

" Yes. Keep a low profile. We don't want anything more happening to the timestream. The situation is chaotic enough right now."

" Okay. You mean, not to... ahm..., like, destroy major, uhm..., like propperty, right? Like buildings or' s'mthing? Or kill lots of people. Right?"

" Yes, exactly. Who knows what will happen out of a sudden. No collateral damage. Understood?"

" Understood."

" Oh, and try to assemble all of the teams at one point--"

" Already taken care of! We'll have a meeting at a special place for all teams to receive orders soon."

" Great. Oh, just another thing, Zelmi"

" Yes'sah?!"

" I want to meet them. I wanna see whom we've got and form my own view about them."

" Al-alright."

" Is there something?"

" Noh, not'rly."

" Good. See you back in thirty minutes. Dismissed."

With another pop of air rushing back filling the vaccuum that remained behind the droid was gone again.

" So. Now we can only wait for what will happen next. But let's continue on planning our next moves. Claire, I think your ref--"

" Hey? Where's Katsu?"

They turned around to find the magician gone.

" Oh no. Not that. Anything, but not that!"

\*

*At not precisely the same moment. 1651. A creaking door goes jink.*

" Ah, be welcomed fair traveller! Please step into my unworthy bar and have a drink on my name. We have the warmest beds, and cleanest sheets this side of the river! Don't be so ashamed. Step forward, please!"

"이 곳을 그래서. 이 악취!"

" What? I don't understand. Say..., what is this lump of iron yer carrying there on yer back? 'That a blade?"

"당신! 이 귀하의 비즈니스가? 이런 더러운 가게!"

" No talking to you? Well, that's a shame. Really. Whatever. 'Came down the dusty road, eh? Y'can put down the scarf and show us yer face. Makes it easier to down the drinks, eh? Here. There ye go."

"귀하의 술집인가? 어디가는거야? 연설!"

" What? It's a clean mug, I promise you. By the way, that's a strange cloak yer wearing there. Looks... expensive."

" 난 당신 놓쳤나요? 나 너무 늦었어요? 젠장! 가 당신이 얼마나 멀리 있나? 연설! 나쁜놈들!"

" Mister. Y'should keep that sword back in there where't comes from. I don't serve the violent kind 'ere."

" 아하 또한 잘!"

" Whoa, you wanna have a quick coin, eh? Well, ye came to the wrong place shithead! Angelo? Willy?!"

" Is there s'mthin', Bruno?"

" Yeah. A lone robber it seems."

" What? At yer place?! Bwahahaha!"

" 이 방법이 더 간단 하죠!"

" Arr, arr! Whadda fool!"

" Yeah. Seems like't. Yer boys're all 'ungry?!"

" Betcha 'dey are!!"

" Bwahaha! Look'it'im! Dat damsel's ponytail!"

" 당신에게 화가 날 달았어! 나는 나의 머리를 세척하기 전에 떠났다."

" Alright, mista. Seems some sausages comin' up early fer chris'mas!"

" C'mon, geddim!!"  
" Dib's'nyer liv-va gobshite!!  
" Last onna grab issa\*!!"  
\*SLASH\*  
" Ayyyyiiii!"  
\*SMAK\*  
\*STABBB\*  
" Fuckin' D\*"  
\*CUTHhhhH-SHLURCKKKKKHH\*  
" Uaaargh\*"  
\*JANK\*  
" No! PhLLEAH-SE! NO!!"  
\*POW-SLAP SIILORKKhSCH!\*  
\*CRASH\*  
" Ye fuckin'—"  
\*SLAH-HaaAaASH\*  
\*PhHHok-Kha-Whock!\*  
\*SLORTSSSCH\*  
" Run! RU\*"  
\*CLONK\*  
\*WHOK-KA-PhukKH – SLARrrTSH\*  
" N-n-n-n-No-Noo—"  
\*CUT\*  
\*rollrollaroll-pHlonkH!trundltrund-dUNK\*  
" 젠장! 나는 이전에 내 머리를 씻어도했다. 그건 너무 오래 걸려서 완성 보인다.  
지금은 내가 너무 늦게이야! 내가 바보 예요!"  
" Aaaa...AaAAarrh... My-my baaahrr... Wha-rrraAAaaah. Whad're ye... I—I'll see  
ya `n `ellBbbb-brraaghrr..!"  
" 난 당신을 찾을 때까지 기다려."  
\*SLASHH\*  
" 당신이 돼지!!"

***To be continued in Part 02: A Warrior's path***

**Preview Part 02:**

" Chaos! ChaaaaOOooOOSss!! RaaAahrg...!"  
" Hey, what did you expect!? It's magic, right?"  
" Shut up, Claire...!"  
" That's what happens when you let magic on the loose."  
" I knew it. I should have gone there myself!"  
" That wouldn't help a thing."  
" I said caution! Caution!! Can't they just hold out against this?! We don't know shit yet!"  
" At least we now know the table can hold out your head."  
" 'Effing fortress. Why don't we just know how to block out magic?!"  
" At least we know now magic can block out reason."  
" Mooaah...!"  
" As well as the table. You shouldn't do that before your men."  
" ...sh'dd'p...."

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**DIALOGUES: TRANSLATIONS**

- “ Kinpaginpa. Kirei desu.” (The sparkling sun on the wave’s spray is beautiful.)  
 “ Sumimasen. Dozo yoroshiku. Anone... Chikujou irikuchi, doko desu ka?”  
 (Excuse me, I am not from here and I don’t know my way around. Could you help me please? I am looking for the entrance.)  
 “ Misete kudasai” (Please show me)  
 “ Iie, wakarimasen” (No I don’t understand)  
 “ Nante koto da. Sokka? Naruhodo.” (Jesus! Is that so? I see/that’s right/indeed)  
 “ Souiukotoka” (I see/So that’s the reason)  
 “ Akinohihatsurubeotoshi” (The autumn sun sets as quickly as a bucket dropping into a well).  
 “ Hontouni zannen.” (Too bad!)  
 “ Shitsurei desu ga...” (Sorry to be rude)  
 “ Harawokukuru” (to prepare oneself for the worst)  
 “ gojishin” (yourself)  
 “ Atamakakushiteshirikakusazu” (Don’t cover your head and leave your bottom exposed; You have to be careful not to expose your weak point while attempting to protect yourself)  
 “ Abunai!” (Watch out)  
 “ Ikimasho!!” (Letsgo)  
 “ Fusero!” (Duck!)  
 “ Emparker, sil’vou’plais....” (Please, all embark.)  
 “ Rien ne va plus.” (And nothing goes.)  
 “ Ce crayon ne vaut rien.” (This pencil is no good.)  
 “ Ça ne promet rien de bon.” (This bodes ill.)  
 “ Ca va chier” (There’ll be trouble)  
 “ Il ne nous faut rien.” (We play for love./We require nothing.)  
 “ Tu me les casses” (You piss me off.)  
 “ J’ai tiré la mauvaise carte.” (He’s got shit out of luck.)  
 “ C’est à chier” (That sucks arse.)  
 “ 이 곳을 그래서. 이 악취. (So this is the place. This stink.)  
 “ 당신. 이 귀하의 비즈니스가? 이런 더러운 가게!”  
 (You. Is this your establishment? What a dump!)  
 “ 귀하의 술집인가? 어디가는거야? 연설!”  
 (Is this your snake pit? Where’ve they gone to? Speak!)  
 “ 난 당신 놓쳤나요? 나 너무 늦었어요?젠장! 가 당신이 얼마나 멀리 있나? 연설! 연설! 나쁜놈들!  
 (Have I missed them? Am I too late? Shit! How long are they gone? Speak! Scoundrels!)  
 “ 아하 또한 잘!” (Aha. Just as well!)  
 “ 이 방법이 더 간단 하죠!” (More simple way to do this!)  
 “ 당신에게 화가 날 달았어! 나는 나의 머리를 세척하기 전에!”  
 (Don’t dare to touch me! Before I left my hair clean.)

“젠장! 나는 이전에 내 머리를 씻어도했다. 그건 너무 오래 걸려서 완성 보인다. 지금은 내가 너무 늦게이야! 내가 바보 예요!”

(Shit! Why did I wash my hair before I left?! It seems it took much too long to finish. Now I am too late! I'm such an idiot!)

“난 당신을 찾을 때까지 기다려.”

(Wait until I find you.)

“당신이 돼지!!”

(You Pig!!)