

NIHILANIA'S
Dark Knight

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DARK KNIGHT

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INTRODUCTION TO NIHILTANIA

Nihiltania is a dark fantasy world where nasty stuff happens. There are four continents: Valeria, Frostholm, Sandora, and Shadowmire. Valeria, Forsthalm, and Sandora are connected by land while Shadowmire is an island. In between the mainland and Shadowmire lays the Middle Sea. Throughout Nihiltania live a variety of beings like Humans, Elves, Giants, Dwarves, Gnomes, Goblins, and Beastmen. Each of them also has different varieties depending on where are they from etc. There are also god-like creatures. The highest tiers are The Spirit and The Guardian. Spirit created all life and maintains it while Guardian has created all matter and all of the worlds.

The Dark Knight is the final story in the Blade Trilogy timeline. Before reading this story, it is advised to read Nihiltania's Guardian and Nihiltania's Dragonslayer but you don't have to. I do not care. Enjoy reading, or don't.

DAYS OF FUTURE PAST

Three hundred years. It has been over three hundred years since it all started. Since the Spirit gave me false hopes. She knew what she was doing, and I would spend eternity just to hurt her the same way. After all this time, it still hurts like a fresh, open wound. The only person I've ever loved. The first time I returned to her, I couldn't even reach her. I couldn't stick around the second time, and I never saw her again. Sometimes I wonder, what happened to her. Three centuries is a long time. The world has changed but my ambitions remained the same. During my venturing, I've killed all kinds of things, but the blood elves still hold the first place regarding quantity, second is everything else. Now I wander through the moonlit night.

The Dark Knight rode his horse, making his way through southern Valeria. He didn't resemble a living creature, and neither did his horse. His armor was made out of black, shiny metal. It appeared to be a piece of rock rather than armor. Spikes covered every centimeter of the plating. The helmet made the wearer look like an animal, a beast, or most suitably, a being out of this world, its eyes being illuminated by small flames that manifested themselves in the eyeholes. The armor structure could seem to limit the being's mobility. But you couldn't be more incorrect. On his back, he wore a large, spiked, black glaive, fittingly named Spirit Crusher. Lastly, not even Dark Knight was sure if the thing he rode could be called a horse. The horse had black fur, red glowing eyes, and long horns. The creature also had hardened spiky plates, covering vital parts of its body.

The Dark Knight had become a legend, a myth. In the beginning, he killed everyone that he came across but that stopped long ago. Back then he couldn't stop moving. The Soulwardens pursued this dark spirit for over a century until they stopped one day. He was a rogue dark spirit—one with a goal larger than life itself.

On his way, he stopped on a grassy hill. He got down from his horse and sat down. He took off his helmet, revealing his long blonde hair and blue eyes. He looked up toward the night sky. Roughly half of the stars above his head were moving at a slow pace. It was Seriphalion, the celestial serpent passing by Nihiltania. Even after thousands of years, his existence was a part of a debate. Some described the star shift as a recurring celestial event, others believed it to be the celestial serpent. The dark knight continued gazing upon the stars, lost in deep contemplation. Deep in his heart, he felt calm but nervous simultaneously. His more recent discovery was causing him these emotions—the so-called holy child.

There is a legend that every thousand years, a child is born that is in some way, connected directly to the Spirit. It is supposed to repair Nihiltania in some kind. In his years of searching, he found old scriptures that approximately pinpointed when the last Holy Child was born and when the next one would come. He waited for so long that the approximate date was now fast approaching.

He stood up from the cold ground and equipped his helmet. He got on his horse and rode toward the harbor city of Valor. But before going to the city he made a little detour to a smaller forest by the southern mountains. Preferably he needed to be dark so he sped up to get there before the dawn. As he approached the forest, he could hear some commotion coming from deeper within the forest. That threw him off a bit but he ventured further until he came across a little pond surrounded by dense bushes. He got down from the horse and walked over to an armored bag that the horse had on his side. Reaching inside he grabbed a smaller cloth pouch that had a symbol burned out on itself and was tied with a string. With his large gauntlets, he untied the pouch in which lay two small glowing gems. They emanate a bright blue light and bore the same symbol as the pouch. He carefully picked up one of them and retied the knot, then placed the pouch back in the bag, and with the gem clenched in his hand, he walked over to the pond.

The nightly breeze was rustling the leaves that surrounded the Dark Knight. Excluding the unsettling commotion somewhere in the forest, the night seemed peaceful. The Dark Knight stood on the edge of the small pond. It appeared that he was hesitant about his next move. His grip on the little gem tightened. His hands were trembling ever so slightly, while his heart was beating faster than usual. Before he continued, he took a deep breath and regained his composure. Afterward, he extended his arm over the pond, and with a sudden, persistent squeeze, he crushed the small gem. From between his fingers, an iridescent, shimmering dust began to descend to the water's surface gracefully. Then he opened his fist and poured all the remaining dust into the pond. When the particles made contact with the water, the pond ignited with ethereal radiance. Abstract objects could be seen floating in the water. The sight was mesmerizing.

His horse curiously observed the ritual from behind him. The knight watched and waited until all the dust particles landed in the pond and mixed with the water. Then he slowly stepped into the cool water, step by step. He was slowly descending deeper into the pond. His horse was waiting by the tree, to which he was tied. The knight didn't float at all. His heavy, spiked armor dragged him deeper into the dark depths until he disappeared completely.

When his head was submerged in the glowing liquid, the pond's floor expanded infinitely into a boundless, dark void. The ground below his feet disappeared and he finally began to float. The water around him disappeared and air filled his lungs. Darkness surrounded him, except for a little bright orange light in the distance. His heartbeat once again spiked as he waited, floating in the void. After a brief minute, an alien, glowing woman emerged from beneath him, and at the sight of him, she gasped.

"Oh my, my eyes must be fooling me. No. It is you, my little immortal rascal," She giggled after finishing her sentence as she placed her palm before her mouth.

"Long time no see, Ms. Spirit," The Dark Knight responded while staring her down.

"Hmhm, what brings you here after all those years? What are you up to this time?" She asked.

"I've come to ask you about the Holy Child," The Dark Knight says with a monotone but serious voice.

The Spirit's eyes widen as he finishes his sentence. "The Holy Child? W-What about it?!" She asks, now with a visible frown and tension. All of her usual playfulness was gone.

"What connection do you have with the Holy Child is the question," He says now determined to get an answer.

"Holy Child is merely one of my minions that I send down to Nihiltania every millennium or so..." She says with a steady composure. The Dark Knight notices how suddenly her approach to the matter has changed.

"Hmm really? Well, then I have one more question. I've found an ancient script, one of a kind. It says that the last Holy Child died prematurely at a young age and after that, all of the creatures in Nihiltania were sterilized for decades, which almost caused a wipeout of all life in the world, why was that?" Just as he finished talking, the Spirit's eyes lit up. She was about to burst out but contained her anger and just responded.

"Leave. Now," She said and floated away. Their whole encounter lasted just a minute or two, but that was all the confirmation he needed. There was a connection. The death of The Holy Child had to cause damage to her since she is responsible for all living beings in Nihiltania, and their sterilization had to be caused by her being too damaged by the event. Then suddenly he was once again submerged in the cold water of the pond. He began to make his way up back to the surface until he emerged from the water. The pond was no longer glowing when he looked back. As he was stepping out of the cold water, he had a grin under his helmet. His goal was now clear. Wait and kill The Holy Child. "Whatever happens to her when the child dies does something terrible to her," He thought to himself as he got on the horse. Just as he sat down on the horse's back, a bolt came flying right into the horse's neck, but instead of digging in, the bolt snapped when it crashed against the horse's skin. The Dark Knight looked in the direction from where the bolt came from. Behind a bush, a young blood elf was peeking with a metal-hardened crossbow.

The elf was in disbelief after the horse stood, completely unfazed by the bolt that he shot at it. Before the blood elf could do anything. The Spirit Crusher flew right into his face and out the back, decapitating the poor guy. Blood and brain matter splattered everywhere, and pieces of his skull were all over the ground. The Spirit Crusher was stuck in the ground right beside the body.

The Dark Knight walked over on his horse and pulled out the glaive from the ground. He noticed the elf's crossbow, so he picked it up by the string with the glaive and then began to inspect it closely.

"Hmm, their weapons got a lot better since I've last seen them," He thought while taking a closer look at the crossbow's structure. It was made out of steel, the string was metallic and very springy. It can shoot bolts at incredible 'speed. It also had a proper scope for maximum accuracy. It was an impressive piece of weapon engineering. But at the end of the day, weapons like crossbows were slowly getting replaced by a new kind of weaponry. The new era brought us the musket. Even though gunpowder-powered weapons aren't new, muskets proved to be incredible tools for killing and are now replacing older weaponry, like crossbows. Using a magazine system, the musket wielders can shoot repeatedly, bullets of all kinds, short or long range, don't matter. Muskets themselves are still being developed and have become popular in recent years.

The Dark Knight inspected and admired the metallic crossbow, after which he threw it back on the ground. The sun slowly began to rise, and the forest wasn't so dark anymore. He was about to leave for Valor when the commotion he heard last night was much louder now. Since his earlier encounter, he decided to check it out. And so he began to ride toward the source of the sounds slowly. After a few minutes, he reached the top of a hill and the forest's edge. Down on the plains beside, lay a blood elf camp. Something was going on down there. The Dark Knight observed what was the commotion all about. And why did it last the whole night?

In the camp, there was a different story brewing. A blood elf recruit named Hawk was just about to be executed for conspiracy and dishonor toward the great purification. He was just sixteen. This was a military recruitment camp, where Hawk's mother worked as a nurse coincidentally. The commotion from the day before was caused due to Hawk's verdict to be executed. His mother was filled with rage, knowing that her son was a traitor, and his friends were disappointed.

But Hawk didn't hold remorse for his actions and believed that their doing was wrong, now he was about to be made an example. The Dark Knight wasn't sure what was even going on over there. But after all, it was a blood elf camp, so he might as well erase it from existence. He charged down the hill with his glaive raised. His horse's hooves crushing against the ground sounded like a thunderstorm...

Everything was so vague. I remember being cold and stuck in some dark hole. Someone was there, just beside me. The person was screaming at me. It was a terrible, dreadful feeling. It felt like an eternity. My mouth felt dry and my stomach hurt, from beating. Blood was pouring down my face and from my nose. After a long time, someone grabbed me and pulled me somewhere away. The sun shined on my face, completely blinding me. They dragged me on for dozens of meters until we stopped, somewhere. I was pushed down on my knees and was forced to bend over on a stone slab. I tried to move but my hands and ankles were tied with a steel rope that was bruising them. My sight began to slowly return, there were people around, gazing at me. I realized a tall man was standing beside me with a great axe. My mother stood in the crowd, she had a blank stare on her face. This was an execution, and I was the one to be killed. A storm was coming, and I heard thunder in the distance. But the sky seemed especially clear that day. Maybe I was delusional, I thought. Some people began to look unnerved and look around. The executioner stepped closer while the crowd began to slowly devolve into absolute panic. Something rode into the camp and at high speed, it started devouring everyone there. The executioner ran over, trying to strike it with his axe but instead got pierced with some kind of glaive. When the person on the horse pulled the glaive out, it took the executioner's ribcage with it. It was a grizzly scene. But I didn't feel much. They were bad people, only fueled by hate. I didn't want a violent and hateful world. But what could I've done? I just lay there on the slab, waiting around to die.

After a while, the screams went silent. Then the sunshine that was landing on my face got blocked by some tall figure. "Hey!" He yelled and poked me with the bloody glaive. After no response from me, he pushed me over with it. Now we were looking at each other, eye to eye as I lay on my back.

“What is this supposed to be? Were they planning on executing you? Why?” He said as he seemed puzzled.

“Conspiracy...” I responded, my throat was sore and the words barely made it out of my mouth. The tall man in the dark armor laughed at my answer.

“So what are you? A rogue blood elf? What were you conspiring?” The man asked. He had a helmet on, but I could feel he was grinning with curiosity.

“I-I wasn’t in line with their ideology. I don’t want anyone to suffer...” I responded. I felt like I was going to pass out. The man seemed to get lost in his thoughts for a few seconds. He was thinking about something.

“Hmm... No more suffering you say? How does total sterilization sound to you?” He said after he was done thinking.

“Huh? H-How do you plan to do that?” I was shocked by his words. But I was willing to listen to him.

“Well, let’s say there will be a Holy Child born in a few years. It is connected to The Spirit, killing it would hurt The Spirit enough to cause total sterilization, definitely a stronger one than the last one did. Then, there will be no more suffering. As simple as that,” The man began to explain his plans to me. I began to come to my senses and began to think about it.

“But... But it won’t be that easy. You will have to kill leading up to it. And why are you even telling me this?” I began to slowly get up from the slab I was lying on.

“First of all, yes people will die and suffer, but it’s all for the greater good. And second, I’m telling you this because I would like someone to help me with this. You’ve been trained with the most advanced weapons this era has to offer and you have a solid motivation,” He continued explaining himself. Even though I knew the total sterilization was just a by-product of his true goal, I yielded. I got up and looked at him, only then I realized who I was talking with the whole time. It was the dark knight, I was surprised but then I looked around at the massacre that occurred minutes ago.

“Okay... I’ll help you... F-For the greater good,” I said while staring at him.

“Excellent. Now, you have half an hour to gather any gear you want, and then we’re leaving,” He said and made his way to the edge of the camp.

GATHERING STORM

It took me a moment to absorb what he said. I have thirty minutes. I began to look around the camp. The ground was soaked with blood. Dead bodies lay everywhere. Instinctively I immediately went for the armory. On my way there I saw my mother in a pool of her own blood. I stopped and stood there for a moment looking at her. I didn't feel sad, or bad for her. She was as evil as everyone else. She lived to hate. I kept on running.

"I'm going to grab a musket, I was the best with them. It should do the job," I thought as I ran until I saw our trainer's corpse lying in the grass by the dormitory. He had his uniform on, as usual, but he was missing his arm. It was nowhere in sight. But a few meters from his body laid his musket. The thing was this was no ordinary musket. Our trainer had a personalized, modified musket. This musket was special... Very special in fact. The modifications made it probably the most advanced firearm in Nihiltania. I stopped and walked over to it. I never got to see it from up close.

It had a scope, consisting of four collimators. The zoom depends on how much of them you have up (enabled). The barrel was gold-painted with a ventilation shaft to prevent overheating and was modified to increase the accuracy for a long range. The chamber was reinforced to sustain even the most powerful of rounds. The stock and grip were modeled for better recoil control. On the side was a golden name tag reading "Spitfire". It was a fitting name, I guess. Anyway, I picked it up and slung it over my shoulder, and then I searched the trainer's body for anything useful. On himself he had an ammo bag that could be attached to a belt, I took it and equipped it.

Besides that, he didn't possess anything useful. When I stood up and attached the bag to my belt I made my way over to the armory. I opened the door of the cabin and entered. The place was filled to the brim with weaponry. I stepped closer to the uniform cabinet. At the time I had a white shirt, mahogany pants, and military boots, and a standard recruit wear. I began to dig through the cabinet. Eventually, I pull out a red scout cape with the Legion symbol on the back. Since I was a child I always found these capes neat. I took it and I put it on. After that, I grabbed some more ammunition and some smaller melee weapons.

By the time I walked out I had only about ten minutes left, I spent the time I had left gathering rations which I placed into a few bags that I attached to the horse's saddle. The white horse I took also belonged to my trainer, his name was Nemesis. When I was done packing I mounted the horse and went to the camp's edge where The Dark Knight awaited me.

"Hmm, well let's go now," He says when he sees me approaching. We begin to head east.

"So... Y-You are the Dark Knight?" I asked him.

"Yeah. You could say so," He responded in a monotone voice.

"I'm Hawk by the way. Do you have a name?" I said as I awaited his answer.

"Uhhmm. I... My name is... Arno..." He said. He seemed hesitant before he said his name. He probably wasn't used to saying it too often, maybe he had even forgotten it for a moment.

"Okay, Arno. So what's the plan? You said the child is supposed to be born in a few years, so what are we going to do? Do you even know where the child will be when it's born?" I unloaded a barrage of questions upon him, just so we're on the same page.

"Firstly, I do not know where is the child going to be born. But there is a rumor of an artifact existing that could help us find it. Second, we're heading to Shadowmire to retrieve it," Arno began explaining his plan.

"I know you'll ask it sooner or later so I'll just tell you. The artifact is a compass called Pathfinder, in short, it shows you the way to anything you desire. From what I've heard, it has to be enchanted in a certain way. Let's say you want to find someone with it. Then you have to enchant it with something that is connected to the person you are trying to find. That could be a problem for us, but it is our best option from what I know," Arno told me. I listened closely to him.

"I understand. But you are sure the total sterilization will happen, are you?" I asked.

"It should, something similar happened last time when The Holy Child died. The second time it should be even more extreme," Arno responds, sounding quite confident, so I decide to give him the benefit of the doubt. We slowly continued riding through the southern plains. In the distance, I could see the southern mountains. The Valor port was still pretty far, but at this speed, we should reach it within a few hours.

The boy was following me. His name was Hawk, and he was a rogue blood elf. I enjoyed having his company, he reminded me of someone. Pathfinder... Is it even real? Could it be just a rumor? No... It cannot be that far from the truth. As we were riding through the plains, everything went black. I was in a familiar place. I rode on. It was the void again. Something shining floated over to me.

“Long time no see, B-D-umm how should I even call you?” The figure asked.

“Arno...” I responded.

“Ohh, Arno... Is that your original name? You never wanted me to call you this, is this the name yo—”

“What do you want?” I cut him off. It was The Guardian. He was an orange-glowing alien-looking armored man.

“You should be careful about what you want to do next. The Spirit is watching you, the Soulwardens can return to hunt you at any moment,” He begins to say this stuff.

“What are you even talking about? Why are you telling me this?” I was baffled.

“Hah, well. What can I say, I’m bored. I don’t have anything to do unlike Spirit, I can just spectate now and I want to make things interesting,”

“Also all of this paranoia began after your last visit. You painted a target on your forehead by asking her about The Holy Child. And I think it is futile to try to convince you that total sterilization is not possible. So from now on, be careful with your actions,” The Guardian says. I don’t respond, but I keep his words in the back of my mind. He notices me ignoring him.

“Very well,” He says before the dark void transforms into the plains I was riding through moments before. The Guardian is gone as well. Hawk is still riding beside him. He seems lost in thoughts.

“Does your horse have a name, Arno?” Hawk asks me suddenly.

“Ehm, I think I gave him one before. It was something like Jumong?”

“Huh? What kind of name is that? What does it mean?” Hawk asks.

“I think it doesn’t mean anything,” I respond.

“나는 이 치욕스러운 모습에 갇힌 죽음의 황제다,” Jumong says. Hawk almost falls off Nemesis from how it startled him.

“What the fuck?!” Hawk freaks out in confusion.

“Hey shut the fuck up!” I shout at the horse.

“What was that?! What is he saying?!” Hawk keeps shouting at me.

“I have no clue...,” I respond in a defeated tone.

Many hours later, we arrived in Valor. The city had large, majestic walls that surrounded it. We rode on a paved road that led to the city's entrance.

"So... what kind of boat are we gonna take?" Hawk asked me as we were approaching the city's main gate.

"We're gonna have to find someone who will be willing to take us with them. We can't go by public ship because we need our weapons and those are banned there,"

"Oh okay. By the way, aren't you gonna like, attract unwanted attention, I mean, with your armor and horse and all?"

"I'm not that obvious, believe me, there's a lot of wacky figures here," I told Hawk and he nodded in agreement.

"Hold up! And what about me?! I'm a blood elf!" Hawk began to panic a little.

"Since you are not killing anyone here, you should be fine. Although the Legion scout cape you got there is not helping much," Hawk was shaking as we entered the city. The guards gave us nasty looks but didn't even stop us.

The city was stunning, it was built on a hill and spread all the way down to the beach, where the harbor was located.

"Holy shit! This place is humongous!" Hawk's panic was quickly swapped with uncontrollable excitement. I've been here before, so my reaction was much more bland, but I have to admit, the city is a sight to behold. As we rode through the streets of large, beautiful buildings made of marble. People give us weird looks, but I would too in their place. I observed how they were dressed. It was completely different from what people wore back in my time. It's a different world now. Knights are not a thing anymore, anyone who thinks of themselves as a knight is considered to be crazed. I don't consider myself to be a knight. I'm a vengeful spirit. The sun was setting. Hawk pulled out a pocket watch, looked at it, and said.

"Oy Arno, where are we going to spend the night? I'm getting tired..."

"Uhm, okay. Let's find some inn,"

"Inn? Haha, what the hell is that?"

"Huh? A place where you pay for a room where you can spend the night. You don't know that?"

"Oooh, you mean a hostel. So you really are that old!" Hawk said with a huge grin on his face. Little bastard. I didn't mind though. Traveling with someone is better than alone. In my wanderings throughout the years I thought I would lose my mind any day from the isolation.

The part of the city we were traversing was a little too noble, so we rode to a let's say cheaper part of the town where we found an in- a hostel. Luckily, horses were still used by most people so we tied ours to the post outside, I took off my helmet, and my long blonde hair waved in the breeze.

"Woah!" Hawk shrieked.

"What?" I looked at him.

"Oh, nothing... I just didn't realize that you were... you know... a human?"

"I'm a dark spirit now. This body is just a vessel," I said while I grabbed something from Jumong's bag.

"Wait, then whose body is this? And where is his soul?" I rolled my eyes at Hawk's questioning.

"I'll tell and explain how it works to you one day," Hawk was not happy with me dodging the questions.

"Whatever..." He frowns while he takes off baggage from Nemesis. We begin to walk to the hostel's entrance.

"Hey, are you not taking your bags with you? What if someone steals them?" Hawk lands another set of questions on me.

"They won't, the bags are rune-sealed. Only I can open them and take them off," We finally get in and I walk to the reception while still holding my helmet in my hand. The place is pretty dark but nothing too bad, an average hostel. An old hag is sitting behind the reception table. She glanced towards the duo. Arno's presence in his heavy spiky armor seems to not bother her in the slightest.

"Good evening ma'am. I would like a room for two if that's fine," I said in a forced polite tone with an unconvincing smile. The old hag looked at me for a good moment before she abruptly bursted out.

"YEAH, sure, whatever. That'll be twenty gold," She wasn't in the mood I suppose. Bitch. I pulled out a heavy pouch of gold and carefully picked out twenty gold coins. It was overpriced. After she counted all of the coins with a suspicious look in her eye, she grunted even more as she handed us a room key. I grabbed it and motioned to Hawk to move. We got to the stairs and began walking up the stairs.

"I didn't like that hag," Hawk says quietly.

"No way, you didn't like that nice old lady?" I responded sarcastically. I mocked him, I mean, it was like saying the sun rose today.

"Shut up..." Hawk said.

There we stood, in front of the door of our room. Number seven was on a sign that was nailed to the door. We stepped in. The room stank and the furniture was old. I wouldn't even be surprised if the furniture was made in my time. Hawk leaned his musket against the dresser and laid down on the bed. The bed creaked as Hawk entered it and stretched.

"Woah, this bed is much better than the ones we had in the camp. They always told us that real warriors sleep on the ground," Hawk said after he deeply yawned.

"You are not as demanding as I expected," He chuckled at my response. He didn't know it but I didn't need to sleep. I had to do it for him and just played along. Possessed bodies do not require eating, drinking, or sleeping. Every single one of these actions can be done just for the enjoyment you can get from them. I didn't like sleeping. Or rather waking up, not knowing what would be waiting for me there. I merely avoided death several times just as I woke up. My home, in the forest, in... the flesh pit, and every time after. I was putting down my heavy armor when I noticed that Hawk was already asleep. I thought I could slow down for at least one night. I placed my armor set on the ground beside the bed together with the Spirit Crusher. I quickly washed myself in the bathroom and then looked at myself in the mirror for who knows how long. Was the person in the mirror still me... No.

The person I'm looking at was never me. He had blonde hair and blue eyes, and he was human. We were nothing alike. The sun had set by the time I walked out of the hostel. The night streets of Valor were full of life, and even this part of the city was still pleasant. I was roaming around all of those taverns, drinking up and down, but the alcohol had only a faint effect on me. While I was sitting in one of those taverns I thought I saw someone, I looked around more but couldn't find the person I was looking for. I felt kinda dizzy, but it couldn't have been from the alcohol. It was too sudden, when out of nowhere, there he was sitting at one of the tables. Abyss, The Butcher of Shadowmire. No. I was hallucinating. Abyss died, by my hand. Back then, he was the last one of them. Last ascended mortal of my era. My head hit the hard, wooden table. Some guy asked me if I was okay and I convinced him that it was nothing, he thought I passed out from all of the alcohol. My head rosed up again and I continued with my drinking spree. People around began to notice and were pretty impressed. It felt good, being normal for at least a single night. I felt someone's hand on my shoulder, it was smaller and soft.

“Uuuh, that is impressive honey. You are one tough guy, aren’t ya?” Said a feminine voice from behind me. I looked around, and there stood a half-elf, half-dwarf girl. It was a rare combination but she was gorgeous. In my years I haven’t seen a lot of folks like her. She had lush ginger hair, a cute face, and an attractive figure. She was wearing a black crop top and brown shorts and boots. I was a little... Stunned, flattered, maybe?

“A-Are you a prostitute?” I asked her the mathematically dumbest fucking question I could.

“Hahaha... Actually, I am, I was thinking of not working today, but you are irresistible. Come on, I’ll give you a discount,” She laughed at my stupid question and gave me a “special” offer.

“Heh, s-sure, why not? My name is Arno” I stood up and reached out my hand for a handshake. Instead of shaking my hand, she leaned onto me.

“I’m Thirfarra, but you can call me Thir,” She had the most dwarfish name there was. Don’t get me wrong, she was taller than a normal dwarf due to her elf genes and had elven ears. It was just a little odd, half-dwarf having such a dwarfish name, whatever.

“Do you have a place we could go to honey?” Thir asked.

“Yeah... I-I have a room at a hostel here,” My mind was still foggy. Maybe the alcohol was doing something. I don’t know. I don’t know what I was planning.

As we walked out of the tavern, I noticed a group of three men walk toward us: a human, an orc, and a panther beastman.

“What the fuck? Is that an orc? A giant, orc class. Am I seeing things?” I thought to myself. But I wasn’t seeing things. The trio approached us.

“HEY! What the fuck do you think you’re doing?! That is my girl, you shithead!” The human began yelling at me in the middle of the street. We’ve gotten into a heated argument. I can’t remember all of it but after he yelled at me for a solid moment, the panther beastman grabbed me by my neck and lifted me in the air. I struggled for air, the panther guy was pretty large and was certainly strong since he could lift me up with such ease. I was going to pass out soon. My eyes started slowly closing. Why haven’t I stayed at the hostel? I thought I was a goner before a loud bang rummaged through the nightly streets. Suddenly I was falling to the ground. There was a lot of blood. It took me a good while until I realized that the panther’s hand was gone. The one that held me up. The two other guys were in complete shock. I had hit the ground, hard. It woke me up from whatever state I was in. The beastman began to scream and hold his bleeding arm.

The blood was splattering all around. Then another bang ragged, it landed by the human guy's foot. They began to run down the street frantically. Thir was in shock as well and she ran in the opposite direction while screaming as well. I sat there before I began running as well. I ran all the way back to the hostel we were staying at. I ran past the reception, but the old hag wasn't there. I leaned on the door with the number seventeen on it. I was breathing heavily before I opened them and stepped in. It was dark inside. Hawk was sitting on his bed with Spitfire leaning on the bed beside him. I walked in quietly. Hawk stood up from his bed and approached me slowly before he looked up at me. He slapped my face, leaving a pink handprint on my cheek.

"You made me cause more unnecessary violence," Hawk said quietly while looking at the ground. I didn't respond, he was right. I got carried away and now I was facing the consequences of my actions, again. No, that's not the right way to say it. Hawk went back to sleeping and so I laid down on my bed as well. I stared at the ceiling the whole night until it was dawn. Then I waited for Hawk to wake up from his slumber. But after waiting for a good few hours, he continued sleeping. It was late morning by now. I stood up and got to the window. Out of it, you could see the exact spot where I got grabbed last night by the panther guy. There was still his blood on the paved road. I felt guilty when I was thinking about it, so I didn't. I walked over to Hawk and woke him up.

"We have to go find someone willing to take us to Shadowmire, buddy," I told him. He still seemed angry at me but agreed, so I equipped my armor, we took our stuff and we left on our horses.

"Okay so, the plan goes like this. We'll walk around the taverns at the harbor district and ask people about the taking us with them thing,"

"If you find someone, firstly offer them four hundred gold, if they refuse, go up by fifties or hundreds up to seven hundred, if they still refuse, leave. Every twenty minutes we'll meet here in case we've found someone,"

"Is that clear?" I explained when we arrived at the harbor district. Hawk replied with "Got it," and so we began our search. We've begun riding up and down the harbor district taverns. The first twenty minutes have passed by. We met up a the designated spot.

"Nothing?"

"Nothing,"

We went back to seeking. There were a lot of potential folks but even our overkill of an offer didn't please them.

We met up for the second time.

“Nothing??”

“Nothing,”

We continued looking, and seeking, and searching. We met up for the fifth time.

“Nothing???”

“NO! Fucking no one man. There are like a million taverns and like a billion people. But no one is: going to the Shadowmire, has a large ship, is willing to take us, and is pleased with the amount of the gold!” Hawk said, frustrated.

“Why haven’t we gone and printed flyers yesterday?! This sucks!” As I was thinking about how to respond, a shady man approached us.

“Oh, you gentlemen need to get to the Shadowmire? With all of your things?” He meant our horses and weapons. His voice was slimy. He was fat and had a mustache.

“Yeah. Will you take us?” I asked.

“Oh, but it won’t be free, how much do you guys have?” He said with his stinky voice. I felt like I was getting dirtier with each second that I spent speaking to him.

“Six hundred fifty. And we might give you a tip if we enjoy our time riding with you,” We won’t.

“Hmmmm. Well alright, boys. I’m leaving with my crew in a few hours,” Then he proceeded to explain to us where is their ship docked and how is it going to be on board. He said that he and his crew were merchants, what were they shipping? That was questionable. He tried to convince us that they were shipping sugar, cloth, and other things. By the way, most of all sugar comes from Shadowmire.

We wandered around the harbor district until we had only half an hour left. We got to the place the man talked about. The ship that stood before us was big and besides ordinary sails, it also had a steam-powered engine. The combination made it fast, so fast in fact that getting to Shadowmire should have taken only three days. And it did. We rode up the plank to the ship’s board. The slimy man was there talking with his crewmate. He immediately noticed us and ran over.

“Oh hello boys! Welcome aboard!” Mr. Shady ran over to us and greeted us.

Yes, he will be called Mr. Shady from now on. Hawk was clearly uncomfortable, he was weird, but he was willing to take us to Shadowmire. After he was finished talking, he told his crewmates to open up the hold entrance. And so we lead our horses down where we tied them. After that, we found a good spot at the front of the ship. Minutes later, we departed. With Hawk, we watched as the land slowly disappeared behind us. The Middle Sea is a wild and dangerous place, luckily for us, we were only scraping the edge of the sea's center. But that didn't mean that there would be no problems along the way.

Chapter 3

FLYING WHALES

Arno was leaning against the ship's railing while we watched the sunset. "Arno? I... I don't care that you killed my mother. I hated her. As well as everyone at the camp," I wanted to make it clear. Arno stayed quiet. I frowned a little but I couldn't blame him for staying silent. I wouldn't know what to say in his place. Then, Mr. Shady made his way over to us.

"So boys, what even are you? I see that you are a blood elf, except you are a friendly one," He looked at me with his disgusting grin.

"And you are? Mr. Arno was it?" He looked at Arno, who seemed completely disinterested in conversing with him.

"This armor of yours... What is it made of? Where did you get it?" Arno began to feel bad and awkward, so he began talking.

"I got it from an army general a long time ago, and it is made of enchanted steel," Arno said while Mr. Shady listened closely with sparkling eyes.

"Ooooh, so you are like a war hero? Since the general gave you such a special set of armor?" Mr. Shady asked. I think he was blushing.

"Uhm, no. I killed him and took it. It was his armor, I enchanted it after," Let's say Mr. Shady was not amazed. He spat out a little "Oh," before he left. Me and Arno stayed looking out on the sea till dark. Then a door in the back of the ship flew open. A dirty man stood in it.

"Oy! Ya ratlings, come and drink hahaha!" He yelled at us. It seemed that a few guys were actually operating the ship while most of them were drinking. Arno had an uninterested look on his face but figured that we could just go to pass the time faster.

"If you're going, I'm going," I say to him. He shrugs and begins walking toward the guy, I follow. We get in the room which is filled with stench. Most of the crew is there and they are all already drunk. One guy pukes on the floor beside him. I gag. It's disgusting. Arno gets to the edge of the bench and sits down. The guys beside him slide further from him, they are a bit intimidated by his spiked armor. I sit down beside him. During the night they bump into me causing me to get poked by Arno's armor. I didn't drink anything throughout the night. Arno drank a bunch of rum, he was completely fine after that though. After all that we went to sleep. It was familiar. We slept on the floor. Like I used to in the camp. The ground was hard and moist. I slowly drifted off to sleep. The ship floating on the waves was kind of soothing but also it was making me a little dizzy

In the morning we were suddenly woken up by someone who was frantically ringing a bell up on the main deck. While Arno was getting off the ground, I was already on my legs with Spitfire in my hands.

“What’s going on Arno?!” I squeaked.

“Bloody hell, calm down. How should I know?” Arno rubbed his eyes and began to stand up. Screaming and yelling could be heard from above. The other men that were still down here in the hold were whispering to each other. Then a man stormed into the hold and shouted.

“EVERYONE! Do not go up on the deck, stay here! The flying whales are coming!” Just as he said that I noticed a guy sitting in the corner, curled up, shaking. The man pissed himself from the panic. Since then, the ship has become dead silent. After some time Arno and I made our way to the gun deck, there were rows of canons there.

“So these merchants... Merchants don’t usually have cannons on their ships, do they?” I asked Arno.

“These guys are some shitty pirates. But what do I care, they are at least taking us with them,” He said. I shrugged and began walking around the gun deck, looking at the cannons. As I was walking by the rows of cannons, I realized that there were gunports that were covered with lids, I jumped over and took a closer look. The lids could be open to peek outside.

“Arno? What are flying whales?” I asked Arno as I was squatting by one of the cannons.

“Well, it’s pretty self-explanatory. They are whales. That can fly. And are pretty dangerous, that’s why there was all of that commotion earlier,”

“Hmmm,” I leaned over and slid the lid open, and then I peeked outside. Arno noticed but didn’t bother to say anything. Nothing could go wrong. I tried looking outside, but there was nothing in sight except the endless sea.

“Huh? Where are they?” I said. Then, a huge eye floated by the gunport, covering my view of the sea. I fell backward, landing on my ass before shuffling over to the other side of the room.

“F-F-FUCK. W-What...”

“Hah. Yeah, that’s one of them,” Arno says while trying not to laugh at me. I got up with a frown on my face. We stayed in the gun deck until we heard a bell on the main deck signaling that it was safe to come up again. We got on the main deck, Arno had his full armor on with his glaive on his back. I thought it was dumb, but I did have my musket on me as well so I could say anything to him.

Mr. Shady was already there.

"Well hello there, Knight Man and Gun Elf," It seemed Mr. Shady had given us nicknames. I don't know why. He knew Arno's name. I think that that was his way of doing things.

"I'm sorry for the rough awakening, but we had a little company," Mr. Shady said. Arno nodded and then walked past him, I followed him. It was going to be another boring day. Staring at the sea got old after yesterday, and we were only about halfway there. But I couldn't complain, the ship was fast. We got to the front of the ship. Arno looked in the distance, on our left it seemed like a storm was coming.

"Hm. The weather is not gonna be nice today I guess,"

"Don't get fooled, that is the edge of the center of the Middle Sea. There are always storms there," Arno said. I raised my eyebrow, yeah, you're right I presume. I was looking at the storm in the far away when everything went silent. Just like in the morning. A loud wailing was coming from behind the ship. Everyone had a terrified look on their faces. Arno was dead focused on the direction the sound came from.

"FLYING WHALE! IT'S FLYING WHALE!" Sounded from the back of the ship as some other man rang the bell, but it was too late. From behind the cabin in the back a large winged whale emerged. Absolute panic engulfed the ship.

"HAWK! Prepare your musket! We're gonna go whaling!" Arno shouted at me. Then the time returned to normal. People were running around the ship and down into the hold. Arno began to rumble with something as I watched the whale slowly approach. It flew over to the right of us, it was inspecting us with its huge eye. It was pearly white with a turquoise pupil. I think it was looking right at me.

Suddenly its eye twisted in an unnatural way, it was now bloody red with green pupils. It began wailing like before, but now it sounded like screaming. I fell to the ground with my jaw dropped, the whale began changing its course, it was slowly drifting toward us. Fear and terror spread through my body in an instant, I quickly turned and tried to grasp my Spitfire, and when I got a good grip on it, my scope's reticle landed on the whale's bloody eye.

"Now. Just pull the trigger. It's just an animal. It's either us or it," I thought to myself. Without warning, a black object flew by me and right into the whale's stomach, just behind the pectoral gliding fin. Liters of blood started pouring out of the wound the object left behind. It was Arno's glaive. I looked at Arno, who had chains wrapped around his arms, on the other end, the chains were tied to the glaive's grip.

“Shoot! Hawk!” I yelled at the boy. The chains were wrapped around my hands as I took a stance. Hawk collected himself, aimed, and shot multiple shots, hitting the whale right in the eye. It began to bleed but it seemed it didn’t do enough damage. The whale became enraged as it dived down into the water, pulling the chain together with me. I got pulled all the way to the gunwale, and I pressed my legs against it.

“Hawk. Go get your explosive ammunition. Quick!” I shouted at Hawk. The wooden floor, as well as the gunwale, began to crack under the pressure of my feet. When Hawk heard me, he spirited to one of the trapdoors and jumped down to the hold. I kept holding the chain. The pressure was so high that if my gauntlet cracked, my hand would be severed in an instant. But I knew that the gauntlet would last. Then I could feel the chain loosen.

“Did my glaive slide out? No,” The chain began to move upward. The whale was resurfacing. I flew out of the water, now floating in front of the ship with my glaive still stuck in its ribcage. I once again got flung, now to the front of the ship, the fo’c’sle. The blood from its gut was landing on me and the ship.

“Where the fuck is Hawk?” I thought before he suddenly appeared behind me. He reloaded his Spitfire with a magazine of explosive bullets and then began shooting the whale repeatedly. The skin on its back flew off more and more with each explosion. The whale wailed or rather screamed in pain and accelerated, the tension in the chains rose greatly. My heels dug into the wood. The whole ship was getting pulled, and we flew through the waves, faster than we ever could before.

“My gauntlet will last, but I’m not sure about the chains,” I thought while gripping the chains, but I was not sure about how was I going to get my glaive out. Hawk loaded in another magazine.

“Hawk! Shoot its gut! I have to pull out my Spirit Crusher!” I yelled at Hawk. He looked at me and nodded then he sprinted and sled over to me. As he sat there on the ground, he aimed his musket. Each of the four glass collimators popped up, one by one. When he lined up each of the reticles, he began to shoot. His bullets were landing one after another beside the wound to where the chains led. The shots tore the whale’s skin and then started ripping its flesh out. There was one last bullet in Hawk’s magazine, he pulled the trigger. The bullet flew through the air, into the wound, and landed right on the whale’s rib, breaking it. I could feel the Spirit Crusher come loose, it ripped more flesh as it flew out of its wound. The whale could leave now, it was seriously injured, but that’s not how flying whales are.

Instead of flying away, the whale spun around and began heading right for us. I pulled on the chain as much as I could as the Spirit Crusher flew through the air, landing in my hand. The whale opened its huge mouth as it shot forward, slightly tilting to the side to get us both with a horizontal bite. Hawk couldn't get up in time. I wasn't able to react fast enough either. The whale snapped its jaw shut. Hawk sat there, covering his head. Blood began to pour down on him from above. He was astounded that he was still alive.

Hot blood began to pour down on my hair, face, and clothes. How was I still alive? I looked up and saw Arno holding up his glaive in a way that prevented the whale from closing its mouth. The blood was coming from the whale's bleeding gums where Arno's glaive was stuck.

"Hawk. Shoot it!" Arno yelled out as he held Spirit Crusher so it wouldn't slip out. But I had an even better idea. I reached into the ammo bag on my belt, and it clicked and opened. Besides a few magazines was a small explosive, the brand new "hand grenade". I pulled it out, blood was dripping from it since it even got in the bag. I quickly placed it on the floor in front of Arno. It had an irregular sphere shape, so it wasn't rolling around. I reloaded my Spitfire and yelled. "Arno! Kick the grenade!" I yelled. I'm not sure if Arno had even heard about grenades, but he understood that I meant that thing in front of him, and so he delivered a forceful kick that sent the grenade flying into the whale's throat. As it was traversing the air, I had my Spitfire ready and when the right moment came, I pulled the trigger. The bullet had hit the hand grenade. As soon as it did, I and Arno got sent flying through the air, Arno collided with the main mast while I flew further away, to the back. Chunks of meat began to land on the ship and into the water. For a moment, it was raining blood.

Some of the merchants, or pirates, whatever, got up to see what caused the explosion. When they saw us, they ran and helped us get back up on our feet. We sat down on a bench in the cabin in the back where we drank the day before. I was still breathing heavily, Arno seemed to be completely fine. If he didn't have his armor, I bet that landing would shatter his spine. Mr. Shady has opened the door.

"Oh heavens! Are you guys alright?" He said with a shocked voice. Arno gave him a thumbs up and I just glanced at him before looking down on the ground again.

"I-I don't know how to repay you guys. You saved the ship! And the whole crew!"

"Look. Here's the gold you gave me for transporting you. You guys deserve a free ride," He continued as he handed a pouch of gold over to Arno. He took the pouch.

"No problem, we can't get to Shadowmire on a wrecked ship," Arno said and then took his helmet off. His long blonde hair dropped on his shoulders before he placed it beside him on the bench.

"This deserves a celebration! Don't you think?" Mr. Shady said, now with enthusiasm in his voice. Then he left. We sat there quietly until I decided to break the silence.

"Hey Arno, I was wondering. You are pretty old, right? How old exactly?" I asked him. Arno thought for a moment before he said.

"It's been around three hundred years I think,"

"Woah, so, do you by any chance still know how to use magic? Because like, today nobody really knows how to use it anymore," I followed up with another question.

"Hmm. I don't think so. It's been a long time. And this human body doesn't have a lot of mana. Everyone has a lot less of it nowadays. But I can give it a shot," Arno said and stood up. He raised his arm and casted a little fiery ball on top of his palm. He had a tiring expression and was grunting while doing so and after a short moment, it disappeared.

"Ooh, cool," I said.

"Do you know any other spells?"

"I do, but this one depleted all of my mana, so I can't do it now," Arno said before sitting down next to me. Nothing interesting happened that day after. At the brink of the sunset, the festivities began. But I wasn't there. I was sitting down in a corner in the hold. Arno said that he'll at least check it out. I sat there thinking, about nothing particular. I was wondering what would happen next. Will we find the Pathfinder and then we have to wait for the next five years? Or will finding the Pathfinder take five years? Thoughts were running through my head. But before I knew it, I fell asleep. It felt like an eternity before I woke up again. The ground was softer than before, I hadn't even opened my eyes since it was so comfortable. I was lying on the grass when I finally realized the ground was weirdly soft. I spread my eyes wide open to the sight of a black sky while being surrounded by a horde of trees. For some reason, I've found myself in a discolored dark forest.

It was so silent I could hear my blood running through my veins, the beating of my heart, all kinds of things. I stood up and noticed that my Spitfire was not there and so I began walking. From time to time a cricket could be heard somewhere in the afar. On the black sky above shined a crescent moon, but stars were nowhere to be found. As I walked on, more sounds could be heard, like a wolf's howling, an owl's hooting, and even some scraping noise. One would think it would make me calmer but no, the thing was that these sounds didn't sound right. It was almost like someone was imitating these noises. I walked up on a small hill just to discover a small cottage. There was smoke coming from its stone chimney and so I approached it. I stepped closer, just in front of the wooden door and I knocked on it. After a few seconds, a short, old woman opened the door slightly and glanced at me from behind it. "You shouldn't be here boy. Come inside, quick," The woman said in a scraping voice before opening the door wide open, inviting me in. I walked in. "Where am I? What is this place? Who are you?" I began asking but the woman didn't answer, she just stepped over to her chair sat down, and looked at the bright white blaze in the fireplace. "What is this place?" I asked again, hoping for an answer. But the old woman just looked at me and then turned her head back to the fireplace. I was so very confused. How did I get here? I just sat down on the bench that was by the table and looked around. The cottage was small and lacked color as everything else. There was an old bed with stained sheets in the corner. I've sat there for a good while, I think someone was walking by the windows outside. Some dark figures.

I got bored so I stood up and since there was nothing around in the cottage, I walked up to the door and grabbed the handle. As soon as I did, a skinny arm with long nails got hold of my forearm, and its nails began to dig into my skin, making my arm bleed. It was that old woman. I had so many questions, but when I gazed upon her, her face was twisted with anger. "You have to stay here, young one. WERE YOU NOT LISTENING?" Her voice has morphed into a demonic lament. In shock, I pushed the door open and pulled my hand out of her grasp, pieces of my skin remained on her nails. I cried out in pain and I sprinted through the forest until I was out of breath. I was trying to catch my breath, I looked behind to find myself alone. I slowly calmed down and the pain in my arm started to settle in. It was really bad, the pain made me fall down to the ground, I tried to rip my cape to bandage up my arm when I noticed something walking right in front of me.

Walking around me was a deer. I just looked at it, even forgetting about the pain for a moment, until it stopped and stared at me. Its muscles began to twitch, skin in its joints began to shred. The deer's legs started to grow, followed by its body. Its skull grew until it broke the skin on its head and tore all of the muscles. Now, a nightmarish creature was standing in front of me. The antlers on its head grew into enormous spikes. It grew closer to me, the skull was twice the size of me. Then it opened its mouth and I stared into the abyss inside, then, I heard a snap and it was completely dark...

I felt it. All of it. I was being crushed between the beast's teeth. My bones were breaking with each chew, and my blood and guts poured out of me when I suddenly woke up in a cold sweat. On a mattress in the hold. It was still night and Arno was sleeping on his mattress by the wall. He reeked of alcohol. I was still shaken from the nightmare and my throat was dry, so I stood up and walked around the hold until I found a pitcher of water, I smelled it just to confirm that it was actually water and took a long, refreshing sip. Then I went back and sat down on my mattress. I repeated the nightmare in my head, over and over again. Then suddenly, I remembered a detail I had initially forgotten about. The deer beast. It had a rune of some kind carved in its skull. It resembled a dragon or something like that, I think.

SYMPHONY OF DESTRUCTION

Later that day, Hawk and Arno arrived at the Shadow Harbor. The capital city of Shadowmire. Since the dawn of time, Shadowmire has always been united as one territory, unlike Valeria or Frostholm. The market is nearly as unrestricted as it gets. You can buy any kind of weapon, gadget, or drug there is, here. Shadowmire has a democratic government; they vote for new parliamentarians every few years. But don't get fooled by all of this, Shadowmire, and Shadow Harbor in particular might just be the most dangerous place to live in. Pirate gangs are an iconic part of the island, they are the reason for the massive import of rare contrabands into the market here. There is a saying, "Shadow Harbor never sleeps" (or Shadowmire, depending on who you ask). That is because not only nightlife is yet another iconic part of Shadowmire, but it's also because the nights are filled with the sounds of gunfire, explosions, and screaming. Diseases and dangerous wildlife are also one of the reasons this isn't the best place to be. But now that that's out of the way, let's return to the story.

It was afternoon when we finally arrived at Shadowmire. It was a grueling forty-eight hours on the ship but we got lucky since the ship was fast and we made it here pretty fast. It was a sunny day, and the warm sun's rays were landing on my cheeks. I was excited and as I walked out on the deck, the harbor in which we were about to dock, quickly lost its charm the more I looked at it.

"Wh-Wait. This is a shithole!" I gasped. Arno came closer, laughing at me and my reaction.

"Welcome to Shadow Harbor buddy!" He said before resuming to laugh at me.

"How was I supposed to know? I only knew Shadowmire was an island place, I didn't know it was the butt of Nihiltania,"

"Oh come on, that's too cruel of you. There are beautiful sides to Shadowmire!" Arno said as he tried to not laugh.

"Yeah? What for example?"

"You can get any drug you want here," Arno tried to convince me.

"I don't want drugs!"

"Oh? Then piss off, you party pooper," Arno said, laughed, and left.

"What the fuck? What's up with him?" I thought to myself before following him.

We walked over a bridge from the ship onto the wooden pier. Our horses were already waiting for us there. Mr. Shady was standing there looking over his crewmates unloading the ship's cargo.

"Thanks for the ride," Arno said when we approached Mr. Shady.

"No problem boys, you saved our asses after all!" He said and let out a belly laugh before slapping Arno on the back. If he slapped him just a few centimeters to the left, he would impale his hand on Arno's armor.

"By the way, when are you guys leaving again?" Arno asked.

"Oh, we're going back to Valeria in like... two months? We can give you a ride back if it suits you," Mr. Shady responds.

"Oh, no, we won't stick around that long. But still thanks for the offer," Arno said and we walked off, waving to Mr. Shady one last time.

"Wait. So you know where the Pathfinder is? What are we gonna do after we find it? We'll still have a lot of time," I asked Arno as we were walking on the pier to the port.

"I already told you. We still have to find a way to enchant it so it leads us to The Holy Child,"

"As for the location of the Pathfinder. I have this," Arno turned to his horse and opened one of the leather bags, in it there were a lot of scrolls. He looked over a few of them before picking one and pulling it out. He turned back to me and unrolled it.

"I recently discovered this scroll. It is some kind of documentation of the Pathfinder and it says that it was sealed in a temple on one of the hills here in Shadowmire," I gaze upon the scroll Arno was presenting to me.

"I see," I said quietly. That's when we reached the end of the pier. I almost didn't notice since the road was made out of the same wood as the pier.

"I guess you are expecting some kind of break after all of that," Arno said when he climbed onto his horse.

"Uhm, not really but I would appreciate it," I said as I was climbing onto my horse.

"Well then. Let's take a look at the market here and then we can find someplace to stay," And so we made our way to the market when we got there, there was no end to it. There was every kind of person here, humans, elves, orcs, dwarves, beastmen, goblins. Besides all of the wacky characters, Arno didn't stand out like he did in Valeria.

"Now tell me, Hawk. Have you ever seen crazy shit like this?" He said while pointing to one of the stands with bladed weapons. The weapon's blades had blades, and getting stabbed with these would probably result in certain death.

I have never seen anything even close to this. We continued to stroll around the market for a while. Here is a summary of some of the more “intriguing” stands. Meat stand: Selling meat of any kind, even human, orcish, goblin, anything. Drug stand: Selling drugs of all kinds of drugs like Dreamleaf Bloom, Chimera’s Veil, or Necrotic Fog. Whatever. Ummm next up... Potion slash charm stand. Magic stand in short: Bone melting potion, temporary gender swap potion, hair growth potion, teeth regeneration potion. As for the charms: bounding charm, lucky charm, spirit charm, void charm... Okay, last one. Slave stand... Okay, never mind.

We arrive at a hostel later that day and we book a room. It somehow looks better than the one in Valor. Except for a blood stain on the wall. But overall it was much more refined, which was nice. We put down our things and were deciding on what to do next. The sun was slowly setting and was giving the whole island an orange tint. Our horses stood outside, tied to a post. “Aren’t you going to put down that armor? You are wearing it all the time, it has to smell like shit,” I told Arno while lying down sideways on the bed. “It is a safety measure. We don’t know what awaits us,” “Now you’re just being paranoid...” I retort. Arno just rolls his eyes and puts on his helmet. After a brief brainstorming session, we decided to pay a visit to a tavern. I’m starting to think it is Arno’s favorite place to be. We walked out of the hostel, I took my Spitfire with me since I didn’t want it to get stolen. The wooden paths made a cracking sound under Arno’s heavy metal boots. The streets of Shadow Harbor didn’t disappoint to amaze and shock me. On our way to the tavern, we saw drugged orcs fist-fighting in the street, a woman giving birth in an alley, and a legless man crawling on the ground. This place is unhinged. We arrived at a tavern called “Drunken Marlin” which was a fairly decent spot, compared to every other establishment there.

“Oh look Hawk, this place’s fancy!” I turned to Hawk. “Yeah, I guess so,” He said. “Well let’s sit down, you can have a glass of milk since you’re a little turd” I let out a belly laugh while Hawk was gazing at me with a bored expression. We sat down... I saw him again. Why? Why him? He’s long dead. Abyss... Why does he keep appearing to me? It’s not real. We’re safe...

Some girl approached Arno from behind. I thought it was the waitress at first, coming to take our order.

“Helloooooo darling! Long time no seeeee!” The girl said. Arno still had his helmet on, but I could see his eyes open widely, shining from behind it. She reached out her hand to the back of his head.

“HAWK!” Arno shouted before a ball of flame followed by a huge explosion emerged from behind him. It was ringing in my ears, but what I think happened was that the explosion tore the tavern apart, killing most of its customers. I woke up momentarily under Arno who covered me from the explosion before I fell unconscious again...

I stood up, Hawk was lying on the floor. I was hoping he was hurt badly. I looked back. From the smoke emerged a human girl with red hair in a red dress. Pyra, The Infernal Witch, is one of the last mages.

“SO YOU CAME BACK YOU FUCKING SHITHEAD!” She shouted maniacally at me. I remained silent.

“NOTHING TO SAY?! WELL LET’S CONTINUE WHERE WE LEFT OFF!” She casted a large ball of fire and tossed it toward me. I kneeled and guarded Hawk from it.

“STILL HAVEN’T ASCENDED YET?! TOO BAD!” I grabbed Hawk and rushed into an alley where I threw him into an empty wooden barrel and covered it with a lid. She chased after me and when I looked back, I was met with a wall of fire. Further down the alley, it split into two directions, when I went there, the exits were blocked as well.

“You have a strong fucking nerve to come back,” Pyra said, now calmly from behind me. I turned to her. There was fury in her eyes.

“You are not the reason I’m here,” I respond. She seems to get even more enraged.

“Do you realize that that was the worst thing you could have said? Do you remember what happened last time?”

“You threw a tantrum and burned down a whole street, like a child,” After I said this to her, it seemed she was about to explode at any moment.

“You left me. Because of how selfish you are! You wasted lifetimes chasing a goal because The Spirit ruined your life. Well, guess what? You are not the first one. You are just the only one that is so fucking stubborn to come back from the dead and waste what’s left just chasing this lunatic fantasy of yours,” My grip on Spirit Crusher tightened.

“Shut up woman. If you want to die, then let’s get over with it,” Pyra frowned at my response.

“Yeah. Same old you. Kill anything that comes your way...” She casted a fireball at her hand and tossed it toward me. I sliced it in half.

“We don’t have to do this,”

“It is too late, YOU FUCKING STUBBORN, DISLOYAL PIECE OF SHIT!” Pyra screamed maniacally, I could feel burning. Before I realized it, she set me on fire under my armor, and I was slowly burning. The fire was merciless. This is not where it ends. In the cover of the flames, I ejected my tar-colored soul as my burning body fell to the ground. I made my way to the barrel where Hawk was hidden and possessed him. Pyra stepped closer to the burned corpse dressed in my armor and mumbled something to herself. The lid on the barrel popped open with me in Hawk’s body pushing it out of the way with Spitfire, which I pointed at Pyra. I didn’t know how muskets work, I only knew I had to pull the trigger. With the reticle at her head, I fired the musket and after a loud bang, she collapsed to the floor with a piece of her skull landing beside her. It hurt, hurt my soul. That feeling was so foreign to me. I climbed out of the barrel and looked at her...

A few days later.

After a minor setback, we were ready to find the Pathfinder, Arno told me he had to change bodies after the battle with that woman. She was allegedly some crazed ascended mortal that Arno had bad blood with. I think it was impressive that he had defeated her. We were walking up stone stairs up the mountain. The terrain and nature here are vastly different from Valeria. Is it a lot wetter? Anyway, after walking up the stairs to about halfway, Arno quietly turned and began walking into bushes. I didn’t ask and followed him. The foliage was catching onto his spiky armor.

“So, do you know exactly where the entrance is?” I asked.

“Somewhere around here,” He answered in a stoic voice. Just as he did, the ground below me collapsed and my leg fell into the ground. It startled me and I looked up at Arno.

“Well. Good job buddy,” He said more cheerfully this time around. He pulled me out and broke the trapdoor that was below the thin layer of dirt. We drop down into the hole with a second thought, there is a staircase leading down to a heavy wooden door. The moisture has made the door easier to break down, which is exactly what Arno did. Beyond the door lay a vast underground complex.

The stench of rotten flesh was filling the cold rooms. Then, a blood-curdling shriek sounded from deep within the temple. I stayed still when I glanced at Arno. He was on guard, completely focused.

"Hello, old friends," Arno whispered to himself.

"What?" I asked but he didn't react and started slowly walking down the hall, into the darkness. I quickly pulled out an oil lamp and lit it while running down the hall after Arno. The darkness was consuming the light from my lantern. There were sounds of something choking and gagging echoing. Arno suddenly stopped, I almost impaled myself on his armor. He pointed his glaive in front of him. I leaned and looked ahead, wondering what made him stop. A humanoid creature was in front of us, slowly stumbling in our direction. It had multiple skinny arms, and two mouths with teeth sticking out. A lot of blank eyes covered its head. Arno didn't hesitate and pierced its head with his glaive, killing it instantly from afar. It silently dropped to the ground. It had to be a chimera.

"Don't even think of using that musket of yours here. That's out of the question," Arno whispered. I nodded in agreement. We made our way down another staircase. This wasn't any ordinary temple. It was built like a maze, to keep away unwanted guests. Guess they didn't expect The Dark Knight here.

Another chimera appeared. With a swift slash, it crumbled down. Our steps echoed through the endless hallways. The blood splattered on the cold ground. Silently we traversed through the complex. At one point, Arno again abruptly stopped dead in his tracks. I looked ahead but saw nothing.

"Why did you stop?" I whispered. Arno looked back at me and pointed at the ground. About two steps ahead there was a pressure plate embedded in the stone bricks two steps in front of us. It was pretty hard to spot.

"Shit, is that a trap?" I asked Arno quietly.

"Definitely. There isn't much else it could be," He said as we slowly stepped over it and continued down the infinite halls. After a good while and many dead ends, we arrived at a large, decorated room. There was a big stone frame in one of the walls. By one of the pillars which made up the frame, stood a pedestal with a little bit of salt water in it. On the front of it was an intriguing symbol carved into the stone. I inspected it closely.

"What now? Is this another dead end?" I asked but Arno just walked over to the pedestal and pulled out a pouch. It had the same symbol on it as the pedestal. From it he picked up a small glowing gem, then he reached over with his arm and crushed it above the little body of water. I watched his every move with curiosity.

As the sparkling dust fell into the water, it began to glow, like stars in the night sky. With the water in the pedestal, the frame was filled with similar liquid, creating a doorway somewhere.

“Okay. On the other side, we should find what we’re looking for,” I nodded at Arno who stepped closer to the portal, following close behind. And so we stepped through into a dark place, only small lights were illuminating the scenery. We were under the sea, in an air bubble.

“Holy shit! Are we in the middle sea?!” I asked Arno with my mouth open wide while inspecting this dark site.

“Yeah. It seems like it,” He responded. I walked around before stumbling upon a large rock that was reaching into the air bubble. In the middle of it was a dent, and in it, the artifact, Pathfinder itself. My eyes sparkled as I reached in to grab it.

“HAWK!” I shouted at the boy. I’m no expert, but no ordinary rock has two glowing eyes. It seemed that the dent in which he was reaching had a spherical lid that slid when he reached for the Pathfinder and severed his whole left arm. He began to bleed all over the place, too shocked to even scream. The rock began to move and left the premises of the air bubble and swam, or rather walked away. This thing was enormous, incredibly huge. I ran over to Hawk who was bleeding like a pig. I ripped off his white shirt, which was slowly turning red and I bandaged up his wound, but it wasn’t enough. I couldn’t carry him in this armor, so I had to drag him. Holding him by his cape, we barged through the portal back into the temple. He was slowly drifting away as I pleaded for him to not die on me. His Spitfire was banging against the floor as I dashed through the halls. After a good few minutes, we reached the exit. I tossed him out of the hole and climbed back up myself. Unfortunately, we didn’t bring our horses, so I had to run four steps at a time down the mountain.

As I ran down the stairs, dragging Hawk on the ground, the world around me transformed into a dark void. But I kept on running. Before me appeared her, The Spirit, and she seemed angrier than usual.

“WHAT ARE YOU DOING AGAIN YOU FUCKING MAGGOT?!” She shrieked.

“I don’t know what are you on again,” I responded, still bolting down.

“You... You pieces of shit had awoken TERRAMOR!”

“Didn’t he disappear like one-thousand seven-hundred years ago?” I asked, slightly surprised.

“He did. But you just have to fuck around all the time. GAH! I’VE HAD IT WITH YOU!” She yelled before disappearing with the void.

When we reached the bottom of the mountain, I rushed Hawk to the nearest hospital where they took care of him. After about an hour I walked out into the night. I immediately realized that he couldn't continue in this state. So that same night I found a mechanic workshop and I went in. After another good hour of bartering, I have ordered a mechanic prosthetic for a reasonable price, I'm going to pick it up next week...

"Don't hesitate to speak. There's only us here."

"Who are you?"

"I am ██████."

"Why are you here?"

"I was here when the world ended. I'm one of the few remaining humans. As long as the universe exists, so does my immortal body. I'm not bothered by my immortality, however. I find it liberating."

"What is your purpose?"

"I don't have one. Like I said, I'm apathetic. To be more accurate, I don't need or want a purpose. I feel like the world is meaningless and I exist just to exist."

"Why exist then?"

"I just exist because I exist. I don't need a reason. The world is empty and lonely but it doesn't even affect me. I actually enjoy the quiet and loneliness. It's not like I have anything else to do."

"For eternity?"

"Yes. Some unknown force gave me the gift of immortality. I don't know why or what my purpose is. I can travel throughout the universe and not die. I can do anything I want and never die, so I'm not worried about wasting my time here."

"Doesn't it get tiring?"

"It doesn't get tiring but I wouldn't call it "fun" either. Living without emotions makes it difficult to enjoy anything. I cannot love, hate, care, or be interested in anything, regardless of what it is. I exist just to exist. I'm merely observing the end of the world without feeling anything."

"Wouldn't it be better not to exist?"

"That is an interesting question. I guess everyone has different definitions of "better". In my case, I think existing is better than not existing, even if it's meaningless. Not existing is too hard to comprehend for me. I believe existence is comforting and reassuring."

"Am I real?"

"Yes, you are real. I assure you, you are not dreaming. You are a living being just like me. You may think it's all a nightmare, but it's not. The world has ended and only you and I remain."

"Are you real?"

"I am real. You can touch me if you wish to. We are not in a dream. It is a cruel truth that the human race has been eradicated, but you and I still remain."

"What now? You're all alone here,"

"It seems that way but you're here too. We are now each other's companions. We'll be here for the rest of time. It's better than being alone. I can spend my time doing nothing and you can spend your time doing nothing. I think this is a good arrangement, wouldn't you say?"

"What is there to be done now?"

"Absolutely nothing. We don't have any goals or any work to accomplish. We can do or think anything we want to. I know this sounds absurd but this is our new normal. This empty world is ours to live in for the next eternity. So... what do you want to do now????"

"Is this hell?"

"No. But I can understand why it would seem that way. Hell implies punishment. It implies eternal torture. There is no hell because this is not a punishment. This is just... nothingness with nothing to do. It's like being stuck in a small house or room and being unable to move. You are not being punished. You're simply stuck and need to think of something to do to pass the time. This empty world is our small room for eternity. It shouldn't matter that everything is gone anymore. In a way, we're finally free."

"Wandering in nothing for eternity doesn't sound like suffering?"

"Why does it have to be suffering? Being stuck here might seem like punishment but this is a neutral existence. You are not punished or blessed. I have the gift of immortality and so do you. It's a strange gift that forces you to exist eternally. The world ended long ago, but we exist to wander and explore its remains. Yes, it does seem dreadful to be here forever, but there is no better option. Once we get past the fear and uncertainty of our situation, this empty existence can be peaceful."

"Isn't this a punishment?"

"Punishment implies punishment by a higher power. This is just existence. As far as I know, it's not a punishment. There is no higher power granting or denying us this existence. It's not a curse either. This existence is neither cruel nor kind. We simply exist without any goals or purpose. This could be considered punishment or suffering but, to me, it's neither. Once we accept that this is our existence, it becomes easier to embrace the emptiness and silence of the universe. This empty world gives us nothing but it also takes away nothing at the same time."

"This is fate worse than death."

Chapter 5

ACE OF SPADES

Hawk woke up the next day. After a week they released him. He was dead silent since. He was usually pretty lively, but not now. He was in our hostel room, lying, just staring at the ceiling. I was riding my horse down the street with the prosthetic arm already finished. I was thinking about that night...

When I walked out of the workshop after placing my order, far out, in the dead of night, all the way on the sea, two large, yellow sources of light were hovering...

"Is that... Terramor?" I asked myself. And I got my answer soon after because in the same distance, to the right of him, the sky was torn and a blue ray descended from the heavens, right into the behemoth. The yellow lights went out. A nearly minute later, the sound and shockwave reached me but didn't have any effect, it sounded like someone dropped something and the shockwave resembled more of a calm breeze. So this was Sagittarius.

I opened the door to our room, Hawk lightly glanced in my direction, acknowledging my presence. I brought him the prosthetic, and he tried it and was back to his normal self (...). The next day.

"So. What are we going to do now?"

"Hmm, I'm not sure," I said I was thinking of other ways we could commence. There was one idea, one last resort.

"How's your wound?"

"Oh, It's getting better, but it still hurts when I use the prosthetic,"

"Let's just sit back here for now," After that, I went into the streets. I was walking through the dirt of a place this was. After scouring the market for a few hours I saw a man that I recognized. I watched him from afar. He hasn't noticed me with everyone around. He was talking with some merchants, I just stood there. They then entered a tavern, so I waited outside, behind a corner. The day slowly turned to night. The harbor district is one of the more dangerous parts of the town, but it's not too much of a problem to me. After many hours, the man walked out and made his way through the dark streets, I quietly rode after him. As I was following him, some drug thug stepped in my way and began begging for money. I rejected him which made him angry, and more of them stepped out of the shadows (death). The man I was following entered a hostel beside a warehouse in the harbor.

I waited there until the dawn came. Just then, a bunch of guys walked out, followed by Mr. Shady. I approached him and we had a short conversation. I told him that they could take us back, a month and a half from now. He told me a date and where we would meet up. Hawk seemed to have gotten better over the days, at least it appeared to be so.

I wasn't okay, could I believe him? It was my fault, my arm. He had even gotten me a prosthetic. It was my fault... We want the same thing. Or rather. Accomplishing his goal does good for me. No more pain, like the one I'm in. No more sorrow, like the one I feel. He's a good person, even though he may cause pain. He killed a lot of people. But he killed a lot of bad people, like my mother. She deserved to die, to feel pain. It was the right thing to do. My shoulder hurts...

While Arno was away I went on a walk. Shadow Harbor sucked. It was the most disgusting place I could ever find myself in. I wanted to get out of there as soon as possible. I tried to relax but the constant noise and smell were ruining my futile attempts at doing so. On that walk, I questioned everything we were doing. This whole thing. Was it really necessary? I have the power to change the world, so why wouldn't I? Nobody has to suffer from now on. Suffer like me, or like Arno did. Arno makes The Spirit sound like a monster, but maybe she really is. As I walked through the dirty streets, I saw the worst things this place has to offer, and if they can happen in broad daylight, I don't want to know what happens at night or inside all of those buildings. That day, I saw a lot of suffering and sorrow. I was sure that I wanted to continue. I returned after a long time, Arno awaiting me in the room. Though I was expecting him to be annoyed that I was gone for so long, he hadn't said anything. We went to sleep. A few weeks later we were informed that we would be leaving about ten days earlier. So on the final day, we packed our things, rode to the harbor, and together with Mr. Shady's crew, we left the horrendous place. Our way back was more peaceful this time around and we had arrived at Valor a mere few days later. The day we arrived, we stayed at a hostel where Arno began to explain our next step. The stuff he was saying sounded like a fairy tale, but there wasn't much else we could do, and considering his whole appearance and background, it had to be real. And so, the next day we departed for central Valeria.

A few days earlier. There seems to be a bit of commotion. Two figures stood in front of the door. One was tall and muscular, while the other one was shorter and leaner. The shorter one held a musket, but not a gunpowder-powered one. He gave a signal to the big one with his hand, who pulled out a crescent saber that resembled a moon. It was made from a metal out of this world, just like the musket. The tall figure raised the saber above his head and slashed the door in half, splinters flying everywhere around. The shorter figure wasted no time and flew into the room. He ignored the bathroom and immediately dashed to the bedroom. He stopped abruptly, pointing his white musket at the beds. But they were vacant. When the taller figure got through the door, he checked the bathroom and approached the smaller one in the bedroom.

"Looks like we missed them," The shorter one says with a mischievous grin—the larger one growls.

"Well. They are probably off to Valeria again. Let's get going Cery boy," The short one says with the same grin, finding the whole situation amusing.

"Yes, my lord," The large one growls.

A familiar scenery. Me and Arno were once again riding through Valerian plains on our horses. Except this time, my arm was made of metal, but I've gotten used to it over the time we spent in Shadowmire. I even found out that the arm improves my accuracy and the built-in gyroscope in the elbow makes it easier to shoot accurately from a horse. It even might have been a blessing in disguise. We just have to finish this. We rode for many days to almighty knows where. Arno hasn't said anything about his plan. It was getting warmer, and the summer breeze felt nice. After many days, we've arrived at Arno's desired destination. It was a spectacle—a forest, with trees sprouting high into the sky. The land everywhere around was twisted in a way as if a great battle had taken place just outside of the forest. The closer we got, the darker and quieter the surroundings became. Stepping into the forest made my breathing shallow.

"Arno, what is this place?" I asked but Arno remained silent.

Welcome home...

"This. This is The Elven Kingdom," Arno responded after a while.

"Huh?" My head tilted in confusion.

"At least it used to be," Arno said and I lacked any more questions.

The tree crowns were creating a solid ceiling. High up in the trees, there were clusters of houses with bridges, creating a whole city. Except. There was no one around. Darkness and silence surrounded us. It was completely abandoned.

“W-What is this place?” I asked and after a moment Arno answered.

“Home, sort of,” His response startled me a little. It felt like it made sense... Sort of.

“And what are we looking for here?”

“... Inheritance,” Arno said. There was an audible sob, but we both acted as if it didn’t happen. Eventually, we found ourselves in an area, which resembled a park or a garden. I wondered what it had looked like before it was abandoned. The whole forest felt a little familiar like I’d been here before... However, we made our way through the park and we arrived at a small structure with an iron gate. On the other side was a staircase leading down into a greater darkness. Above the gate was a carved writing saying “Royal Crypt”. I once again started thinking deeply. Arno was still vague about our plan. I watched him get down from his horse and approach the gate. He pulled out his glaive and smashed the gate open, after doing so, he pulled out a torch out of his bag and lit it up, using the fire spell, almost failing considering his amount of mana. I silently followed, and as we were walking down the stairs, I slipped, and flew down the stairs, hitting my head hard. The darkness was greater than before.

I’ve woken up in a forest. A familiar one. The elven? No, or... I don’t know. The sky was pitch black with only a crescent moon, shining above me. The forest lacked any color. Now I remember. I looked around, to see nothing. I was here before, but this time, it was completely silent, almost like it was abandoned. I sat down, not wanting to do anything. Curled up, my face pushed up against my knees. After a few minutes, a rumbling noise made me look toward its source. In the faraway darkness, a red symbol was glowing. Slowly getting bigger and bigger, the rumbling increased in intensity as it got closer. It was coming. I sprung up and ran in the opposite direction. Breathing heavily I ran, nowhere. In the panic, I tripped on a tree root, my face digging into the gray grass. The rumbling was rapidly approaching. I didn’t even bother to stand up. I just lay there, accepting my fate. Suddenly the rumbling stopped. I finally found the strength to look up. And as I gazed upon the black sky, in it I saw the dragon symbol, glowing as never before. It first seemed as if wasn’t attached to anything, but then suddenly, the forest shifted into a bright white void. Revealing, them who bore the rune.

A monster. Its presence being indescribable. The definitive manifestation of a nightmare. A being not from this world. Bearing no resemblance to anything we know. Black scales covering its huge, skinny body. Teeth, sharper than any sword in Nihiltania. Even though the creature lacked eyes, it was apparent it acknowledged my presence. A dark eye stared down at me, from deep inside of its mouth. I began to shake, I couldn't even get up from the ground. A puddle of urine appeared below me as I gazed upon the horrific creature. My doom was imminent. But not in the way I expected it. The familiar dragon rune shined on the creature's forehead. The ground below opened up, and suddenly, I found myself in a freefall. It looked at me as I descended, somewhere into the void. Then I had a feeling. Like I was approaching solid ground.

When I came into contact with it, I jumped up on my feet, finding myself in the royal crypt.

"Ah. Finally awake," Arno said calmly, standing by with his helmet off. He ran his hand through his short black hair. He then pulled out a tiny brown pouch out of his mouth. I have seen him throw these around but this time, he didn't just drop it on the ground, but placed it in a small metal can. I rubbed my head, which still hurt from the fall.

"Ugh. Can you tell me already what are we doing here? And please, no riddles," I tell Arno while I get up from the cold ground. Arno looks at me. I feel a cold gaze behind his helmet.

"I'm going to ascend..." Arno said.

"A-Ascend? You mean like... Like the ascension? Like you are going to become an ascended mortal?" After a moment of hesitation, Arno responds with a simple "Yes". I watch as he slowly strolls around the crypt.

"Here. This one..." Arno's voice cracks as he says that. I gaze upon the catafalque by which Arno stands. On top of it, lays a small skeleton. A child? No that's not it. I didn't dare to ask Arno about it. He placed his hand on the catafalque and knelt down. When the torch illuminated the front side of it, I saw it. The rune, the dragon rune. My eyes widened.

"A-A-Arno??" I barely managed to speak. But Arno seemed to be completely hypnotized by it. Any sound I made went into his one ear and out the other. He slowly reached his hand on the rune carving. It began glowing in blood red when he did. All I could do was watch. The front side slid down, creating an opening into a secret compartment. Arno reached inside, without a hint of hesitation.

Out he pulled out a glass jar. Filled to the brim with blood. I was speechless. Arno turned toward me.

“This, Hawk. This is a dragonslayer blood. This is my inheritance,” Arno said. Completely calmly, sending a chill down my spine.

“W-What now? Are you going to drink it?”

“Uhm. No. I’m going to absorb it.”

“Huh? How?” After I asked, Arno opened the jar and set it on top of the catafalque. Then, he collapsed.

“Arno!” I yelled out, in confusion. I jumped to him, holding up his arm, when I noticed it. A small dark cluster of particles glided through the air. Arno's soul. It went right into the jar. A flash of bright pink light blinded me. I shielded my sight with my forearm. When the light faded, I looked over at the spot where the jar used to be, now only a pile of glass shards. Suddenly I found myself back on my legs. I then realized Arno had lifted me by my hood.

“We’re done for now,” Arno said.

“What?”

“We’re done. I’ve seen what I’m now capable of. I can feel it. The apex predator inside me. I-I,”

“...”

“I’m the ace of Spades Hawk! I feel so powerful, It’s... You cannot imagine it,”

“Arno?” He suddenly twitched, as if I woke him up.

“Oh sorry. Well. As I said, we’re done for now. All we can do now is wait,” Arno said and began slowly walking up the stairs. I grabbed Spitfire and quickly followed him.

On the surface, we got on our horses and began riding out of the forest.

“Where would you like to go? We still have years to spare,” Arno says and I take a moment to think about his question.

“I think... I’m not sure.”

“Come on!”

“Uhm. I... How about Frosthalm?”

“Frosthalm, huh?”

“Y-Yeah... I always wanted to ride a war hog.” My sentence stunned Arno. For whatever reason. Then he just nodded. It took a while but we made it out of the forest.

“So then. Let’s not waste time... Ha. North it is,” Arno said as we started heading north.

The warm summer breeze was still present. I sighed. Finally. True peace. Not being pursued, threatened, or staying in a shithole. This land is actually very beautiful. And there is no real way to be completely safe.

“How long will it take till we get to Frosthalm? Approximately... Also, you have to show me your new abilities, you have to!” But there is no response.

“Arno?” I looked at him. He was staring off into the distance. I tried to look for what had caught his attention. Then I saw it. There were two figures far in front of us, on a hill.

One short and skinny, the other tall and large.

Chapter 6

STARMAN

“I refuse.”

“What?!”

“They are not enough of a threat. I will not waste my anti-mana on them.”

“Are you joking?! Not enough of a threat? Really? How dare you even speak to me like that?!”

“Hmph,” The beautiful white-haired woman turned around and left.

“Why... WHY?! Ugh! Foolish celestials!...” The woman with the blue skin thought for a moment.

“Celestials... I haven't seen them in millennia. I wonder how are they doing...”

The blue-skinned woman arrived at the kingdom's walls. The sky was pitch black, with a crescent moon in the sky. The woman enters, and the kingdom seems empty. She enters the palace and floats into the throne room.

“Hello,” She speaks in a soft tone. On the throne sits a man. Some would say he's an elf. He has long pointy ears after all. And his skin is pale blue. An ice elf, no? He has a beautiful blue coat. Little orbs orbiting around his head, creating an illusion of a crown. His white metal musket is leaning onto his throne.

“Hello, Cosmo.” The woman speaks. The man looks her way and smiles warmly.

“Her glory. My saint,” Cosmo says as he changes position as he sits on the throne. The woman's eyes shift beside him, on a large, muscular beastman wolf. He kneels and bows when she approaches.

“Hello Ceres.” She says sweetly. Ceres nods as he stands up.

“It's good to see you two again. I see you're kingdom's doing well.” She says and Cosmo nods and stands up from his throne.

“Great Mother, Divine Spirit. Your wish. Is my command.”

“What bothers you?” Cosmo asks with a confident tone.

“Sagittarius... She betrayed my trust! You two are the only ones who can help me!” The woman's voice is filled with drama. Cosmo drops to all fours and softly kisses her feet.

“Tell us! Tell us what needs to be done!” Exclaimed Cosmo.

“Has Sagittarius become faithless?! Do we need to enlighten her?!” Cosmo responds in a similarly dramatic manner.

“No no. You need to go to Nihiltania and find thee who mean to hurt me. Those nonbelievers!” The woman's tone shifted to seriousness. After a few more minutes the conversation between the two comes to an end.

The blue-skinned woman leaves. Cosmo glances at Ceres who immediately understands and pulls out a magnificent dagger from his belt. The crescent saber on his belt wiggles slightly as he does. Then he slashes the air, creating a gateway into Nihiltania.

“Shadowmire was it?” Cosmo asks, standing in front of the portal. Ceres grunts and nods in agreement. Then, they both step through the portal.

“Huh? Oh. It’s you again. █████, was it?”

“Why are you following me?”

“Didn’t you say that nothing matters?”

“I have to admit. I took a liking to you.”

“I’ve realized that eternity feels better with you.”

“...”

“Can I tell you a story?”

“...Okay. I’m listening...”

Once upon a time, in the boundless expanse of the cosmos, there lived a boy named Cassiel and his faithful companion, a celestial dog named Virgil. Together, they traversed the stars, their bond unbreakable even amidst the infinite void.

One fateful day, as they journeyed through the cosmos, Virgil sensed a disturbance in the fabric of reality. With a whimper, he nudged Cassiel, urging him to heed the warning. Ignorant of his companion’s premonition, Cassiel pressed on, unaware of the impending tragedy.

Suddenly, a cosmic anomaly engulfed them, tearing Virgil from Cassiel’s side and leaving him alone in the vast emptiness of space. Frantically calling out for his loyal friend, Cassiel searched the stars in vain, his heart heavy with sorrow.

Days turned into weeks, and Cassiel’s hope waned as he realized Virgil was gone. Consumed by grief and guilt, he wandered aimlessly through the cosmos, haunted by memories of happier times.

In the end, as Cassiel gazed into the abyss, a sense of resignation washed over him. With a heavy heart, he surrendered to the void, knowing he would never see his beloved companion again. And so, in the cold silence of space, both boy and dog drifted into eternity, their spirits forever lost among the stars.

“Oh wow. Wait. Isn’t that a fairy tale? I definitely heard it before”

“Haha! Yes!”

“... You... Laughed?”

“Uhhmm...”

I began riding my horse toward the two figures. Hawk was following close behind. The closer we got, the more of an idea we got of who are we approaching. Now, only a few meters were separating us. The duo hasn’t moved at all in the meantime. Cosmos and Ceres they called themselves.

“Oh wow. Where do I even begin? First of all, I must say. We really aAs I backed up, re counterparts hahaha!” Cosmo laughs.

“And also, you two are two slick bastards. We had to walk all around this place to get ya.” Cosmo continued.

“Who are you people?” I asked.

“Hm? Oh. We are eternal servants of her glory. The Spirit,” Cosmo laughed again.

“We are here to take care of you two. So let’s get it over with,” I frown upon Cosmo’s comment.

“But that would also be boring. So why don’t we make it a little more fun? You knight man Arno, you can face the strongest beastman in the universe. And I will have a little showdown with the little gun boy Hawk. And yes, if you refuse, we’ll just kill you on the spot,” Hawk’s shock is more apparent than mine is. It seems we don’t have a choice. These people. They look out of this world. Not even mentioning how they managed to track us down.

“We agree,” I say, determined to do anything to make it out alive.

“Wonderful! Let’s not drag this out then!” Cosmo exclaims cheerfully before shooting the ground below Hawk. A portal appears and Hawk falls into it. Cosmo does the same before I can even react. The portals close and now it’s just me and the beast towering over me. Ceres stares at me with hatred in his eyes. Since there wasn’t anything to tie the horses to. I tied Hawk’s Nemesis to my Jumong since I knew he wouldn’t move anywhere anyway. I look upon Ceres who brings out his crescent saber and is more than ready to fight. I pull out Spirit Crusher.

“Bring it on devil,” Ceres growls. I don’t say anything. It’s probably time to test out what it means to be ascended. I pounded the ground with my glaive. Large black spikes started emerging from the ground, quickly approaching Ceres. He pulled out the dagger from his belt slashed the air and disappeared. Moments later reappeared behind me.

His next strike was headed for my neck, I tried to dodge but he managed to hit a spike on my helmet. To my horror, his saber cut right through it. As I backed up, I struck his gut with the pommel of my glaive as I backed up.

The two of them stood there, facing each other. Ceres dashed, Arno again slammed the ground with his glaive. A wall of spikes appeared in front of him but Ceres broke right through them. Then a spike emerged right from below Ceres' feet, bruising his paw and canceling his attack.

"Hmph. You aren't the first obesely fat wolf I've fought." Arno mocked the beast. Ceres just grunted as he stared right into his eyes which were now burning with a red glow.

"... At least you have a way to fight back... Ascended mortal."

"Unlike your friend. He's not dead yet. I'm positive Cosmo is having a lot of fun with him," Ceres grinned widely. Arno frowned and raised his glaive once again. Hexagonal slabs appeared and launched Arno forward. Their weapons clashed on impact. Their eyes met in the blade lock.

"Nice toothpick. I didn't expect it to withstand my saber." Ceres laughed and swung his weapon, throwing Arno back. The clash continued for endless minutes. Ceres created a portal with his dagger, the other end appearing behind Arno, luckily he noticed and dodged the attack.

"You are really starting to piss me off!" Now, frustrated Ceres barked. Arno summoned the slabs again and launched himself. Ceres prepared to block the attack when he sensed something. He quickly dodged the oncoming spike from behind him. Arno has lost control. He dug his glaive into the ground, even trying to summon more slabs just to slow down. But he couldn't. The impact broke a bunch of his ribs. Arno coughed up blood as he hit the floor. Ceres stepped over him.

"You've bitten off more than you could chew. Now it's time for your punishment." Ceres pressed a switch on the handle of his saber. The blade collapsed splitting into multiple pieces of the blade connected by a glowing wire.

"Arno, The Ascended Dark Knight. I sentence you to a thousand lashes, which I considered appropriate for the crimes against her glory, The Spirit that you've committed. Is there anything you have to say?" Ceres asked with a serious tone. Arno looked up at him.

"... Fuck you..." Was the last thing Arno could say before Ceres began flogging him, the whip slowly breaking his armor.

“Fifty-four... Fifty-five... Fifty-six...” Ceres was quietly counting. The outer layer of Arno’s armor was now gone.

“I can’t summon spikes anymore... I’m... I’m out of anti-mana...” Arno thought. But there was a way I could restore it. Every ascended mortal can replenish their anti-mana with something, some sort of a resource. For Arno... It was blood. He quickly sat up, going for a punch but then he got struck with the whip right across the face, throwing him against the ground. It was futile. He can’t do anything, he was going to die here.

“One-seventy... One-seventy-two... One-seventy-three...” More and more flog was raining down onto Arno’s chest. “Wait, I think...” Arno had gotten an idea, he focused as much as he could in that painful situation. A tar-colored soul flew out of his chest, it smacked against Ceres’ chest before ricocheting back into Arno’s body.

“What?!”

“How? WHY?!” Arno groaned. Ceres looked at him before he bursted out laughing at his useless attempt.

“Y-You... Haha... Ahh. You thought you could possess me? A celestial? Are you so desperate that you’re losing your common sense?” Ceres never seemed so expressive as he did now. Laughing at the sinner below him, trying anything and everything he could to save himself. Now, Arno was truly without a way out. There was nothing...

“Four-thirty-nine... Four-forty... Four-forty-one...” Arno’s organs were soon going to give out. And with no one to possess in proximity, his soul couldn’t last long on its own. In agony, he looked up to the sky. He saw something in the sky. But when he moved his eyes, it moved as well.

“Four-sixty... Four-sixty-one... Four-sixty-two...” Ceres counted on. The something Arno had seen was now clearly a rune. Which was burning itself onto his cornea and he could see it now, very clearly...

The pain was unbearable. Spikes were growing from under Arno’s skin, fusing with his armor. He screamed like a banshee while Ceres looked on with a shock-filled expression.

“ǎłžæôŸ+ž:žì.ïæĵšçðä?” Ceres croaked. The sky blackened. The crescent moon shined. The colors melted.

“đ∞ǎłžæı≈%,ŧî≈łv...πðķ^ηΣ+, °æz¶ðπř©°đçı´ûš´é°q≈đ∞ǎłžæ+ž!!!”

“...” Ceres screamed maniacally upon the horror.

Hawk was mesmerized by the object. In the corner, he noticed a set of numbers that resembled a date. But they made no sense. He turned to the woman again and said “Uhm, what date is it?” with a slightly confused expression. The woman turned to him again.

“Huuuuuuuh? Honey, it’s the eleventh of September two thousand one! Are you under the influence, honey?” She shifts her big ugly greasy nose. Hawk bent over in his seat, grabbing his head with his hand, now sweating.

“I’m three hundred years in the future!” He whispered to himself.

“This can’t get any worse!” He panted.

Suddenly Cosmo jumped up on his seat back on the plane and started firing into the ground.

“GET THE FUCK DOWN!” He screamed. The plane dipped into a full-on panic. People screamed and cried. Hawk didn’t hesitate and went to grab his rifle when he felt something. He looked at the fat woman beside him. Her pants ripped and a black tentacle flew out and bit down on his arm. It hurt as hell but Hawk managed to pull out a dagger out of his ammo bag and slice the damn thing. As soon as his dagger made contact with it, it let go and he could move freely. The fat woman beside him appeared to be dead so he moved past her into the aisle. Crouching, he began to move to the back where Cosmo was yelling from. But Cosmo noticed him and started raining down bullets in his direction.

“Shit!” Hawk exclaimed as he fell back onto the ground dodging Cosmo’s barrage. On the bottom of one of the seats was a noticeable crack. Hawk touched it before pushing his whole hand through. He snapped it open, it seemed like a new doorway, so he crawled into it.

“Five, four, three...” Cosmo started counting down. Hawk entered the newly created portal.

“Two, One...” When Cosmo finished counting, the plane crashed, but by that time, Hawk was already gone.

Again, I’ve found myself in a new space. This time it was a house and it was pitch dark. I glanced outside the window where a city was sprawling out below me. I quickly realized I was looking at the harbor of Valor. But then a spear tied to a rope split the door in two, digging into the wall above the bed. A masked man entered the room. Without hesitation, I pointed my musket at him, if I didn’t have my prosthetic I doubt I could keep a somewhat steady aim as I did.

The man slowly turned to me, his eye burning in a blood-red color. He stared at me for a moment.

“En Garde!” he exclaimed, and then he exploded into a puddle of blood. Seeping into the wooden floor. I watched it happen with my rifle pointed at the puddle when I heard a bubbling sound behind me. As the moon shined into the dark room I saw a small blood puddle form on the wall beside my head. Then it clicked. I dashed forward as a spear flew out of the puddle. But I was far from danger. A horde of bloody puddles began forming on every surface in the room. The door, I ran to it but it was locked. Time was running out as I was loading in a single explosive round. Bang! The lock on the door flew apart. Just as I jumped out into the hallway, the small room was filled with spears.

I’m starting to lose my mind. It might have been hours or years, I can’t be sure anymore. I think he got bored with me, cause I’ve been in this black void for some time now.

I woke up on the plains, quickly remembering where I was. When I sat up beside me was a gorey mush with white fur scattered all around. That was what remained of the celestial. On the ground glew a dagger. It clearly stood out in between all the blood and meat. I got up and grabbed it. After a long while, I finally found out its purpose and that was to create gateways. When I pressed the button on the hand and slashed the air in front of me, it opened a portal, on the other side I saw Cosmo, slowly making his way to an empty throne, I didn’t hesitate. I raised my glaive and I lunged forward into the portal. He didn’t even realize what happened when the blade of my glaive tore his spine, coming out the other end as his blood soiled his throne. He fell and it was over within moments. The throne room where I now found myself was nothing comparable to what I had seen before. It all seemed out of this world. The air suddenly got much much colder. Even though one would expect the palace to be in absolute chaos by now, this place was desolate. The sound of my metal boots was bouncing off the tall halls. As I was traversing a corridor, I got a glimpse of the outside world. I was greeted by a pitch-black sky. A crescent moon was shining, but the longer I gazed at it, the more it shifted. I spent a good dozen minutes looking at it. By the end, it morphed into a huge sphere that covered a good portion of the sky and it took me a good minute to come back to reality and resume wandering around the alien palace. The gardens lacked any greenery, instead, they were filled with blocky structures and weirdly shaped statues.

My wandering eventually led me back to the throne room. Cosmo's corpse still lying there. The white musket he had onto him, now lay beside and it seemed it was resonating. I took hold of it and noticed a digit display on the side, which could be switched. I realized that Cosmo's musket must work similarly to Ceres' dagger. With the last used combination of digits, I fired the musket and created a doorway. I stepped through. A familiar place. A black void. On the ground in front of me, he lay.

I looked up at him, ruined.

"Y-You really got them?" escaped my mouth.

"Yes. Let's go now." Arno responded. We walked back into the palace and we talked while Arno was trying to figure out how to get back.

"... You are so strong. I can't believe that you got both of them," I said. Arno mumbled "Yeah" and he continued tweaking with the white musket. But slowly the musket disintegrated. However, confusing it may seem. I was startled for a moment before Arno pulled out Ceres' dagger. The dagger, compared to the musket, didn't require anything else than a place the user had imagined. But it was also comparably weaker, the musket could create a sort of "pocket dimensions" while the dagger couldn't. Arno slashed the air, and we were back in the plains of Valeria. The dagger broke as well...

ALL GUNS BLAZING

The duo would mourn the loss of the two weapons, but their new find took up all of their attention. Jumong, Arno's horse, is tied to a pile of horse's bones. They exchanged looks of surprise and confusion.

“멍청한 인간! 어디 있었어?! 몇 년이 지났나요? 이 썩은 뇌야!” Jumong barked out at Arno.

“Shut up you stupid horse! Don't you realize I can't understand a shit you say!” Arno yelled back. After a good moment of deep thinking, Arno got an idea, he activated his apex predator ability, the target being a newborn messiah, the horse died some time ago, but not long enough for the bones to rot and Jumong does not require anything to live on. And then, click. Arno got a lock on. He swiftly spun around to Hawk.

“I got it! The time must've passed, The Holy Child was born!” Arno shouted at Hawk, who was bewildered. Arno then stopped cheering, he didn't notice it the whole time, but Hawk's hair was much longer and unkept now, and his height was also different, a good amount taller than before.

“Seems you got caught up in this time mess as well.” Arno laughed at him. Hawk pouted and asked, “Whatever, it's only like five or six years, not as it matters anyway when we're gonna, you know, do the thing.”

They both mounted Arno's horse and began galloping to where Arno's instincts would lead them.

“So, where are we headed? Approximately,” Hawk asked.

“We are headed right toward Sandora, so that seems to be our final destination.”

“Sandora? I've never been there.”

“It's basically a huge desert,” Hawk nodded in acknowledgment. It all seemed so rushed. The celestials messed with the time, unintentionally making the wait more bearable. Hawk was most visibly affected, not only his looks but also his demeanor. Quieter, not a bit of the past spark and determination. His prosthetic was still fitting since it could be adjusted. Back when Arno was trying to figure out how Cosmo's musket works, Hawk noticed something glistening on Cosmo's corpse, it was a charm with a little reticle. It was the marksman's charm, a magical item. Hawk pocketed it and inspected it when he was sitting behind Arno on the horse.

“... How long will it take? The road.” Hawk mumbled.
“Weeks. At least. We’ll also have to gear up before we go.” Arno said and Hawk responded with unintelligible mumble. On the first day, they galloped through the plains, the city of Aboran could be seen in the faraway. And they rode on. A few days later, the two of them arrive at the city of Zeinheim, central Valeria. As they wander around the streets, there’s a stage on the main square. A banner reading “New Seraffel Republic Movement” with a young man yelling out babblings. Arno glanced at them as they passed by and just shook his head. “What a bunch of idiots. How could they know how Seraffel really was,” he mumbled. Hawk noticed but didn’t say anything. They had spent the night there, gathering resources. Food, ammo, even explosives. Arno got hold of a repeating pistol. He figured out he could power up his shots with his ascended power. For the last bit of gold they had left, they bought a horse for Hawk to ride, Arch Nemesis. The judgment day was rapidly approaching.

Weeks later, we walk through the rough desert. A walled city is slowly approaching us. The sun was burning hot, beating down on us. Arno’s new red cape was flowing in the wind, light barely reflecting off his black armor. Eyes burning red with anticipation. We approached the huge wooden gate, no guards in sight. The silence was deafening. Arno got down from his horse and looked at me.

“Go tie down your horse somewhere around, in case we have to leave immediately and somewhere secluded,” Arno said in half-whisper. I nodded and followed his orders. Then he walked up to the gate and knocked on it, hard, his gauntlet ripping out wooden splinters. To my surprise, the gate opened. I walked beside the dark horseman. We found ourselves on the main street, no one around, dead quiet. We slowly stepped into the middle of the market area which was just beyond the gate, further splitting into more streets.

“The sinners had come as the prophecy foretold. The city of Markhatat sentences you to death by gunfire for crimes against The Spirit and The Holy Child. Fire!” A voice sounded throughout the streets and a legion of gunfighters emerged from the windows and balconies.

“Shit!” I screamed Arno’s spikes sprung up from the ground before me as a firestorm of bullets came our way. Arno readied his glaive but just then the bombs began lading with the gate shutting behind us. The load of bullets began to dent Arno’s armor, so he looked at me and pointed toward the houses.

“Go! Take cover!” He screamed. With his horse, he began scaling the building thanks to his spikes which were popping out under each of the horse’s steps. He jumped up onto the balcony, slaughtering anyone in his way. I bolted for the nearest building, breaking the wooden door as I rammed into it. I fell onto the ground in the cold room. As I was trying to get up, I heard a quiet sob, my musket’s barrel flew out in the direction of the sob to be met with a woman holding a small child, petrified as they stared at me. They weren’t a threat so I ignored them, but then a man ran into the room, with a single-shot pistol pointed at me, unlike them, he was a threat. But this man, it quickly came to my mind that he was protecting his family in the first place, The Holy Child in second. I placed all of my strength into my leg and I sprung up into the air, flipping upside down, which made the man hesitate, thinking he would miss. While head down in the air, I aimed and shot, hitting the last digit of the man’s index finger, and making him drop the gun.

The man and the woman screamed, and the child cried. I ran past the man, up the stairs, and to the window. Peeking outside, the walls were covered in blood. The houses shaking under the pressure of the spikes springing up from them. A bullet broke the window beside me.

“He’s inside! There!” A man shouted. I returned fire, killing one of the shooters, before getting overwhelmed. I could hear the men flooding the downstairs, so I charged at a window, jumping through it, into the next building. The glass shards flew all over the wooden floor as I landed with a loud thud. But there was no time to waste. The men were onto me. They surrounded the broken window in the other building, now ready to fire. I spun my musket toward them and fired. One fell and I booked it down the stairs. Leaping down the stairs, the cabinets and shelves blasted apart from the rainstorm of bullets. I sled down the stairs on my stomach, hitting my chin on the floor. I was out of breath at this point. The sound of a gun’s cocking brought me back to reality. Ogling up, one of the holy fighters stood upon me, I gazed at his barrel and it gazed back at me. This is the end.

“Huff huff. Almighty, I’m exhausted.”

“Hmm. That’s weird, like as if you still had a connection with the solid world.”

“Yeah... How far do we still have to go?”

“It’s just around here.”

The two walk out onto a cliffside, overlooking valleys and the colossal mountain, which hosts a city surrounding a pristine cathedral. They are at the top of the world.

“Woah... Are we still in Nihiltania?”

“Yes indeed.”

“...Wait, where is this? I’ve never seen anything like this.”

“This is the capital of Feigrveröld. Sól.”

“Fei- What? Sól? Where in Nihiltania is this?!”

“This is the future, my dear friend.”

“██████...”

I pulled out my glaive from one of the corpses that were now engulfing the streets. That was when I heard a commotion coming from a house and so I approached the front door, opening it slowly. I saw a tall man, standing above a smaller more familiar face. It was a great time to test out my new toy. From my belt, I unstrapped a repeating pistol that was resting in my holster. His head found itself in between my iron sights, then boom. He fell down on Hawk. I wanted to pull the corpse off him, but to my surprise, Hawk had no problem getting from under it. But then I realized that he had grown quite a bit. When he stood up, he glanced at me.

“Thanks, I guess,” He mumbled. I gave him a stern look, to no avail cause of my helmet being on, but I think he got the idea.

“We should get moving,” I said.

“There are still more of them in the next house over,” as he said that, the doors busted open, with the group flooding the house. I pounded the ground with my glaive without hesitation. Black spikes shot out of the floor and walls, impaling every single one of them.

“Now, we can move on,” I said to Hawk with a contented tone. We walked out into the bloody streets. It was as if death itself made its way through here. Jumong ran over, now all three of us walking deeper into the city, side by side.

The sun beamed, strong as ever. The discomfort of the heat left me a long time ago. Hawk has been looking at me weirdly since we reunited. When I looked down I saw that my armor was more brownish color now, from all the blood. The streets were now eerily quiet. It seemed that it was over, but I knew that this was only the beginning.

And my theory was soon proven when there was a fire burning in an alley from around the corner. I halted Hawk with my hand on his chest.

“Wait,” I whispered. There was something off about the flame. It was not an ordinary fire. A figure emerged from it, about the same height as Hawk. It stepped out of the blaze. My eyes widened, followed by Hawk’s as Pyra appeared in front of us. With a scar on the forehead, from where the bullet exited her skull.

“...” She didn’t even say anything, she was just seething like a maniac.

“Shit,” I thought. I summoned a slab under Hawk that launched him up into the air and onto the rooftops. This was a good call, since Pyra let out a manic scream, enveloping whole streets and alleys with a fiery flood. But my armor withstood.

“I’LL JUST BURN YOU LIKE THE LAST TIME!” she cried. Hawk was already in position, aiming at her head.

“NOT THIS TIME! YOU LITTLE SHIT!” She yelled again, flipping her whole body around diagonally and launching a fireball at Hawk.

I almost died again right there, my hand was trembling as I looked at my prosthetic which had melted but luckily, it still worked with no problem. Meanwhile, Arno was summoning his spikes left and right. Pyra danced around them, she then reached out her burning hand.

“Burn,” she said angrily.

“Wait! Pyra, honey,” Arno said. Pyra seemed to be taken aback a little and hesitated.

“Huh, trying to talk your way out of this now, huh?”

“Pyra please, it doesn’t have to end like this,”

“Haha! You are pathetic. You manipulative piece of shit,” she chuckled.

“I was your fucking substitute all along. Does that boy know he’s another brick in the wall?”

“...” Arno remained silent.

“You used me. You use everyone to push your agenda. To reach your desires, and if someone is not good for your use, you throw them away. Like you did with me, like you will with the boy.”

“I’m not here to defend The Holy Child, I’m here to punish you. To kill the demon you truly are.”

“... I still love you Pyra,” Arno said with a drop of sorrow.

“Pft. You truly are pathe-” A gunshot rang out. Pyra hit the cobblestone road.

“I got her! I got one of the sinners!” A man from afar yelled out.

Arno stood and watched as a bomb landed beside Pyra. Moments later, she was blown apart, and even more blood now covered the path. Without another word, Arno walked past her.

“I don’t understand, didn’t the world end?”

“Yes, but it doesn’t mean that there will be no future.”

“...”

“This is the vision of the future.”

“So, what does this mean?”

“Nobody knows, probably one herself. I assume we’ll have to see.”

“Herself? You mean-”

“Yes. Her.”

“...”

The two left the cliffside.

“This is it,” I said.

“If the child’s gonna be anywhere it’s here.” I continued as we stood in front of the Final Bastion. Hawk prepared his musket. The gate of the Final Bastion opened. Out walked the legendary, Bat’Lazar. The warrior from the Sandorian tales. A giant man, wielding a mace. He grinned. In the nightmarish fashion, he began walking to us, with no words, a strong grip on his weapon. Hawk pointed his musket at him and began firing with no effect. I, on my horse, charged the giant man. A clank rang out as our weapons clashed. When I sat on my horse, we were roughly the same height. His next swing went for Jumong, smacking his head. But the horse barely reacted. Explosions started appearing on the giant’s upper body as Hawk began to shower him with bullets.

Arno ran up to him, slicing his arm, creating a relatively deep cut. But Bat’Lazar only snickered. He began to make his way to me. With his mace raised high, he followed it up by vertically swinging it at me. In an instant, I rolled out of harm’s way. Arno raised up his glaive, spinning it around in hand as his horse stood up on its hind legs. The glaive’s velocity began to peak when Arno struck his nape. The giant fell. I looked at Arno, it was finally time. We stepped closer to the entrance of the Final Bastion. But then a brigade of the holy fighters emerged from balconies and the bastion’s doors closed in our faces. And worst of all, the giant began to rise up again, a fleshy tentacle emerging from the wound that Arno had made.

Slowly it contorted and transformed until it was a huge arm. The holy fighters meanwhile had prepared multiple Hellstorm repeaters (cylindrical repeating machine guns). High power, high speed.

“Last chance sinners. Surrender and you may receive a proper execution,” the giant’s rumbling voice sounded, calm and deep as the Middle Sea.

“Try me,” Arno barked. Then he tapped the ground and his spikes consumed me. I was in an unbreakable shell.

I stood there, just me against the giant and dozens of more people, armed to the teeth, with the newest weapons available. I jolted and began running along the walls of the bastion’s yard. All of the guns started blazing. The giant was following me, using his huge meaty back arm to boost himself forward. The smell of gunpowder was overwhelming. I trailed my glaive along the wall. The weapon’s blade scraped the walls creating a harsh scraping sound. Meanwhile, on the balconies, spikes began shooting out of the ground, taking out the gunners. Any that made it through, I shot down with my repeating pistol, semi-successfully. The giant launched at me and my horse stopped dead in its tracks, I pointed my glaive at him, and a swarm of spikes outgrew from behind me. And Bat’Lazar impaled himself on them. I was baptized by his blood when I tore him to shreds. Hawk’s shell crumbled and he stepped out, looking around.

“Animalistic as always I see,” he smirked very subtly.

“Shut up Hawk, it’s inside. Let’s finish this.” I said. The two of us entered The Final Bastion.

“ ... ”

“...Oh, there you are! I searched for you for years!”

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

“... You never were very talkative. But you could at least greet me.”

“ ... ”

“Okay, that does it!”

“Await the end alone if you will.”

The two crawled through the mighty bastion, killing anyone who stood in their way. The end was imminent. After searching through the whole complex, they met up on the roof of the monumental structure. Hawk stared Arno in the eyes with a tense look

“IT ISN’T HERE!” Hawk barked.
“FUCK! Where is it?!” He continued.
“Calm down, hold on for a moment,” Arno closed his eyes, channeling his tracking. Hawk stepped around nervously. Until, he saw a caravan, in the distance, going in the opposite direction of them.
“Arno.” Hawk bumped into Arno, poking his arm on the spikes as a result. But he remained silent.
“Arno!” Hawk exclaimed.
“There!” Arno pointed his glaive on the caravan. There was a moment of silence. After exchanging a glance, they rushed to the city exit. When they ran out the gate, Arno grabbed and threw Hawk onto Arch Nemesis, which was leashed outside the desert city.

The sun shined, now stronger than ever. The desert wind breezed the sandy dunes. The living hood of local sand creatures was disturbed by the caravan rolling through with special Sandorian carriages that carried a load of fighters, ammo, and The Holy Child. Besides Sandorian horses pulling the wagons, multiple of the fighters were mounting Saharstriders, the iconic Sandorian bipedal lizards. Hawk’s horse was surprisingly fast at full speed, keeping up with Arno. Slowly but surely, they were approaching the caravan. Arno’s predator senses growing stronger. The fighters on the Saharstriders slowed down and began moving strategically before opening fire. Hawk raised his musket and began taking them out one by one. His prosthetic helped his aim immensely. Bodies began falling and slowly disappearing in the distance. Arno took out his repeating pistol and started firing on the fighters as well. The chase continued until only four carriages remained. Three covering the one at the very front. Hawk prepared his explosive rounds. First, he took shots at the tracks and wheels of the wagon. They were sturdy but eventually, he disabled one of the carriages. Then more bullets came their way. Hawk maneuvered his horse, trying to dodge the oncoming bullet hell. Arno on the other hand rode in a straight line, not phased at all. He dropped his glaive down, then swung it against the sand. A huge spike impaled one of the carriages, ruling it out. Two were left, and now the defense was shallow and weak.

Arno waved at Hawk, signaling him to go from the left. Hawk nodded and sped up. Galloping through the desert, the sand was flying up from under the horse’s hooves. Arno began firing at the front carriage, making the defensive one swing to the right, giving Hawk a firing opportunity. And Hawk fired his explosive round, right in the back of the front wagon.

The explosive round blew open an opening in the back and Hawk saw them. A young woman, holding a newborn child with eyes so blue they shined like stars, wrapped in a rough cloth, there was no mistaking it.

“This is it. One more shot and all suffering will end. Finally,” Hawk thought to himself. But Hawk’s horse began to slow down from exhaustion. It is either now or never. He raised his musket one last time when the skies opened up into a deep cosmos.

Sagittarius emerged, her bow already drawn. Arno watched in horror as they were to be evaporated in the next few seconds. He glances at Hawk, riding just a few dozen meters away from him. They were dead. And there would be no redemption...

But Arno didn’t want to let all of this go to waste. He raised his glaive one more time. He swung it. A dark spike shot through Arch Nemesis, stopping him instantly and making Hawk fly off and land in the sand. Arno looked back, seeing Hawk at the brink of passing out from pure terror. The cosmic arrow landed right on top of him in a great explosion that sent a strong shockwave. The strength of it lifted Arno and his horse into the air, sending them flying forward. The time seemingly slowed down as Arno was gliding through the air, below him was the defensive carriage, and in front was the main wagon. There was a chance, he tightened his grip on the glaive. He flew through the air at high speed, right at the opening Hawk made. Like a thrown spear, he landed, piercing both the mother and The Holy Child. The wagons crashed, and just moments later, Arno crawled out. He kneeled there in the sand, looking up into the bright sky. It’s over.

But the brightness was instantly exchanged for a total and utter blackness, the dark void. The Spirit was there, but no words came out of her mouth, gold flames engulfed her. It seemed that she was trying to resist the pain but soon she couldn’t bear it anymore. In the most terrifying painful voice, she screeched, trying to desperately put out the flames to no avail. Her movements were spastic and full of panic, unrecognizable from her usual demeanor. She began scratching and tearing the skin on her chest, wanting to die already to get relief from the unfathomable pain. She looked at Arno one more time.

“This will never end. And you, you will suffer the same,” she managed to say in the most calm tone she could manage to get out before she ripped her own heart out of her chest.

The void dispersed. The continuation of life in Nihiltania was no more. Arno kneeled there for a few more minutes, expressionless. Before he stood up and retrieved his glaive, he found his horse and wandered off, till the end of time.

AT THE END OF THE RAINBOW

Fifteen years before the birth of The Holy Child. Shadow Harbor, Shadowmire. I got sidetracked by this point. I realized it one morning when I woke up in a big soft bed. The sheets were silky and white, and onto me was clinging a smaller, skinnier framed body. A girl with red hair, which she brushed off of her face and looked up at me with her big dumb orange eyes. “Hihi, it’s cute when you’re trying to form a thought,” unexpectedly, this came from her. We must’ve resembled a mentally handicapped household sometimes. I flicked her forehead, which resulted in her usual ranting. She had a very selective sense of humor. Now that I’m thinking about it, she might have been schizophrenic, but I’m not sure. But it was that day that I just left. I took my equipment and my horse. It wasn’t what I wanted, Pyra was an interesting person and I really liked her, but if I told her that I was ending our gig, she would’ve killed me right there and made sure my soul went back to the realm of the dead. So I just left, left Shadowmire, and went back to Valeria.

“And here we are. No more of your nonsensical questions after this.”

The two of them traverse the dark void until they arrive at the epicenter.

The egg. Light blue glowing, pulsating egg.

“W-What is that?!”

“Spirit’s egg.”

“She knew she had it coming.”

“I-I...”

The one hugged the other.

“Let’s await the end, together, just the two of us...”

“While we still can.”

I'm walking at the end of time, there's nothing living anymore besides myself. As Hawk would say, nobody else has to suffer now, only I, for am I destined to suffer the consequences. This whole place is one huge desert now, the whole north is frozen over and I'm left to wander. I killed myself a long time ago, but my soul was now bound to this armor. Jumong didn't seem to mind, actually he might have been enjoying this. Now, it appears that I will spend a lot more time here, maybe I'll never leave.

...INTERMISSION...

About two hundred and sixty years before the birth of The Holy Child. I've arrived at the Hill of Mirrors, about four kilometers from The Elven Kingdom of High Trees. It's a sunny day... It also has been roughly a week since the Soulwardens stopped pursuing me. Forty fucking years of no sleep. But... Now we can meet again. Jumong mumbled something to himself as we approached a small cabin on the hill. I stopped on the top and I dismounted my horse. I grabbed my dark helmet and hung it on my horse's saddle. Then I tied Spirit Crusher to the bags. I turned around and slowly walked toward the cabin. The grass, so soft below my cold boots. After all those years of persecution, I could finally rest.

On the cabin's porch, sat a little figure on a rocking chair. Back and forth, slowly. I walked onto the wooden deck, looking down at the little thing. It was a small familiar green face. She slowly looked up.

"Hello there... Hm? I know you, do I?" She asked in a soft and nostalgic tone.

"Yes, Lulla," I said. Her droopy eyes widened subtly.

"Blade. So it is you... You look nothing like what I remember. So, you aren't being followed anymore I assume," She continued.

"Yeah... Lulla, I'm sorry. Sorry that I couldn't be here for you when you needed me," I said, with a little sorrow.

"The elves took good care of me. And you were there, on the 303th day." She smiled.

"Hah. I guess so. But I wanted so much... To give you the life you deserved." I went on.

"I did too. But there's nothing we can do now. Blade I-"

"Arno. My real name is Arno Mannheim." I told her.

"Arno... I'll die soon, but I'll never forget you," She said.

"... I'll make her pay. That sadistic whore!" I growled with a hint of sob.

I sat down beside her on the ground.
“Arno... How could you make her pay? She is the almighty,”
“I don’t know, I-I really have no clue,”
“... Maybe if you could ascend...”
“How would I even do that?”
“Well... You know, I still do have the dragonslayer blood running in my veins,”
I looked at her, surprised.
“... No Lulla, that’s out of the question!” I proclaimed.
“Haha... I love you, Arno, thanks to you I’m here today, I’ll let the elves preserve my blood and lock it behind a dragonslayer rune,” she reached out her little wrinkly hand to me. I did too until our palms met. The back of my hand glowed with a red dragonslayer rune.
“Come and retrieve it from the royal tomb, when your all other ways fail...”
We looked at each other for a moment before we shared a hug. I stayed there for the next week and the week after, because Lulla had passed before I left. Maybe this was also done intentionally by The Spirit, just to spite me even more.

But that doesn’t matter now, nothing really matters anymore and that is the end of my story...

DARK KNIGHT
THE END