

REBORN

A TALE OF SECOND SKINS



JRW CONWAY

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To my sister,
for nodding along

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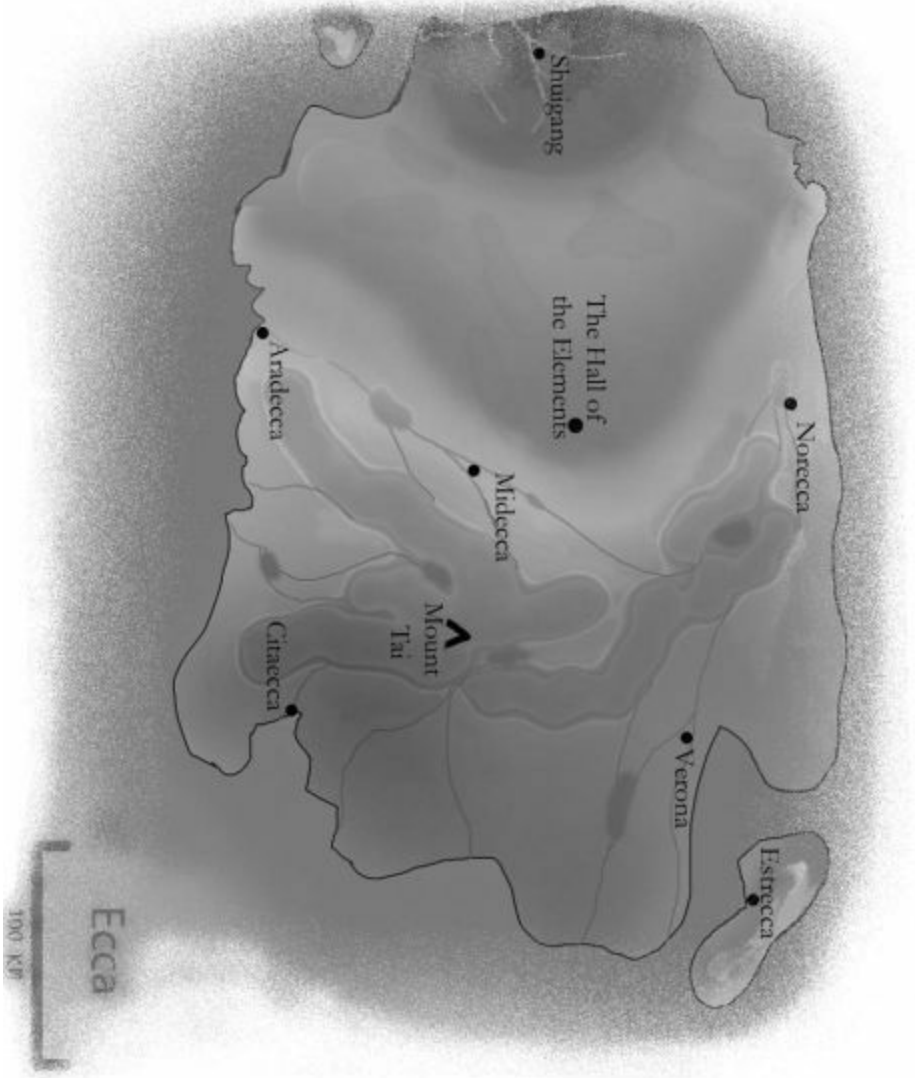
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Shuigang

The Hall of
the Elements

Norecca

Midecca

Mount
Tai

Verona

Estraeca

Andecca

Cinaecca

Ecca

100 KM

1 Rebirth

I awoke breathing heavily. My mouth was dry and muscles tense. I could still see the images of battles long past, flashing before my eyes.

A glittering sword of amethyst steel and a fiery purpose sent innumerable soldiers to their deaths. Elemental beings clawed their way free of the earth and fought Humans for the right of the land. Crops withered at the demons passage. Their feral eyes saw only a sack of blood and bone, to be devoured after the satisfying action of watching the life escape from its eyes. Unnaturally long claws projected from segmented hands of stone skin. Like the chitinous exoskeleton of an insect, cracks in this grey armour widened as the creatures flowed forward, revealing a glowing red beneath the surface. Daylight flickered as the sun was covered by the evil magic brought forth by the sorcerers that were my target.

Terror drove the Human soldiers on. If they did not die today, their families would die tomorrow. When all hope drained from the air, the amethyst sword would sweep in and with its green glowing malachite counterpart, tear a swath of death through the opposing forces. Feeling the energy of this passing, the soldiers would fight harder. Their yellow and red eyed foes paused for a second too long with each passing of the amethyst sword and cold steel now adorned many of their backs. Yellow teeth sought the bringer of this second death, but the soldiers moved on quickly, learning to leave the demon to find its way back to the underworld in its own good time. Other fights required their untrained attention.

The whirlwind of green and purple continued to light its way across the battlefield, searching for the sorcerers who had brought forth the forces of darkness and covered the sun with their evil. Finally, it found a triad of men with arms held to the sky. One turned to it, smiling, as if at some private joke. Diamond veined sapphire eyes turned to face, not the whirlwind, but my own eyes. Me.

Feeling their presence leave my own, I made to curl up into the foetal position, to feel the warmth of my body surround me. Something was wrong, my arms were the right length, but far more muscular. My quilt was shredded. Too strong legs thrashed, ripping free of their material enclosure.

Fear would not allow me to focus on any single detail, but the conglomerate of all. The splintered wood of my bed, thrown chaotically around the room; shards of timber scattered in my sanctuary. The bed slats had fallen to the ground. Somehow, gravity had led the mattress in a coordinated attempt to keep me comfortable through the night, having dropped it carefully on the ground. Destruction was not excluded from my possessions. Burned books and shattered childhood memories now decorated the carpet with their chaos.

I could feel the material of my purple and green quilt cover, interlaced with the white of my

quilt. Focusing on this sensation, I dragged my mind bodily back to a somewhat stable state. Gripping the amethyst and malachite bracelet at my wrist and closing my eyes, I concentrated on my fear and sent it through me into the stones, performing an exercise that calms as only a placebo can.

Ignoring the destruction wrought upon my room, I wobbled to the miraculously untouched mirror hung on my closed door. Relieved at avoiding a heptad of bad luck, I examined my re-birth.

It's odd to get what you wish for. My first thought was to the waste of money the herbal oil, which tasted like wanting to throw-up, had been. Yet, it magically cleared my back of those accursed red dots that appeared in accompaniment to the unlucky adolescent. The purchase appeared redundant in the light of my currently movie-star-clear skin.

This thought was rapidly replaced by the shock of finding a well sculpted six-pack adorning my abdomen and my arms twice their former width. My legs felt stable, more correct, but wrong to their nineteen years of faithful service.

Feeling defiled and out of place, I covered my face with too strong hands. Nothing was right, but it all felt correct! BAH! Expecting to wake, after a deft slap to the face, I attempted the act upon myself. Embarrassingly, I missed on the first try, my arms being other than expected.

With a sigh, I decided to test this 'new' skin. Searching my room for underwear or at least some pants, I wondered at how they were removed during the night. This thought was quickly dismissed as ridiculous. Compared to the removal of my brain and replacement in an unfamiliar analogue, underwear removal was quite trivial.

Donning a new set of boxers and assaying my male member for growth, I was sourly disappointed. Crossing my fingers, I hoped I was dead on average, as was usually the case. Finding some loose fitting cargo pants and a white top, I finished dressing.

Looking in the mirror once again, I saw the one true change to my face. My eyes were no longer their original colour, but the purest amethyst purple. My hair remained the same colour as yesterday and was understandably messed from the night's antics. Even structural dimensions remained within similar parameters; broadish shoulders, a largish straight nose and largish feet. But, no longer could I utilise my average features to blend into a group. Something I could not fathom had changed.

Unlatching the bolt to my window and leaving the mess in my room, I ran as far as I could from my former sanctuary. Not puffing, I gazed at my crystal clear surroundings. No longer were my eyes a burden to see through. Glasses could not aid me in seeing the, dare I say, 'dappled autumn morn', in any greater clarity.

I continued to run the broken concrete paths of the mountainous region where I lived. Moving swiftly, I passed the confused green trees, still clinging to the desire for sun and the orderly twigs that dropped their leaves prematurely, as if to get an early night. As I ran, a profound feeling of oneness consumed me.

Approaching one of the reserves dotted around this country suburbia, I moved towards the sound of birds. I could hear the bewildered crowing and ominous hooting of the transitional creatures, waking or sleeping at dusk. Looking to the red sky I could see clouds competing with the leaves for the multiple hues of red the Human eye could perceive. A pit formed in my gut at the bad omen.

I came to rest at a stream I often rode to on my bike. I looked into the clear water and saw a flash of green. My eyes darted behind me and I heard a chorus of long slow in-taking of breath. A cacophony

of noise suddenly flooded my ears, with one clear message, "A Druid has returned. Finally, a different topic to climate change!"

A long sucking noise, not unlike those heard on sci-fi TV shows, often ending in a resounding POP, was heard and the voices were replaced by the chirping and shrieking of the creatures in the reserve. All of a sudden, there was too much information present to process. The half-heard voices, the green flashes, the cool morning wind rushing past and the rising of the sun casting its warm light upon my unfamiliar form. Remembering the tactics of a social recluse, I made a mumbled excuse to the nearest tree and deftly departed the psychological danger.

Leaving the grove, I returned to the path on which I had come and realised how ridiculous it was to have apologised to a tree. The sun was past the horizon now and through all the confusion, I realised I might be late for my ten am lecture. Attending this regular event was suddenly of intense value to me. It was a chance to affirm the normality that was escaping my current situation.

As I began to walk - more of an awkward hobble at first - I realised just how far I had come. The distance would have taken at least twenty minutes by bike. Avoiding another hole in the footpath, I tried to look as if I was out for my usual stroll, blending with the joggers and dog walkers that occupied this formerly unknown hour of the morning.

Of course, I didn't have a usual stroll. So, I was looked upon with curious aversion. This aversion was likely due to my messed, dirty and rather large appearance. "scuse me, have you got the time?" I asked a frightful looking woman with a dog more white fluff than animal.

An almost disgusted set of eyes looked down the bridge of a snobbish nose. The lady eventually addressed me with a haughty air of superiority often present when a youth speaks to a watch repairer, "It was twenty minutes past seven when I left the house. I imagine it is approaching eight now."

"Thank you kindly, dear lady," I mockingly replied with a bow and a tip of an invisible hat. The hour was drawing nearer that my presence should be felt on the bus into the city. So, I choose to ignore the stares of the remaining morning people and ran the remainder of the distance home, hoping to still have time to ready myself and catch the bus.

I was careful not to be seen by my father, as I walked around to the back of the house. He would leave for work about now, if the snob had told me true. I walked past the wheelie bins to the back lawn. Flanked by a small yard and forest beyond, the house felt quite isolated. That was until the neighbours cut loose on the weekend, sloshing a few back.

The torn curtains from my room could be seen blowing out the open window. So, I clamoured back into the room and closed and locked the glass panel behind me.

Surveying the destruction for a second time, it appeared less shocking and the damage was mostly superficial. The bed was never going to stand again, but the mattress was in good condition, probably more comfortable for the indentation of my body now present in its springy surface. My computer monitor was miraculously intact, seeing the shards had struck almost everything else.

Looking again in my mirror, I realised my eyes had reverted back to their usual colour. Yet, green and purple liquid could be seen moving through the depths, like oil spilt in the ocean. The amethysts I kept on my desk attracted my attention. They too were moving, shifting, as if driven by an unseen force. I pocketed the stones and, feeling a grumbling in my stomach, decided I best find something to eat before I left.

Grabbing my already packed bag, I ascended the wooden stairs to the kitchen. Making my usual

bowl of cereal, I went to the oil-that-tastes-like-throwing-up and laughed. I quickly silenced my insanity however, expecting to be looking for hair on the palm of my hand soon enough. Or was the hair what made me insane. I always fell for that confusing joke in primary school.

Quickly downing the cereal and sculling a glass of water, I ignored the voice in my head which told me it was a poor way to hydrate. My tongue picked the larger bits of food from my teeth before they were brushed in the bathroom near the kitchen.

The cream walls, white roof, pale basin and paper-white-white tiles of the bathroom all made for such little interest that I could no longer ignore the mirror in front of the basin. Seeing this analogue of my former self, I unconsciously paused in my usually vigorous brush. It was my jaw, but slightly squarer. My nose, but slightly more streamlined. Clear skin had replaced the acne blasted surface of past years and my ears had fallen more central to my head.

Realising my lapse, I hurriedly rinsed my mouth, retrieved my bag from the hall where it was unceremoniously thrown and left the familiar home of my former self. I couldn't miss the bus to normality, the crazy train was far too near for comfort.

I quickly followed a gravel road to which my house commuted. This road appeared darker than usual. It seemed unlikely to be the light of this relatively cloudless day. Maybe it was because my new eyes could discern each piece of gravels shadow, without the need for glasses. Too much close up work had led to my short-sightedness, as so often seems to be the case in the developed world. Where we develop the ability to get a job in this confusing society, but lose other abilities with this goal achieved.

The details displayed before me on this relatively cloud free morning were wonderfully clear. The weather was cold enough to wear pants, but not too cold to need a jumper. Trees changed from day to day and falling leaves left the smell of their successive decay. This mingled with the familiar sounds of the birds and insects, chatting amongst themselves. Like travelling to another country, they speak their own tongue with privacy from ignorant tourists. But, somehow, this morning I knew they were talking of my passing.

The road was forested with deciduous trees and interspersed between these trees were small enclaves of civilisation, made more noticeable by the paved driveways and small bushes lining these routes. My house was not far down the main dirt road. I could see a bitumen surface coalesce just out of sight, with a bus stop decorating the side of this sealed symbol of civilisation. The yellow pole labelled *hail* was my destination.

Hailing a bus destined for the city and my similarly located university, I smirked at my continued confusion at the term hail. Remembering English lessons from years gone by, a Cockney accent suddenly shouted in my mind, 'Hail, it is I'.

Stepping onto the hailed bus, I bit my tongue so as not to announce ones presence in a similar manner to that of my Cockney accented mental companion. Looking down the corridor for free window seats, one was spotted mid-bus and hurriedly taken.

Arriving at the university, I say 'the' because Aradecca was only allotted one, being the small Southern capital of Ecce. I walked down a straight-and-narrow road, a road much the same as the others to be walked. Yet, this road in particular led me to a similarly straight-and-narrow lecture

theatre, my destination. So, I walked this path. Travelling with my usual aversion to the enclosed, people ridden paths dotted about the university.

Staring at the brick buildings which enclosed the road, I found their former security lifted. Now that I knew of what changes could occur in a single night. My new legs felt too nimble in each step, but an ever growing confidence in these unfamiliar appendages began to build in me.

I found myself flexing my too-large hands and cracking my foreign fingers in a nervous habit I had failed to banish. I no longer had to compensate for my slightly longer left leg and awkward appearance. To wake reborn seems a holy thing, to be accompanied by death prior. I suppose what they say about a good night's sleep is true.

Day-dream-walking must be a major statistic for some people's sudden and unexpected removal from this world. Hit as they unwittingly crossed a busy T-junction, headphones in ears, comfortable in their bubble of musical separation.

Realising the contradiction in my thoughts, I shook my mind to clarity and ignored the odd looks from passers-by and classmates alike. The students weren't the only thing that told of the fact I was not on the art student side of the university. On the engineering and sciences, not even the bricks of each building differed too greatly in the reds present.

Shocked, I realised I was standing in front of my destination, a large brown soundproof door staring back at me from its brick enclosure. Cutting short my reverie, I pushed the door labelled 'pull' that had been staring at me for some time now. Eventually, I found the clarity of mind to pull the door ajar, and step inside. Aware of the possibility of seeing a familiar face and their recognition of my unfamiliar mask, I cautiously entered the theatre. Human contact was avoided, as was my usual approach to a new situation, and a seat was found. Poor fitting cargo pants were placed, along with my anterior body, in to the near-antique leather upholstery.

As seems so often to be the case once seated, I had left the pre-printed lecture notes sitting idly in a pile by the door. Too focused on my social invisibility to *see* what was in front of me. Cursing silently at my error, I rejected the idea of retrieval. On any other day I would have made the very awkward and very visible walk, back up the stairs to retrieve my due. Today however, I stayed the course, taking the minutes remaining before the lecture began to assay my surroundings for changes.

The chairs were still seated in the university standard trapezoid, with the seemingly useless bench, for shy lecturers to hide, as a checkout operator hides. Beeping several hundred students into the mental shape so desired to achieve a standard response. Thus demonstrating our ability to think on the topic thought, or is it taught. The room must have been made in the 60's because the brown décor and grey panelled walls could only pass for a timeless prison or a kitchen from that period. Outdated blackboards sat ready on oiled tracks, staring forward, as if to ignore the white projector screens flanking them on either side. Beep, I smiled to myself. The lecturer now stood before his customers, expecting silence from such a gesture. Forgetting his name, and the reason I bothered to leave the house, I took to reading the graffiti so blazingly displayed on my grey fold-out desk. The blue pen tattoos told me of Dan's need for the male member, Susan's infatuation with Dan and numerous bands, labels and cars of past and present import. Turning my attention back to the screens, which now displayed each item priced for examination value. Something felt wrong; I couldn't decide if it was the semicolon now unnecessarily present in the sentence or something more relevant. I surmised, this something had felt wrong since I got this new skin, growing in my gut as each wrong felt moment passed. Only once my ears pricked to the sound of confident footsteps did my stomach relax. They

approached the lecture theatre from the road. An explosion rang out.

I suppose at this point, I would be asked if I would like any cash out, after being informed of the amount tendered. Instead, I was faced with a choice, either I turn in my chair, like those around me or I look for a weapon. "Either you all do as I say," the deep voice of the sure-footed man yelled from the rear of the lecture theatre, behind me. This sentence was punctuated with a second explosion, this time aimed at one of the lofty blackboards.

I recognised these explosions as a bullet fired from a .357 self-cocking 6-shot revolver. Putting this mysterious detail to the back of my mind, I leapt from my chair onto the stairway flanking my row of chairs. Enraged by the threat to my peers, the world took on an oddly purple tint, not unlike the blue of a cop show. Thrashing about, aware of a whole supermarket staring confused at my performance, I heard the sure-footed man with the pistol say, "Get him back in his chair before I put him there with a bullet decorating his stomach lining!" Completing this threat with the ominous, "And I'm a terrible shot. I suppose it's lucky that none of you are of any value."

On that ominous-yet-overly-dramatic note, I had finished thrashing and ascended the stairs in doing so. Feeling like I'd just been hit by toddlers on four sides, I leapt for the formerly disregarded pile of lecture notes and knocked them in a snow storm about myself. I felt bullets whiz past me as they rebounded off of the walls and notes alike.

When I heard the fourth shot ring out, my legs took me towards the gunman. Upon realising his error, he reached for a second pistol holstered on his belt. But, before he could put his cold blooded hands on the comparatively warmer handle of his pistol, I was upon him.

Fiery fists leaped into his abdomen and clasped above his now doubled-over self. Bringing my clasped hands down, I released the rage that had built itself inside of me as I painfully ascended the stairs. This action knocked the surefooted man off his feet and sent him sprawling to the floor. Using my left foot to roll his body over, my right found his Adam's apple and poised ready to take from him his ability to breathe. He reached for his still holstered weapon and found that the pressure on his throat increased. Learning from this, he acquiesced to my will.

Shouting at the nearest student for aid, a small girl with curly blonde locks and a green folder jumped at being addressed. "Could you hand me those cuffs," I asked, indicating the zip-tight plastic handcuffs on my prisoner's belt. She leapt from her seat with a squeak, hands shaking as she removed the handcuffs from their belted position. "Don't worry," I comforted her, "I'll do his hands up." Taking the handcuffs from the girl, I secured the surefooted man's hands.

Removing the sure-footed man's holster from his belt, I strapped it to my right thigh, with a 9x19mm semiautomatic pistol contained within. This complete, I turned to a lecture theatre of confused students and a silence a cricket would have felt uneasy breaking.

Not yet up to facing this silence, I grabbed the surefooted man and bodily threw him up against a wall. Forgetting the strength unknown in my muscles, the man's body landed harder than expected and I winced as his shaven head slammed the wall. Trying to appear as if this was the intended outcome, I grunted with apparent approval and turned from the now bloody wall to once again face my classmates.

Feeling time was of the essence, I instructed another student to search the formerly sure-footed man for hidden weapons and to remove the Kevlar bullet proof vest he was wearing. This time, a tall boy had come to my aid, wearing one of those ridiculous tight cardigans, half buttoned up with

colourful woollen stripes moving horizontally across his less-than-ample width. Clearing my insecure vocal cords, I began to speak, squeaked involuntarily, blushed, and finally found the confidence necessary to say, "I have a feeling this man is not alone in his disruption to our, well, I want to say learning."

I paused, waiting hopefully for the sniggers resultant from my poor humour. Yet, I continued to be met by blank stares. Finally, the silence was lifted by my saying, "Well, if you're all just going to sit there, waiting to be told to fly as Fleance once did, I believe I greatly underestimated the intelligence necessary to become a second year university student. GET UP!"

Moving to the door and instructing the cardigan wearer now behind me to tender the tools he had acquired, I heard a flapping of desks sprung into latent positions. I then proceeded to strap a knife-in-sheath to my left ankle and to reload the revolver's top-break cartridge.

Revolver now held tightly in my right hand, I handed the protective vest to a random passer-by. Hearing the scraping of bags lifted from the floor, I turned, face confused and angry, to address my formerly respected peers, "And FOR GOODNESS SAKE leave your bags behind!"

This was followed by a series of thuds and the shuffling of feet in my wake.

"It seems too soon we meet again," I mumbled to the door, which stoically waited to be swung outward yet again. Trusting in the bullet proof properties of the thick door, I used my foot to push it ajar. Holding the now reloaded revolver in my right hand, as I had seen so often on television - steadied by my left hand, elbow slightly bent - I strafed using the door as cover. As I stared down the barrel of the revolver, ancient knowledge of projectile motion, enemy strategies, Human psychology and anatomically appropriate targets filled my mind. Aware of a lecture theatre full of fearful eyes, ambivalently awaiting a bullet to quiet the possibility of more harsh words, I pushed the door fuller than its apex, to allow the locking mechanism to click and signalled for my people to follow.

I stalked free of the soundproof lecture theatre doorway, my peers waiting helplessly behind me, with my revolver outstretched. My eyes were flicking from side to side, rapidly searching for any sign of danger. A low, weaselly voice resounded from behind what I knew as the boring building, "He was just laying down the law, I say. Letting 'em know he had bullets and they waz gonna feel 'em,".

The boring building, devoid of artistic innovation was built of red brick and matched with red painted window frames. The main door now hung off a single hinge, the body of a receptionist in stark contrast to the brick-red which formerly formed the majority of the paintwork. It would seem the boring building had finally added a new hue to its repertoire, though this seemed an unfortunate method of artistic enlightenment.

A road separated my educational supermarket and the boring building. Walking into the middle of this road and turning towards the direction of the voice. Only a shadow of my form was visible through the halo formed by the shining of the sun.

Time appeared to slow, as I raised my gun to face this new threat. A yell of confusion and anger resounded and an explosion vibrated the ear drums of my followers. Before the reality of the noise could take effect, I dove to my right and in a single concerted motion, brought another bullet to bear on the former threat's accomplice.

I became aware of multiple bogies inbound from the other end of the road, their heavy footfalls responding to the gunfire. Running to the bleeding bodies, trying not to examine my handiwork, I

grabbed one of the dead men's 9x19mm semi-automatic pistols. Strapping it to my left thigh - in its appropriate holster - I brought the revolver and pistol from the sure-footed man horizontal to the road. Feeling the barrels as an extension of my arms, a twelve fingered mutant, I began to run.

I fired the pistols wildly as I ran at the small force preparing to enter another campus building. The world began to take on an increasingly familiar purple tint.

12 bullets fired, 6 men - hit twice, once in a knee cap and once in their firing hand - and 1 revolver discarded later, I found myself surrounded by 4 men with 7.62x39mm assault rifles, the men wore large smiles and had an identical glint in their eyes.

Dropping my remaining pistol and moving to raise my arms, I noticed the man in front of me stood before a tree. Without warning, I ran at this man as fast as my new legs would take me. Bullets whizzed past as I ducked and weaved in the three seconds it took to cover the few metres between me and my target. Powerful legs propelled me rapidly forward. 'How is it that the bad guys always have such terrible aim?' I wondered.

I lowered my shoulder and, upon impact, stopped the man's heart with enough force to shake the tree and shatter his rib cage. Using this same tree as a spring-board, I pushed off and, knife removed from its left-ankle-holster, lunged at the next man. Bullets peppered the heart-broken man as he slowly slid down the tree. The whites of my next target's eyes were wide with shock as the knife I wielded pierced the hand holding the grip of his rifle. Dropping to my knees, I cut his Achilles tendon before he could respond to the initial aggression.

Letting the man fall to the floor beside me, I faced the remaining two men facing me. Throwing my knife at the man to the left and drawing my remaining thigh-holstered pistol in a single fluid motion, I fired a single shot at the man to the right. Turning to the remaining soldier with my knife sticking out of his left leg, I fired once. He dropped to the ground, holding his trigger-finger-bereft hand close.

Purple-tint fading, this last living soldier saw the futility of his efforts. Watching as his companions fell lifelessly to the floor. Finally, he held his rifle high in the air in the universal symbol of surrender. Lowering the weapon to the ground and un-strapping his other holstered weapons. I allowed his continued good health and moved to secure his hands with a set of zip-lock plastic handcuffs I had found on one of the dead soldier's belts. As I did so, the surrendered soldier reached for one of the holstered pistols lying near his bent right thigh. Grabbing his neck before he could bring the weapon to bear, I brutally revoked my former sympathy and felt my stomach lurch as the crack of life escaped from this foolish man.

2 Corridors

“Bind their hands and remove their weapons and protective vests,” I said with as much authority as I could muster, “Then line them up against the lecture theatre wall.”

I felt like a fool when only blank faces accompanied my instructions. So, I began to act on my own commands. I moved towards the two freshly dead men, whom I had brutally revoked from this world not a few minutes prior. I then proceeded to remove their Kevlar vests and put the harvested weapons in a pile equidistant from all the enemy bodies.

One of the vests, which had belonged to the man who stood before a tree before my attack, was so bullet ridden I discarded it with the empty revolver I had collected from the ground where it was thrown. It appeared the revolver was not standard issue, as there was no ammunition to be found.

Retrieving the body of the sure-footed man from the empty lecture theatre, I lined up the dead bodies, proud to see my peers had done the same with the two bodies from the side of the boring building.

When the final body was lain against the brick wall, I turned once again to my people. They stared back at me expectantly, searching for a way to leave this confusing situation. Recognising a friend from my tutorials, I motioned for her to step forward. Looking in the eyes of several other people I motioned only those who attempted to hide their fear and sought to fight their way home, as a reality TV show host picks out the potential winners to drag out the suspense. My acquaintance, Lela, stepped closer. Brilliant blue eyes filled with a sparkling lighter blue energy, quested into my own. A face framed by short brown hair hid a smile in serious features.

Forgetting to put on my authoritative voice this time, I hurriedly spoke of the gruff necessity, “Those of you I have singled out, I ask to don these Kevlar vests and arm yourselves. I intend to free as many students as I can, but I can’t have you lot following me ‘round.”

Pausing for emphasis, I motioned towards the pile of armaments.

“How do you know there are any more of these soldiers about?” asked one student near the back of the crowd.

Clicking my tongue, I realised how unsure I was of my own information. I felt there were soldiers all through the city, but I couldn’t just tell this scared crowd I had a feeling. Staring into the eyes of the crowd I spoke, “Let’s plan for the worst, that way, if I’m wrong and these were the only soldiers, the worst we’ll get is a day off.

So, with the goal of getting a day off, I’ll ask you to get clear of the city. Steal cars, if the necessity arises and hide in the suburbs.”

“What if they attack us?” a female voice yelled from the centre of the crowd.

Lunging at one of the rifles in the armament pile, a strangely familiar 7.62x39mm assault rifle, with iron sights and slanted muzzle brake, I rolled to the left. Entering an aggressive squat, I aimed my rifle in the assumed direction of the heckler. With a glare down the sights, I swung the gun at the

crowd, which responded by shying back from my piercing gaze, or the barrel of the rifle, or both, who can really say. Anyway! I quietly spoke, “Best not to wait and see ey.”

Maintaining my sombre tone I explained that, “If there is a greater army outside the universities walls, you should split up into smaller groups. Whenever you encounter a survivor I have sent, you yell...” suddenly losing my resolve, I rushed through appropriate words in my head, eventually deciding upon, “‘amethyst’, to which they will respond ‘malachite’.”

Finishing my succinct speech with a hopeful, “Come to the Locksenbury oval in the mountains, in five days. I will be waiting for you.”

Frustrated by the lack of movement in the crowd, I swung my hands in the direction that seemed to lead to safety, towards the bullet ridden tree of previous pages. Making a, ‘yah!’ noise I had heard horse riders grunt in the movies, I kicked the armament pile and formed the vanguard of the group, hoping to escort this motley crew to the university’s boundary.

An explosion, not unlike the sound of a 7.62x51mm bolt-action sniper rifle, echoed along the brick building lined road. Behind me a scream escaped from numerous throats. A tall pasty boy crumpled to the floor. His gangly appendages lifelessly released their grip on an assault rifle. The rifle fell in slow motion, landing with an eerie clatter.

Blood decorating those surrounding the body explained the absence of his... its... head. “Everybody scatter!” I screamed, while throwing bodily a fear frozen woman from harm’s way. Seeing the shooter at the opposite end of the road, rifle barrel hidden back from a window in one of the administrative buildings, I grabbed the corpse. Purple tint focused my thoughts as another bullet arrived, stealing some skin from my right shoulder as I crouched over my fallen comrade.

Mentally marking the sniper’s line of sight, I threw the headless corpse to the path lining the road and grabbed his rifle. My sharpened senses heard the click of the sniper finishing the rotational reload of his bolt-action rifle. The bullet casing was ejected, as the rifles bolt was unlocked and the breech opened. I could hear the firing pin cock and the next round slide into the breech. The trigger depressed and I leapt towards where I had thrown my comrade’s corpse. The force of the bullets passing knocked my feet awry. I landed with a thud and came to the conclusion that the risk of removing the sniper was too great. Instead, I resigned to flight.

Motioning towards another girl, who appeared to have been close to the fallen, I removed the dead man’s Kevlar vest with a rip of the Velcro and threw it to the teary eyed brunette. Jaw locking, eyes firmly gazing into mine, she strapped the bloodied vest over her ample chest. I held the rifle towards the steely eyed woman, who responded with a nod. Delicate fingers wrapped firmly around the barrel.

I left my convert to her own devices, following the rest of the group. They had already begun to hurriedly move to the university’s boundary. Proud of their initiative I ran to the head of the column and directed them clear of the sniper’s line of sight. A shorter man, holding two pistols firmly in his meaty hands, stepped forward. His dark brown eyes and thin moustache, turned back to the group for support. Speaking firmly and with sympathetic eyes, he said, “We can make it out of here, if you go back and get our friends.” Hiding his eyes for a moment, he finished by saying, “We’ll do as you told us. Just promise you’ll help the others. My brother only started uni this year. He didn’t want to come. Wanted to be...” looking as if he had said too much his brown eyes blinked away tears.

I nodded and smiled, proud to see a strength formerly reserved for examination periods. “Well,”

I said expectantly, "I'll see you in five days ey." Smiling with as much warmth as I could muster, I turned and ran through the open door of the nearest building.

Deeper purples led me towards those in need, rushing through the enclosed offices of the faculty. I vaulted MDF membranes covered by pinned pictures of loved ones. Reaching the end of a corridor, I was met by a scene to rival those of nightmares past. Bodies littered the floor. The formerly blue carpet was now decorated with a sickening scarlet. Waves of red created a flowing image on the white walls. Broken arms could be seen grasping for life with freshly dead hands. Severed legs were no longer capable of transporting the cadavers from this chaos.

Through all of this carnage, survivors began to rise in my presence. I ran to a man of huge muscles and even larger shoulders. I saw his wounds, not as scarlet reminders of his attackers, but as glowing purple mirages. Reaching towards a particularly large gash running down his left thigh, I tentatively extended my arm. Suddenly, the purple I saw was alight with energy. The amethysts in my pocket began to vibrate and glow, clawing their way to my eager hand. Grasping the nearest stone, I became a channel.

Healing energy jumped from my fingers and ancient knowledge of anatomy guided my hand. Torn ligaments, broken skin, severed blood vessels and rent muscle tissue all wove back together. Moving over his injuries, my fevered emotions guided my similarly muscular arms to throw him this way and that, caring not for his own comfort, but for the feeling of life that this healing energy lent.

Almost as shocking as its arrival, my connection was cut, once the healing was complete. I turned from my speechless patient to face a squad of enemies wielding swords of varying size and description. The great broad swords, wielded in a stubborn two-handed grip, were in stark contrast to the piercingly thin rapiers, whipping the air with their manoeuvrability. The closest man spoke in a voice smooth and commanding, "I suppose you lot thought you'd escaped the worst of it. You'll all be prisoners! Recruits to replace those we've lost."

As the man motioned towards the mismatched group of swordsmen at his rear, they raised their steel and advanced past their confident leader. His cold eyes locked on my own. Drawing the pistols holstered on my thighs, spinning them on my middle finger as I did so, I raised my twelve fingered hands to face these new foes.

Firing with the deadly accuracy of a trained killer, I waited expectantly for the swordsmen to fall. When they continued in their stoic approach, my shock triggered their leader's laughter to resonate horribly around the corridor. As I fired, several swordsmen tore off their shirts to reveal identical tattoos, which glowed with a mysterious light.

The closest swordsman swung downward, hoping to splay me from neck to groin. His broadsword moved in a powerful sweep. I lent backwards and in dodging the blow caught the swordsman's wrist with my left hand. My right pushed his shoulder, leading his body into the ark of a fellow. I used him as a Human shield to guard my own shoulder, the second soldier's thought-to-be target. Upon realising his error the second soldier did not relent, slaying his comrade and plunging his longsword deep.

Anticipating its escape through my pierced shield's abdomen, I flung the body from myself, and with it, the second swordsman's tool. Shocked at his sudden disarmament, the second swordsmen reached for his slain comrade's fallen weapon. He moved too slowly. I had already dropped to the floor and grasped the fallen broadsword, snatching the weapon away. Bringing enemy steel up from

my crouched position, I swung it in an arc to deflect a blow from a third opponent. This swing was not slowed by the removal of the head of his ruthless companion - the second swordsmen.

Finding myself surrounded by yet more men, I began to make progress towards what I recalled was an empty office space behind me. Seeing an equally threatening number of soldiers rush towards me from behind, I heard the leader crow, "get 'em while they're fresh! You have no idea of whom you are fighting young Armour, to fire bullets at swordsmen with glowing magical metal resistance. Its futility is humorous in the extreme."

Anger rising, I saw the confident fool grab a woman from the floor. She squirmed, terrified, against his hold. Rage flared. I drove my scavenged sword deep into the nearest enemy's heart. Ripping my tool free, I swung it in a great arc of destruction, knocking weapons from hands frozen by fear. I hacked gracefully through those who stood between this apparent leader and my bloodied steel.

Dancing left and right, my sword moved fluidly through the group with the sole desire of saving the woman my enemy held. A knife was placed at the woman's throat. Reacting instinctively, I gripped the broadsword I possessed, as one would grip a javelin. The leader had a sparkling purple halo highlighting him as a priority threat. And so, feet a shoulder's width apart, in a stance that felt more natural than any tennis serve I attempted in my youth, I swung my right arm, which held the javelin aloft, in a great semi-circle.

Upon release, I dropped to my knees in anticipation of an attack from the men still standing at my rear. Feeling a whisper of steel slice a tuft of hair from my head, I opened my arms and rugby tackled the swordsmen behind me, responsible for my unwanted haircut. I hit him hard in the chest before he could recover from the momentum of his thought-to-be-decapitating swing.

Forgetting to listen for the scream that signified the accuracy of my throw, I continued the scuffle with my latest foe. Falling to the floor, I could see his straw blonde hair whip around his face, poorly concealing a button nose and rosy cheeks. This boy was no older than myself. 'What drove men to kill innocents in a place of learning? Who would give the command for this youth to do so?' I asked myself, feeling a small sympathy for the boy.

Yet, this feeling was rapid in passing, as my rosy cheeked foe slammed my back with the pommel of his longsword. Absorbing the blow as one would a raindrop, I felt for a hidden knife while gripping the boy in a great bear hug around his torso and left arm. My wily foe saw a weakness in my right shoulder's lack of skin, resultant from previous sniper fire. Rosy cheeks rose in a grimace and he proceeded to use his body weight to roll towards the wall.

I hurriedly wrenched a hunting knife free of his belt and plunged the well kept blade into the intestines of its keeper. Ducking to the left to avoid a machete striking from above, the tip of my pinkie finger was stolen and a deep wound left in the wrist of rosy cheek. A shrill scream of pain was silenced by a gurgling gasp as I drew the harvested knife, in a rugged line across the former owner's abdomen.

Removing myself from the vicinity of my intestinally bereft foe, I heard a crunch of bone and sinew as the wielder of the machete struck again, this time planting his weapon deep within his rosy cheeked ally. The hunting knife fell to the floor in my haste to remove myself from the vicinity of the machete. Scanning the bloody scene for a weapon, my eyes returned to the robber of my pinkie's tip, one of only two soldiers left standing. He swung two machetes in as threatening a manner as possible. The threat appeared less so, when one saw the ridiculous twin caterpillars that sat below an overlarge nose. His moustache bounced up and down above lips bent in a rictus snarl. Assuming I had

not noticed his companion, a heavy footed man with beady eyes and thick black hair, the machete wielding man ran at me.

Knowing full well this was a distraction so beady eye could pierce me from behind with his broadsword. I spun on my left foot and, in doing so, rolled down caterpillar man's machete. I then gripped the machetes hilt and machete man's left hand, with my right. Pulling him forward with his own momentum, I plunged his own blade into beady eye's chest. Blood bubbling from his slain comrades lips, I used my right elbow to break caterpillar man's nose and caught his companion's broadsword with my left hand. The sudden pain caused him to unwittingly release one of his own machetes. I then brought my new weapon to the machete man's throat and I called for surrender, "No more death, drop to your knees and beg for your life."

The man's scarred features formed a snarl and he spat at my shoes, "Run me through. I'll not beg."

Acting as instructed I slammed the sword through machete man's kneeling right thigh. The shout of pain was punctuated by the delayed falling of his beady eyed companion's corpse. I next suffered his left thigh of my malice. Finding plastic handcuffs to zip-lock his hands, I bound his wounds with the cleanest shirtsleeves that could be found near his pain stricken body. Thrashing and wailing, machete man found his feet only flopped.

My adrenaline faded and with it my vision slowly lost its battle purple tint. Feeling my wounds as if they were just received, I grabbed an amethyst from my pocket and watched as its colour faded. The action was not as wondrous as my first encounter with this healing energy. Yet, it still left me gasping after the glorious energy was lost.

Searching for the tip of my pinkie on the floor, I found it lying next to a plastic potted plant. I placed the tip over the congealed wound and touched the stone again. Its energy shone through the gap dividing finger and former finger tip. In moments, no space was left between. I could feel other minor wounds sealing as the healing energy did its work. My shoulder regained movement I had forgotten it possessed. Testing my pinkies tip against the black plastic pot of the blood spattered plant, I felt a comfortable pressure.

My heart skipped a beat. I turned, remembering the other people hiding nearby. I discarded the quartz crystal that replaced the amethyst I once held. Finding the broad shouldered back of the healed man from before, seen opening a door to a tutorial room, I watched as other survivors stumbled out with mumbled thanks. His well muscled back was riddled with minor cuts and several more serious gashes. Two bloodied corpses lay before the door, gore adding to the caked blood present from a previous fight. One corpse belonged to a fellow student, fresh blood defiling his well pressed multicoloured shirt. His hand slack around the hilt of a knife plunged deep into another corpse's neck.

The big man mumbled, "He saved my life. This neatly dressed idiot!" The man began to weep, a sight almost as shocking as the many corpses littering the floor. I saw the lethal sword wound along the neat mans side. Not wanting to examine further, my eyes searched for the woman of prior import.

The apparent leader of the troop lay with his cocky face lifelessly staring up the bloodied blade of my broadsword/javelin. Somehow, I had thrown with such deadly accuracy as to pierce the man perpendicular to his nose, dividing his face down the middle. Seeing half of his face reflected in the polished steel of the piercing blade, I couldn't help but wonder as to the other sides of this man. Being a soldier is only a job after all. Who else was left grieving, had I widowed a woman, killed a father or just felled a hate-filled son? I had no way of knowing who any of the now dead soldiers left

behind. Who was this invading army?!

Looking to the left of the broken body, I finally spotted the woman. She was leaning against the wall, holding her throat to prevent further blood loss. I ran to her side, her neck flared a deep indigo. "Please, let me see," I asked, gently removing her bloody hand and projecting a warm smile.

Purple sparks flew from my fingers and her wound. The lethal cut to her jugular sealed, leaving only a bloody reminder of the mortal wound. Looking back into her face, I was struck by her beauty. She was a near perfect sculpture of the Human form. Her high cheekbones were covered with soft pale skin, dotted by just-the-right-amount of freckles. A small nose, with a similarly freckled exterior, rose above small pale red lips, supple perfection drawing my own lips closer. It was almost as if - no - she had to be real. Catching myself, I stared into the almond brown depth of her round eyes and told her of her safety in my presence.

Not wanting to be proven a liar I stood, reluctantly withdrawing my gaze from the thick brown wavy locks that framed her beautiful face. Holding out my hand for her to grasp, I pulled her to her feet. Delicate fingers gripped my own hand with a surprising firmness. Dark brown hair rolled back as she came to her feet. A sweet fragrance, excited by this rolling, tickled my nose with delight.

To my right, I found the broad man helping a tall blonde woman to walk. "I have sent survivors," I began, pausing as I remembered the presence of the lone wounded enemy of prior.

Taking the broad man and his tall ward into the tutorial room, I spoke, low and quiet, "Survivors with weapons are moving East, taking the fastest route from the uni. Arm yourselves with what you can find on these bodies and follow them. When you find them yell 'amethyst', if they respond with 'malachite', they are instructed to help you. This goes for you, as well for the others that also remain."

Quickly using the remaining colour in the two previously used stones, I healed the broad man and his willowy woman ward and rushed from the room without waiting for a response.

I began to walk off down the scarlet corridor, intending to find more survivors and escape the recent carnage. Hearing a woman shout from behind me, I turned to see the gorgeous girl jogging after. "Where do you think you're going?" asked the newly healed girl.

Looking to the beautiful girl before me, I moved closer and spoke quietly, "Follow that big bloke. He will keep you safe. It's too dangerous to come with me and I can't be worrying about your safety."

"So, you're telling me that it's safer to follow a man twice my size and who seems more preoccupied with that tall willowy woman, than keeping an eye out for danger. I think I'll stick with you. After all, you said I was safe with you. Did you not?" She retorted with a quirk of a delicate eyebrow, her logic infuriating.

Forcing a smile, I found it exceedingly hard to deny a woman of such raw beauty, "This is the exact reason I aim for male sales people! I am going towards the fighting. I'm going to get more people out of here. Stay hidden, I can't have you needing to be rescued all the time."

"Fine by me," she responded and proceeded to collect and clean the bloodied hunting knife I had earlier used to remove a man's intestines. Its long blade was dark with blood. Its blunt side was serrated, to increase the damage it caused upon removal.

Shaking the out-of-place image of a major babe with a gory knife from my head, I proceeded in the direction of what looked to be a large lecture theatre, at the end of the corridor. From behind me I heard the gorgeous woman ask, "How do you intend on saving everyone in this university on your

own?! It's huge! To cover every room would take half a day at least." This thought had crossed my mind, but the true magnitude of the problem hadn't yet sunk in. "I suggest you get the people you free, to free others, before they also flee," she continued.

"H'm, that might be a better plan. When they hear of my exploits, they're bound to send reinforcements. That plan sounds faster, since time is not in our favour." Seeming satisfied, she jogged passed, towards the closed door of the lecture theatre. Hurrying after her, I tried to keep my mind on the task at hand. This became more difficult when all I could see was her well shaped buttocks, as she ran in front.

An explosion of glass shards showered the carpet in front of the lecture theatre, as the tall window flanking the door was replaced by a bullet ridden corpse, bereft of the majority of its torso. Shouts from within the theatre could be heard, promptly silenced by another explosion, this time from a 12 gauge double-barrel sawn-off shotgun fired into the roof. "Anyone else tries to resist my men and I will not hesitate to end their worthless lives, as I did this fool's," was the demand that echoed after the shotgun fired.

Following the speaker's apparent line of sight, I looked into the eyes of the corpse that had flown into my vicinity. Life had all but vanished from their glazed depths. Resigning to revenge, I peeked into the theatre. Two men were standing at the projector control terminal at the front of the room, a dead lecturer at their feet. Another man, who I assumed was the speaker of prior, was standing in the lecture theatre's crowd holding the sawn-off shotgun pointed at the roof. His wild blonde hair formed a mane to frame his furious features. A broad nose rose above thin lips. These lips were currently curled in a snarl of defiance, asking anyone else to try as the window-shattering corpse once did.

Removing the corpse's pants and replacing my own with its, I searched the foyer outside the lecture theatre for a clean T-shirt. I felt guilty when I triumphantly removed a beige shirt with *potato mash* tattooed across its front from a cold student outside an empty tutorial room.

Instructing my gorgeous companion to remain where she was, I entered the room through the main door. The door flanked by a now shattered window. Locking the main door in an open position, playing the act of a habitual helper, I mumbled to myself as if I was late to class and made my way to a seat.

Crossing in front of the projector control desk, I drew nearer the left-hand-side of the lecture theatre. Looking as if I planned on seating myself somewhere in that vicinity, I smiled at the thought of the murderous man now confused at the top of the stairs. Without warning, I leapt onto the desk, purple highlighting the threats in my vicinity. Sliding, I reached out and grasped the wrist of the left-hand gunman. His left hand gripped, I prevented his retaliation by twisting the gripped-hand's arm behind the gripped man's back. While I did this, my other hand reached into the soldier's hip holster and removed his 9mm.

This pistol seemed to be the enemy standard, a fortunate choice, as the grip was quite comfortable. Firing at his companion, to the right of the projector control desk, I split his forehead with two quick shots. His assault rifle, raised too slowly to remove my own threat status, fell uselessly to the floor. Lifeless arms released the rifle to fall free of the body. Discarding the pistol and placing my hand on the elbow of the man I now gripped, I pushed upwards to pop the arm free of its socket. His scream was silenced by the wild fire of the blonde man still half-way up the lecture theatre's staircase.

Dropping behind the counter to avoid the barrage, I found the assault rifle of the double

penetrated man at my feet. The blackboard resounded with the peppering of shotgun shells. I realised the dislocated soldier had not been killed, but only silenced. Raising the scavenged rifle to face the now pistol wielding soldier, I found the side-arm I had formerly gripped gazing angrily back.

We were each staring down the barrel of an equally lethal weapon, me from my crouch and he from his upright position, blood oozing from multiple wounds. It seemed we had reached a stalemate, I pulled my trigger...

...expecting to receive a similar response from my enemy, I had closed my eyes. The thump of a falling body accompanied my own sigh of relief. A hole now decorated the forehead of the dislocated and bloodied soldier.

Standing smoothly from my squatted position, eyes staring down the sights of my newly acquired rifle, I was faced with a hostage situation. The wild haired leader of the two freshly dead men stood with his shotgun facing an entire row of fearful students. At a loss for what to do, I began to lower my rifle. Before I dropped my sights a centimetre, a short girl leapt from her seat and knocked the apparent leader's shotgun awry. A single shell was fired into the wall. This was closely followed by a bullet from my rifle, silencing the wild-haired man.

The short girl, cheering at her saviour, raised her chubby arms and encouraged her fellows to follow. Standing in front of some two hundred cheering students, I was heartened to see so much life.

Explaining the current situation and instructing the group to arm themselves with the weapons of these dead men, I proceeded to emphasise the necessity of freeing more students on the upper floors and instructing them to similarly arm themselves. Eventually, they were to escape East and find the survivors I had sent there.

As I spoke these words, my gorgeous companion stood to the right of the theatre, a dazzling smile on her soft lips. I hadn't seen her enter the theatre, this confused. My new body had amazingly acute senses after all. Completing my speech, I walked over to her and asked "Who are you?"

Thinking perhaps I was too blunt, I took my eyes from her's and began to say something to soften the situation. "Keira, my name is Keira." She quickly responded, sensing my apparent awkwardness.

Hearing her voice was an unexpected comfort and I smiled uncontrollably, even after all that had occurred. "Well *Keira*," I began, stopping to think of how I had always liked that name, "I believe we have other buildings to attend."

3 Survivors

Hefting the large rifle William had entrusted to her, Lela kept to the middle of the group. Latham formed the vanguard, with his other boisterous men-with-guns. The man's thin moustache could be seen whipping about frantically as he lead the crowd.

Will had never seemed a violent kind of guy to her. He kept to himself in tutorials, sitting next to her on occasion. He only made half the sense he could have if he stopped to think about what he was saying. Frankly, she had found him kind of annoying. But, seeing him take control of the lecture theatre and proceeding to rip those soldiers limb from limb had somewhat changed her impression.

As Lela followed, she watched mesmerised as Latham's cropped black hair flapped around at the force of his footfalls. Her lithe gymnast-trained muscles easily kept pace with the group. The tall buildings of the university were dwarfed by those of the fast approaching city. Innumerable windows were shattered and as they hurried, glass exploded from a nearby office and screams could be heard, shrill in the tense air. All around, the smell of burning was acrid to the puffing group.

The sudden introduction of gunfire pulled Lela from her tormented trance. Screams reverberated all around her. It seemed as though the university was not all that was under siege. A loud squeaking, followed by a series of rumbling crunches, marked the almost ethereal entrance of a tank.

It rolled up the road perpendicular to the University's boundary, blocking the groups planned escape. The grey painted metal box rotated its turret to face them.

Yelling for people to scatter, while running haphazardly towards the tank, saw Latham ensure the even distribution of 'his' people. This tactic also saw the explosion that followed tinted with scarlet. Assorted limbs flew forth from the crater where Latham and two of his followers, had been running. Their silent guns fell to the bitumen.

Understanding the urgency of the situation, Lela followed in the now martyred Latham's footsteps. Not in the explosive target manner, but by calling for the students to remain spread and continue to run for cover. She waved her arms towards the smaller buildings at the edges of the university, guiding with her frantic motions.

Adrenaline heightened her senses. The heat of the explosions and the acrid fumes made her eyes water. Her bones jarred with each heavy footfall. The whoosh of unseen projectiles spurred her on.

She continued to yell support and instructions until she was nearby the tank, which was on the opposite side of the road to the university's boundary.

Due to the reduced reload speed and slow rotation of the tank's large main turret, blessed few survivors had suffered its wrath. And then, only those who had grouped close together or were crushed by falling buildings or flying rubble.

However, when the small machine gun, located just below, and to the left, of the main turret, began to mobilise its formidable people mowing abilities, all appeared lost. Lela leapt to cover behind a small brick retaining wall.

Most of the group had taken too long to mourn the fallen. They made easy pickings, falling in tragic red piles of clippings.

When a sound like a chain shaking loose of a bike accompanied the quiet of a machine gun being reloaded, Lela saw her chance to act. She watched as a former survivor dropped to the floor, body following knees as they crumpled, bullet-hole windows showed a tank rotating its main turret in her direction.

Putting on a burst of speed, she ran from her meagre cover. Approaching from the right side of the tank, she had a clear line to the vehicle.

Finding purchase on the cratered road she leapt onto the hard metal surface of the tank. Foolishly assuming this would be similar to leaping on the soft mats used at her gymnastics classes, she had not anticipated such a hard collision. Rebounding with a soft thud, she fell to the bitumen, listening terrified as the hatch of the tank opened with a creak.

Reaching for the rifle she had been equipped, Lela came to the horrific realisation that she had dropped it after slamming into the side of the tank. Frozen in fear, her Panic stricken mind fumbled for one of her fleeting thoughts. Each idea slid like the proverbial soap in the shower.

A familiar face stumbled towards Lela from the university's boundary. It was a boy whose name was frustratingly unknown. He held out his hand for help. The now reloaded machine gun fired so much lead into his dying body as to create three products, aqueous in a bloody mash, from the single reactant plus the bullets.

This image of unnecessary carnage melted Lela's frozen body and she slipped back to her stern resolve. Searching again for her rifle, it was spotted not a metre from where she lay. She reached out. A burst of bullet fire rushed past her. It peppered the area her body lay not a second before.

Covering her face from the flying pieces of bitumen, she expected the next burst to rupture her petite frame. Her cradled rifle, now scavenged from the floor, was held close. She stared down the road from her foetal position. No pastimages flashed before her eyes. No pain erupted in her fallen form. Before the slideshow could begin or the bullets pierce her skin, a thud shook the floor beside her.

Turning her head, Lela's light blue eyes were faced with the glazed gaze of her would-be-killer. Sickened by how much time she had wasted, lying affrighted on the road, she jumped to her feet and clambered onto the metal surface of the tank.

Firing even before she stuck the barrel of the rifle into the hatch, she cringed at the screams of soldiers as the clip was unloaded. Thus, she ended their mournful morning mow.

In the relative silence, uncut blades of grass came from cover and began to cheer. Lela was touched by the scene. But, she could still feel the rifle recoiling against her arm. Screams of soldiers, killed by her own hand, reverberated around her shaken mind.

The ringing of the tanks machine gun rose again, another blade was cut, as a dying soldier used his last breath to drag yet another life down with his own. Sweat dripped from the student's lank brown locks which fell to cover his face. Pained eyes stared through these keratin bars, watching as life slipped from his grasp. Two eyes met Lela's. His cheering smile faded, as he pleaded for an answer. She was responsible for yet another death and could not stop the sobbing that followed. The tears left a salty tang on her lips.

After the tanks crew was killed, Lela remained on top of the vehicle, waiting for the survivors to

assemble before her. Many new faces now swelled their ranks and she scanned these lost students for any signs of her hero. ‘Who had killed the soldier at the hatch of the tank, ready to end her?’ Lela wondered to herself.

When no one came forward, she opened her mouth to ask, but was silenced by cheers of, ‘Hail Lela Tankbuster!’

The crowd chanted this for many moments before Lela could silence them with the frantic waving of her hands. She didn’t want other soldiers to be drawn to the uproarious noise.

Still slightly confused, Lela saw that these people were looking to her for guidance. They raised their scavenged weapons high, saluting her with their willingness to fight by her side. She could feel the urgency of the situation scraping along her bones, a knife on a chopping board. Seeing the sea of eager eyes before her, she reluctantly straightened and faced the crowd.

Reaching deep within herself, she found the courage to speak, “More survivors will come this way looking to escape. The only escape route I see is to Okee road and the car dealerships there. I want a group of people to wait here to take up defensive positions. Ultimately, to guard and guide survivors to safety. Maybe even figure out how to use this tank. To take revenge on these Human look-a-like’s who kill unarmed students!”

Pausing for emphasis, she finished with a hopeful, “Once we have cars, we will come back for those who remained to defend. Finally, we shall scatter. Meeting at Locksenbury oval as William instructed.”

More cheering followed and several hard eyed students stepped forward. Quieting the repeated shouts of ‘Lela Tankbuster’ with her raised hands and a quick finger over her lips to encourage silence, she leaped from the tank and landed gracefully before the crowd.

Lela pointed to those who had stepped forward, assuming them to be the volunteers for defence. She motioned to the buildings across the road, “Take up positions in those buildings. Collect as much ammunition from the-.” Her voice wavered, her emotions momentarily rendering her speechless. “Collect as much ammunition as you can find. A few of you should try the tank.”

Leaving the group to the task of defence, hoping she would not return to see more death. Reluctantly, she led her people to Okee road, in search of a means of escape.

Spirits rose as Okee road came into sight. Tanks, or some other vehicle of a similar mass, had cleared the main roads of the motionless traffic. The trees lining the roads of this mid-sized CBD were aflame.

Soldiers were often seen nailing survivors to trees, lighting them on fire or generally causing needless pain and destruction. On occasion, soldiers were seen loading survivors into windowless black vans. Presumably to be taken to a prison camp elsewhere. Whenever these groups of soldiers were spotted, the students hid, waiting until the soldiers were far from sight before moving ahead.

Lela had left small groups of survivors at street corners, to defend the route to the centre of car sales for the city. The survivors had encountered little resistance, hiding as they did. They stuck to the small pedestrian paths that wound a confusing route through the concrete building blocks of civilisation.

The cadavers that covered these paths all seemed to have fallen in similar directions, fleeing their inevitable fate. Faces distorted into masks of fear and horror. It was a savage roll of the dice,

which only a lucky six saw some few survivors to the relative safety of Lela's number.

Lela forcibly pulled her gaze from the street, where a squad of ten soldiers could be seen nailing a screaming woman to a burning tree. Action, in this case, would disobey Newton's 3rd law. The supposedly equal and opposite reaction, likely to see more of her own followers slaughtered by trained soldiers, than an attempt at rescue could justify. So, the soldier's erected their symbol.

Lela motioned for her vanguard of Kevlar wearing, weapon slinging students and a hard eyed businessman, who went by the name of Ted, to join her around the window where she hid. Assaying the scene between them and the numerous car dealerships, Lela began to whisper in a serious tone, "I want each of you to gather small groups of survivors. You get them to one of those car yards ahead."

"What about that wom-" Ted began.

Glaring at the haggard man, I cut him off, "We will wait for the squad to leave. Then you will take your groups to the car yards. Send as many armed survivors as you can, with plenty of empty seats, back along this route to collect the defenders. Make sure all the people who can drive are marked in some way before we make our run."

Eying off the group, Lela only continued when a nod was received from each. "Make sure your groups all know to scatter once they have completed their respective tasks of either collecting defenders or getting the hell outta there."

More nods. Lela put particular emphasis on her last point, "No one is to tell anyone else of Will's intended meeting place unless they can prove without-a-doubt that they are not an enemy spy or they use the code words Will gave us all; amethyst and malachite."

'Where'd he come up with such daft code words,' Lela wondered covertly.

Final nods and a Lela reminded the group to, "Wait for my signal." This resulted in Lela's dismissal of her council. At this point she turned back to her window. As the woman now nailed to the scorched tree grew pale, the soldiers grew bored with her. Her life's liquid remained in stark contrast to the dull bark of the burning tree.

Lela held her hand high and looked around the office buildings reception area. Small groups of survivors could be seen, crouched behind their respective leaders. Ted appeared to have marked his drivers with the offices worker's ties around their foreheads. Innumerable nervous eyes bored into Lela. Their escape and continued survival dependant on her plan.

Happy with a raised arm response received from the group leaders, Lela swung her arm in the direction of the road. This being the signal to act, she proceeded to smash the remaining shard of glass she hid behind. The sound of the window shards destruction widened the tired eyes of those crouched in the reception area.

Vaulting the window frame, she hurriedly took cover behind one of the small decorative walls that formed the boundary with this sky scraping office building and its neighbour.

Checking the street for the squad that had nailed the now dead woman to the charred tree, Lela was ambivalently relieved to see only the desolation left in their wake. An effigy now hung, where a screaming woman once thrashed with life.

Lela watched as small groups of survivors ran past. Capable drivers clearly marked in each groups unique way.

Sticking close to the left flank of the overall group, Lela didn't stop swivelling her head, remaining vigilant for possible threats. So, the approach of a square beige box of metal, large wheels and a swivelling machine gun nest atop was spotted before the threat was too great.

Lela puzzled at the necessity for 'APC' being splashed across the side of the box in black spray paint. It's like labelling your own pants, in the event you do lose them, it's unlikely you'll want to suffer the shame of their return. Assuming APC stood for Armoured Personnel Vehicle, Lela proceeded to scan her peripheral for weapons, and other threats.

"Get these people out of here," Lela yelled authoritatively. She ran free of the group, numerous confused faces following her departure. Reaching a row of parked cars that had not yet been set aflame, or damaged beyond use, she hurriedly searched for a car with key-present-ignition and an intact engine compartment. However, the hatch-back she found was not bereft of its driver. A middle aged man, odd tan lines forming streaks across his formerly pale face, lay with his head bleeding against the dashboard. As Lela pulled him from the right-hand driver's side door, she noticed the 'tan' lines were blistered and charred. Repressing a shudder, she dragged the tanned face man as far from the car as her petite frame could manage.

Aware of the APC fast approaching, she jumped into the now unoccupied driver's seat and hurriedly turned the key. The approaching enemy evoked a painful pit in her gut. Fortunately, the automatic engine hummed to life with no need to pump the throttle or perform some complicated procedure that only the car's owner knew, unlike Lela's own car.

The right side of the vehicle was blocked in by wrecked traffic. So, slamming the accelerator, Lela leapt onto the clear pedestrian path. Trying to avoid bodies, she felt the occasional slip, as the wheels ran over a latent limb.

Approaching the T-junction, she finally broke free of the path as the APC sped past. The military vehicle visibly swerved towards the survivors. Lela was in pursuit. Spinning the steering wheel, she targeted the rear of the APC, where the personal of the acronym would likely disembark.

Not expecting another vehicle to be on the road, the APC slowed. A soldier climbed up to mount the machine gun nest on the roof.

Removing her seat belt, Lela forced the accelerator to the floor and prepared for her departure. Grabbing her rifle from the passenger's seat to her left, she removed the driver's side door with a street lamp as she passed. When she was within about five metres of impact, she leapt from her hatch-back-missile, rolling as her body joined the road once again.

Hearing the crash and crunch as she continued to roll, she tried to come to a crouch with her rifle ready to tear apart the remaining soldiers. The impact with the road was harder than she had anticipated however, and the momentum carried her onwards. Feeling foolish when she finally found enough strength to come to a crouch, the first thing she spotted was the soldier still in the machine gun nest on top of the APC.

Panic began to scratch at the edge of her consciousness. Still curious as to why he was not firing or reloading, as was expected from these blood thirsty foes, Lela looked more closely.

She jumped as the APC's cracked frame creaked and a limp arm flopped uselessly to the soldier's side. The crash had left his upper body disconnected from his lower. The corpse remained upright by the twisted wreckage that was the rear of the armoured vehicle.

Men's shouts could be heard, echoing manically from within the wreckage. Not willing to aid these soldiers and finding the idea of ending their lives repulsive, Lela left them with the possibility of rescue.

Choosing instead to find another car, to aid in the retrieval of the defenders, Lela rose painfully to her feet and began to hobble past her deftly orchestrated crash. Her shoulder felt sore enough to be

broken. The skin was covered in a rapidly coagulating gravel rash. Lela, with a great effort, put her shoulder from her mind.

Visible through the thin visor of the APC was the driver, face frozen in shock and confusion, clutching at an unanticipated metal bar that now protruded from his chest. The APC had been sandwiched between a stoby pole and Lela's smaller missile.

At her passing, the passenger's side door swung open and a soldier, blood caked over his chiselled features, fell the remaining distance from his seat to the road, black hair matted with congealed blood. His side arm fell uselessly to the floor. Weak fingers wobbled near a pistol. Even after all he had seen and experienced, this dying soldier wanted to kill.

Lela expected to feel sympathy towards this man. Yet, when his dark brown eyes looked up into hers, all she felt was a cold blooded fury.

Finding new strength in sore muscles, she walked over to his fallen body. Lifting her rifle high, she brought the butt down hard upon his dying head. Yelling at the top of her lungs, "This is for Latham!"

Not wishing to assay her handiwork any longer, Lela stretched her bruised legs and began to jog towards the nearest car yard, bloody rifle held firm in shaking hands.

The sight of her ripped and blood stained shirt, torn jeans and stone cold expression, caused the survivors to pause at Lela's approach. In conjunction with the bloody rifle, held firmly in her left hand and the loud crash they had heard before, Lela found it hard to imagine what was running through their heads.

As she walked past a tall girl with what used to be thick brown hair, burnt patches now decorating her scalp, she heard a mumbled, "Hail, Lela Tankbuster." Disturbed by her idealised actions, Lela hurried to find the armed person she had put in charge of this group.

Ted was found at the entrance to the glassed in showroom, shaved head bobbing as he distributed keys amongst the small group gathered about him. He motioned for a rapid departure and I heard glass smash as a small 4wd broke through the tall windows of the showroom. Turning to Ted, Lela asked if he had any cars remaining. Ted turned and smiled at the sound of her voice. "Good to see you caught up," he jovially responded, "I hear the Finch is sporty, with plenty of seats."

Following his gaze to the far corner of the caryard, Lela saw an olive green sedan with shiny wheels and one of those metal bits stuck to the boot. It was on a slightly raised platform. Lela smiled at the overly fancy vehicle, "That'll do fine. Thanks Ted."

Grasping the keys, she followed Ted to the car as he explained in 'laymen's terms' the vehicles features. Most of which weren't layman enough for Lela to understand. Once seated in the well padded leather seats, Lela paused for a moment to clear her mind. Under her breath she whispered and smiled, "No one gets left behind."

Suddenly, the passenger door swung open and Ted's bald head bobbed into the Finch, saying, "What was that?" "Nothing. Let's get outta here."

A series of loud revs echoed horribly around the caryard. Lela flushed in realisation. She was no longer in an auto, having smashed the last one into the back of a soldier laden APC. Ted smirked from where he sat in the passenger's seat, trying not to let it be seen by his ferocious companion. 'Surely he didn't fear rebuke from *me?!*' Lela wondered to herself.

Correcting her mistake, Lela depressed the clutch and threw the gear stick into reverse. She

followed the two other cars that contained only a single driver. They had been armed with additional weapons, ammo and Kevlar. These donated by the reluctant, yet relieved, drivers that were fleeing this lost city.

Once they had bounced free of the caryard, Ted began rummaging through his pockets, eventually saying, "We found some protein bars and extra weapons among the dead soldiers." Ted handed Lela a knife and a pistol in corresponding holsters. She awkwardly strapped the knife to her left ankle and pistol to right hip consecutively, while Ted held the steering wheel. Pocketing the protein bar, she relaxedly pulled the handbrake into a hard turn.

A pit formed in Lela's stomach. The street corner should have been defended by their people. Drifting past the second car in their rescue group, she noticed it was parked on the corners curb, behind the first. The drivers were loading injured people into their cars, with the aid of those defenders that could still stand. There seemed far too few people coming free of cover.

Shaking her head in dismay, Lela resolved to let the cars sent by other groups pick up the smaller postings. Ted placed his hand on her shaking shoulder, trying to calm raging emotions. She had to get to the tank of which she was now titled.

Cars continued to split off the column behind Ted and Lela. They could sometimes be seen escaping the city limits after collecting survivors. Not all the defended positions had been hit as hard as the first and it appeared this section of the city was devoid of almost all invading soldiers. The invading forces must think them all captured or dead. Occasionally black vans could be seen retreating down side streets. Small pockets of fighting were quelled by the reinforcement convoy Lela led.

Ted fired from the passenger window and managed to distract the soldiers long enough for defenders to win minor scuffles as they passed.

Slamming on her anchors, shiny wheels locked, Lela skidded towards the turret of a tank that looked exceedingly similar to the one she had previously de-crewed. Coming to a stop one hundred metres down the road, her heart raced as she sat perpendicular to the turret. '*Déjà vu's a bitch,*' she thought grimly to herself.

She relaxed however, when a waving student appeared from the hatchway. Lela turned and smiled at Ted. It appeared her people had sussed the controls. But, Ted did not trust in good fortune this day. Lela heard him mumble, "We're not out of it yet."

As if these words had summoned the opposition, sparks flew from the metal that formed the hatch of the tank and the waving figure quickly disappeared into the cover of the tank. An explosion rocked the solid metal behemoth. Lela floored the Finch to its aid. The turret turned and the machine gun fired.

An unseen enemy approached from the right side of the road, perpendicular to the one Lela's car now travelled. Lela brought the car to a stop approximately ten metres from the friendly tank. Small fires could be seen in craters both on the road and the tanks surface. Crouching, Ted and Lela ran to the cover of a building to their right.

Firing one last shot from its massive main turret, students began to appear in the hatchway. The enemy, though recovering from the pre-disabled-tank's wrath, anticipated the attempted escape. The fleeing tank drivers were torn apart. Broken limbs ripped from the hatchway, flew onto the road around the cratered tank.

Lela made to rush forward, but Ted grasped her arm, holding her back. More reinforcements approached from behind where they now hid. Enemies, moving to confirm the tank kill did not expect to run into heavily armed resistance. They broke free of cover and moved on up to the smoking wreckage.

A new group of students appeared from the other side of the road. Coming from the university, the students with weapons fired, sending two soldiers to join the tank operators in death.

Motioning for their patience, Ted and Lela moved towards the road. Fearing larger numbers, they peeked around the corner of the building. Three soldiers could be seen, long tubes strapped to their backs and triumphant smiles still on their faces. Ignoring their dead comrades, they laughed and fired randomly towards where the students cowered behind cover.

One of the soldiers said in a slurred voice, "I don't know how these civies got a tank, but they had no bloody clue how to use it."

Angry at the ease at which they stole the defender's lives and frustrated at her inability to prevent it, Lela rolled free from her street corner. She brought her rifle up to fire at the trio. Too slowly the soldiers raised their weapons in defence and soon two of their number were falling.

The third defender would have returned the favour. Yet, Ted, firing from his position on the street corner, ended this last soldier's life before he could take aim.

Nodding her thanks to Ted, Lela ran to the group of students across the road.

Comfortable that Ted had her back, Lela nevertheless kept a close watch on her surrounds. When she reached the group of students she asked, "Do you think there are many more of you coming? We have a few cars across the road. But, I'm not sure if there are enough."

The de facto leader of the group stepped forward, separating herself from the fifty something students slowly rising from behind the low brick walls and small maintenance sheds at the fringes of the university.

She was a tall willowy woman with a pistol in each hand, sword at her hip and blonde hair escaping from a bun at the nape of her neck. She wore a shredded Kevlar vest marked with blood. The various spray patterns unidentifiable as either her's or her enemies. She did not speak, but pointed behind herself and shook her hands.

Another girl, quivering with fear, quickly explained, "There was a small group behind us who looked to be coming from the last building. We saw Will run off campus after that."

Nodding her understanding, Lela's eyes caught movement behind the battle hardened blonde.

"Hurry," Lela growled, spotting soldiers completing their job on what must've been the last group of students. Screams reverberated through the air, tearing at the already tense atmosphere.

The tall leader swung her arm in the direction of Lela's reinforcements. Lela ran to the still flaming tank carcass, with Ted in tow.

They took cover by the bodies of both friends and foes. Lela crouched behind the tank holding her rifle parallel to the road. Quickly checking behind herself, she watched anxiously as survivors ran past her position.

Soon the sounds of squealing followed the slamming doors. Elated at the completion of her task, Lela's eyes were forced to leave the little metal prongs at the end of her rifle barrel. The cover fire she had laid down stopped with an ominous click.

Chancing a look behind, Lela saw only her Finch remained, its green paint miraculously

unmarred by the day's events. The tall blonde was using the passenger door for cover. The patter of return fire could be heard as it buffeted the tank she currently hid behind.

Lela motioned for Ted to lead their retreat. Dropping the bloodied rifle, she hurriedly followed in his flying footsteps.

Hearing a yell, Lela watched with dismay as Ted fell to the floor, his blood now spreading across the road. Seeing the wound on his right leg, she leant in and lifted him. The two pistols of their heroine fired wildly at those soldiers that chose to pursue Ted and Lela. Pretty features, lit by the fire from her pistols, began to contort in rage. Eyes fixed on some target behind their limping form. Lela supported Ted's weight on her significantly slighter shoulder, while her other shoulder burned for attention.

Bullets whizzed past their ears. Lela's shoulder burned as a shot, likely intended for her head, pierced her gymnastically trained muscles. Grunting, Lela thanked whatever God(s) existed that it was her left shoulder, not the right, which Ted currently rested upon. The gravel-rash and minor bullet wound caused enough pain to almost cause Lela to vomit.

Somehow, Ted urged Lela on and they both reached the car. Two clicks announced the empty clips their heroine now possessed. Opening the rear passenger door, Ted was thrown unceremoniously onto the back seat. Lela's hip holstered pistol rotated through the air as it was tossed to the fiery blonde.

At last Lela ran, head down, around the back of the Finch, to the driver's side door. Opening the door with an out-of-place squeak, Lela shouted for their heroine to join her in the vehicle.

Dropping the handbrake, Lela was already accelerating in reverse before her saviour had completely sat inside. She pulled the handbrake back up again, this time spinning the steering wheel in conjunction with the action.

Lela felt the slam of the door closing with the momentum of her hundred and eighty degree spin. Throwing the gear stick into third, she planted her foot on the accelerator and, ducking below a final burst, drove out of range of their pursuers. Finally, they fled to the prophesised safety of suburbia.

4 Late

Waking with a start, images of triumph long past and long forgotten flashed before Graham's eyes,

Assisting from the centre of the fighting force, as was the appropriate place for a battle mage, Graham formed protective shields for warriors on the flanks and used his trio of javelins to send magically assisted death to the creatures that now ripped free of the earth. He could see the Wills Armour, cleaving the enemy forces in a hurricane of purple and green, a weapons master that even the armies of the undead feared.

Numerous other Armours were fighting for the same cause, but most did not have the power that Graham and the Wills Armour possessed.

The Human army quavered as darkness spread across the land. Enemy Armours channelled their diamond focused magic to quell the demon's weakness, sunlight.

Graham could see the purple and green hurricane approaching the sapphire focused Armour of Cavanor. Pooling all his remaining strength Graham sent an invigorating blast of energy, which both rejuvenated the muscles of his ally and the stones of his armour. Now, all he could do was hope that he had provided enough magical energy for the dual longswords to break the enemy force field, protecting the sorcerers.

Falling to the floor, Graham barely had sufficient energy to stand, after casting such a spell so late in the battle. A group of devoted soldiers formed a protective cluster around his fatigued body.

Graham's eyes closed after seeing an enormous snail, rainbow shell glowing faintly in the dull light, battering through a small group of approaching demons.

Suddenly the darkness cleared, Graham could hear cheers breaking out from all corners of the battlefield. He could feel the light of the sun warm his exhausted muscles.

Fatigue had worn thin the clarity of his thoughts. Nevertheless, Graham knew they were victorious. A weak smile touched his lips as he looked up to see his friend and ally holding an enormous sapphire high in the air. A tremendous symbol of victory, presented for the weary Human forces.

Shaking his curly brown hair, Graham saw pieces of clock strewn about the floor beside his bed. This explained why light was flooding his near empty room, when the customary events of the morning usually took place in relative darkness. But, what was as yet unexplained was the scene of utter destruction that befell his still bleary eyes.

A small smile touched his lips as he thought of the lecture he had likely missed. "What's the harm in missing another lecture, they go that slow I could probably catch up in a few minutes online

anyway,” Graham mused to himself.

Snapping his thoughts back to the more important questions, like why he was lying in a bed that no longer resembled such and how it came to be that his right hand was glowing with a red-orange light?

Keeping his glowing hand at arm’s length, Graham untangled himself from the wreckage that was formerly a bed. The mattress had fallen with gravity. But, Graham was certain that the smouldering slats and warped metal of the bed were not so easily explained.

Further musing led him to the conclusion that it was something to do with his consistently glowing hand.

Breaking free of his fabric enclosure, Graham’s eyes became fixed on the fluctuating red light that had replaced the dull glow of prior musings. Suddenly, a strange voice echoed in his mind.

“Focus your mind on absorbing the magic back into yourself, in a storage capacity. Or you could just let it all out and destroy this suburb and yourself,” came the soothing voice.

Graham could feel a mental shaking of a head and a smile. Nevertheless, Graham began to follow the mysterious command. For some unexplainable reason, he trusted the voice.

Focusing on the glow, Graham imagined a capacitor in his mind. Filling the capacitor with the energy that was attempting escape, he watched intrigued as the glow subsided. All the evidence that remained was the feeling that a strange power now resided within. And the destruction evident in his room of course. But, that in itself was far less exciting. Destruction being more of an annoyance when it comes to the necessity for cleaning that tends to result.

Flexing his muscles, Graham felt as though he was ripping apart. The voice in his head came again, it’s now mocking tone strangely familiar, “You were a bit less buff than your predecessors. I blame society. But, then again, who doesn’t.”

A small garden snail edged into Graham’s room from the corridor. The glittering trail did not last long its wake, which was unexpected of garden varieties that are oft to leave long routes for the glistening morn.

Wiping tired eyes with a swipe of his hand, Graham found the snail was gone. His ambivalent relief was short lived however, as the snail appeared to have made its way to his desk. Slimy tentacles swivelled towards him, the shiny black eyespots found a level appropriate to look into Graham’s Human counterparts.

The shell of the snail seemed to shift, unsure of its own true form. Something felt very peculiar about this ‘garden variety’ gastropod.

For a moment, Graham’s attention slipped from that of the snail to his own appearance. Suddenly, he came to the realisation that he was ripped. Running now dull hands along his abdomen and legs, Graham could feel athletic muscles through his T-shirt and forming his bare legs.

Surreptitiously checking inside his jocks, Graham was not surprised to find his cock had remained a similar size. ‘How can you improve on perfection?’ he mused.

Smiling, his thoughts were drawn back to the mysterious mollusc. Walking over to the animal, Graham reached out his hand to poke at the eyespot, as he had done as a kid. ‘I live in an apartment building in the middle of the city, where did the snail come from?’ Graham thought to himself. This train was interrupted when his hand was but a few centimetres from the tentacle of the snail.

The snail seemed to shimmer, as if in a heat haze. A large snail of not dissimilar size to Graham’s own hand, replaced the small snail of prior moments. It’s shell stopped its shifting and

finally settled on the many colours of the rainbow, adorning its surface in intricate whorls and helices.

“Felix,” Graham mumbled in confused recognition. “Oh. You remember me. I’m touched. ‘Though, it’s probably something to do with that DNA conspiracy. Now if you’re finished checking your penis for changes, we’ve work to do,” explained the higher order intelligence gastropod before Graham.

“Why do I know you?” Graham inquired of the miraculous mollusc, its mocking tone still reverberating through his mind. Directionless, separate from the image his eyes told him was indeed before him.

Annoyance registered in the voice’s preceding statements, “Right. We need to get one thing straight before I take you anywhere. I am no lesser being to yourself! And I will not have you address me as such. Mollusc, Gastropod and snail are all expressions you’d best be ridding yourself of. You need me, even if you don’t realise that yet.” Silence that resembled a pause, was filled by a final, “You will think or refer to me as Felix or sir. And yes, I can hear what you think, until I teach you otherwise.”

Graham imagined acquiescence, with a mental nod, then attempted to probe Felix for answers as to how his room was messed and why his hand had been glowing. Quieted by a shimmer of Felix’s multicoloured carapace, the tentacles receded and with them, the black eyespots that seemed to pierce Graham’s very soul.

“Meet me outside when you’ve dressed and eaten,” with this, the snail began to slide away. Then, with a blink of Graham’s eye, Felix vanished into the ether.

Closing the door to his two bedroom student flat, Graham locked it and began to walk down a concrete corridor. Its white washed walls were pockmarked with graffiti and several yellow painted wooden doors, not unlike Graham’s own, all leading to the other cheap student flats that shared the floor.

Graham’s curly brown hair was shorter than yesterday, sitting on his head in more of a controlled mass than the explosion that usually adorned his scalp. Wearing his usual brown natural fibre pants and plain T-shirt, his bulging arms stretched the seams of what was formerly a loose fitting top. Coming down the stairs to the foyer of his apartment building, Graham felt a pit forming in his stomach. The buildings silence was beginning to eat away at his nerves. Thinking, for Felix’s benefit, “I’m here now, dressed and confused.”

He received the response, “Things have changed if that’s how you lot dress these days. No matter. People are dying and you’ve got to get out there and help.” Upon hearing this, Graham’s eyes widened and his breath caught in his throat from the bluntness of the statement. Though, considering the circumstances, this should not have seemed too great an oddity.

Graham queried Felix on the topic, “Was this something to do with my dream?”

“No. Your dream happened millennia ago, before the Armours were hidden and all the bollocks that followed.

What are you lot all doing on this continent anyway? There are too many powerful lineages in one place if you ask me. But, no one does, no one does.

Bitterness aside, I suggest we look for your belt and dart tube so you don’t fall prey to an ignorant soldier. Open yourself up to some of the energy you stored in that ‘capacitor’ of yours and

feel where your ancient tools are hiding.”

Confused, but not willing to argue with the creature - he meant Felix - Graham probed the capacitor of magical energy in his mind, thinking to add a resistor to the mental circuit before he was overloaded with the force of his own power.

Graham could feel a red throbbing in his mind. Shaking his head to ensure this wasn't a continuation of that crazy dream he had had before, he suddenly knew where he must go.

“This is all so surreal,” Graham mumbled to himself. For Felix's benefit he capped this with, “Well, it's that way.” Raising his arm, he pointed Northeast, towards the city centre.

Reaching the foyer of his apartment building, Graham exited the stairwell. Panic ensued as soldiers broke through the large glass doors at the opposite end of the large entrance. He was promptly faced by this group of Kevlar bedecked, assault rifle wielding trained killers.

Instinctively, Graham raised the palm of his right hand to face the similarly raised weapons of the soldiers. Mental resistor removed, a flood of immense power threatened to overcome him. A red pulse of such tremendous force sent the soldiers sprawling off their feet. Balance lost, they found a tiled companion in the foyers hard floor.

Windows broke in a cacophony of shattering and showering shards. The sudden loss of energy shocked Graham's new body and he dropped to his knees, hands reaching for his now throbbing temples. The taste of vomit was bitter in Graham's mouth as he swallowed his breakfast back down. He had no desire to see the hurried meal for a second time.

A voice, deep and powerful, rumbled over the sound of falling glass, “Impressive young battle mage. Yet, I suggest smaller spells to begin.”

Straining his ears to locate the origin of the booming voice, only the sound of groaning soldiers and settling glass fragments remained. Graham was suddenly thrown into a dizzying sense of unreality. A feeling as if his body was shifting through space spun him in a spiral of what he perceived as reality. Stomach churning, he could sense his ancient belt approaching so rapidly that to pin-point its exact position was impossible.

With a pop and a blue flash, a dark skinned man of middling age appeared in the centre of the foyer. A great Sapphire oval was inlaid in golden armour of such intricate design that Graham's eye could not follow the numerous patterns formed. Gold strands overlapped with the grace of a dancer moving to a tune all of their own.

He could feel the tall man's presence. A magical energy ebbed and flowed through the room, emanating from the man now central to the foyer, drawing Graham to him.

Returning slowly, Graham's jumbled faculties sought the comfort of a thought-to-be ally. His perspiring fingers ran over the smooth shell of the snail where it sat on the foyers reception desk. Unsure of how he had traversed the gap between the elevators and the desk, Graham focused his attentions on the relative normality of the mind-reading gastropod, Felix.

Reaching for the snail's own mind, Graham sought advice on how to deal with this imposing new man. Hearing nothing in return, a larger pit formed in an already unsettled stomach.

The mysterious man finally spoke, large hands moving in explanatory patterns around his powerful form, saying, “I can still remember the confusion I felt when I was reborn. The change was not as dramatic for me, as I am a sorcerer and do not require the musculature of a weapon's master or one such as yourself, a commanding battle mage.”

Unsure if this was his cue to speak, Graham held his silence, resigning to a quick glance at Felix and a silent nod. The man continued to speak, but Graham was too absorbed in the shimmering of the armour over his dark skin to hear the words. Watching as the light caught different threads of gold, Graham's thoughts wandered to the power the man must possess.

Finally, a dark left hand was held out, in which was clasped a worked black leather belt with an inlaid carnelian. The sorcerer spoke again, "I thought you might be looking for this. Who has time for the outdated games of the past? It's time for you to join me in glorious battle."

Ambivalent, Graham stared longingly at the belt, knowing instinctively the strength it would grant. Reservations encouraged him to remain where he stood, wanting nothing more than to step forward and accept the gift gratefully.

Graham chanced another glance at Felix, receiving only the blank gaze of a regular garden snail in retort. Intelligence lost to the tentacly extended oil-drop eyes. He searched the snail for any semblance of the sarcasm that once spewed forth from it's mind. It was useless.

Feeling the belt calling to him, in a similar fashion to the magus' energy, Graham assumed he had imagined the whole talking snail thing as a sort of waking dream, a brief side-effect of the nights changes. Upset by this thought, Graham shook of his hesitations and walked up to the man who held out his next step towards greater power. Power he had never seriously thought he would possess, at least not in the physical realm.

Graham accepted the gift, saying, "Thank you, uh – I didn't catch your name."

"I didn't tell you. And I don't believe it has any importance, nor relevance. I haven't asked yours either have I?"

"You haven't, no," Graham said, disguising his reluctance. "What's next?"

With a small quirk of his lips, the magus spoke finally and decisively, "Well, glorious battle of course. Would you like Belladavia?"

Staring into the carnelian belt buckle of the ancient worked leather, Graham could see shimmering scarlet fissures running through the dark orange depths. He felt a deep bloodlust peaking, his muscles quivered with anticipation.

Feeling irresolute about the whole situation, Graham denied the part of his mind that told him this was because of the loss of the thought-to-be-but-now-silent-talking-snail Felix. And so, he imbued his next statement with as much perky excitement as he could muster, "When do we start?!"

The shaved head of the dark sorcerer bobbed and he smiled a dazzling white smile through his wide mouth, "Why delay? Let's start a fight."

Graham reached behind his back and looped the belt through his pants, the buckle joining with no visible clip. Unsure if they were always there, numerous darts and a tube had appeared on the belt after he had strapped it on. With a quiet strength and a growing confidence in his newly acquired abilities, Graham accepted the strange tools now at his disposal.

Reaching into his hip pockets, Graham removed mobile phone and wallet, disposing them on the messed foyer floor. They were but meaningless remnants of a former life.

The soldiers were just now beginning to rise and collect their rifles. They were not brave enough to hazard a glance at the powerful sorcerer.

Reaching onto the reception desk that stood patiently at his side, unsure why he was bothering, Graham plucked the snail gentle from the wooden top. With his left hand he grasped the shoulder of the Sorcerer of the Sapphire and that was the last he saw of his former home.

When the movement ceased and blue light no longer shimmered in his eyes, Graham fell to the floor. His stomach finally gave up the battle to digest the breakfast he had thrown down. Felix sat by his side, not making a sound, tentacles rotating to absorb the new surrounds.

Wiping his mouth on his sleeve, Graham was astonished to see that he was standing in a compound of many hundreds of tents and small buildings. The encampment was just outside of the city limits, somewhere to the Southeast.

“I’ll leave you to get acquainted with your surroundings and maybe find yourself a second breakfast,” explained the sorcerer before he was gone again, leaving Graham in a squatted position formerly jointly occupied by the sorcerer’s feet.

Feeling oddly inferior, like a first year student who asked a lecturer a question and received only the short, ‘read your lecture notes,’ as a response, Graham stood slowly. His unfamiliar legs wobbled with the effort. This was not helped by the spinning sensation that remained after the sorcerer’s transportation trick. Looking around, Graham could see the city off in the distance. The sorcerer must have moved us at least fifty kilometres, from the foyer of Graham’s apartment building to this huge encampment.

The numerous tents surrounding Graham looked to be of a Human military and the soldiers that moved about the camp could have passed for any of Ecce, a rather generic bunch.

The assortment of desert, digital, woodlands and numerous other camouflage designs on the tents followed logically with the loss of speciality that accompanied a deployment of such a size. Small squads appeared merged in favour of the ‘quantity over quality’ motto.

Picketed neatly on the dusty scrubland that flanked the coastal site of Aradecca, the nearest tent to Graham had the feint markings of some unrecognised military. Certainly not that of Aradecca’s forces. The markings were almost completely scrubbed from the rough canvas. Not sure what to make of this observation, Graham turned to the hills that surrounded the city.

These small mountains flanked the Southern capital of Ecce, Aradecca. Staring up into these mountains, Graham’s mind wandered to the fate of his friend, Will Wills and of Graham’s own family, living near the centre of Ecce, in Midecca.

Eventually dismissing these thoughts as fruitless, Graham took to exploring his surrounds.

The camp was huge. Soldier’s tents formed an outer ring surrounding the armoury, field hospital, command tent and numerous other tents that Graham couldn’t put a name too.

It seemed odd that the armoury was so much larger than the field hospital. Dismissing this as irrelevant when invading a city that had several hospitals, Graham continued his self-guided tour.

Walking past the sounds and smells of a mess tent, Graham stumbled upon a curious cluster of multicoloured tents. The first two were shaped like circus marquees. Walking closer he counted three in all.

One of the marquees was a deep sapphire blue, with glittering fissures of what Graham presumed to be cubic zirconia. The idea that the glistening fabric was covered in actual diamonds was mad. How wasted they would be on a tent. If one could even afford the plural.

To the sapphire marquees left was an ever so slightly smaller abode. The canvas was painted a startling shade of opaque pink, without allowing an image of the interior to be seen. Yellow swirls and whorls moved through the pink, like ripples on the surface of a pond, flowing with the wind and the world.

The last tent, completing the circle, was of a similar size to the pink tent. Yet, the black ink that

coated its triangular surface seemed to suck the light from the surrounding area. Only a horizontal slice of colour could be seen. Widening near the centre of the tents triangular tube like shape was a sliver of golden yellow. It seemed to look out at the encampment, lazily watching the progress of the day, as a cat sitting on a windowsill.

Without drawing nearer the trio of tents, Graham could sense a kinship with those who stirred within. Placing his hand on the carnelian at his abdomen, he could feel the power throbbing beneath his fingers.

The slither of a snail cautioned Graham against any sudden movements, lest he knock Felix from his shoulder. Confused at the snail's sudden appearance, Graham made efforts to dislodge the adamant gastropod. Unwilling to be perturbed, Felix remained fixed to his shoulder. Tentacles facing forward, Felix appeared to be glaring at the circle of tents suspiciously, if a snail could be said to look suspicious.

Squaring his shoulders, Graham made to approach the circle of tents. But, before he drew too near, the yellow slit piercing the darkness of the triangular tent shifted. He felt the yellow sliver stab at his confident façade. He was a scared boy, thrown into a new world with only a persistent snail and a belt with a big ass stone.

In a flash of silver and black, Graham found himself with a hunting knife to his throat. He saw the blade of an axe, glinting in the growing light of mid-morning, held aloft and primed to strike.

The rugged man was bedecked in dark pants and a silver breast-plate, black stubble decorating a chin riddled with scars. He was much shorter than Graham, this probably explained his ferocity, but in no way softened the threat. A square jaw complemented his thick, muscular physique. Bushy black eyebrows sat above sunken eyes of the darkest black.

As these shadowed eyes bored into Graham's own, he noticed glittering yellow fissures within, floating in the depths of these enormous pupils.

Not one to accept a threat meekly, Graham reached for his mental capacitor and prepared to remove the resistor. The small man's dark eyes glittered.

"Hah! I like you kid," came the rumbling voice from behind Graham. Removing the knife from Graham's throat, the man stepped back. Clapping Graham on the shoulder and tapping the tiger eye embedded in his silver armour, he explained, "Can't pull that shit on me. I get a glimpse of the future, iff'n it threatens me."

"You probably have some weird shit like that too bro," the man said, motioning towards Graham's belt with a nod of his head.

As he removed the knife from Graham's neck, Graham similarly released the metaphysical grip he had held on his mental circuit. The two men clasped wrists in a firm grip. As they did so, a girl came out of the pink and yellow marquee and gracefully took Graham's attention from the world proper.

Her eyes, family-sized curry pots, were framed by delicate eyebrows and an oval face. Full lips smiled at Graham's consideration and his gaze dropped. Unintentionally, he found himself locking on to her ample chest and narrow shoulders. He was about to drop his eyes further when he realised she was already before him.

A voice to Graham's left spoke, but all Graham heard was white noise. All Graham was, was with the woman standing before him. The voice to his left spoke again, "Dude, your holding my hand like we're a couple."

Shaking his head to clarity, Graham wondered at how long he had been standing, dumbfounded, before this woman, holding the gruff man's hand. Hurriedly, Graham slid his hand from the rugged man's and quickly dropped his arms to his sides.

A look back to his right, where the goddess was standing, saw Graham shaking her firm-yet-soft hand. Just when he thought his mind had caught up with the situation, the girl shook her pretty head and thick blonde hair ruffled with the movement. This created a slow motion image like those seen in those intentionally risqué shampoo commercials. Yeah, you know the ones, with the ridiculously hot girl with CGI hair and only a waterfall to conceal her naughty bits.

Shaking his head for a second time, Graham attempted small-talk. "Name's Gra-Oh, are we doing names? This is all a bit odd," he stuttered.

Smiling a dazzling smile, the girl said something along the lines of, 'I'm hot and, I'm hot. Blah. Sexy. Blah. ARE YOU READY FOR A FIGHT?!'

Saying anything to please her, Graham mumbled an affirmative in response to the questioning tone in her voice.

...and suddenly found himself in the city centre, blue energy fading from his vision and a strong desire to show the world his sputum.

Not entirely sure when the sorcerer from prior moments had shown up, Graham resigned to focusing on the where.

Rising from the position he had fallen, Graham looked up to see a battle raging. Screams filled the air, as he was finally able to decipher the individual noises that seemed to shake the earth with their cumulative power.

Although, this earth shaking may actually be something to do with the earth shaking. This coincidence drew most of Graham's currently limited attention. The seemingly simple act of standing became more difficult as the magnitude of the tremors increased.

To gain a measure of balance, Graham held his arms outstretched at his sides. Glancing around the battle, the fighting seemed to have ceased. Soldiers were shouldering their weapons and saluting to the Armours they were viciously fighting not a moment before.

The saluting soldiers ceased to move with the tremors and Graham noticed that the Armours he had met previously were similarly not shaking.

That's when Graham saw it. The blood on the numerous tools of the Armour of the Tiger Eye/Onyx, the torn corpses of soldiers, their innards shining crimson in the dull light. Gore was everywhere. Graham felt an uncontrollable rage take a hold of him. His vision turned a deep shade of orange. Red's became dazzlingly bright and all other colours seemed to fade, taking on a dull grey tinge.

The final straw was a faint red coating on the gorgeous feme's armour. Graham slipped away. The darts at his waist were for stealthy assassinations. Graham wanted blood. He needed blood. Without noticing the tremors cease, Graham lowered his arms and focused on finding a more appropriate weapon.

After Graham saw a saluting soldier with a sniper rifle, things became a haze of red.

Destroying his magical resistor, Graham pulled the man with the sniper to his outstretched palm. Once the soldier reached him, Graham grasped the sniper then pushed the body of the soldier with five times the force used to pull. The soldier's chest cavity exploded in a shower of multihued red

satellites. The reds were dazzling. They seemed to orbit Graham's magically enhanced form. They lit the Earth with the life of that which Graham stole.

Bringing the sniper's stock to his left shoulder, Graham grasped the modern weapon, with skills as ancient as the belt he wore. He infused the bullets with a magical energy stored deep within. The link to the ancient carnelian embedded belt he wore granted unbeknown destruction.

Graham began to fire with a ruthless need to unleash a scarlet rain upon the Planet. Ammunition appeared in the barrel from the metals present in his close vicinity, both in the soil and in the bodies of the fallen. He fired past a point no longer remembered, darkness filling his mind's eye.

5 Elements

Waking from another nightmare, Liàng wiped their face slowly with their hand. Their palm came away damp. The moisture quickly dissipated. “I have been watching too many movies,” Liàng mused quietly to himself. Their fissioner was not mad, Liàng knew that now.

A month of sleepless nights was enough to convince Liàng that it was time to leave the forest. Time to leave the safety of their ancestor’s magic and enter the world of the Humans. This had not been done in unnumbered fissionings. The world outside was no place for an Elemental. The world had changed. They had let it. Somehow, Liàng’s line had inherited a kind of foresight. Terrible nightmares of possible futures intermingled with the life energy of their being. This energy held ancient memories and they seemed to try and explain the dreams to Liàng. It was not then difficult to see why his father appeared mad to some. Liàng had trouble enough keeping up appearances.

Many of the elders had tried to forbid Liàng’s leaving the forest. Almost as innumerable as the number of council sessions held to discuss what Liàng proposed, were the reasons Liàng presented for their leaving the forest.

The council understood the necessity, what really worried them was the possibility that Liàng’s line had become corrupted. They were worried that the madness that their predecessor had spouted before their ‘encouraged’ ascension may have been from a biomagnification event, in a similar fashion to DDT’s effect on higher order organisms.

This ‘corruption’ of Liàng’s lines life energy might have been growing over numerous fissionings, concentrating into each new being. Not entirely unheard of, biomagnification was far more common in the days when Elementals walked with the lesser races, when the taint caused by those species on the land influenced their close link with that same land. The implication that Liàng was similarly corrupted made many sessions fruitless, due to the possible invalidation of his advice.

Political confusion aside, the council eventually forgo further discussion, in favour of acting before the choice was taken from them. The only concession, Liàng must be accompanied by one of the elite Gust Guard, to ensure that if it was only madness that led to Liàng’s beliefs, there would be someone there to prevent a larger problem from emerging. Exposure without necessity was not an option. The Human’s could not know of the Elemental presence beyond the desert!

Entrusted to the defence of the Elemental forest’s boundary with the harsh desert of the Human lands, the Gust Guard were warriors akin to their water counterpart, the Water Guard, of which Liàng was a former member.

Currently, Liàng was approaching the edge of the forest. Nausea from their recent dream-state left their head groggy. Far above they could see an intricate staircase winding up the side of the

thickest tree in this part of the forest. Walking to the base of the tree, they saw the mark of the Air Elementals, with the protection of the Earth Elementals indicated by the second, lower, character:



All of the outposts along the forest's boundary with the desert were operated by the Air Elementals. They were the logical choice. Their power enhanced by the wind that blew over the dunes to the East of the Elemental's forest home. The power of the Air Elemental magic was amplified by their manipulation of the sounds in the atmosphere and their control over the harsh desert winds made them perfect for desert combat.

Ascending the staircase, Liàng read of the history of the outpost. Engraved in the ancient script, along the bark which ran with the staircase, were numerous historical recounts. Interspersed between tales of valour relating to this particular defensive structure, were enchantments of protection and long-sight. These outposts were first built when the Elementals retreated to the forests, in fear of the unfathomable strength of the Metal Elementals. They never failed, manned as they were, by the combined strength of the allied elements - earth, wind, fire and water.

The allied Elemental forces eventually fought back against the Metal Elementals. As dictated by the spiralling staircase script, this victory did not imbue as long lasting a peace as was hoped.

Growing sick of the history, Liàng's impatience got the better of him and they ran the remaining steps. Rapidly entering a liquid state as an Air Elemental guard ran so fast as to split them in two.

Sloshing to a standstill, Liàng rolled past the Gust Guard and retook their Humanoid form.

"Mate, you why do that?" Liàng asked, exasperated, while they collected their cloth bag from the step.

Shifting their beaked head in confusion, the Gust Guard ruffled their wings and asked, "You why here? No-one here comes without sending on the wind news."

"I bring you a letter. It by the council of elders signed."

Reaching into their retrieved bag, Liàng pulled the letter out. This letter spoke of Liàng's being able to cross the desert that separated the Elementals from the Human world.

The abrupt Air Elemental, having read Liàng's letter, motioned for Liàng to follow them up the remaining stairs. During this ascension, Liàng admired the Gust Guard's silken 'armour'. Air Elementals were by far the most powerful enchanters. Hence, their weapons and armour were imbued with more magical protection, than any earthen counterpart. The silk, spun in the huge enchanted looms that resided deeper in the forest, was used to dress most Air Elementals. The outfits were of intricate design, often a mark of pride for the wearer, passed down through the fissionings. In the case of the Gust Guard, the silk was woven with powerful wards of protection and speed. Able to keep

almost the same pace as an Air Elemental shifted between their avatar and their Elemental form.

The pair entered a round room. Panoramic views of the forest collided brutally with the harsh dunes of the desert beyond. The guard quickly disappeared, gone with the wind to inform the others of Liàng's presence and intentions.

Looking back to the vista surrounding them, Liàng directed their magic to show the great river that flowed from the mountains in the North, through the forest. The magically magnified image could be adjusted to see the sea, far to the Southwest, or most anything on this isle of Ecca. An Air Elemental design, the panes in the towers panoramic windows were enchanted in such a way as to affect the focus of the light and from there the viewer's eyes, while four thick poles held the roof from the floor.

Looking towards the city from whence they came, Liàng could see the trading vessels in the port. Shuǐgǎng, Water Port in the modern tongue, was the beautiful capital of their hidden nation.

Liàng's reverie was disrupted by a rumble. Unsurprisingly, an Earth Elemental had sensed a disturbance in the outpost and had come to investigate.

The ape-like avatar leapt through the magical window pane and landed near where Liàng stood. Elementals were not oft in Humanoid forms, preferring a more practical body shape. Liàng's being a Water Elemental lends to the belief that they should be more streamlined, or at least have the common slug-like tail, which allowed a sliding movement on the ground and an easy shift to a powerful posterior fin when entering the water. Instead, they had chosen a Human avatar for the purposes of blending in when Liàng entered the Human world. Wanting to grow accustomed to the appendages of a Human and to gain some additional perspective into their lives, Liàng was oft to take their form.

The Earth Elemental's skin visibly hardened as they faced what was perceived as a threat. This loss of flexibility was apparently acceptable when taking the defensive. Further examination revealed Liàng's blue-tinted skin and with this, their true nature. Earth Elementals, not being as intelligent as fire or water, are generally labourers, stonemasons or smithies. They tended to perform the repetitive tasks, after another Elementals initial oversight. Gentle creatures, they were slow to anger, but would fight stubbornly to the death if provoked. Not prone to prose, the Earth Elemental left when it had found the threat null. Likely returning to the wood or stone carving they took such joy in the making.

Looking to the centre of the outpost, Liàng watched the hole in floor, waiting for it to fill with the form of an Air Elemental on a round disc elevator. From what they had read, the tree the outpost resided was hollowed out near the top and below this was where the living quarters, common rooms and armoury were located. These rooms below the viewing platform, on which Liàng now stood, were said to be lavishly decorated and well supplied for the often boring task of watching the desert winds for threats. The branches of the tree could just be made out through the windows of the platform, likely unaffected by this hollow magical platform. Liàng noticed the defensive cannons were still present, latent in their housings, a tiger behind bars.

Elementals had exceptionally long lives, only fissioning when their life energy grew powerful enough for two or rejoining their element as they ascended to whatever existence they saw beyond their own. This did not make all of them patient however. Air Elementals, often the least patient of all, found it more satisfactory to enchant a loom than to perform the repetitive task of operating it for instance.

Liàng was not dissimilar in their impatience. Not overly youthful, Liàng's interest in Humans

was reinforced by their similarly brash nature. So, losing track of how long they waited on that outpost, Liàng began to grow anxious. They had spent enough time getting permission to leave the forest. ‘Why must they delay further?’ Liàng pondered impatiently.

Of course, Liàng knew that they could not hurry the packing for such a journey. Most of the supplies were likely in storage and Liàng was unsure quite what to expect from the world outside, as were most Elementals of this age of man. Books could only supply a perspective and little of Elemental writings described survival skills or blending into the Human world. Hence, Human texts were consulted and these generally did not account for a magical being composed entirely of water.

When the hole in the floor was finally filled with the wooden elevator, the Air Elemental that stood before Liàng had a pile of tools for the taking. The Air Elemental, their curious winged Humanoid form dressed in an intricate silk suit, spoke in a breezy voice, “I called Feng Kuài. I with you together arrive at Human lands go.”

Looking closer, Liàng saw the pile of tools contained two packs. It would seem this outpost was to supply Liàng with their Gust Guard companion.

“Ok, Feng Kuài. I called Shuǐ Liàng.”

“I Human clothes brought, also have some concealable knives,” continued Feng Kuài.

Looking Kuài up and down, from their beaked head and feathered crest, to their winged back and clawed feet, Liàng couldn’t help but smirk.

“Kuài, you first must a Humanoid form take,” Liàng commented.

Nodding, Liàng watched the Air Elemental effervesce, slipping out of, then into, a new solid state. A slender woman of milky skin, lavender eyes and obsidian locks now stood naked before Liàng. The multicoloured silk ‘armour’ fell silently to the floor. Kuài shifted uncomfortably.

Turning to the enchanted window-pane of the outpost, Liàng examined their own form in the reflection. Short brown hair, ruffled in a mass on a square-jawed head, was accompanied by a similarly slender-yet-muscular form. Deep blue eyes matched the slightly blue-tinged skin. So many fissionings with webbed feet and hands meant his fingers were not as dextrous as they had hoped to form. The blue tinge was also exceedingly hard to hide, not helped by eyes that brought out the colour.

Smiling at the strange nostalgia of their and Kuài’s Human forms, Liàng motioned at the clothing pile. They both dressed in the styles that the outpost had observed were common. Liàng donned jeans, a poor quality leather belt, sneakers and Potato Mash t-shirt. What a traditional side dish had to do with clothing was beyond Liàng. Smirking at the Human condition, Liàng turned to see Kuài had donned red high heels, a denim mini-skirt and a tight black top with a snot green jacket. Something about the outfit looked wrong. They assumed women wore more diverse clothes than men these days and left it at that.

Liàng wondered at the impatience of the Air Elementals that may have influenced their Human observations. This generalisation reminded Liàng that they had to remember Humans were very politically correct, even the obvious must be phrased more carefully. Yet, after his years of study, becoming the foremost expert in Human relations in the Elemental lands, he had come to realise racism was a prominent feature in their society. Each island disliked the other islands people for the strangest reasons. This formed a worrying contradiction. The Air Elementals would at least be able to relate to this Human aspect. They often spoke loudly and with grand generalisations of the other Elemental races. Although, this in itself was a generalisation, Liàng realised. It would appear they were more Human than his blue-ish skin suggested.

Eying the sword on the hip of their companion, Liàng gave Kuài a quizzical look. Kuài responded to the look with a sigh and put the sword in their own pack. Donning their own pack, Liàng hid the various knives he had been given in a range of positions on their person. The longest knife, a hunting knife with a too-thin blade, made for an Air Elemental, was also hidden in their pack. They were set to go and, after saying their goodbyes to the skeleton crew of guards, Liàng and Kuài made their way down the stairs to the forest floor.

The distance from the various outposts to the forest's edge was never far. The desert beyond was vast and abrupt, better range for the cannons could be had, closer to the forests boundary. The last few trees of their ancient homeland lay on transitional soil. White sand from the desert was in stark contrast to the dark soil to which it adjoined and overlapped. Like the blue waves of the ocean, the forests nutrients were rolled into the harsh sand of the desert.

The magical barrier that hid the Elemental nation also protected the soil from excessive erosion. A bubble of artificial forest climate flanked the enormous desert of Ecca. The bubble also served to disguise the presence of the forest to radar and the various other Human technologies developed of late, not that this stopped curious Humans from occasionally stumbling upon this 'mirage'. Sadly, they were dispatched, and rarely seen again by their own people. If their mind was weak enough from the difficult journey, they were often 'encouraged' to believe a false tale of the forest mirage at the edge of the desert.

Kuài and Liàng stood on this boundary for some time, an invisible line between the comfort of home and the harsh lands beyond. Stepping across this line, Liàng found they were suddenly buffeted by strong winds. The sand that whipped their face had little moisture. They felt themselves fading and had to form their own resistant bubble, before evaporating away. Liàng was so used to the moist environment of the forest, where they could exchange water constantly with their surrounds. Elementals could draw energy from their elements presence. It was like an extra sensory input.

Now, Liàng was forced to cut their ties to the desert environment. It was a disturbing feeling. Loneliness clawed at the edge of their mind. They searched for Kuài, to see how they were faring. Seeing them only fleetingly, they flitted about, enjoying the power of the wind. Liàng felt that this was going to be a long journey.

Kuài leapt dunes in the far distance and, without the completion of a breath, they were next to Liàng.

"This is great," Kuài said.

Liàng grunted, while hefting their pack more comfortably onto increasingly heavy shoulders. They began to walk.

The walk became a trudge, before it was a drag. Liàng had not thought to take much water, had not realised the true meaning of a desert. Elementals do not eat you see. They absorb their energy from the air, the heat, the earth, the metal or, in Liàng's case, the water. Where there was no water, Liàng began to fade. There was so little around that Kuài had to run ahead, collecting what little they could in a hat they had found in Liàng's pack.

Liàng didn't get to talk to Kuài much over this desert journey. The week, or was it weeks, past slowly. Kuài would run ahead and Liàng would keep walking, looking forward to Kuài's immanent and sudden return, bringing with them, water and company.

The loneliness became bearable with time, as did the nightmares that woke Liàng from their

meditations most every night. No longer was Liàng tormented with visions of their fissioner. Now, they saw Metal Elementals free of their prison and an evil sorcerer enslaving Human-kind.

So, Liàng dulled the effects of fear and anxiety by practicing with knives. When Liàng was too tired from dehydration to walk or wield, they would practice speaking the Human dialect to themselves. Mostly translating directly from the ancient tongue, the sentence structures still sounded nothing like the Human texts in the libraries of Shuǐgǎng.

Nostalgia, brought forth from Liàng's studies, brought memories of their fissioning. They suppose the overseers of the fissioning didn't want Liàng to enter academia, with their line's history of 'madness'.

Before Liàng's 'mad' ancestor, Shuǐ Shòu, ascended, they fissioned, as was customary. This kept the number of the Elementals manageable, only having a small area to supply their population with the Elemental energies required for life.

Very old Elementals ascend, their physical and Elemental forms joining with the world from whence they came. No one is sure where they go, but life cannot last forever. And so, they search for the next phase.

Fissioning was somewhat like bacteria's binary fission. The essential life energy of an Elemental, unexplainable as it is, grows with time. Eventually, this grows too great to sustain in a single form and hence, the Elemental fissions into two, where the first remains and a second individual is brought forth. Liàng, like most Elementals, had inherited much of the knowledge of their particular branch of the Shuǐ line because of the nature of the life giving energy.

Although, personal memories and feelings were infrequently inherited. Liàng did however, inherit Shuǐ Shòu's foresight. Originally recruited to the Water Guard in what was assumed to be a preventative measure against the 'madness' Liàng was hypothesised to contain, the elders couldn't stop the dreams or fault the possible insights that developed later in Liàng's life. And, of course, ending the life of another Elemental of one's own line was all but unheard of, only contemplated when biomagnified madness makes the act a sympathy. At least now the elders knew the 'madness' had both rhyme and reason.

The Water Guard were the elite soldiers that manned the outposts on the coast. This was the logical choice, with the ocean easily manipulated by a being made almost entirely of the primary molecule that composed its majority. Not able to manipulate the air to enhance their magic, warrior Water Elementals used their dual wield forms to draw the characters of the pictographic ancient language in the moist atmosphere or the ocean as they fight, manipulating the water in the air as a medium for their magic.

As an exercise, Water Guard developed a series of standard forms used commonly in combat. The Water Guard would practice these every morning, a habit Liàng continued. Completing another form, Liàng flowed to the next. Moving through these motions, Liàng flexed the characters, with a little creative flare. The knives extended each stroke and allowed for a more powerful cast. Some characters were oft used in conjunction with a physical attack and hence, a sort of martial art was formed.

They were good blades all, but not as familiar as the Keris Liàng had used during the time they spent in with the Water Guards. Keris are long wavy bladed daggers, favoured for their emulation of the rivers and tides Water Elementals love. Elementals didn't really own anything. In the Elemental

society, objects were given, used, made and traded only if needed. So, when Liàng left the Water Guard to become a Human scholar, after the nightmares had begun to drive him to a dangerously familiar ‘madness’ Liàng had forfeited his Keris.

The hunting knife Liàng had now was of air design. Characters for speed, strength, durability and aerodynamics had been sung into the hair-thin steel. The other smaller knives wore similar enchantments, though the hunting knife had a sentence in its hilt that Liàng found most interesting,

吉祥如意
(jíxiángrúyì)
Good Luck

‘A strangely sentimental enchantment,’ Liàng thought.

Suddenly distracted from the forms, unsure if it was a mirage, Liàng saw something over the closest of the dunes. Revealed by a sudden gust of wind was an enormous red rock. Liàng recalled the images used to disguise the Hall of the Elements. They had hoped to make the ancient hall the first stop on their journey to the Human lands. Liàng almost dropped his blades.

Upon Kuài’s next return with water, Liàng thanked them and explained that they must be more careful when using their inhuman powers, to avoid detection. The Humans had satellites and binoculars and other even more confusing and unexplainable technologies.

With grudging acceptance, Kuài slowed to a more visible pace. Their Human female avatar’s brown hair was whipped so far out of control, it had transcended from straight to bouffant. Liàng placed a hand in *her* hair, realigning the water molecules bound to the imitation keratin chains. Hair falling flat to Kuài’s back, Liàng smiled, satisfied.

On their approach to the city-sized rock, the trudge became a jog, before it was a walk. Liàng had to hold Kuài’s arm to prevent them from zipping off to explore. Signalling to a large pack of tourists on a mound a few kilometres from the rock, Liàng cautioned Kuài to be patient.

Liàng’s assumptions at the rocks true nature were quickly verified, ‘skin’ rippled and the lost water returned. As Liàng was re-hydrated, they also regained at least a foot in height, which had not noticeably been lost.

Kuài seemed to experience a similar effect. They were buzzing loud enough that to Liàng’s ears they were the last letter of the Human alphabet.

When they reached the side of the rock, an almost orgasmic amount of energy flowed from its interior, buffeting them with its power. The magic of this monument was what imprisoned the last Metal Elemental and kept both the Druid and Elemental races hidden, in their respective forest homes.

Thinking back to their studies of this hall, Liàng knew that the entrance would appear at any surface. Quickly looking around for tourists, Liàng prepared to follow instructions he had read many years ago.

As required, when beside the enormous ‘rock’, Liàng looked to the North and spoke the words to summon the door,

我要大厅元素
(wǒ yāo dàtīng yuánsù)
I require the Hall of Elements

A light appeared at opposite corners of a rectangle, above Liàng's head. The light changed colour through all the visible wavelengths, beginning with red on the left and violet on the right, reaching the centre as a violet-red beam. This beam then dropped downwards, falling to the floor. The newly cut door swung inwards, beckoning their entrance.

Looking back at Kuài before they entered, a swish of Kuài's hands in the direction of the door comforted Liàng somewhat. Not enough that Liàng did not feel it necessary to remove the hunting knife from their pack however.

The sound of their first steps in the sacred Hall of Elements rebounded off dull walls. Dust could not settle on such a magically infused place. 'Why then did this hallowed Hall appear to have fallen to a filthy fate?' Liàng wondered aloud. The stones of the minor Armours, embedded in the thick stone walls, looked to have lost their lustre.

After the defeat of the Metal Elementals, this hall was built on that final battleground. The last Elemental could not be truly defeated due to the nature of such a being. And his lust for domination of all the elements meant he would never willingly ascend. So, the minor Armours sacrificed their power, to imprison Jīn Sǐ the last and first of the Metal Elementals. The first of the other Elemental races had long since ascended and hence, their demi-god nature was lost. This left only their immortal ancestors, of which Liàng and Kuài were representatives.

Liàng's mysticism at the dust found a neat explanation, spiked by confusion. Liàng and Kuài suddenly found themselves facing two Armours. Who, from the books Liàng had read, appeared to be a knight and a battle mage.

The glittering aquamarine primary stone of the knight glared furiously from its silver and gold filigreed enclosure. Stepping closer, Liàng's palm opened in the gesture Humans refer to as waving. Moving closer still, with the intention of a hand shake, Liàng watched with growing confusion as the knight hefted the shield from her back and drew her long sword.

The battle mage, red jasper primary stone activating with a glow, swung their quarterstaff in a series of threatening gestures. Kuài had disappeared and in Liàng's frantic search for them, they saw the empty cage hanging from the ceiling.

Realisation dawned on Liàng almost too slowly for them to parry the knight's first blow. Sparks flew from Liàng's hunting knife, muscle memory reacting in defence. Liàng had to fall back from the strength of the knight's blows. Thankful for the swift enchantments on the knives, Liàng's retreat saw no injury.

The full body armour of the knight made aggression difficult. Liàng could no longer see her face, the visor of her helmet falling down, over what had appeared to be a classically beautiful face.

Liàng found they had approached the summoned doorway of the hall. Here Liàng chose to make a stand. Channelling the energy buzzing in the atmosphere, Liàng pushed with a hand towards the Knight of the Garnet/Aquamarine. The blast of water sent forth was dispelled by her shield and the futility of Liàng's efforts highlighted.

The Armours were originally created to aid in defeating the Metal Elementals. Many were superior warriors than even the strongest of the Elemental races. If Liàng could not defeat her with water-based magic, the enchanted knives would have to do. Focusing on their Water Guard training, Liàng barely held their own.

Deciding to slowly retreat to the doorway of the hall, Liàng heard a whisper of the ancient tongue. The wind was alight with a flaming sword and the Battle Mage of the Red Jasper was on the

retreat.

Liàng used this distraction to change the course of their own duel. The knight's attention temporarily belonging to Kuài, Liàng's suddenly liquefied legs fell halfway to the floor in less time than Humanly possible. Slicing horizontally, the gaps between the greaves of the Knight of the Garnet/Aquamarine were found and rapidly filled with Liàng's enchanted blade.

A high pitched wail escaped the knight's lips. Yet, no blood satisfied Liàng's masochistic desires. Instead, a red light shone from between her greaves. The battle mage's wards healed the knight's legs.

Liàng splashed to the right, feigning and reforming an avatar to the left. Kuài could be seen ducking and dodging the flaming quarterstaff of the battle mage. Kuài's sword flickered and Liàng saw them no longer, a whisper on the wind found Liàng's ear and the knight had to fight to find his feet after the blow that Liàng assumed Kuài had sent her way.

Taking this chance to flee, Liàng danced a 快(Kuài), for speed. Running in a half-liquefied state, Liàng's left shoulder exploded in a shower of red energy. Fighting to hold their physical form, Liàng observed the two Armours did not pursue them into the desert flanking the hall. But, they could feel their gazes on their collective backs. Liàng was fortunate in the ally they had in Kuài. A thanks was spoken to the air surrounding and the flight continued.

When they had reached what was deemed to be a suitably safe distance, Kuài retook their Human avatar and sat next to Liàng. The semi-desert scrub that surrounded the Hall of Elements was pock marked with bushes and dark trees. Liàng had decided to sit on a rock where he could pause for a moment and allow jumbled thoughts to reform an avatar of what Liàng hoped to be sanity.

There were nine knightly garnets distributed amongst the Armours, seven of these remained. Each of these knights was charged with ruling the respective nations or races of the fissioned Gondwanaland.

The Knight of the Garnet/Aquamarine was charged with the Shuǐ Archipelago, the water portion of the fissioned land mass. The irony of Liàng's near-death experience at the hands of the ancestor of their ancestor's ruler was not lost.

Chosen to lead because of their honour, patriotism and the loyalty they evoked in their followers, the knights commanded the remaining Armours through almost a millennium of peace. To think, the ancestors of these once great leaders now followed the twisted orders of the descendants of the sorcerers that killed their forefathers.

'Could peace truly be sustained?' Liàng moaned. 'The unsteady relations between the nations that formed after the first demise of the Sorcerers of the Ruby, Emerald and Sapphire was peace enough for the various races of this planet to live comfortably.'

Liàng planned on fighting to restore this unsteady peace, but how could they face the combined strength of the Armours and the escaped Metal Elementals? They needed allies and they needed them fast.

Kuài looked exhausted. Their sword had been broken by the Battle mage's magic. Even one with enchantments such as those woven by the Air Elementals could not withstand the blows that had been dealt.

"Kuài grim things look," Liàng said, mostly to themselves, "Before we fled, you manage grab anything from floor?"

“I have only my flute and broken sword.”

“I have my hunting knife and one smaller knife you provided.”

“You know what means right?”

“Yeah, free once more are the Metal Elementals and the Armours, likely meant fight new threat have awoken. Maybe some Armours who not under influence of the corrupt sorcerers we find.”

“We should find the Armours of Amethyst/Malachite and Carnelian/Obsidian. They before defeated the sorcerers.”

“First, we need some clothes.”

“Those tourists not see the fight provided, we for the greater good could sneak into their camp sites and liberate some.”

With that, they waited for the cover of darkness and snuck into the nearest campsite. There was little chance of them being caught. They were of the water and the wind.

Decked out in appropriate Human attire, Kuài and Liàng had to face their next challenge. How to find either of the two Armours that they hoped would aid them.

“Your magic is/is not strong?” Liàng asked Kuài, “We can use a smaller amethyst or carnelian to find the larger?”

“If they have their chest plates, or at least their belts, and only if we in peace seek can we negate the wards of discretion placed on their Armours. First, to channel through we need an amethyst or carnelian.”

With that Liàng began to probe the moisture in the soil. They were out of the desert now, though the sand dunes were still in sight. The scrubland they currently occupied was moist enough that Liàng no longer needed water ferried to them.

Liàng could feel the morning dew, settling softly on the sandy soil. More importantly, they could feel the water in the earth.

They spent innumerable hours walking in what Kuài referred to as a cross-hatch search pattern, or something else with an equally sophisticated-yet-nonsensical name. Kuài led Liàng by the arm. Liàng felt the soil with their extended being, searching for a suitable stone.

When Liàng finally stumbled upon a small deposit of amethyst, they had to stop and back-track, just to be sure. This sudden change from forward momentum confused Kuài and Liàng opened their eyes long enough to see Kuài stumble forward.

“Kuài you need rest,” Liàng told them.

A small nod was followed by a suitable remark on Liàng’s currently motionless position, “You found a stone?”

“Yes, there an amethyst geode a few metres down.”

Kuài nodded and Liàng began to weave a spell to summon the geode from the soil.

把紫晶晶洞到上面陆地来

(Bǎ zǐjīng jīngdòng dào shàngmian lùdì lái)

Amethyst geode arrive surface come

Swaying from side-to-side and repeating these lines several times, Liàng created a power vacuum strong enough to pull the stone though several metres of dense soil. The completion of Liàng’s spell was punctuated by the splitting of the earth and a blue glow emanating from within. The earth

fell back in on itself. The amethyst geode remained, falling into the resultant dip in the cracked earth.

The geode was not large by the standard of the stones of the Armours, but was at least a half-a-foot in diameter. More than enough for the locating spell Kuài was to perform.

When Liàng had finished examining the amethyst geode that had been summoned, they turned to Kuài to ascertain their readiness to locate the Wills Armour. This glance was answered by the thud of a fainting Kuài.

Elementals do not need sleep, per se, but, meditation is required to rejuvenate lost energy, after the use of much magic. The fight must've taken more out of Kuài than Liàng had imagined.

Placing protective wards on the surrounding area, Liàng pushed Kuài into a sitting position and began to recite characters of rejuvenation to the air, entering a meditative state.

6 Belt

A soft caress and the neurons in my fingers fired faster than a million times the rate at which my hand moved along the small of her back. Slower, I explored the ridge where her spine ran up to her slender neck. Her shoulder blades rose and fell with the movement of her arms. Tiny hairs bounced off my hands as they flowed past.

I knew my body was beneath hers, but I was not in it. I was rising, past her delicate inward curve of a waist. Soft tissue indented at my passing. I wanted to be everywhere, feel all of her. Hands separated, left moving downwards to her firm buttocks. Right rising, pleading with her right shoulder for passage. Kissing the join between arm and collarbone, I distracted the toll keeper with my lips.

Hand moving away, losing itself in her thick hair, my lips were all I was. I traversed the mountainous regions of the collarbone. Softly caressing the not-so-jagged peaks, as my hand re-entered the world. It found an unsought escape from the fruit scented locks, just as my own mind found an unwanted escape to reality.

I could hear a voice softly saying, “Wake up. It’s me, Keira.” My eyes flickered open, and images flooded forth, as they had the night before. I trembled with the force of the abrupt vision.

My fatigued muscles were suddenly invigorated. Quietly thanking my battle mage ally, I used the energy to break through the last of the resistance. Protesting the triad of sorcerers, I was the purple and green whirlwind and I would end this eternal night.

My amethyst enchanted blade gleamed eerily in the moonlight, it hummed with a life of its own. It was eager for victory. I swung across and in one mighty blow felled the Sorcerer of the Sapphire.

His body fell. I felt the broken triad’s power peak then fade away. The other sorcerers lost their links to his corrupt soul and the soldiers under his command no longer fought mindlessly. The battle was over. The demons that had broken free of the underworld could no longer remain on the surface with the intense light and without the corrupt sorcerer’s magical aid. Soldiers free of their bonds lay down their arms. The remaining two Sorcerers of the Ruby and Emerald fell to the floor, magical energies exhausted to the air. I reached down to place my hand on the huge sapphire, embedded in the felled sorcerer’s golden armour. The breast-plate collapsed into itself and I lifted the stone high in the air. It was a symbol of victory that I held high, for the benefit of my loyal friend and ally, the Battle Mage of Carnelian/Obsidian.

Unsure what was reality and what was dream, I lay as still as I could. Keira was by my side. Sweat dripped from my forehead and was absorbed by the sheets beneath. I heard a gentle whisper beside me. I could feel the air pass over my ear’s soft flesh, could feel Keira’s maroon lips brushing

the air with their touch, saying, “Are you ok? You woke up smiling then your eyes went blank and you started sweating.”

“I. Uh. How did I get here?” I stammered.

“Don’t you remember? You aided the escape of a university of students two days ago.”

With that statement, I felt the days prior to my now bed-occupying position flooding back.

I had just helped the last group of students, in the North-western-most building of the University. Keira was standing at the door, her thick black hair brushing her shoulders, as she shook her head and smiled. I smiled back, eyes enjoying the image. Her narrow shoulders and tanned skin made her look so huggable.

I was relieved at the sight of the empty room I had just entered. The only bodies littering the floor were those of soldiers. I spoke mostly to myself, “Well it’s up to them now, we actually managed to save a large portion of the university.”

“That you did.” I could feel Keira’s small hand on my shoulder, softly supporting my actions, as she had all day. “C’mon. You helped. I couldn’t have done it without your idea to send them to free each other. Thank you,” I responded with a thin smile, still suspicious of her warmth. Keira misinterpreted my hesitation, asking, “Why do you still look lost? You can’t possibly want to save the entire city, your just one oddly capable man.”

“I do. But, I feel something, a purple haze in my peripheral, which grows deeper when I turn towards the city centre. I need to go there, and find... whatever it is.” I shook my head, confused at my thoughts and emotions. I had to find this object. It was related to my rebirth and would help to explain this whole situation.

Slender arms, slid along my broadish shoulders. I suppressed a shudder. This both comforted and frightened me. I could feel time nagging at the edge of my consciousness. All I wanted to do was turn around and hold this beautiful woman, covering her dark oval eyes as I pressed her small round breast into my chest.

Grunting, I gently removed her arm and thanked her again with a glance and a warm smile. Still holding her hand, I walked over and opened a door that led outside. Standing in the North-western corner of the University, I was still a fair distance from my goal. I could feel it, pulsing in my mind. A pocketful of quartz told me, I was completely out of amethysts. So, I decided to take a safer course, avoiding large patrols.

The lazy autumn sun was falling from its peak. Clouds, under this suns seemingly uncaring watch, were tentatively forming to the South-west. Pausing to let Keira rest a while in a wrecked coffee shop, I realised our journey had skirted around the city centre.

Outside of the coffee shop, I had run into a pair of soldiers as they defiled a corpse in my path. I had taken these ‘men’ by surprise and excavated their bodies of internal organs with the knife I kept strapped to my ankle.

Currently I was staring down the barrel of one of the soldier’s 7.62x39mm assault rifles with slanted muzzle brake and iron sights. Two of their pistols strapped to each thigh, I assayed the scene across the road through the V-shaped iron sites of my rifle.

Somehow, I had made my way to my friend Graham’s apartment building. “You ok now? Need a

bit longer?" I asked Keira anxiously.

"Sure. What's another kilometre of running, to cap off a day of running."

"We can walk for a while. I know it's probably a depressing idea, but I want to check the apartment building across the road."

Keira stood slowly, graceful legs carrying her to my side. Somehow she was still smiling, her confidence infusing my body with steely purpose and a hard resolve. I turned and walked along the cheap vinyl floor of the coffee shop. Peeking through the wooden slats of the shop window to the foyer of my friend's apartment building, I could see a group of soldiers rubbing sore muscles as they hefted their weapons and stood.

Just as my mind finished racing through possible powers to put a platoon of soldiers on their posteriors, there was a flash of dazzling blue light and the soldiers had to shield their eyes from the source. It looked to have come from further into the foyer than I could see from my vantage. Moments passed and the soldiers appeared too scared to move. I watched as they finally stood, after a second flash of blue light.

I felt as if I had missed something important. The soldiers, after completing their rubbing and hefting, now walked towards what I knew were broken lifts, before climbing the buildings stairwell.

Motioning for Keira to follow, I carefully opened the small coffee shop's door. The only visible threat was that of the now obscured soldiers that had vanished into Graham's apartment building across the road.

Burning pencil pines decorated the traffic island. The crackling of the flames made the screaming from the city centre fade to a quieter hum. As if the screams of the trees were enough to drown out those of the survivors. I hurried to the foyer, not wanting to tarry in the empty street.

I could not help but marvel at the efficiency of the invading forces. They must have used tanks to clear the dead traffic from the streets because the two lane road I was currently crossing was lined by wrecked cars. The centre of the road was entirely bereft of the stationary traffic. Likely this was to improve the ease of enemy troop movements in the now occupied CBD.

Occasionally, cars that were parked prior to the attack could be seen, still in their original condition, boxed in by the wrecked vehicles that formerly occupied the roads. I asked Keira to check these cars for keys as she passed. It would make our goal a lot easier in the achieving and in the preceding flight.

Reaching the doorway, which was formally filled by a set of sensor operated glass panes. I might have noticed the absence of windows, which now decorated the floor with their shards, if my purple tinted vision were not focused entirely on the identification of possible threats.

When the tint faded and my vision returned to its previous multicoloured clarity, I motioned for Keira to join me from her hiding place near the door.

Finally, I lowered my weapon and said, "I don't know what that light was, but I would like to have a quick look in my friend's apartment. I might be able to beat the soldiers to the punch."

"Can't hurt I suppose. Wait," she began sarcastically, "it can, because a platoon of mindless soldiers is running through this building!"

Smiling, I filled my chest and pretended to remove a set of exceedingly cool metaphysical sunglasses, while saying, "What's a bunch of angry guys with guns got on me girl. Garr." Shaking her head and smiling back at me, she chose not to respond and we began to walk towards the

stairwell. I felt my foot knock a strange object on the floor. Searching the floor for what I had hit, I saw a wallet that looked very similar to the black leather of Graham's own. Not wanting to find my friend's mocking smile, I stood staring at the wallet for some time.

I eventually forced myself to pick up the worn leather and open its folded form to reveal a student ID. A mass of brown hair framed a set of light blue eyes, which stared at the camera as if to say, "This system is useless and you are but a mindless follower of this capitalist society."

Or something to that effect, I might get lost on the political side of it all, but you get the drift. The camera operator probably deserved the derogatory stare. Yet, I couldn't help but feel he was mocking my failed attempt to save him.

Turning to Keira, her dark eyes looking sympathetically into mine, I tried to speak. The words that flooded my mind seemed foolish and without the proper meaning. Events were finally catching up with me. The suppressed confusion and anger began to bubble forth. Words would make this whole situation too real. Keira broke my silence by saying, "I suppose that's his wallet. I don't see any bodies. There is still a chance he is alive."

Nodding solemnly, quietly fuming, I held onto the wallet as delicately as I could, not wanting to break this memento of another lost friend. After I pocketed the wallet, I found myself surrounded by slender arms, a warm gesture from my beautiful companion.

Beginning to close my eyes, to enjoy the comfort of the embrace, I moaned as purple filled them. The stairwell began to ring with the sound of numerous marching feet, on even more numerous metal steps. Shaking with fury, I carefully removed the tanned arms of my companion and told her to hide in the broken elevators next to the stairwell.

Reaching for the 9x19mm semi-automatic pistols strapped to each thigh, I ripped free their Velcro holsters and threw them aside, along with my assault rifle. I wanted to feel these men, bullets were too sweet a death for the monsters that stole what few friends I had.

Searching the floor for a suitable weapon to begin my assault, I blocked the sudden thoughts of my family from my mind, the possibility of their survival too hard to contemplate. A metal pole, formerly a handrail, had melted free of the floor. It shone with an enticing purple light. I hurriedly grabbed this coffee-mug-thick club of arms length stainless steel. A suitable blunt instrument, my opposite hand was occupied with the small knife I had kept strapped to my ankle. The blade was gripped in a style much older than myself. And, as such, I waited stoically for the entrance of my first doomed foe.

Apprehensively, Keira, entered an elevator. Eying the what looked to be antique *Not in Service* sign nervously, she left the elevator doors ajar. William looked like a rabid dog. He had retreated into himself and now stood in clear view of the stairwell. Keira watched the entire scene from her position in the broken elevator, a crack left in its door for her viewing... ability.

William held his formerly ankle-strapped-knife aloft, hurling it at the first man to reach the bottom of the stairwell. I expected this to be a non-lethal leg wound, as William had generally attempted to spare life. I was later shocked to see the man had fallen to the floor, the thrown knife protruding from his silent heart.

Using the momentum of his throw and yelling with a savage fury, William ran into the stairwell with his scavenged pipe/club held high. The next man to encounter this Wildman was clubbed rather

severely in the temple. William was lost in his loss. He tried fruitlessly to end the pain by returning the emotion with his blunt weapon.

No more men came out of that door. When I saw only a shaking shadow on the floor in front of the stairwell, I pushed the heavy elevator doors open again. William was standing over a bloody pulp of what I assumed was a soldier. This was only due to the tattered Kevlar vest that surrounded a larger segment of pulp. What happened?

I heard the footsteps approach from behind me, but I didn't bother to raise my head. No longer caring whether it was a soldier or a friend. The two bloody corpses I now stood over must have been sent to guard the entrance, to prevent the escape of the other residents. In my fury, I heard more footsteps and perceived more of a threat than there was. "I'm no better than these two now. I didn't even try to disarm them," I said quietly to myself, and whoever was behind me.

Shaking with suppressed sobs, I dropped my now rusty pipe to the wet floor and turned to walk away. Keira was standing in the doorway, staring at the mutilation. I needed to go, to hide from all this confusion. I heard Keira speak, but I didn't trust myself to answer. 'Slap,' I felt a cold sting on my cheek as a fiery eyed woman, vied for my attention. Holding my hand to the sting, I locked eyes with the dark ovals of Keira. But, they weren't truly oval were they. Like two silhouettes of birds, pecking at the arch of her nose. Opposite ends curved inwards, complementing twin beaks with a slight upward curve of a tail.

She spoke in a stern tone, "I get that you went kinda psycho on these guys, but you can't lose sight of your goal here. For now, let's just get out of the city."

An explosion, not unlike the firing of a similar assault rifle to the one I had discarded, rung around the stairwell where we stood, adjacent to the doorway. I felt Keira freeze with shock, lasting only moments before she dragged me from the line of fire, into the foyer beyond.

She stopped dragging me to ask, clearly distressed, "William! Look at me! Are you ok?"

"Wha? I'm fine, what are you talking about. Hey look, I have blood all over me."

"Are you completely out of amethysts, what about the bracelet your father gave you?"

Without asking how Keira knew of this, I reached for my wrist. I could feel the tumbled stones, cold and powerless in my fingers. No healing tingle escaped the quartz enclosure. But, there was most certainly a tingle from somewhere.

"Hey," I said pointing, "look at the purple dancing lights in the air! "

Cursing under her breath Keira tried to drag me further, aimed at the nearest window. Finally, she stopped. Puffing, she said, "William, you need to walk. I can't drag you. You're too heavy."

"Don't worry. I've been doing this for years. You could almost call me a pro. Hey hey, pro walking!"

I then proceeded to break it down, "Check 'dese out! Ooo more purple lights."

"You're losing a lot of blood. So, I need you to show me how easy it is to jump through *that* window and meet me at *that* tree, the one that isn't on fire," Keira told me.

I nodded, determined to prove myself to this woman who doubted my supreme walking ability. I could easily jump through *that* window, but I should make a show of it. Scraping the floor with my right foot, like animals were oft to do in cartoons, I prepared for my run up.

Hearing the word 'go' and assuming in all my preparation I had missed the 'ready, set,' I began

my approach.

Wobbling a little to either side as I ran, I could feel my feet slip on some thick liquid. But, I couldn't let the sexy girl down. Then, leaping as high as I could, I used my high school high jump skills to leap easily into the small courtyard beyond. I landed painfully on my back, head bouncing off of the turf below.

Suddenly, I could hear noise all around me. What I could understand sounded like numerous voices speaking a single sentence, "What happened to you young Druid?" "Nothing's wrong. I just got me some blood on my top is all. Where'd my friend get to?"

"I think you're losing blood, how about you sit down and rest for a while," came a booming voice. The noise, I shook my head. Everything was too hazy. The noise, the voice! NO! I leant against the tree that wasn't on fire, intending to wait for Keira. I could feel the old tree's presence glowing in my consciousness.

The voice-noises boomed in my head again and again, "We are dying. The sorcerer knows you're Druid and is killing all the trees in this city, so you have fewer allies. We do have one last trick though."

Ominously, the tree imbibed Will, 'Put your hand against my bark, young Druid.'

Not knowing why a profound sense of foreboding had come over me, I obeyed the voice-noises. My intuition confused me. It told me the trees were communicating with me, from all over the CBD. A cacophony of ancient voices all speaking as one. 'But, how could trees talk and why hadn't I heard them before,' I wondered aloud.

Nervously, I placed my hands on the bark, unconsciously opening myself to the trees. I could feel the pain. The trees were burning, their leaves, innumerable points of pain along scorched branches. Each node tried to cut off the pain from the forest network, but it was too overwhelming. The city-forest was dying. This tree was a small part of this extended network. It was beautiful, the trees were beautiful.

As soon as I began to connect and to truly fathom this beauty, it was savagely cut from my mind.

I was alive with energy, the trees had died to heal my wounds and as I stood, I saw my pocket was glowing also. The stones were alive with the healing energy of the amethyst and I was invigorated by the tree's gesture. I turned to thank the tree I was leaning against, only to find a hollow remnant of the tall green splendour of prior moments.

Its leaves fell slowly to the floor around my feet, gently covering the ground in a thick mat. I felt a loss akin to amputation of a valued appendage. Unconsciously, my hand reached toward the amethyst/malachite bracelet my father had given me. I could feel the energy stored within it now.

A profound sense of emptiness engulfed me. My escape to this courtyard-come-graveyard was a blur of confusing emotions. Clarity of thought quickly returned after I was healed, but the memories of the trees were unclear and my mind kept wandering to the fate of my parents.

Seconds later, I felt a hand upon my shoulder. I turned, shocked to find Keira standing at my back. "How did you get there?" I asked, "No matter. You're ok. Let's get out of here before they decide to follow the trail of blood." I reluctantly ran, Keira's hand in my own, from the dead tree who had saved my life, leaving a whispered *thank you* in the burnt air.

After running through the streets for what felt like hours, we finally homed in on my original target. It looked to be a hippy store that sold bongos and heavy metal t-shirts.

Keira, exhausted at my side, spoke while pointing at the store, "It looks like someone beat you to it, the windows are all shattered."

Looking closer I saw how wrecked the store's façade had become since the invasion. "Yea. But it's in there, whatever it is," I responded more confidently than I felt.

Cautiously, I approached the door to the store, apprehensively eyeing the signs of forced entrance. The figurines in the window were in disarray. Their threatening or what may be seductive poses, to the right kind of clientele, looked closer to disgruntled, due to their present horizontal positioning.

I pushed the sticker-coated door ajar, the jangling of bells drawing unwanted attention to my presence. Cursing under my breath, I motioned for Keira to wait outside as my vision blinked to a deep purple. I dropped to a squat and rolled backwards, away from the door, just as a burst of fire added to the sticker-coated door's rugged style. I had no weapons to speak of, so I searched the ground for blunt instruments or large pieces of glass. The bodies of civilians on my route here had had no visible weapons and I had avoided patrols as if they were infected with a contagion. Figuring too much attention would likely have ended poorly, I was currently armed only with a few corny catch phrases and some rubble.

I could hear the shuffling of what I assumed were more soldiers responding to my bell-announced entrance. Knowing I could not assault, I resigned to a stalemate, taking up a position to the left of the door, Keira taking cover behind myself. Hopefully, the soldiers who had fired upon me had come to the conclusion that I had fled. So, I took to waiting for their curiosity to draw them to the bullet-ridden door, in search of my fleeing form.

As expected, the door swung inwards. A soldier would have stepped out, if I had not dragged him to the floor before he could so much as contemplate this step. Kicking his pump action shotgun aside, I crushed his firing hand with my right foot and motioned Keira to bind his hands with the plastic handcuffs that all the soldiers appeared to have equipped to their belts. "You just got Will-dizzled," I sniggered.

As Keira approached, another soldier appeared in the doorway and I kicked the disarmed man at my feet in the head to render his consciousness devoid. Rolling to the shotgun that I had kicked aside, I came to my knees with the weapon aimed at the soldier in the doorway. I had hoped he would lower his weapon and surrender to me. No such luck. I fired two bursts. Not able to disarm the man with a weapon of such destructive power, I resigned to a quick execution.

The lank body of the soldier dropped to the floor, head torn and abdomen decorating the fragments of the formerly-rugged-come-shattered door on the floor. Shouts of anger could be heard from within and I chose to rush the soldiers who would be preparing to run outside, with their guns blazing of course.

Running over the now shattered door, I flung myself to the ground inside the store. Shells flew from my barrel and another soldier fell, joining his friend in the art of fragment decorating. I took cover behind the front counter. It was a long display cabinet, full of bongos and other items that people who use bongos also seem to need.

Peeping out the side of the cabinet I saw one last soldier, a woman this time, gun aimed at where my head was most likely to pop up. I stuck the tip of the shotgun up, and felt bullets ricochet off the

display case above me.

I could see the storeroom. It was an easy few steps from the counter. But there was a small area where I would have no cover. Between the counter and the storeroom door was about a metre of empty carpet. ‘Why bother,’ I asked myself, the woman would not have moved and this counter was only thin. The barrel of the shotgun placed against the flimsy plywood inside the display case, I fired twice. Once to break the plywood covering, a second shot to ensure injury of the woman. My ammo was depleted, but the shotgun was still useful. I rolled free of the counter and threw my empty weapon at the woman’s head.

The shotgun knocked her to the floor, after striking her in the temple. The blood on her right thigh indicated the final shot I had fired had done its job. Calling for Keira to drag the cuffed man inside and get to the safety of the store, I hurried to the bleeding soldier that had suffered the shotgun through the counter. My vision faded to the multicoloured hues of normal sight. Securing her hands, I used a small amethyst to heal her bleeding leg.

“What’d you heal me for? You kill my friends and then you heal me!” the female soldier asked, shocked and more than a little annoyed.

“Your right, maybe I’ll just use the knife you have hidden in your cleavage, to find your heart and eat it.”

She may have continued to speak, but once her hands were secured a glowing belt on the wall stole my attention. Nothing else registered.

By now Keira had dragged the other man to the relative safety of the store. Walking over to the belt, I held out my hand to feel the dark brown worked leather that hung horizontally on the wall. Two empty scabbards were attached to the belt, its intricate designs of an importance I could not yet fathom. I barely noticed the other weapons also hung on the wall, price tags adorning all but this belt. I reached up, grasping the farthest ends of this ancient pant supporter.

A large amethyst adorned one end of this belt, its energy barely contained within the constraints of its size. But, it wasn’t like the stones in my pocket. I couldn’t use its energies to heal. I sensed some other function.

Removing my own cheap belt, I looped its magical length around my waist. A long scabbard found my left hip and a smaller thicker sheath, resting near my right butt cheek. This left an odd metal clasp, opposite the longer scabbard, on my right hip. As I joined the amethyst to the blunt leather at the opposite end of the belt, the two ends become one and a katana appeared in the scabbard to my left. Checking the sheath to my right, I found a machete lodged there.

A voice came from behind me, I turned to the woman soldier as she said, “So, you’re the one we were warned about. They’re worried about you, but not enough to bother sending an Armour to stop you getting that belt. You should just surrender to them before you die, like most everyone else in this pitiful city.”

Kicking the soldier in her side, I walked over to Keira, her slender body resting up against the window display. She smiled her dazzling smile up at me, eyes peeking through long lashes. I held out my hand for her to grasp and helped her to her feet, saying, “Let’s get out of here. Did you see any cars with keys still in the ignition?” A shake of her head was enough and I walked back out into the street. Still holding Keira’s hand in my own, a new focus entered my mind.

Two options stood before me. I could either flee, beginning preparations for the rendezvous with the survivors or I could continue my tiresome search for those who still clung to freedom, and life,

within the city limits.

7 Camp

Waking with a start, Graham could feel the images of the night prior continuing from some metaphysical time-point,

The forces of evil had been defeated. Together, a battle mage and a weapons master had fought off the three most powerful sorcerers ever to have lived and the forces of darkness to which they had allied themselves. Albeit it was not a task they had completed alone. But, their leadership and battle prowess had had an important effect on this most glorious of victories.

Graham's weapons master ally approached. But, Graham could feel tenseness in the air. Molecules vibrating, signalling to his bloodlust that an enemy was approaching, this could not be. The Wills Armour was his ally.

Yet, if he came in peace, why was his weapon drawn. Too tired to think clearly, Graham shook his head. A blur that was independent of the movement of his shaking head, was upon him.

Fiery purple steel embedded itself in Graham's abdomen and a scream was torn from his throat. Dying words left a curse on the name of his traitorous 'ally'.

Chest heaving from the shock, Graham's hands grasped at the muscles protecting his intestines. He could still feel the sword of the traitor ripping him free of his former life. The Wills Armour, that was his true enemy.

Strangely, Graham could feel a presence beside him. He looked up from his untarnished chest and saw the dark sorcerer who had given him his belt.

He spoke quietly, "Your injuries are not severe, though I cannot say the same for the regiment we hoped to recruit to our cause."

Remembering the soldiers that had triggered his collapse, Graham shuddered. Red flecked images flashed before psychotic eyes. Convulsing, Graham tried to rid his mind's eye of the screaming faces and tortured looks as he spun to fire his high calibre sniper rifle at anyone who felt, to his crazed mind, a threat.

Shaking, Graham began to lose control. He couldn't fathom why anyone would kill so indiscriminately. Then, he could feel the comforting presence of another being. Assuming this was the sorcerer, Graham squeezed his eyes shut and was left with a final image of a young soldier, eyes begging for sympathy to his injuries. His arms rose to protect his face, but he was unable to flee due to the wounds Graham had inflicted on his abdomen. "I killed that soldier and he was but one of many," Graham whispered to the air.

Graham woke again later that day, not wanting to shift, waiting expectantly for images of battles past to flood his mind. When none came he slowly opened bleary eyes. Reds were sharper, as they had been since he had entered his new skin, but the tint was not present. He was in control for now.

The sorcerer, who had been at Graham's side the last time he woke, had left. Yet, the comforting presence remained. A note labelled, 'Battle Mage of the Carnelian/Obsidian', was on Graham's side-table.

Assuming this was how he was to be referred, Graham broke the envelopes seal and found it to be empty. The atmosphere buzzed and Graham felt a strange energy flow through him, settling in his ears.

Suddenly, words followed the feeling, "You modern day Armours certainly enjoy your sleep. I wouldn't get hung up on the bloodlust. A mage with power such as yours will take time to develop a finer control over his abilities. This is why sorcerers have diamonds, to focus and control our power. Whereas, a stone like your carnelian is primed for release."

A pause for effect was accompanied by an invitation to convene with the rest of the Armours at fourteen hundred hours. Recognising the military lingo, Graham swung unfamiliar appendages free of their spring embedded sleeping apparatus, intending to find a clock.

Prior to his swinging, Graham had not contemplated the clothes he was not wearing. As the hospital white sheets of his bed slid free of a newly muscular form, he found himself standing naked in a similarly unadorned room. Looking around the camouflage green tent, Graham found no flaps that posed as windows, nor anything else, other than the bed he had lain in and a small bedside table. A light and the note that had been left were all that adorned the table's surface.

Upon closer inspection, the canvas wall to the right of the bed appeared to be a curtain, which Graham tentatively pulled across to find a kind of small entrance hall. His clothes, including the carnelian belt, were hung or draped on the plain wooden furniture dotted around the room.

A voice came from the farthest wall and Graham hurriedly donned his ever-so-comfortable brown natural fibre pants. Pants on, free-balling it, he heard the voice ask, "Well, are you going to leave a lady waiting? I've been calling for long enough."

Graham's left foot left the floor as his right foot was disturbed by a slippery sensation. He looked down to see Felix and was oddly comforted by the snail's presence. The mollusc, which Graham had previously thought could speak provided some level of familiarity to his new surrounds.

Lost in thought, Graham heard another call from the door-flap, the female voice shrill with frustration, "I know you're awake! My senses tell me so! Now open the bloody flap!"

Unsure if it was magic or social reservation that stopped the voice from entering the room of their own volition, Graham shook his head to clarity and rushed past the wooden furniture that littered the small entrance hall of what Graham now assumed to be his personal tent.

Opening the farthest wall from his bedchamber, his eyes were suddenly filled with an image of such beauty as to dry the tongue and saturate... other areas of one's body. Areas that were, without appropriate forethought for such a possibility as that of the image currently standing before him, free-balling it. The what-I-had-come-to-assume-to-be mirage spoke in it's sensual-yet-approachable-mildly-husky voice, informing Graham of his apparent rudeness, after ignoring it's calls and something about a dart shaft that he was storing in his pants.

Frustrated at his continual lack mental clarity, even in his second meeting with this woman, Graham discretely pinched a leg and decided to reach for his mental circuit. He hoped to find some measure of focus from the trickle of magical energy that would run through his veins.

The vision spoke again, blonde hair shaking from side to side, "Please, that's not necessary. You haven't the fine control over your magic to do that yet."

“Do what?” Graham replied innocently, hurriedly following this foolish attempt at deception with a mumbled, “How did you?”

“Your facial expression for one,” the mirage responded with a quirk of her full lips.

Graham responded, by quickly relaxing the muscles in his face, donning a stony outward appearance. Well, he hoped he donned a stony outward appearance. More likely he just looked pained.

“My rose quartz does give me, along with the ability to heal minor wounds, an increased empathy to emotions. Kind of like how animals can smell fear,” the mirage continued to explain.

Graham’s blank expression must have flipped a switch and the woman – by now Graham had decided she must be real, or he was talking to very attractive air – motioned behind him and began to push her way inside saying, “I know you’re new around here, but you still haven’t invited me in.”

Swinging her head to view the entire entrance hall, she spoke to Graham as she faced the bleak interior of his newly assumed tent, “It’s a lot more impressive from the outside.”

Puzzled by this statement, Graham stepped outside. He was in the centre of the circle of tents belonging to the Armours. Swirling pink and searing yellow flowed over the adjacent tents surface. To this gaudy tents immediate left, an orange slit adjusted to better accommodate its watching Graham through the absence of light that was the canvas. To the right of Graham’s tent was the glittering abode of the Sapphire Sorcerer, its diamonds almost blinding in the sun.

Mesmerised, Graham tore his eyes from the tents surrounding, only to find himself facing one he had not seen before. This tent was a fiery orange, with obsidian flames leaping to and fro. White specks confused the image, responding to the movement of Graham’s eyes, as well as the soft breeze and the motions of the other multicoloured tents. Graham didn’t want to leave the beautiful girl in his tent waiting, so he magnanimously moved from his marvelling and hurried inside.

Upon re-entering his tent, Graham was faced with the challenge of grasping a long wooden pole as it hurtled towards his befuddled head. Sliding his feet to the left, his right arm shot up, automatically grasping the flying quarterstaff. He then proceeded to rotate his whole body to help bring the thick shaft to bear on the blow now faced from the left.

The beautiful girl from prior instances was upon him, fierce blows buffeted reactive arms, as Graham hurriedly blocked the blonde’s assault. Swing left. Quick right! The ferocity of each successive attack threw his mind into a similar spin.

Unable to continue the defensive tact as he was pushed against the heavy canvas of the tent, Graham began to feel a bloodlust brewing in his gut. A red tint entered his vision. Blonde hair whipping past became a grey mirage and her impenetrable Armour darkly shaded. These shades were in stark contrast to the bright reds of exposed legs and a soft skull.

Graham took a blow on his right thigh to allow the balance of the brawl to be broken. Using his superior strength, he smashed into her slightly shorter quarterstaff with a low swing. Then, removing force from this blow as quickly as it was applied, Graham swung his staff in a great arc. His opponents guard open, he could bring down a powerful blow from above.

Still recovering from the first hit, her enemy’s quarterstaff became a fear-evoking blur. The beautiful woman could not stop the final blow that took the quarterstaff from above her grip. Her weapon was sent clattering to the floor.

Disarmed, blonde hair falling lank to her shoulders, the beautiful girl moved to secure her

footing, which had been lost in the disarmament. Graham remained under the throes of bloodlust. Weak points highlighted by faint red patches on her perfect skin. He felt himself swing the quarterstaff towards her bare neck. She did not twitch, but seemed to shimmer, as if in a haze.

All of a sudden Graham became aware of his surrounds and the person's life he was so near to ending. A fog filled his mind and clarity was reduced to but a sweet smell.

Finally falling gratefully to his knees Graham dropped the quarterstaff. Landing in an analogous fashion to that of the weapon, Graham rebounded slightly off the floor of the tent before coming to rest with a dull thud.

Thankful for his continued consciousness Graham could vaguely hear feet walking around and a voice saying, "I can't always be there to disarm you with pheromones. You must learn to control this bloodlust. This power you have. Else you may injure those that seek to aid you."

Wanting to respond, Graham's mouth moved, but only broken gasps and shattered thoughts escaped quietly smiling lips. His mind was a buzz, nostrils filled with a scent so near ecstasy his mind began collapsing in on itself. A soft pressure on his hand told Graham he was not expected to have achieved more.

Comforted by this acceptance, Graham listened as the padding of delicate feet receded, replaced by the soft squelch of a snail coming to rest on his collapsed form.

Resigning to wait out the pheromone overload that had escorted him to his current position, Graham lay staring at the wall of his tent, thinking of the fierce beauty of the Armour of the Rose Quartz/Topaz, listening to the keening hum of a comforting friend.

Walking clear of the newly erected tent of the Armour of Carnelian/Obsidian, Vanessa couldn't help but feel the warmth of his ignorance. Though, this feeling was accompanied by a small pit of guilt, eating away at her empty stomach.

She should amend that vacuum. But, food just doesn't seem to have the same attraction as it once did. This Armour of hers had changed too much. It felt right, but some part of this whole experience seemed - no was - wrong!

Rubbing the topaz on her belt, she wondered, as she was oft to do when she was alone, the true purpose of her primary stone. Her own ignorance infuriated. With a sigh, she remembered to watch her thoughts so near the tent of the Armour of Tiger Eye/Onyx. His magical eye sensed all possible threats.

Vanessa still could not completely understand all of the minor abilities that made the Armours so unique. That damn sorcerer told her so little. And yet he kept such a close eye. It all seemed to come back to this seemingly useless primary stone embedded in the front of her armour.

'Whose side she was on?' Vanessa mumbled to herself. She was part of the invading army, but was unsure of the goals of the conquest. Growing more angry and frustrated she tore at the useless stone of power on her chest. 'What use is an Armour that is bereft of its primary stones function and can only use the minor stone, embedded on the *back* of the chest-plate?!' Vanessa fumed to herself.

Rose quartz is not even present on my enchanted belt. A weak cleric is near useless in a fight between Armours. Finally, smiling to herself, she thought of the control of pheromones and the empathy her rose quartz lent to her consciousness. At least she was not completely defenceless.

Realising the innocent confusion of the Armour of Carnelian/Obsidian was analogous to her

own, in some respects, Vanessa found herself longing for his company, wanting desperately to confide in someone her concerns and frustrations.

Not walking with any true destination, Vanessa was startled to find herself in front of her garish tent. She pulled the flap open to find the Sorcerer of the Sapphire standing in the centre of her living room. He stood with his back to her. Dark bald head stoically floating on broad shoulders, his minor stone, the diamond, was glittering magnificently from its central indentation on the back of the sorcerer's intricate breastplate. A cunning longsword could be seen, strapped to his left hip. Its pommel decorated with yet another diamond and its partner, a sapphire of the same size, attached concurrently at the end of the hilt. The sorcerer's hand rested on this hilt, lifting the sword up just enough for Vanessa to see a glimmer of the keen blade.

He threatened her with the simplicity in which he could remove her. Magic not his only weapon. Lately he had taken to highlighting her limited value to his cause. This habit continued with the proceeding gesture, asking, "How's our new brother coming along?" With an air of loftiness that frustrated he finished by saying, "I believe the last recruitment effort demonstrated him to be the perfect candidate to hunt down the Wills Armour that seems to have escaped our grasp."

A trained Armour could prevent Vanessa's empathy or pheromone induced senses from detecting or affecting emotions, unless they were particularly distressed or distracted. So, Vanessa hesitantly responded, unsure of where the conversation was leading, "He almost killed me. Even with the haze of pheromones that create an image of a seductress for his minds interpretation."

"But, you yet remain. He is coming along then! If he could come close to killing an Armour of your training and who has in their possession the breast-plate that accompanies the belt, without his own, or much training to boot! That's perfect."

"He cannot control his bloodlust!"

"He is but a blunt instrument. All he needs is enough control that he would not enter his bloodlust induced fever before we could point him in the right direction."

She began to object before being cut short by a sharp, "I have an army to attend to. Thank you for the update. I expect him ready to be deployed within the week."

With that abrupt order, the dark wizard's bald head was engulfed by a haze of blue smoke and a darker sapphire light was left burnt into Vanessa's irises. "Arse," she mumbled under her breath. The only reason she could fathom for the sorcerer not killing the Wills Armour himself, was that he feared the power that they may already possess. This filled Vanessa with a hope she could not entirely comprehend. 'Which side am I on?' she pondered allowed.

Moving to the small table, off to the left of her living room, Vanessa removed her breast-plate and lay it down in its contracted form. Looking into the oval cut topaz, a stone the size of a cheese platter, with room for biscuits, she stared deep into the glittering depths. She could see fissures, magical swirls and whorls of golden energy, arcing between the more transparent sections of the stone. Light was captured and refracted in many hundreds of directions. It changed at different angles and she slid the stone around to see them all.

Flipping the platter in her hands, Vanessa found herself staring at an equally sized rose quartz. The faint pink surface was as smooth as a water droplet. Vanessa felt her mind fall back into the past. She had awoken in her room from a wonderful dream. A great victory had been won, she was furiously reporting the events. But, then it grew hazy. One minute, the sorcerers had been defeated and

that was good. Then, the Wills Armour had turned on them. His betrayal led to the death of the Battle Mage of the Carnelian/Obsidian, before... before, the Will's Armour was defeated and peace was restored. 'Who defeated him?' Vanessa asked herself.

Pulling the two stones apart again, Vanessa felt them try to pull themselves back together, as if they were two universal bodies, gravitating towards each other. Two beams of energy joined the stones, one pink, the other a brilliant yellow. The beams danced around each other in random patterns, entwining and intertwining with a disjointed grace.

Trusting in her own lineage, as a descendant of the Sandigh family name, Vanessa intercepted the beams with her chest, placing the golden topaz between not insubstantial breasts. She could feel the gravity of these bodies as they drew themselves towards each other, through her own body. It was not uncomfortable, but comforting. As if the stones were holding her together with their power.

Upon releasing the stones, they maintained their positions, high on her rib cage.

Depressing the topaz to her heart, Vanessa felt the lattice of a golden metal alloy form its unique protective filigree upon her skin. The armour encompassed her chest, from neck to just below the navel. An almost impenetrable shield, variable upon the stones embedded and the alloy's own enchantments.

Vanessa's armour held many mysteries. Most of which, she believed were kept hidden by some trick of the Sapphire Sorcerer's magic. She was sure there must be a more effective method of using her pheromones on Armours, but the Sorcerer of the Sapphire would never allow her to learn of that either. With a sigh, Vanessa collected her quarterstaff from the door where it had been carefully propped up against the wall. A five foot pole of enchanted Major Oak, from the famed Mu Forest of Difang Dao. Gilt traversed the staves length in a spiral from the rose quartz adorned top to its topaz counterpart, at what was presently the bottom. Vanessa took to spinning the stave through a series of relaxing motions, to help clear her mind before the meeting at two o'clock.

Having lost track of time, Vanessa hurriedly checked the clock she kept on the small wooden table in her lounge. Finding that she had ten minutes to get ready to meet the other Armours, Vanessa hurried to the mirror hung in the curtained off bedroom section of the tent.

Pulling the lighter topaz yellow canvas aside, she approached the mirror. Staring into its small reflective surface Vanessa saw her eyes were a brilliant yellow. This was often the case after using her quarterstaff. Unlike the transparent pink they turned when she used her secondary stone, their golden depths held no rose quartz. She stood there a while, contemplating how to activate the mysterious power of her primary stone. The yellow surface of her breastplates stone taunted with numerous eyes. They glittered. Or did they wink?

Resigning to defeat, for the time-being, Vanessa ran a comb through her wavy chestnut brown hair. Not bothering with make-up, she straightened moss green cargo pants, held up by a seemingly useless worked leather belt, with a brilliant topaz buckle decorating her abdomen. An odd metal clip on her left hip sought to further suspicions regarding the repression of her armours full potential.

Nevertheless, Vanessa picked up her stave from where she had left it, leaning against the small table, and made her way outside.

Pulling the flap of her tent aside Vanessa saw the light outside was dim, overcast skies, threatening rain. She felt no need for a jacket though, curious how her armour seemed to imbue a

temperate external body temperature. She rarely sweat in battle, as she seemed to be cooled by the simple act of wearing her breastplate.

Vanessa's heart leapt as the Armour of the Tiger Eye/Onyx appeared at her side with his usual sleazy smile, saying, "Nice to see you've dressed up for us all. You know a bit of cleavage in that metal chest of yours wouldn't go astray."

"How your presence always brings a strange taste of bile to my tongue. Have you an explanation for this, OH *mighty* weapons master?" Vanessa responded with disdain. With a hearty laugh and a slap of Vanessa's butt, he disappeared from her presence before she could crush at least a toe with her stave, which she continued to hold in a white knuckled grip. He was off to harass some helpless soldier in the few minutes before the meeting, she supposed.

Reaching the centre of the Armour's small cluster of tents, Vanessa smirked at the placement of their new companion's red-and-black abode. To an outsider, the tents appeared to be a motley assortment. Yet, it was a spiral of rank, with the centre at the tent-flap of the Sorcerer of the Sapphire's glittering tent.

The deep blue in stark contrast to the forest of diamonds he had created to decorate the enchanted canvas. A disgusting display, since it literally took a forest of trees to obtain the carbon necessary to produce the stones. A story he often told on the nights they dined together.

Not noticing before, but Vanessa's own tent had been moved down, assuming its rightful place at the end of the spiral. However, to her astonishment, so had the tent of her fellow, the distasteful Armour of Tiger Eye/Onyx. It's ever watchful eye now looked towards the toilets and the mess tents of the 'lowly' soldiers. The battle mage's tent now took precedence, the penultimate rank.

The Armour of Carnelian/Obsidian must have left his tent or else the obsidian fire on the tents surface would still be present. Only a trained Armour with the focus, and knowing the trick of the fabric, could maintain the personal image from afar.

Suddenly pulled free of her reverie, Vanessa heard a voice approaching awkwardly from her left. Realising it was the Armour of the Carnelian/Obsidian, she hurriedly adjusted her pheromone levels. Relief was disguised as she turned to face her new companion, catching enough of what he said to assume it to be a greeting. She responded with the retail experience of a true checkout chick, "Fine thanks, you settling in OK?"

His light blue eyes stared intently into the haze of pheromones Vanessa had around herself. He responded with a sarcastic, but slightly anxious, "Better now I've beaten up a woman. I didn't hurt you did I? I'm working on the whole control thing."

Opening her mouth, prepared to provide a witty retort and positive encouragement, Vanessa was cut short by a blue burst of light. The dark Sorcerer of the Sapphire appeared at the door to his glittering abode. A second blink brought the arrogance of our friendly local weapons master into our presence, throwing Vanessa a wink before he turned to face their leader.

The smooth tones of the sorcerer filled the air with a story of a battle on the East coast. Two Armours had resisted after their families were killed before horrified eyes. Most of the Armours following the Sapphire Sorcerer had been recruited before such an event. However, in this case the rebels had somehow formed a large following. Armed and presently ousting the 'lowly' soldiers that were used to bolster the Sapphire Sorcerers numbers.

They cemented a power base when his Armours were not present, as was often the case in our

large scale incursion. Here's where things grew hazy again. Vanessa couldn't quite recall why they had begun the incursion. It seemed as if the sorcerer was awakening the other Armours, to fight the Wills Armour. As she grew more frustrated Vanessa wondered, 'But, if that was the case, who awoke the Wills Armour and why hadn't they faced him yet? Surely they should take the fight to him? And why were these rebel groups so disorganised, if they were following the Wills Armour to whatever destructive end he sought?' Too many questions! Questions Vanessa was not free to answer.

The sorcerer had sustained an injury in his hurried retreat and regrettably could not join them to quell this coo, planning to visit two more awakening Armours to 'ask' them to join the cause. Vanessa's mood heightened at the visible weakness to which the sorcerer had succumbed.

Although, this thought was quickly quenched by a glance from the mindlessly loyal Armour of the Tiger Eye/Onyx. His cold glare then fell to the Armour of the Carnelian/Obsidian, as he noticed the new placement of the tents. The direction and heat of this fierce gaze moved back to Vanessa, as his fleeting telepathy caught some measure of her heightened mood and its reasoning. A questioning quirk of a lip was all the expression that touched his scarred and stubbled exterior.

Finally, well wishes were said and they prepared for the blue light to engulf their thrice accompanied forms. Vanessa remained mildly disturbed by the longing expression and protective position the Armour of the Carnelian/Obsidian had taken throughout the briefing. This unease was not lessened by the proximity in which he stood. Arming himself with numerous weapons he must have found at the overlarge armoury. He visibly bristled with projectile potential.

Vanessa's reverie was cut short yet again, as her eyes were filled with a blue light and a scene of retreat at the front lines of what she assumed to be the East coast of Ecce. Two Armours fought fiercely on either flank. One appeared to have his breastplate, which posed a significant threat to the flying forces. Swinging her quarterstaff aggressively, Vanessa ran forth unto the fray, a crazed battle mage following close at her heel.

8 Memories

A rumble from below reminded me that I hadn't eaten since... well, whenever I had gone to sleep. That must have been some time after I had made the decision to test out my new fangled belt, by continuing my search for survivors.

However, this decision was hastily re-thought, after a series of high calibre sniper shots had echoed from the city centre. These shots were accompanied by the screams of what I assumed to be the small number of survivors that remained in the CBD.

Keira had touched my shoulder. Letting me know she was ready to follow me, wherever it was I finally decided to go. But, it seemed that decision had been made for me.

With an ancient sword and an similarly steely resolve, I began to scan the road where I stood for a suitable mode of escape. The cars were still parked in the centre of this road because the clearing vehicles appeared to be taking a less than effective route. Judging by the smoke screen of debris that had formed around the CBD the tanks must be using some kind of hardcore cow snatcher to plough the empty vehicles from their path. Whatever it was, I could use the debris field as a means of escape. Keira assured me the parked cars lining the side of the road were inconveniently bereft of keys.

Spying a green striped café-racer style motorbike, lying on its side near where we stood, I carefully approached. I kept a keen lookout for the sniper that I had heard firing wildly before. The screaming may have stopped, but the unease it evoked yet remained.

Reaching the bikes side, I saw the paintwork was only mildly scratched from the fall and the bike looked to be in good shape.

I could hear my parent's voices as I swung my leg over the black padded leather seat. They whined of the danger that was riding a motorbike and how it wasn't just you, it was the other drivers that you had to look out for. Eased by the grim fact that I was unlikely to encounter anything but stationary heavy traffic, I motioned for Keira to join me on this two wheeled engine with a seat.

She spoke, uneasy at the prospect, "Have you ever actually ridden one of these? You looked like you didn't know which way the front was."

"It's just like riding a bike right," I said with a lopsided grin.

Keira returned my smile with a thin lipped grimace, her pale pinched nose twitched with the perturbation of her emotions. Resigning to her equivalent absence of choice, she flicked her shoulder length auburn hair from her face and swung her shapely calves onto the bike. The pressure of firm breasts on my back sent a tingling up my spine.

Revving the throttle, I turned my head and yelled, "This is the brake, right?" pointing to a lever on the bikes handlebar.

Before she could respond, I sent the bike accelerating through the centre of the empty traffic, away from the calls of the dying.

As my eyes scanned for threats, the lifeless city flew past. Smoking charcoal had replaced the once noble trees that decorated the paths. A void was left in my head. A presence, that I hadn't noticed was there, was gone now. Not even a shrub, could whisper a fleeting memory to my passing mind.

It might have been naïve not to expect soldiers as I left the city centre. But, when a squad of four appeared as I sped through the emulation of a busy intersection, near the edge of the city limits, I was not prepared for the bursts of gunfire that, in a most un-cinematic fashion, punctured both my rear tire and some part of Keira.

I heard her yell out as I struggled to bring the bike to a controlled stop. The bike's rear rim scraped the bitumen. Sparks flew forth. The sound was deafening. Purple flooded my vision. I could sense the squad spreading out around the mock traffic.

Bullets flew past and I twisted in my seat to grab Keira and as the bike began to skid horizontally along the road, I rolled free to the cover of a motionless vehicle, finding cover in the life size diorama.

Not judging the speed of the bike correctly, I slammed into the side of a sedan and it rocked with the force of the impact. Not checking the door for a dent, I hastily stuck one hand into my pocket and the other found the slender neck of my companion. Healing energy flooded through me and I could hear Keira moan, as she was healed. I heard the clink of formerly embedded bullets, emerging from their entrances and falling to the road.

Ignoring the gravel rash that was coagulating on my legs, I rolled Keira under the sedan and began to search for the offending squad. Hand on the hilt of my katana, I kept my head below the tops of the cars. Glinting, the amethyst decorated hilt seemed to beg to be unsheathed, to be let loose upon my opponents.

Spotting two soldiers crouched at opposite street corners. I assumed the other two must have separated in search of my wounded form. Purple spots behind me, told of the trail of blood I had left through the traffic. Rushing to crouch next to a car to my left, I hid near the cover of the boot. A car behind me gave the appearance of a good place to wait for a trap.

Hurriedly healing my leg with the energy from my pocketful of amethysts, I ran to the car opposite and waited for the pair of soldiers that I assumed to be following my bloody breadcrumbs. The first soldier approached and I exhaled a silent sigh of relief. They hadn't spotted Keira where I had hidden her, under the dented sedan that signified the start of my trail. No more gunshots had been fired and I wasn't willing to consider the clean knives they wore on their belts. I slid further behind the car I now hid, waiting for the second soldier to draw near enough that I could dispose of both in quick succession.

Arriving at what appeared to be good cover, the end of my blood trail, the first soldier looked to his partner, confusion evident in his expression. This was only aggravated by my sliding across the boot of a car, behind them, opposite the good cover.

My shining steel revealed a rain of purple droplets, as the confused soldier's neck was exposed to a greater degree than life allowed.

His companion raised his 7.62x39mm assault rifle with an alarming number of features. Before he could take a shot, I had danced forward and was upon him. Swinging his rifle to the right to deflect

my initial blow, he stabbed with a bayonet. I grabbed the hilt of my malachite adorned machete and removed both it from its sheath and the contents of the soldier's right lung. Tearing it free with a rending gasp, I watched, sadly satisfied, as the bodies of the soldiers fell in successive thuds.

I wrested the second soldier's 7.62x39mm assault rifle from his dying grasp. Gunfire could be heard from the street corners, but this was not my greatest concern. The debris field I had hoped to use as a cover for my escape was quickly approaching. Accompanied by the rumble of what I grudgingly accepted to be tank tracks.

Sheathing my medieval weapons, I ran, head down, enemy rifle in hand, to the dented sedan where I had left Keira. My heart skipped several beats when I found only empty space where a beautiful woman once hid.

Suddenly, I was startled by a female's slightly bitter voice behind me, "I'm here, now keep your head down before I need to roll *you* under a car."

The gunfire had stopped, but I did not believe the soldiers had decided to let me be. We moved to the farthest right point of the intersection, from the soldier's point of view, which may or may not be stage-left.

I slipped the tip of my rifle past the tire I was prone behind. I could see only one street corner. From my vantage, one of the soldier's was scanning the intersection. Anger and fear focused his trained eyes. He spotted the movement of my rifle barrel. A standard 7.62x32mm assault rifle was swung to meet the threat. But, before his trigger finger depressed, I had blown it free of his hand and two more shots saw the ending of his immediate ability to walk or use his secondary weapons. "Quit hiding and face me like a man!" the final soldier angrily yelled from his opposing street corner. "I think the true cowardice is in facing a man when you outnumber him four to one!" I yelled in retort. The tank was very close now, the ground rumbled in anticipation of its passing. When the first car in the intersection rolled along the tank's thick steel cow catcher, I used the distraction to run to my original destination. I grabbed Keira's hand as I ran through the intersection to a main road that led out of the city.

Holding her hand tightly in my own, I chose not to risk ending either my life or that of the remaining soldier's. A few half-hearted shots echoed over the intersection, but I decided to leave some hope in his Humanity. His companion was not beyond saving and maybe, once he had realised this, he would aid him and not pursue.

Pouring a bowl of cereal in my usual fashion, combining all the various boxes present to create a tastier mix. I made a move towards the fridge, where I hesitated. 'Was the power even on?' I wondered to myself. Putting my hand to its slick white surface, I could feel no rumbling. I guess it was lucky we had long-life milk.

Smiling to myself, in spite of the days leading up to my current breakfasting situation, a bowl of cereal was such a comfortably normal thing to have. Sitting down, milk soaked cereal in front of me, I took to a continuation of my pondering of the days prior mentioned.

I could see the Northern highway now, Beiloo Highway, a few blocks down from where we

stood. We took cover outside a small building, which judging by the outwardly bland exterior, had previously provided some kind of financial service.

It's slightly indented front doorway was now servicing two people, taking cover from the slightly more exciting sniper. The sniper could be seen, similarly taking cover. His cover was not likely taken out of fear, but out of the necessity to remain hidden. In the window of the 10th floor of a telecommunications building on Beiloo Highway, I had spotted the threaded muzzle of a 7.62x51mm sniper rifle with rimless bottlenecked centre-fire cartridge and flash suppressor, and had hurriedly found cover. If it wasn't for the fading light of the setting sun, glinting off the sniper's barrel, it seemed unlikely that I could have spotted him, before a shot was fired.

The clouds from the Northeast were making slow progress towards the CBD. However, rain was not at the forefront of my mind at the current time. Keira was exceedingly tired and I wasn't sure if our chances of escape would increase under the cover of darkness. The darkness, like the clouds, was fast approaching. Tucking this information comfortably into the back of my mind, I asked Keira to stay in the cover of the doorway, while I backtracked towards the city centre and crossed the street.

Approaching the sniper's position from the opposite side of the street to the door front where Keira hid. I moved the tip of my 7.62x32mm assault rifle around the shop front I was taking cover behind. I had removed a lot of the unnecessary features the former owner thought necessary, reducing the rifle to the standard conspicuous grip, flash suppressor, ACOG scope and box cartridge. Using my right arm to steady the rifle against the wall, my left took aim and depressed the trigger once. A single shot rang out and the barrel of the sniper rifle swung towards the clouds. Having no desire to wait for confirmation of the kill or to see if anyone else knew of it, I motioned for Keira to run and we made short work of the distance between the assumed to be financial offices and Beiloo Highway.

Further assumptions led to the conclusion that the suburbs would be similarly full of motionless traffic. So, I searched the terrace for a second motorbike.

I realised, in my hasty trip to get to the terrace, that the traffic here had already been wrecked by one of the tanks equipped with a cow snatcher. This realisation came with a beam of light from two blocks down. The light was accompanied by a purple haze. A truck with a spot light on our position rumbled to life. Its rear tray wasn't visible, but I assumed it was full of smiling soldiers, itching for a fight.

I turned to Keira and hurriedly told her to run in the direction of the mountains and find a motorbike. I would be close behind. As I did this I dropped my rifle in a mock surrender, raising my arms to the darkening sky. Troops leapt from the rear of the truck and surrounded my position.

Hands held at shoulder height, I waited for their leader to exit the truck and approach. I suppose a border patrol was inevitable, no matter which direction I left the CBD.

When their leader was within a metre of my position, I unsheathed my katana and made a move. Bullets were fired from the soldiers that had me surrounded.

Assuming I was targeting their leader, poorly contemplated deployment saw friendly fire wounding several of the group nearest this soldier. I planted my right foot hard, changing direction mid-lunge and propelling myself towards the soldier that had taken up position at my six o'clock.

Realising their mistake, the soldiers, who had not been shot by their comrades, made to aim for where I had relocated. Why they had surrounded me was a mystery. They must have been trained at some point.

The soldier behind me had enough time to yelp and raise his rifle in protest to the katana that

now adorned his chest.

Ripping the blade free, bullets burning my right arm and left ankle, I dove to the right and rolled. My victim's body shuddered as it was pierced by bullets from the rest of the patrol.

Ending my roll, I found my feet, while my machete flew through the air towards the furthest of the soldiers. The thick blade planted itself in a soldier's right eye with a thud. This was accompanied by three clicks, signifying the empty clips of the remaining three soldiers.

The closest soldier hesitated between knife and side arm. I did not. A flick of my arm left his mind free of any further deliberation and he fell faster than his companions took to reload. My katana made short work of another soldier, his newly cropped head dropping with a thud. As the body fell, I slid the knife the headless man had had at his waist free of its holster and with a swing of my right arm, sent it spinning through the air towards a frantic foe.

The leader, who had somehow escaped injury, slid a sword free of its hip hung sheath. The glimmer of his rapier sent a purple glint to my eye from the spot lights continued illumination. Smirking, I flicked my katana to the left, to free its slick surface of blood. This gesture opened my chest up for attack and the leader did not hesitate.

Rolling left, my right hand found the hilt of my katana. Clasp my left hand, I swung with as much power as I could muster. The stumbling man had his blow deflected and his torso disconnected, before I had a chance to assess him as a threat. This, I suppose, surmised he was non-lethal.

Collecting my machete from where it glittered green, embedded in the eye socket of a fallen foe. I turned to the mountains in the North and took to the run.

A clatter of metal on tiles snapped my attention back to the present. Milk decorated my crotch, but my mind had wandered to darker places, too far to smirk at the spreading stain. I'd never so much as put fist to face for as long as I could remember.

'Before', I thought, as I mentally motioned at my metamorphosed form. 'When did it become so easy to take another's life and when did I gain the right?'

An audible sigh brought a soft thudding to my ears and a beautiful woman to my eyes. Big blue eyes tried to draw my mind out of introspection. Shaking my head from her sympathetic stare, I fell further into my contemplations, searching for a purpose behind the death.

I found Keira, crouched off to the side of a park, next to the intersection of two main roads. She had a motorbike lying by her side. Greeted by her worried expression, I shrugged off the questions in her eyes and pulled the bike upright, careful to hide my wince, as I stretched the half healed wound in my right arm.

I think the bullet was still embedded in my forearm, but I had had only enough energy in my crystals to close the wound. My pants were stained with blood, bullet holes making them more rugged than any of the pre-torn pants you found in these 'modern' clothes stores. My t-shirt was in such poor condition it was hardly worth wearing.

Looking down at my outward appearance, I could see why Keira had appraised me with concern. But, my new body was holding up just fine. I would say it was exceeding expectations, but

all of this remained so beyond my comprehension, it seemed a foolish turn of phrase. I had few expectations remaining.

Without a word Keira slid herself onto the bike behind me and I proceeded to slide my feet onto the sides. We smoothly cruised off and up the crowded main road.

Finishing my bowl of cereal, I looked up from my reverie. A soft voice in front of me spoke, “You back in the real world now? Your eyes glazed over and your face turned to stone.”

“Yeah. Was just thinking about things. I’m gonna go for a walk. There’s plenty of food in the cupboard. I’ll see you soon.”

I walked free of her gaze. I felt bad leaving in such a way. But, I needed to be alone for a while. It was probably a bad idea to have returned to my parent’s house after escaping the CBD. But, I had to chance their survival.

Staring at the carpet as I made my way to the door reminded me of my mother, who would be furious at the stains. Although, I suppose them being the result of her and my father’s deaths would exempt the carpets continued cleanliness, on this one occasion.

I had taken their bodies outside and buried them before I could sleep. The crossed sticks that marked the burial place of those who had raised me were hardly recognisable as individual personalities. Solace was only available in that I had no idea of the fate of those that *had* survived. Some may yet be free, but of those that had been taken, who knows. If this was any solace to take. With a heavy sigh, I opened the front door and stepped...

...into a forest of ancient proportions and of even older memories. I wasn’t surprised at this sudden transition, quite the contrary, I felt a certain relief. As if I was finally home and safe. This was where my magical lineage was born.

Exploring the ancient forest, I brushed my hand against every tree I passed. They were stoic Muwood, but not of Difang Dao, the isle of earth. They were from another time.

Listening to the whisperings of news and feeling the slow progress of life, I could feel the power of the forest. The combined entity. The balance between life and death, harmonized existence and my mind.

A deep voice echoed, directionless, in the catacombs of conscious thought, “You have awoken at last. I was growing tired of the day-to-day life of a *normal* animal.”

With this, a dark grey wolf of a larger size than I would expect stepped out from a behind tree in front of me. The wolf was near three feet tall and at least four and a half long. Yellow stained teeth bared in what I chose to assume was a smile. A single purple eye mismatched with a deeper green, in a gaze that spoke of many years.

Powerful muscles brought the wolf slowly to my side, where he continued to walk, looking me up and down, as if I were a menu. Finally, responding to my unease, the voice came again, still directionless, “I am Wolf, the familiar of the Wills Armour since the Druid Armours were formed. Your secondary stone, the malachite, grants you Druidic powers, which you likely have not suspected. It became so, so as to aid you in protecting and guiding the dying Druid race.”

“Where am I? Wait... Druids?” I queried, shocked at my own lack of shock.

“You are in your subconscious mind. Exploring an ancient genetic memory, passed down through

the Armour enhanced bloodline of the Wills family.”

“So,” I began, somewhat confused, “my father was one of these Armours?”

“No,” clipped the directionless voice, “the Armours have been sleeping for a long time.”

Walking deeper into the forest, I could feel a power, an energy, pulling. I reached a grove with a small rock face, clear water running down its worn surface. It stood in the centre of an otherwise flat grass oval. As I circled around the small face, which had apparently erupted from the centre of this oval, I could see fissures of malachite and amethyst interrupting its surface.

Finding, what I assumed to be the front of the fissured rock, I searched for a source for the water that ran from the top of the face. The water ran down into an indented pool before it continued its journey to the thick grass below. Looking to the top of the stone, a blink brought a new tone to my eyes. Deep greens, lush and beautiful in the surrounding forest, stood out, as stark and bare as the contrast of black to white. The whole world was black, and the green that shone before me, stood out as the purest white.

Looking back to the fissured face, I followed a glittering green stream as it extended up, into the sky far above. I could see purple snakes, slithering in the liquid depths. Visible was the duality that brought my armour its power.

Looking deeper into the indented pool, where the water was first diverted, I could see a great oval malachite, polished smooth by the gentle strokes of the waters flow. Reaching into the pool...

...I found myself in the middle of a battle. Screams of pain tore at my ear drums. A dying woman held out her hand for aid. I reached into my pocket, but felt no spark. Her eyes were glazed before I could then contemplate conventional healing. Looking around, I found I had mistaken what I thought to be a battle, for a slaughter.

The bodies lying on the floor were not those of soldiers, but of civilians. Other than the hastily grabbed plows and scythes from farming, no weapons were clasped in their dying grasp or littering the floor.

Interspersed in the sea of corpses, were slender individuals that looked too delicate and powerful to be entirely Human. These people were my people. They were Druids. Dead because of some mistake that I could not yet remember.

The ancient Mu forest flanking the village was alight with magically enhanced flames. The trees were fighting the flames with all their power, or as much as such a being can conjure when facing its greatest weakness.

The fire was fuelled by a sorcerer. I could not yet see them or their army. Scanning the landscape, my ears felt moist with blood, the screaming of the forest was unbearable. Finally, I spotted the enemy forces across the river, taking aim with bows and crossbows alike. United by their goal, to end the lives of the only Armours capable of fighting back...

...I found myself removed from the world of my subconscious. Suddenly I was standing in the breach of my front door, hand still grasping the door handle, sure of my purpose.

9 Suburbia

It had been two days since Belinda, Ted and Lela had escaped to the maze of fences that was suburbia. Belinda had hardly spoken. Well, she didn't speak at all actually. But, Ted and Lela owed her their lives from her cover of their retreat from the university.

From the snippets she mumbled, when she thought they weren't around, or in her nightmares, where she thrashed about and cried, Lela gathered a man had saved her, but had not made it out. Her slender form grew closer to starved, as she only seemed to eat when she felt it was necessary. Muscles bulged besides bones. Thin blonde hair had become ragged and short. Her well kept appearance had been replaced by cold blue eyes in sunken holes and frayed blonde hair, that seemed to grow shorter by the day. She was never without a gun.

We had avoided patrols as-so-far through luck. Although, their frequency was diminishing as the days passed. This was not all that was diminishing however. The light seemed to have dimmed also. The clouds from the Northeast had settled over Aradecca, but no rain had fallen. Lela was becoming more and more anxious as to how they could evade these patrols and make it to Locksenbury oval in time for Will's proposed reunion.

Ted's leg was becoming worrisome, but, despite the pain, he put on a brave face. The area around the wound looked infected. White ooze around the puncture was a pretty clear indication. Lela knew there was a hospital nearby. Although, the invading army was likely using the hospital for their own wounded, or at least had ransacked it for the antibiotics and other drugs they required. Ted needed drugs and clean wrappings not derived from former attire.

Another stifled moan from the bedroom where Ted was resting, after our latest relocation, brought a concerned glance from Belinda and an acknowledging nod from where Lela sat. The couch was comfortable, but Belinda refused most comforts, in favour of constant vigilance. She instead chose to sit under a window that faced the road, watching.

The screech of tires outside saw Belinda roll backwards, out of the doorway, to avoid being spotted. The yells of angry soldiers accompanied heavy footfalls approaching the house, and it's neighbours on either side.

Instinctively, Lela grabbed the axe she had found in the shed and hurried to Belinda's side. One of Belinda's pistols was in her hand, the other she offered to Lela. Knowing how lethal Belinda was with those pistols, Lela refused with a shake of her head and took a position near the door, axe at the ready.

The corner Lela hid behind had a straight line of sight to the front door. She made sure she could retreat to Ted's bedroom down the corridor. Alternating pistol fire and the shattering of glass told Lela of Belinda's fury.

Lela heard a thump and saw Belinda run past her to a doorway further down the corridor, clips

falling free of both pistols. She was ready to cover Lela's own retreat and protect Ted, where he lay in the bedroom.

Lela heard numerous footsteps as they cautiously approached the front door. Moving through, the first man cursed Belinda, 'The bitch with the pistols', Lela believed was how he referred to her. Waiting until she saw a foot step past her corner, Lela swung with her good arm. She could feel her left shoulder twinge at the action and she winced as the bullet wound ripped open once more. Nevertheless, her swing brought an axe head to the chest of the man who had revealed his foot, most unfortunately for him. She pulled him around the corner and made a shield of his final moments, digestive juices left to dissolve his insides. Lela threw her shield towards his companion as a second soldier rushed around the corner.

Former partner firing at the propelled shield, Lela watched as limbs fell free of the corpse. Lela dropped to the floor, Belinda finished the second soldier's life, as Lela collected her shield's shotgun from where it had fallen. Lela then proceeded to fall back to the cover of Ted's bedroom doorway, where Belinda currently hid, her pistols eager for revenge.

Behind them, Belinda and Lela could hear Ted frantically wrapping his wound in the broom-stick splint they had made for him. Now concealed in Ted's ward, Lela's feelings of security were shattered with the similarly broken glass now falling to the floor. Remembering the window of the bedroom, Lela dropped to the floor to avoid the possibility of surprise enemy fire. A pistol flew through the air and Ted caught it and swung towards the windows vandal in a coordinated motion. Three shots ended further concern. Ted still had our back.

Belinda's remaining pistol was firing down the corridor again and Lela hurriedly found her feet. A burst of fire had left a group of holes where she had stood. Not taking the time to breathe a sigh of relief, Lela chose to end this defence before they were overrun by re-enforcements from the neighbouring houses.

Shotgun stock up against her good right-shoulder, eyes fixed on the V at the end of the barrel, Lela swung her gun free of the doorway and due to a depression of her index finger, saw a soldier's head explode. Moving forward, Lela could hear Belinda helping Ted to his feet, pain obvious in the groans and grunts from behind.

Dodging to the left, Lela fired at the next soldier to enter the corridor. Only grazing them, Lela felt bullets whiz past, as she ducked into another room. Dust filled the air and Lela suppressed the urge to cough and clear her raw throat. Instead, she gripped her shotgun tight and stood halfway, legs bent and ready to leap. Pushing sideways, Lela was firing before she was out of the doorway behind which she had hidden. The doorframe was the first to suffer her wrath, before the soldier was blasted against the wall.

Landing with a grimace on her already tender left shoulder, Lela quickly walked over to the soldier. From the range Lela had fired, the shotguns pellets had not killed the soldier. Kicking the gun from their hands, Lela knocked the soldier unconscious with the butt of her weapon.

Time slowed as Lela spun to face a new threat approaching from her left, through the open front door. Lela knew she was too late. Yet, in the same blur, the soldier fell. Slow motion showed the explosion of the soldier's left temple in disturbing clarity. Belinda had fired, pistol resting on Ted's hunched form. Whispering thanks for her good fortune and good friends, Lela continued toward the front door.

Lela could see more black vans approaching from down the street. Unsure if there were still

more soldiers from the first squad, they ran, heads down, to the first van. Frantically, Lela looked in the places where she had seen people hiding keys in the movies. Lela almost cried when her last ditch attempt found the glove box empty.

Lela could hear the approaching vans skidding to a halt on either side of their own van. Belinda helped Ted into the passenger's seat, while she stood on the side step. Pistol firing at the black vans that now flanked them. Putting her hands and head on the steering wheel Lela moaned. Life did not flash before her however, as she realised the ignition had not been checked.

Firmly grasping a piece of metal she assumed to be a key, a turn led to the roaring of the vans engine. Throwing the clumsy vehicle into reverse, Lela saw an angry blonde throw an empty pistol at the driver of the closest van. Her last shot killed the passenger, not her intended target. The pistol cracked the glass in front of the startled driver. Lela pulled the handbrake and kicked her knee up to propel her shotgun to Belinda, as the van spun in a dramatic one-hundred-and-eighty degree turn. Inertia favouring the quick thinking, Lela heard shotgun shells littering the passing road.

Belinda emptied the shotgun into the vans attempting pursuit. Dead drivers and bullet ridden tires averted the possibility of a chase and Belinda slid herself into the seat beside Ted. Face scrunched in pain, he smiled at our good fortune nonetheless. Although, he might have been smiling at the slender form that now sat exceedingly close to his middle-aged self. That's when he said something that Lela hadn't expected, "I guess I might see my wife again after all. Thanks to you two, we might have a chance."

"How do you know she is still alive?" Lela asked, curious as to this revelation.

"They took her. The soldiers in the black vans took her and all I could do was run."

No other words were spoken. Belinda just mumbled to herself and placed a reassuring hand on Ted's good leg.

With a worried glance, Lela told the other two of her concerns about staying on the roads. Even though they were driving the same van as the patrols, the patrols may have been alerted to the theft and consequent escape. Lela's concerns were misplaced however, as the true threat appeared to be the three ragged people with assault rifles standing in the centre of the suburban street they currently travelled.

Not waiting for Lela to slow down, they began to fire warning shots around the van. Slamming her foot onto the brake pedal before a stray bullet pierced her or her companions, the van slid sideways into a parked sedan.

Rocking with the impact, Lela didn't have time to recover before she was being pulled bodily from the commandeered vehicle by a large man with dark reddish-brown hair. The van rocked with the efforts of an average sized woman and a short man with muscular arms, trying to hold Belinda against it, against her will.

Thrashing wildly, Belinda's shoulders grew bloody with the effort. Calling for her to calm down and for the two to release her, Lela tried to explain how they had come to be driving the van of the enemy. Met by obvious and understandable mistrust, the reddish-brown haired man, the defacto leader, spoke in his reedy-sleazy voice, "If you aren't soldierz and yer drivin' one of *their* vanz, how came yo waz so eazily overpowered. You shuld be better fighterz than uz. We've been trying to nab a van for dayz."

"Why do you want a van? There are plenty of cars in the caryards around the place," Lela

queried.

“We figured it’z safer outside of thiz ‘city’.”

“What’s the chance the rest of Eccia hasn’t been taken over as well? This is the Southern capital. There are no reinforcements waiting in the country to save the survivors.”

“Where elze should we go? The country seemed the safest place. Wait, ‘til all thiz blowz over.”

Turning to Belinda to gauge her trust of these people, led by this weaselly man, a small nod told Lela of her agreement to tell them of the plan. Lela explained the escape from the university and the warrior-student who had saved them. Finally, she told them of his chosen meeting place, in three days.

Running a hand through his reddish-brown hair, the defacto leader cautiously spoke, “Whatz the chance of ‘im actially surviving and ‘iz meetin’ not bein’ found by soldierz. I meanz to say, an oval isn’t ex-act-ly covert.”

“I agree, but I think he has some other part in all of this. We are going to chance our continued survival on his and you are welcome to join us.”

“There are otherz, we can’t leave without them. Some are injured. You still have *three* dayz to get to ‘e hillz. Could you lend uz your van,” this said with a small smile, “and help uz to raid a hosp-it-al for antibioticz and other medz?”

Smiling at Ted, where he was lying against the vans front tire, Lela nodded.

It was a sad sight. The wrecked hall had at least twenty injured people, some in much worse condition than Ted. Tables and chairs had been moved to the sides of the dining room where the wounded now lay on blankets. Pillows from the chairs were used as head rests. The various plaques from the walls were mostly askew, if not lying neglected on the floor and the bar had been raided for alcohol to sterilise wounds and minds no doubt.

Five children tended to the wounded, red rimmed eyes spoke of tears and a lack of sleep. They rushed around, water and dirty towels used to keep the wounded comfortable. Motioning towards the rifles our three escorts held, Lela asked, “What’s your armoury like? Or is this it?”

“Not all of these wounded were found thiz way. After the initial attack, patrolz and rescuez have left our able bodied number diminished. But, the weaponz the wounded were using, are kept over ‘ere.”

Following Clive, the reddish-brown haired man, Lela was led to a pile of armaments composed mainly of the standard assault rifles she had seen used by many soldiers. A number of pistols, three grenades and five tattered Kevlar vests were also present. Lela’s vest was sufficient, but she grabbed the most intact vest for Belinda. Strapping a pistol to her own right thigh, Lela also collected a rifle. Sufficient ammo for both the pistol and rifle were added to her three remaining vest pockets.

Behind Lela, Belinda could be seen making Ted comfortable in an empty space on the floor. A spare set of bloodied blankets and a pillow were found near the back of the dining hall. From behind a soft voice spoke, reediness gone for the moment, “A good man once lay there.” “And now a good man lies there again,” Lela responded gently.

One of the children came over to Ted’s side and began to pour vodka from a near empty bottle onto a napkin. Wincing in pain, as his puckered wound was rubbed clean, Ted held Belinda’s hand for support. This seemed to soften her expression for a moment. Before the ice returned to her gaze, she

kissed Ted's forehead and stood, brushing her tattered locks from her eyes.

Belinda walked to Lela's side and took the vest Lela had found her. She proceeded to re-supply herself with two thigh-strapped pistols, ammo and a rifle from the floor. Nodding, Belinda's body spoke of readiness and Lela turned to Clive, saying, "Are your people ready to go?" "I waz 'oping for some lunch. But, if youz iz ready," reedy-sleaziness returning to his tone.

Clive called for the two who had accompanied him earlier. Leaving the beds of the wounded with a squeeze of a hand or a kiss, they grabbed their weapons from their sides and the remaining grenades from the armament pile.

They left the van around the corner from the nearby hospital. Grey skies coloured the groups collective mood. Lela could feel the tension as Belinda climbed out the back of the van, with the other two Clive had brought. Glaring at Belinda's back, Lela thought the woman was going to spit at her feet. This could only end in severe injury on the woman's behalf. But, it seemed they would work together, if it meant a greater chance of success. The wounded needed medicine and they would get it.

Jumping the fence adjacent to where the van was parked, they made slow progress through each successive block. They were especially careful not to wake dogs as they passed and they kept their fingers crossed against a patrol randomly checking a house they were passing. The group was fortunate in that when they reached the corner block, opposite the hospital, they had not been detected.

From beside Lela, hidden in the vegetable patch and small grove of fruit trees of the corner block, Clive spoke, "The hoz-pit-al don look too crowded. But, there *are* two sniperzz on the roof and I reckon the medical staff will be armed with somethingzz."

Pointing to the car park down to the right of the corner, Lela whispered, "There are two vans in the car park over there too."

Turning to Belinda, a small nod saw her acquiring a grenade from the woman who had accompanied us and rushing off into the backyard of the corner block. Turning back to Clive Lela said, "She'll get the sniper to the left. I'll get the sniper to the right. Then you and your people need to make a run for the hospital and get good positions before the two squads are mobilised."

A grunt told of his grudging acceptance of Lela's assumed leadership. He wanted and needed Belinda on his side, she was lethal. And this meant he followed Lela, for the time being. Waiting for the right sniper to turn the barrel of his gun to his left, away from the corner, Lela ran right.

Moving across the road, to the opposite corner block. Lela took cover behind the gap in a brick wall, formerly occupied by a gate. Now only two broken hinges adorned this empty attempt at security. Judging the distance the sniper was from her position to be too far to hit from her hiding place, Lela decided to get a better angle. Keeping her head down, so as not to be seen over the brick fence, Lela hurried into the house formerly protected by the now broken gate.

Aware of Belinda's speed and insatiable hunger for revenge against these soldiers, Lela bolted upstairs and crawled to a window facing the hospital. An explosion told her the left sniper was down and Lela hurriedly used the butt of her rifle to smash the upper bedrooms window and rested the rifle on the ledge. She could see the sniper scanning for the source of his companion's death, too absorbed to hear the shattered window.

Hurriedly bringing her eye to the scope of the rifle, Lela looked down its unmagnified crosshair and fired three bursts, to ensure the sniper's final breaths were indeed final. She watched as Clive

and his loyal followers ran across to the large double doors of the hospital. As they ran, Lela paused in the removal of her rifle from the window frame, spotting a soldier in a room to the right of the double doors. The whole world slowed down as Lela rushed to take aim.

Lela could hear the blood rushing through her ears. Heart racing as she watched helplessly. The woman Clive led fell to the floor from the first burst of bullet fire. This smashed one of the hospital's front windows and her chest cavity to tiny fragments of what once was a whole. A second later, the offending soldier was lying on his back, Lela's rifle ending his life a moment too late.

Adrenaline lent a greater clarity to Lela's mind and she quickly acquired another target. Clive's other follower, the short buff man, stopped and ran to his friend's side. She was already dead, but he tried to help her nonetheless. More soldiers rushed to the hospital windows. Lela's mind screamed for him to get to the cover of the hospital. Lela fired wildly at the various soldiers as they appeared.

Clive now took cover, against the hospital's double doors, waving frantically for the short man to join him. The soldiers were forming a firing squad for the man whose name Lela knew she should know. A click told her of a depleted clip. Lela could see three more soldiers in the windows. Two taking aim on her own position. She dropped to the floor to reload and had to cover her face as the remaining glass of the window was propelled by gunfire. Lela heard a man scream after another round of bullet-fire and begrudgingly Lela accepted that Clive's people were dead. She was too slow.

Finishing reloading her rifle Lela ran downstairs and found the gateless hole. Here she took cover, hurriedly firing at one of the soldiers who had formed the firing squad. By now Clive was inside, and she saw Belinda beating another of the soldiers who were in the hospital windows. Only one soldier remained and he knew where Lela was taking cover. 'I knew I should have taken a grenade,' Lela grumbled to herself.

Cursing her position and the sturdy wall separating her from imminent escape, Lela swung the rifle onto her back and un-holstered her pistol. Clicking the safety off and taking a deep breath, Lela ran free of the gateless gap and rolled into a crouched position a few meters adjacent. In the centre of the T-junction Lela fired a full clip into the hospital room where the remaining soldier now took cover. She did not assume the shattering of glass corresponded to a hit. At this range her pistol was far too inaccurate.

Getting back to her feet, Lela frantically ran past the corpse of Clive's dead male follower and reached down to collect a fallen grenade. Throwing herself to the right, assuming the soldier would be back on his feet by now, Lela paused long enough to hurl the grenade's pin to the floor and the live explosive into the room of the possibly living soldier. An explosion eased her concerns and Lela rapidly covered the remaining distance to the hospital's double doors.

Puffing, she could hear gun fire inside. Her chest heaving with the effort of getting to the hospital, she locked her knees to prevent against collapse. Assuming Clive and Belinda were somewhat responsible for the gunfire, Lela cautiously entered the hospital, rifle off her shoulder and clasped in a steady grip. Suddenly, Clive came stumbling around the corner. Almost firing on his fleeing form, Lela rolled into a doorway she had just passed and prepared to fire on his pursuers.

Two soldiers, fully decked out in riot gear came barrelling around the corner at the end of the hall and Lela quickly dispatched their foolishness. Overconfidence led to their demise, not bothering with leg guards or caution. In their fall Lela could fire upon the remaining exposed regions. A glance from Clive by his cover behind her, told of his thanks and a nod of his head told of the relative safety

now in front.

Every room Lela passed was empty. This puzzled her, but the thought was interrupted by a waved signal from Clive. He was leading the way through the hospital, riot gear harvested and currently in his use. Rushing to his side, Clive explained the presence of two soldiers guarding the pharmacy door.

As this was described, Lela heard shocked yells from the direction Clive had been describing. Peeking her head around the corner of the corridor where they currently took cover, Lela's right eye told of two trained soldiers overcome by a shaking-and-mildly-insane blonde.

Calling to Belinda - to ensure she did not fire when they revealed themselves - Lela ran to where the shaking blonde stood over the corpses.

Belinda had lost or discarded her Kevlar vest. Only a very torn and grimy white T-shirt covered a similarly tattered white bra. Her long legs were covered by jeans-turned-shorts. A sniper rifle was strung on her back and she held a pistol in her right hand, with a shotgun its partner, in her left. Turning her head halfway as Lela approached they locked eyes for a short while. Belinda then kicked the bodies of the soldiers aside to clear a path for Lela and Clive's access to the pharmacy.

Assured of their safety, with Belinda watching the door, Clive and Lela grabbed a shiny metal cart and quickly loaded it with anything that sounded useful: antibiotics, anti-virals, antiseptics, assuming bandages and band aids could be found at a supermarket, some were grabbed for convenience sake nevertheless. Hearing no gun fire, Lela assumed Belinda had encountered no trouble.

Intent on leaving the hospital Lela took the lead, while Belinda covered the rear. Clive pushed the silver cart in the centre of their little line. A rumble outside caused a pit to form in Lela's stomach. Just when they thought they were free and clear.

Reaching the open front double doors, Lela could see a tank approaching in the distance, could feel the hauntingly familiar rumble of its tracks. Turning to Belinda, a nod told Lela she would take Clive and get the medicine to the hall. Running to the centre of the road, Lela then proceeded to fire wildly at the soldiers escorting the tank. Clive and Belinda made it across.

To prevent the soldier's pursuit of the necessary medicine, Lela ran back from the middle of the road, into the hospital. She had come to the conclusion that this hospital was not used for the treatment of soldiers, but as more of a way point, for meetings, communication and the occasional lunch. Hence, they must have an armoury and Lela planned to live up to her title. She was going to bust that tank.

Leaping to the cover of the double doorway, an explosion formed a dust storm around Lela's feet. The soldier's had also begun to open fire. The doorway was by no means, safe. So, Lela ran back into the hospital she had recently raided. Quickly moving through the hospital corridors, she encountered no resistance.

This changed however, when Lela ran the latest of a series of corners. This particular corner revealed two soldiers guarding an apparently important doorway. Throwing herself back around the afore mentioned corner, Lela winced as she landed on her apparently-never-to-be-healed shoulder.

Lela could hear heavy footsteps approaching. So, she smoothly pulled her pistol free of its thigh-holster. Subsequently taking aim at the corner from her missionary position. The first soldier to rush around the corner was met by a bullet in the teeth. The second was more cautious and rolled around, firing above Lela's position before he sorrowfully saw her lying on the floor. His high expectations

ultimately led to disappointment, as he joined his friend in the afterlife. This encounter left Lela too shocked to move.

Dust fell from the concrete around Lela, as the hospital shook from another tank shell. She grudgingly found her feet after this, peeking around the corner before she made her dash for what she hoped was an armoury. She prayed her distraction had led enough troops from the pursuit of Belinda, Clive and the meds or else all this was for nought.

Opening the door of the apparently important room, Lela was relieved to see long tubes with numerous rockets strewn about. She chose to grab a new Kevlar vest, not one to be superstitious. Similarly, she strapped new pistols to each thigh and stocked up on as much ammo as she could carry. A shotgun was procured and a new rifle, with what looked to be extra features, was slung over her good shoulder. Three extra rockets were strapped to a belt, with three explosive grenades and one with a grey strip.

Not waiting to read the labelling on the mysterious grenade, Lela ran from the room and down the nearest corridor. Finding an emergency exit, she pushed the doors open. Shotgun at the ready, she was heavily weighed down by the numerous weapons strapped to her petite-yet-athletic form.

Lela saw no soldiers in the alley she had entered, flanking the hospital, but she did find a set of fire escape stairs leading to the roof.

Climbing to the roof, Lela saw the empty sniper's nests. The left nest was closer to a sniper's fox hole after Belinda's grenade. The visible thickness of the roof seemed unnecessary. She ran, head down, to the nest she had disabled.

Dropping her shotgun, Lela pulled the rocket tube up to her shoulder and looked through the sights. Pulling the trigger, she was disappointed to find it was not loaded. She could see a van full of soldiers turning down the street where Clive and Belinda had fled with the medicine.

Dropping a rocket into the tube and crossing her fingers it was the fins that went first, Lela fired at the van. A fireball in Lela's peripheral vision told her it had worked, but she was already reloading. A second shot saw severe destruction wrought on the tank and Lela had to fall flat to avoid reciprocated enemy fire.

Frustrated at being pinned, Lela crawled to the edge of the building and, relying solely on the direction she held the tube, fired a final rocket. Not knowing if the explosion she had heard was the tank or the road, Lela dropped the tube over the hospital's edge and crawled back to her shotgun.

Lying where she had left it in the sniper's nest, Lela grasped the handle in a white knuckled grip. The roof of an adjacent house could be seen, not twenty metres from where she lay. It was a gymnast's jump from the hospital's flat concrete. The fire escape stairs that led to the roof's helicopter pad were suddenly rumbling with the sound of many heavy boots. Not waiting to see if they were friendly, Lela ran to and leapt the gap.

Lela continued to run the roofs until she heard the first shot ring out. Dropping to the closest backyard, Lela held her suddenly stinging ear. The side of her head burned and she fell to the floor exhausted. Footsteps on a roof nearby forced her hand and Lela managed to drag herself to weary feet.

Ramming with her good right shoulder, Lela flew through the sliding glass door that led to the backyard in which she had landed. Fighting for balance, she continued to run, now looking for keys.

The kitchen bench provided the necessary means of escape and Lela proceeded to kick the already broken front door off its hinges. Spying a black four-wheel-drive in the driveway, she ran around the back of the car and jumped into the driver's seat. Slipping the key into the ignition, Lela threw her rifle and shotgun onto the passenger's seat. Slipped the gear stick into reverse and floored the accelerator. Lela careened off down the road.

10 List

The list was written. Now I could cross off items and feel satisfied of their completion and my readiness. I had walked back inside after my ventures into the realm of my subconscious, hurriedly rushing to find a pad and pen. “What happened to you?” Keira asked confused.

“It’s too hard to explain,” I mumbled as I hurriedly scribbled out what was required to get those who were yet free to safety.

“Do try,” Keira continued, frustration entering her tone.

“Not now! I have-,” I began, mind running leaps ahead. Then, I paused. My eyes slowly rose from the pad where I had been frantically scribbling my resolve. The beautiful woman, hands on her hips, frown creasing her forehead, stared down at me as if I had peed on her new rug.

“Do you want to start again?” Keira said calmly.

“Sorry,” I began, “I had a revelation, if you will.”

“And now you have to write something down with such great haste?”

I looked down at the pad, my writing barely legible. “I suppose not.”

Keira came around the kitchen bench and sat down beside me. “So, it’s a list.”

“Uh, yeah.” I stammered, “of what I need for the survivors.”

“Well, food should be on there somewhere,” Keira said with a smile. Over the next few minutes we nussed out the necessities and I deposited the list in my pocket.

“Be careful,” requested Keira patting my shoulder. And on that parental sentiment I left.

Survival Checklist

General Supplies i.e. Medicine, Food, Water, Toilet Paper

2. *Camouflage*
3. *Generator*
4. *Computers/ Electronic Gear*
5. *Communications? / Radio Jammer?*
6. *A Tank*
7. *Electronic Billboards & Signs*
8. *Survivor Spreadsheet(s)/ letters*

Having ridden the bike from my driveway to the highway, I parked it carefully and took to wandering the median strip on foot. Soon a black van came hurtling down the road towards me from

the city. Turning on an angle to disguise my katana and machete from view, I held my hand out as a hitch-hiker to a truck driver.

Slamming on their brakes, the van came skidding towards me. Retracting my hand and acting startled, I made to cower from the hurtling vehicle. Stopping not far from where I cowered, the driver and his partner got out of the van and came towards me.

The soldiers didn't care to raise their weapons against me, apparently preferring to bodily throw me in the back of their van. When the first made a grab at my shoulder I slid my katana free from its sheath and along the soldier's neck. Dropping my sword I grabbed my machete and threw it at the second, before he could raise the rifle from the sling at his shoulder.

Collecting my weapons, I cleaned them on the second soldier's uniform. I removed the vest and uniform from the first. These I threw in the back of the van, along with their rifles and 9mm side arms. The bodies I dragged to the side of the highway and threw down the embankment. They wouldn't be found before the survivors had escaped in 3 days.

I regretted the loss of my bike as I drove towards the shopping mall in Locksenbury. It was just another vehicle on the side of the highway now, but it had served me well and didn't deserve such a fate. Nevertheless, my priority was in discretion and enemy vehicle was ideal for such a purpose.

Jouncing onto the pavement, I quickly accelerated into the glass mall doors. The shattering caused my paranoid mind to freeze up and the van stopped its crunching over the broken doors as my eyes searched for enemy eyes.

Hearing no approaching footsteps, my heart rate slowing somewhat. I continued into the mall, pulling up beside the supermarket. The back of the van was then loaded with plastic crates full of food, boxes of water and eskies of fruit and vegetables.

My gut wrenched at every venture into the store. The floor was littered with innocent bodies, cut down in such an unnatural place. I vowed then to return to bury these people when I could. They deserved that at least.

Thoughts of burial lead my mind to open spaces and I jumped quickly to the local high school. It was hidden in the back roads of Locksenbury and it was large enough for a great number of survivors to hide.

Loading up the final few crates, I reversed my filled van back to the main street and drove off in the direction of Locksenbury high. I passed another van on route, panic quickly giving way to relief as the enemy uneventfully left my presence.

Arriving at the high school, I rolled the van down the school entrance into a large bitumen area. A row of buses were neatly filling a good portion of this area, sitting beside the entrance to the large under-cover performance area. Above the performance area was the school proper and, luck providing, I would be able to house my survivors in the classrooms there. I pulled the van into the undercover area and parked the van.

Opening the door I felt exhaustion slap me like an angry cook flipping a pancake. My head dropped to my chest and my eyes closed. I could feel the wind as it brushed my cheek, bringing with it a brief respite from my own odour.

After a while, I felt my mind reaching into the surrounding environs. The silence of the concrete was alarming. My mental feelers retreated from the buildings. Drawing near to my enchanted belt, I felt its magic directing itself through the malachite studded machete and the smaller stones I had in a

pocket.

Suddenly, a power filled me and my eyes tore open. The world had taken on a dark green tint. The trees seemed to warp and the small creatures nearby all stopped to stare. An eagle at one moment was diving, the next, pulling in a tight arc to gain a better insight into the sudden Druid power that had erupted in the concrete jungle.

As if my ears had only just opened, the world suddenly erupted with sound. There were voices slow and deep. And sharp tones, quick and piercing. And many others demanding equal voice between. The sum of these voices rose to a level that was beginning to cause a splitting headache. I felt at my nose, to see if blood was flowing, as it is oft to do in the movies. When my hand returned to sight, only sweat decorated its surface. "How disappointing," I mumbled to myself.

"Excuse me?!" came a quick, piercing reply.

All of the other voices seemed to dull somewhat. The eagle swooped down to perch on a nearby bench. Its head cocked to one side and it squawked. Focusing my mind, I listened for the voice behind the squawk. "Hello?" I began.

"Criiicky," exclaimed the bird, "this guy's a flamin' Druid. Wouldn'ta bloody guessed it!"

Blinking, it was different to the voice of Wolf that I had heard in my vision of the forest. It was as if an intelligent dialogue was being placed upon the birds intended message. As if my Druid inheritance was translating a squawk to a series of words I would understand. 'Curious,' I commented quietly to myself.

"Enough of that!" squawked the bird, growing frustrated at my minimal responses.

I cocked my head to the same side as the bird and asked, "Why don't I look like a Druid?"

Taken aback somewhat, the bird seemed to look about for support. "You know," began the bird. Then, with a flutter of innumerable feathers, a flock of ravens joined the eagle.

"You're wearing a top for one," commented a raven from somewhere in the flock.

"And your face is a bit too interesting," came another.

"And your talking to birds, not trees," began another.

"Bloody snobs some of 'em," finished yet another.

As the chatter increased, an increased amount of differences were squawked in my direction. It began to grow rather overwhelming, especially since the level of detail the birds detected was greater than I had seen between myself and other Human-beings. Holding out my arms, I said, "Maybe I should've spoken to the trees first."

Silence, then, "Oi! Bit rude mate."

"At least now I can hear myself think!"

This set the birds off again and I walked away to let them fight over who was the most annoying, or something of the like. Approaching a lone tree in the centre of a concrete courtyard, I jumped as the eagle from before landed in its branches, its head cocked once more to the side. "Hello?"

A deep rumbling resulted from my greeting, before the tree spoke, "Hello there young Druid. What brings you so far from your grove?"

"My grove?"

"Yes," rumbled the tree, "where your kin worship the forest. Has it also fallen to the Tree-killer."

"What are you on about?" I whined, exasperated.

"Ah," grumbled the tree, "this I must ponder." And with that, the tree would not respond to

further urgings. I looked into the branches and saw the eagle had left. Exhausted, I fell against the trunk of the tree and closed my eyes.

“Hmmm,” came the deep rumblings of the tree. I jumped awake. Panicked, I looked to the sky to see the sun slowly falling over the horizon.

“How lon-”

“You’re an Armourling then,” rumbled the tree smugly.

“Huh,” I began, “Wait, what?!”

“Never mind young one,” rumbled the tree. “All will soon become clear.”

“Well that’s unnecessarily ominous!” I yelled. But, to no avail, the tree was gone once more. So, with a sigh, I rose and began unloading the back of the van to an undercover area nearby the row of buses.

As I unpacked, my mind wandered to the still incomplete list. I had enough food for a few survivors, but only a pessimistically small amount. I had to return to the supermarket and to get more and medicine from the pharmacy there.

Begrudgingly, I made several more trips to and from the supermarket, each time careful not to be spotted or followed. I had enough of the essentials now, but I still needed electronics. Knowing that the sort of supplies I required couldn’t be found in Locksenbury, I readied myself for a trip out of the mountains.

Leaving my fully stocked safe house, I drove once more into the centre of Locksenbury. ‘Surely the sorcerer has heard of my plans by now,’ I pondered to myself. Half expecting this pondering to spawn a small force to assail my van, I looked around frantically.

Before speeding onto the highway that led out of the mountains, I hadn’t seen a single enemy van. On the highway however, enemy vans pelted up and down, performing the various duties the soldiers were assigned. None so much as slowed upon passing myself. Nevertheless, my heart raced at every passing, hand reaching down to the hilt of my katana.

Finally, approaching a larger township in the foothills, I took the exit and weaved through the various wrecked vehicles and rubble strewn streets. My destination was the large mall in the townships centre.

Pulling into the enormous car park I looked towards the city. The fires still raged to the East and in the various parks surrounding the small Southern capitol of Aradecca. Further South, I could just make out the coast. Fires could be seen in small pockets along the blurry docks.

My eyes unwillingly returned to the blasted concrete box that was the shopping mall. I glanced down at my list.

Pulling up outside a large electronics store I zipped about collecting laptops, cables, radio equipment and other useful looking devices. A small marine outlet provided a few generators, but I had no idea what I was looking for in the field of radio jammers.

Loading the electronic gear into the back of my van, I froze as the last laptop was slipped into a small niche near the roof. A pair of black vans was approaching from the highway.

Quickly, I closed the back of the van and leaped into the front seat. I was sure they had seen me

and even more sure any excuses I had would have no chance to be spoken before I was riddled with bullets.

Jumping into the front seat of the van, I slammed the stick into first. I floored the accelerator and skidded over the sidewalk and onto the main street. The two vans were in hot pursuit. They were rapidly catching me on either side. I pulled the handbrake and screeched onto the highway on ramp.

Bullets began to ricochet off of the back of the van. I swung this way and that attempting to shake off their fire. I had no idea what to do. So, I slammed on the brakes and made to ram the leftmost van.

The fire stopped, but the vans slowed also. I slammed into the van on my left and felt the heavy vehicle rebound powerfully against my own. The right van was drifting across now, attempting to sandwich my van. I slammed my foot down on the accelerator and the right van pulled away in time to avoid a collision with his partner, but I was getting away now.

I pulled into Locksenbury, at least four vans in pursuit now. But, I had enough distance to slip off into the side streets and ditch my van behind a house that I saw had a motorbike parked in the driveway.

Quickly covering the van in a tarp and locking the doors, I hid the key in the garden, hoping to return for my haul. Running to the motorbike, I revved off in the direction I had come.

“No! Turn around,” I heard a voice rumble from somewhere nearby. Ignoring the demand, I skidded wide-eyed into Locksenbury’s main street. Here I was met by far more than the four vans that had given pursuit. I leapt from the bike and rolled to some cover in a nearby shop.

Bullets destroyed the shopfront, but they stopped suddenly as three soldiers ran inside.

Drawing my katana, I leapt at the first, plunging my blade deep into his abdomen. Tearing it free, I swung wide to get the second soldier. He jumped from my reach, but I dropped low and cut at his partners legs.

As the third soldier fell to the floor, I dodged to the side of the second. He had his pistol out now and was firing randomly, panic clear in his eyes. I grabbed his head then plunged my sword deep into the head of his fallen comrade, before he could similarly draw his pistol.

Outside, I heard the bullet fire resume and I dropped to the floor. It was useless, there was no way I could face down this force. I couldn’t even get up to find a way out the back of the shop. I was trapped, the gig was up.

Removing my grubby white t-shirt, I hung it over my katana and held my other hand in the air. Rising slowly, I walked to the shops door. My ears were thudding with the force of my racing heart.

Sick of his camp outside Aradecca, the awe inspiring Sorcerer of the Sapphire chose to return to his primary base of operations in Citaecca. It was always satisfying to see the twin spires of red and green blasting the clouds with the leashed energies of the Sorcerers of the Ruby and Emerald.

A smug grin touched the lips of the Sapphire Sorcerer as he thought of the vegetative forms of his fellows.

Wishing to ensure their powers were appropriately channelled, the Sapphire Sorcerer teleported to their penthouse suite in the commanding citadel of Eccas capitol. Tended for by their respective alchemists, the leashed sorcerers sat prostrated in the centre of a lavish room.

“You return master sorcerer,” snivelled the Alchemist of Larimar/Lepidolite.

“An unnecessary observation,” remarked the sorcerer, attempting to shoo away the grovelling alchemist.

“We only ask so that we may serve,” continued the Alchemist of Larimar/Citrine.

“You can serve by leaving me in peace,” commanded the sorcerer. “Away with you! Attend your vegetables!” At this, the alchemists slid away, busying themselves with the changing of pillows and cleaning their vegetative masters. ‘Where is *my* Alchemist,’ remarked the Sapphire Sorcerer to himself. With this statement, the sorcerer expected his slippery servant to appear from some shadow nearby, but the sorcerer was left disappointed.

Instead, he turned his mighty gaze to the prostrate pair in the centre of the room. The energies emitted through the recently blasted holes in the roof contained all manner of information. Information that the sorcerer had painstakingly encoded upon their powerful armours.

Formerly allies, the Sapphire Sorcerer had seen the weak heirs of these greatest of Armours as less useful than their enslaved forms. So, he had tricked the pair into falling under his controlling spell, before they could discover their own powers, which were equal, if differently focused, to his own.

Walking over to the Ruby Sorcerer, the Sapphire Sorcerer placed his staff into the red beam above the prostrate woman. Without the high level of mental discipline, which the Sapphire Sorcerer had developed over his many years in the desert tribes of Huodao, the amount of energy would overload his mind before any of his Armour’s wards could defend him.

As it was, the Sapphire Sorcerer lurched onto the tips of his toes and began to allow small amounts of information to flow through the narrow tube that led to his mind. This information told of the media bubble that was disguising the Sapphire Sorcerer’s invasion to the other three nations of the world. The ‘quarantine’ had apparently increased to a radiation leak spreading over the nation as the nuclear power plants were left to meltdown. This was apparently due to the madness evoked by the virus that was infecting the former world superpower, the nation of Ecce.

Reading deeper into the magical code, the sorcerer found that the meltdowns were released to the media cloud in response to the Shuǐ Archipelago’s fleet of aid vessels. Needless to say, they did not venture too far from the Archipelago, once the new information was discovered.

Satisfied that the media cloud was sufficiently deterring any traffic to the ‘troubled’ isle of Ecce, the sorcerer turned his attentions to the satellite coverage of the isle. The desert that covered the West of Aradecca, past Midecca remained desert. But, the sorcerer knew of the Elemental race that lived to the far West. Something alarming would occur after the Elementals were evicted from their forest. The satellites would see a forest appear in the middle of what was once desert. The sorcerer would not have the other nations aware of such a development until Ecce was firmly under his control. So, using the Ruby Sorcerer’s enslaved energies, the Sapphire Sorcerer added a small magical code to the satellite feeds.

Suddenly, a squawk from a nearby window snapped the sorcerer from his review. A crow, the hateful familiar of his Alchemist of the Larimar/Jet sat perched nearby. Cursing the creature, the Sapphire Sorcerer knew the alchemist was against the murder of his own familiar. ‘What use was a weasel to the Sorcerer of the Sapphire?’ the mighty sorcerer wondered to himself.

Instead, the ancient heart of the sorcerer’s familiar was removed and used to forge the required upgrades for his staff. The animal’s heart now adorned the staff above the topmost hand grip, acting to

'narrow' the energies of the two prostrate sorcerers further. Mental discipline could only go so far.

"Where are you then?" the Sapphire Sorcerer commanded the penthouse. "Come out, I know your here. Your bloody bird interrupted me again. If it inter-"

"Calm yourself master," came the slippery voice of his servant. "You know how your temper can upset the vegetables." A small snigger came from a shadow behind where his bird was perched. Approaching the animal, the Alchemist quietly berated the bird, "Bad Nerg. We mustn't upset master. Then where would we be?"

"Stop that," commanded the Sapphire Sorcerer. "What news of Citaecca?"

A single glistening eye seemed to assess the sorcerer from beneath the Alchemists hood. "The city is yours master. A single cleric and his followers have fled North, but I have a force preparing to intercept at your whim."

"What of the boats?" pushed the sorcerer. "When will the navy be ready to sail on the other nations?"

"There were not enough master," explained the Alchemist, hands fidgeting under his cloak. "We must get more boats from the other cities before we can fit all of our forces aboard."

"What happened to the mighty fleet of Citaecca?" fumed the sorcerer.

"The first group of rebels burnt many of the bo-"

"Enough! I will squeeze the soldiers onto the remaining boats," protested the sorcerer. "Do you bring any other news?"

The alchemist waved off his crow, only to see it return at the head of a procession. Marched into the room, three abreast, were a curious assortment of soldiers and beasts of terrible disfigurement. Upon closer inspection, the sorcerer saw that the beasts were chained and that the soldiers were escorting these mutated individuals. "These are the -" "I know what they are!" yelled the sorcerer, sick of the conversation. A wicked grin slipped over his face and he gestured for his Alchemist to draw nearer. Placing a hand on his servants shoulder, a blue flash took them all from the room. All except the two prostrate Sorcerers of the Ruby and Emerald, left to channel their respective magical energies into the world.

"A demonstration," commanded the sorcerer. The Soldiers looked around at their camp, clearly not yet used to the sorcerer's means of transport. They now stood in the midst of the force readied by the Alchemist. The force that will now be accompanied by these mutants, if all was well with them.

The Alchemist nodded from his side and the front most soldiers unlocked the chains on a creature that was easily a foot taller than any of the soldiers. It's head was elongated into a beak. Two beady eyes peered over the beak and upon release, a crest of feathers fluttered atop the creatures distorted crown.

Great wings unfolded from behind the creature, knocking the soldiers to the floor. With a click of their beak, the creature leapt powerfully into the air. The sorcerer watched amused as the Alchemist struggled to hold his cloak against the wind, his hood falling off to reveal a grotesque head. His bald scalp bobbed and he looked up fear evident in overlarge eyes. The sorcerer looked back to the sky, expecting to see the bird swooping down to end the soldiers. When time began to stretch on, the sorcerer raised his staff, preparing to blast the creature from the sky.

"Master," implored the Alchemist, "if you but wait a few more moments."

As if by the raised staff the creature had been signalled to return, a great screech broke the sky

and the creature slammed into the two soldiers that had guarded it against escape. The first was rent by the claws and was torn asunder. The second stood a moment, horrified, as his abdomen slid from his legs.

The sorcerer clapped jovially as the bird came softly to land before its new master. The creature bowed its elongated head and the sorcerer turned to his Alchemist, “Wonderful. You have turned the Druid prisoners to something of use!

Rise mutant!

Unchain the others and have them join their fellow in swearing their allegiance to my cause.” Hesitantly, glancing at their fallen comrades, the soldiers released the creatures to the sorcerer’s care. “How many of them are there?”

“These are but a fraction master,” explained the Alchemist, “the others are still in their cells. They have been merged with their anima-”

“I can see that!”

“Master,” the Alchemist continued, “what I was leading up to was that their magic.”

“Yes,” flapped the sorcerer, attempting to speed up this tiresome dialogue.

“Their magic, while no longer one with nature, is far stronger than the other Druids.”

“Because you opened them up to their animalians, you also opened up their source of magical energy!” finished the sorcerer, quite excited now.

A great assortment of different animal mutations walked towards the sorcerer then, all knelt before their new master. Holding out his staff, the sorcerer enforced these mutants to swear their allegiance to him. This of course, would never occur. Shooing the Alchemist off with the task of bringing the other mutants before him and having the force ready themselves for the end of the last of the Citaecca rebels.

11 Watchers

The sun rose to an empty sky, hanging low over the desert dunes in the distance. Images of destruction still coloured Liàng's thoughts. Meditation had lead to the usual assortment of nightmares of the end of the world, the Sorcerer of the Sapphire burning the last forests and demons rising up to claim the souls of those left standing.

Focusing on calming their mind, Liàng surveyed the landscape. The Hall of Elements could be seen not far from where they had camped, a huge red monument dominating the landscape. This was an illusion of course. The same magic that protected the secret existence of the magical beings of this planet also hid the true beauty of the hall.

Liàng had heard of the hallowed hall in scriptures, stories and songs of the ancient times. Retired armours studded the outer parapets and spires. Shaped like a six-faceted jewel, the clear roof was said to magnify the sky, lighting the hall, day or night. Huge columns supported the structure, one at each corner of the enormous hexagon. Stained-glass windows filled the walls, lighting the inside with images from battles won and peace protected. No door could be seen, but any who sought to enter found a door, if they looked with pure intentions. Now, for all its pure intentions, Liàng only saw a huge red rock, changing colour with the rising of the sun.

Liàng turned from their reverie, to Kuài's meditative form. Their skin was so pale as to almost appear translucent. Long black hair lay flat against a toned back. A small nose sat above thick curved lips, almost as pale as their skin. Liàng supposed Kuài would be considered attractive to a Human, though they remained unsure. Whispering Kuài to wakefulness, Liàng motioned to the clothes they had scavenged.

Liàng donned blue jeans and a white T-shirt, covering this with a thin jacket of blue cotton. Kuài dressed in a thin, well-fitting, floral dress with a small cardigan. Burying their broken sword, allowing it to return to the land from whence it came, Liàng saw Kuài still clasped their flute in a white-knuckled grip.

Liàng gave Kuài their second smaller knife to conceal in a cleavage that grew large enough to accommodate it. Liàng then proceeded to strap the hunting knife to their own calf. Neither of the pair wore shoes. Blending in was important, but the idea of not feeling the earth beneath them was horrifying.

Having dressed and rested, Liàng handed Kuài the amethyst geode. Liàng watched as Kuài shimmered, half-Elemental, half-physical. The air began to vibrate with the power of the spell. An eerie tune came to Liàng's ears. Liàng had always found it difficult to understand air magic. They seemed to whisper the characters in many places, the conglomerate of all creating a huge power vacuum.

The ancient language was tonal in its very nature and this might have explained Liàng's sudden

desire to dance. As Liàng swayed to the tones, the sounds of Kuài's flute began to eerily resonate around their small patch of scrubland.

What must have been a strange scene to begin with, became stranger still, as the amethyst geode shone with a purple light. Their forms were silhouetted in the light ochre of the rising sun and the purple of the geode.

With each new recapitulation of the tune, the amethyst dimmed, shining brilliantly by the end. Finally, Kuài pointed to the Northeast and the geode shone no longer. Liàng ceased to dance with the last recitation, following Kuài's hand in their mind. "That toward Aradecca," Liàng noted. "He is how far?"

"Feels very long way."

"I will the river to the East take. I can that way travel much faster. I meet you where the river runs through the city."

With that, Kuài was gone on the wind. And Liàng began to jog towards the river their memorized maps told them was East of the Hall of the Elements.

There were mountains dividing the Southern deserts from the more fertile Northern seaboard. They ran the length of most of Ecce. All of the major rivers ran out from these mountain. Pure water melted from the mountains peaks and sparkled its clarity down to the life below.

The river Liàng now approached was filthy. They could smell animal faeces and the strong ammonia of urine. But, that wasn't the worst of it. Chemicals from factories many miles away had rained down on the mountains, increasing the acidity of this 'water'.

Shuddering with anger, Liàng vowed to cleanse the rivers of Ecce, after they had secured the continued longevity of the Elemental race. Liàng wrapped their clothes and hunting knife into a tight bundle and threw it into the muck, reluctantly sliding over the harsh black mud of the bank into the conflagration of chemical carcinogens.

Liàng felt themselves burning and had to continuously purify the water as they travelled. Liàng couldn't waste the energy required to cleanse the entire width of the 'river', as they were unsure how long this trip would take and even less sure of what to expect in Aradecca. Dragging the pack in a protective bubble, Liàng rushed past farmland. Numerous pipes reached into the river, greedy fingers sucking the 'water' to irrigate the foreign crops.

'Where were the hardy cereal crops, which used to be grown on the farms this close to the Southern deserts?' Liàng asked the world furiously.

Cattle grazed on huge patches of empty soil, defecating in the river as Liàng passed. There were no edible fish in this 'river'. They had all died, along with many of the water birds. Gradually absorbing solutes from the water, Liàng's entire form now consisted of tears. A once noble and beautiful river had been defecated and destroyed. A river which the Elementals should have been protecting.

On their approach to the city, factories spewed harsh chemicals directly into the river. These were then taken out to sea, after the course was run. Estuaries were destroyed for water treatment plants, which took what precious little of the river that remained, down the pipes to Aradecca.

'What had we allowed to happen?' Liàng blubbered.

Suddenly, concrete tubing and suburbia gave way to intricately decorated footbridges, small boats and neatly paved paths. Liàng assumed this was the inner-city, where people could marvel at

the 'river', after the various filters and treatments left it more-or-less tolerable. Liàng imagined joggers, tourists, lovers, cyclists, boaters, ducks and walkers paying no mind to the terrible state of the river they passed, photographed or sat upon.

Liàng wasn't sure what was more tragic, the absence of commuters, the broken pavement, the polluted river, the patrolling soldiers or the fires in the city beyond. A city shrouded in clouds. Leaving their bundle of belongings on the shore, Liàng leapt at the nearest patrol. Furious tears blasted the men and women of the sorcerer's corps. Drawing what little water there was from the river, Liàng rose to ten feet tall.

Crushing the re-enforcements, Liàng punished the people they had chosen to blame for such needless destruction. Although, from what Liàng had read of the last rise of the sorcerers, these soldiers were merely pawns. Powerful magic controlling them, due to the rigorous military training they had received. Such discipline, loyalty and patriotism can, with the right know how, be replaced by mindless obedience. For someone with such powerful magic, such as the Sorcerer of the Sapphire, the Human mind was weak to resist.

Liàng felt bullets ripping and tearing at their extended form and began to weaken. The anger fading, Liàng could no longer draw from the strength it had awarded. Shrinking, Liàng formed 冰 (bīng ice) with a number of small pseudo pods that had formed. Giving them a little push, shards flew towards the remaining squads and Liàng hurriedly collected their parcel.

Taking to running along the bank of the river, Liàng drew the energy remaining, thanking the river for its kindness and generosity. Finding reeds enough to take refuge, Liàng placed protective wards and a beacon in the air for Kuài to find. Chanting characters of rejuvenation, Liàng meditated to ready themselves for the forewarned fights to come.

Liàng awoke with a start when they felt someone brush past their wards. They could feel, more than hear, Kuài's approach. The gaseous water of the atmosphere buzzed with joy as Kuài stroked the molecules with their presence. "I both the Armours of Amethyst/Malachite and Carnelian/Obsidian found," Kuài said. "Although, I do not the best of news bring."

"Well, you not keep me waiting!"

With an audible sigh and a sympathetic look, Kuài explained what they had seen, "The Wills Armour of Amethyst/ Malachite by the hour growing stronger, fighting for his people. But, he is in the fight alone. The passionate nature of the Mast Armour of Carnelian/Obsidian unto the enemy has led him. Where he spars with a book keeper no less! And, not just any book keeper, the Head Keeper of Topaz/Rose Quartz!"

"No, no, no! The Sorcerer of the Sapphire must have triggered awakening of the Armours and is converting them to his cause systematically. His magic must very strong be! Does the head keeper not read of histories and record continue?!"

"Exactly who she is the Head Keeper does not seem to realise."

"Do the newly awakened Armours not dream of their past?!"

"Their dreams by enchantments are warped.

Enchantments around their belts are woven, which the sorcerer too soon hands them."

"This truly is a sad affair. We inform the council must." "Yes, I will go. I compared to you am much faster." "Yes, I will aid the Wills Armour, without myself revealing if possible."

And, with that, Kuài was gone. “They really are impatient,” Liàng mumbled to themselves, after Kuài had left without telling them where to find the Wills Armour.

Liàng had chosen to flee the inner-city, making their way into the suburban mass of boxes. The clouds that shrouded the city acted to increase the humidity and with this, Liàng’s strength. The only being Liàng was afraid of was that of another Armour. So, Liàng did not engage the many patrols they saw for fear of drawing an armour to them.

Not needing to breathe, in conjunction with artificial blood and bullet holes, allowed Liàng to make a convincing cadaver of their avatar. The perfect disguise in the body riddled streets of Aradecca. Their blue tinted skin only added to the effect.

So, Liàng explored suburbia for most of what they assumed to be the day. This judged by the indiscriminate gaps in the clouds, sending rays of light down upon the alternately rain soaked soil. Thunderstorms could often be seen raging haphazardly around the city.

Liàng rounded the latest of a series of right-angled streets, a feeling of profound despair coming over them. ‘How did I hope to find any sign of the Wills Armour? Was I to run every street in Aradecca?!’ Liàng mumbled disenchanted.

With Liàng’s despair came conveniently the rumble of tank tracks and the crack of gunfire in the distance. Making a line for the commotion, Liàng began to draw as much energy from the water in the atmosphere as was metaphysically possible.

Almost shimmering in anticipation, Liàng drew their thin knife as they approached a semi-main road. To this road commuted a hospital. As indicated by the large red cross on the building’s facade. Liàng saw a tank approaching the hospital from down the street. A group of what they assumed to be survivors now stood, apparently dumbstruck, in the centre of the street. However, their ragged clothes and salvaged weapons were held not in despair, but in defiance. Seeing the black vans approaching with the tank, Liàng threw wards of protection at these survivors. Bullets rained down on their position, but Liàng diverted them to the floor. Tank shells were sent on slightly greater trajectories and bullets whizzed into the walls surrounding, avoiding the soft flesh.

Liàng leapt into a tree to avoid detection and the tree, responding to the necessity, concealed Liàng with it’s branches. Through the water in the air Liàng could see a somewhat limited amount of the action out of their line of sight and what they saw astounded. The most exhausted of the survivors was a girl/woman of slightly-less-than-average stature, short brown hair, bright blue eyes and a smile that was tragically hidden. She had broken free of the group and ran toward the hospital.

The other two survivors, pushing what Liàng assumed to be a cart of medicines, ran to a black van. The van was hidden in the back of one of the buildings, opposite a much larger building.

Liàng sent shards of ice at the would-be pursuers, the antagonistic black vans, shredding their tires. Enough vans failed to follow that eventually they gave up on pursuit and focused on the short woman inside the hospital.

Several squads, rifles ready to rip the admirable woman apart, entered through the hospitals front doors. Making to leave their hiding place, Liàng paused when they saw her head pop up on the roof. Her blue eyes sparkled with such intensity as to hold Liàng’s gaze. She probably didn’t need the help. Liàng provided it nonetheless, disguising her presence with a conjured image of an empty roof. The woman lay at the edge of the roof and fired an explosive projectile at first a van, then the tank.

Liàng’s conjured image failed as bullets tore the water based magic apart. Tiring, Liàng pulled

water from the air to form an invisible barrier against the barrage that the female now faced. Stolid water molecules redirected bullets, not strong enough to cease the movement entirely.

Firing one more shot from her tube, the tank exploded in a tremendous fireball. Shards of metal flew several hundred metres from the wrecked metal box. Using what little energy they had remaining, Liàng placed a final protective ward over this remarkable woman,

吉祥如意
(jíxiángrúyì)
Good Luck

This left them too tired to move. But, Liàng felt his defence of this woman was significant and was satisfied in exhausting himself upon the task. Letting the tree conceal them further, Liàng fell into a deep meditation, dreaming not of the forewarned, but of the petite.

‘I have survived to day four, but to what purpose?’ Lela wondered to herself? She almost wanted to get caught, to end the running. Driving her four wheel drive around for a while, she had initially thought it was to ensure she wasn’t followed, like they did in the movies. But, once the sun had set, Lela was driving to escape.

Every turn of the steering wheel brought a familiar sight and a twinge to her shoulder. Lela’s head had throbbed for hours and her hair was matted from the blood. But, she just kept driving.

The clouds remained, leaving a deep eerie darkness with the absence of the moon.

Passing a familiar row of smouldering trees, a tear came to Lela’s eye. All of the main roads had black vans parked in the centre and she often had to turn around before she was seen. The only escape was to fight. But, she was so damn tired.

Lela stopped in someone’s driveway, telling herself it was because she wanted to close her eyes for a while. When she allowed her eyes to close images of the past few days flooded the darkness. Now she’d never get to know the family she had ignored. ‘I think I have grown closer to a half-crazed blonde mute than to anyone before,’ Lela mumbled to herself.

Her drive around the surrounding area had told her there was no escape. A bitter metallic taste came to her tongue and Lela realised she had the muzzle of her rifle in her mouth. A strange blue light shone from the tears she had not realised were falling. Wonderment stole her mood from its sullen pit. Lela gasped as droplets of water coalesced, floating seemingly in a vacuum. They glittered with the same blue light as that of her tears.

Lela felt blessed to see such a strange and fantastic sight. As she felt this, a stranger comfort came over her. The water’s light slowly faded away. Lela followed it’s progress to her lap, where it dispersed over the rifle that rested there. Instilled with a new desire for life, Lela ironically began to wonder what features her fancy new rifle possessed. Down the barrel was written, ‘7.62x39mm’. Further investigation revealed a thick-tube-which-she-assumed-to-be-a-grenade-launcher, knife-attached-to-the-front and telescopic scope.

Struck by a new optimism, Lela suddenly felt it was time to escape, or to die trying.

The darkness was inescapable. It drew you in, absorbing the light. Lela’s mind was still filled with the blue of prior moments. Her night vision was failing somewhat. So, she fought the urge for

stealth and turned on the vans headlights.

Lela slowly realised she didn't even know how to find the hall anymore. This thought eerily coincided with gunfire in a direction Lela found difficult to pinpoint. It was nearby. She could smell the fear of the gunmen/women. For the first time in a long while, Lela took her small truck into a gear higher than second and roared towards the imagined foes.

She checked the shotgun to ensure it was loaded. Unclipping her thigh holstered pistols and turning the safety off on her 7.62x39mm assault rifle, Lela could see two black vans double-parked haphazardly in front of a familiar hall. Soldiers with swords were walking towards a firing-squad of the remaining able-bodied survivors. They were almost glowing with the bullet fire deflected by their unarmoured chests.

Aiming at the largest group of the apparently-bullet-resistant soldiers, Lela rammed three. Bouncing off her bull bar with cracks of displeasure, she felt her tires finish the work. Jouncing over their over-confident forms, Lela pulled the handbrake and fired out of her window with a pistol. As she had expected, the bullets were deflected.

Enraged by the soldier's new advantage, Lela dropped the accelerator to the floor. She pulled the pin of a red striped grenade. Driving with her knees now, she tossed the grenade to two soldiers who were still walking, somewhat faster than before, towards the survivors.

Taking cover in the halls doorway, Clive and Ted had been firing with decreasing frequency, realising the futility of the action. That was until Lela's grenade finished off the approaching pair. Lela saw Bell fighting another soldier down the side of the hall, knives in both hands. Her blonde hair whipped the air with the force of each swing. The soldier she fought was forced backwards with each successive blow. Frantically, he defended with his sword.

Right hand on the steering wheel, Lela ran down another two soldiers, before they got wise to her efforts. The four wheel drives tires were slashed by what remained of the two-vans-worth of soldiers, which wasn't many. Using the driver's side door to slam the nearest to the floor, Lela pierced his throat without hesitation. Her bloodied ankle holstered knife was subsequently raised in defence.

Already, Lela felt her strength wanning. The significantly larger blade of the bullet-proof soldier pushed her to the floor. A wicked grin crossed his face, that was before Belinda appeared behind him. Hand reaching around his neck, she created a wicked slit along his throat.

When the last soldier fell to the floor, Lela followed in suit. She felt Belinda lay down next to her. Lela watched Belinda's small chest heave with the effort of returning oxygen to seriously fatigued muscles.

Lela's rest was interrupted by Clive's reedy voice, "We need to move 'em. What if those soldierz comz back? How can uz defend againzt bullet-proofed soldierz for goodnezz sake!"

"Clive," Lela said, fighting to keep the quaver from her voice, "start loading the wounded into the three vans we now have. Put them on top of each other if need be!"

Without further discussion Clive hurried off. Lela turned to Belinda and a nod told her she would help Clive.

Watching Belinda smoothly rise from where they lay, Lela could see a multitude of gaps, gashes, gouges and grazes adorning her barely covered skin. Lela's mute friend slid her various knives back into the sheaths bedecking her person, after cleaning them on the uniform of one of the dead soldiers.

Lela grudgingly rose and began collecting weapons and the modest armour some of the soldiers had been wearing.

It took half an hour of hard labour to get all of the wounded into the three vans. The children helped as best they could. Weapons, medicine and alcohol were stowed in the convenient netting of the vans rear compartment. Ted was the last out of the hall, hobbling on his splint.

Clive and Belinda were waiting in the driver's seats of the other two vans. Children were squeezed into the passenger's side of each. As Lela led Ted to the last van, a familiar rumble reached her ears. Changing course, Lela almost carried Ted to the driver's seat of the remaining van. This curious placement was accompanied by a worried glance from Ted, which Lela comforted with explanation that his good left foot could do all the work. Sat in his seat, Ted firmly clenched his jaw and his eyes met Lela's own, "Don't do anything stupid. We need you."

Smiling softly at this man she barely-knew-but-felt-such-a-strong-kinship-to, Lela closed the driver's side door and hefted her increasingly familiar shotgun. After the encounter with the bullet-proof soldiers, Lela thought it timely to grab some extra knives and a sword. These now swung, or hung sheathed about her person.

Running to the cover of the hall, Lela watched her friends escape. The bullets fired at the flying friendly vans were silenced at the source, by Lela and her remaining rifle. Craters appeared in the road behind the escaping vans. Lela threw her remaining three grenades at the tank. The first two exploded, shattering one of the sets of tracks. The rumbling stopped. The remaining grenade, a grey striped mystery, left a smokescreen the main turret couldn't aim through.

Taking this opportunity to make her escape, Lela ran across the road in search of a car. Making it to the fence of a small cottage, she leapt to cover as a van drove past. Soldiers fired out of the vans windows. She could feel her hip burning with the passage of a sadistic bullet. Rolling onto her back, shotgun at the ready, Lela withheld a cry of pain. The edges of her consciousness receded with the agony that was her bodies many maladies.

Two soldiers arrived on motorbikes, slowly dismounting and approaching Lela's wildly firing form. "How are my bullets so useless now?!" she yelled, furious. Struggling to her feet, she slipped the sword she had collected from its scabbard at her hip, wincing at the effort.

The soldiers came through the gate. Splitting up, they approached Lela from opposite directions. She threw her shotgun at the nearest and while he was distracted, she swung her sword at the second. He casually knocked her weak blow aside. Sword in flight, Lela heard it land with a clatter on the road beyond the fence. Lela watched a second van speed past and relief replaced her own concerns. It looked to be the last.

Lela had a knife in each hand now. One was held toward each soldier. The futility of this gesture was highlighted by the soldiers smiling faces. Just as the first soldier lunged and Lela fruitlessly defended, a brilliant blue light flashed in her peripheral vision. An average sized man with a long thin blade appeared out of nowhere. He threw what appeared to be a shard of glass at the lunging soldier. Lela watched the soldier fall, their neck bleeding profusely.

The mysterious man moved to Lela's side, defending her from the remaining bullet-proof soldier. The soldier hesitated, unsure where the greater threat lay. Lela began jabbing at the soldier, forcing him to defend against her. She watched the man, or what she thought to be a man, fluidly draw a shape

in the air. Torn free, the soldier's legs casually fell to the floor.

The bleeding man was left. Lela's saviour then swung his head towards the two motorbikes, parked next to the fence. Shaking her own head, Lela found herself being pulled towards the metal death-traps. 'I'll run through an enemy occupied hospital, but a motorbike is pushing it,' Lela mumbled, mostly to herself.

Struggling against the man's grasp, Lela was next to the closest bike in moments. The red go-faster paint had a white slash through the engine compartment, below the seat. This did not instil confidence in her. The sudden appearance of a crater in the road however, instilled the need for action. The tank may be immobilised, but its turret was still functional. Now the smoke had cleared sufficiently, the swivelling tank presented a not inconsiderable threat.

Before dancing towards the tank, the strange man motioned again towards the bike. Leaping onto the bike, Lela kicked up the stand and pulled the nearest handlebar. She turned back to the man as he finished his dance. Her eyes widening as she watched confused. The tank's turret unexplainably exploded.

Kicking and pushing every button and lever on the bike, Lela panicked a little as the bike groaned and crunched. Finally, she flicked the red button on the bike's handlebar. This found Lela jumping forward, barely in control. Another explosion behind her ceased any further hesitations. The strange man ran beside the bike, keeping pace without apparent difficulty.

As she rode, the wobbling began to smooth and her heart slow. The mysterious man had to mime the gear changes and there were a few near misses, with awkward crunching to incite Lela's nerves. The man continued to run beside the bike, occasionally flicking out a hand to indicate where she should turn.

Lela began to realise there were more oddities to this man than she had first seen. His skin had an oddly blue tint and his brown hair did not move in the wind, but rather to its own underwater current. Large eyes shone a brilliant blue and apparently didn't blink. He ran wide-eyed into the wind.

Lela wasn't sure where he was leading her, but she hoped it was to the aid of her friends. She was still puzzled as to where the man had come from. But, she felt safer in his oddly familiar presence and so, chose not to question his appearance further. Gunfire ahead cut-short any further puzzling and Lela carefully un-slung her assault rifle. The bike wobbled with the effort, but the man kept it steady for her.

Around the next corner Lela was awarded a confusing sight. Five black vans jostled for position as bullets, fired from windows, shattered windscreens and pierced engines. Lela couldn't tell which van was which. Driving along the side of the closest, Lela had to brake and swerve behind to avoid fire from one of the lead vehicles.

When the rear doors of the last van opened, Lela was suddenly faced with a soldier holding a smaller gun. Not waiting to see its effect, Lela, her rifle resting on the handlebars, sprayed into the back of this van. The handlebars steadied its fire enough that the rifle peppered the shocked soldiers falling from.

Knowing now that this van was not friendly, Lela swung back out to its side. Accelerating up to the rear tire, she emptied her clip into the rotating rubber. The van kicked and a black metal box careened toward her.

Lela broke and turned towards the vans former location. She ducked her head as the van flipped over her. She had to rip the handlebars back towards the road, before she was embedded in a fence. The bike fought violently against her control and during this struggle, she lost her rifle and the skin off her left shin. Her hip burned ferociously.

The beast tamed, Lela looked around for the mysterious man. She didn't have many senses left. She had never been in so much pain. The explosions, gunfire and voice of negativity in her head were all drowned to a low buzzing hum. Her nose was full of scalding smoke and exhaust fumes and these were all she could taste.

Lela shook her head to what little clarity she could muster.

That's when she saw him. The mysterious man. He was pulling soldiers from the back of the remaining enemy van.

Lela was next to the van, firing her pistol at the driver. Senses clouded, it was as if she wasn't in control of her firing form. Then, she was pulling the driver from his seat.

Before she knew what had happened, Lela was driving the van and her bike was falling free.

12 Imprisoned

I walked into the dim room. She was sitting in front of the fire reading, as was her preferred pastime. Flicking a switch nearby, a light shone down on a shocked silhouette. Curly brown hair rolled over bare shoulders and, after realisation dawned, I was warmed by the wide smile that was thrown in my direction. Bouncing to her feet, I was forced to catch her beauty in my arms. I was bone weary, but I caught her, swinging in a small arc.

A kiss on my cheek and I was alive with her presence. Her supple breasts pushed up against my muscular chest. The thin fabric that separated our two forms was torn away in haste. Grabbing her toned thighs, I pulled them around me. Knocking up against a bookshelf, our locked forms continued into darkness, as I begrudgingly awoke.

I couldn't breathe. Water ran down my back. Opening my eyes, I saw only darkness. My eyes burned from the filth in the bucket. My nose burned. The dirty water, unexpected in its deliverance, ran through my nostrils. Gagging, I coughed into the water. Suddenly, the roots of my hair were wrenched. Oxygen flooded my lungs. Then was savagely taken away, my scalp, at least, was relieved.

Slowly, with adamant reluctance, the events that led to my current situation became clear and some of the fog in my mind receded. This knowledge did not aid me however and I began to lose track of the number of times I was dunked. Finding rhythm enough to breath, I was asked questions by a gruff man. But, I got the feeling he didn't expect me to answer.

So, I remained silent, using these chances to regain my strength. At some point, a new presence entered the room. A strange power was exciting the air. My skin tingled with its energy. After more questions and innumerable dunks, the tune was stolen. My hair, having lost the feeling in the roots, was used to pull me to the floor beside the bucket.

I heaved with the effort of capturing oxygen after the latest dunk, water rushed down my cheeks to the floor. I didn't bother to open my eyes. Instead, I imagined the joy of the survivors when I finally found them. They could feel safe again, knowing they had escaped.

The concrete was cold beneath me. I was rolled over and I felt someone kneeling down. Their breath was hot on my goose-bumped forehead. I smiled along nevertheless. "It's ok," the deep male voice pronounced clearly, bearing down upon my wheezing form, "I can make all this go away."

My response to this was manic laughter. Head knocked sideways, my cheek began to sting. The voice spoke again, this time patience was more of a struggle, "Why do you not open your eyes?! Look upon your new master, while I still feel you are of value."

My laughter ceased, but the smile remained. I spat in the 'patient' man's face. Mainly because that's what I'd seen guys do in the movies. It just felt right you know? The tang of blood and saliva was left on my lips. This was the last thing I remembered before I was knocked unconscious by a rifle butt and thrown into a holding cell.

“Hey. Hey! Wake up you stone-powered pussy.”

With a grumble, I shook sleep from my bruised form. Looking around for the source of the voice, I saw only concrete walls and a thick metal door. Suddenly, my head shot with pain and I was holding a bloody patch of my skull. Finding my voice, I spoke to the air around me, “Who is that? Where are you?”

“I’m in the cell next to you. The sorcerer is foolish in his overconfidence. Not believing the magic of an Albemarle Monk to be strong enough to counter his pathetic enchantments.”

My eyes had adjusted to the darkness now. There was no light source, but I could see the dark concrete of the walls. The thick metal door had a square panel near eye level, which I assumed was a window. A grate near the bottom of the door looked to be adjustable, probably for meals or water, or so I hoped. I was famished. The bottom seemed to be where the meagre light was coming from. “So,” I began, holding my head as it throbbed with the pain of my most recent injury, “do you have magic enough to get yourself out of here?”

A scoff accompanied the return of the directionless voice, “I am here because the trees spoke of your capture. I wanted to help you do more than escape.”

“Alright, I don’t have much time. I don’t even know how long I’ve been here. It might already be too late.” “I’m not sure what you’re too late for, but you’ve been here for almost a day,” said the voice sympathetically. “Now, I must explain some things if you are to succeed in defeating the Sapphire Sorcerer.” Beginning with a cough, the voice settled in for a long explanation, “There is more to your armour than being a mere weapons master.”

“Much as I’d love to hear you rant-” Will interrupted.

“Now you best apologise. Youth does not excuse such rudeness!”

“I,” Will began, feeling foolish and even more on edge regarding the time and its passage, “I’m sorry. I have a deadline. People are relying on me. People could die.”

“Ok. I understand. But, this information concerns *your* continued survival,” continued the directionless voice, patience ever present in the tone. “Although, I suppose you hadn’t even heard you were of the weapons master order, it is of some importance to the type of warrior you shall become. The weapons masters were originally of the blacksmith profession. When the Elementals decided to recruit Humans, to aid them in the fight against the metal of their kind, the blacksmiths were given stones of the earth.”

“Hold on a minute,” I interrupted, “who are these Elemental characters? And why should I believe you?” I added with a narrowing of my eyes. My suspicion peaked as I recalled the common television technique of placing an ‘ally’ in with a prisoner, to sympathize and to eventually obtain information through their common incarceration.

“You were the one who instructed haste! Do not interrupt!” A disgruntled pause precluded further explanation, “as I was saying, the blacksmiths, in order to forge the magical armours first forged crude pre-armours. Using these pre-armours, the smiths could work the magic required to forge the true armours, with the aid of the Elementals. Enchanted by powerful Elemental magic, they were inlaid with the largest and purest stones of the earth. The Armours were offered to specifically talented individuals. The traits of these Humans, when combined with the power of the stones, were amplified many hundred-fold. There was much debate as to whom the stones should be given. These debates were mainly to do with the value of the skills each of the various guilds possessed and which were willing to aid the Elemental cause. But, of course, some wanted an armour to further their own

ends. It was difficult to screen for such individuals within the guilds. So, the knights were entrusted with policing the Armours as their primary role. This was to ensure a smooth transition into the Elemental forces and to eventually create a leadership, which had tested the reliability of its forces.

Certain stones were first given to the noblest knights, the most talented alchemists, the most effective clerics, those individuals closest to their magical ancestry, the monks and the Druid race. Cutting to the chase, your ancestor received an amethyst armour. Once a particularly gifted cleric, they became a field medic, healing the various other armours during the battles to come.

The Elemental war lasted for generations and the third bearer of your armour chose to defect, having fallen in love with a silversmith.

Your ancestor became a blacksmith after this and worked alongside his wife, as they lived out their days in hiding. They had some children, as you'd expect, having as much protection as their libido allowed. What was not expected was the oldest son's sudden overnight transformation.

Normally, when the oldest sons came of age, the armour was passed to them and a ceremony evoked their rebirth.

Anticipating his inheriting the family business, the oldest son had trained as an apprentice silversmith under his mother. Not knowing his father had been a powerful cleric of the foreign war and furious at the secret that had been held from him, the son forged new weapons for his inherited armour. And so, the armour took on a new set of traits. His father's forge burned with the son's passion.

The dual swords that currently occupy your armour were forged by this boy-come-man. Eventually inlaid and enchanted by the Druids. The blacksmiths, having been recognised as loyal allies to the Elemental cause, had their pre-armours fine-tuned, so to speak. The ability to enchant and forge weapons was enhanced, along with their knowledge of the numerous weapons of the Human cause, which they had forged. Hence, as they trained, they became weapons masters of renown. Their value to the cause was not only due to their ability to forge enchanted weapons for the Human armies, but also for their skills on the front line.

The oldest son, the fourth wearer of your armour, joined the fight and was proclaimed a hero. A powerful cleric, the boy-come-man trained with his two swords night and day. Eventually, he made his name by banishing more Metal Elementals than any Armour before them. A callous man, he sired many children to as many wives and, upon his death towards the end of the Elemental war, the armour was inherited by a farmer.

The boy had awoken in a similar fashion to his unknown father. Not enraged, but horrified by the idea of killing, his swords were only used in defence. Healing greater wounds and with more energy than he safely should, the Armours grew to respect the pacifist farm-boy.

At the end of the war, the allied Elemental forces rewarded the Humans greatly for their help in defeating the Metal Elementals. Many of the so-called secondary Armours were retired. These Armours were weaker, only having their primary stone and a focusing base stone on their back, which was usually quartz, for the sake of completeness. The combined power of these secondary armours was used to trap the first and last of the Metal Elementals in a huge hall. This being was proclaimed as immortal and so, his imprisonment was necessary for the peace that came after the generations long war. The bearers of the lost secondary armours were rewarded with enormous fortunes and lived comfortably for the rest of their lives.

Many armour's had received secondary stones however, after showing exceptional valour or

heroism during the war. These stones replaced the quartz and thus, their Armour's power was increased and hence, the primary Armours were denoted. A leadership system was created, with the Armours deferring to the four Elemental Knights as the leaders of each of the fissioned Elemental isles and the water-derived archipelago.

Your Armour might have been retired with many of the less significant Armours at the end of the war. But, the Druids asked for Human ambassadors. Three were chosen, yours answering to the Knight of the Garnet/Malachite or Druid Knight. The Druids were impressed with your ancestor's loyalty and kindness and so, they granted the three of you their most powerful talisman, the Druid malachite, which is your secondary stone. This is perhaps degrading to the beauty and power of the stone, which on its own would lend great power to an Armour.

I imagine dreams have granted you the rest of your more current history. So, I will skip to the part where your secondary stone grants you the use of Druid magic."

Having held my questions thus far, the idea that I could cast a spell was too farfetched for me to completely absorb. I butted in, "You mean," pausing to mull over the next words, "I'm a sorcerer?"

"No! No! You are the Weapons Master of the Druids. This grants you some control of the magical elements earth, air and water. Along with a powerful oneness with the Earth. It has been noted that some Druids can talk to varying numbers of plants and animals. This may or may not have revealed itself to you.

Being a mage of sorts gives you a unique advantage over any of the other weapons masters. This, combined with your powerful clerical abilities, mean you have inherited one of the most versatile armours remaining."

The voice stopped for a spell, allowing me to digest this new information in silence. I took to focusing on the water dripping from the walls and swinging my arms aromatically. I concentrated on moving the water from its concrete abode. Laughter echoed around my cell and I stopped my waving.

The voice, returning once again, spoke in a patient teachers tone, "Druid magic usually requires the use of the ancient tongue, more so for a novice such as yourself. This magic differs from the magic of a sorcerer, which is derived from the sorcerer's mind itself.

Your genetic memories of the ancient tongue should return to you more fully when you acquire your armour. The belt you possessed was powerful, but nothing when compared to the stones inlaid in the armours.

We called those yet to prove themselves, Armourlings, and they would train with their belts for variable times before they were deemed ready to don their full armour. Although, many Armours, especially later in the war and after it, were simply inherited and worn from then on. So, there is no strict policy in this respect.

Anyway, I diverge. I am going to teach you some simple characters, enough to aid you in stealing your armour from the sorcerer's camp."

"Wait, my armour is here!? What of the sorcerer and all the soldiers?"

"We'll get to that."

And so, I was shown several characters that I could use only sparingly, with the energy from my own body. There were purportedly few life forms, other than insects or soldiers, to draw from near the camp, due to the sorcerer's fear of Druid spies.

My lesson was cut short when the window near the top of the cell door slid open. Metal grinding

on metal was so unexpected, I jumped. The character I was miming in the air suddenly shone, holding its form when I removed my hand. I felt myself tire ever-so-slightly with my first recorded use of magic. With no purpose, the character only remained for a short time, disappearing entirely with the influx of fresh air that followed the entrance of a silhouetted character.

The door was closed softly, the silhouette checking outside surreptitiously. I waited, convincing myself that I was only *pretending* to be too weak to react to the unexplained visitation. A hushed female voice spoke in hurried tones, “Oh! You look terrible.”

Waiting for a response, she received nothing from my slumped form. I simply stared into the darkness that was her face. Pulling a pole from somewhere unseen, she tapped the ground. A sharp click was followed by searing light, emanating from the top of the pole. Instinctively shielding my eyes, they adjusted quickly to the unexpected brightness. The female voice came again, almost cocky this time, “So, you are capable of movement. Had me fooled for a moment.”

She shook her head at this. As if she should have easily known. With this, I chose to speak, “Why are you here? I’ve told you nothing and will continue in this fashion.” “Oh, no. Uh,” with a blush, she turned her head away. When she turned it back, I got a good look at her face. The whole room seemed to spin. This was the girl from my dreams. Her hair was blonde and her face was a different shape. But, her eyes, something in her eyes told me definitively that this was she.

She spoke again, more confidently this time, as if my recognising her had imbued some deep determination, “I heard you had helped many people escape. Mainly Aradecca University students. I also heard it took a whole platoon to bring you here. You didn’t even have your armour!”

Now I was really confused. “You still didn’t answer my question,” I told the woman from my dreams. “Who are you?”

“I... I’m not sure I should say.”

With this, the wall to the right of the door disappeared. The voice from before spoke once more, this time from a burly man in the corner of what I had come to believe was an adjacent cell, “This, judging by her armour, is the Head Book Keeper; the Sandigh Armour of Topaz/Rose Quartz.”

Taken aback, the Sandigh Armour spoke once more, caution edging into her tone, “The Sapphire Sorcerer brags about how he captured an Albemarle monk. From what he told me, you were secured in a warded cell.”

She finished speaking with a smirk, laughing inside at the sorcerer’s failure. Her expression changed, as what the monk had told her truly sunk in. “So, you know my armours true purpose,” she asked, “I knew there was more to it than just pheromones.”

“I do,” the monk responded, a glint in his eye, “and I’ll tell you all about it, just as soon as you fetch young Will here his belt, katana and machete.”

I just sat there, mouth lolling open. A girl from my dreams was talking to a monk that made a wall in my cell disappear. It was all rather surreal. The girl argued at the impossibility of getting my belt for some time, until she eventually gave in to the apparently desirable thought of finding out the true purpose of her armour.

Leaving in a huff, the girl flickered in the pole-light. I glimpsed curly brown hair, before the blonde visage returned and she was gone.

I turned to the monk with a few questions of my own. Anticipating this, the wall returned and so did the directionless voice, “Unlike you, I do not draw my energy from a stone, but from years of training. I grow weary and must rest if I am to free you.”

“What are you?” I asked, knowing it was unfair of me to press the man.

“The story of the monks is a long one,” he began, “for now I’ll tell you there were two sides. Those who followed Albemarle, believing we should exist like the Druids, one with the Earth and more ethereal in our power. On the opposing were those who sought to increase their power through the control of the elements.”

With that, I heard no more from the monk and his directionless voice. I closed my eyes to rest before my hopefully imminent escape. I couldn’t sleep however, all I could think of was the survivors.

By the time the Sandigh Armour returned, I felt more tired for my rest. She slid into the cell, her head lingering in the corridor that I assumed was beyond. I saw she held my belt in her delicate hand. She flicked her thick blonde hair from her face, full lips twisted in a nervous smile. She was partially hidden in the shadows from the light of her quarterstaff. Her large eyes held me. They were so familiar. The wall beside me disappeared and the Sandigh Armour spoke, “I got the belt. But, you must hurry. They will soon notice its gone.”

Painfully getting to my feet, I reached for my belt. I stumbled as it was pulled farther from my reach. “First,” she began, looking into my weary eyes, “I need your word you’ll find a way to get me out of here.”

“I... why can’t you just leave?”

“That’s the second thing I need promised, that this monk will provide me with whatever information I require to free me of the enchantments that the Sorcerer of the Sapphire has placed on my armour that prevent me getting too far.”

The wall between the cells disappeared once more and the monk spoke, vowing to do all he could to aid the Head Book Keeper. I gave my word to help with her escape, but admitted to my ignorance in the area; at least for now. Finally, my belt was handed to me. I hurriedly clipped its length around my worn pants. I felt the healing energy of the amethyst fill me. I opened myself to its power. My skin glowed, cuts, grazes, gashes, bruises, worn muscles and various other ailments, no longer weighed me down. My mind still felt sluggish from lack of sleep, but I stood tall. Looking to the Sandigh Armour, I spoke my thanks. About to leave, I had an idea.

“Come to Locksenbury oval in...” I began, “What day is it?! What *time* is it?!” Panicked now, I tried to calm my wild thoughts.

“It is very late,” said the book keeper, “you’ve been here for about a day I’d say.” Calming somewhat, I had a day and bit left then. Not much time, but enough.

It was the monks turn to give me something now, “I saved up as much energy as I could. Come over here.”

Confused, I remembered the monk mentioning aid for my escape. Reaching his side, I was instructed to hold his hand in my own. A strange light filled my eyes. I could feel his unique variety of magic, filling my stores and those of the amethyst on my belt.

Thanking the monk once again, I ran through the characters he had taught me in my head. Happy that I had a firm grasp on them, I hesitated no longer, leaving the cell that I had wasted too much time in occupying.

Cautiously, I scanned the corridor. Seeing no guards, I wondered at the sorcerer's arrogance. Rounding the first corner, I saw only cell doors. The thick metal taunted me. I wanted nothing more than to open every door, freeing the people of Aradecca. But, I had no way to ensure their safety.

To evoke the sorcerer's wrath at this stage was suicide. These were only excuses though and so I vowed to return.

I saw a guard desk at the end of the latest of a series of corridors. A small garrison of soldiers was posted there. They were all heavily armed with assault rifles, swords and riot armour. If this wasn't enough, the small armoury on the wall behind the desk had all sorts of destructive tools. Some of which glowed with enchantments.

I focusing on the stored energy in myself. But, with no malachites for control, the spell was made significantly more risky. Carefully, I drew the short spell on my arm, making sure to limit the magic to a time interval,

我的身体二分钟看不见的
(Wǒ de shēntǐ èr fēnzhǒng kànbùjiàn de)
My body for two minutes not see

I felt a tingle run up my appendages. The earth magic acted quickly. I froze. Looking down, I saw the wet moss-covered wall that I had leant against. My legs were gone! Looking closer, my arms were also 'invisible'.

Panicked, I was unsure if my use of magic was correct. 'What if I remained invisible forever!?' I whispered aloud. My ears drummed with the beating of my frantic heart. I felt like I was at a job interview, being asked a stupid question, like, 'which sort of animal do you think you are?' I had no idea! A polar bear!? But, then again, that was as irrelevant as the moss on the wall I leant against. Or, I suppose, the heavily armed guards that could no longer see me.

That's when I remembered what the monk had told me. I was not truly invisible, that was beyond my capability. If I looked closely enough, I could make out my outline, which my eye didn't want to see. Calming somewhat, I looked closer at a hand that I felt was near my face. I could feel my breath on my palm, could hear the air as the hand swished past my eyes. Then, as if a trick of the eye, I saw something in my peripheral vision. The something was my hand. Well, I assumed it was my hand, it was pretty damn vague.

Feeling more confident, and less panicked, I wasted no more time. My hyperventilation stilled, I hurried through the guard post.

Reaching the exit, I careful opened the large wooden doors of the prison complex. Turning back, I made sure the unexplained opening of the doors was not seen by a guard. I managed to slip through them unnoticed, or so I thought.

I entered the enemy camp. Lights could be seen in tents behind the two guards that I now faced. They looked right through me, towards the seemingly unexplainable closing wooden doors of the prison they were guarding. Reacting instinctively, I reached for the neck of the nearest guard. Squeezing as tight as I could, my machete found his heart.

Silenced by my grip, the guard fell limp in my grasp. Weakly retching against my hand, I pulled the machete free of his new cavity and darted backwards. Unsure of his fellow guard's sudden violent disembarkation from his duties, the second guard swung at the air with his longsword. Staring wide-

eyed at the tip of the blade, as it sliced the fabric of my prison uniform, I grabbed the retreating wrist that held this longsword. The large swing left the guard open to disarmament. I wrenched the longsword from his hand after slamming it painfully against the wall, weaving silence in the air with my other hand. The guard's screams were mouthed to no ears.

Promptly ensuring any magical failures were inconsequential, I slammed the skull of the guard I held by the hand into the wall.

Hurriedly scanning my surrounds, I was relieved to see no one had come to check on the commotion. My concern peaked as I realised the arm I was using to drag the first guard was visible. I hid both of the bodies around a corner from the doorway. Not expecting them to remain hidden for long, I hoped I wouldn't need the whole night to find my armour and fly.

A patrol walked past and I reflexively clasped my hand over the unconscious guard's mouth. Smirking into the darkness, I stripped the same guard of his uniform. My smile was embarrassingly wiped from my face as I unbuckled the man's belt. Shaking my head, I finished the job, donning the guard's uniform and dropping my prison garb to the floor.

Walking through the camp, I held the unconscious guard's rifle in the manner I had seen other soldiers in the patrols holding them. Surreptitiously searching for the largest tent, which, if I was told true, was the armoury. My eyes felt like they were giving me away, every soldier I walked past made them grow in size. I had no idea if they knew my face. Stealing a soldier's cap and darting behind a tent, I pulled it low.

Across the dirt street in front of me, I saw a row of tanks, one of the last things on my list. Mentally marking my position, I rushed past the armoured vehicles, assuming the armoury to be nearby.

I had to pause as I ran past a cluster of multi-coloured tents. I felt power emanating from the enchanted canvas structures. Drawn to the dark blue tent, I wavered as its diamonds glittered brilliant rainbows in my mind.

Suddenly, Keira walked past. My head followed her. I hadn't noticed how far I had walked from the dirt street. I was standing near a black tent. Fiery snakes twisted disjointedly over the fabric. I shook my head to clarity and ran after the dark beauty as she flitted away.

Twisting past guard posts, mess halls, an oddly small field hospital and many barracks, I finally got a good look at my beautiful companion. A companion I left in Locksenbury. She opened the flap to an enormous tent and slipped inside. I wasn't fooled by the possibility of illusion or insanity on my behalf. And so, I approached the tent cautiously.

Finally aware enough to take mind of my surrounds, I was thankful of having not been spotted as I ran wildly through the camp. I didn't see guards outside the armoury, but assumed there to be several inside the enormous tent. Loosening my katana in its scabbard, I slipped through the canvas flaps. Two guards were suddenly beside me. One asked in a gruff tone, "What business do you 'ave 'ere?"

"I... ah -" I began breathless, "-need to replace my rifle. Keeps jammin'. Told me to come 'ere."

A suspicious glance and a finger pointed towards a series of crates granted me entrance to the tent. Handing my 'broken' rifle to the guard who hadn't spoken, I walked with apparent confidence to the crates I was directed towards.

Arriving at the afore directed crate, I saw no rifles. Realisation flooding my mind as purple

flooded my vision. I leapt to the cover of the various surrounding crates. Rifle fire answered my suspicions. I heard the first guard yell in his gruff voice, "Seems fine to me! Next time you might want to learn the pass-"

"Hah!" interrupted the other soldier, "next time? how bad you shooting lately Rob?!"

Smiling at the guard's slow reaction, I ran with the failed deception. Darting through the maze of crates, work benches, racks and various deadly looking weapons, I searched for the room where the sorcerer stored the unused armours. Having no luck, bullets focused my thoughts. I grabbed a pistol-in-holster and strapped it to my thigh as I ran. Rolling around corners and diving to cover, I darted through the huge tent.

Looking to the roof of the tent, I saw one of the far corners was cordoned off with a second layer of dark canvas. Aiming my way through the crates towards this corner, I ducked and weaved. I heard soldiers approaching from either side of me, their heavy boots pounded the earth with the precision of their training. I could feel their approach in rattling bones. I drew my katana from its scabbard. My machete found my right hand, held with the thick blade facing the ground. Rolling through a corridor between crates, I felt the air buffet me with the passage of bullets.

My arms, back and legs all burned with near misses. Coming to my feet in what I hoped to be the last series of crates, I spun my katana in a wide arc around myself. Soldiers with an assortment of blades jumped backwards from the arcing blade. Searching with my mind, for the soldiers protected by the metal enchantment I threw my machete at the nearest. His enchantment was highlighted by a dark green tint.

Dodging, he took the blade in his collarbone. As the soldier fell to the floor, my right arm drew the pistol I had collected. Firing precise shots at the four un-enchanted soldiers, their falling corpses slowed the progress of the remaining soldiers.

Grabbing the hilt of my machete from the still dying man, I pulled his body up to mine. Putting my shoulder up against him, I felt him moan in pain. Coughing blood, the wound I had inflicted appeared fatal. Throwing the man into the forest of his companion's blades, I leapt onto the side of the nearest crate.

Kicking with my right leg, my left found the shoulder of a reeling soldier. Pushing off, I felt the man's shoulder crunch underfoot. I rolled over the small corps now below me. Landing behind them, I didn't turn to watch them recover. Instead, I sheathed my weapons and ran pell-mell towards the dark canvas corner.

Ripping the canvas aside, I watched as knives and swords alike flew past my flying form. Falling to the floor in a tangle of torn fabric, I rolled out of the entrance to the dark section. I prayed this corner contained my armour, I could not foresee many other opportunities to search.

Wrestling my legs free, I came to a crouch and prepared myself for a second wave. Weapons at the ready, I waited for what felt like much longer than I knew it must have been. Breathing heavily, I sheathed my machete. Keeping my katana aimed at the door, I was ready to face down whoever tried to enter unexpectedly.

My mind calmed, and with this, a different clarity entered my thoughts. I could feel the stones surrounding me. Some hung on walls with plaques below them. I couldn't read the plaques, they were in the ancient language and my vocabulary was exceedingly limited. But, from what I could gather, the plaques were titles for the armours.

Assuming the fear that kept the soldiers from entering the canvas corner, did not prevent them from alerting other Armours. I quenched my awe. Filling myself with the limited healing energy of the amethyst in my belt, I searched for a shining receptacle for this energy.

I rushed through the dark corner, pausing when I saw a glass display case at the farthest wall. I could see a purple light glowing, sending eerie shadows on the canvas behind the case. Sheathing my katana, I felt the amethyst energy similarly slip back into my belt. I reached the case. Realising I wasn't breathing, I reached my hand toward. Suddenly stopped short, I stared confused when glass stopped my hand mid-reach. Shaking my head, I proceeded to lift the glass lid.

There was a large red stone sitting beside that of the huge amethyst that drew my attention. The amethysts power vibrated the air. Quickly checking the coast was clear I grabbed my armour and prepared to depart. That's when I saw him, ugly face twisted in a grimace.

13 Convoy

Lela awoke to rays of muted light through floral curtains. She looked around confused. It took a few moments for the events that led up to her current state to illuminate her mind. Yet, there was still a blank. After she took control of an enemy van, her mind went a hazy shade of grey. The deeper she pushed into her subconscious, the thicker the fog of grey became over her memories.

These ponderings were paused at the entrance of Clive. “You ok? Wazn’t sure if you waz gonna wake,” he expressed.

“Yeah, I think so. What happened?”

“After you tookz the fourf van, we drove uz to a primary school near de high-way.”

“Right, but how did I get here,” Lela emphasised, motioning to the bed she currently occupied.

“Oh. Dat blue bloke waz ‘ere. He tapped you wife ‘iz finger and ya fell. We ain’t know what he’d done. Left after dat, he did. We took you ‘ere and you’ve been out for near a day.”

“A day,” Lela exclaimed, shocked, “but, then we only have a day and a bit to get to Locksenbury!”

“That ain’t the worst of it. The van chase lef a lot worse off.”

Lela struggled to her feet, feeling a strange loneliness at her apparent saviour’s absence. Flexing her injured shoulder, Lela was astonished to find that pain was gone. Exhaustion had replaced her numerous injuries. Whatever that blue man had done, it had come at the cost of fatigue. There was no time for recovery. Lela had to get her people to Locksenbury. Laughing at the thought of these survivors being ‘her people’, Lela metaphysically stepped off of her pedestal.

After walking out of an adjacent house to the primary school, Clive took Lela through a confusing series of corridors to their apparently intended destination. Red hair matted with sweat, he still moved quickly through his exhaustion.

They were in another hall now. This one had floors marked for sports. Sad sticky patches of a deep red had sunk into the wooden surface. The survivors Lela passed were pock-marked with bruises and broken limbs, in addition to their previous injuries.

“At least they’re alive,” Lela said, quietly reassuring herself. The fevers and infections had been eased, if not cleared, from the medicine they had accrued. Looking around, Lela found Clive tending to a tall man with fresh bandages along his arm. The few sheets and blankets available were layered to form thin mattresses.

Belinda was sitting by Ted’s ‘bed’. She was holding his hand while he slept. Feeling Lela’s gaze, Clive turned and answered the inferred question, “Fre of the children, the onez who were tall enough to reach the pedalz, were shown ow ta drive. The fourf van is so full of bullet ‘olz, I doubt we’d make it frew a checkpoint.”

“How many wounded could we fit in a van?” Lela responded somewhat desperately.

“I ain’t sure. Not az many az afore. Not without ‘urtin’ them.”

Looking to her silent companion, Lela asked, “You alright Belinda?”

A small nod was followed by a mumbled, “Bell.”

Smiling, Lela gave a small nod in return. She felt a confidence edging into the farther recesses of her mind. The light outside was already beginning to dim. They knew they had to move tonight, or not at all.

Going to the gymnasium’s sports locker, Lela found skipping ropes and volleyball nets. Pulling the string from the nets, she created make-shift ropes. Going back to the survivors, Lela used net strings to get the wounded to draw ‘straws’. The first six long straws were then strapped down on the tray of the three intact black vans. Another 6 were tied to the seats on either side of the vans rear compartments. Finally, Lela tied uncomfortable wounded to the passenger’s seats of the vans. This left fewer wounded than she had expected, which was a grim-yet-relieving thought.

Not long after the wounded were strapped in, the group formed a nervous convoy of black rectangles. Clive, Bell, Ted and the remaining three wounded - those who had drawn a short net-rope fragment - rode with Lela in the last van, the one full of bullet holes.

Avoiding main roads, their small convoy traversed the back roads of suburbia for as long as possible. Each main road crossing required a staggered distribution of their vans. Avoiding the attention of patrols by crossing at varied times. This was effective, yet it took far more time than they had.

Lela’s van especially required discretion. The bullet-ridden carapace drew far too much unwanted attention. So, they crossed last, forming the rear-guard of the group. Lela shuddered as she felt their vans engine do the same, as it attempted to shirk its responsibilities for the umpteenth time. She had to drop the car into neutral several times, rolling at high speeds, to prevent the engine giving-up entirely.

Fortunate as they were, the convoy managed to reach one of the few routes to the mountains without event. They had chosen not to take the main highway. The chosen road took them past the mansions that overlooked Aradecca. Assuming this route to be less heavily patrolled, Bell, Clive and Lela were nevertheless armed with the remaining weapons.

Lela banged on the thin metal that separated the rear compartment from the rest of the van, signalling Clive and Bell to be ready. They had arrived in the foothills.

Eventually, the back streets gave way to a few main roads and the lazy routes they followed. The convoy was sent weaving along the outskirts of the city proper. Many of the houses out here had large acreages, used for farming, arboretums or botanical gardens. A usually enjoyable view was now ruled by fire. The dark greens and wistful limes gave way to smouldering reds and livid oranges.

Lela’s gaze was pulled back to the road as she noticed the lead van being checked by a patrol. Eyes widening, Lela grabbed Ted’s arm from where he sat, next to her, and pulled it to the steering wheel. Opening the driver’s side door and drawing her thigh-holstered pistol, Lela fired at the hinges that held it to the van.

Flying free, Lela’s heart skipped a beat as the door threatened to return the favour on the back end of the severely damaged van. Fortune favouring the bold, Lela’s distraction lent the lead van enough time to break free of the patrols prying eyes.

Soldiers hurried to raise rifles as Ted drove towards what Lela assumed to be a checkpoint. No

one seemed to notice the other two vans that slipped past and began the journey up into the mountains. Lela was relieved to see the lead vans following her previous order to run and let the rear-guard do the fighting, Lela began firing at the patrol with her fancy rifle.

Not bothering to aim, Lela emptied her clip. The patrol fled to the cover of their van and the crates that presumably sustained the patrol's longevity. Hearing the click of an empty cartridge, Lela grabbed her shotgun from Ted's lap and released her hold on the van's roof.

Landing with a fierce impact, Lela's healed shoulder absorbed the brunt of the impact and returned to its previously injured status. Rolling to her feet, Lela could hear Ted pulling the van in a fierce turn. A low-speed collision with the enemy van saw the rear doors pop open and Clive and Bell loosed upon the soldiers. Having already taken cover from Lela's rifle fire, the soldiers began to fire back, while sending numerous profanities their way.

Shotgun held tight, Lela fired once to rock the enemy van. Fearing their cover was blown, two soldiers stood tall enough for her to see them through the van's shattered windows. And so, her pistol made short work of the taller of the two. But, Lela was soon leaping sideways in a preparatory retreat from the crate covered soldiers to her left. Accidentally dropping her pistol as she did so.

Opening the passenger-side door of their already bullet-ridden van, Lela took cover from the new threat. Rifle fire from her right told the hopeful tale of Clive and Bell's victory. So, Lela lay down cover fire through the shattered window from behind which she hid.

Quickly running out of shotgun ammunition and not wanting to waste time reloading, Lela rolled free of the van in search of her lost pistol. More rifle fire told of a freedom of movement on Lela's behalf, Clive and Bell making enough of a distraction. Hence, she did not expect to come face-to-face with an angry looking bloke with a sword.

Standing over Lela's pistol, long black hair thick with oil, he smiled a rictus grin as she came to her feet. Hesitating no longer, Lela swung with her shotgun. Blocked easily, the slender blade of her foe slipped over and around the thick barrel of her offence.

Lela's concentration wavered at the sounds of another battle. She could hear Ted firing her reloaded rifle from the van. Wanting with all her heart to aid those that she had led to this point, Lela found herself the one who needed saving. Her blocked swing was accelerated and she lost her shotgun to the floor. Darting back, she hesitated between the sword at her hip and the knives she had strapped around her person.

Deciding familiar and small was to her advantage, Lela drew a knife for each hand. She began fending off blows sooner than it took to pull a trigger. The oily man was strong and confident in this strength. He sent wide swings to her small knives. So, Lela was slowly propelled backwards, but she began to see a pattern. He left himself wide open after each swing, more so if he struck to the left.

Drawing his blows to his clearly dominant right side, Lela struck. Making two thrusts with her left knife, she used one to feign and panic the man, while the second embedded her blade below his rib cage. She pulled the knife along the bottom of his ribs, gutting the man before he could recover from his powerful swing.

Not realising she had sustained a deep gash down her right side, Lela instead focused all her energies on ensuring his death was quick. Stabbing him a final time in his throat.

Oily corpse falling sallow to the ground, Lela's gaze was now free to turn towards the crates. There she spotted Bell and Clive adding another body to the fallen. "We need to get those three

wounded into this more intact van,” Lela yelled to Clive.

A short nod and he was rushing to the back of the van. Ted was slumped on the driver’s seat, lying atop Lela’s fancy rifle. Patting his hand, Lela asked, “Can you drive the last of the wounded out of here?”

A weak bob of his head and Ted was hobbling out of one van and into another. With Lela’s help he was sat in the slightly shattered van recently in the hands of their enemy. Bell arrived, bedecked as a porcupine in innumerable rifles and swords. Lela provided Ted with some extra clips for the fancy rifle and the wounded in the rear compartment were handed spare weapons from the fallen checkpoint soldiers. Everything else was quickly loaded into the bullet-ridden van.

A sad smile crossed Lela’s face as Ted drove off, up into the mountains. They were soon on his tail however, pattering along in the rear-guard.

Clive drove this time while Bell tended to the gash in Lela’s side. It was a windy road, but the bandages were deftly wrapped with firm-yet-gentle hands. Never saying a word, Lela watched her blonde friend. Warmth filled Lela at each careful caress.

Smiling, Lela was grateful for Bell’s silent company and willing assistance. It was madness to think they had made it this far. You could almost believe they had a chance at survival.

Suddenly, a frantic banging interrupted Lela’s moment. This was a less-than-subtle warning of approaching danger.

Momentum from a hard handbrake turn pulled Lela toward the rear door. Holding the convenient handles on the roof, Bell and Lela both glanced, first at each other, then the rear doors. Wobbling to an unwilling halt, the pair ran forward, kicking the rear doors open, reloaded rifles ready to fire at the sight of a threat.

Bullets rocked the van and Lela turned too slowly to see Clive climbing out of the van into a barrage of angry fire. Expecting events to slow, Lela was sadly mistaken. Soldiers rushed towards the van. Lela saw a slightly shattered van escaping into the distance and was somewhat relieved.

This relief was banished as the impending threat approached.

Lela was dumbstruck. Her rifle fell slack at her side. She felt, more than saw, Clive’s body fall to the floor with a thud.

Inextricably numb, Lela and Bell flew to the cover of a flanking forest. Ducking and weaving between the trees, shotgun banging against her back, Lela found a large trunk and skidded around behind. Peering towards the soldiers, the trees seemed to move to provide her with a clear view of the approaching hostile forces. Lela saw the soldiers split into groups of two to outflank her and Bell.

Lela looked to Bell, who nodded in return. The two women planned to assault the centre of the smaller patrols, hoping to break through.

Lela made to rise, but had to drop as a volley of arrows was loosed from deeper in the forest. The wind in the wake of the volley seemed to suck back explosively. Marvelling at the speed, Lela scrambled to her feet. Wide-eyed, she searched the forest for Bell. Relief filled her, seeing Bell gracefully rising and nodding from the last tree Lela had seen her.

Soldier’s bodies now littered the floor. It was hard to make out details from her vantage, but arrows in the closer bodies confirmed Lela’s confusion.

Running to Bell’s side, they both turned with trepidation toward the depths of the forest. Backs to each other, rifles raised, they prepared for what may be a greater threat.

Lela sensed movement in her peripheral, but whenever she looked, there was nothing. She felt Bell doing the same, eyes searching for the phantoms their vision conjured. No longer could Lela see the road. The trees felt like they were closing in. They were encroaching on their shrinking personal space.

Forcibly slowing her breathing, Lela focused on the rifle, held firm against her newly healed-come-internally-bruised right shoulder. She could feel the shotgun, cold against her back, the numerous knives about her person, the sword at her hip and the pistols strapped to each thigh. The tools of her new trade seemed to call out for a target. Lela's side itched under its fresh bandages. But, through all these stimuli, Lela managed to steady her gaze down the iron sights of her rifle. A cool breeze ruffled their tangled hair. Bell grew tense against Lela's back. All of a sudden, a topless woman of indecipherable age appeared from the trees. A drawn bow aimed at Lela's chest.

Lela swung to face her, iron sights aligned with the woman's neck to allow for recoil. Another person, this time a topless man, appeared to Lela's left. Then another, and before they knew what had happened, they were surrounded by innumerable topless people. All with bows aimed at Bell and Lela.

Slowly, realising the odds were far from their favour, Lela lowered her rifle. Many more people appeared, seemingly from nowhere. Lela reached behind, sliding her fingers along Bell's arm. Upon finding Bell's slender hand, Lela gently lowered Bell's rifle also. Lela felt Bell grudgingly lower the weapon, keeping her hand in Lela's, more for Lela's benefit she thought, than for her own.

Lela casually slung her rifle over her left shoulder. Bell did the same and they spun to look the topless bowmen in each of their enchanting green eyes.

Unsure of who to face, the worn cloth was exceedingly similar on all of the people. Ageless and tired, they looked curiously at Bell and Lela. Finally, much to their shared relief, the first woman to appear spoke. "Do you serve the sorcerer?" the woman said in high jilting tones. Almost musical, it was hard to take the question seriously.

"We serve only ourselves. For the time being, that is," Lela added, explaining further that, "We're seeking safe harbour in the mountains."

"You carry the weapons for defence then?" the woman stated it as a question, but Lela sensed more to this inquiry than was let on.

Hesitantly, Lela phrased her response carefully, "We have been rather offensive to prevent the necessity for defence."

"Mmm. We have observed this." The woman turned to a nearby topless male, one of the only ones left to have a bow raised, if no arrow notched.

A conversation appeared to take place within this look and the man spoke in an angry-yet-similarly-musical tone, "You can't be serious!?! This could just as easily be a trick. They will slow us down!"

"As do our wounded," the woman retorted, "but you would not leave them behind."

Lela sensed a recurring theme here. The woman was the true leader of this half-naked band of ageless archers, but the man had some authority. She decided to speak up in their defence, "We will be fine travelling on our own. We can find vehicles near the now empty outpost, I'm sure."

"Nonsense," this voice came from a third source. Turning to face another woman, Lela saw she was garbed quite differently. The main curiosity being that she was wearing a top, unlike her fellow

topless companions. The oddly dressed woman continued, “They must travel with us. The fire grows stronger than our magic can resist and these women have neglected to tell us something.” The collective gaze of the group turned to Bell and Lela.

Lela’s face, the picture of innocence, felt as transparent as the air that she heaved. She didn’t want to tell them of Will’s plan to meet in Locksenbury, not unless they too were allies. ‘And who am I to decide who Will should form allegiances with?’ Lela pondered to herself.

Cautiously, Lela asked, “Do *you* serve the sorcerer?” Laughing, the group finally lowered their remaining bows, some glancing first at the angry man.

Unsure if it was wise to reveal her own ignorance, Lela finally let her curiosity get the better of her, “Um. So, this sorcerer fellow. He’s the one leading the soldiers against us right?”

“Hah! Yes. The sorcerer we speak of is the one who leads the soldiers you have been facing,” this was explained by the newest voice, from the woman wearing a top.

Lela looked to the newest voice, her hair was long and brown and she was the only one not to have green eyes. Rather, a deep hazel, with what appeared to be colours swirling within the depths. But, Lela was too far to make these out more clearly. The woman’s tanned skin spoke of work in the sun, lighter colours hidden beneath the small gaps of cloth. Toned muscles were in stark contrast to her friendly expression. The most unique attribute was the worked leather belt that held a mighty longsword, for she was the only one to carry such a weapon. The topless individuals all had long knives unceremoniously slipped into their near-identical garments. Both at the hilt of the sword and at the buckle of the belt, were abnormally large stones of dark amber. A second darker green stone could be seen, also embedded in the hilt of the sword.

Wondering at the significance of these observations, Lela listened to the strange people argue about the approaching fire, mistrust and finally, of a Wills Armour. Wondering all the while who this sorcerer character was and how he had come to possess such a force. Interrupting, Lela inquired about the Wills Armour.

On this note, the apparent leader finally spoke to Lela in her sing-song voice, “We are here in search of the Wills Armour. I believe he is referred to as William.”

“William Wills!” Lela exclaimed, shocked. Without thinking, she told the group of their true destination. Upon finishing her description, Lela’s eyes widened at her own flippancy and she felt where Bell had been poking at her back. Numerous eyes narrowly navigated the few crevices of Lela’s face, searching for the truth in her words. All but the oddly dressed woman. All she did was give a small smile.

Ashamed at having revealed Will’s plan, Lela took to awkwardly confronting the collective gaze. The tense moment was interrupted when a tall albatross flew in between Lela and the assumed leader of the group.

An inquisitive silence followed. Lela chanced a confused glance at Bell, who she found to be similarly befuddled. Shockingly, the bird ripped apart and through the carnage of its self-destruction appeared a frustrated looking man with a similarly topless and ageless appearance. “I tell no lie! The small force the sorcerer sent for us is not far off. They have two elemental knights and at least four platoons,” frustration tinted the albatross-come-man’s tuneful tone.

Anger flashed in the formerly patient eyes of the longsword-adorned woman. She struck the male component of the leadership with a hard glare. Quick words were passed through the group and it

was decided that flight was the wisest option.

Lela heard one man cry out in frustration, “But how did they find us in these woods?!” These words were spoken with numerous glances in Bell and Lela’s direction.

“The dome of intact forest in the middle of a forest fire might’ve had something to do with it!” shouted the leader of the group, growing more furious with the continual complaints.

A decision seemed to have been made, as half of the group suddenly imploded. Gore resolving into animals of untold variety. The sound of heavy boots trampling the forest floor spoke of the urgency of their sudden departure. Lela saw the leader of the group become a muscular lioness. She padded over to Bell and Lela, along with a proud stallion. The lioness swung her fearsome head towards that of the horse. The pair hesitated mere moments before pulling each other onto the back of the topless-person-come-horse.

Bolting into the forest, Lela lunged for the mane of the brown equine before she was thrown. Bell had her arms wrapped around Lela’s stooped form. Branches appeared to move from their path. Lela tried to look behind, to see the forest reform in their wake, but the gallop was too fast to do anything but grip.

After what could have been hours of riding, the course of the horse seemed to change dramatically. Lela could feel the heat of the forest fires that surrounded the dome the group rode through. This heat however, was far less irritating than the pain in her legs from the bare-backed horse riding to which neither Bell nor Lela was accustomed. ‘Was whatever magic protecting these people failing?’ Lela asked herself.

Suddenly, they were falling free of the muscled back of the stallion, as gore replaced the horse. Bell and Lela landed in a bruised and moaning tangle. “Draw your weapons and take cover!” Lela heard a voice yell from somewhere unseen.

The fire at their backs raged closer. Somehow, the topless group had been herded towards the flames. Trees shifted, allowing clear aim at what Lela estimated to be almost, if not more than, two hundred soldiers.

Lela’s tired eyes found the iron sights of her rifle, which she rested against a tree she took cover behind. Waiting for the arrows to be loosed, Lela tracked a group of targets. A sound like the intake of many breaths coincided with a fifth of the core falling to the floor. Shafts now decorated their hearts and minds.

Each cadaver appeared to have only a single arrow. Marvelling at the coordination of the group, Lela joined the fight. Not an expert marksman, many soldiers still fell in the hail of her fire. Although the topless archers had their backs pushed up against a wall of fire, Lela was impressed to see they had manoeuvred to the high ground, even in retreat. The enemy soldiers struggled to climb the rough slope, arrows, branches and bullets greatly slowing their approach. That was before the two medieval-style-armoured swordsmen appeared.

The soldiers, who were still attempting to take cover in the shifting forest, parted for the shining warriors of gold and silver. Lela watched confused as the formerly deadly accurate arrows of the topless group were deflected by the large shields of the warriors.

Reloading, Lela listened to the crackling of the approaching flames. She felt her skin prickle. Her gun was heating up almost too much to touch. So, Lela tore off her shirtsleeves and wrapped them around her hands. Continuing to fire, Lela tried to ignore the approaching dangers of the glittering

warriors and the fire drawing nearer at their back.

She heard Bell doing the same and watched many soldiers fall to their amateur volley. Lela supposed with a smirk, that the sorcerer had not deemed bullet resistant soldiers necessary when pursuing topless bowmen. Arrows still thudded into unwitting soldiers, but most of the archer's fire seemed to be directed at the armoured warriors.

A resounding click told of Lela's depleted ammunition. Turning to Bell, Lela saw her throwing her rifle to the floor and drawing knives from her innumerable hiding places. Lela reached for her shotgun, but found the barrel too hot for even her fabric-wrapped hands to touch. The wall of fire was drawing far too close for Lela to stand any longer. She was virtually in the flames. The smell of burning hair and the sting on her skin forced her hand.

Lela had lost sight of the armoured warriors. So, she searched for Bell. Panicked, Lela realised she had lost her too. The topless animals-come-people were, as usual, unseen. Lela was alone. Flames continued to lap at her back.

Seeing soldiers ahead, Lela found herself behind the line of enemy soldiers. She drew her pistol, a knife finding her other hand. Losing some dexterity from the fabric wrapping on her burnt hands, Lela decided to attempt guerrilla warfare.

The trees shifted in response to where the topless people desired. So, Lela followed the route of the most visual resistance. Boughs seemed to move to block her sight. Branches shook leaves and stole Lela from visibility. Lela used this cover to sneak up on soldiers. Coming from behind the core, Lela slipped her knife along the throats of four soldiers before they realised something was up. From Lela's perspective, the forest appeared thick and hostile. Arrows flew by, whispering death from the unseen. Flames leapt over the trees ahead. Sliding from the cover of thick tree trunks, Lela had to retreat from suspicious eyes, hoping to hide from the enemy and friendly-fire alike.

Three soldiers suddenly had Lela surrounded. Thankfully, they hadn't noticed. Hiding in a dried up river bed, Lela waited for the left-most soldier to draw near. Popping up, Lela pulled him down the bank and slipped her knife into his heart. Holding his throat, a small yelp nevertheless escaped his lips.

Cover blown, Lela rose with her pistol pre-aimed at the place where the right-most soldier should have been. Her jaw dropped at the sight of two corpses, arrows decorating their backs. Bell stepped from the tree-line and smiled. Lela's arms dropped lank at her sides. Bell was followed by several other animals, most noticeably the brown stallion from before.

Bell motioned for Lela to join her in mounting the horse and it's powerful flanks took them careening deeper into the forest.

14 Nostalgia

The insanity that had led Liàng to this moment was still beyond their fathoming. Liàng slid one of their keris along the blade of a weapons master in a shining howlite/lapis lazuli armour. The wavy blade hooked the guard of the weapons master's longsword. Pushing away from the weapons master with the keris, the weapons master lost focus while attempting to retrieve the situation, and his sword.

Kuài acted from somewhere unseen and the weapons master's magic-resistant shield was activated. The strength of Kuài's attack sent the distracted weapons master into a stumble. Failing to find some measure of the strength he once had, Liàng's second keris slipped around the weapons master's shield. With no other means to defend himself, the weapons master howled in pain as Liàng weaved the curved blade along his bowels and deeper into his body. A sickening grin was left across the weapons master's abdomen. To bypass any wards that may save this spineless excuse for an Armour, Liàng sent their liquefied arm up the keris' blade. Dripping with blood, Liàng slid along the blades many bends.

Slipping past the armours enchantments, Liàng was free to remove the water from the weapons master's dying body. With no Human of the appropriate bloodline to sustain it, the Howlite/Lapis Lazuli armour folded in on itself, returning to its latent state.

Leaving the pile of bones, dust and latent stone, Liàng returned their eyes to the battle raging around. They felt two crossbow bolts pierce their Humanoid avatar. These parts were liquefied to allow the bolts to fall free. Liàng felt their energy flag from the effort. The downside to a physical avatar, as opposed to the elemental, was that damage to the physical avatar drained. Yet, one cannot influence the physical realm without a physical form, or the use of magic.

The Sorcerer of the Sapphire and his ally, the first, formerly last, of the Metal Elementals, had invented all sorts of custom killing tools. The Elementals were not prepared for such warfare. Trebuchets lobbed ironic boulders from the hillside, a former tourist lookout. Enchantments improving accuracy guided the boulders to their targets, where they exploded with enough energy to obliterate an Earth Elemental.

Soldiers carried fishing line nets and trip wires, to mince Air Elementals moving in their hurricane-fast avatars. This restricted them to their elemental forms when at the front lines, weakening their ability to act on the world. If they weren't dangerous enough, the fishing line was also enchanted with acid and fire, to burn the air and the elemental form alike.

Liàng couldn't figure out exactly what the enchantment was, but the industrial gloves the soldiers wore deterred further investigation. Flamethrowers roasted the air wherever Fire Elementals were not. Incinerating the Air Elementals, that would whisper wards and words on the wind. For the passionate and aggressive Fire Elementals, there were bullets of ice, cooling the elemental fires within.

Water, at least, was proving hard to banish. This difficulty was not unlike the challenging Metal

Elementals, who required the combined efforts of fire and water, to temper the steel. Following several acts of tempering, water quenching the intense heat, the suddenly brittle metal could be shattered and the Metal Elemental killed.

Like fire, metal avatars are both physical and elemental. They had little escape, if you could get close enough to act. They were far from helpless however, manipulating the metals in the ground to form innumerable pellets. Sudden showers of metal, moving as fast as an Air Elemental over the desert dunes, were the result; shredding the physical form.

Whispers on the air strengthened Liàng's resolve and their magical protection. Kuài had their back. To Liàng's right, an Earth Elemental exploded. The concussive force sent Liàng sprawling. Sand whipped their face. The noxious fumes of battle burnt Liàng's senses. Liàng stood out as the most Humanoid of the Elementals, choosing to fight as the Elementals once had, back when the Armours were their trusted allies.

Liàng had to roll to avoid the zinc/iron/manganese pellets the water of the soil forewarned. Extending their Elemental senses, Liàng lost somewhat of his physical avatar. If they had a heart, or indeed a circulatory system, this would be working furiously now. When Liàng had sufficiently avoided the lethal pellets, he came out of his Elemental stupor. Physical eyes told of a recently fissioned Metal Elemental standing over them.

In a whirlwind of keris, Liàng was upon them. Taking the offensive defence, they extended their consciousness through the atmosphere. A void behind them told of a Fire Elemental's presence.

The rapid approach of a thinner line of void portended the resultant heat. Liquefying, Liàng reformed their avatar behind the Metal Elemental. What Liàng had not foreseen was the forethought of the enemy.

Reforming with a rude spike through their chest, Liàng felt pain beyond imagining. The heat provided by their fiery friend now scorched Liàng life's energy. Hugging the Metal Elemental, Liàng embraced the pain and quenched the malicious heat of this, the ancient enemy.

Sloshing from their macabre cuddle, Liàng reformed enough of an avatar to slash with their keris. Losing count of the blows, the damage was done. Exhausted, Liàng proceeded to water the soil of the scrubland. Their energies too exhausted to think.

Days ago, Liàng saw muted light shine through floral curtains. This was a good sign. The sorcerer must be required elsewhere. Allowing the cloud cover over Aradecca to disperse somewhat. Liàng had chosen to follow the woman they had learnt was named Lela. They hoped she would lead them to Will, in just over a day, when the Human survivors apparently planned to meet.

Liàng wasn't a particularly gifted healer, so the woman would likely sleep for much longer than usual, to recover the energy lost from her body. She was a beautiful woman, brave, wise and quick. But, she was vulnerable. Her hidden fear imbued a deeper drive for her protection.

Another man kept close tabs on her recovery, performing the leadership role in her absence. He appeared flustered, but was managing, as far as Liàng could tell. His red hair was matted into a mass on his spotty head. This added to his flustered appearance, making him appear less in control, as his own body fought against him.

Kuài had returned, which, in itself, was a good thing. Liàng rather enjoyed their company. But,

with Kuài came a containment vessel. These were rare artefacts from before the Armours were created. It was a time when the Elementals were a young race, experimenting with their very essences. A particularly inquisitive Water Elemental found that if he focused his elemental form into an aquamarine of large enough size, density and quality, he could ‘slip’ inside. The largest and most powerful stone went into the creation of the Armours. Yet, a few aquamarines of appropriate attributes are still kept by the council for various tasks. It appeared Kuài had been sent to retrieve Liàng with all haste. For these stones were greatly prized and almost never entered the Human realm.

The wind rushed past Liàng’s ears and they felt Kuài speak, “The Council requires your presence at Shuǐgǎng.”

“I as much guessed.”

“Please, you can inside this aquamarine go. Short is time.”

“The council has to a decision that requires my input come?” I asked, confused and loath to leave Lela’s side.

“They have,” said Kuài, motioning towards the aquamarine.

Liàng couldn’t understand the longing they felt to stay with this Human. “First, I must her safety ensure,” pushed Liàng. Receiving no response, Liàng barely had to open the door before he encountered a flustered Clive. So, they faced him, expression as stern as Liàng knew how to affirm, and asked in firm-yet-gentle tones, “Please, you make sure she is for cared.”

A small bop from his freckled head and Liàng was slipping away, into a crystal enclosure.

Liàng could feel others joining them, leeches from the scorched earth of the battlefield. Vaguely, they remember thinking it was a most unusual turn of events. Usually only a single Water Elemental would be drawn into the aquamarine.

Liàng’s thoughts were too cloudy. Mixing, intertwining with the other minds that now shared the enclosure. It was a strange sensation. Not unlike being in their Elemental form, as they could not act, only observe.

But, even Liàng’s observations were limited, tinted as they were by the position of the enclosure and the blue-green of the large stone. They felt opinions of the battle mingle with their own.

Different angles on tactics and situations fought with Liàng’s consciousness. Looking outside, Liàng saw only a blur. Images flickered as they were lost in the multitude of life energy that surrounded. Liàng was...

...Swinging a wavy bladed tulwar, in an attempt to behead several Human soldiers. Their blood intermingling with their own form, ‘Liàng’ took their water and watched dust fall to the floor; a darker red, to stain the desert soil. The shrubs that littered the land were aflame.

‘Liàng’ watched the fire join the forms of a small group of Fire Elementals. Walking purposefully, they cindered a platoon of soldiers without hesitation, or apparent difficulty.

All was too simple. ‘Where were the Armours and Metal Elementals of which they had come to face?’ ‘Liàng’ wondered aloud.

Humans were no threat to an Elemental.

As if in response to the pondering, those ‘Liàng’ had feared appeared from amidst the scrub. A wicked grin decorated the face of the first, formerly last, Metal Elemental. Their size and strength

distinguishing them from the others of their kind 'Liàng' had faced.

They were the father to all those of the Metal Elemental race, one of the original five monks to embrace their element, and formerly the last of the metal bloodline. The Sorcerer of the Sapphire accompanied the metal forefather. 'Liàng' watched the elemental fires of the group of their allies extinguish. No flight available from their physical forms.

'Liàng' had clashed with waves of water, seeking to quench the superheated metal of their foe. Laughing, the sorcerer threw the tulwar aside and ripped their life energy from 'Liàng's' form, dashing the soil with their soul.

Liàng thought back to when he had learned of the councils desire for war. Finally released after his journey from Aradecca, Liàng was shocked to have the blur of motion still and the image of the outside world clarify. Liàng slipped into Human form, their preferable avatar.

They then stood before the council, which waited patiently for them to re-assert themselves with the world.

Kuài was by Liàng's side, their Air Elemental standard winged avatar knelt before the elders of their race. Unwilling to prostrate themselves in front of these narrow-minded individuals, Liàng stood staring at the two 'wisest' of each Elemental race.

The council, having dealt with Liàng and Liàng's father before them, skipped the usual speech about respecting their wisdom and went straight to the bit about how they thought it was a good idea to go to war.

"If we strike now, before the Metal Elementals have a chance to fission too many times, we can end this threat before it becomes too great," demanded the passionate and impulsive Fire Elemental councillors, slamming a magma fist into an ignited palm.

The powerful wind councillors agreed, flickering with their anger, "We are strong enough!"

"But, what of the Armours, the Sorcerer of the Sapphire is not to be seen as a mere Human. His powers are great and he commands the armies of Ecce," worried the wise water councillors. "We created the Armours to aid in the defeat of the strongest of our brethren." The water councillors glanced towards their water brother Liàng, aware of their past ignorance's and the chance they had to avoid this situation if they had listened.

"And we have not fought for many fissionings," cautioned the slow and gentle earth councillors. Their passive faces crumbling with their ambivalence.

It appeared the council was divided. Liàng opened their mouth on several occasions, but Kuài's hand, softly placed on Liàng's shoulder, silenced the words held tightly to the tongue.

Kuài had brought the council the information they had found on the first, formerly last, Metal Elemental. So, Liàng couldn't help but wonder why their presence was required. Liàng would have said as much, if the council had not come to an uneasy and likely unwise decision, in such a short time.

Finally called upon, Liàng was asked to explain their take on the Human situation and to describe the small rebel group they had joined. The council appeared uneasy at the rebel's chances. They weren't pleased to have to face the remaining 'enforced' Human forces. Not a threat in small numbers, but the entire Human armed forces would hamper the Elemental army as they faced their old enemy. More worrisome were the former allies they had armoured to aid them in defeating the metal

monsters that sought total domination. The Armours were a threat they had never thought to face.

After explaining to the council all they knew and felt, Liàng was asked to leave. Their opinions were of little consequence to the ‘superior’ intellects of the elders. Sighing, Liàng removed himself from the council’s presence.

Liàng was beginning to think they were recalled on a whim, to confirm the grim state of affairs in the Human realm, a Water Elemental more likely to sway the water councillors than Kuài. How fickle and unnecessary the intricacies of politics.

They should be looking for Will, helping him fight, felt Liàng. But, instead, they saw the Elemental armies preparing for war. A futile attempt that could see their entire race run madly towards disaster. ‘How could they stop it?’ Liàng pondered dejectedly. They couldn’t.

Liàng’s second trip in the aquamarine was far more stressful. The various minds slid like oil over crashing waves, irate filthy penguins bobbing to the surface and bringing with them another experience, another perspective of the presumably lost battle.

‘Liàng’ was a councillor. They watched themselves leave the council chambers and was saddened at the lack of voice that had been allowed their brother. Liàng was wise for his years, having learnt much from his studies of the Humans.

This knowledge was amplified by their trip among them. ‘Liàng’, through the mind’s eye of the councillor, knew the councillor had seen this pre-emptive strike as foolish. So, the water councillor was inclined to agree with Liàng. But, the quick tempered Fire Elementals and the powerful Air Elementals were far more skilled at warfare. So, grudgingly they accepted their tactic as sound, strike at the heart before the body can grow. They supposed it made sense.

‘Liàng’ was walking outside now, webbed feet slapping the smooth stone of the council chambers. The other councillors were talking, but they heard nothing over their nation’s preparations for war. Now, the feelings of hopelessness at their nation’s possible destruction were numbed by an invisible wall of separation. That wall now was the past, the genuine destruction of their nation.

The chink, clash and jangle of the Earth Elemental blacksmiths mingled with the whoosh of the Air Elemental enchanters.

‘Liàng’ stood at the top of the memorial stairs that led up to the council’s chambers. Each stair represented a lost soul. They ran more than a mile from the main town of Shuǐgǎng. Enchantments caused the chambers to slowly shift with each loss. ‘Liàng’ shuddered to think of the distance it may gain from this latest effort.

The huge river that ran through the centre of their forest home split, flowing two routes toward the coast, around the island that Shuǐgǎng was built upon. Liàng could see Water Elementals fighting the current and leaving the river near the training temple of the water guard. Here they were armed with keris or the wavy bladed tulwar, favoured by those untrained in dual wield. These weapons came in carts, drawn by Earth Elementals, from smithies further inland. They were then loaded into barges and brought across the river, to Shuǐgǎng.

Fire Elementals sailed the shoreline, preparing their great ships and smaller trading vessels to carry the Elemental nation to war. The efficiency and enthusiasm in which they prepared both shocked

and saddened.

‘Liàng’ felt their being grow saltier with unease. No longer comfortable in the presence of their fellow councillors, ‘Liàng’ left. In search of the comforting presence of the river, ‘Liàng’ slid the length of the stairs.

Liàng began to lose themselves in the mass of conflicting memories. They tried to think how they arrived back in Shuǐgǎng, but it came fragmented...

...There were metallic clashes. Liàng held two recently acquired keris in a standard defensive posture. Surrounded by Water Guards, they were sparring in preparation for the battle to come. “Well slit my webbing and call me dexterous,” exclaimed Liàng’s sparring partner. “You becoming an academic didn’t lose much!”

“Hah. Standing in the tower all those years, straight from the bottle drinking Mirkweed wine and you’re your touch losing,” Liàng retorted jovially, slapping them playfully on the thigh.

Their partner did not look happy though. There was a time when Liàng was one of ‘the guards’, a time when they could’ve gotten away with mocking the feared and respected Water Guard. That time had apparently passed.

Now, the pearl-woven chainmail felt heavy on his Human avatar. The tiny links, a pearl woven into each, were rough against the water of Liàng’s ‘skin’. Liàng missed his Human clothes, even for all the enchantments and the value the Water Elementals placed on such pearls, which were highly responsive to water based enchantments. Liàng felt the chainmail no longer belonged on his scholarly form.

Angry at their own ineptness, Liàng’s blows grew more frantic. Swinging wide, their goal became to distract or disarm their partner, sending their other keris in low, to slice at the legs. Liàng’s wide arm was slammed aside with the pommel of a tulwar and their chest was suddenly adorned with its blade...

...Liàng was marching through the forest. Earth Elementals, bedecked in thick steel armour and wielding powerful weapons of immense size, walked with them. The clang of the Fire Elemental forges had been deafening. Their deep pits in the ground rang for kilometres. The ground surrounding the pits belched fire as the core of the planet responded to the Fire Elemental attentions.

The Fire Elementals had to re-enchant, or re-make, much of the ancient armour worn by the Earth Elementals and many of the weapons that had fallen from use for many fissionings.

Having risen from near the core, fierce Fire Elementals looked even angrier at the low temperature at the planet’s surface. They carried bows of similarly flaming enchanted wood. Quivers absent, they would belch fire at their foes.

Wild Air Elementals chanted, clashing spears against shields. Whisper thin knives swung loose as they glided in the air above the army. They were whispering wards of protection and luck upon the marching force.

Liàng was not with the water contingent, nor the councillors at the head of the army. Liàng was an academic, dual keris were strapped at the waist of their outlandish Human form. They were put to the side. But, Liàng was not alone. Kuài walked beside them. Slender longsword at their hip, spear and shield in hand. They walked in their strange Human avatars, within the core but outside the

army...

...Time was irrelevant in the forest. The huge trees reached for the changing colours of the sky, but night and day were lost to the canopy, the rare desert rains were stolen by the huge leaves far above. But, the magic of Liàng's people illuminated the places they dwelt. And in this eerie half-light, their increasingly solemn army walked. The trees spoke of the Druid's warnings. They spoke of how the Druids were fleeing their forests from the growing threat of the enemy Armours.

A powerful people in their own right, Liàng was certain the Elementals should take heed of these incessant warnings and maybe even join the Druids in their flight, for now at least. The rest of the army seemed to feel the same, the excitement that had brewed now fermented to concern.

But, the Fire Elemental's passion had caught too great a hold of the army. They were told they had to strike, to end the threat before it became too great. Liàng urged them to send scouts, to gauge troops and plan a less head-on assault. 'But,' the Fire Elementals argued stubbornly, 'scouts took time and time gave the Metal Elementals more fissionings. We hide no longer, it is time they felt the true wrath of the four allied elements!'

Defeated, retreated and severely weakened, the Elemental army had fled for dear life energy. Each would fly to their appropriate element. The wounded were left in the soil. Only Water Elementals could be extracted without time and magic. And, even then, there were few aquamarines available. The unorthodox way in which Liàng was rescued had begun to make sense.

Kuài had fled the field after Liàng fell, returning soon after with the four aquamarines that remained in Elemental possession. Not wanting to leave an Elemental behind, their lines lost to the elements, Kuài had absorbed multiple Water Elementals into each aquamarine.

Liàng had fought for control over their own thoughts. Fragments of themselves struggled to coalesce. Strange beings slipped past and into Liàng's awareness.

That was until suddenly they were released and they felt the other consciousnesses recede. Questioning their clarity, Liàng heard only, "The Wills Armour aid."

They had sacrificed their freedom for Liàng. Liàng felt their life energy, their power, flowing inside.

Liàng was one, now they were many.

The council chambers in Shuǐgǎng still shook softly as the many thousands of new stairs were created for the fallen. Leaving the aquamarine, Liàng had been reborn in these council chambers. What looked to be the remaining water empire now stood around four conflicted Water Elemental's physical forms.

Liàng saw the other three Elementals shift, preferred avatars fought for control with each grasp of a consciousness. The sight was horrific. Contorting in pain and fear, internal conflict reined in each of their trapped brothers. Liàng could hear the water councillors begin to chant. They attempted to break the life energy of the twisted beings that writhed before them. It was a fruitless attempt, made more foolish when they all realised they were chanting along.

The second councillor was a part of Liàng now. Liàng felt their knowledge and wisdom guide their thoughts, not seeking control but aiding. Soft guidance told of the need to aid their fellows in a

similar manner.

Liàng shuddered. Everything had changed. Acting out of instinct, Liàng reached their hand and mind toward one of the distraught water beings that now cleaned the floor with their contortions. This was made more fruitless by the enchantments that ensured its cleanliness to the end.

The normal in-rush of life and mind that accompanied such a connection with another Elemental was tainted by the terror that resided in the being's mind. Liàng felt the terror as if it were their own. Screaming filled their mind and Liàng's senses felt sharp and biting. It was coming from inside, but it was not their own.

A bitter wind rushed around Liàng's metaphysical avatar. On a plane, Liàng saw random bulges contort the desert landscape. Shrubs were raised, torn apart then reappeared nearby the first. The sky was in turmoil. Clouds roiled and boiled in an ever-changing world.

Liàng searched for the pond where, in the normal course of events, two joined Water Elementals could swim and converse on the most personal of levels. In the lake of their shared consciousness they could find peace. But, the lake was nowhere. Only red sand and small sick shrubs decorated the stark surface.

At Liàng's back, Liàng saw four other Water Elementals. The second councillor gave a short nod. A Water Guard held his fist up encouragingly. A nervous academic paused his hand-wringing to quiver a smile in Liàng's direction. And finally, an old pearl diver from the farthest North-Western shores locked Liàng's eyes.

All of these motions occurred as rapidly as the landscape rocked. Fighting their fear, Liàng focused on a small pond. Their throat burned, they hadn't noticed they were screaming. They supposed their nerves were still raw from their recent rebirth. Not only were they fighting the terror of this conglomerate conscious, but also for control of their supposedly acquiescent passengers.

Turning back to the small pond, Liàng began to hum a tune. Not knowing where it came from, Liàng's four companions hummed along. Rising and falling, they began to infuse the tones with the power of their combined magic.

Before they knew what was going on, the tones drove the four Water Elementals to dance out the characters in the air of this subconscious nightmare. And, one at a time, Liàng felt their passengers calm with the shared effort of the magic that was weaving. Their fear ebbed into the frigid air that surrounded their dancing forms.

Soon, the song and dance became a chant of the ancient words for ocean, pond, island, river, stream, creak, and so the ground flickered. One second, red sand, the next, the disruptive shrubbery found a watercourse.

Lost to the void again, the bitter atmosphere grew calmer. At each repetition of the chant, the bodies of water would stay for longer. Soon, the cracks in the harsh desert were filled with a swirling ocean. Dark water bubbled forth, like clouds in a building storm.

Liàng stepped into the most lasting water source, hoping this was the point of origin of the rational minds of the consciousness they shared. A swirling accompanied Liàng's entrance. At their back were their passengers, silent observers, pillars of support for Liàng's every action. Violent waves fought in front of them. Like a spinning bucket, water splattered the area around them and forms began to resolve.

Stepping back, they waited or Liàng waited, it was becoming harder to tell the difference. When

finally the thrashing water settled, Liàng turned to the pillars that stood at their back. True silence reined. All chanting ceased. All that could be heard was the water that lapped around their form(s). The resolved Elementals of the mind Liàng had joined held ambivalent avatars, randomly shifting, as if in a haze. Choosing to break the silence, Liàng spoke to the group. “You’re yourselves killing with this needless fighting.”

Hollow voices spoke almost at once, a cacophony of gibbering pain. Liàng’s mind was overwhelmed with the force of their thoughts. Liàng’s passengers, a semi-circle of stoic pillars at Liàng’s back all spoke in unison, “Quiet!”

The noise ceased, but the pain remained. “You,” Liàng looked to the right-most Elemental, his gaudy head crest seeming to mock the grim expression on his ambivalent face, “begin.”

“My body! Stolen from me it has been! And... and now I share it with... with these,” gesturing at the other angry looking Water Elementals that sloshed around.

“You all need to an arrangement come,” Liàng explained calmly. “You else yourselves will tear apart.”

The world spun. Noise, deafening to the point of silence suddenly filled the inner ocean of the mind of this tortured being.

Liàng was thrown from their world.

Awoken from unconsciousness, Liàng’s hands slapped against solid ears. The terrible sound had ceased, they... Liàng ... was in the council chambers again. The other water councillor stood above Liàng ... Liàng’s? The Elementals they had joined with were not in sight.

Shaking their head, Liàng rose in their Human avatar to face the dwindling water empire. As they did so, one of the other aberrations exploded with a shriek. Life energy sparkled forth, covering the nearer of the Elementals with a tingly liquid. This was too much for some, who chose to leave and have the decisions made by the wiser of their race.

Dejectedly Liàng turned to the councillor. “We return to aid the Wills Armour must. Else our sacrifice more pointless made.”

“Liàng,” looking confused and upset, the councillor seemed to chew on the rest of his sentence, “and company. you were away while. It was decided that fly to their respective elements would each of the Elemental races. They until it is deemed safe to reunite will hide.”

Shocked at the weakness of their people, Liàng struggled to find a diplomatic response. This was made more difficult as the final aberration melted into the ground. Liàng’s emotions took this opportunity to burst forth.

Although, it would appear the choice of harsh words was stolen from Liàng, as the second councillor, who currently intertwined their own life energy, chose to speak, “You this is folly know! The Metal Elementals will only to divide stop until this world they have conquered.”

Looking torn, the other councillor rebuked, “We our strength must regain. And, who knows, maybe one day by the Humans the Metal Elementals will be defeated and we can return without further life-shed.”

This point was punctuated by the suddenly noticeable shifting of the council chambers beneath their generally webbed feet. Heads hung in sorrow and shame, the defeated Elementals skulked from the chambers.

Liàng stood there, alone but for the Elemental(s) they had joined with before this most

disgraceful of outcomes. Also appearing saddened by the turn of events, they turned their shifting features to Liàng; to themselves. Left standing alone, they felt their collective form grow salty with sorrow.

15 Armour

Armour in one hand, katana in the other, I stood facing a man that looked to be more than a match for my recently acquired talents. An Armour himself, the silver of his breastplate shone dully in the mute light of the tent. His scarred face, hidden beneath a stubble beard, was contorted in a grimace. Heavy brows shadowed shrewd eyes. Deep purples highlighted his various weapons. His thick black hair made an oily mass on his square-jawed head. A stout man, when he lunged I felt the air rock against the power of his axe's passing. A deep rumbling voice spoke from this apparition as he swung his axe at my chest a second time. "I've been waitin' a long time for the chance to take a SWING at the *mighty* Will's Armour!" This sentence punctuated by a spit at my dancing feet. Blocking with the huge amethyst I held in my right hand, I swung low with my katana.

Thinking I had a chance at landing an easy blow, I sent all my might into the end of the arc. Instead of landing said blow, my blade met only air where once the powerful man had been.

Panicked, I grappled with my lost balance while my head wildly turned in search of my enemy.

Spotting him next to the display case that had held my armour, I raised my katana in defiance. He wouldn't disappear on me again.

Expecting another lunge, I was shocked to find a short sword appearing at my left. Bending backwards, I watched as the blade flew through where my left shoulder had been. Rocking right, I swung forward. The short sword of my foe was knocked awry and I struck right, at the man's open guard. Not committing to my strike, I was not surprised to find only air where the man had been. My left leg reaching the ground, I pivoted on the spot.

Pain erupted in my cheek. I watched a knife, intended for the back of my head, slide over my right cheek. My left handed swing was too slow. Pivoting again, this time on my right foot, I felt my balance slipping away.

I had to buy time, find a way to don my armour. Remembering the invisibility spell from my incarceration, I closed my eyes and focused on the words and the large malachite held firmly in my right hand.

My green tinted eyes opened seconds later to a confused man tripping over his latest swing. I felt the wind whoosh past my lower left side. Hurriedly, I sheathed my katana, sure that the disappearing man would soon discover my trick.

Instinctively, I pulled the two stones I held apart. I could feel the magical energies of my armour erupt within. Two coloured waves danced between the stones. Purple and green bolts, first joined, then repulsed, dancing together in an ambivalent romance.

"I can smell your fear! Even with your armour on you know you cannot defeat me!" the dark man yelled from the centre of the room, opening his glittering chest in defiance.

'Chest! That was it!' I garbled aloud. I hurriedly pulled the amethyst to my chest, the energies caressing my trepidation. I felt my worn t-shirt fall away as the stones sought skin. Silver threads of a

viscous metal covered my exposed chest and back in seconds.

Knowing my enemy had heard the t-shirt fall to the floor, I felt his short sword clang against the solid metal that now protected a formerly vulnerable right shoulder. Visible again, my transformation had cancelled the effect of the magic. So, I drew on the ancient memories of those who had come before.

At my back, two sheaths clicked out. Before I could think what for, I was holding the swords from my dreams. Deflecting a blow from my left, a dazzling spark of green energy retaliated. "Fancy parlour tricks won't help you against my magical defences. You really grew dusty in your cabinet!" I heard my enemy taunt. But, thought little of it, for I had remembered whom I was facing. The tiger eye in his chest and powerful battle axe held tight in his left hand told of the Flange Armour, historically the lap dog of a more powerful Armour.

Smiling, I held my dual swords in an aggressive pose, one held high above my head, the other up front, facing my foe. This left my abdomen wide open from the sides. The moment the Weapons Master of Tiger Eye/Onyx disappeared I dropped my swords to my sides and leapt into the air. Tucking my body in, I rolled, sheathing my longswords. Throwing knives from various hidden places, dropped into a loose grip in each hand. With a flick of my wrists, the knives flew to either side of where I formerly stood. Listening for the chink of blade hitting armour, I landed. Suddenly, I swung my katana loose from my hip and to the left, where the chink had resonated.

I halted my right blade against the man's throat. The tip of his short sword was against the vulnerable gap between sword belt and chest plate. Anticipating this duality, my machete came round his body. Slipping under his chest plate, I brought the machete up.

Eyes bulging, the man did not live long enough to retaliate. His gut convulsed. My katana slit his throat to ensure death was final. Not even clerical healing could resuscitate this distasteful creature.

The clang of short sword against the floating floorboards accompanied the shrinking of the man's armour into its latent form.

Standing over the body of the dead Weapons Master of the Tiger Eye/Onyx, I felt saddened that the first act I had committed upon attaining my armour was murder.

Eyes still downcast, I collected my dejected throwing knives from the floorboards. Reluctantly, I came to the conclusion that my low mood should be felt at a safe distance from the camp of my enemy.

Loath to leave the tent full of armours for my enemies use, I contented myself with the large red stone that had sat beside my own armour and the latent tiger eye/onyx armour from the floor.

Recognising the red stone as the armour of my former ally, the Battle Mage of the Carnelian/Obsidian, I felt satisfied my decision was a good one.

The weapons master sent to kill me had failed and the sorcerer was bound to send reinforcements. So, I wrapped the two latent armours in some cloth and tied them to the back of my belt.

Knowing the inside of the armoury tent was filled with soldiers, I went to the farthest corner of the room.

Using my amethyst blade to cut through the enchantments placed on the canvas, I slipped from the darkened room of my enlightenment.

The clouds over the city were not as dark as they had been before my incarceration. Hoping this meant the sorcerer had more important business elsewhere, I ran directly from the tent, in the

direction I hoped led me to the tanks. Numerous soldiers spotted me, but were silenced by a quick spell,

你的嗓音一个小时丢失的
(nǐdesǎngyīn yí gè xiǎo shí diū shī de)
Your voice for one hour lost

Not willing to face the man who had so easily silenced them, the soldiers fled from me in search of a way to warn others of my presence. My knowledge of the ancient language seemed to have returned to me since donning my armour, but it seemed limited to spells I had used in the past. According to my genetic memories. A full grasp of the language had not yet been granted.

I spotted an eagle above the camp and extended my mind in search of it. “Hello?” I began, unsure of the formalities involved in communicating with a creature other than a Human.

“Oh!” I heard the eagle cry. Above, I saw the bird flutter dramatically.

“Ah-” I stammered, “-I hope I didn’t startle you.”

“Startle me! You bloody kidding mate!? Give us a bit’a warnin’ next time ey,” came the similarly startling retort.

“Ah, well I’m new to this whole talking to animals business,” I said in way of an apology.

“Well, you’re no Druid I’ve met!” exclaimed the bird, its pitch somewhat painful to the metaphysical ear, “What’re you after then?”

“I was hoping you could give me some directions,” I explained, “to a tank preferably.”

“A tank?! What d’you want’a get one of them for! Killin’ I says-” started the bird.

“Let’s call it self-defence,” I interrupted.

“-I’ve been tellin’ em. They can’t even trust Druids these days. All these metal contraptions, burnin’ and pillagin’,” continued the bird, quite unabated by the urgency creeping into my tone. “All quite contrary to the continued goodwill between the birds and the bigger-creatures-of-two-legs!”

“OK,” I continued. “I see that this may have sparked some argument, long in the discussing, but I am growing quite short of time. Me currently being hunted and all that.”

“Well then,” screeched the bird. “God forbid I should delay the hurried goings of a bigger creature!”

“I am sorry! Would you mind if we continued the conversation once I’ve got out of this situation to which the urgency I was previously addressing is abated?”

“Oh, well that sounds quite reasonable,” said the bird, somewhat more calmly. “Follow me then.”

With that settled, I was guided by the bird to a line of tanks. It appeared to be the same line I had seen on my way towards the armoury. This line was adjacent to a road, which could be assumed to lead to my freedom. Continuing to walk, not wanting to look too out of place, I made long work of the short walk.

I thanked the eagle and offered it a seat in the cockpit of the tank. But, seeing as it was a tool bent on destruction and all that, the eagle chose to delay our continued discussion for a later date. And so, I gave it some energy from the malachite medium by which we were commuting, to aid in its continued good health. The rest of my energy was directed into a difficult version of the invisibility spell that I intended to cast on the large tank that I stood before. My vision took on a dark green tint that shocked me almost as much as the tanks sudden disappearance. I felt my malachite stores

dramatically decrease.

Having apparently disappeared into the ether, the tank should provide the perfect escape from this camp that had stolen too much time from me already.

While clambering over the now invisible surface, I fumbled for the hatch, I saw a confused soldier across the way. I panicked and fell head first into the unseen metal box.

Hoping the soldier would be too embarrassed to tell others of his logically ridiculous sighting, I untangled myself from the floor. Closing the hatch, I heard a yell go up and the clouds outside visibly thickened. The sorcerer had found the body of his right-hand man and I had to hurry in my leaving, as I was still unsure if the sorcerer could see through my disguise.

Not bothering with the numerous dials that bedecked the inner surface of the tank, I went straight for the front-most controls. Pressing what looked to be an *on* button, a monitor in front of me flickered to life and the engine roared. Ignoring the confused staring of passers-by, I used the joystick to my right to guide the tank clumsily onto the road.

Thankfully the inhabitants of the camp had grown used to unexplainable noises and the clamour of the camp quickly drowned out the mysterious rumbling of the unseen tanks passing.

I still had some items to collect before tomorrow's meeting. So, when I felt I had reached a safe distance, I got out of the tank and enchanted it further. This made more difficult by the invisibility enchantment I had recently placed. I managed to find the tracks and give them speed (快 Kuài). Acknowledging my flagging strength, I chose to leave further enchantments on the turret and ammunition until I had rested more fully.

Finding the hatch again, I steered the tank towards the mountains. I could see a fire spreading through the forests of Aradecca and the Druid inside me wept.

It was a long trip, even after the tank was given greater speed. Reaching the area near Locksenbury in the small hours of the morning, I felt my tired mind drifting. The last time I had slept comfortably was at Keira's side. I wondered at her condition. She would be worried out of her mind at my having not returned. As I thought of her, I began to see her in my peripheral, sitting beside me at the Tanks communication station.

Shaking my head, I was reminded of the vision of her that I had seen running through the enemy encampment. Something was wrong. 'She couldn't have been there!' I fumed to myself. But, I had found the armoury. Sighing, I quieted my tired mind. Such thoughts could not be concluded in my current state.

So, I parked the still invisible tank facing down the main road of Locksenbury, next to the oval. Its enchantment was fading. I could feel the magic waning. So, I covered the hidden surface with bushes and asked the nearby trees to obscure it with their branches. Only having required the invisibility for my escape, I had limited the spell to a less powerful enchantment.

Being a weapons master granted me certain skills in enchantment. These were honed and broadened by my Druid magic, stemming from my malachite. Yet, to permanently hide an entire tank was beyond my abilities.

Finding an intact motorbike in the main street, I quickly closed the distance between the town and my old home. Checking my neighbour's yard for the hidden black van full of electronics, I was comforted by its presence. My preparations were all but complete. I felt weariness hit me like a wrecking ball shattering a building. Parts of my mind were propelled away from my grasp and I staggered into a wall. Leaning here, I found my balance before my near-buckling legs wobbled the short distance to my parent's house.

Crossing the street, I heard the front door fly open and a woman's voice cry out, "Where have you been!? I've been going stir crazy in this stupid house!"

"I..." I began before the wind was knocked out of me by the force of Keira's sudden embrace. I motioned for Keira to quickly join me inside. The risk of being spotted was too great. I was wary of returning to Locksenbury, where I was previously captured. Hopefully the sorcerer would assume I would not be foolish enough to go back. Nevertheless, I closed the door after scanning the road for any signs of movement.

"What happened to you?" demanded Keira once we were within the relative safety of the house.

"I was captured by the sorcerer's forces. A man helped me escape and guided me to the armour I now wear," I hurriedly explained. "They know who I am now. Someone may be able to tell them where I used to live. It is no longer safe here."

"Ok," Keira acquiesced to my urges to hurry, "but I expect a full recount on the way to the high school."

Nodding, I agreed, "But, first I have something I must do."

The running water was freezing and I dared not waste my magic on warming the shower. Thin red liquid ran down my legs, staining the grout. I stood in the cold stream for a while longer, a certain numbness locking my form.

Movement outside cut short my ritual cleansing and I quickly shut off the shower and dressed without taking the time to dry. New cargo pants were donned and a white t-shirt poorly covered my chest plate. Hoping the time it took to question the bulge would give me enough to escape a future threat. My old sneakers replaced the worn shoes that formerly adorned my feet.

A small explosion snapped my attention from my clothes. Keira ran into the bathroom and began frantically pulling at my forearm. "Stay behind me," I told her, handing her my machete to defend herself if necessary. The world was highlighted by light purple hues. I drew my katana, expecting the room to become too crowded for dual swords. I was shocked then to find my friend Graham Mast in the corridor.

My ancient memories reminded me of our former allegiances. Suddenly at ease, I slid my katana back into its hip sheath. I was then puzzled to find that the purple in my vision did not fade. "Dude, how're you?! I thought you were dead!" I commented jovially.

"No," he explained bluntly. "I hear you've got something of mine," continued Graham, strangely dark.

Unexplainably hesitant, I attributed this to the shock that my best friend had turned out to be a descendant of my armour's most powerful ally. Reaching behind my back to the fabric package that contained the large carnelian/onyx armour, I pulled it out. A darker green light came from Graham and

I watched helplessly as his armour flew from my grasp to his own. I knew then that I had been betrayed by the past. “Now you will pay for your betrayals!” Graham yelled as he ripped his stones apart and placed his armour atop his chest. His eyes glowed a fierce red.

My shirt ripped as sword sheaths descended from my shoulders. Drawing my dual swords, I had to deflect a javelin that exploded to my right. I felt the energy of its passing run up my arm. It threatened to become limp. Infusing a throwing knife with flames, I sent it hurtling towards the battle mage’s legs. Running with the flying blade, I swung with the force of a falling boulder. My swords infused with the elemental magic of the earth.

Graham’s face contorted in rage, his eyes responding only to his uncontrollable need for blood. One of his dual-wield axes, forged by my ancestor’s hands, barely blocked my baleful blow. Whispering words of water, my body slipped away from Graham’s second blade as it swung under my exposed guard.

I knew he was more powerful, but he was newer to his armour and his rage drove him past common sense. Choosing to feed his bloodlust, I allowed him to force me back. I gave him the chance to incur minor wounds to my exposed legs and arms. I felt his blows pummel my enchanted armour. I Waited. I could hear muffled screams from behind as Keira feared for my life as I appeared to retreat. Opportunities came and went with inaction. I tired from the wild blows.

But, finally, I saw an opening. Swinging in what he thought would be a decapitating blow. The maddened Graham hadn’t counted on my feigning weakness. Suddenly empowered, I knocked his wide axes aside. Hearing them clatter to the floor behind me, I disabled the man with two downward thrusts. Cutting both wrists and rending them immobile, I slid a throwing knife up against his throat.

However, I couldn’t kill my former friend and ancient ally. He had been corrupted by the sorcerer’s magic. So, instead I chose to leave a message of compassion. Whispered words of sleep, infused with the power of my malachite, led to Grahams collapse onto the floor of the corridor. I leant down and healed the wrists of my foe. Not wanting him to bleed out during his sleep. I envied the man, for I was exhausted beyond imagining.

I had already emptied my home of all of the relevant semi-precious stones. So, I turned to Keira and took back my machete. I didn’t need to explained the urgency of our departure. If Graham knew we would be here, chances are, so did the sorcerer.

I took the now uncovered black van full of electronics from my neighbour’s yard. Taking a round-about route that missed Locksenbury entirely, I drove into the back streets of the mountains. Sensing no unseen watchers, I still took a slightly more confusing route to the local high school, where I had stored half of my supplies. During the trip, I briefed Keira on the events that led up to my current situation. But, I felt as though she had changed. No longer did she feel like the friend I needed. Now she felt like the friend I had wanted.

Finding a large four wheel drive at an adjacent house to the high school, I drove to the garbage dump, which for some strange reason, was adjacent to the region’s council storage yard. I suppose it was all council owned. Nevertheless, this trip brought back nostalgic memories of trips to the dump with my father. In the most destructive way possible, we would destroy the odds and ends that had

built up in the shed, right before throwing them into the tips bins. I still remembered the joy at seeing bricks thrown at the old TV sets.

Cautiously, I entered the yard of my apparently destructive youth through the open gates. I couldn't ignore the feeling of being watched. Paranoia was not uncommon in my troubled mind. So, I chose not to hang around for too long, just to be on the safe side. Having never driven such a complicated vehicle, I spent several moments reading the instructions for activating four-wheel drive on the inside of the fold-down sunshades. Quickly, I found what I was looking for in the yard and proceeded to leave my uncomfortable drivers chair.

Walking purposefully towards the road works signs, I kept seeing flickers of movement in my peripheral. So, upon reaching the electronic billboards with the internal generators, I deftly removed the locks and prepared to hook them to the back of my 4wd. I felt satisfied that a few of these would easily guide the survivors to safety.

Jogging back to the car I backed it up to the first sign. The others were tied to the first with rope. Turning to leave, my hand found my katana quicker than my mind found a large wolf to my right. Slowly walking backwards, I dared not draw my blade and risk attack in the drawing. The wolf growled, but laughter echoed in my mind. Then I recognised the wolf as Wolf and the laughter in my mind was joined with my own and I dropped my hand to my side. The overlarge familiar walked closer and I ran my fingers through their thick fur. "You look tired old friend," I thought.

"If I look tired, you must be the living dead!" came the joking reply.

"I've had a lot to do since my rebirth."

"I know. I spoke to the Druids of your awakening. But, they're in no position to aid you."

"I thought as much," I thought, with an audible sigh. "Have any other Armours escaped from the sorcerer's touch?"

"A few have fought, but few still live. He has been ruthless in his hunting those who seek to defy him."

Leaning against the four-wheel drives filthy exterior, I wiped my hand down my face in exhaustion. "What of the other continents?"

"Most have fallen under the shroud of the sorcerer's magic. He has the other two Sorcerers of the Emerald and Ruby imprisoned in the citadel in Citaecca. Their magic is being channelled into a media shroud that has disguised this invasion from the rest of the world."

"But... that's impossible! What about trade? Hasn't anyone noticed?!"

"If they did, the sorcerer has certain... fail-safes, in place. I heard tourism was being deterred by some warning of a plague. The nation was immediately quarantined. This sounds perfect for the sorcerer, he could feed the media whatever footage he liked and blame it all on the disease."

Shuddering, I felt the hopelessness of my futile resistance. Once Ecce fell, the sorcerer would easily overpower the other continents. The sorcerer could hunt the last free Humans with his spare time. He could form his own society, under his rule. He could finally succeed in achieving his desired worldwide domination. "Well he's certainly not fighting the stereotypes. A true evil genius, if ever there was one."

"All is not lost," Wolf's comforting tone soothing Will's troubled mind. "You and the Mast Armour fought off the sorcerer once before. We must work to bring more Armours to our side. The Druids, if we can aid them to escape the sorcerer's keen eyes, could aid you also." A grunt escaped my throat. "What of the Elementals? My memories tell of a third dominant race of beings."

“They...” seeming to rethink their words, a quiet conclusion was reached. “They tried to fight the Metal Elementals, hoping to end them before their old enemies grew too strong. What they hadn’t accounted for was the power of the Metal Elemental allies. The Sapphire Sorcerer brought his main force of Armours to bear.”

“So, the Elementals are defeated?”

“They remain... alive. But, their will to do so appears greatly diminished. I’m sorry Will. You’ve got a lot of work ahead of you.”

With a grunt I made my way back inside the small truck, nothing left to say.

Having placed and programmed the traffic signs along the possible routes to Locksenbury oval, I returned exhausted to the high school where Keira hid. Cruising into the large hall through the ajar roller door, I smiled at my achievement. Reaching down to Wolf, I ran my hand through his dark fur. Able to teleport short distances, in the way a pure weapons master could, Wolf appeared after I dismounted the café racer motorbike I had ridden.

Looking around the high school I couldn’t help but wish I had had enough time to set up cots for wounded or installed some of the electronics or maybe even prepared some meals for the survivors, but, as it was, the school would have to do. I had prepared all I could. To the point that if the reunion went bad, the school buses weren’t far away. These were full up with the majority of the supplies.

Finding Keira in the hospitality building cooking pasta, I marvelled at her physical beauty. But, I couldn’t shake the feeling of unease that came each time she looked to me. Each time she knew an obscure detail or appeared unexpectedly. I was starting to question her reality. Wolf padded up beside me. “You know what she is right?” Wolf asked softly.

“I think so,” I hesitantly replied. “She’s some extension of my personality?”

“Something like that,” Wolf grunted, amused.

Looking at the beautiful girl again, she was almost transparent. The spoon continued to stir of its own volition. A light green glow suffused her person. Licking my lips nervously, I asked, “If you are my sub-conscious, then why that face?”

Turning to me, she smiled, “Am I not what you want to see?”

And with that, the wooden spoon fell to the floor. So, I walked slowly over to the pot and, absurdly careful not to tread on Keira’s memory, took up the spoon.

Wolf plopped down at my feet. I told myself I was ok. I had Wolf now. No doubt it was common for Armours to see their sub-conscious.

“Not really,” came Wolf’s unnerving reply.

‘Shake it off,’ I told myself. My eyes flicked to Wolf. ‘Must I censor my thoughts?!’ I wondered to no response.

16 Reinforcements

The shorter wavelengths of light brought a fierce red to the sky, as the sun descended over the barren landscape. Ancient trees stood charred against the stark sunset. The grey earth absorbed the light, seeking light to sooth its seared surface. Everywhere smouldering shrubs added to the acrid fumes already burning Persephone's throat and nostrils. Her eyes watered against the smoke that lazily wafted into the dense cloud cover. No rain fell from those clouds. They stole the light, but gave nothing back.

A storm front off in the horizon, had drawn thinner and nearer for part of the day. From their high mountain vantage only the far distance was green. Only the far distance was getting the life giving rays that the clouds greedily kept to their upper levels. The only ironically bright side was the darkness of the coming night would be deep, covering the tired retreat of the Druids.

Unable to enjoy this brief respite from the retreat, Persephone stared down at her newly acquired armour. The garnet of the knight's brotherhood, her primary stone, seemed to contain its own sunset. Deep reds and flaming oranges mingled in the earthy brown of the noble stone.

Rolling the large stone over her hands, Persephone looked deep into the malachite of the Druids.

Persephone had not earned her armour through acts of peace and intense training, as was the way of the Druid Armourlings before her. She had instead fought for her right and appealed to the greater need of the Druids. Images of that last battle haunted Persephone's waking hours. Too afraid to see what her subconscious had to say, she avoided sleep, to avoid the likely dreams.

Melancholic thoughts were interrupted by the new girl, Lela, sitting on the log beside her. She was hard, covered in an assortment of weapons to rival that of a weapons master. Her short brown hair was pulled in a severe pony tail and a worn and filthy white tank top poorly covered a red-come-brown bra. But, she did not seem to notice the dirt. She walked as tall as her limited stature allowed, with a grace that betrayed her expected exhaustion. "What's that large rock do?" Lela asked, turning her head enough to nod at the powerful oval. "You've been staring at it since we sat."

"It's my armour," Persephone responded, as much in awe of her stone as in Lela's unnoticed observations. Eyebrow raised, Lela appeared to accept that this curious statement was no stranger than people exploding into animals, which was later explained to her as the most dramatic power of the Druids.

"What are you just staring at it for?" Lela prodded further, shifting closer on the log they shared.

"Not likely to see anything new am I?" Persephone said quietly, more to herself than to the blunt girl beside her. "I suppose it's just strange to finally have something you've worked your life for."

"C'mon," Lela responded with a scoff. "This is all nonsense and self doubt. Put the bloody thing on and have done with it."

"Huh?!" slipped from Persephone's lips without intent.

A compassionate smile filled Lela's lips, "I don't have any fancy armour to speak of and I tell you now, I'd be gladder for one."

Smiling back, Persephone nodded with a vigour she didn't quite feel. "You know what! You're right! I'm a knight dammit!" Delicacy lost in a sudden fervour, Persephone ripped her two stones apart. A deep breath and she was filled with the noble power of the knights. She felt her arms cover in an enchanted metal exoskeleton, her Druid bow was discarded in favour of a malachite encrusted longbow. A quiver slipped over her left shoulder filled with arrows, which she could replenish using the wood from nearby trees.

Persephone marvelled at the legendary gauntlets of the Dunpai Armour. Holding her arms aloft, they were raised then dropped as fast. Two square shields erupted from the enchanted gauntlets, which were small enough to be easily manoeuvrable, but large enough that to land a blow on even her protected chest was difficult.

A couple of throwing axes, hung from below Persephone's ribs. Characters of accuracy, penetration and various elements adorned the surface of these distractory tools. All at once, she felt powerful. she felt she could lead this small Druid force to Will the cleric's aid and their own survival.

'She didn't take much convincing,' Lela mused to herself. Watching as Persephone slowly stood, her form encased by a spider web weaving of a magical metal. After her chest was covered by brilliant silver and gold filigree, plate-mail clicked down her arms. Fitting perfectly, the gauntlets became shields and a quiver clicked out and over her left shoulder. Lela was baffled beyond speaking. 'How can I fight people with such impossible magic at their control?' Lela wondered to herself. All Lela had was a bad attitude.

It seems Bell was suffering from similar feelings of insignificance as she came to take the seat formerly occupied by Persephone. Placing her head on Lela's shoulder, Lela realised she didn't care about her average Human nature. She'd flow with it, not like the streams that now ran dry in this deadwood forest, but like a powerful river, cutting its own path through the world. This mental image helped to stem the tide of helplessness that forced at her subconscious.

Looking around, Lela saw topless people wiping their eyes. Mentally chastising herself, she had to remember to call them Druids. After being overheard calling one of them a topless person, she decided to learn their curious race's name, before anymore insults were added to the various injuries.

The sorrow the Druid people felt for their lost forest home was slowly being replaced by the hopeful sight of their new leader; an old friend coming into her own. The fire could still be seen raging behind the exhausted troop.

Seeing Persephone rise, the apparent elderly leaders of the group of ageless Druids made to rouse their people. Thinking they would be walking away from the flames, taking a longer route to Locksenbury, Lela was surprised yet again, when not even a forest fire stopped these people. They began to chant and some stuck their hands in the earth or onto a tree. This strange practice saw a channel gradually open in the wall of fire at their backs, which they proceeded to walk their wounded through. Ignoring the flames they had so vehemently fought before the battle. But, Lela could see the difficulty this magic layed upon the Druids. Some exploded into animals that could carry or drag the

wounded, but the faces of those who did not change were less than ageless.

Lela could hear Persephone giving her new found energy to those who still appeared dejected at the loss of their forest home. But, not even Persephone's brilliant form resolved their utter exhaustion as she flitted amongst the crowd.

The Druids dragged their feet through that channel, but they didn't stop. Lela saw the leader of the Druids, the ageless woman from the grove. She was standing aside, smiling warmly at Persephone. It looked as though the mantle of leader had been passed to this young Armour. These were truly amazing things, these magical breast-plates.

Behind the Druid forces the approaching enemy was visible. The two knights from before were leading reluctant soldiers across the burnt plains. Many were lost to the flames, but their fear of the knights must have been greater than their fear of such a horrifying death because they ploughed on through the wall of fire.

Suddenly, a chant went up and Lela felt the ground beneath her rumble. Grass and other ground covers sprung forth. The dead plain, where the fire had passed, lurched to life. Dead trees surrounded the rocks where the group had chosen to rest, after traversing the fire wall. As these dead trees spiralled into the sky, leaves slid from now living branches and a small pool bubbled to life.

The Druids disappeared into the small grove, an oasis in the ashes of the recent fire. A few remained on the ground, exploding into powerful animals. A bear hid behind a nearby tree and two tigers rushed deeper into the grove. A dark shadow, moved gracefully up in the branches, briefly revealing itself to be a fearsome panther.

Lela assumed the remaining Druids had their bows drawn and raised. Out of ammo and completely lost for words, Bell and Lela stood dumbfounded. Suddenly, a hawk landed at their feet and exploded into Persephone, her armour glistening beautifully in the twilight. "Hide in the trees," she told us with a smile. "You've done more than enough to help us. There is no cowardice in sitting this battle out."

Lela thought Bell was going to skin Persephone then and there. Holding Bell back with an outstretched arm, Lela looked Persephone in the eye. "Bell and I will use the trees as cover and fight beside that bear and the tigers," Lela told Persephone carefully, fondling the hilt of the sword she wore at her hip.

After a curt nod, Persephone disappeared deeper into the grove. Lela drew her pistol. Less than a full clip could be salvaged from half-empty casings. Cursing her luck, Lela followed Bell into the grove.

Bell had a sword in one hand and a smaller knife blade down in the other. Face grim, Bell nodded her support. She had Lela's back. Checking her own sword was loose in its scabbard at her hip, Lela stabbed a knife from her ankle into the tree she now took cover behind. Pistol gripped tightly in anticipation of the coming onslaught, she braced herself.

After summoning the grove, Persephone felt her magical malachite stores grow nearer depletion. The trees would give her enough energy to survive. She had to trust in that. Thankfully, the grove provided an advantage to her people, who were currently in the trees, bows drawn. Some had chosen to remain animalian, knowing they could tear soldiers limb from limb with their chosen power. Those

who's animalians were of a gentler nature exploded into their topless forms and disappeared into the tree tops.

Ferneagle, the second in charge of the Druids, was one of two Druids that stood before Persephone now. Both had eagles of some kind as one of their animalians. So, she had asked them here, intending to cast a spell her ancient genetic memory had enlightened upon her mind. "Please," she began, looking deep into the eyes of each Druid, "could you take on your eagle animalians for me?"

Trusting in the Druid Knight's power, the two Druids did as Persephone asked. Focusing on the near depleted well of energy Persephone held in the various malachites on her person, Persephone cast a spell on each,

你把一个小鹰成大鹰
(nǐ bǎ yīgèxiǎoyīng chéng dàyīng)
You small eagle become large

Two great eagles took flight from the groves forest floor. Soaring skyward, they rapidly gained altitude, creating terrifying shadows for the soldiers below. The soldiers were rapidly approaching the grove, confident in their upcoming victory. Graceful and deadly, their claws flexed for effect. This flight was the signal for the archers to similarly loose a flight. The sky grew dark with shadows of both arrows and eagles. Soldier's screams filled the crackling air.

Leaping deftly into the canopy with Druidic grace, bounding off branches and bows, Persephone watched the dark shafts descend on the approaching force. The soldiers who did not fall from the arrows turned fearful eyes to the skies, as two great eagles dropped. Rampaging through the small force, the eagles tore men apart with huge claws or beat them with the power of their wings.

Pulling men aloft, they dropped them into the core of the troops, causing panic to rock the force. Shafts continued to fly in volleys at the now running soldiers. Fleeing headlong into the grove, seeking the deceptive cover of the trees, the soldiers were met by animalians of unexpected power.

The two Elemental Knights could be seen entering at different areas of the grove. Leaving the weaker of the two knights to the other Druids, Persephone followed the Water Knight of the Garnet/Aquamarine. Running along the branches of the small canopy, Persephone asked the trees for enough energy to kill this traitor. Responding with kind words, the trees gave all their tired trunks could give, still exhausted from their sudden growth from their formerly dead stumps.

Persephone felt a deep love for the ancient forest and was proud that she resurrected this small section before the spark of life had left.

Persephone watched the Water Knight walk confusedly through the grove, Druids avoiding him as commanded. Flapping to the forest floor, Persephone squawked once. Exploding into her true form, she dropped her gauntlets into shields and drew her longsword in a fluid motion.

Turning to face her, Persephone's first swing bounced off of the Water Knight's shield. Suddenly, Persephone was blasted in the side by a torrent. Persephone's sword flew away and she landed in a heap.

Rolling, she quickly came to her feet with a throwing axe in each hand. Laughter came from the knight, "Thought you'd keep the rest of your filthy Druids away huh?" A scoff, "A Druid Knight, how pathetic! You gonna call some squirrels to bite at my ankles?!"

Confused at his poor, and frankly outdated, humour, Persephone dropped the shield from her left side and opened herself to the surrounding trees. “A fighter ey,” mocked the Water Knight. “This could be fun, at the very least.”

Anticipating the blast of water that came at her unguarded left side, Persephone spun and deflected it with her right shield. Coming at Persephone from behind, the Water Knight flowed, his wavy bladed tulwar snaking its way around her guard. Persephone brought her left gauntlet in front of her chest as the tulwar came at it with a blow that could pierce her weakened magical protections.

Persephone shook her left gauntlet to extend the shield. The tulwar flew from the knight’s grip as her shield shot out.

Hurriedly spinning clockwise, Persephone swung madly with her axes. Ricocheting off of the knight’s tower shield, she forced him back. She felt for the forest and it responded in kind. Channelling the wind with all her stores of magic, Persephone blasted the knight backward. Smiling at her futile attempts to break his guard, his expression was replaced with shock as a branch erupted from his chest. It pierced next to the huge garnet that adorned the centre of his breast-plate.

The knight’s heart was torn and he collapsed, body lank. Persephone dropped to a knee in exhaustion. She watched the wavy bladed tulwar slide into the latent armour that had fallen to the floor at the body’s feet.

With the knight slain, Persephone dropped to a knee, feeling the after effects of the magic that she had used to pierce the magical wards of the knight’s armour. “No squirrels,” she whispered, “but an unexpected branch wiped that arrogant smile off your face.”

The fighting was fast, one minute the whisper of arrows filled the air. The next, the screech of huge birds and the screams of soldiers drowned out all other noise. Un-aimed gunfire shook the grove. Leaves rustled as the tree trunks absorbed the fire. Lela’s ears rang with the clamour of battle. She saw the Druid-come-bear rip through the trees and, eerily silent, tear two terrified soldiers apart.

The tigers leapt from some unseen part of the grove and tore the throats from their victims. The panther crept along the branches above fleeing soldiers, lazily swinging at them as they ran. It would tear off arms and rend skulls at a whim.

Horrorified, Lela watched the carnage. Eyes glued to the battle. But, somehow she remained abstracted from the scene.

Through the gravitating mayhem walked one of the knights. After calmly sliding his blade along the side of a leaping tiger, deftly dodging the snarling teeth, he swung around and stuck his sword into it’s back, piercing the heart. As he filleted the helpless Druid, Lela felt the knight’s gaze on her. It felt as if he had targeted her the minute he entered the grove.

Lela couldn’t tear her eyes from his. They glittered a reddish-brown. She could feel the heat of his gaze. Panicked, she fired the full clip from her pistol into the enchanted Armour, his huge shield protecting his other appendages.

When the knight did not slow, nor even flinch in the slightest, Lela felt her hands quake. Looking around for Bell, Lela saw her fighting off a cluster of soldiers. Turning back, Lela’s eyes locked again to the now very near knight.

He walked slowly through the massacre, occasionally throwing fireballs from his hands. Drawing her sword, Lela stepped from the tree and prepared to face the knight. She could see fire

reflecting in his curved sword. But, there was no fire to be the source.

Steeling herself, Lela leapt to the attack. Charging silently into his shield, she rebounded off in a futile attempt to break through his guard. Falling to the floor, she rolled towards her former cover.

The knight stabbed down at Lela's kicking feet, as she scrambled along the forest floor. He was playing with her. She could almost hear him cackle, 'DANCE PUNY HUMAN!'

A sickening grimace split his face. Flames began to grow around Lela. Somewhere she had lost her sword. It was useless anyway, she supposed. A wave of despair rocked her as she clung to the tree, feeling as if it could somehow save her. The knight's sword thrusts grew nearer. Distraught, tears sprung to Lela's eyes. She quickly wiped them, deciding suddenly that she would not give him the satisfaction of breaking her.

Reaching back, Lela felt the knife she had stabbed into the tree. Grasping the hilt, she prepared to pull it free. Who knows, she could wound this fiend, if she got lucky, if he gave her half a chance.

Although, as he lifted his curved sword skyward, Lela could only watch horrified as he prepared to finish his play.

Knife gripped painfully tight, Lela felt a final breath rush into her gasping lungs, when, out of the fire, came a huge bear. Not prepared for such an eventuality, the knight was caught off guard. Spinning to face the bear, he all but forgot Lela's whimpering form.

Battering the knight's shield, the bear fought ferociously. Forgetting her own fear, anger filled Lela's blood with adrenalin. Her formerly final breath was preceded by rapid, athletic, breathing.

Yanking the knife from the tree, Lela jumped to her feet. She stabbed the knight in the back. Honour exempt, she pulled the knife free, searching for the gap between belt and armour. Again and again, her knife came down.

The flames surrounding now filled Lela's heart. She could feel fire rushing through her body. Repeatedly, she brought the knife home. Blood splattered her face. She watched the armour slide into a latent state. But, her former fear clouded judgement. Lela continued to stab the corpse. Up. Down. Up. Down. Up. Down. Up. Down.

Up. Down. 'LELA!' came a voice. Pausing, Lela wondered if that last bit was in her head. Again, this time softer, the voice came, "Lela. Lela, he's dead."

Shuddering, Lela's breath came in gasps. She dropped the bloodied knife to the floor. Lela felt strong hands gently pull her shoulders back.

Quickly, clarity returned and Lela found she was straddling the knight's corpse. His arrogant face dug deep into the soil. Most of his back was gored. More gruesome than the gore however, was the realisation that she had committed the act.

Stomach lurching, Lela convulsed. Discovering then that she hadn't eaten today. The gentle hands held her hair from her face and pulled her close after her stomach had settled. That's when she saw the male Druid, burnt and battered, lying nearby the knight's corpse.

Lela recognised the bear who had saved her life. Pulling herself from the warm hold, Lela scrambled to the fallen Druid's side. There was another Druid beside him, tending his wounds with strangely coloured pastes. Some glittered odd colours and Lela wondered at their effectiveness, compared to the modern medicines the Humans used.

The bear turned his face to Lela and smiled a small smile, "I see the fearless Human is covered in blood, vomit and tears."

"Huh," Lela responded dumbfounded. He was so beautiful. Her eyes followed his strong jaw,

which framed a handsome face. The caked blood could not conceal the bear-come-Druid's smooth skin nor his button nose and large eyes. This set Lela's heart racing.

Another Druid placed a hand on Lela's shoulder, "We need to take him. He needs rest and healing."

Confused and more than a little disoriented, Lela looked at the tall Druid woman behind her, "Ok. Uh, just give me a sec." Lela turned back to the bear-come-Druid who saved her life. Kissing him softly on the forehead, she whispered softly in his ear, "Thank you."

Rising slowly with the stretcher, Lela watched him get carried off to where all the wounded were mysteriously transported. Lela's eyes widened when she saw Bell's hard face on a stretcher heading in the same direction.

A small nod from Bell's weary head and Lela knew she'd had her back. Tears of anger burst from Lela's eyes.

Releasing Lela to stumble to Treebear's side, Persephone knelt down and collected the Fire Knight's latent armour from beside his mutilated corpse. They had successfully fought off the two knight's force. Thankfully, the fires had already past, leaving the Fire Knight severely weakened. But, many of Persephone's grove had been injured. The grove being a term used by Druids to refer to their tribe, often located at a central grove, their home.

The two warriors Persephone had turned into eagles were taken from the burnt forest plane on stretchers, blasted from the sky by the Fire Knight's magic. They were running out of able bodied Druids to carry all of the wounded.

What they needed was a cleric. Druid healing can only do so much and many of the wounded would hardly last another day. Turning her head to the now dark sky, Persephone felt time flowing swiftly past her. She watched Lela, the strongest Human she had ever known, break down and cry. CRY! 'How much longer could they push?' Persephone wondered miserably.

They couldn't survive on their own. Lela had told the grove about her plan to meet the Wills Armour at an oval somewhere in a mountain town called Locksenbury. Persephone concluded that they had to make it there. They had to make it there before any more Druids died unnecessarily. Only a cleric could save her fellows and the only cleric around was the Wills Armour.

Placing the two latent armours and her old Druid longbow into a sack at her back, Persephone went to the Druid Grove-master. The wisest of the Druids in a grove, the Grove-master is elected as spiritual leader and legal last-word. Limping amongst the wounded, in their combined magics protective sphere, Grove-master Fernlion laid her exhausted magic on the worst of the wounded in prayers of natures love. "Grove-master," Persephone spoke reverently, deferring the conversation to her willingness to speak by bowing her head.

"Yes, Fernhawk," she replied, calling her by her new Druid name. Formerly Treehawk of the warriors, by accepting a leadership role in the grove, Persephone also adopted the title of fern-, along with the spiritual members of the grove.

The hawk was Persephone's first and, as yet, only animalian. This is taken as a name among the grove. Druids too young to have mastered an animalian form are referred to only as Leaf. But, not

spoken in a discriminatory sense. This initial title serves more to encourage them to earn a name that they can be proud of amongst the grove. Amazingly, little confusion stems from names such as these due to context and personality traits evident in someone's choice of animalian, it remains rare for two Treetiger's to be confused for each other.

"I believe we should investigate the information the Human Lela has brought us regarding Will," Persephone explained, head still bowed.

"You no longer need to defer to me in such a way Fernhawk," Fernlion told Persephone firmly, "this will be discussed as *equal* leaders of this grove."

"I'm sorry Grove-master. This is all still new to me." Fernlion gave a small nod and a wave to continue. "If the Wills Armour is where he plans to be, then we could provide aid," Persephone began quickly, knowing how unreasonable this sounded. "He is a cleric and in returning the favour of assistance, he could heal the wounded which are growing too numerous for our care."

A heavy sigh accompanied the rise and fall of the Grove-master's shoulders, "At least we would not be coming to him as beggars."

"According to the Human, we have until sometime near lunch tomorrow. How fast can we move the wounded?" Persephone continued, eager to act.

Fernlion's face flashed with anger, "No. We can't rush them and besides, the Human town she spoke of is a long gallop from here."

Unhindered, Persephone got right to the point, "Do you think the threat is truly gone? If the sorcerer could sense the loss of his knight's would he send a similar force to finish the survivors?"

"If he could, which he probably can, it wouldn't matter if you were here or not," Fernlion told Persephone, staring deep into her eyes. "But, if you took a contingent of Trees, you may be able to save the Wills Armour and bring him to our aid."

Not liking the idea of leaving the majority of her grove behind, Persephone asked, "Will you be ok following slower behind us?"

"It's a risky move. A decision you must make as a leader."

Persephone gave a curt nod. "If we don't go, we could lose more to their injuries," voice cold. "I'll leave enough to protect, carry and maintain the magic's protective bubble over the wounded."

An analogous nod from Grove-master Fernlion and Persephone turned on her heels. There was much ground to cover.

Persephone instructed many adamant warriors to remain with the grove. It was their duty to protect. She then chose a select group according to their strengths, skills and animalians. Next, she was to discover Lela's intention. Assuming the stout woman would want to join them, instead of remaining with her wounded friend.

Lela was found cleaning her knife on an old shirt. Dressed in a small soldier's uniform, she had armed herself accordingly. Rifle across her back, she had knives strapped in numerous places, and likely more remained unseen. A shotgun lay beside her and a pistol was holstered on an adjacent hip to a short sword.

Each pocket bulged with what Persephone assumed to be ammunition, being mostly rectangular in shape. "I take it you're joining us in finding the Wills armour?" Persephone asked with a smile.

"You're damn right I am! No one else is gonna get hurt in my place! My people are there and, after seeing those Armours in action, I'd think Will needs all the help he can get," responded Lela

vehemently.

Motioning behind herself, Treehorse trotted from deeper in the small grove. Lela, understanding how much slower she would be than the Druid animalians, awkwardly scrambled onto Treehorse's back.

Weighed down by her myriad of weapons, Persephone stifled a snigger at the sight. Opening herself to the small grove for the last time for what could be a long time, Persephone thanked the forest for its aid and prayed its burns would cool quickly.

Finally exploding into a hawk, Fernhawk took to the sky.

17 Locksenbury

‘Ahh,’ He mumbled, ‘the pitter patter of raindrops on my tent, like tiny feet trying to KICK in the roof.’ Graham awoke, sore and tired, a headache piercing his head. It felt as if his brain was being bathed in a thicket of blackberries. These headaches had grown more painful upon the acquisition of his armour.

He trained late into the night with spells that would prevent that vile Wills Armour getting close enough to even contemplate defeating him a second time. The three javelins of his armour could be quickly enchanted with spells of offence or defence, then wiped clean with as much ease as the shake of an etcher sketcher.

Having collapsed into a couch he had summoned from his former apartment, Graham awoke in his breastplate, one of these javelins now pressing at odds with his back.

The sword-breaker that would hang from his breastplates side was currently lying on the floor beside the couch. Its notched blade – used for hooking and if luck prevailed, breaking, an opponent’s sword – reflected the low light that escaped the folds of the tents heavy fabric. Finally able to use the complete retinue of tools his armour had available, Graham had spent much of his night sparring summoned targets. Ghosts of men the Sapphire Sorcerer had taught him to produce.

Ancient memories could only teach so much. So, as the Sorcerer of the Sapphire had commanded, Graham had been training his new body to use the techniques he recalled from his past lives. This task made easier by the acquisition of his armour last night.

Most of his not inadequately sized tent was sparsely furnished, allowing as much space as possible for private training. The couch and a small kitchenette were arranged along the edge of the tent that opened into the adjacent bedroom, opposite the door flap.

Hearing footsteps approach the flap, Graham rolled off the couch and found unsteady feet.

Without waiting for permission, the Sorcerer of the Sapphire entered the red and black tent of the Mast Armour.

Graham hurriedly collected his sword-breaker from the floor where it lay. Ignoring the two javelins at opposite ends of his tent, he awkwardly turned to face his master.

“You need not worry about your appearances young Mast,” evoked the sorcerer. “I know how hard you have been working.”

Brushing a hand through his curly brown hair, Graham nodded. This only worked to increase his headache however and he held his eyes shut with the palm of his hand.

“I was expecting Vanessa for our morning training,” explained Graham, eyes still covered. “If I had known you would be joining me, I would have dressed more appropriately for your presence.”

“You flatter me,” responded the sorcerer. “I am pleased to hear of your eagerness to train further, but the time has come for action. I have sent Vanessa to ready the troops. In addition, my most loyal follower and lieutenant, the Grekarc Armour, has come to join in our fight. I thought it was prudent to

reinforce us after the loss of the pathetically weak Marth.”

At the sound of his name, the Grekarc Armour slid quietly through the door flap. Wearing dark pants of a voluminous cut, metal could be seen glinting within the folds of both the voluminous pants and the thicker fabric of his shirt.

Gliding on silent feet, he was beside Graham in moments. The man's black hair was greased flat to his head. Stretching into what appeared an unfamiliar expression. The dark skin around the man's mouth formed an odd sort of smile, closer to a grimace.

A hand extended from the fabric of a dark cape and was held outstretched. Recovering from his initial shock at the sudden appearance of the man, Graham grasped the man's hand in a firm shake.

“I have heard much of the powerful Battle Mage of the Carnelian/Obsidian,” said the croaky voice of the shadowy man. Without pause for polite acknowledgements, a small glass vial was pulled from within the folds of the man's voluminous shirt, “To restore your fatigue.”

Graham looked to the sorcerer for support, a small nod from his master and Graham promptly uncorked the bottle.

The viscous liquid slid easily down his throat. Like drinking cold water on a hot day, Graham could feel the progress of the liquid as it rejuvenated tired muscles and relieved his mind of its blackberry bubble.

Having stepped back while the potion was taken, Graham jumped at the small cloth bag that was thrown to him from where the slimy man had slid unheard. Catching the bag, Graham could feel numerous small stones rattling about within.

The chord of the bag unravelled easily and upon its opening, Graham could feel the carnelian energy drawing his hand inwards.

“To restore your armour to full strength before the battle,” explained the grovelling man.

Nodding his thanks, Graham prepared for the battle to come.

Vanessa had been up since dawn's orange light caressed the dark clouds above Aradecca. The rain that had softly fallen overnight was quickly abating. Using her empathy to play on the soldier's feelings, she motivated, organized and prepared the troops. Well, that's what she was supposed to be doing.

Intending to sabotage the assembling forces of the sorcerer, Vanessa moved through the ranks. Her arms moved in a deceptively motivating fashion, but her pheromone control then placed doubt in the minds of the assembled soldiers. Doubt in both her motivating words and the likely success of the battle to come.

The soldiers put on brave faces and made to ensure their weapons were loaded, additional ammunition was stowed and body armour was properly donned. However, Vanessa could see the effect of her work. Hesitant glances between comrades, nervous whistling and the occasional loading of a gun prematurely. She didn't know if her effort would overly change the face of the battle to come, but she had to do something.

Approaching the tent of the Armour of the Carnelian/Obsidian, Vanessa froze when she saw the Sorcerer of the Sapphire leaving. The flap of the tent seemed to caress the dark man's muscular back. Thinking she hadn't been spotted, Vanessa made to begin walking again. Just as she did so, the sorcerer turned halfway towards her. Glittering teeth flashed from the shadow of his gaze and Vanessa

felt herself shiver.

Not long after the sorcerer had hurried off, Graham also left his tent. Looking better than he had all week, Vanessa could feel something troubling Graham below the surface. Checking her pheromone levels to ensure her guise was up, Vanessa hurried over to him.

“How goes the readying for battle?” Vanessa asked with a flirtatious smile and saccade of her eyes along Graham’s form.

“Oh,” he began, struck by Vanessa’s sudden appearance, “the sorcerer said to ready for battle.”

“Come out to see what it’s all about?”

“Yeah. Something like that.”

“Do you think you’ll be able to control it?” Vanessa asked, concerned.

“Yeah,” and with that, Graham stalked off, shoulders hunched and eyes shadowed.

“I’m off my game,” Vanessa mused, trying to allay her concern. Unsure of what else to do, she decided to consult the Albemarle Monk for advice.

Walking over to the prison, Vanessa mused at the easy escape of the Wills Armour. She had aided and abided that fugitive and she still expected to pay the price. Every time the Sapphire Sorcerer looked into her eyes she felt as if he knew of her betrayal. The glittering depths seemed to read her doubt. Her doubt in his ways and her failing allegiance. She felt as if they were tattooed on her forehead.

Vanessa had often come to visit the monk after Will had left. For the company mainly, she brought him food to keep him strong. So, when the time came, he could hold up his end of the bargain. He seemed to appreciate the gesture.

No matter their respective motivations, they would sit and talk. He would tell her of the history of the Armours and she would talk of her family and her life in Midecca, where she was an arts student studying history and linguistics. No one else in the camp cared for her stories or her woes, but the monk listened; quiet and attentive, commenting where appropriate.

Holding a meal she had filched from the guards, Vanessa approached the monk’s cell. Expecting to hear his voice as she drew nearer, she felt no emotions ebbing from the cell. Panicked, she hurried to the steel door and peered in through the small barred window. The cell was empty. Suddenly, the darkness from down the cell block coalesced into a man. Evil seemed to ebb from under the hood of his cloak. Or was it even that, the dark cloth seemed to cover his whole body, leaving only soft leather shoes, dark leather gloves and a small fissure of his face visible.

“A strange place to be,” came the smooth tones of the dark man. “Thought we’d venture to the cells for a snack did we?”

“I was bringing the prisoner the scent of food. Eating in front of him may yield to bargaining,” retorted Vanessa defiantly. She could sense this man was an Armour, which meant his emotions were particularly cloudy to her.

“No doubt you were,” spoke the man through a yellow toothed grimace. “I can’t imagine anyone would think of betraying the power of the Sorcerer of the Sapphire to some bald-headed sycophant. Madness!”

And with that unnecessarily ominous statement, he left. Vanessa stood a while longer, pondering the empty cell and the appearance of a new Armour into her already muddled equations.

After leaving the forest, Persephone had sent the bird-form Druids in the direction Lela had described as Locksenbury. There they had been instructed to form a search pattern that both hid their true nature, by looking irregular, and effectively isolated the position of Will and his meeting place.

Persephone herself, taking on the form of a hawk, currently flew over what she hoped was Locksenbury. She could see a thin shaft of smoke coming from an assumedly new hole in the ground. ‘There has been fighting here,’ she concluded pointlessly.

The other bird-form Druids had been instructed to scout the nearby towns for an oval, just in case the directions had been off slightly, but Persephone felt confident in Lela’s information.

A raven approached her from the direction of the land-based Druid re-enforcements. “The Land-based Druids are getting tired Fernhawk,” the raven squawked, dodging the aerial blow directed at their left wing.

“It is a long way. I understand, but they still have far to come,” squawked Persephone in response, continuing the feigned aerial combat. To any on lookers, the Hawk was attempting to protect its nest from the egg-stealing raven.

Persephone was growing nervous at the likely outcome of the battle to come. The Druids would be exhausted. And the sorcerer must have heard of the intended meeting place and is likely to send a force to intercept the free survivors of Aradecca. ‘Surely Will has a plan, but how can we see it in time?’ Persephone worried aloud.

Lela was growing increasingly frustrated with the monotonous bouncing of Treehorse. ‘Was that actually his name?’ she wondered to herself. ‘A curious bunch these Druids.’

Lela kept seeing glimpses of other animals. A tiger here. A raven there. She knew they were communicating, but she couldn’t understand the guttural growls and groans of these woodland creatures. Once she thought she saw a bear. Her heart felt like it was going to burst free of its ribbed enclosure at the unexpected sighting.

Just as rapidly, her heart slowed as she eventually recalled the fate of her saviour, resting back in the grove from injuries incurred from aiding her. All this guilt was getting ridiculous. She missed Bell. Her silent company was comforting.

She knew the forest would end eventually. Yet, when Lela suddenly found herself riding a horse down a main street, she was more than a little confused. The animals who had traversed the desert landscape between the grove and the still in tack forests were suddenly beside her again. The jouncing of the horse became more pronounced on the hard bitumen of the main street. Slowly Lela came to recognize the mountain town. “A while to go yet lads,” she shouted to the crowd.

As if in response, two black vans sped around a corner nearby and slammed on their respective brakes. Skidding to a halt, Lela watched hopelessly as two squads of soldiers emptied out of the vans and took aim on the animalian Druids. Lela looked around, expecting to see naked people with their arms in the air, panicked at having been taken so far from their protective forest. What she did see however, was quite the opposite. The Druids had left Lela and the horse in the centre of the main street.

Instead of panic, they choose to take cover in the shop fronts and behind signs. Lela could see the trees lining the streets, formerly burnt to the ground, were suddenly flourishing with life. Several Druids now hid in each tree. Each Druid holding a bow pointed towards the soldiers that had only the

cover of the two black vans. Drawing her own assault rifle, Lela locked a round into the breech dramatically.

The soldiers visibly hesitated. Trigger fingers unsure if they were faster than the medieval bows of these naked animals-come-people. A raven squawked once from overhead and a nervous soldier jerked his head up anxiously. The Druids fired.

Not a soldier remained that wasn't broken hearted. Leaving the mess of corpses where they lay, the Druids retook their animalian forms and wearily continued their journey.

Liàng's Water Elemental collective consciousness had stood in the chamber for several long hours, Kuài by their side. They had not only failed to defeat the Metal Elementals and the sorcerer, but had failed to bring a new ally to the Wills Armour. Liàng thought of Lela, the brave Human fighting against tremendous odds for the lives of those she led. She was an amazing woman. A woman they should join. Turning to Kuài, Liàng looked into the violet eyes of their Air Elemental companion. "We go to Will's aid," came the distorted echo that was Liàng's new voice. "Even two Elementals is better than none."

A small nod from Kuài and a glance at the overlarge aquamarine on the floor was answer enough. Kuài was gone, to get supplies no doubt and Liàng was left to contemplate a return trip in that nightmare of a stone. 'We are afraid,' came the echo of voices in Liàng's mind. "So am I," Liàng mumbled allowed. "So am I."

When Kuài returned, Liàng's collective conscious had convinced him against a second journey in the aquamarine. Instead, they would take the river from Shuǐgǎng. From their quiet island capitol, they would navigate the torrent downstream to where Mǔhé, a coastal town, met the ocean. Aradecca was on the coast. So, they would be able to swim the ocean Southerly, then East towards the port of Aradecca.

The plan was laid out. Kuài donned enchanted silk garments, made to fit an Air-standard avatar. The garments left a strange emptiness at the hips and shoulders. The colours were wonderful. Deep purple slid smoothly over the lighter pink and blazing orange that somehow wove the overall garment. The fragile appearance of the silk betrayed the true power of its defensive wards. A single longsword, one that Kuài appeared to be endeared towards, and several knives could be seen attached loosely about their avatar. The spear and shield of the Gust Guard were wrapped reverently in some travel silk, along with Kuài's flute and longsword, to aid in a quick return to Aradecca.

These additional items would slow Kuài to the speed she could move the silk package on the wind. Yet, they would still likely reach Aradecca before Liàng. So, Kuài took a smaller aquamarine and enchanted the stone with a sort of homing beacon. A second stone was passed to Liàng, who took the stone and felt it pulse Kuài's position to them. It was somewhat unnerving, each pulse quite strong due to their current proximity. "The stone to me guide you when within one hundred kilometres," said Kuài.

"I assume you meet Will stay with him?" confirmed Liàng.

"Find him, and then I for you wait. Go with the..." Kuài paused in a familiar Air Elemental saying, "water."

Liàng smiled. With that, Kuài was gone. Liàng hurriedly finished packing. They wrapped a pearl-

woven chainmail vest, two Keris, a few small amethysts and the knife Kuài had given them into a large piece of travel silk.

'Time to go,' Liàng informed his mental companions, well aware they already knew.

'Indeed,' came the echoed response.

I had been up all night ensuring all was in readiness for the upcoming battle. Lying on top of the tank used to escape the sorcerer's prison, I watched the stars slowly fade from the sky as the sun's warm rays banished them from sight. 'Another red sky,' I sighed.

As I lay there, I ran through the plan to make sure I hadn't forgotten anything. I had placed road works electronic billboards on the most likely routes to the oval.

I ran through all of the routes I could imagine, saw that my billboards covered them all. Each had a camera and a small laptop hooked up. This allowed me to control the screens writing and to allow me to see who could see this writing. The information was relayed back by a series of wireless boosters, hooked up to solar panels, which I took from some of the houses near the oval. The billboards used their own small generator power sources.

The cameras could all be seen on two monitors I had set up in the tank, with a larger computer powering the flow of information. A second computer was set up to allow me to control the writing on the billboards, according to whom I saw could see it.

I had programmed in several messages, hot-keyed to be displayed. These would direct my people to the school I had supplied. However, if the approaching vehicle was obviously an enemy, I could direct them to the oval, where I was waiting.

'Today,' I mumbled, trying to find security in the admittance of the upcoming events. At this, Wolf's head rose. He lazily looked me up and down, from where he lay beside me. Deciding nothing was amiss, he languidly lowered his head back to sleep.

At the school, I had set up several laptops in a shelter, where survivors could input their details, such as useful skills/occupation, name, age, gender and whether they had any injuries. An electronic billboard was also set up at the entrance to the school, explaining to survivors that they should collect one of the letters that I had placed in a shelter by the entrance. The letters read,

Hello Survivor,

Let me begin by congratulating you on your courage, skill and will to live. You can hopefully understand my caution then in leading you on a confusing route to the safe-house. I am likely fighting those among you who sought to harm us through subterfuge.

Please let me apologize in advance for what you may have hoped to be a day spa style safe-house. I have few supplies, but by banding together, I hope to create a comfortable environment for our continued survival. So, to begin the next step in your journey, I'd ask you to please fill in your details on the spreadsheets open on the computers I have set up in the sports shed by the school oval.

Please fill your details in carefully and accurately because they will dictate the position you fill as part of our little tribe.

After completing the spreadsheet:

If you could now load all your valuables onto one of the buses I have provided, I will be with you as soon as I can.

Yours sincerely,

William Wills

My stomach tightened as I recalled the writing of the letter. I hadn't had time to type it after the draft was complete. So, I had made the photocopies in the staff room and placed them in a box at the entrance to the school. Most of the supplies had been loaded into the yellow school buses lined up beside the school.

Nodding softly, I felt I had planned the route adequately. I had hidden a motorbike and some weapons in the scrub nearby the tank for my escape. The bike had minimal enchantments, just speed and durability on various parts. I could still smell the noxious fumes as I burnt the paint with the magical energies.

The tank, along with having computers inside, had lost its hurried invisibility enchantment. Instead, I had covered it with as much foliage as I could and placed the strongest enchantments I could think of on the ammunition. Basically, the ammo would explode bigger and brighter than one would usually expect.

Grudgingly, I rose from the hard metal of the tank. Lifting the hatch and dropping inside, I moved to the similarly hard driver's seat. Settling in, I ran my eyes over the monitors and my hand over the amethyst at my breast.

18 Together

Sitting in the tank, my butt-cheeks were long passed complaining and well into total numbness. I jumped at the sight of the first vehicle on my monitors. Early, it was only 9.13am, a black van with bullet holes and two followers came into sight from one of the back routes from the city. I hurriedly hot keyed the wrong sign to flash directions to the school. Realizing my error, I flicked the appropriate sign on and watched as the small convoy slowed.

They may be driving enemy vehicles, but I figured the bullet holes and the fact they were in such a tight convoy, gave them away as survivors. I had expected to see these vans. It was the logical choice for getting through the likely enemy checkpoints. Hopefully I'd be able to see soldiers in the driver's seats of the enemy vans. My hands were shaking with the pressure. My eyes shifted frantically for new arrivals. I forced myself to calm down, to slow my breathing. Falling further into the uncomfortable chair, I didn't see another vehicle for a quarter of an hour. After that, my fingers were working furiously on the keyboard to ensure enemy vans were directed towards the oval and survivors towards the school.

By 11 o'clock I had directed a swelling number of vehicles to the school. I hadn't heard any rustling near the tank, but I assumed the enemies I had directed to the oval were milling about confusedly. They had only started arriving half an hour before I had told the survivors to meet. Well, the enemies I spotted had. I felt my fingers start to crack and realized I was nervously fulfilling the habit. Placing my hands back on the keyboard, I bit my lip and looked out the tanks visor, to the oval beyond.

I could see soldiers looking around suspiciously, expecting an attack. Most held their weapons and scanned the edge of the oval, using their vans and some sneaky undercover cars for cover. I hadn't lead any survivors to the oval, it would seem, but, I was still nervous about some suspicious vehicles I had lead to the school.

The tank was almost entirely covered by broken branches, but soon the soldiers were bound to start looking around. The oval was, after all, a perfect place for an ambush. Hearing twigs snap and Wolf growl I cursed myself for not putting up some sort of sensors around the tank. I guess my time was up, it was just past eleven now. So, I set the billboards to read, 'Wait here for further instructions. Be wary of other approaching vehicles.'

Billboards set, I could hear the perimeter growing noisier as Wolf fought of a small group of scouts. The soldiers on and around the oval were suddenly aware of a commotion in my direction. So, I moved the computers aside and took control of the tanks main gun.

Graham, his energies and armour fully restored, spent the time before the 11 o'clock departure in

the lotus position. His Javelins strapped at his back, he explored his armours inner energies. Wanting to understand his abilities to a greater depth, Graham poked and prodded at inner switches. His armour responded by extending various hidden compartments. These contained many blank scrolls, empty potion vials and strange utensils that seemed vaguely familiar. But, what Graham was truly interested in were the weapons.

A curved sword breaker dangled at his left hip, slotting away when unused. Two mid-sized axes fit adjacent to the javelins at his back. His mind ran along the pathetic blowpipe at his belt. ‘Which of my ancestors had thought *that* a valuable addition?’ Graham wondered aloud.

Satisfied that his armours available weapons had been mapped, he removed the three javelins that were strapped to his back. Placing them across his legs he proceeded to explore their possibilities.

Eyes closed, he sat like this for many hours, until his alarm clock buzzed and he was informed of the upcoming need to move to the assembly area.

Re-attaching the javelins to his back, Graham left his tent. Upon acquiring his armour, his tent had taken on a more definite form. The flaming carnelian lapped against the obsidian roof, flickering as he passed.

The tent Marth had formerly occupied was now snot green on deep black. The slimy contrast seemed to move like a lava lamp, the green bubbling up through a black liquid. The tent order had not changed, but Graham felt the slippery potion-bearer was held in high esteem by the Sapphire Sorcerer.

Arriving at the assembly area, Graham walked past the troops where they stood in rough order, fiddling with straps and weapons. A small group of soldiers with strange markings stood near the centre of the force. Next to them was Vanessa, looking gorgeous as ever. But, the Slimy Armour and the sorcerer were nowhere to be seen.

Walking up to Vanessa, Graham greeted her with a dramatic bow. Apparently not seeing the intended humour in the motion, Vanessa gave a small smile and nervously looked around.

Before Graham could ask what was wrong, the Sorcerer of the Sapphire appeared with a blue flash. Most of the soldiers appeared accustomed to the sudden appearances and hurriedly finished up their preparations. Vanessa however appeared to grip her quarterstaff more tightly.

What Graham had not been told was that Vanessa was planning to escape. But, to do that she needed her small library of books that had been removed from her armour at some point she could not recall. Only her quarterstaff, some writing equipment, a small set of binoculars and many empty compartments remained.

She had tried to leave in the past, before the sorcerer had fully planned his initial assault. The sorcerer had found her within minutes of leaving the camp. He had appeared before her, smug as ever. He did not berate her however. Worse, he turned her around, led her back to the camp, then, with a small smile, he left her in her tent; comfortable in the knowledge that he owned her.

What he didn’t know, was that Vanessa had been talking with the monk he kept in the prison. They planned to free her and get the small library to Will.

When the sorcerer and his force, including Vanessa, left for Locksenbury Oval, the monk would sneak into the sorcerer’s chambers and steal back the books. The monk assured her that with these books he could find a way to remove the tracking enchantments on her armour. Maybe she would

finally realize the full potential of her armour.

Lela and the Druids had followed one of the back routes into the mountains, staying off to the side. A couple of vehicles passed them, but apparently, they didn't spot the horse rider or the other animals making quick pace through the woods beside the road. Lela wondered at the value of hailing one of the vehicles and convincing them to give the Druids a lift. But, most had limited seats and the time it would take to explain the Druid's nakedness would eventually slow the overall trip. Besides, Lela knew they weren't far off Locksenbury. Only a township away, Lela checked over her weapons to ensure their readiness for the likely battle to come.

Overhead, Persephone could see a small complex, about halfway between the land-based Druids and the township of Locksenbury. Many of the vehicles coming from the direction of Locksenbury seemed to be directed down a confusing series of roads, which eventually led them to the small complex. 'Clever,' Persephone thought to herself. 'Will must somehow be discriminating the survivors from the soldiers and be directing them to a different rally point.'

The bird-form Druids continued to report that the oval in Locksenbury was filling with black vans full of soldiers. Not waiting around to find the means of Will's discrimination, Persephone broke off from the randomized search pattern of the bird-form Druids and made a Bee-line for Lela's crowd. Feeling the wind rush over her feathers, Persephone closed her eyes and enjoyed the glide down to her small Druid force.

Gunfire rang out. Treehorse stopped suddenly and Lela jumped as Persephone exploded from the sky. "There's a complex near Locksenbury," Persephone began, hair a mess. "There is a fire there, but no sign of Will."

"Are there any survivors at this complex," asked Lela concerned.

"There are a few hundred people digging in for a defence. They appear to be waiting until all of their number have made it to safety."

"But," Lela stuttered, quite confused, "what of the oval?"

"The soldiers appear to have been directed to the oval. I assume this is where the Wills Armour will appear."

"So, we're going to-" began Lela.

"You're taking the land-based Druids to aid at the complex," interrupted Persephone.

"NO! I came here to help Will!" demanded Lela.

Growing frustrated at the time wasting, Persephone responded sharply, "The bird-form Druids are heading at the oval. YOU will go to the complex and aid those of your kin!"

A series of explosions came from the direction of the oval and Lela saw a raven rushing towards them squawking, "A tank has appeared at the oval. It started firing on the soldiers."

Lela, stunned at the unexpected change, sat there staring blankly for a spell. Clarity returning to her, her mental vacuum clapped suddenly into place. Persephone was turning to leave when Lela yelled, "Get him-"

Persephone broke her off, patience lost in the stress of the situation. "I will," She responded quickly. With that, Persephone exploded into the air. A hawk and a raven flapped madly towards the tank explosions.

My mind rang with the BANG, KATHUNK, of the tanks main gun firing then loading another round into the main turrets breech. I had long since lost my ability to hear. I felt Wolf fighting soldiers beside the tank. "I'm ok! Keep firing," came Wolf's frustrated response to my ponderings.

My eyes were beginning to glaze over. I had been focusing so hard on the tanks firing port that I was getting a terrible headache. 'Quit complaining,' I yelled at myself.

The plan appeared to be working. All of the soldiers that made a move to get whatever anti-tank weaponry they happened to have in the back of their vans were singled out by the high-calibre weapon I had at my disposal. All of their cover, namely their vans, had exploded and they appeared to be retreating. The pitter patter of fruitless rifle fire had ceased and I let the soldiers who dropped their arms flee.

That's when it all got interesting. A blue flash suddenly came from the centre of the oval. My hands came from the controls as I shielded myself from the glow. With a crack, the cricket pitch was once again visible. But, where once there was burning grass, now stood two platoons, a large group of topless warriors with the mark of the Metal Elementals and three Armours.

I gulped. Grabbing the controls, I fired on the platoons.

Panic ensued. The sorcerer had seen fit to join this battle, but he quickly retreated to the rear of the force. I knew my time in the tank was limited. Those Metal Elemental marked soldiers would likely be immune to my fire and I wasn't sure how magically resistant this tank was.

Arriving on a solid concrete slab, Graham crouched and prepared for an ambush. The blue light faded. He looked around, there were destroyed vans dotted around a cricket oval. Much of the grass was singed and some continued to burn. Graham's vision took on a darker hue, blood surrounded him. 'Whatever caused this *best* not identify itself,' Graham warned.

BOOM! The platoon to Graham's left exploded into flames. As lucky survivors made to rise, a second shot shook the ground. This time the second platoon, to Graham's right, was hit. The force scattered. Graham could hear soldiers yelling all around. He looked up. Frantically he tried to spy the direction of the threat.

The marked soldiers began to run towards the sloped side of the oval. Looking closer, Graham could see a tanks main gun swing slowly in his direction. Instinctively, he ran from its line of fire.

An explosion from where he had formerly stood allowed some relief. Graham didn't want to test his armours wards against a tank shell. Taking the opportunity, he made a zigzagged path toward the armoured vehicle.

Vanessa knew Will was in the tank. She could feel his presence, could smell his disgust at the carnage. Graham ran panicked from the fire. She was relieved he had left her side for this battle.

Biting her lip, she watched him rush off to assault the tank. He was the one reason she would have stayed with the sorcerer. The poor guy didn't know the truth, still brainwashed by the sorcerer's magic. 'Heck, if it wasn't for my pheromones, I'd probably still think the sorcerer was a worthy leader,' Vanessa brooded.

An explosion nearby knocked Vanessa back to the present situation, she had hardly moved since

they got here. She had to look as though she was trying to fight Will, for the moment at least.

I began to panic. Most of the normal soldiers were dead or fleeing. But, I still had to deal with two to three Armours and a platoon of Metal Elemental marked madmen. Marking enemy positions with a last glance through the tanks viewport, I grabbed a handful of grenades and with my other hand, pulled myself up the ladder to the tanks top hatch.

“Am I clear to get out the tank?” I asked Wolf, suddenly nervous at my ascent.

“Any longer and you’ll be fighting them on the roof!” came Wolf’s harried reply.

Needing no further encouragement, I pulled all the pins of the grenades and opened the roof hatch. Releasing the grenades, I felt myself thrown from where I stood, halfway out of the roof hatch.

I landed in a heap behind the tank. A growl nearby told me Wolf had my back. But, I wasn’t entirely sure where my front was. My armour was still recoiling from the blow. Quickly, I found my feet and imbued the dual sheaths of my enchanted longswords to descend from my shoulders.

Knives were flying in my direction. Katana in my right hand, I deflected the hurtling weapons. Not fast enough, my arms stung with innumerable cuts. I had to cover my face as knives rebounded from my chest plate.

Anger bubbled forth. My eyes blazed purple. The first metal marked madmen came running from the scrub beside the tank. I feigned to the right, deflected a thrown axe and slid my long blade down the chest of the madman. His upheld claymore fell discarded to the floor.

Madmen surrounded me. With a wide swing, I sheathed my katana. Willing throwing knives to descend, I loosed three per hand. Not watching for their success, I used the distraction to pull loose my longswords.

One held in each hand, I felt for the scrub through the Druid’s malachite at my back. What little energy I felt, I imbued to my swords. My cuts glowed and faded from the excess of energy channelled through my armour. A green tint entered my vision, guiding me to environs of benefit.

A madman holding two axes ran at me from the bushes. One longsword swept his left axe aside. The second found his open chest. Pulling my right free, both swords swung low as I ducked a blow from behind.

I continued the swing, severing a leg. I called,

把我的六个刀返回我
(bǎ wǒdeliùgèdāo fǎnhuí wǒ)
My six knives return to me

Stabbing both longswords into the fallen madman, his limp arms ceased to clutch his stump. At each strike, I could feel the Metal Elemental wards shatter. What projectiles could not pierce was more easily broken by the more direct pressure of a blade.

My hands reached out and found the six thrown knives and returned them to the air. The whisper of their flight betrayed the anguished screams that resulted. But, I did not dwell, my hands had already found the hilts of my longswords and I was pulling them free of the corpse.

Continuing in my rotating motion my longswords severed another foe, coming from below his guard as he swung a short sword too high. Wolf was nearby, tearing and clawing at the bullet-resistant

foes. They were no match for his tooth and claw. Yet, he still bled profusely from numerous minor cuts and some deeper gashes.

We were surrounded. Their numbers were too great. Backing closer, Wolf and I fought fiercely. That's when I saw Graham, walking calmly from the direction of the oval. He was holding a javelin aloft. I gulped, not seeing a chance to single him out when there were so many foes.

Suddenly, several birds dived from the sky and exploded into half-naked men and women. Bows drawn, they fired on the madmen surrounding Wolf and I.

Taking the chance, seeing that Graham's attention was also on the mysterious bowmen, I grabbed Wolf's hair and pumped him full of healing energy. He bucked away, not wanting the healing. But, I held tight, needing my familiar now more than ever.

The madmen's attention was divided. I slid my longswords along several and made a route through to where Graham stood. He threw his javelin then. Both of my swords exploded with sparks as they deflected the thrown pole. My back foot dug deep into the earth. Then, the javelin exploded with energy and I was thrown bodily against the tanks solid outer shell.

Kuài arrived in time to see Will thrown from the top of a huge metal thing. Seeing the source of the spell, they called upon the wind to whip up a storm against the Sorcerer of the Sapphire. Kuài knew they were no match for the sorcerer, but the least they could do was slow them down long enough for Will to escape.

The enchanted silk of Kuài's armour started to fray as the sorcerer threw blast after blast in their direction. Kuài tried to focus, un-weave the spells as they travelled through the atmosphere, but it was no use, there were too many.

Rolling to the ground, Kuài drew their spear and hefted their shield. Hiding behind the metal barrier, they could feel the enchantments rapidly weakening. They weren't designed for this sort of punishment. The shield burst into flame and Kuài threw it to the floor. By now they were close enough to stab at the sorcerer. But, his longsword was out and he knocked the spear thrusts easily aside.

'I hear laughter?' Kuài wondered aloud. 'I one finest Gust Guards, how this Human be so powerful?!' Ducking backwards, Kuài drew their sword, their weapon of choice. Whisper thin, the blade had served them, and many before them, well. The sorcerer brought their longsword forward, looking down its blade at the Air Elemental.

Kuài could see the sorcerer's huge sapphire was faded. The effort of bringing this force, then fighting the Elemental, must have taken a large toll on the sorcerer's stores.

Drawing in the air around them, Kuài created a magical barrier, that only the sorcerer's magic could diffuse. This greatly tired Kuài, but they felt they could hold the barrier long enough to give Will a chance.

Riding towards a line of haggard survivors, Lela could see they were fighting a losing battle. 'It's a school!' cried Lela madly as she saw the *school* complex, nearby which the fighting originated. Lela could see numerous vehicles of varied description parked haphazardly around the entrance. There were wounded calling out, anguished at seeing their friends cut down at a place that was meant

to be safe.

Lela raised her rifle. Treehorse galloped faster towards the battle. She was becoming accustomed to the kick of the rifle as she fired at a small group of approaching soldiers. A few dropped to the floor, but those left turned to face the lone rider. Lela smirked as the soldiers saw the other animalians break free of the roadside scrub. Tigers, bears, weasels, rabbits, they all ran pell-mell towards the combat. Some exploded into bow-drawn Druids, firing with frightening accuracy at the soldiers.

As a bear began to rampage through their ranks, the soldiers started to drop arms and fly. Having little mercy remaining, the Druids dropped the fleeing soldiers, wooden shafts left quivering in their backs as they fell to the floor.

Lela discarded the empty clip from her rifle and locked a replacement into place. Approaching the small stand beside the entrance, Lela fell to the floor as Treehorse exploded into his half-naked self. He then proceeded to collapse exhausted to the floor. Seeing his hand wave off her attention, Lela got back to her feet and collected a letter from the tray. Scanning the content, she then looked upon the haggard students and exhausted Druids surrounding her.

With a sigh, Lela took to calling orders to set up a barricade and get the wounded to a safer position.

Persephone fired arrow after arrow. Her shoulders burned with the effort. The madmen fell like lemmings off a cliff. Yet, their numbers allowed them to scramble over the wounded. She could see her fellows growing tired as she was. But, they did not falter. They stood as a line of eleven half-naked birds-come-people, sending volley after volley into marked madmen as they ran wildly into the fire.

Nearby, Will rebounded off the tank. Wolf was in front of him, bodily blocking Graham from an attack on his person. Graham sniggered, he oozed confidence. Will called his swords back to his grasp with a quick spell. Their eyes locked.

Will held his swords in an aggressive posture. Graham had drawn his sword-breaker and his opposite hand held an axe. Wolf stepped to Will's side. With this small motion, something small plopped off of Graham's shoulder. Graham seemed as shocked as Will was at the movement.

Suddenly, a huge snail, easily as large as the overlarge Wolf stood between the two fearsome Armours. It's shell glittered brilliantly. Rainbow colours danced along the surface of the shell as two long tentacles oozed from the huge head. One eye faced each warrior. Will glanced at Wolf, who didn't seem overly surprised at the sudden appearance. On the contrary, he almost seemed pleased.

Before this could be explained however, a volley of arrows was loosed on Graham. His Armour deflected most of the shafts. But, one pierced his leg and he fell to the floor with a cry.

Red light accosted Will. The last thing he saw before he covered his eyes was the snail, turning it's tentacles to Wolf.

Kuài was out. They were exhausted. Dropping their silk garments and sword, they retreated to their elemental form before it was too late. Will was on his own now. They flew into the upper

atmosphere. Here Kuài would recover. Their last thought before falling into a deep meditation was that Liàng should find the aquamarine where it had fallen on the oval, with the rest of Kuài's belongings.

Having finally banished the tiresome Air Elemental, the great Sorcerer of the Sapphire turned to where the battle was truly being fought. 'Where the hell had the Elemental come from anyway?!' mused the sorcerer, frustrated at the distraction. He had thought their defeat in the desert had sorted the Elemental problem. It would appear some remained.

Making a brisk walk towards the tank, the sorcerer could hear the fighting atop the hill. How he loved the sound of the screams that reverberated in the air. He stopped suddenly when he saw a bright red flash before him. Too dignified to cower behind his arms, hiding from the light, the sorcerer grew concerned.

If the Wills Armour had defeated Graham, then the sorcerer was here on his own. The Sandigh *book keeper* was no use in fight between *real* Armours.

Approaching slowly, the sorcerer did not reveal his presence as he approached behind the cover of some trees that lined the oval. He could see the Wills Armour with some Druids and a second Armour, holding a bow. 'Where had the Druids come from?' the sorcerer asked himself, 'and who is this other Armour?!'

Growing more frustrated by the second, the sorcerer knew he was no match for the pair in his condition. So, willing a large portion of his remaining energies, he wove a powerful blast to strike at the Wills Armour while his back was turned. Then he would make his escape.

I hesitated. The red was still fading from my vision, but something was moving beside the oval, behind some trees. The Armour that had appeared with the topless archers walked over to me.

"My name is Persephone," she began, holding out her hand. "Will I presume?"

Suddenly, I saw Wolf leap into the air and a blue flash came from the side of the oval, indicating the departure of the forgotten Sapphire Sorcerer. Wolf exploded. The familiar's flesh, torn apart by the blast, rained down on me as I stood shocked beside the empty tank.

Overcome by exhaustion and the sudden severance of Wolf's presence from my mind, I fell to the floor. Crouched there, covered in animal matter, my stomach heaved out what little I had eaten when I had finished my preparations at the school.

I felt a hand on my back. Soon, this hand was joined by another. The second grasped my arm and pulled me to my feet. My taste buds recoiled from the acrid vomit. I wiped my mouth as I was pulled to my feet by the second arm, soon joined by the first.

To my left I saw the curly locks of the Head Book Keeper.

To my right, a tall woman turned concerned eyes to my filthy form.

One girl told me, "I will take my Druids and make sure all of your people have made it to the rally point." It must have been the girl to my right, because she left before I could ask how she knew of my 'rally point'.

The book keeper remained. She released her grip on my arm. "Have you found a way to disable

the tracking spells on your Armour?" I asked. My head throbbed. I staggered slightly and wondered faintly at the motorbike I had in the scrub.

The book keeper was talking. I caught the end of what she said, "...monk should be here soon."

Not entirely sure what she meant, I saw a glittering object on the floor. Shaking my head, I tried to find clarity for longer than a few seconds. The object was a flawless sphere of what looked to be amethyst and malachite. The stones flowed together so perfectly. Sighing, I knew it was something to do with Wolf's death. I gulped, loneliness threatened to steal what remained of my exhausted mind.

"Look at me damn it!" I heard the girl call from behind.

"Huh," I mumbled stupidly. "Oh. Sorry. Distracted." I pocketed the sphere in my torn pants, almost repeating my retching when I had to peel away the animal flesh to get to the pocket.

"Here you are! Thank goodness!" I heard the girl cry.

"I said I'd be here," explained a second voice, this one was male. "I'm a monk of my word." This last statement he said with a hint of good humour.

Looking up, I saw the new man had a pile of books in his hands.

"You go on, get your people to safety," imbued the man. I recognized him, but couldn't quite put my finger on why.

Taking his statement as an order, I stumbled my way off into the bushes to find the motorbike I had hidden a safe distance from the tank. A small smile touched my lips as I thought of the success of the battle. Guilt quickly stole it however, as the cost still coated my exhausted form.

Epilogue

There was a knock at the door. Still mostly asleep, I turned over and convinced myself there had been no interruption. Soon after, not surprisingly, the knock came again and someone came softly into the room.

“Will,” came a forceful female voice, “Will. You said to wake you with my report.”

With a grunt, I stretched out my legs. The ground was hard beneath me, even though I had used towels to create a thin mattress. I had a splitting headache, not helped by the sudden light from the hall.

“Sorry to get you up. But, you insisted.”

“I know,” I consoled. “Just give me a sec.” I stiffly lifted myself to an office chair. It sat behind a desk I had been using the evening before. The laptop was still switched on. Holding my head, I forced my eyes to gaze upon the intruder.

“Heh,” Lela scoffed, “not a morning person I see.”

“Apparently not,” came my joking reply. “Well, go on then.” I motioned my other arm to encourage her report.

Lela smirked and looked down at a sheet of paper she held in front. “I grabbed those computer science guys and got them to set up a basic system and backups of the spreadsheet you got us all to fill in. They even added some additional fields for increased functionality, as they put it.”

“Uhh,” Lela paused, seeming to lose her spot. “The duty rosters are pinned up downstairs and people seem to be following them. Only a couple of hiccups with the guard rotation, but they’re smoothed out now.”

Moving her finger down to the next point, Lela informed me of ongoing supply cataloguing projects and of small scouting missions using bicycles, as she had suggested.

“How about the wounded?” I asked, concerned.

Lela dropped her finger down the list. “Oh, yeah. There is a large infirmary in the gymnasium. I’ve got Persephone running that show. The Druids have been using their own methods, but their supply list grows longer each hour.” Lela explained, suggesting that, “you might want to talk to them yourself.”

I gave a small nod, “Anything else?”

“The Druids have asked that you make plans to return to their grove to aid their own wounded, once you have recovered.

Also, many survivors are keen to have you train them in some sword-play or archery. You know, get something going.”

Another small nod, “Sounds like a good idea. Tell the Druids to assemble a small escort. I’ll leave tonight. What of the book keeper?”

Lela looked confused for a moment. Then, “you mean Vanessa? The third Armour? She’s around.

Why?”

Waving the matter off, I was satisfied that the monk had sorted her out.

Assuming that Lela had finished, I got up from my chair, intending to look for some breakfast.

Lela cleared her throat awkwardly and added, “Before you go!” She almost looked guilty. “There’s a strange man here to see you. Calls himself Shi Ling, or something like that.”

“Letting unknown persons into the camp now?” I asked hesitantly.

“He’s fine,” Lela assured me. “I trust him.”

“Ok, thank you Lela. Keep it up and all that.”

Lela turned and left. I saw her motion to someone in the hall before her footsteps faded away. A six foot man, of athletic build, soon filled the doorway, his piercing blue eyes locking onto mine.

“Hello?” I began.

Holding his hand in the air and moving closer, I couldn’t tell if he wanted a high five or if he was awkwardly waving at me. Quickly, he closed the distance between the door and the front of my desk. His hand was still raised. I tried very hard not to flinch at this almost threatening approach. But, the man’s expression remained more confused than aggressive.

I raised my hand up slowly. Pausing, I then proceeded to tap the man’s hand in a gentle high-five.

“Oh good,” he spoke, “I unsure of appropriate custom.” Then, “Yes. On the box.” He seemed to say to himself, appearing annoyed.

“Um. Sure,” I appeased. “So, what brings you here?”

If I had expected the torrent of information that this Elemental then blasted in my direction, I would have paused them to allow me to fetch something to eat. As it was, Shui Liang, I hope that’s right, got me up to speed on all of the events that had led him to Aradecca, including the failed assault in the desert.

Listening considerately, I felt a heavy weight slowly drop onto my shoulders. I looked out the window, as Liàng’s arms moved evocatively through the air. As I stared, I thought to myself, ‘If the sorcerer thinks Ecce will be a cakewalk, he’s got another thing coming.’

About the Author

JRW Conway is a science student living in Australia. Tall, pasty and far less violent than his text would portray. Most of his time is spent studying or thinking up stories when he should be studying.

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