

Feel free to click the "Notify" button up here, rather than posting
to watch. ----^

Illustrations always welcome, if anyone feels particularly inclined. I'm not much of an artist myself.

If you have any suggestions, artwork, or directions you'd like me to take the plot, PM me.

Encouragement and constructive criticism is also welcome.

(I love getting feedback of any kind, provided it isn't "YOU SUCK" 🙄)

[Spoiler: illustrated with 19 pictures and counting](#) (click to show/hide)



Art by Splint

(Vanya is pronounced VON-yuh (first part rhymes with "spawn"))

A Skulker's Tale takes place in the **Boatmurdered/Headshoots/Syrupleaf/Spearbreakers** universe.

Quote from: A Book Jacket Blurb

All I ever do is run, leaving everything I know and love behind me.

In ancient times on the planet of Everoc, the demon Sankis created the Spawn of Holistic, a twisted mockery of dwarvenkind. Parasol, a multidimensional company, stimulated their progress until they became a dreaded scourge. Although unaware of Parasol's existence, the dwarves fought back, creating mighty fortresses to defend their borders from the deathless hordes.

From their fastness in the macabre blood plains, the Holistic Spawn spread the world over, leaving a trail of devastation in their wake. In the meantime, an earth-shattering war began between Parasol and another company, Ballpoint. A third company, Eris, menaced always on the horizon, led by the brilliantly devious Joseph.

In the year 200, the dwarves founded a new military fortress, Spearbreakers, at the edge of the Spawn heartland, intending to rid the continent once and for all of the ever-present threat of doom. Unbeknownst to them, a timid outcast dwelt in their midst, a homeless, kinless girl by the name of Vanya.

Vanya's journals tell of the great, unsought quest she undertook in her desperate attempt to save herself, Spearbreakers, and ultimately all of Everoc from an inevitable destruction. Her story reveals her perilous adventures, her trials and hardships, and her forbidden love, as she tries to master her fears and come to terms with who, and what, she is.

This is a series of novels, based in a heavily-modded Dwarf Fortress universe. It's one story, but I've split it into pieces, calling them Book One, Book Two, and so on. Although each is largely self-inclusive and ends right between arcs, the story continues smoothly between them. I would strongly suggest that you start with the first one. The genre is fantasy/science fiction/drama.

You could also just ignore the chapter links below altogether, and just read through from top to bottom. To make that a little easier, while the links are separated into books, the actual chapter titles in the posts progress from 1 to 46. Book 3 is in the works. I'll post some of it soon.

Book One: A Girl's Broken Mind

Preface and Introduction: This post

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Book Three: A Girl's Weary Feet

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(a work in progress)

Book Four: A Girl's Fiery Soul

(exists only in notes)

[Spoiler: Chapter Titles](#) (click to show/hide)

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The italic portions before each chapter are written in second-person by "Urist Jones", the dwarven archaeologist, as he reads the journal entries. I'll usually keep them brief, but they'll almost always be there.

A Skulker's Tale: A Girl's Broken Mind

Preface

(removed until I could write it up with a little better quality)

Introduction

Just inside the cover, there is a loose sheet of paper of standard quality, apparently written later by the author, as it bears the same handwriting, and ends with the same five-pointed star as a signature.

I was born in 188. When I was 3, I was taken to a dwarven mountainhome and left there, having nothing with me but my newborn sister. An old couple took me in as family, encouraging me to call them "Granma" and "Granpa". Five years later, when I was eight, my Granma died, and my Granpa blamed me for her death. From then on, he was cruel to us. After two years, I'd

had enough... I took my seven-year-old sister and ran away from home, carrying everything we owned in two small luggage cases. We set out for a new life.

For three long years, we traveled between fortresses, trying to stay out of sight and keep people from finding out we were homeless. As soon as we were spotted, they always kicked us out, and had to travel to the next. In this way, we traveled ever deeper into the territory of the Holistic Spawn.

The Holistic Spawn are evil creatures... when one bites a dwarf, it infects it with the young soul of a demon. When the demon matures, it takes over its host's body, transforming it into a nightmare: shriveled skin, bony, elongated arms and legs, claws instead of fingers, eyeless sockets, and a huge, gaping mouth running down between its ribs, ringed with razor-sharp teeth. Though we were always on the run from them, we never actually saw one. It was a terror that skirted the edges of our minds as we traveled in caravans from one place to the next.

Finally, when my sister and I were 10 and 13, we took refuge in a place called Spearbreakers. It's a military fortress situated between a jungle and a vast stretch of hellish land, where it rains blood all year: the blood plains. It was a grim landscape to look upon, and I hid myself and my sister deep underground, hoping we'd be safe.

Due to the curious political system, each "Overseer" had only one year in office before the next was elected. We arrived during the second year, in Talvi's reign. Soon after, Talvi broke under the stress and started to slip from sanity, gaining a fierce love of Mr Frog, then a lowly mechanic, and an even fiercer love of "cavies", which is what she called guinea pigs.

After her term was over, she handed the fortress over to Mr Frog, who began making major changes. He hated homeless dwarves, and started taking pains to wipe us out. I almost starved early that year, but he soon ordered a new wagon road dug out underground, increasing our trade with other civilizations in the region. I would sneak around after dark and steal food from the caravans that passed through, just enough to keep us from starving to death.

Nobody seemed to notice the food disappearing, but Talvi noticed that her cavies were starting to disappear. It had nothing to do with me, but she recruited my help and that of other homeless dwarves, in exchange for food. We put up posters saying, "Have you seen me?" with a picture of her cavies. Then, Talvi started digging around in Mr Frog's room, and stole an odd device from him: it was a little metal tablet that emitted light from one side. I never got a close look at it, because she wouldn't let anyone close. She called it "Joseph", giving a human name to the inanimate object.

Then, Mr Frog's reign was over, and Draigneau took over, building magma forges atop the Magma Sea, deep in the bowels of the earth. Sadly, his right-hand-man, The Master, went insane, massacring a number of people before Colonel Fischer put a stop to him. He had been making a jade spearhead, and nobody ever saw what happened to it afterwards. In the meantime, Talvi had slipped ever farther from sanity, beginning to think that she was a cavy herself.

During this year, my sister grew very ill, and somehow, she wound up at the hospital. I feared for her life: the hospital at Spearbreakers had such a terrible reputation that many dwarves would rather throw themselves to the zombies than spend a night within. It didn't come as a surprise when I overheard Wari, one of the nurses, talking about her passing with one of the other doctors. Even how inevitable my sister's death was didn't make it hurt any less, and I spent the next two years in hiding, all my hopes and dreams shattered.

Over those next two years, sieges bombarded the fortress from outside: armies of Holistic Spawn, and massive hordes of undead led by necromancers. The dwarves always held them off, but it felt a hollow victory to me. Nothing was the same anymore.

Looking back now, I wish I'd stayed away from Spearbreakers... but at the same time, I'm glad I didn't.



A cavy poster. Art by Talvieno

Chapter 1: Eavesdropping

(Year 205, late winter)

This is a shoddily-bound journal composed of bits of a number of posters of cavies. The edges of the pages do not line up. The cover is made of heavily-worn animal leather of an unidentifiable species. There is nothing etched on it, possibly because the owner feared the journal would disintegrate. The pages are unsigned and undated, save for a five-pointed star at the end of each entry.

This is going to have to be my journal, as I don't really have the funds or means to get a hold of anything more extravagant. I made this myself, like I do most of what I own. I don't like scrounging in garbage stockpiles...

It's sad that I've fallen this low; that someone with schooling could be so hard-pressed for a bit of coin that they would throw together a journal of old posters and write in it with a charred stick. But I miss writing, and this makes me happy... so this is the best I can do.

It's a disappointing fact of any fortress, but you can see a "caste" system if you look for it. There's the "master class" – the higher nobility: barons, kings, counts and duchesses. Then below that, there's the "upper class": the mayors, sheriffs, captains of the guard, tax collectors and other such positions. Next are middle-class citizens: soldiers, miners, masons – anyone considered

vital to the fortress but not holding a position. Then, there's the lower class... those few that are recognized as members of the community, but are also considered expendable because they earn their living hauling furniture or cleaning pastures. I wish I could say I was part of that, but no... sadly, I'm one farther down. I'm in the "basement" class, as it's called: a poor girl that nobody notices simply because they choose not to. They don't *want* to see me, because it reflects on the state of their society. If they imagine no one is in rags, they feel the fortress is more wealthy. People call us skulkers or vagabonds when they speak of us. A good example: the basement class ran the olden fortress of Boatmurdered – "into the ground", a friend of mine, Thalgor, used to say. That was before he moved up in the world and chose to ignore me. Nobody of the other classes is publicly friends with a skulker. Well... apart from those who aren't right in the head.

I'm old enough to work, but nobody will give me a job, judging me by my clothes and thinking me unfit, or deciding I'm a slacker. Plus, it doesn't help that I'm a little shy sometimes. As a result, I don't really have a home of sorts. I mostly move around, staying in darker corners in different areas of the fortress. I have a few friends... it's not like I'm invisible. On occasion one of the cooks brings me something. He lost his daughter in the vampiric wars, and he's said I remind him of her. Sometimes he chokes up. I don't blame him... I lost my sister to disease two years ago. The doctors wouldn't treat her. "No coin, no service", they said. The doctors wouldn't have treated her anyway; before Mitchewawa set things right, they wouldn't treat sick patients. They'd occasionally perform operations on the healthy, though... which was how my sister became ill in the first place. If the basement class isn't careful, we become guinea pigs for experiments. Some think it's all we're good for...

I'm careful to stay clear of Mr Frog.

Hopefully, someday, I'll leave Spearbreakers, and all its ungodly, almost idolized chaos. When I do I'll travel back to the Mountainhome. Maybe my Granpa will take me in again, and I can write a book. If it sells well, I won't have to worry any more. Among dwarves, writing is still considered low-class, but it's better than how I'm doing now. Maybe I'll travel to the human cities, but I don't know. I'd rather not move back in with my grandfather, but I don't speak Human.

But I have something more important to write about than the current state of my life.

Three days ago I was hiding in a side hallway as Mr Frog passed by, and I heard a commotion in the room next to me. One of the voices sounded familiar, and I looked around on the wall for a peephole. Finally, standing on tiptoe, I found a small crack in the wall I could see through, where a dabbling engraver had carved too deep.

I was standing next to the hospital, and inside, I could see the pudgy form of our old overseer, Talvi. I arrived after her term was over, but as I understand it, she wasn't *always*... mentally challenged. She's always been kind to me, though, and I've always been kind to her in return. She was there for me when my sister died, for instance, and I was there for her when she found out about her cavies. While over the past year she's been almost clinically depressed, a few weeks ago she recovered, only soon thereafter to be found in the old garbage chamber, passed out. She'd been in a coma ever since, but interestingly, now, she was awake, and apparently in an almost murderous mood. It was funny, in a way. The doctors had pronounced her case hopeless,

and it looked like she'd come to on her own. She was trying to leave the hospital, but Dr. Kannan and a couple orderlies were keeping her restrained.

"Let me go!" she screamed. "I needa leave, you cain't keep me here!"

But Dr. Kannan shook his head. "No, my dear, I'm afraid you need your rest. It is good you're awake, but you should really be asleep. Hadhod, Grond – restrain her and get ready to sedate her." Dr. Kannan was the one who "treated" my sister before she got sick. I didn't like the dwarf.

His words were met by loud protests. "No, you cain't! I'll have your jobs fer this, y'know! Don't you dare!" Talvi struggled to get away, but Hadhod shoved a gag in her mouth.

The doctor appeared done with the matter and turned to his assistant, shaking his head in disappointment. "Just five more days! That was all we needed. We were learning so much about science through my experiments! Wari, why is she awake? You medicated her like I requested, did you not?"

"Of course I did, sir," was the prompt response from the young woman, though *I* knew better. Wari is always shirking her duties to spend time with her lover. Being unnoticed lets you see things others don't.

Dr. Kannan was satisfied with her answers, though, and watched the two orderlies wrestle Talvi into a traction bed. Fearing for her life, I suddenly turned from the crack and called out, "Talvi is awake!"

As I listened to my voice echo through the little darkened alleyway and the cold stone corridors of the fortress, I hoped that I'd saved her. Within the hospital, the dwarves froze for a moment, listening, before Dr. Kannan said almost frantically, "The needle! The needle! Sedate her!"

Several dwarves walked past the alley towards the hospital entrance, among them Splint and Fischer. They paid no heed to me, but looking back through the little crack I saw the door open and several dwarves pass through.

"Talvi! Glad to see you're awake," said Splint, with just the slightest hint of surprise, before looking suspiciously at the needle in Wari's hand, and then Dr. Kannan. "The good doctors had said you were beyond hope of recovery. Grond, remove that gag from her mouth and let her sit up."

Grond looked like he'd been stricken helpless by the conflicting orders, but he finally obeyed Splint, the higher authority in the room.

Getting to her feet again, the fire in Talvi's eyes died a bit as she looked around, seemingly bewildered. She glanced at Fischer in surprise, who gave a slight nod of recognition. Her eyes moved to those of Splint, and a confused look broke across her face. "Mister Splint, I... I..."

Behind Splint, Mr Frog turned and left the room, a satisfied expression on his face. Talvi watched him leave, then her face hardened and she walked to Splint, saying in a hushed voice I could barely hear, "Splint, I needa talk t'you in private." She grabbed his arm and pulled the surprised manager from the room.

Fischer glared heatedly at Dr. Kannan, who almost trembled in her gaze, before she turned and left. She looks like a guy, and she can be every bit as scary as the meanest when she tries. One of the tales in the street is that she killed a tavern full of humans who, over their brew, joked about how she ought to have a beard. Judging on how pale Dr. Kannan was when he turned back to his assistants, I'm guessing he'd heard similar stories. Fischer takes disrespect as a personal challenge, and she'd always hated Dr. Kannan for the poor treatment he gave her soldiers.

I left my post at the little wall and followed Splint and Talvi down the hall, trying my best to keep to the shadows so they wouldn't notice me. None of the other dwarves rushing about their tasks did, but Talvi has sharper eyes than most, and she doesn't ignore skulkers like myself – if I wanted to know what had happened to her, I would have to be quiet.

Finally she stopped just inside a little alleyway between the workshops and the stills. I'd always thought it was a bad idea to do the dusty task of stonecarving so close to the breweries, but everyone else seemed to think it made more sense. "After all," they said, "you can go get yourself a glassful of beer fresh from the still right after you carve your mug." It made little difference, really. There's hardly a corner in this fort that isn't cluttered with at least a few of the things. Someone suggested just last year we use them as a building material, and was taken seriously. Others talk in whispers of turning them into weapons and raining mugfulls of magma from the sky.

"Splint," Talvi began in a hushed tone, her sweetly high-pitched voice breaking through the damp air. I had to sneak forwards and hide behind a stack of mechanisms just inside the alley in order to hear. "Splint, it was Mr Frog."

I looked until I found a small gap to look through, between the gears and springs. Splint was clearly confused. "Talvi? What? What are you talking about?"

"Splint, as sure's a yellow fishbone eats vowels, Mr Frog is plottin' to take down th' fortress."

She looked dead serious. As it was Mr Frog she was talking about, I didn't have much trouble believing her. But Splint shook his head. "Talvi, you know I valued your opinion, but I just can't see Mr Frog doing anything shady at all. He's very up-front with me about his proceedings, and I work with him, too."

"'Valued', y'say, Splint? Well, jes' maybes you oughta value it again, 'cause lemme tell you right now, there ain't nothin' straight about 'im!'"

Splint shook his head again. "Talvi, he's a good dwarf – he's smart and loyal. We're good friends – I know him. Is this just about your crush on him? What did he do this time?"

Talvi blushed strongly but tried to brush it aside. "No, it ain't 'bout that, Splint. Mr. Frog ain't what he seems. He's workin' with the enemy. There's somebody named Joseph, and he talks to him, an'..."

"Talvi! Talvi! Listen to yourself. Joseph is your imaginary friend. Remember we talked about that? And your psychologist did too."

She looked confused, as if having trouble remembering, but then stammered, "Well... I..."

"Wait..." The old overseer's brow furrowed as he thought. "'Valued'... you caught that?"

Talvi hesitated, but nodded.

"And the thing with the fishbones... You're saying those phrases again..."

Talvi nodded again, and Splint scratched his beard in thought. Talvi took advantage of his silence and spoke. "Mr Frog made me drink some stuff, an' I ain't thinkin' so jumbled no more now. He hit me, too..." The faintest hint of a tear trickled down her confused, bewildered face, and my blood boiled at the thought of Mr Frog striking Talvi. It didn't seem like him, I'll admit, but what did I know? I always avoided him.

Splint seemed to have the same thoughts. "Talvi, I doubt Mr Frog would've hit you... but maybe he had you drink something intended to cure your... um..." he stopped, unsure of how to put it nicely. "Anyway, I'll have a talk with him about it."

Talvi's eyes widened. "No, don't! Don't you dare! You keep this good'n quiet now, hear? I don't want him knowin'."

"But Talvi," Splint began, "it'd likely be smarter to -"

"No!" she interrupted in an almost fierce whisper. "You cain't. You ain't goin' to, neither. Promise me, Splint! Nobody can know."

Splint looked at her curiously, perhaps surprised at how she seemed at least halfway intelligent. Slowly, he said, "All right, Talvi... I'll trust you here... You have my word. But all the same, I want a detailed report on what you think happened... Come up to my place later and we'll discuss it." He walked away, saying over his shoulder, "And bring me a couple new mugs while you're at it. Mine keep ending up shattered on the wall..."

He walked past me, and I shrank back against the stacks of mechanisms as much as I could. He didn't even know I was there.

Talvi watched him leave, and then slowly began to walk out of the alleyway, humming something about bluebirds. As she passed, she did a double take, and her gaze rested on me. I was afraid she would be furious that I'd heard everything, but instead, she smiled lightheartedly, in a way that clashed eerily with her fierce mood only moments before. "Come with me," she said with a gentle laugh. "We've gots somethin' to do. I cain't do it on my own. Wanna be my wingcavy?"

I had to think on what she said for a moment. "Wingcavy" doesn't make that much sense to me, but I guessed it was akin to "wingman", an old phrase from when a second dwarf stood on the short, protruding "wings" of a battleyak chariot to protect the driver and cut down enemies the battleyak missed. After a few moments of looking up at her face, I whispered cautiously, "Does it have something to do with Mr Frog?"

The smile left her face, and she looked at me with a glimmer of anger. "Oh, yes," she said matter-of-factly. "It has ever'thing t'do with... him." She said it distastefully, as if despising even the name. "Like the cheese on the wall said to the engraver, 'Why are you eatin' me in this bedroom and not yours?'" She looked at me solemnly for a moment, before her expression gave way to happiness. "I like cheese," she laughed, extending her hand towards me.

I thought for a moment, and a hope crossed my mind – perhaps this was that opportunity my Granmomma always talked about, before she died. Maybe this would get me out of the "basement" and back into society... I didn't want to interfere, and especially not with Mr Frog, but all the same... I wanted out. I wanted to be accepted by people. I wanted to fit in.

I reached up towards her, and my hand was soon enclosed in hers as she pulled me to my feet. "Come on, now," she said, almost triumphantly, as she motioned for me to follow. "We's goin' where the cavies go!"





A non-pudgy picture of Talvi Diamondknight. Art by Splint.

Chapter 2: The Cavy Tunnel

This is a poorly bound journal. All craftsmanship is of the lowest quality, at best. Several of the pages are half-falling out. The following entry is written with on a number of pages sporting a heavily faded "sad cavy" background, which it would appear someone attempted to scrub away with a sanding tool.

Nothing much has happened since my last entry. I tried to sleep, but couldn't. I'm still hiding behind some of the garbage heaps in the east room. The miasma is terrible, but I'm too afraid to leave, after what's happened, though I know that I'll have to, eventually. I won't eat these rotting scraps, not if I starve to death. But the smell never lessens... you never get used to it. I've found a better cap than I was wearing, at least, over here in a pile: a pretty green woolen-knit beanie. I can't imagine why anyone would throw it out; it's only slightly worn.

I always wear a cap of some sort, though I still let my hair hang down past my shoulders. Most dwarven women keep their hair up, but not me. Maybe some people see it as a bit of unjustifiable vanity, but it's just who I am.

It feels like I've been here for days. I miss my friends, if you could call them that. Most fortresses don't have more than one or two skulkers hanging around, but Spearbreakers has so, so many. The official census says the population rests around 90 or so, but in reality it's probably closer to 120, or even more. The additional 30 or so is made up of skulker dwarves like me. We're unusually thin for dwarves, because we haven't seen a good, hearty meal in days. Or even weeks. I'm thinner than most, though, and nimbler, too. I think that's maybe why Talvi chose me

to help her on her quest, and not someone else.

After I'd lavished my curiosity with an eavesdropped conversation between Splint and Talvi – the fortress's first two overseers – Talvi told me to follow her, and I did without question. I trusted her, to an extent. She'd never really tried to trick me, and to be completely honest, I didn't think her mentally capable of something like that. I know that's cruel to say, and I wouldn't say it to her face, but it's true.

As we passed through the hallways, we became intermixed with a large number of other dwarves rushing back and forth.

Talvi looked over her shoulder with a smile and said, "Caravan's here."

I nodded in response. I'd been wondering when the next one would come through. Mr Frog usually oversaw everything, so he would be outside. It wasn't that he wanted any more socks, like most of the other dwarves who would crowd around their wares (though he'd once said that they made satisfactory test tubes in a pinch). No, Mr Frog was out there because few skulkers could resist attempting to sneak a bit of food or clothing from all that was lying outside... or at least, that was my opinion of why. After all, if you could get a full set of clothing, a good shower, and fix yourself up, you could pass as a lower-class citizen. People would make eye contact with you again, and you could eat in the dining room. You might even find a job, if you were lucky.

Talvi and I wove our way through the crowded corridors. The doors were almost always open when it was this busy, with so many people rushing through. They never even had time to close. It made things a lot easier, as we dodged workers carrying barrels full of mugs and mechanisms to the depot. I hated the chaos and crowds, but it fortunately wasn't long before we reached the stairs and descended towards the housing level.

Minutes later, we were outside her door. "Come on in!" she said, as if welcoming a surprise guest into her home. It wasn't clear if she'd forgotten about me during our walk down the stairs, but I did as she asked.

She set herself down in front of one of her chests and began digging through it, looking for something. I approached cautiously, looking over her shoulder. The chest was full of little bits of paper, and she appeared to be searching for one piece in particular. I ventured a question, though a bit timidly. "What are you doing?"

"Oh!" She turned up to look at me briefly. She always makes eye contact. I like that about her. "I'm jus' lookin' fer a key. I knows it's gotta be in here somewher'."

I couldn't help but smile, and I nudged the little object to the right of the chest with my toe. "Is this it?" I asked.

Her face lit up and she gave a little clap. "Yes! That's it exactly!" She scooped it up in her hand and stood, walking quickly to the other side of the room. "I allus keep a special chest hidden over yonder, 'hind th' statue in my sweet cavy room's ear," she said over her shoulder, as she squeezed her way between the statue and the wall. It was an over-sized statue of a dwarf, but I couldn't tell you who.

I had an easier time stepping behind the statue into the dark alcove than Talvi did, and found her rummaging through another chest, removing items and dropping them on the floor: an axe, a

rope, string, a mismatched pair of socks, a shovel, a calendar, and a few other assorted items. She finished quickly, scooping them up in her arms and giving them to me. "You'll needa carry them, V, girl," she said in her southern drawl, with an almost blissful grin. "Jes' like how the parrot said to the bauxite."

Talvi always called me "V" – my first initial. I didn't like anyone using (or knowing) my first name, but that's something I'd rather not go into, even in a private journal... someone might read it. Talvi was one of the few who knew what it is, but she didn't ever use it.

As I headed towards the door, Talvi called me back. "Where you goin'? Get back here, we gotta do this right quick."

I stopped, confused. "But... didn't you want to go to Mr Frog's room?"

She shook her head and smiled in a way I would've considered motherly, had it come from anyone else. "There ain't jes' one way to the letter 'E'. Sometimes you have to travel with a smell in your nose." She turned and walked away. Not knowing what else to do, I followed, as she continued, "Learnt that one from a calendar page. Or... two that'd stucked 'emselves t'gether. It's a right good'un, I reckon."

Talvi got to her knees beside a chest and began pushing. I watched, carefully shifting everything around in my arms and trying to keep the axe from getting me.

With some effort, and a good deal of huffing and puffing, she managed to shove the chest aside, revealing a grate-covered vent shaft on the floor.

She stood up and brushed her hands off on her clothes. I envied her a bit about that. I've often wished I could have so little disregard for my clothing, but unless I want to go naked, I have to take care of what I have. No socks or shoes is bad enough.

Talvi interrupted my musings. "You don't never wanna block them lungs on th' floor," she said, pointing at the vent, "but in this case, I done it anyhow."

I suddenly realized what was going on, shaking my head violently. "No, I'm not going in there! You can do it by yourself, but I can't go in."

"Sure ya can, it's just as easy as puttin' one foot ahead of th' other, V. Pretend you're a cavy, like I is," she said nonchalantly as she slid the grate to the side. I'm not sure how she managed it, but she didn't seem to notice my widened eyes or quickened breath.

I suppose now would be a good time to explain that I'm terrified of small spaces. It's not quite a phobia, but I always get the feeling that everything is going to crush down on me and kill me. It's not a good fear for a dwarf, I know, and especially not a skulker, but I'm a special case.

Talvi got down on her hands and knees and just barely managed to squeeze herself inside. I couldn't imagine how there could possibly be enough air in there to breathe. I stood paralyzed in fear, hearing in the back of my mind the sound of the former overseer calling to me... I didn't want to move, but swallowing, I forced myself down to my knees. I hesitated in front of the blackness, away from the flickering torchlight, but finally moved in, carrying the bundle of goods beside me in one arm. I didn't care so much about the dark. Just the tight space.

Farther along, the passages grew large enough to stand inside. I don't remember much about any it now: I was scared out of my mind and hyperventilating most of the way through the dark passages, with nothing audible but the sound of my breath, Talvi's shuffling along, and my rapid heartbeat. I once got up the courage to ask where we were going, and she made my hands start

shaking with her response. "I dunno, V," she said, almost in tears. "This's where all my covies went afore they's disappeared." Her mood swing to melancholy wasn't helping my morale.

Finally she stopped, and I ran into her. "What happened?" I asked in fright.

"Somethin' don't smell good," she said. I listened as she knelt and sniffed around – yes, sniffed, like a dog. After a moment, though, she stopped, and I heard a spring snap, followed by a sharp clatter of metal.

"What was that?" I asked.

A couple tense minutes passed before she responded. "It's a dart," she said. "It's got Mr Frog's cavy poison on it. Wanna touch it?" she asked innocently.

After imagining impaling my finger on a sharp object in pitch blackness, possibly laced with a deadly poison, it wasn't hard to decide to pass. "I've got my hands full," I replied as an excuse, and listened as she placed it back on the floor. "Miss Talvi, we can't go through here if he's put up traps." I said, trying to reason with her addled mind. "It's like he expected someone to come through. And where does this stupid passage lead, anyway?" I wasn't in a good mood. I just wanted out of there.

"Cain't you smell it?" she asked in surprise. I shook my head. She saw, despite it being pitch-black, and said, "It's Mr Frog's bedroom."

"We'll have to go back," I prodded her verbally, and she finally, finally agreed.

Later we stood in her room, brushing dust off ourselves. Talvi seemed in a good mood, despite the failure of her mission. "His door'll be locked now, I reckon. We'll have to wait 'til nightfall – he don't allus remember to lock it."

"What, we just go in there while he's inside?"

"No, I'll chew the door a tad in a couple o' good places while he's asleep. He won't e'en know it ain't locked when he leaves tomorrow mornin', 'cause I'm a skilled biter. You come 'round with the birds, an' I'll let ya' in. We'll go t'gether."

I finally decided she meant to come by at sunrise, getting up when the birds did, because nothing else made much sense.



A small corner of Mr Frog's room. Art by TalonisWolf.

NOTE: this is not at all what I had in mind when I wrote this story, but it was too awesome not to put here.

Chapter 3: Burglary Mission

The following is an excerpt from the poorly crafted journal of "V". These salvaged-poster pages

boast of a peculiar smell, and are marked in places with colored ink. At the bottom of the entry is a five-pointed star in charred stick.

I can't say I liked her plan, and I especially didn't like seeking out Mr Frog. Even so, the next morning at sunrise I left my little alleyway, walked to her door... and waited. After a while, I grew tired of standing and sat down against the wall... and then I waited some more.

I was there for well over an hour, actually, and was beginning to get a little annoyed before a sleepy-eyed Talvi finally stumbled out... on her way to breakfast, I'm guessing. Her gaze fell on me briefly, and she looked at me blankly for a moment before saying, "Oh, hi there," and continuing on her way.

I was beyond words with incredulity that she'd forgotten our plans, but thankfully, only moments later, she remembered. She did an about face and came back to me. "V!" she said. "You came!"

As much as I tried not to, I couldn't help but laugh. "Yes, I did! I said I would. I'm just glad you remembered."

"Well, now..." she said, scratching the back of her head clumsily, "I almost di'n't remember, you, sweetheart... don't know why, tho'... Anyhow, let's get our stuff an' get over t' his place – how's that sound?"

We got the bundle of items, which I carried, and left her room. Right outside the door, though, was someone I hadn't seen before – a battle-hardened soldier with an overwhelmed expression. Talvi stopped to talk to him, and I crouched close to the wall, hoping I wouldn't look suspicious holding an axe and other atypical items. Fortunately, he only glanced at me once, noting the condition of my clothing before averting his eyes uncomfortably. I blushed at his glance. He was terribly handsome, with that storybook chiseled jaw, well-kept hair and beard... He was well-mannered, too, which is rare for a soldier, saying "have a nice day" when Talvi was finished talking. He's the kind of dwarf any girl would dream of... I'd write his name here if I only knew it, but I'm sad to say I've never seen him since... Maybe I'll draw a picture of him someday when I have better parchment and paint...

Anyway, Talvi appeared quite taken with him.

I didn't catch what was said, but eventually she sent him on his way, up towards where Splint and Mitchewawa were. Mitchewawa is our current overseer.

Talvi led me down the hallways, keeping to the shadows and pausing when necessary like any expert skulker. Not a soul noticed us on our way. She was taught by the best, or so I'm told: an odd dwarf I could never find. He was dressed and mannered as well as any ordinary citizen, she said, while all but invisible to others. I can't recall his name, though I think it started with a T... But it doesn't matter. I'll remember it later.

After a time, we reached Mr Frog's door and slipped inside.

I'd never been in his room before, and I was a little awed by all I saw: sketches papered to the walls, jugs of liquid boiling without sitting on a fire, metal rods shooting tiny bits of lightning, and ominous-looking machinery. There were several hardened socks hung up on rods, filled with some kind of liquid, as well as a strange hoop held up in one place that made the air on the other side look shimmery. After being in there twice, I'm almost sure that the room was bigger on the inside than it was on the outside. It was practically a wonderland to a curious mind, but I doubt I

would ever know what all of it did even if I spent my life studying everything. It was sad, in a way – I suspected her plan was to destroy everything Mr Frog owned.

To my surprise, though, Talvi ignored it all and went sniffing around on the floor. In a whisper, I asked, "Are you looking for the vent shaft entrance?"

She shook her head. "We'd never find it, iff'n we did try. He's too good with smells, he is. I'm hopin' we might mebbe do somethin' else, maybe get Joseph back."

"Are we going to destroy everything?"

She looked at me like I was insane, and I didn't fail to catch the irony. "You crazy?" she asked. "If we make Mr Frog mad, he'll try t' kill you! Y'know that, I hope."

I swallowed involuntarily at the thought. "Preferably, if at all possible, I would rather remain alive, if it's all the same to you. I have an odd attachment to... not dying," I told her, flailing about verbally.

She gave a distracted nod, and I wasn't sure she'd heard a word I'd said. Suddenly, she stopped, standing and pointing at a large smoked glass on a low tabletop. The glass seemed to be filled with a murky, slimy liquid. "There," she said pointedly, as if that explained everything.

It was hidden behind a number of other pieces of oddly-shaped glass, and was so dusty I could only imagine that Mr Frog had forgotten about it. I approached it and cautiously peeked over the rim. Sitting at the bottom was a small tooth. I looked back at my friend quizzically. "What is that...?"

"It's a cavy tooth!" she said. "We needa get it back so I kin take it t'show Splint."

"How?"

She pondered for a moment. "We gotta reach inside."

I nodded. It was the logical conclusion, unless you wanted to dump it out on the floor. I waited patiently for Talvi to finish.

A few minutes later, Talvi was still standing there, looking at me. "Aren't you going to get it?" I asked.

"Cain't, it's cavy poison. My hand'd shrivel up like a singing walnut! You ain't a cavy, tho'... 'T'won't hurt you none. Jes' reach on in ther', pull it out! Be careful, tho'."

I didn't believe there was such a thing as "cavy poison", and I really didn't want to stick my hand in whatever liquid was in there, but I didn't feel as if I could back out, now that we were actually in Mr Frog's room. With a sigh, I handed Talvi the axe, rope and shovel. After removing my bracelet, I put my hand into the glass, pulling out the tooth a bit overdramatically and handing it to her. "There you go," I said, taking the bundle back.

She acted as if it was the most precious thing in the world, and a tear of joy ran down her cheek. "Thankee so much, V," she beamed, wiping the tear away with her sleeve.

I nodded dismissively. "Why are we here?" I asked. I was on edge – I didn't want to be here when Mr Frog got back. Talvi might be able to get away with it. I knew I wouldn't be able to, though; I'd be the next guinea pig.

But Talvi didn't respond. She was sniffing again.

Ten or so minutes later, she stopped... right next to Mr Frog's bed. She looked at me, her eyes wide. "Here," she exclaimed in a hiss. "It's here!"

Together we managed to pull the bed away from the wall, and a small flutter of paperwork fell down from where it had been wedged. Talvi hastened to pick it up, and to my horror, she ate one of the pages.

I snatched them away from her. "No!" I said. "We can't do that, it'll make him mad!"

She merely chewed the page with the unconcerned, blank stare of a cow, which she resembled, to an extent. I looked the sheets of paper over and realized they were pages of a journal: Mr Frog's journal. "Talvi, this is his journal, you can't eat this!" I scolded.

"I have before."

"Well, *I'm* here now," I said, putting the little stack on the bed, away from her. "And I'd rather not die, remember?"

"Right..." she said ponderingly. "Kay, then, lets get this floor up'n moved. Gimme that shovel there, hmm?"

Confused, I handed it to her, watching to see what she would do.

She set it against the rock floor and pressed, sliding it forwards. A hidden panel lifted upwards against the shovel as she slid it, and she pressed down, levering it upwards. "V, we's gotta get this slab up!"

It looked like stone, sounded like metal, but was as light as wood. I don't think I've ever seen anything like it. With a bit of effort we moved it to the side, and Talvi gasped.

We'd uncovered some sort of a grave... and inside weren't humanoid skeletons, but skeletons of covies. There were at least two dozen. Talvi fell to her knees, covering her mouth and choking back a cry. "Oh, my sweet little babies..." She began to sob. Sitting down, I put my arm around her to let her know I cared. "Georgie Boy... and Petunia... and oh, sweet Elana..." she wailed, rocking back and forth in her distress. "They's all here. This's where they's all gone off to..." I caught my breath at the name of the third, wondering why she would give something an elven name, but as she named off the rest of them, I soon forgot. I'm not sure how she could tell which name belonged to which, as there wasn't anything left of them but bones. It might've been impressive, if it hadn't been so morbid.

We sat there for a while, before I gently reminded her we needed to go before Mr Frog got back. "Kin we take 'em home with us, V? Please?" she asked innocently, with hope in her eyes.

I hated to, but I shook my head. "No, Mr Frog would know we've been here."

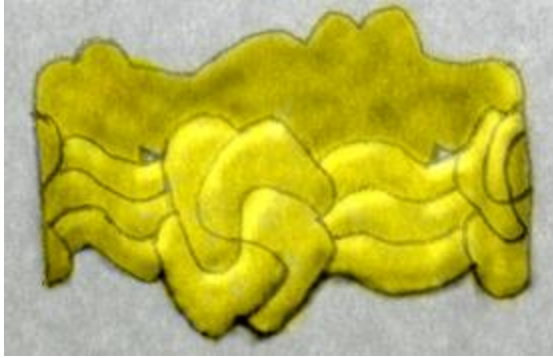
She nodded and said goodbye to the skeletons, blowing them a kiss. We put everything back the way it had been as best as we could before leaving, and after helping Talvi fix the door and lock it, I walked with her to her room.

She wasn't the same on the way back. She looked, literally, as if she was plotting murder. And maybe she was. She told me that she'd come for me when she needed me again, and that she needed some time alone.

I went back to my little temporary home in the alley next to the hospital and huddled up under my little threadbare patchwork quilt. The alleyway was usually horribly cold, but most other skulkers avoided it, as it was so close to the corrupt doctors. I was alone. It was how I preferred things.

It wasn't until later that night that I realized with horror that my bracelet was missing. I'd left it in Mr Frog's room... and he was sure to see it if I didn't get it back.





My best attempt at drawing her bracelet. I'm pretending the five-pointed star charm and initials are somewhere on the other side, because I couldn't get them to look recognizable. I'm also pretending I got the coloration right.

Chapter 4: A Golden Bracelet

The next entry's pages have fallen out and been placed in the wrong order, but you manage to rearrange them after some work. The charred stick text is as flowing as in the other entries, although here it is a bit smudged.

Most basement-class dwarves have at least one possession that's precious to them: a keepsake, basically. It might be a leather etching of their family, or a ring that was passed down to them. It could even be something simple like a knitted sock their grandmother made. It doesn't have to be valuable, but the idea is the same: it's something that reminds us of a time when we were better off, and gives us hope that things might someday be like that again. *My* only keepsake is my bracelet. It looks golden, but I was never sure if it was real gold, or just painted to look like it. It's shaped like a ring of intertwined roses, and it has a little charm on it: a golden star.

Whoever made it carved my initials into the side of the bracelet, in a flowing script. Before she died, my granmomma had made it for me – I remember her saying I'd eventually grow into it. My granpa didn't like to talk about it for one reason or another – I have a feeling he didn't like what my granmomma had done. I don't remember them, but I still keep the bracelet with me everywhere I go. But I'd left it in Mr Frog's room, and if the desire to get my bracelet back wasn't enough to spur me into going, the knowledge that Mr Frog would find it *definitely* was. But I was still terrified of going alone. It had been easier with Talvi along, as she'd offered encouragement and acted brave. It's always easier to be brave if there's someone who actually *is* brave there with you.

I've a terrible problem with indecision. It can take me hours to make up my mind about something, especially if I feel there's a lot at stake, and this was no exception. Though the evening bell had sounded before I discovered my bracelet was missing, it was an hour more before I decided that I couldn't go without Talvi's help, so I decided to go and find her.

Leaving the safety of my little alleyway, I walked through the long, dim corridors of the fortress, heading for the stairs. Other dwarves passed by me, hurrying along with their duties. Everyone but the watchdwarves would sleep at night, but that time was an hour or more away, so I knew I'd have to watch carefully for anyone who might stop me. I was so scared that I almost felt like hiding when anyone passed, but I really didn't want to look conspicuous.

But I didn't make it to Talvi's room. I saw her ahead of me, going up the stairs, which was odd: ever since the majority of the workshops had been moved deeper underground, there wasn't really anything for her to do on the upper levels. Even so, I followed her, hiding in the shadows as I went along so that she wouldn't see me. I was curious to see where she would go, and though I felt a bit guilty about hiding from a friend, I was worried what she might be doing, since I knew she was in such a terrible mood.

My worries proved to be ill-founded: she stopped outside the door of Splint, our broker/bookkeeper, knocking a few times. The door opened, and she entered. I realized I'd already forgotten what I'd overheard Splint telling Talvi the night before: that she should come and talk to him. I smiled in spite of myself and left the shadows, walking down the dusty, dirty hallway towards Splint's room. The floors and walls there were not of stone, but of dirt and clay, and kept from collapsing inwards by wooden arches that also supported the ceiling.

I pressed my ear against the door, listening carefully for the conversation I assumed was taking place. I didn't hear much of anything, though, until Splint got angry.

"You broke into his room?!?" I heard him cry, followed by the sound of a mug shattering against the wall. It startled me, and I jumped. "Why in Armok's name would you do something like that?!?"

"Mr. Splint, I done knew he killed my covies dead, I did, and iss what I found!"

"Talvi, it's against the law to break into someone else's room – *unless* of course you're just passing through on the way to your room due to bad architectural design. But this is inexcusable!"

"I'm sorry, Splint, really I is, but I didn' have no choice! Same as a zombie's toothbrush!"

"No! Damnit, Talvi, what did you see in there? Tell me everything you saw!"

"I jus' tole you! I saw all mah covies dead in there, unner his bed."

"That's not what I meant, and you don't even know if those were yours! I gave Mr Frog permission to use stray guinea pigs in his experiments so that he wouldn't use dwarves!"

"Well, beggin' yer pardon, Mr. Splint, but they weren't strays, and guinea pigs ain't covies!"

"Yes they were and yes they are! You never officially filed a claim of ownership on any of them, and 'cavy' is just a different word for 'guinea pig'!" He mumbled something I couldn't hear following this, interspersed with a string of curses.

"No, Splint, you *cain't* do that!" Talvi cried out, fear and emotion creeping into her voice.

"*Please* don't you tell Mr Frog on me! What if he kills me this time, hmm? He don't like me none anyhow!"

"Talvi, I don't have any choice. The security of this fortress is at stake!"

"Joseph's the one you oughta be watchin' fer! He ain't no good, I know that fer sure now, I's seen it!"

Another mug hit the side of the door opposite my ear and my heart leapt into my throat.

"Armok damnit!!!" I heard him swear. "You shouldn't even know about Joseph!"

Talvi broke down and began sobbing, causing Splint's volume to decrease past where I could hear it. Though I listened intently, I heard nothing more for a time... but then I heard footsteps. They came not from inside the room, but from around the farthest corner of the hallway, and almost immediately afterwards the shape of a dwarf came into view. My eyes widened as I realized who it was: Mr Frog.

I looked about frantically for some place to hide, and my eyes lit upon a darkened alcove that

some novice miner had mistakenly carved into the dirt wall, only five meters away. I leapt up and made a dash for it, praying to the gods that Mr Frog hadn't seen me, and trying to slow my rapid breath. A minute later, Mr Frog was standing just down the hallway from me, knocking on Splint's door. I should have been afraid for Talvi's life, but I'm ashamed to say my rapid-beating heart betrayed the fact that at that moment, I was more afraid for mine.

Mr Frog knocked twice, and the wooden slat in the door slid to the side, revealing Splint's eyes. "Splint, I have something I need to discuss with you," he said quietly.

Splint shook his head and apologized. "Sorry, but I'm kinda busy with someone at the moment, Mr Frog – it'll have to wait." I almost sighed with relief. I'd fully expected him to give Talvi away.

"It's urgent..." Mr Frog insisted.

Sighing, Splint said, "All right, then – tomorrow morning. Will that work for you?"

With a brief nod, the tall, cloaked dwarf turned and walked away, and the slat closed back.

Staying far back and out of sight as much as I could, I followed Mr Frog to see where he would go, praying he'd find something to occupy himself as far away from my bracelet as possible. Though largely uneventful, the walk back kept me very much in suspense. I was sure that at some point he would turn around and stare me directly in the eyes.

Nothing like that happened, although Mr Frog's walk ended right where I had hoped it wouldn't: his room. After the door closed behind him, the sound of the lock sliding into place echoed down the hallway... a death-knell to my heart. With a shattered spirit I walked listlessly back to my quiet alleyway and collapsed on the little heap of rags I called a bed. Clutching my ragged quilt to me, I found no hope... only silent tears and an empty heart.

Yesterday, the day after those events, I awoke late... far later than I usually do. After brushing out my hair and eating breakfast (a few half-stale plump helmet biscuits and some of the sewer brew from my waterskin), I felt a bit more lively than I had the night before. I didn't quite feel ready to take on the world... but I did feel ready to try to get my bracelet back.

After hiding my things behind a pile of mugs so they wouldn't get stolen – though I'm not sure who would bother stealing them – I straightened my little beanie on my head and left, headed for Talvi's room.

Knocking on the door gently to let Talvi know I was there, I looked around, my eyes lighting upon the same dwarf I'd seen the day before: the strong, gentlemanly one. Without thinking, I moved my hands to fix my hair, before I remembered that he probably wouldn't even care to look at me, which is what happened. He passed straight by without giving me so much as a glance. I've been told I'm pretty, but what good is it if nobody ever notices you?

After I finally decided that Talvi wasn't there, I entered her room myself, as I knew she never remembered to lock the door. The chest in the cavy room's tail was pulled back into position, hiding the little vent. Walking over to it, I pushed at the chest to try to get it to move, but found to my dismay that my arms were far too weak to manage it. Then I tried bracing my back against the wall and pushing with my feet, and slowly, slowly, the chest slid across the floor, revealing the iron grate behind it.

The grate wasn't nearly as difficult to move, and after moving it to one side, I saw the

blackened tunnel's tiny mouth opened up before me, like a mildly ominous warning. If it had only been *larger* (and thus looked *more* ominous), I wouldn't have felt quite so much like it was going to crush me to death after I entered.

It took me a few minutes to work myself up to it, but I did eventually manage to will myself to crawl inside: I closed my eyes and imagined puppies, large open fields, a nice, hot meal, and most of all, my bracelet. I couldn't move the chest back, but I made a point of putting the grate back in place before I continued down the tunnel.

It was a lot harder without Talvi leading the way. I was close to tears for much of it, and with my outstretched arms I could feel just how narrow the little shaft was. It doesn't help that I can't see nearly as well in the dark as Talvi can, but I did finally manage to stumble my way, hyperventilating, to where I'd been before.

This is where I realized that I hadn't thought my plan through all the way. Without my friend's "cavy nose" sniffing about, I had no idea where the traps were. Then I remembered the strong smell of the liquid the cavy tooth had been in, and, following Talvi's example, I sniffed along, trying to catch the faintest smell of anything.

Twice I found something, and managed to disarm the traps without walking into them. The darts were small, but very, very sharp. They appeared to be spring-loaded into the tiniest mechanisms I've ever known of – only Mr Frog or Mekkia could've made them.

At the end of the tunnel I could just barely make out a metal grate, papered over on the other side. After calming my breathing with thoughts of open space directly on the other side, I waited for a few minutes, listening carefully for the slightest sound – any indication that Mr Frog might be in his room. I heard nothing, though, and assumed that he was in the middle of his meeting with Splint.

Carefully lifting the grate from its stone slots, I set it down to the right and left the vent shaft almost eagerly, feeling so much safer now that I was in a larger room. It was Mr Frog's room, actually... Talvi had been right. It had a peculiar odor to it that I hadn't noticed the first time I had been inside: an odd burnt smell that was just barely detectable.

The first thing I did was place the iron grate back into its original position. It had a large sheet of thickened parchment attached to it, with various numbers, letters, and mathematical symbols scrawled across in columns. It was a disguise that had kept even Talvi from finding the grate. When I was done, I turned away and surveyed the room.

Everything looked as we had left it the day before. I walked over to the dusty table with the strange glass equipment and looked it over... but my bracelet wasn't there. Glancing around, I saw that the door was locked, and that Mr Frog's bed looked slept in, though it was currently empty.

Then I saw what I'd come for: a little glitter of gold on the nightstand by his bed. A surge of hope ran through me as I went over to see, and I couldn't help but smile with joy as my eyes confirmed it: it was my bracelet, sitting safely in the middle of the table. I reached out to touch it, but heard the sudden snap of a cord, which startled me. I jumped back just in time to avoid being hit by a small volley of little darts springing from a nearby wall.

I was startled further by the sound of a familiar voice I'd grown to fear. "You're quick, little one..." Mr Frog was standing in the shadows on the other side of the room. "Not many people

would be quick enough to avoid that... But you're not like most people, are you?" he said pointedly, not expecting an answer.

I realized in shock that he'd been waiting for me... watching me ever since I set foot in his room. I said nothing in response, but backed away, wondering how much he knew. I considered grabbing the bracelet and running, but was too afraid that he might have set up more than just one trap.

He looked me over, almost curiously, and I shivered. As he slowly advanced and stepped into the light, my hands began shaking, and I found myself inching towards the door. More than anything else, I didn't want to share the grave of the guinea pigs after going through the untold horrors of Mr Frog's experiments.

"It's an excellent disguise, I'll admit, and not at all what I expected..." he continued in a menacing tone. "You can stay in the shadows, and yet in the open... No one sees you, but not because you're invisible, no... Rather because they choose not to. You have no need to hide because no one cares. No one knows who you are."

As I continued to back away, I suddenly heard a snap, and ducked instinctively. Another volley of tiny darts whistled above my head.

He chuckled, a sound that filled me with more fear than even his rage would have. Mr Frog never, never laughed. "Not bad, not bad... You have fast reflexes." I got back up and continued backing towards the door, past the tables with alchemical apparatuses and odd machines, past the shimmering hoops. "No, no one cares to know who you are... But *I* know."

I shook my head negatively, but doubt began to creep into my mind. "No," I said in response, but my voice was barely audible.

"Yes, *I* know... Your jewelry betrays you. Vanya... An elvish name."

Tears of fear stung my eyes and I shook my head in disbelief as I tried to figure out how he knew my name, when the bracelet carried only my initials. "I'm not an elf," I whispered.

Suddenly he leapt at me, drawing a knife from beneath his cloak, which billowed out behind him as he flew through the air. I turned and ran for the door, and heard the familiar snap of a tripwire. It wasn't darts this time, but a horrible green gas that he seemed to be immune to. With one hand over my mouth and nose I unlocked the door in wild desperation and threw it open, dashing into the hallway with Mr Frog right behind me.

As I sprinted away, attracting the stares of passersby, I heard Mr Frog far behind, calling out to me: "*I will find you!* You cannot hide forever, little spy, and I have eyes and ears everywhere..."

I didn't stop until I'd reached the alleyway where I'd slept the night before. I bundled everything I owned inside my blanket and left. I knew if I stayed there he would find me almost immediately. The first skulker he met would be able to tell him where I was living. If I wanted to stay alive, I would have to hide somewhere that no one would ever look...

The condemned garbage dump.

Mr Frog sealed it off years ago – originally Talvi herself had set it up when she was overseer of the fortress. The idea behind it was that dwarves could store items to rot in there instead of leaving everything in the hallways, so that miasma wouldn't be an issue. Unfortunately, nobody since ever used it: Mr Frog, during his term, had declared it a health hazard. But there are always ways past barriers, if you knew how to find them, and being homeless, I was one of those who did. There are a series of natural tunnels that some creature had dug in the dirt levels, starting near the farms – one of them led directly to the old dump.

And so I set up camp here... and here I've been ever since. It's been a whole day now, at least. You can't hear the time bells here, but it feels like it's been forever. It's damp, smelly, and horribly cold, but I'd rather be in here than out where Mr Frog can find me. I almost feel like I could take a nap now, but there's something

The text ends here abruptly, without Vanya's customary five-pointed star.



Mr Frog. Art by Mr Frog, actually, but of the forums, and not of the story.

Chapter 5: Dark Conversations

You flip through the remaining "pages" of the shoddily-bound journal, but the rest are blank except for parts of cavy posters that had had the ink sanded away. You set it down on the table where you found it disappointedly, wondering what had happened to the aspiring writer who'd written out her tribulations. As you turn to leave, your gaze sweeps past the strange, dusty machinery, and something else catches your eye – lying beneath where you'd found Vanya's journal is a second book, with a five-pointed star etched lightly into the cover. A quick glance inside confirms your suspicion – most of the entries are written in Vanya's familiar, flowing

script.

I didn't get a chance to finish my last journal entry... I don't even know where my journal is, now, though I suspect Mr Frog has it. I'd been sitting against a wall in the condemned dump, when he leapt out from the shadows with a dagger in hand. The only reason he didn't succeed in killing me was that I threw my journal at his face as hard as I could, and though I did it more out of surprise than anything else, it seemed to catch him off guard enough to make him lose his balance. He slipped on some of the slimy animal skins and fell... I didn't stay long enough to see if he was all right, or even long enough to gather up my belongings. My journal had come apart when it hit him, and I knew there was no way I'd gather up the pages in time. I simply turned and fled. It feels like that's all I ever do now... I run and hide, and I leave all I care about behind me.

I ran partway down the length of the garbage dump and then ducked into a nearby giant mole tunnel, praying it wouldn't be a dead-end. It was small... about four feet high in most places. I don't mind earthen tunnels as much as I do stone, but I was still in a hurry to get out of there. I was glad at first to find it ended soon... and then I saw something I would rather not have seen...

The tunnel opened up onto an underground road that appeared to be abandoned, and I knew at once what I was looking at: the Spearbreakers wagon road. It was piled with all manner of humanoid corpses, some still clutching their weapons. In one darkened corner I remember there being an armored skeleton with five arrows stuck inside the face of its cracked skull. The whole corridor reeked of the dead... I can't imagine what the merchants in the caravans thought as random bones crunched against their wagon wheels.

I carefully worked my way past the grisly mess, avoiding stepping on any of the bones and hoping I wouldn't trip on anything. The last thing I wanted was to fall into a skeleton's open arms. But then I saw something that caught my attention: the well-crafted wooden dagger of a rich elven merchant. The hilt was shaped like three holly leaves, and it had tiny designs and elf-runes carved into it. I couldn't read what it said, but it still looked incredibly beautiful. I left it lying there, but it reminded me of what Mr Frog had said: *"Your jewelry betrays you. Vanya..."*. He'd called me an elf. The only worse insult among dwarves was to tell someone their father was beardless. Most dwarves swore by their father's beards, or in serious situations, by Armok's. But more importantly than the insult, he'd known my name... How did he know my name? The only person I'd ever told it to were my sister and Talvi... and my sister was dead. Did Talvi tell it to him – was she working with Mr Frog behind my back? Were they all conspiring to kill me just because they thought I was an elf?

My thoughts were rudely disturbed when I tripped over a large set of iron armor. Why they never collected it all after the battles, I don't know, but as I painfully got to my feet, I noticed a journal lying on the ground. A rusty iron gauntlet clutched it tightly, though the owner's hand was gone. Slipping it free, I glanced inside the front cover out of curiosity.

The writer had a hard, jagged script, like he was trying to murder the page by seeing how hard he could press. He appeared to be an excellent artist, though, and the image he'd drawn of Spawn came very, very close to making me vomit. I hastily flipped through the rest of the journal, but there was only one entry. The rest was blank. I felt then that I'd found a temporary journal I could use, and, thanking the gods, I took it with me.

I sadly reflected on how the little journal was all I owned, and it wasn't even mine: I was just borrowing it from the dead. Everything else I owned I'd left with Mr Frog in the dump.

It's ironic, I suppose... I went on a mission to recover an item I'd lost, and it ended with me losing everything. Well... except my little beanie, which never left my head.

At the end of the tunnel, something caught my eye. It was a gorgeous purple-bound book: "We See Deler Inkblushed, the Union of Haunts". It was near the bottom of a pile of skeletons, and almost covered over by a black cloak. I gingerly pushed the bones aside and opened it, and despite my sorry situation, I laughed in delight at what I saw within its binding. Someone had thickened the parchment and arranged it into special shapes... it was a "pop up" book. It had pictures of the necromancer who'd written it, along with many other pop-up pictures of zombies, skeletons, potions and cauldrons. It was a manual on how to resurrect corpses, and was intermixed with a very egotistical autobiography. Necromancy is forbidden and shunned among all civilized races, but I *love* books... and that one was so, so beautiful.

I was so absorbed in it that I didn't hear the dwarf who was approaching me from behind until he was only a few feet away. "Well, what do we have here?" he roared.

I snapped the book shut and spun around in a fright, which escalated to near-terror as I realized who it was.

"I'm going to throw you outside the walls, you filth... The zombies can have your brains for their breakfast," he said with a scowl. It was Mitchewawa.

Despite how he'd inadvertently carved the basement class more homes in the walls, saying he loathed skulkers was an understatement. He took pride in how he'd managed to whip Spearbreakers into shape, and he considered us the most inefficient part of the fortress. "Parasites", he called us. Any of us he encountered on his solitary walks were typically never heard from again.

I really didn't want to join the zombies for breakfast, and as his heavy hand slammed down on my shoulder, I made my best attempt to swallow down my fear. "Mitchewawa, sir," I said as sweetly as I could, though I could hear my voice tremble, "I have something you might want to see."

Not without a tinge of regret I handed him the book. I was smiling as prettily as I could, though he took no notice. As I watched, he turned it over in his hands, reading the runes on the cover and spine, and then he opened it. "Hrmph," he said, which was the closest he ever, ever came to a laugh, "this is a rare gem." He flipped through the pages idly, looking at the different pop-ups.

That was the last I saw of him. I didn't wait for him to finish... I darted up the ramp and into the fortress.

I hurried down the stairways and corridors until I came to Talvi's room, my heart pounding with fear and exertion. I didn't even think to knock as I threw the door open and rushed inside, almost tripping over Talvi, who was sitting just inside, playing with a paper calendar that looked suspiciously like one of Draigneau's.

If anyone could forgive an intrusion, it was her: she looked up at me and smiled. "V! I's been wonderin' where you was, sweetie. Looked t'find you, and you wasn't where you *always* is."

Nodding, I closed the door behind me quietly and sat down against it, trying to slow my breath enough to talk. The stitch I'd gotten in my side didn't help things much. "Yeah," I managed finally, "I had to move somewhere else."

She nodded. "Thass all right, just glad yer here now. I's been worried a tad 'bout you, y'know." She got up, walked over to an old oaken chest and began looking through it.

Somewhat pained, I managed to stand and follow her over, curious about how much she knew about my recent adventures. "Worried? Why were you worried about me?"

She laughed. "I went to go find you and saw *him* – Mr Frog – comin' outta yer alleyway. It was a right funny sight, it was – Mr Frog down there when he allus keeps t' himself."

I shuddered at the thought. "How long ago was that, Miss Talvi?" I asked.

She stopped shifting things around in the chest for a moment and stared blankly into space for a moment before saying, "I don't rightly know... Past few days, I'd reckon, but I don't care t'keep track o' time no more. You know that almost better'n anyone, V." She continued her search, finally drawing a little parchment envelope out of the bottom and holding it up triumphantly. "Ha!" she exclaimed with a wide smile, "found it!"

Curiously, I asked, "What is it"?

"Never you mind that, V, iss jes' somethin' you needa keep safe, all right?" Her tone grew more serious, though it still sounded playful due to her heavy accent. "V, I need you to listen careful. I'm gonna be doin' somethin' real dangerous soon. I dunno if I'll come back at all, but jus' you watch out fer when it comes 'round, all right? You cain't do nothin' suspicious'r let Mr Frog find you. If somethin' happens t'me, V, open it'n do what it says, 'K'" She handed it to me, and then a puzzled look came over her. After thinking for a moment, she asked suspiciously, "Why's Mr Frog after you, anyhow?"

I couldn't meet her gaze, my eyes dropping downwards. "That's what I wanted to talk to you about, Miss Talvi..." I hesitated, fiddling uncomfortably with the envelope in my hands. Suddenly I looked up. "Do you remember when we went into Mr Frog's room?"

She seemed to have a bit of trouble recalling the event, but did nod, finally. "That I do. We was goin' after Joseph, t'get him back from Mr Frog. But we didn' manage... cavies were more important." Her brow furrowed at the memory, and her mood shift made me more uncomfortable than before.

"Well... I kind of left my bracelet in there by accident, and Mr Frog found it."

She exploded, something I wasn't expecting. "You did *what*!?" she yelled. I backed away from her in fright at her anger. As she bore down on me, I stumbled and fell to the ground, the muscular, heavy-built woman towering over me. "You done gone and *left your bracelet there*!?! V, girl, I's seen stupid in my day, but that beats all, worse'n a coconut monkey up a gum tree!" She approached me, scowling.

"I tried to get it back," I said, my timid voice scarcely above a whisper, "but Mr Frog was waiting for me."

"Well *o'course* he was waiting for you, you potato! That's allus how he do things, I'd know that better'n anyone! You didn' e'en come see me afore you went – I coulda tole you that!"

"I didn't get a chance, you weren't here!" Tears were forming in my eyes. To Talvi's mind, "potato" is a more serious insult than calling someone an elf. She hates potatoes.

Her voice was heavy with sarcasm. "Oh, I weren't here, so you thought you'd done go traipsin' along, happy as a flea's biscuit, uppity-up to Mr Frog's house to see if you could get yer precious bit o' gold back, is that it? Well, now he knows someone's after 'im, and d'you know what Mr Frog does when he gets suspicious? Do ye?"

I shook my head, biting my lip as I brushed away a tear with my fingertips.

She stood directly over me now, fuming, her face contorted with anger. "Oh, I'll tell y'what 'e does. *He sets up traps*!! Now, when I go t' take care'f him, he's gon' be well-prepared, I tell you

what. He'll be watchin' for someones, and it won't matter to him none that it'll be me, *nooooo*, it won't! Faster'n a dolphin's finger he'll chop me down! Mark my words, you... you..." her lips pursed as she tried to bring herself to form an appropriate insult, but she finally gave up and stomped away in disgust. "Agh! Why you always gotta ruin *ever'thing*, V?!"

I watched her for a moment, it only now dawning on me what I'd done. It was unusual that Talvi had figured it out faster than me, but then again, she knew more about Mr Frog's habits than anyone in the fortress: she'd been romantically obsessed with him almost ever since he arrived during her year as overseer. "I'm sorry, Miss Talvi," I managed, my voice breaking with despair.

She spun to face me, scowling. "That don't cut it none, V! Get outta my sight afore I make you like a tree stump!"

I leapt to my feet and fled the room, tears streaming down my face. I was on the run for the second time today, and the fact that I was running from a friend made it so, so much worse.

I hid in a darkened alleyway near the stairs and sat down, clutching my knees close to me and trying to stem my tears. Everything that I'd considered safe was dangerous; everything I considered precious, gone. It was all because I'd tried to help Talvi in her mission against Mr Frog... and Talvi didn't even want to talk to me anymore. I didn't know what to do... I knew if I stayed in one place I'd likely be found out, but where did I have to go? Talvi was gone to me, and Sus was dead, too. Sus had been kind to the skulkers during his rule, a year ago. He'd actually been born into the basement class, and worked his way up from the bottom. He'd fought for our rights and privileges, and even started a food drive for the homeless. Despite being a soldier, he was a very sensitive dwarf. Not only that, but the old coot had had a soft spot for *me*... Maybe I reminded him of someone, I don't know, but I still considered him a friend. He was one of the best dwarves I'd ever known... and he hardly got a decent funeral. Even so, I'd attended it, and I'd cried for him.

My musings were broken almost before they began: Splint walked by, and I was suddenly struck with an idea.

Splint was considered the "Father of Spearbreakers" by most... he always had Spearbreakers' best interests at heart, and he would do anything to defend the fortress from any threat, no matter how small. If there was anyone at all who might still help me, it was him. I just hoped Mr Frog hadn't talked to him about me yet. Offering a prayer of thanks, I set out after him.

He moved quickly... *so* quickly that I was having trouble both keeping up and watching for Mr Frog. I was just beginning to worry about looking conspicuous with all my dodging about, when he turned down the hallway towards the dining room... somewhere I felt I'd be sure to be spotted. Looking back on it now, I wonder if maybe that was the reason he went in: it's a wide-open area, with no dark places to hide in... But I *needed* to follow him.

Doing my best to brave myself against my fears and look invisible, I snuck inside. There were dwarves talking in groups here and there, and one or two sitting and eating, but for the most part, the room was empty.

Splint sat down at a table in the far corner, right next to the kitchens, and began to work on some paperwork he'd brought with him. Deciding to seize upon this opportunity, I made my way towards him.... and that was when I saw my antagonist. Mr Frog was headed towards Splint as

well. Not wanting my life to end, I hid in the nearest place available: the kitchens. Splint didn't notice me as I passed, thank gods, or he might've stopped me.

Mr Frog sat down across from Splint, who put away his books. I sat with my back against the inside kitchen wall, out of sight, and strained my ears for whatever I could hear.

"Glad to see you, Frog – how's the work progressing?"

"Let's skip the pleasantries, please. You know I don't have the stomach for it, or the time."

"Yes... sorry. Anyway, I have something I needed to talk to you about."

Staying low to the ground, I peeked one eye through the door and saw Mr Frog nod. "I have some recent developments you'd be interested to hear as well."

"All right, then," Splint said, "I'll start. Talvi has spoken to me several times in the past few days, and while I'd initially promised her I'd keep it confidential, I think it would be in our best interests if you knew."

He took a sip from his mug and continued, drawing his eyebrows together and frowning. "To start out with, Talvi seems to remember an awful lot about Joseph – I'm not quite sure that amnesiac we gave her did its job."

I shook my head in disbelief. I was shocked. Splint was on Mr Frog's side?

Mr Frog interrupted him. "That is part of what I had to tell you. I have acquired a journal from the spy I mentioned when last we met. Most of it is clearly lies, but what it says about Talvi matches up to what I know almost perfectly. I have reason to believe Talvi may be planning to attack me."

My eyes widened at the word "journal" and I hid back behind the doorframe. That was the second time he'd called me a spy. I don't know where he got the idea, but it's all lies. Why would I be a spy?

Splint groaned. "Why didn't the amnesiac work? It *should've* worked – you said it would."

Mr Frog was silent for a moment. "I don't know... But I think I know who does," he said pointedly. I looked back around the doorway in time to see Mr Frog and Splint share a glance. Mr Frog nodded slowly.

Splint only groaned once more, putting his head in his hands. "Not again..."

"I'm afraid so."

Sitting up, Splint took a deep gulp of his beer. "Fine, contact him again. See what he can tell us."

"And if he can't fix this mess? What do we do about Talvi? She's a liability – we'll need to dispose of her."

Splint shook his head and took another draught. "Fine. We'll rig a cave-in. Frog, this is going way beyond what you said we'd have to do. This is a lot more than we bargained for – can't you see? We're in too deep..."

Folding his hands, Mr Frog responded, "I can't help that, Splint. There's more at risk than the life of a simple-minded individual. In war, there are casualties, and our young Talvi may be a necessary one."

In shock, I slid back behind the wall, slumping against it and trying my best not to breathe heavily; trying to keep from being loud, though I could not quiet my beating heart. They were plotting to kill my best friend, right in front of me... and there was nothing I could do to stop it. But then I heard something that piqued my interest.

"Mr Frog, what about the spy? Did you bring the bracelet?"

"Yes, here." I peeked around the doorframe again and saw Mr Frog reach under his cloak and

withdraw something wrapped in a piece of cloth.

Splint reached for it. "Let me see it." As it exchanged hands, I caught a glimpse of glittering metal. Splint looked it over carefully in his palm, and then held it up to the light... there's no doubt in my mind: it was *my* bracelet they were examining. It was so close to me then... yet so very, very far out of reach.

"I highly doubt it's as valuable as you claim," Splint said slowly, "but it's still a fine piece. Very good craftsmanship... But you're wrong on one count."

Even at a distance, I could see Mr Frog's brow furrow with displeasure. "And what might that be?"

Splint continued unheeding. "It's not of elven make. Any dwarf could tell you that... It's made of gold. Elves only use wood."

"But the script, the design... The initials..." Mr Frog insisted. I listened closely – I'd always wondered where my bracelet had come from. If the threat of Talvi's death wasn't weighing so heavily in my mind, I might have been excited to hear what Splint had to say.

His friend shook his head. "Well, yes... elves would never touch a hammer and tongs... and it's designed completely in the elvish style... it's something no dwarven blacksmith would make. We hate elves – you know that." He paused for a moment, puzzled. "I don't understand. This bracelet can't exist. The elvish style combined with the forging of metal – it's impossible. And you say it's the tool of an elvish spy..." He turned it over in his hands, shaking his head slowly and trying to work it out. Finally he sighed, handing it back to Mr Frog, who placed it back under his cloak. "Anyway, Frog, what news do you have on its owner?"

"I recovered her journal earlier, as I said. I almost managed to kill her, but she escaped. If she's anything, she's agile. I consider her a higher priority than Talvi – the spy needs to be eliminated." Now it was *my* death they were discussing. I couldn't believe what I was hearing. I almost wished I could just run away and never have stumbled into the whole mess to begin with.

"Don't kill her," I heard Splint say, and for a moment I felt relieved.

"No?"

"I'll set out a 'capture and hold' mandate on her, along with a warrant for her arrest. We'll need to interrogate her."

There was a brief pause. "She might respond well to torture." I almost started crying.

I heard Splint sigh. "If you think it's necessary, Mr Frog, then do it. I just want all of this over with. I'm only doing this for Spearbreakers, do you understand?"

"Of course," Mr Frog said calmly. "You're doing just as you should."

With that, I heard the distinct sound of a stone chair scraping across the floor, and Mr Frog's footsteps fading into the distance. I got up and exited the dining room through the back way, so Splint wouldn't see me.

For once, though, I was putting someone else first. I *had* to warn Talvi. Mitchewawa may have hated skulkers, but he was a good dwarf. If she could talk to him and get his protection, I knew she might stand a chance. With this in mind, I headed back towards her room as fast as I could.





The "magic brick". Art by Splint.

Chapter 6: The Magic Brick

As you read, you note that this journal is remarkably different from the previous, and not just because of the fact that it's an actual book, and not pieces of cavy posters bound together with string. While the other had sentences circled in red ink and writing in the margins, the pages of this one are clean, besides the occasional blood spatter, and the word "HARD", which is repeated several times here and there in different handwriting. There is also a strange cut slicing across the back cover. Vanya had carefully written around these, though she was still using a charred stick to form her runes.

I knew that Talvi probably wouldn't want me in her sight at the moment, given how angry she was at me, and I really, *really* hoped she wouldn't try to kill me... but I had to try to save her life. According to what I'd just heard, Mr Frog was likely going to try to murder her. Given how Splint was going to have *at least* the guards searching for me, if not the entire population of Spearbreakers, this might be the last chance to warn her that I would have.

On reaching the stairs, I hurried farther down into the fortress, counting floors until I'd reached the apartment levels. (That's something else that sets Spearbreakers apart from other fortresses: the total lack of any "you are here" engravings.) I rushed down the hallways and pounded on Talvi's door as loudly as I dared, still fearing to attract attention. When no response came from within, I assumed Talvi was ignoring me, and I knocked a second time. I was panicking: it had been the first time I'd heard someone plot a murder, and I sure as anything didn't want it to become the first time a friend of mine died when I could've saved them.

Suddenly I heard footsteps coming from behind. I crouched against the door, hiding in the shadows as I watched someone turn and walk down the corridor opposite me: it was Mr Frog, rushing off somewhere. I didn't know where he was going, and for that matter, I wasn't sure I even wanted to know... but it was the last straw for me. I turned Talvi's knob and entered her room myself, uninvited, for a second time that day, praying to the gods she wouldn't hurt me in her rage.

However, what I found surprised me: Talvi wasn't there. I wasn't sure when she could've left, as I hadn't even been gone an hour, but there was no doubt in my mind: she wasn't in the room. I quickly decided to leave and find her myself, with the hope that I would be able to track her down before Mr Frog could.

Just before I turned to leave, I noticed that the chest in the cavy room's tail had been moved aside, and the grate was lying on the floor. I remembered what Talvi had said: "*Now, when I go to take care of him...*" She'd been yelling at the time, but it made little difference. She was going to try to kill him, and it looked to me as if she was already on her way to do it.

Foreboding filled me. I knew what would happen when Talvi attacked him, and I didn't like it: Mr Frog would be prepared, just as he had been when I'd met him. He hadn't even known who I was, and had only had one night to prepare for me, and he'd *still* almost managed to take me down. But it had been less than three hours since I'd thrown my journal at him in the condemned dump... I figured that maybe how brief a time he'd had to prepare would be enough to tip the balance in Talvi's favor. But the more I thought about it, the more I knew: Talvi didn't stand a chance. When it came right down to it, she had an almost superstitious fear of Mr Frog - for instance, she believed he'd designed a poison just for her: "cavy poison". All Mr Frog would have to do to have the upper hand would be to pick up any liquid-filled glass and act like he'd dump it on her.

I bit my lip. I didn't want my friend to die, whether she hated me or not.

I did have another idea, though my timid mind shied away from it: maybe *my* being there would be enough to tip the balance in her favor. The only problem was, I didn't really want it to be in *anyone's* favor. I didn't want anyone to die, but I knew that the longer I hesitated, the less chance I'd have of saving anyone.

With rapid heartbeat, I approached the little blackened tunnel for the third time, noticing that the chest was half-blocking the entrance, almost as if someone had tried to pull it back into position from within the shaft.

I set myself down against the wall to push it aside, groaning inwardly at the task. It was a lot harder the second time: I'd been running a lot, and my legs were tired. Before, I'd had a good night's sleep to work on. Suddenly in frustration I stood and threw open the chest, the wooden lid clattering on the floor, and what I saw made me gasp. It was full of metal... beautifully designed weapons and various pieces of chain-link armor. I'd heard a rumor that Talvi had been in the military before she arrived with Splint at Spearbreakers... Perhaps, as unlikely as it seemed, it was true. Unfortunately, whether it was true or not, she'd left her weapons and armor here instead of taking them with her, so they'd be of no use.

Suddenly I was struck with an idea. Talvi might not use them, but *I* definitely could. I had no

skill in combat, but I knew I'd have more of a chance at defending myself if I had a weapon. I reached into the chest and tested the weight of various pieces. The armor was too heavy for me to lift, and the jeweled axes felt heavy in my hands, but I found a dagger near the bottom, made of a silvery metal. It was beautifully designed, and it reminded me of the elven weapon I'd found in the wagon tunnel. Picking it up, I tested it out, and was surprised to find that it rested so comfortably in my palm; I almost felt it had been made just for me. After digging around until I found another that matched it, I tucked both blades away at my waist. With slightly strengthened confidence, I braced myself against the wall once more for a final push at the heavy chest.

Unfortunately, I'll admit my recently-won confidence drained away when I peered into the darkness again, but I steeled myself against it, thinking the same thoughts as before, and went inside. I couldn't help my fast-paced breath, or the tear I wiped from my cheek, but I was moving forwards. I hoped that was enough.

As I neared the end of the tunnel, I heard someone speak. It startled me, and my heart leapt into my throat, but I made myself crawl around the last bend... and then I stopped in surprise: the papered-over grate in Mr Frog's room had been moved. Within the tunnel I was deep in shadows, but if someone was to peer inside, they would almost certainly see me.

"But of course!" said a man I'd never heard before. "I'd be more than happy to assist you. Simply state what you desire, Mr Frog, and I'll do my very best." The voice sounded friendly... so friendly that it made my stomach turn. To me, it sounded like an act, and I dreaded meeting the speaker. Then I heard another voice I knew I'd dread meeting even more.

"I'm only doing this so that I have more options at hand." It was Mr Frog himself. I crept a little farther down the tunnel and looked inside the room. Mr Frog was standing by a table, holding something in his hand and looking at it with an expression of annoyance.

Someone laughed joyfully. I looked around, with what limited vision the tunnel offered me, but the person it came from appeared to be out of my field of vision. "Of course, of course! A one-time favor. You understand, though, that I never grant favors without expecting a favor in return." I could imagine a face smiling sweetly as those words were said.

It was only then that it hit me: I'd come all that way for nothing. Talvi wasn't there, and there was no sign that she'd ever even been there at all. Still... I thought that perhaps I might get my bracelet back.

Mr Frog's brow furrowed and he frowned. "I wouldn't ask if it wasn't important."

"You would not, no, but you're in luck, my friend. I already know what it is you would ask!"

"You usually do," Mr Frog replied tersely.

"Ah, I see, I see - it is something you have come to expect of me, is it not? Do you still doubt me? We would work well together, you know."

Mr Frog's expression darkened. "I told you not to mention that again until I'd had more time."

"My mistake, my mistake. Now, what you desire is a grade four amnesiac for your young woodcutting friend, is it not? You would also like to inform me that the previous dose you administered was ineffective, and had unusual effects. Have you studied these effects, my dear Mr Frog?"

"I have not." Mr Frog seemed to hate admitting it, but a new hope surged through me: maybe he didn't want to kill Talvi after all. He was asking a friend for an amnesiac that would actually work. I hated the idea of Talvi forgetting anything forever, but it was far, far better than her death.

The voice continued. "Ah, shame, shame. You ought to have, like the scientist you are, my

good friend. But! Not to worry, not to worry. I already know what it is that happened, and have prepared for it."

"But what -"

"No need to speak, my friend, I will explain. You've performed many experiments on the woman, have you not?"

Mr Frog nodded slowly. It only then dawned on me: he was nodding and talking to the little brick of metal he was holding. "You know I have," Mr Frog said in annoyance. "Why bother asking?"

"It is a scientist's job to ask questions. You know that, dear friend. Tell me - did it ever occur to you that you might've altered our young Talvi's DNA? That her chromosomes might not be the same as those of an average dwarf's?"

I didn't understand a word he said, though Mr Frog seemed to. "Yes, of course I did. It was what I was going for."

"Did you design the amnesiac you administered to overcome these alterations?" The voice had taken on an almost motherly tone, which sounded bizarre in my ears.

The expression on Mr Frog's face could only be described as defensive. "I didn't have the equipment necessary, and what I have here is too primitive. Look, are you going to provide me with it or not? I need it quickly, and I don't have all the time in the world, unlike you."

I imagine the owner of the voice didn't even bat an eyebrow at Mr Frog's rudeness. "Patience, patience, my dear friend. I, too, am a busy man. But I know you have an event of great importance happening in... what is it now... thirty minutes?"

"How do you know these things?"

"I see all," the voice said slowly. "The drug you desire will be at drop zone 21-Alpha in approximately... two minutes. I won't ask your favor now, my friend, but I assure you I will not forget it." I heard an odd sound, and Mr Frog placed the little tablet on the table in front of him, shaking his head. Drawing his cloak about him, he turned, marching briskly to the door. Moments later, he was gone.

Cautiously, I crept all the way to the end of the tunnel. I waved my arm about inside his room, jerking it back towards me just in time to avoid several volleys of glass darts coming from different directions. Slowly, cautiously, I poked my head out and looked around carefully for traps. I saw none, but felt a sinking feeling that if there were any traps in the room at all, I wouldn't be able to see them until it was too late. Even so, I entered Mr Frog's room, though not without hesitation. I glanced at his nightstand, as if my bracelet might still be there, but it was as I'd expected. If my bracelet was in the room, he'd hidden it somewhere else.

I walked slowly past the different tables, looking each of them over carefully for any glimpse of my little keepsake. Almost everything looked untouched since I'd been here last, with the exception of some of the glass equipment and machinery on the closer tables. Those at the farther sides of the room, back in the shadows, looked almost as if they hadn't been touched in years.

It startled me so terribly when I heard it that I almost fell over: a ringing sound, like bells, but different and clearer. Out of curiosity, I sought out the source, and what I found mystified me. The object making the sound was a little blue-silver brick of metal, but the interesting thing

wasn't the coloration, or even the unusual shape, but the fact that scrolling across the flat pane of glass embedded in its surface were dwarf runes made of nothing but colored light.

"Magic..." I whispered in awe. I'd heard of it before, and believed the stories, but until then I'd never actually *seen* magic in action.

The runes continued to dance past, and the bell sound beeped urgently. I read the scrolling text: "Tap to accept call."

I decided to try to make it stop making noise. I was sure it could be heard in the hallway outside the door, and besides that, I knew Mr Frog could be back at any moment. I picked it up, trying to find a lever on the side, or a pressure plate I could push to make it stop. Suddenly I heard a familiar voice.

"Ah, at last. It took you long enough to answer..." I almost dropped the little device in surprise, but managed to keep a hold on it, turning it around until I saw the face of the speaker, whose face appeared, animated, on the glass pane.

He had a perfect face: a chiseled chin, smooth cheekbones, and eyes set perfectly; everything about him was symmetrical. It rather reminded me of the perfection in the portraits artists would engrave on walls and floors. In a sense, it seemed... artificial. His face didn't look dwarven at all, but rather human, and the expression was almost one of disgust.

"Are you not going to speak? Are you deaf, are you mute? Are you... blinded by my radiance?" he asked with heavy sarcasm. It was the same voice as the person had who'd talked to Mr Frog, but the tone was entirely different now.

"H... hello..." I managed timidly, in barely more than a whisper. Someone was using magic to talk to me... it was incredible, but scary at the same time. I had a hard time looking past that fact and listening to what the man was saying.

"Ah, there you go. I knew you would be there to answer the call. I only hoped you possessed the... intelligence... to actually respond."

I hardly noticed the insult, and asked quietly, "Why are you talking to me?"

"You don't need to hold the tablet so close to your face..." he said. I apologized and moved it farther away, trying to match how Mr Frog had held it. "Thank you..." he said slowly. Then he continued, "I've been watching you for some time. You've done exactly as I expected - no more, no less. You've actually furthered my cause greatly - far more than the dull-witted Talvi ever managed." He said this last with extreme distaste.

Realization swept over me. "You're Joseph..." I said in astonishment.

His face never changed, but I imagined a smile twitching at the corner of his mouth. "Ah, you figured it out. Good for you, good for you. Unfortunately, I regret to inform you that I no longer have need of your assistance." He glanced downwards for a moment, as if reading something, and then back up at me. "You're a liability now, Vanya. Do you know what that means?"

Fear gripped my heart again, and I had to force myself to remain calm. "You're going to kill me, aren't you..." I whispered.

"Yes, of course, of course," he replied in his slow, unamused tone. "A common lab rat would have the sense to figure that out, though you're wrong in one respect: I'm not going to be the one to kill you. You see... I have other people carry out my wishes. When those people cease to be of aid, I have them terminated by my *other* assistants, and I like it best when those other assistants don't realize they're only doing what I wished them to - just like you've been doing for the past week." He paused, and for a moment I felt sure I saw a smile twitch across his face. "Did you realize at any point in the past week that you were simply a pawn? Did you realize you were expendable; did you realize you were only doing the bidding of another? Of course not, of course

not. The lab rat never wonders what is outside its maze; it only goes straight for the cheese at the end."

I shook my head in horror. Everything had started making sense. "It's *you*... *You're* the enemy Talvi told Splint about, and you're manipulating Mr Frog into doing what you want him to! Almost as if... almost as if he's only a pawn to you, too... just like me..." I couldn't believe it. How could someone who used magic be so, so evil; how could *anyone* have so little respect for the lives of other people? How could *anyone* care for nothing but their own gain?

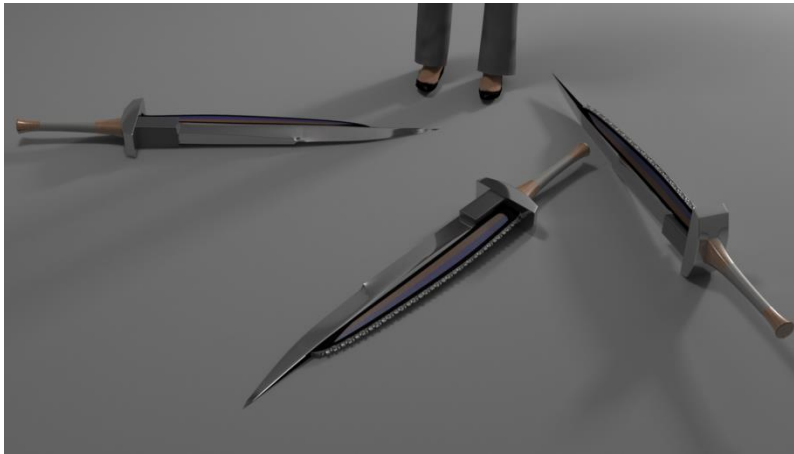
He smiled in wry amusement. "Ah, little Vanya... You foolish young woman... This is exactly why you're a liability. Your cause opposes mine, and I knew you would come to that conclusion eventually. You know too much. I only let Splint live because as he and Mr Frog work together, the whole of Spearbreakers works, more or less, for me."

I shook my head violently as I clutched the lightweight tablet in my hands. "No," I said, unwilling to accept it. "You can't kill me, you won't!" I paused. "And Mr Frog won't, either," I added, though I doubted the truth of that last.

He smiled again. "Ah, and now I can answer your original question: 'Why are you talking to me?'. You see, my young friend, while we spoke, I delayed you long enough for the method of your execution to arrive."

I heard a noise: the sound of someone unlocking the hallway door from outside.

"Goodbye, and pleasant dreams, little rat," Joseph said with a sardonic smile, and his image faded from the tablet, which went black in my hands.



Three chainswords. Art by Talvieno.

Chapter 7: The Frog Battle

This is a journal borrowed from the dead by the dwarf, Vanya. Despite how much danger she was in during her previous entries, the fact that her flowing script continues on the following pages indicates that if nothing else, she was still alive to write it.

I had always thought of magic as purely good, used by the kindest-hearted wizards in the world. I believed it the stuff of legends... of knights in shining adamantine armor fighting the dragons who sought to eat dwarven maidens. I thought it the stuff of kings and fortresses, of mines and forges, of dense woodlands protected by crossbowmen in exile. Yet I believed every bit of it to be true, ever since I was a little child... as far back as I can remember, really. When I

saw it for myself, I wasn't confused, or bewildered, but excited. It was only fate's cruel irony that my first encounter with it was due in part to the most evil person I've ever known... and he who I now consider my greatest enemy.

~~~

Even as Joseph's face faded from the glass embedded in the little magical tablet, the door to the hallway opened. It was who I feared it would be: Mr Frog, carrying a bag under his arm. He saw me almost instantly, and scowled with hatred. "You..." he said darkly, slamming the door behind him. When he saw the tablet in my hands, he fumed with rage. I put it down as quickly as I could, but he'd placed his bag down on a table nearby and was already advancing towards me.

I'm ashamed to say that retreat was the first thing in my mind: I glanced behind me at the tunnel to Talvi's room, but knew that if I tried to escape through it, he'd be sure to catch up with me.

When I turned back, Mr Frog was only five feet away from me, and was taking down some kind of sword from the pillar beside him. I was stunned by what I saw next: when he swung it in a ">" shape as if to test it, it rattled to life, and the edges of the sword flickered in the torchlight. It was magical, and it made a horrible metallic sound like so many clinking chains.

I backed away from him slowly, afraid of what he might do.

He didn't follow me, but stayed where he was in the shadow of the pillar. "Don't worry, little spy..." he said, watching me carefully as I backed towards the passage entrance on the floor. "This will all be over sooner than you think." Saying this, he placed a hand on the pillar beside him and pulled a lever.

My shoulder stung briefly, and I looked downwards to see that two tiny darts had pierced the sleeve of my blouse and stuck themselves in my shoulder. I yelped in surprise and pulled them out, tossing them to the floor as Talvi's words echoed in my mind: *"He's gonna be well-prepared, I tell you what."* I looked at him, shaking my head in shock: Splint had told him I was to be captured, not killed! "You can't kill me," I said weakly, imagining the poison pouring through my veins. If he'd poisoned me, I'd have at best just a few minutes to live, unless I could find some kind of antidote.

The edges of his dark cloak brushed lightly against the floor as he advanced towards me, holding the magical steel sword at the ready in his hand. "No, Vanya," he said scornfully, "Splint wanted me to spare your life, but there are some things he can't understand. I know you're a spy, but you're not the spy he believes you to be, and you pose no threat to him. Interrogation would only tell him things he can't know or understand. I know who you are... and you need to die."

I looked around desperately for some means of escape, but Mr Frog was approaching me more rapidly now. Suddenly I remembered what I carried at my waist, and pulled the daggers out. They flickered beautifully in the dim torchlight of Mr Frog's room, but it was small comfort to a girl doomed to die.

Mr Frog slowed for a moment, looking at the weapons in my hands. "You come armed..." he mused, "This will be interesting... but it will still be brief." He charged, swinging the sword in an arc downwards towards my head.

I cringed, holding the knives up in an "X" to block, and as the sword came down, it almost ripped them out of my hands. My arms vibrating, I looked up at Mr Frog's face, and saw yellow sparks from the crossed weapons raining down around me. Too late did I realize why Mr Frog had stopped attacking: with his free hand, he pulled the beanie from my head, revealing my

pointed ears peeking from behind my hair.

I flushed crimson, but he took no notice. "Vanya Carena, the elf," he said slowly, with a sort of grim satisfaction. "Your file was so easy to find. Trainee spy of Ballpoint Technologies, I presume, here to collect information on my whereabouts and progress?" As he stepped away from me, the sparks ceased, and he tossed my little hat to the side. "Information like the blueprints from my journal that you stole and blamed on poor Talvi... It's fortunate that that's going to be the last thing you steal." He charged again, swinging the humming blade. I tried to leap aside, but the sword caught the edge of my blouse, tugging at it as it cut. "And you can't even fight!" he finished with a dry smile.

Apprehensively, I felt for blood, but found to my relief that I was uninjured. He had hit in the spot that I'd tucked my journal, and that had possibly saved me from being cut. "That's not who I am," I said, trying my best to raise my voice above my drumming heart.

Had he been anyone else, I'm sure Mr Frog would've rolled his eyes. "Come now, it will all be over soon. Wouldn't you like to speak the truth for once?" He stepped forwards and swung again. I dodged it, barely, but stumbled backwards and fell. The blade whirled down towards my chest, and I rolled to the side.

"I'm not who you think I am!" I shrieked in fright, trying to get away, without taking my eyes off my aggressor. "I'm just 'Vanya'! I don't even know who my parents were!" Jumping to my feet, I held out my weapons in defense, which seemed so small in comparison to his sword.

He walked towards me at a brisk pace, his cloak fluttering out behind him. "Your file said as much, Carena. Your faked journal wasn't *all* lies, but the little sister never existed - not in the lists of Ballpoint *or* Spearbreakers."

*My sister*, I thought. As he struck out at me again, I twirled towards his left, striking twice with Talvi's daggers as I spun. I felt my ragged linen skirt swirling about my knees; felt my hair whipping about my face. As his blade came down for a second pass, I held up my knives and deflected it to the side. Hope sprang forth anew, and I almost smiled: years ago, my little sister and I used to play at swordfighting with sticks. I was out of practice, but I hoped it would be enough of an edge to keep me alive. The memory of her fueled me and renewed my confidence.

Mr Frog stopped, stepping back and examining the two slashes in his cloak. He looked up at me with a deadly fury in his eyes, but now I was almost able to brush it away. "My name isn't Carena," I said defiantly, and he rushed me again.

It came easier now: he struck, I twirled and spun; he sliced, I caught his weapon and sent it to the side. My breath was heavy, and I was still scared as anything, but I was alive.

Mr Frog stopped for a moment and looked at me - what was it I saw a hint of in his eyes? Admiration? Approval?

"Very nice," he said in his deep voice, "This is a bit closer to what I'd expect of you." He turned and tapped the wall next to him.

A blade swung down from the ceiling towards my face.

I flipped backwards to avoid it.

Despite the fear I was in, that made me angry... it was an unfair move: something I could neither block nor deflect, and I'd had no warning or reason to expect it.

Grabbing up some of the corked bottles from the nearby tables, I flung them at him, hoping they would explode and set him on fire or something. He dodged most of them, but the last one broke as he blocked, splattering the contents over his weapon. "Stop! You fool, stop!" he yelled.

I threw another, but it missed, bouncing off the machinery to the right of him and shattering on

the floor. A sky-blue liquid rushed out, splashing his cape and hissing over the stony floor, which it seemed to sink into. It shimmered as it faded away, leaving an almost mirrored surface on the stone.

I glanced back at Mr Frog, who was seething with hatred. "And that's *exactly* what I'd expect of you," he spat out through clenched teeth. "You mindless brutes of Ballpoint Tech - all you can accomplish is petty thievery and senseless destruction!" He swung his sword in an arc and stormed towards me, his rattling blade smoking and throwing sparks. His cloak, torn and billowing behind him, shimmered with a pale blue light from the liquids I'd thrown. "But why aren't you dead yet?!" he yelled, and swung the sword towards me with both hands.

I ducked away from it, rolling to my feet behind him and striking with my dagger, but I only carved another slash across his cloak.

He spun, swinging his sword again and again. It was all I could do to deflect it and keep from falling over as he backed me towards the wall.

Suddenly my bare feet hit something that felt less than solid... I glanced downwards and saw I was sliding across the shimmering floor where the flask had shattered. I looked back up just in time to catch the sword between my crossed knives.

As we slid backwards across the mirrored surface, Mr Frog forced his sword closer and closer to my head with both his hands, his face contorted with rage. Sparks were flying everywhere from his sword, and a strange blue smoke was rising from it towards the ceiling. I knew I couldn't keep it up much longer... I was almost spent, and he was a lot stronger than I was.

Reaching the edge of the slippery patch, I felt friction beneath my feet once more, quickly ducking and leaping to the side. Mr Frog's sword hit the floor with a clang, and the rattling noise it was making began to sound strained. Without waiting to see why, I struck out at him, slashing several times and praying I'd be able to hit him for once... but I didn't.

"You can't even hit me!" he mocked, and as I backed away in fear, he straightened, regaining his composure. Leaping at me, he struck again. I caught his blade and sent it to the side.

"They kept you, and got rid of me," he said as coolly as if making dinner conversation, though I could see the hatred in his eyes. "I have practically no official combat training, and I still have the upper hand. Not only that, but I doubt you even understood any of what you stole."

He struck again, but I spun away from the blow.

"They were going to terminate me - did they tell you that? An occasional drink or smoke never hurt anyone, but they were going to kill me for it. Yet they keep you... and you're nothing but a pretty face."

It was an insult I'd heard before, but one that always hit particularly close to home. It hurts like anything when people can't look past your appearance to see what you're capable of, and I snapped, throwing one of my daggers at him. With reflexes like lightning, he blocked with the flat of his blade. Somehow the dagger seemed to entangle itself in the edge of his sword, which fell silent, its rattling and throwing sparks abruptly coming to an end.

Mr Frog examined the blade with a critical eye.

I swallowed involuntarily. I'd just foolishly thrown away one of my weapons, and I knew that just one would never be enough to defend myself with. As fear began to grip my heart, Mr Frog spoke.

I expected anger, but he seemed collected, though somewhat annoyed. "I should thank you," he said slowly, hanging the damaged weapon on the pillar where it had come from. "You just did me a great assistance with my research, though you didn't know it. I've been needing to test that

weapon's breaking point in a combat situation for some time now. However," he added, removing another weapon from the wall, "you've destroyed much of my equipment, and made a great mess of my laboratory." As he looked over his new weapon - a pike with a geared blade like a saw at the butt end - he continued, his brow furrowing with contained loathing, "Not only that, but you're taking *far* too long to kill. I have somewhere I need to be in a very short time, and now I'm running behind schedule."

Suddenly the saw on the pike whirled to life like magic, spinning so fast I couldn't see the teeth. I watched it for a moment in terrified fascination, and he leapt at me.

My confidence was gone, and it was all I could do to dodge the wide arc that the saw-pike could cleave through the air. Only moments later I was forced to block as the blade came at me sideways. I leapt out of the way, but the toothed gear ripped the dagger from my hands, throwing it at the ceiling, which rippled almost like water as the weapon bounced off it. I gasped, wondering what magic it was that Mr Frog practiced in such secret.

Stepping forward, Mr Frog swung again, and I threw myself backwards onto my hands to avoid it, yelling in fear as the blade screamed over me, inches from my face. I tried to get to my feet again, but he was already upon me, holding it inches from my chest. I backed away, looking for something I could grab - anything - to throw at him, but my groping hands found nothing, and I found myself backed against the hallway door.

Mr Frog held the spinning blade steady inches from my neck. I tilted my chin upwards, fearing it'd be cut apart. "But why aren't you dead yet?" he asked slowly, but he sounded more curious than loathing.

Tears began to stream down my cheeks. I didn't want to die. I didn't want *anyone* to die, really, but especially not me. I could feel the wind on my neck from the spinning saw blade Mr Frog was holding so near, and I knew I only had moments to live.

"Really, why aren't you dead?" he questioned with furrowed brow, examining me with the curious eye of a scientist. "The biochemical in those darts should've done its job by now... Why hasn't your kill switch been activated?" He paused, tilting his head. Then, louder, he asked me, "What did you do? What did they give you?"

Blinking back my tears, I whispered, "Maybe I'm not who you think I am."

For a moment, I saw a glimmer of hope that he might spare my life, but it was gone when he responded: "Perhaps so. Perhaps you're just an elvish spy, as Splint thought. But either way... after all you've seen... you know too much." He drew back the sawpike, spinning the sharp end around to face me. As it swung back towards my chest, I screamed in terror.

But I wasn't the only one who screamed: from behind Mr Frog came a horrible war-cry in a voice that I recognized instantly: it was Talvi.



## Chapter 8: Cavywoman Returns

*This is a stolen journal. It has its moments of dullness and the runes are flowing. You cannot help but wish it had been a pop-up book like the one Mitchewawa had claimed credit for finding.*

I know I ended the last entry on a bit of an exciting point, but dinner had arrived. Still... I don't have much else to do, so I'm just going to continue with what I had been writing. I don't want to forget to write anything down, as I still want to get this published so that people can read it. I don't really need the money right now, but it would be nice if people at least knew my story. It

would make it all feel worthwhile... even if it couldn't make any of it better. Maybe it's just a fantasy I'd be better off without, but I can't help it.

~~~

Just as Mr Frog prepared to stab me through the heart with the spear point of his sawpike, Talvi leapt from the shadows behind him, yelling, "FOR MAH CAVIES!!!"

I don't know how long she'd been watching us, to time her leap so perfectly, but it caught Mr Frog by surprise. He spun, holding the shaft of the sawpike between two outstretched hands, and just barely managed to catch the handle of Talvi's axe against it, staggering backwards under the weight of the blow.

The newly-sharpened blade of Talvi's well-worn woodcutting axe glinted in the torchlight as she drew back for another strike, but Mr Frog got out of the way as it came down, snatching a package from a bag on a nearby table as he went. He ripped away the parchment wrapping, revealing a cylinder of glass with a tiny needle at the front: a syringe. Mr Frog had invented them just this past year, and gotten Mitchewawa's new doctors to use them at the hospital. I assumed the amnesiac was contained within the one he held, as he seemed to be looking for an opening in Talvi's defense so that he could use it.

"Mr Frog!" Talvi yelled, stalking towards him with axe drawn over her shoulder. She wore no armor, but looking back now, I'm not sure how her pudgy form would've been able to fit into it - especially not the slender-fit armor in the chest in her room. "Mr Frog, you killed mah cavies! You knocked me over th' head jes' like any right mugger, and now you're tryin' t' kill mah V girl!" She gave me a wink before laying another crushing blow towards Mr Frog from the side.

Mr Frog managed to block with the shaft of his sawpike, but just barely. The weight behind Talvi's axe nearly knocked him off his feet, and he dropped the little syringe, which rolled across the floor and into a darkened corner.

"Talvi, I did what I had to for the sake of science, and I had Splint's permission to do it," he said, stabbing the spinning blade towards my friend, who easily knocked it aside with her weapon. "As to hitting you over the head, I'm sorry, but you stole my PEA and you weren't supposed to know about it!" He sounded less confident now than he had while fighting me.

"That don't matter none! I dun even know what one'f them P-E-A's is, nohow!" Talvi struck at him again and he jumped aside, trying to get to the little needle, but Talvi saw what he was after. She rushed forwards, swinging like a mad woman (which she possibly still was), and Mr Frog retreated. Upon reaching the syringe, she crushed it under her foot.

That seemed to make Mr Frog switch gears. "Talvi, I wanted to settle this without bloodshed, but now you've left me no choice." Saying this, he swung the screaming blade of his sawpike towards her, but she batted it down.

Talvi jumped away from the blade as it came around for a second pass, albeit somewhat clumsily. She seemed no stranger to the weapon, possibly from all her stalking of the dwarf. Backing farther away, she screamed back at him, "Well you ain't ne'er killed nobody! Heard you tell Splint so myself, and I don't bet worth a cloud's stomach you could kill me now!" She stood defiantly in the middle of the room.

I was frozen in terror. I didn't want either one of them to be killed, despite the fact that Mr Frog had been trying to kill me only moments before. If Talvi killed Mr Frog, she'd be executed

for her crime... it was the dwarven way of dealing justice.

Mr Frog approached her at a run, his torn and battered cloak fluttering behind him. Talvi dodged the spinning blade and got in closer, swinging her axe as if she was trying to fell a tree. Mr Frog spun his shaft and blocked, and though he took a step back, he didn't stagger. "Talvi, I can do anything I set my mind to." He knocked her axe aside with the pike end and stabbed towards her. She leapt backwards, but not in time to avoid the pointed metal.

I screamed.

Talvi seemed to grow even angrier, though, and grabbed the shaft with her oversized hand, trying to wrest it from Mr Frog's grasp. The silvery glint of chain mail showed through the jagged hole in her shirt.

They struggled together: As Mr Frog tried to keep the spinning blade behind his shoulder from cutting into him, Talvi pulled, bringing him and his weapon in closer. Then she released it, for a two-handed downwards swing of her axe towards his head.

Mr Frog got under the sawpike's shaft, just in time to catch Talvi's weapon and throw it to the side. Standing, he jabbed towards her again, and Talvi countered with a swing of her own. As Mr Frog stepped away from it, he nearly lost his footing, sliding across the shimmering substance I'd spilled on the floor minutes before. Talvi followed in a fury, laying down one strike after another. He blocked and parried, but suddenly reached to the side and grabbed a vial of liquid.

My friend stopped. "Mr Frog, don't you - " Her words were interrupted as the glass shattered at her feet, splashing onto her legs. "Cavy poison!" she screeched, leaping backwards from it in dismay. I got up and moved to where I could have a better view, and bit my lip as I saw that her legs seemed almost to be smoking.

Mr Frog reached for another vial, but with a scream of rage Talvi charged him like a bull. He swung his sawpike towards her, but she batted it aside as a minor nuisance.

"Mr Frog!" Talvi screamed, readying for another strike, "*I loved you!*" she swung her weapon towards him in a wide arc, slicing open some of the strange machinery on the table beside them, which erupted in flickering lightning and a shower of sparks.

"I'll admit that potion did more than I expected it to!" Mr Frog caught the axe's handle with the shaft of his weapon, his reflexes as sharp as ever, and sent his saw blade down towards her head with as much force as he could. She blocked with the handle of her axe above her head, but almost couldn't hold it.

They stood there for a moment, glaring at each other in fury, panting from exertion. Sweat poured down their faces, beginning to stain their clothes, as sparks flew from the machines and another shower of them cascaded downwards from their crossed weapons. The shimmering surface of the mirroring floor caught fire, tiny flames licking across its surface towards Mr Frog's cloak, which sprouted tiny flames of its own. At the same time, Talvi's shoes caught fire and began smoking.

But Mr Frog took no notice. Without warning, he pulled his sawpike back and stabbed the whirring blade towards Talvi's chest. I shrieked in horror as she stumbled backwards, clutching for something to hold onto, her axe hanging limply in her hand. Mr Frog continued, pressing the screeching weapon against her with as much force as he could muster, as the blade clattered and groaned in protest.

Suddenly Talvi regained her footing and knocked his weapon roughly to the side with the flat

of her axe. A huge hole gleamed through her shirt, showing the jagged, twisted links of broken chain mail, which glittered in the light, as smoke from the fires began to cloud the ceiling.

As she readied her axe once more, she glared at him in the fury of a woman scorned, growling, "You drugged me, Mr Frog? I di'n't make you o'erseer for no good reason other'n that??"

"You did just as I wanted you to, Talvi," he said calmly, leaping towards her, as his flaming, jagged cloak billowed back. "And I drugged you many, many times."

She caught his strike, and with a kick sent him tumbling backwards towards the flames that were licking their way across the floor. As he attempted to get to his feet, she struck at him repeatedly with one hand, driving him back towards me as they slid across the shimmering ground.

The ceiling briefly erupted in a spray of water, dousing the flickering fires spread around the room. The shimmering, mirrored surface of the altered floor appeared to melt away, revealing solid stone.

Talvi swung one last blow at Mr Frog, knocking him onto his back. She stood over him menacingly, and the fire faded from her eyes, replaced with a grim determination. "Mr Frog," she said in her country accent, her chest heaving with heavy breath, "You's jes' as bad as Joseph, mebbe worse. You ain't never gonna poison nobody again." She swung her axe blade downwards towards him.

At the last moment, he rolled aside and swung his sawpike shaft around her, catching her in the back with a loud crack.

Talvi screamed in pain and fell to her knees.

Mr Frog, tired and haggard, pulled himself to his feet beside her and said, "I'm sorry, Talvi."

I looked around desperately for some way to save my friend, and my eyes lighted on a tiny package inside a bag on a nearby table.

He couldn't see the wicked gleam in her eye that I could, as she suddenly swung her axe around, parallel to the floor. It caught him in the back of the knee, and he fell backwards, his weapon arm trapped beneath him. Talvi quickly moved on top of him, pinning his arms to the floor and holding the blade of her axe, hovering, over his throat.

I leapt for the bag on the table and snatched out the little object.

Talvi whispered, "*Ah'm* sorry, Mr Frog," just as I slammed the needle of a syringe into her arm.

She collapsed to the side. Turning her head and clutching her arm, she looked up at me with an innocent, bewildered look in her eyes that made mine swim with moisture. "V..." she said quietly, a tear trickling down her face, "you done betrayed me too, now... How could you? *You*, V... I took you in, kept you safe... we was friends."

I shook my head, as tears began to stain my cheeks. I hadn't wanted anyone to die. Not even Mr Frog.

Her gaze left mine, her eyes dizzying into a fog, and she slumped forwards atop her opponent. I backed away in disbelief at what I'd done, and grabbed my beanie from the floor where Mr Frog had thrown it.

Mr Frog started to try to move her body off him, and I didn't stay to watch. Jamming my little hat down on my head, over the ears I was so ashamed of, I ran to the door, throwing the lock and bolting outside.

I ran down the corridors of the apartment level and up the stairs, hoping to reach the farm level and get back through the little tunnel to the condemned dump. I had hopes that Mr Frog wouldn't have taken my belongings with him, and that I might be able to recover something... perhaps my old quilt, or my hairbrush.

As I exited the stairs onto the level of the mushroom farms, I heard someone nearby calling out. "You! It's you!" a male's voice yelled. I turned to look at the speaker. It was Mitchewawa, coming at me and pointing his finger accusingly.

I turned and ran. I didn't know how much longer I'd be able to keep this up before I collapsed from exhaustion, but I'd rather collapse anywhere besides ten feet from Mitch.

Dodging dwarves that were hauling things to and from the caravan, I headed towards the trade depot by the old wagon road. I thought that if I could make it that far, I might be able to find that little hidden tunnel that led into the dump.

As Splint passed by, I ducked into an alcove and tried unsuccessfully to breathe quietly. Fortunately, he was so absorbed in his duties that he didn't notice, but he stopped only a few feet away to talk to one of the guards. He was talking about me.

I waited - it seemed like forever before finally, finally, he moved on.

As soon as he left, I made a break for it, and was almost stunned to find Talvi ahead of me.

"Hey there, V," she said with a big smile and a nod. Her shirt had been changed.

I'm not sure how the amnesiac had accomplished its job so quickly, but she seemed to have forgotten absolutely everything that had happened in the past few days. She just seemed... blissful. She was happier than I'd seen her in a long, long time, and I had to fight the urge to throw my arms around her, I was so glad she was all right. I only waved back, wiping away the tears of joy that threatened to fall.

With a wink, she turned back and continued towards the depot, and as I needed to go in the same direction, I followed her, into the huge underground courtyard that housed the trading depot.

A new small caravan, or something like it, was coming in from the entrance to the wagon road. I got up against the wall to wait for them to pass, but suddenly I heard screaming: "He's turning! He's turning!" someone yelled, causing everyone to panic. I had no idea what was going on, and slinked into a corner.

Then I saw him again: the big, strong dwarf with the lantern jaw. He was talking to Talvi and pointing down the hallway, deeper into the fortress. As she nodded and left at a brisk pace, he drew his sword, jogging towards the direction of the screaming.

My heart fluttered. He was so close to me now.

Guards were evacuating everyone from the depot, but they didn't see me and I was left behind. I didn't understand what the fuss was about... the yelling had stopped, and the soldiers seemed less on edge. As far as I could tell, they'd already taken care of the problem.

Then I almost fainted. Right in front of me, less than fifteen feet away, a dwarf began to transform. He seemed to grow and split his armor, his skin shriveling and changing to a pallid, deathly hue as his muscles shrank away, his bony arms stretching to an unnatural length.

I shrieked in terror, and for a moment, Lantern-jaw looked straight at me. Then he saw the misshapen dwarf who was twisting and writhing like a worm, and after shouting a few orders, he

charged.

But the transforming creature hadn't finished: it shuddered, and its front split in two halves, creating a deep gash from mouth to abdomen, ringed with hundreds upon hundreds of long, sharp teeth.

It was a Holistic Spawn. I'd just seen one transform right in front of me, and now I knew: the stories were real. I wasn't sure whether to vomit, scream, or cry... I just wanted more than anything to become really, really invisible.

Lantern-jaw reached the abomination and scored a clean strike straight through the head with his spear. I almost cheered, expecting the monster to fall to the ground, dead, but the spawn appeared unaffected, flinging Lantern-jaw against the wall beside me before extracting the spear and tossing it nonchalantly in my direction.

I rushed over to where Lantern-jaw lay, and knelt, putting my hand on his chest to feel his heartbeat... before I remembered: he was wearing a breastplate. His eyes opened, and he shook his head as if to clear it.

"Are you hurt?" I asked him quietly, hardly aware of the battle raging behind me, as I heard another dwarf scream a battle cry and rush the monster.

He shook his head again in response, and looked back at his enemy, trying to struggle to his feet.

I turned around and saw another dwarf hit the monster in the chest, just before being ripped in two, blood spattering everywhere. I stared in shock, my mouth hanging open - I'd just witnessed death. Lantern-jaw seemed to be taking it even harder than I was... it must have been his friend.

Suddenly I screamed: the Spawn had turned, and was approaching us at an incredible pace, using its freakishly long arms to help it gallop forwards. The axe stuck in its chest seemed hardly an annoyance to the creature.

I glanced at Lantern-jaw. He was having trouble standing straight, as he staggered towards his weapon unsteadily.

The spawn was almost on us, but it wasn't headed for me... it was headed for the soldier.

It all happened so fast.

I screamed and sprinted at Lantern-jaw, throwing my full weight at him in a flying leap. We fell to the side as the Spawn's chest mouth gnashed against the wall, having missed us completely.

I looked at the soldier's face... he looked me in the eyes and nodded in appreciation. <3 No one *ever* looks a skulker in the eyes. I almost melted, before I heard a scream behind me, and the monster fell dead, having shattered its own heart with the axe that it'd just crushed farther into its chest.

Other dwarves rushed towards us, checking on whether the Spawn was actually dead and picking up the fragments of armor that had been destroyed by the transformation. Lantern-jaw pulled himself to his feet, shaking his head slowly, and walked unsteadily towards the center of the room. I followed by him, lending what assistance I could and trying to help him stand straight, though I'm not even sure he even realized I was there.

Without warning, he turned towards the other side of the depot. A dwarf was standing there, in a dark, hooded robe that concealed his face in shadow. The dwarf motioned, and Lantern-jaw straightened, pulling his arm from my hand and following the mysterious hooded figure down a

hallway.

I watched him go, standing unnoticed in the center of the depot courtyard, as other dwarves rushed around me. I'd hated that he'd left, but I was also so happy: happy for Talvi, happy I'd saved Lantern-jaw's life. I was so happy that I didn't hear the dwarf who was approaching from behind.

"Where did he go?" he asked brusquely, grabbing me by the arms and spinning me around to look in my face.

It was Mr Frog.

I stared at him, half in fear, half because I didn't know what he meant. "What?" I managed.

"Where did he go? Where did Urist go?" he asked urgently, shaking me slightly. I couldn't believe he wasn't killing me.

"I'm not sure what you mean..."

He looked so tired. Clearly, fighting women wasn't something he did every day. "Urist, the new soldier from the caravan a few days ago, the one who attacked the Spawn a few minutes ago – where is he?"

My eyes widened as I realized who he meant. *Urist*, I thought, *what a beautiful name*.

Mr Frog shook me again. "Quickly!" he said.

My eyes refocused. "Sorry," I said, pointing down the hallway where I'd seen the lantern-jawed Urist disappear. "That way."

The former overseer let go of me and marched away in that direction at a brisk pace, saying over his shoulder, "Don't think I'm through with you yet. I'm simply short on time. I'll be back."

As he walked away, I noticed that he'd removed his destroyed cloak. Watching him disappear into the darkness, I suddenly realized why he wore it: without the cape on, he seemed taller, somehow... taller than a dwarf. It struck me that maybe... maybe he wasn't a dwarf at all.

Then I remembered Talvi's envelope. She'd told me to open it if anything happened to her.

Hastily I retrieved the it from my blouse and slit the top, shaking the contents into my hand. Within it was an oddly designed key and a slip of parchment that read in Talvi's darkened scrawl, "Joseph must be stopped".





Colonel Fischer, Spearbreaker's Champion. Art by Splint

Chapter 9: Pyrrhic Victory

This is a stolen journal, originally belonging to a soldier named "HARD", who had a particularly strong stomach. The story of "V", also known as "Vanya", continues within its pages. It appears as though it may be far from over, though it is unclear just how much more she wrote. Only a few more entries grace these hard-bound sheets of rope reed parchment - if she wrote a full account of her adventures, the remainder must be contained elsewhere.

"Victory" is an odd word... it implies that you've won; it implies that the enemy has been defeated. But what if you've lost while you've gained? What if both sides believe they have a victory? What if both get what they desire, and believe they've struck a crushing blow to the other? What word do you use then?

Some try to change it by calling it a "hollow victory" or a "little victory", but that's only tacking one word onto another. In the end, it doesn't matter what you call it. It's still not a complete win. Your opponent has defeated you in some ways, just as you've defeated your opponent in others.

Even if a great leader loses only a few dwarves while her enemy loses thousands of elves, like the Queen Tholtig fairy tale, those few dwarves who died have been defeated. The victory is near complete, but not total. And what if this great leader only had a few soldiers to begin with? What if she defeats thousands of elves and drives them back, but loses her entire civilization? The enemy was driven back, but could you really call it a victory?

You understand my problem... I don't know whether what I managed on that day was really a

victory. I saved Talvi's life, and that of Mr Frog's, but was it really a victory? The true enemy, Joseph, was still at large, and had simply used me to further his cause. In the end, Joseph got what he wanted: Mr Frog's promise to assist him with a favor. The only way he failed was that I wasn't killed. But if he really knew everything... why wasn't I dead? If he could predict *my* actions - *as well* as those of Mr Frog's - with almost perfect precision, why hadn't I died? Was there something he didn't know? Was he maybe getting lazy?

I've had plenty of time to think and wonder these past weeks...

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As I watched the tall, cloakless form of Mr Frog follow the path that Urist had taken deeper into the fortress, an idea suddenly struck me: my bracelet was unprotected. I could walk right into Mr Frog's room and find it, and it was unlikely that there were any traps remaining in there. A hope surged through my already-happy heart, and I turned, starting towards his room. I was excited, in a way: my bracelet would soon finally, finally be in my possession.

I knew I still had to be careful, though... the guards were on watch for me, and as I snuck through the many doors of the upper levels, I saw several soldiers snatching skulkers out of the shadows and asking them questions. Splint had given orders to look for me, just like he'd said he would a few hours before... the past few years, no one bothered to stop us except Mr Frog and Mitchewawa, but now every guard and every soldier was assisting. In a fortress where a third of the dwarves are in the military, that's saying something.

Through an accident, I'd suddenly made the basement class visible. I hoped they wouldn't hate me for it, and I *especially* hoped that the guards didn't know I was an elf. I knew in my heart that if they did, *one of them* at least would let it slip... and the entire fortress would know who I was.

These horrible, pointed ears drive me mad sometimes... they make me feel like I'm some kind of horrible mutant... like I stand out and everyone can tell who I am just by looking at me, beanie or not.

I may be an elf, but I was raised as a dwarf. While I don't hate my kind like King Cacame from the fairy tales did, I'm ashamed of who I am. I shouldn't be in a dwarf's fortress, but at the same time, it's my home.

Splint was right: my bracelet shouldn't exist. *I* shouldn't exist.

When I reached the apartment level, I walked straight down the corridors to Mr Frog's room, and it was just a few minutes more before I stood directly outside.

As I turned the knob, I found to my dismay that it wouldn't move. He'd locked it when he'd left.

Of course the first thought in my mind was the little passage in the tail of Talvi's cavy room.

Standing before it once more, I looked inside. The grate still hadn't been placed back; it had only been an hour or less since I'd entered last, and Talvi had come after me.

As I steeled myself against my fears, preparing to enter, I couldn't help but smile as I found that this time, the fourth time through, I wasn't so scared. My heartbeat quickened still, but it didn't seem so horrible. With this helpful boost in my confidence, I entered the little vent.

I plunged forwards through the thick darkness as the tunnel gained altitude, brushing my fingertips against the now-familiar walls, my arms outstretched, trying to stay cheerful and keep the half-hearted smile from leaving my face, even as I swallowed in fear and began to hyperventilate. I wanted to get out of there as fast as I could.

I can't see in the dark like a dwarf can, but my sense of touch is the same. Some people even say that elves have more sensitive skin... I'm not sure if it's true, but it was an added comfort to feel that the walls weren't actually going to crush in on me.

Abruptly I came to a halt, as my ears caught the sound of someone up ahead: a female voice, speaking quietly. I got to my knees to avoid the sloping ceiling and crept towards the tunnel exit, listening carefully.

"I'm sorry, sir, but I see no blood," the woman spoke. I continued forwards until I could just see inside Mr Frog's room.

Then I heard a voice I recognized all too well, overdone with pleasantries. "Disappointing, disappointing. Are there any signs of the girl's death, or anything unusual?" It was unmistakably that of Joseph, but the hateful tone he'd used with me was gone. I crawled ahead to the end of the tunnel and peered inside.

A strange figure was pacing about the room, apparently human, but her apparel seemed otherworldly. The sloping chest vouched for it being a woman. She seemed to be searching the floor for something, while speaking to someone I couldn't see. "There are two discarded daggers here, sir. While metal, they aren't of dwarven make - I've never seen anything like it before. Their blades are badly damaged."

"Show me."

The woman walked briskly across the room to one of the corners, and I could see her lift one of Talvi's daggers. Just for a brief, brief moment, I caught sight of a magical tablet similar to the one Mr Frog had. She was holding it and using it the same way.

"Here you are, sir," she said. I got the impression that she might be a soldier of some sort: everything she did had a very professional feel to it.

"Very interesting, very interesting indeed..." I heard Joseph muse. "It is weaponry of the Vampiric wars, likely belonging to Talvi Diamondknight, who served with Splint Spearspin, just before the last of the vampires were wiped from existence. The damage pattern appears consistent with that of one of Mr Frog's chainswords, likely the one you found destroyed - perhaps he desired to test his weapon before he got rid of her. Are there any other abnormalities in the room? Make sure you've made a thorough sweep."

She placed it back on the floor where she'd found it and began to slowly sweep her eyes across the floor, approaching my little corner beside Mr Frog's bed. I backed a little further down the shaft.

That was when I realized that she'd somehow gotten inside while the door was locked. After a little thought, I decided that Mr Frog's cavy tunnel must've been better known than I believed: Joseph clearly knew of it, and it seemed the woman working for him had known of it as well.

Finally she stopped, less than ten feet away from me, and bent down, picking something up off the floor. As she bent downwards, her straight, dark hair fell forwards, and her ears poked through behind it. I started as I realized that she was an elf, just like me. She had pointed ears just as I did, and yet she didn't appear to be ashamed of them, as she went without a hat.

She held up what she'd retrieved in front of the tablet. "Two syringe darts, sir, empty of fluid."

"I see, I see!" Joseph sounded joyful, and as if he'd just solved a great puzzle. "Mr Frog decided to poison her rather than spill her blood, excellent! He's a clever man, as I've often said. Everything is going as I planned it, and rightly so! You have done well, Vanya Carena. You may return to Ballpoint Technologies until I have further need of you."

"Yes sir," she said, and her face dimmed as the tablet's front ceased to throw light onto it.

I hardly noticed her response, so struck was I by the fact that standing a stone's throw in front of me was the *real* spy... the person Mr Frog had thought I was... the person who shared my first name. Joseph had pronounced it correctly, too, rhyming the first syllable with "pawn", a word that is too often in my mind now.

Walking to the shimmering hoops on the darker side of the room, the elven spy began to work with some of the machinery. Suddenly there was a flash of light and a buzz like bees, and the hoop widened to a tall oval, the air inside it rippling and shimmering like water. I gasped aloud at the sight before I could stop myself. Fortunately, Carena didn't seem to notice, and stepped right into the magical device as if it was something she did every day. She disappeared completely; there was nothing left of her. I've never, ever seen anything like it, before or since.

With another buzz and a whoosh, the rippling air seemed to burn away like flames, and in an instant, it was back to normal.

I couldn't help but wonder, though... why would Joseph send Carena? Why an elf? Why someone who shared my first name, and apparently my initials as well?

I laid inside the tunnel, my thoughts racing as I attempted unsuccessfully to will myself to move. The words in Talvi's envelope echoed through my mind: "*Joseph must be stopped.*"

I moved forwards into Mr Frog's room and got to my feet. Taking the envelope back out of my blouse, I shook the contents into my hand.

The key was strange: the bits were hollow, and were filled with black and golden metal. What had my attention at the time, however, was the little slip of parchment. I read it again: "Joseph must be stopped."

On a whim, I flipped it over, and was surprised at what I saw: I'd missed the writing on the other side, which was in a smaller, lighter style of handwriting. It was still in Talvi's crude scrawl, and read, "He said he'll destroy Speerbraekers. Warn Splint. It's dangerous to go alone. Take this, and". The message ended abruptly, leaving me wondering what she'd forgotten to write.

It was ridiculous. Why would Talvi send me, a basement-class dwarf, to Splint? Talvi knew Splint wasn't fond of skulkers, even *without* knowing he'd mandated my arrest. She was basically sending me into the honey badger's den, alone.

I looked at the key again. She'd said it was dangerous to go alone, but what did the key fit? Was it supposed to summon some sort of magical creature meant to protect me?

I slipped the key and parchment clipping back into my envelope, wondering how much time I would have to search for my bracelet before Mr Frog returned. I was sure that if he found me in his office again, it wouldn't matter that I saved his life or helped him with Talvi. I was sure he'd try to kill me again.



With this in mind, I only spent a few minutes searching for my bracelet before quitting. If my little keepsake had been in there at all, he'd hidden it very cleverly.

I could've gone back through the cavy tunnel, but I really, really didn't want to have to travel through that tiny passage again if I could help it. I decided to brave the hallways instead, unlocking the door and leaving Mr Frog's room.

Locking the door behind me, I hurried down the wide corridors to Talvi's room, as I believed it to be the most likely location for a lock her key would fit. It *was* her key, after all.

I had to dodge into a bedroom at one point to avoid the guards patrolling the halls, something I'd never had to do before. Thankfully, the bedroom was vacant, and it wasn't long before I hurried on my way. Not long after that I reached my destination.

Removing the key again, I began walking around Talvi's room, trying to find a chest or cabinet it would fit. Ironically, most of them were already unlocked; security was a matter Talvi never considered.

I finally gave up and left, but to my delight met a familiar face in the hallway outside the door.

"Talvi!" I whispered happily, giving her a hug.

"Aw, my V girl!" she exclaimed a bit too loudly, returning the hug with one that nearly crushed the life out of me. "What's the hug for?"

I shook my head. "I'm just happy," I said, hastily retrieving the key from the envelope again. "Talvi, have you seen this key before?" I asked, holding it up in the light.

The former overseer looked it over carefully, moving her head to look at one side, and then the other. Leaning in closely, she sniffed it, before straightening with a shrug. "Sorry, V, I ain't ne'er seen it afore. You lookin' for a lock it fits?"

I nodded, putting it back in my blouse. "Yes, Miss Talvi. I just thought you might know," I said unhappily. She noticed my disappointment and appeared chagrined. "It's okay, though," I added quickly. "Thank you anyway, you're a great help to me."

This appeared to cheer her somewhat. "Aw, thass no problem," she said with a wide smile, giving me another, smaller hug. "I'll let y'know iff'n I sniff out a lock that smells like it, though, 'K?"

I knew her well enough to know that "sniff out" wasn't likely a figure of speech. "All right. And thank you again!" I said quietly, and then we parted ways.

It's remarkable what a little bit of hope can do for a girl: though I was homeless, and all I had in my possession was a stolen journal, a mysterious key, and a hat from a garbage heap, somehow I thought that maybe bringing Talvi's warning to Splint as she requested would redeem myself in his eyes. I didn't care for being a hero or saving the fortress. I just wanted back to my old, quiet life... the way things used to be. I never wanted wealth; I never wanted power. I especially never wanted fame... I'd be more likely to receive infamy, anyway, just because of my elven heritage. I just wanted to live in peace. I wasn't cut out for any of what was going on, and I knew it, too.

I hesitated outside Splint's office door for a moment, pressing my ear to it. I could hear quiet voices, but I wasn't sure whom they belonged to. Finally I got up enough courage to draw up a plan in my head: I would show him the slip of paper, and then, when I had his attention, I'd show

him the key. If there was anyone who might know what it unlocked, it would be him. After getting Talvi's parchment message out, I knocked on the door.

The slat drew back, revealing the eyes and raised eyebrows of a dwarf. The door opened quickly, and a hand pulled me inside.

I looked up at my captor: it was Draigneau, another former overseer of the fortress. He always wore what he called a "man skirt", as well as a very flashy dress shirt, and his hair was always, always very neatly combed. He was unmistakable.

His musical voice was just as recognizable. "Could this be that same dangerous, skulking spy, Splint?" he asked, dragging me behind him towards the conference table where Splint and Colonel Fischer were getting to their feet in surprise. "It would appear my sheer magnetism has drawn her out of the woodworks, and as you can see she's clearly no match for my strength." The weird thing was, he wasn't being sarcastic. He really does have that big of an ego.

Splint's brow furrowed. "Enough, Draigneau. Remove that hat she's wearing - let's see if it's really her."

Draigneau removed it with a flourish and a bow, as if he was finishing some great act onstage. I could feel the blood that crept into my cheeks as Fischer spoke: "Pointed ears. It's her."

Splint only shook his head. "You're definitely the dumbest spy I've ever seen, but at least you've saved us the trouble of tracking you down." Turning, he spoke to Fischer. "Cuff her - let's get her down to the prison."

"Wait!" I yelled, and three sets of eyes came to rest on me. "I brought you something you have to see. Someone's trying to destroy the fortress, and I'm trying to help you!" I straightened out the piece of paper as best as I could and held it up.

Draigneau snatched it from my fingers. "It appears to be an ancient dialect of Koboldese. Fortunately, I can read in no less than sixteen languages."

Splint raised an eyebrow. Beside him, Fischer rolled her eyes.

"Junn sepp mussabbi stuppid..." Draigneau mused in a serious, thoughtful tone. "Would you like me to translate?"

"No." Fischer answered flatly, walking forwards at a rough pace and snatching it from him. "Please, please don't." She took it to Splint, who examined it carefully. I watched, actually hopeful that I might be allowed a room of my own when it was all over.

Splint scratched his beard. "Koboldese? This is nothing more than Dwarven Standard. Corai's taught me how kobolds communicate, anyway - they don't use writing. This handwriting's horrible, though..." He flipped it over, reading the other side. "*You*," he addressed me, "who wrote this?"

"It was Miss Talvi, Mr. Splint," I said as calmly as I could.

It was a mistake to say. His expression changed from a thoughtful curiousness to disdain. "You clearly couldn't have been here long - Talvi isn't right in the head, and we don't take anything she says at face value. Let's just finish this business - Fischer, hurry up and take her to the prison."

Fischer pulled out a set of manacles and approached me. "Splint, I've had to tell you many, many times. This fortress has been running for six years, and we *still* don't have a prison. Not even a room with chains attached to the floors and walls."

I shook my head and tried to get away, but even one-handed, Draigneau was too strong for me. "I will receive public credit for her capture, I assume?" he asked, examining the fingernails of his free hand with a pleased look on his face.

"Of course not," Splint said as I switched captors.

I felt the cold steel of the handcuffs biting into my wrists... dwarven handcuffs aren't something to mess around with, and Fischer puts them on tightly.

"This has to be kept secret," Splint continued. "I don't want it getting out that we have an elvish spy in custody. And Fischer..." He paused for a moment, deep in thought.

"Sir?" she asked, standing at the ready.

"If we really don't have a jail, just throw her in a room near the spawn."

I bit my lip, but made a final, desperate effort. "Wait!" I cried out. "I have something else to show you!"

A hand clamped over my mouth with vicious strength. "Yes sir, Splint," Fischer said. "I'm going to take the liberty to knock her unconscious as well."

"Fine, fine," Splint said unconcernedly, already turning back to his work. "And keep those ears of hers covered - I don't want this getting out. We can deal with her later."

I felt my beanie being jammed over my ears, and that was all I knew before Fischer's gauntleted fist came down roughly on my head.

And... here I've been for the past... I don't know how long, honestly. A few months at least, I'm sure. I can hear dwarves talking down the hall on occasion, when the Spawn caged near me aren't screeching hideously and clawing at their doors. If I heard correctly, Mitchewawa isn't the overseer anymore. It's someone new: PaintbrushTurkey. He seems pretty bright, at least - I heard someone saying migrants actually made it to the fortress for once, despite the hundreds of zombies milling outside our gates. That hasn't happened in years. It also sounds like he did an incredible job of upgrading the military, something you'd expect from an army dwarf.

The Spawn Isolation Chambers, where I am, have been designated as an area with restricted access. Splint didn't want anyone in here who wasn't cleared.

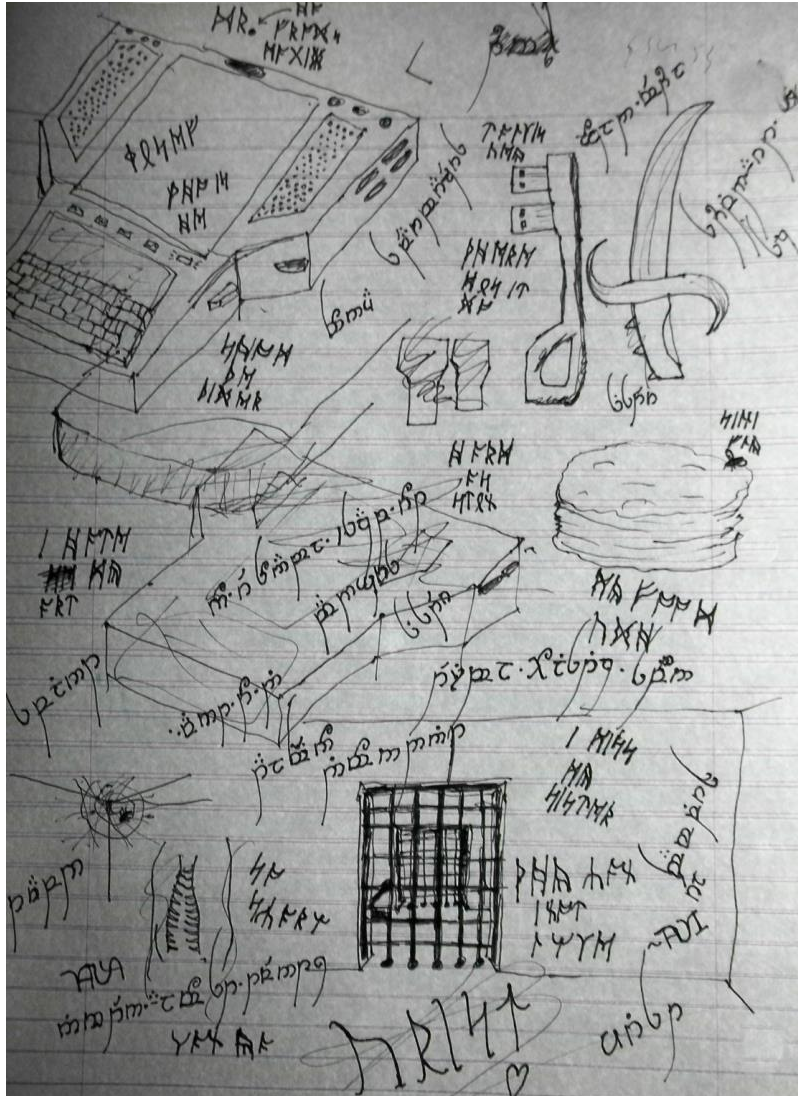
He interrogated me once, early on, but he didn't stay long. "I'll come back when you feel more willing to talk," he told me, wincing at the noise the Spawn were making as he left. His room is up on the top floor, far away from the noise they make; unlike the rest of the dwarves, he doesn't have to sleep through their racket, and he's not used to it. To his credit, though, he did bring me a charcoal pencil... Splint's a kind dwarf at heart. I'm not completely sure, but I don't think he sees me as a spy anymore.

The only person I see regularly is Fischer... I suppose to make sure I haven't escaped or been let free. I don't see how there's much chance of that, seeing how the Holistic Spawn themselves can't break free of these cells. Even so, she refuses to speak to me, and ignores anything I say. On rare occasions, other dwarves come down here to check on the Spawn. Sometimes they look at me, but it's not often any more than a glance.

I used to cry sometimes, after Fischer threw me in here, but that happens less now... I don't see that I'm getting out of here anytime soon. I'll probably be here until the fortress falls.

It's unfair, though... You try to save the fortress, and you wind up incarcerated. You save the lives of two people, and you wind up forgotten... sitting lifeless in a darkened corner like a doll forgotten by its owner... gathering dust, and hoping against hope that the end is coming soon.





## Chapter 10: Strawberry Wine

*The pages following the previous entry are covered in various doodled drawings in charcoal pencil. Vanya isn't the best artist, but you can recognize many of the things she drew: an elven dagger, Mr Frog's PEA, a strange key, and a poorly drawn popup book, among other things. Finally the artwork ends, and you find another entry from the young elven woman.*

They say that if you spend a long enough time with anyone, you know almost everything about them. I suppose the same goes with places you live or stay: I know my little cell as well as I used to know Spearbreakers itself... as well as I used to know my little sister...

The walls in my cell are carved directly from cold, gray stone, and are neither smoothed, nor engraved. The only exit is a rusty iron portcullis that lowers into the floor when a locked lever in the hallway outside is pulled; even if I could get a set of keys from a guard, I wouldn't be able to escape. There's a little toilet at one corner of my cell, and the other corner has a roughly-carved shelf that's supposed to serve as a bed. In between the two corners rests a heavy granite chair, only lightly smoothed.

I get my meals twice a day: once at breakfast, once at dinner. It's usually an old biscuit and a waterskin, dropped in through the hole in the roof of my room. They don't give me alcohol, but I don't really have any problem with that... being an elf does have a few oft-overlooked benefits.

But I have something more important to write about right now... Mr Frog came to see me a few days ago. I hadn't been expecting his visit... I hadn't been expecting anyone at all. Actually, I'd been asleep when he arrived.

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I awoke slowly to the sensation of someone shaking my shoulder. "Vanya," I heard a voice say in my dreams, and it startled me awake.

I rolled away from the wall in a fright and almost fell off the bed-shelf, looking about wildly.

"Careful," someone spoke, as gentle hands kept me from falling and sat me upright.

As my blurry vision cleared, I was able to make out the shape of a cloaked figure. I felt my hands move themselves clumsily to my hair, not so much to smooth it, but to cover my ears. My hair hadn't been brushed in weeks, as I hadn't been allowed a brush. I'd used my fingers as best as I could, but it just doesn't work as well... and I also badly needed to bathe.

My awakener took my upwards-creeping hands and put them in my lap. "Vanya, wake up," the voice said again, and I slowly recognized who it was.

"Mr Frog," I guessed, blinking my closing eyes in an attempt to stay awake, as much as to clear them. Living so close to the cells of the ever-screaming Spawn means you're always tired.

"Correct," he replied. "I said I'd be back."

Still half-asleep, I could feel my lips twisting into a bewildered frown. "Please don't kill me," I begged, my voice breaking. I almost tried to turn and lie back down, as if I could sleep him away, but he caught me again by the arms and kept me sitting up.

"I'm not going to kill you," he said. His voice lacked the cold edge I'd grown familiar to. "I do need you to drink something for me, though."

The fog of sleep was finally beginning to lift from my mind. I looked in his eyes searchingly before I spoke again, in a whisper, "I'm your next guinea pig, aren't I..."

Mr Frog gave a slight shake of the head. "No. This won't do anything harmful to you, and in a few days you can forget you ever drank it." He offered me a small glass filled with a clear, red-tinted liquid.

I made no move to take it, wanting nothing more than for him to leave. I'd saved his life, but it didn't mean I had to like him, and it *especially* didn't mean I trusted him. "Mmm-mmm", I said negatively as I shook my head in protest, turning away.

"Smell it," he suggested. "It *must* taste better than what they've been feeding you. It's from my own private stock, and I don't part with it lightly."

I'm ashamed to admit that that got my attention. He held it up, and I leaned forwards to take a sniff. It was wine, and it smelled deliciously of strawberries. But I still wasn't convinced. "What did you put in it?"

"Nothing harmful."

"But what's in it?"

"Just a truth serum. You don't have anything to hide, do you?"

This last was offered almost as a challenge. If I refused it, he could assume that I *did* have something to hide... but I was already taking the glass in my hands. It tasted wonderful, and I

gulped it down possibly faster than I should have.

"That's a good girl," he said, taking it back and stepping towards the middle of the room. "I'll be back in a day or so. Turn away now - lie back down and go to sleep."

I didn't.

"Turn away, I said," he repeated, the gentleness leaving his voice.

Not wanting to invoke his wrath, I complied. Behind me, I heard the portcullis raise, and then lower again. When I turned back, he was gone. I still haven't figured out how he managed to escape.

My stomach felt queasy that night.

A day later, he returned. I was awake when he arrived, and saw him jump lightly down from the hole in the ceiling, his cloak flapping loudly in the air as he fell the nine feet to the ground.

I was sitting crosslegged on my shelf with my journal in hand, which I put to the side.

"Welcome back," I said softly. "Why are you here now?"

He straightened, and pushed my cell's chair across the floor to where he could sit opposite me, facing me. Taking a notebook and pencil from his cloak, he responded. "I've come to ask you a few questions. Will you respond truthfully?"

"I'm not sure if I'll want to," I said, surprising myself. I wondered why I'd been so blunt.

Mr Frog answered my unasked question. "I see the serum is doing its work. Don't try to fight it, you'll only hurt yourself. I had to invent a new recipe just for you - you should feel special."

"I'm the only elf in a fortress of dwarves... I feel special enough already, thank you."

"And that's exactly why I had to. The elven physiology is different from that of dwarves."

"Now," he continued, "If it worked properly, you'll find yourself compelled to speak your mind, and compelled to speak the truth. Your memory has also been temporarily improved."

"Mr Frog?" I interrupted, "do you really think I'm a spy?"

"I don't jump to conclusions."

"You thought I was a spy before..." I prodded.

His brow furrowed in displeasure. "Originally the fact that you were an elf, that you were listed in the records of Ballpoint as a spy, and that one of my blueprints had disappeared was enough for me to believe it. However, you went to Splint's office, knowing you could be caught. You could still be a spy, for all I know, and just not a very smart one. But for some reason these memories are unclear to me..." He said this last almost to himself, and his voice trailed off.

I decided to take advantage of the silence. "I saved your life," I reminded him, hoping he hadn't forgotten.

It shook him from his thoughts. "That actually works against you. If you were spying on my work, my death would be destructive to your position. It would be in your best interests to save my life."

"But I wasn't spying..." My heart sank as I said it.

"That remains to be seen. Do you have anything you wish to hide?"

"Yes," I whispered.

Mr Frog raised an eyebrow. "And that would be?"

"My ears."

For a moment I thought I caught a smile on his face. "If that's all, then let's begin."

"All right."

He made a note in his notebook and began. "Think back to your childhood. What do you remember?"

"A lot..." It wasn't a lie. For some reason I just wanted to make it difficult for him.

He sighed and looked up at me. "Vanya, if you fight this, it will only take longer."

"I'm sorry, Mr Frog," I said.

"Good," he said. "Now, think back to when you were four. Where did you live?"

"The mountainhome."

"How well do you remember how the mountainhome looked when you were four?"

I almost said "not well", but suddenly found I could recall everything from that age with incredible clarity. I could see my grandmomma in my mind's eye as clearly as if she was there; I saw the old familiar bed where I used to sleep in my granpa's apartment at the mountainhome, the great caravans arriving and departing, the old toys I used to play with. "How do I... how is it so clear? How can I remember it so well?" I asked breathlessly, awestruck.

"The drugs in the liquid you drank yesterday, of course," Mr Frog said dismissively. "Now, tell me about your life as a child. What are some things that helped make you who you are today?"

I found myself almost hallucinating, picturing the beautiful halls of Tathurkeskal in the mountains of The Amber Barb. Everything was so beautiful compared to Spearbreakers. There weren't bodies and bones littering the halls, nor were there mugs piled in the corners. There were almost no dark alleyways at all. Even the skulkers must've had a special home carved out for them. I sent my thoughts toward my Granpa's apartments. "My grandfather was a stonecarver, and my grandmother a metalworker. I lived with them, and my sister. My grandfather never liked us much... sometimes he would yell at us, and tell us we were lucky he'd taken us in. My grandmother defended us, and on occasion he'd get upset at her for that, too. I had to be a mother to my sister, even at the age of four. I was always afraid... so very afraid... I worried we'd be found out, or that Granpa might hurt us. Few dwarves like elves, and my grandfather was among those who hated us most."

I snapped back to reality for a moment, looking at Mr Frog triumphantly. "My sister *was* real. You said she wasn't."

"Your remembering her doesn't mean anything," he said, tapping his notebook with his pencil and writing something down.

I frowned. "And why doesn't it? I remember everything about her," I insisted. "I used to read fairy tales to her at night, *every* night before we went to bed, out of a big book. She wanted to be just like King Cacame, one of the characters. She hated elves like my grandfather did, and wanted to make him proud. She even wanted to join the military eventually, and when we were younger she always wanted us to practice swordfighting."

"Do you remember her face?" He spoke abruptly, shattering my thoughts like a mug through a gem window.

In my mind I pictured my old room; my bed; my sister's bed. I pictured the face of my Granmomma again, so vivid in my mind, and the ever-scowling one of my grandfather. But I paused when I got to my sister... it was blank. I saw nothing. I found it mildly annoying, and I was soon pressing myself harder to remember her.

Mr Frog spoke through the vision, his volume increasing at a slow but steady pace. "Do you

remember her face? Do you remember her voice? Do you remember her laughs or tears, her frowns or smiles? Can you actually recall swordfighting with her at all?"

I saw myself standing in a torchlit room, holding a wooden sword, thrusting and parrying. I tried as hard as I could to place her, but no matter how I tried, I saw no one in that room but myself... I switched time forwards in my mind to when we arrived at Spearbreakers, and saw myself arrive alone, carrying a single bag that carried only my belongings. I relived more memories, but found to my horror that not even one of them contained her. I felt my shoulders droop with shock and disappointment as the realization slowly sucked me from the beauty of my onetime paradise to the cold, hard reality of my prison cell.

"I don't remember her at all," I managed defeatedly in disbelief, my body beginning to shake with repressed sobs. Mr Frog stood and slowly walked to my side, patting my shoulder in a rough imitation of consolation. Several tears trailed down my face.

"It's all right," he said, as if it would be reassuring. "She simply never existed."

I turned to him in anger. "She *did* exist!" I yelled. "She *was* real! I had a sister; she was beautiful and funny, and her name was..." I stopped, searching my memory for something that didn't seem to exist.

He frowned slightly, almost empathetically. "You don't even remember her name..." he said softly, slowly shaking his head.

I broke.

Unhindered, tears cascaded down my cheeks as I shook with sobs, audible for the first time in years. He backed away and began pacing across the room, but I hardly noticed. I'd always felt that my sister had been my whole world; all I had to live for. She'd been the reason I'd kept trying to find a job, the reason I tried so hard to avoid detection, the reason we... the reason *I* moved to Spearbreakers in search of a better life. But to be told she'd never existed; to find I couldn't even remember her name... I'd never felt so alone. Mr Frog's presence in the room made little difference.

"Vanya," he said, and I looked him in the eyes, brushing the hair out of my face and tucking it behind my cursed ears. He seemed uncomfortable... something I'd never seen or even heard of him being. "Vanya," he repeated hesitantly, "it's all right. I've seen this happen before." He didn't seem to know how to react to my crying.

My gaze left his, dropping slowly to the floor. "My sister was real," I insisted weakly, but the fight had gone out of my voice.

"She's real in your mind," he corrected, "and that's all that need matter to you..."

I didn't want to discuss it anymore. I shook my head indelicately, wiping the tears from my eyes. "Let's just talk about something else."

"All right," he agreed, changing the subject. "Do you remember when you first saw your golden bracelet?"

I looked disdainfully at him. "My grandparents said I was two when I arrived at the mountainhome. What do *you* think?"

"Can I assume that you believe it was a gift from your original, elven parents?" he queried.

I sniffed and wiped a stray tear from my face. "No, my grandmother made it for me. She cared about us." The "us" slipped out - I'd meant my sister and I, but had forgotten.

"It wouldn't have stayed on your wrist when you were two. Do you remember when your grandparents gave it to you?"

I thought about it for a moment, but couldn't place the memory. It confused me. "No," I said, shaking my head. "I can't even remember them saying anything about it."

The dwarf sat, picking up his notebook again and writing something down. "Interesting," he said, deep in thought.

"Mr Frog?" I asked hopelessly, looking up and searching his eyes, "Why can't I remember these things? Why can't I remember my sister, or my grandparents giving me my bracelet?"

He scratched his beard ponderingly. "I'm not entirely sure. It's possible your memories were altered."

"Have you ever forgotten anything like that, and can't remember it?"

He did a double take and looked at me curiously before responding. "I'm the one asking the questions. Not you."

Somehow I got the distinct feeling the answer was "yes". I asked another question anyway. "Do you still think I'm a spy?"

"Are you a spy?"

"No."

"Have you ever been a spy?"

"No."

"Are you on the side of Spearbreakers or something else?"

"Spearbreakers."

"Then I believe it. I'm a neurobiological chemist, and I designed what you consumed yesterday to render you incapable of speaking lies." With this said, he tucked his notebook and pencil away in his cloak. "I have enough information now, however. Thank you for your time, Vanya," he finished, as if I had any choice.

He walked over towards me, and injected something into my arm with one of his syringes. He did it so quickly I didn't even have time to tense my muscles at the slight pain. "To return your mind to normal," he explained, putting the empty device away and turning from me.

As he walked towards the portcullis door, I followed him with my eyes. "Mr Frog?" I asked quickly.

He paused, turning back in my direction. "Yes?"

"If you know I'm not a spy, can't I go free now?"

He turned away and began to work with something within his cloak, keeping it carefully out of my sight. "Terribly sorry, but no."

"But I pose no threat to the fortress!"

"Yes, you do. You know too much," he said with a brief glance in my direction.

I was incredulous. Somehow I'd gotten it into my head that I'd be released at the end of his visit. "And you can't just give me one of those amnesiacs Talvi took to make me forget everything?"

The portcullis raised, the lever outside seemingly pulling itself. Mr Frog stepped through and looked back at me through the bars as it lowered again. "I don't have the appropriate equipment," he said simply, and left.

I got off the little bed-shelf where I'd been sitting and stood, stretching my legs and walking to the door. I looked between the bars and watched as the cloaked figure walked out of sight, my last hope of salvation apparently gone. With a heavy sigh, I walked back and laid down on the bed. I picked up my journal, flipping through it absentmindedly as I puzzled over all that had

happened.

Maybe Mr Frog had been right. Maybe I was wrong, and I'd never had a sister at all. Maybe I'd just imagined her to fill gaps in my memory. I had no idea how my own brain worked, anyway. But then, why was I so attached to someone who'd never existed? Why did I care so much about her? And the bracelet... if I'd only acquired it recently, and couldn't even remember how I'd gotten it, why was I so attached to it? Why did I want to keep it in my possession so badly?

Mr Frog's visit raised more questions than it answered.

I put the journal down on the floor and turned towards the wall, wanting to sleep away my confusion. Whatever he'd injected into me was making me sleepy, anyway.

As I slowly drifted from the waking world, a new question emerged: Why had someone altered my mind? Why had someone made me believe I'd had a sister? He'd implied that someone had knowingly changed my thoughts by using magic. Was I really that important?

The last question that lingered before it, too, faded away, was whether or not someone had altered Mr Frog's mind as well.



Chapter 11: The Memory

This is a well-worn journal. It menaces with flaps of binding worn from the back cover by a chainsword blade. The writing is flowing and has its moments of dullness, and you find yourself skipping a number of pointless little stories before Vanya makes another actual journal entry, immediately following a number of crossed out attempts.

Alone... Dwarves use that word often. "I'm forever alone," they say, referencing a dabbling engraver's art as a joke that has a tinge of sadness. But even as they make the joke to someone, they're not fully alone. They *have* someone to talk to, who actually cares about how they're doing, or else the joke couldn't have been made. Jokes require at least two people, and neither one of them can be alone at the time. Of course, the person in question often means a relationship by "forever alone", but in the end, what are they *really* wanting? They want a close friendship with someone; they want someone who cares about them and supports them during their times of tribulations with a helpful smile.

But that's exactly who they make the joke to, so can you really say they're alone? Dwarves may love their booze, but they also love companionship.

I've been completely alone for several months now. There's not a soul in my cell besides myself and a little spider whom, on occasion, I've caught myself talking to almost as if it was a puppy. In a way, even Mr Frog's unexpected visit was welcome to me. For a brief while, I had someone to talk to. He even provided me with a basin of water, an old rag, and a hairbrush afterwards, so I could finally clean myself up.

This journal has become almost my companion. I write in it to express my feelings now; to talk when something confuses me. Where I used to cry, I've begun to write instead. And as any good companion should, it listens, as best as it can. It doesn't tell my secrets or my dreams, and it doesn't ignore me and leave its pages blank and listless. It remembers everything I tell it... but

can you really say that it cares? It's this lack of care about my feelings or my situation that keeps it from being a *true* friend. And therefore, I am alone. In a fairy tale, it would be the perfect opportunity for me to be rescued... but real life is rarely ever like stories.

Recently, however, I found myself with a number of wholly unexpected companions. I've tried several times now to successfully explain what happened... but I've finally decided to write everything down exactly as I witnessed it, completely from my perspective at the time.

I'd laid down on my little bed-shelf one night, hearing the time bells chiming the hour as I drifted off to sleep. At some point, I seemed to awaken, and I thought I saw the familiar form of Joseph's spy, Carena, sitting before me with a knowing smile on her face. Slowly everything faded to black a second time, and I later awoke abruptly in a very unfamiliar place.

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"Wake up, sleepyhead," a cheerful voice said almost mockingly, startling me from my dreamless slumber.

I jerked awake, trying to sit up and get away, but found my arms and legs firmly fastened down with straps of an unusual fabric. Looking about wildly, I took in my surroundings. I was lying on a hospital bed which had the upper half tilted upwards, and surrounded by strange machines and bright lights. There wasn't a torch or flame anywhere in sight, and I'd never seen artificial lights so bright before. The walls were colored white, except for one slanted wall to my left which had a large piece of metal across it like a mirror - so shiny that I could see my reflection.

It all reminded me of horror stories of mad doctors.

A dwarf was standing past my feet, and it was a few seconds before I recognized her: Wari, the lazy nurse from the Spearbreakers hospital. I struggled to get away, uselessly.

"Calm down, girl, there's no reason to fight the restraints," Wari said with a smile, working with various levers and buttons on the machinery nearest her. She seemed to be watching some sort of panel that glowed with light... it was magic. I couldn't recall ever having seen magic before.

"Don't worry. We already know you're an elf, and that's actually partially why you're here," she continued, almost absentmindedly.

I was terrified of what she was going to do, but I laid back against the bed. "Where am I?" I asked breathlessly in a panic. I couldn't recall ever having seen this room in Spearbreakers before.

"You're at Parasol, dear," she said as she worked, tapping the ever-changing screen on her machine.

A strange voice filled the room, seeming to come from everywhere and nowhere. It was a man's voice, and louder than it should've been. "Agent, it's against protocol to tell that sort of thing to the prisoner."

Wari looked up at the mirror on the wall and spoke to it with a humorous chuckle. "Oh, calm down, Eric, it's not like she's going to remember any of it. Plus, if we can calm her down, the

treatment will be more likely to take. And let's not call her a prisoner, hmm?" She turned to me, working with a strange handheld device, with a glass plate on it the same as the machinery. "You're at Parasol, dear," she said again, patting my leg. "I'm Wari, and what's your name?"

I could hear my voice quavering. "I'm V," I replied hesitantly.

She smiled. "V? That's no good, sweetheart, we need your full name. Can you give us your full name?"

I shook my head. I never gave *anyone* my full name.

Again she smiled, condescendingly. "Oh, come on now. If you tell us, we'll let you go sooner. We're not going to hurt you, I promise. Can't you tell me?" She leaned forwards and put her hand on mine. I would've pulled it away, if it hadn't been restrained at the wrist.

"Vanya Carena," I said in a small voice. I'd just broken my rule of keeping my name a secret, but she'd said she knew I was an elf, so what did it matter anymore?

With a little laugh she turned from me and walked slowly back to her machines, tapping at the device she held in her hand before inserting it into a slot. "That's better, dear, much better." She looked at me with an almost friendly smile. "I'm glad you're cooperating, Vanya. We're on your side, you know. Just trying to help you out, and get your help in return."

I shook my head. I didn't want to help *anyone*. I just wanted to get back home. Then it registered that she'd said she wanted to help me, and I was cautious as I asked, "Why do you want my help?"

She turned back to her work. "We'll get to that later, but first I need to ask you a couple questions."

I decided to stall for time. "What is that you're working with?"

"It's a computer, dear," she answered nonchalantly. I hadn't gained nearly as much time as I would've liked. "Now, you remember your childhood, yes? Who were your parental guardians?"

A crackling sound saved me from answering, along with sparks spraying out of one of the metal boxes on the wall across from my feet. Wari saw it and glanced up at the mirror. "Eric, get somebody down here, the Ionization Control has a bad board," she said unconcernedly, muttering something about "stupid electrical equipment". Looking back at me, she told me, "Hold that thought - this'll take just a minute."

A door opened behind my head, out of my field of vision. Someone in a white lab coat like Mr Frog sometimes wore walked over to the sparking equipment and opened it up. I stared in fascination at the many greenish boards it contained - it wasn't like anything I'd ever seen before. The boards had strange pieces of colored metal stuck to them, and were traced all over with tiny gold lines.

In a moment, the worker had removed one of the boards and replaced it with a new one, closed the machine up again and left.

"Now, parents, grandparents, relatives - who took care of you while you were young?" the question came again with a smile.

"Do I have to answer?" I asked in a whisper. I'd given up on escape, but I didn't go around telling everyone about my former life.

The smile vanished and was replaced with a tired, serious glare. "Honey, you ever seen lightning? The bed you're lying on can send a burst of it straight through your skin. Trust me, it isn't something you would enjoy. If you don't give us any trouble, we won't give any to you, deal?"

I bit my lip to keep from crying at the threat. "Mmm-hmm," I managed in affirmative. It was a few seconds before I could collect myself. "My grandparents took care of me."

She turned back to her computer and began tapping at it with her fingers. "All right, and which of them were nicest to you?"

"My grandmother," I said, gulping back tears, "but she's dead now."

"That's all right. What was her occupation? Her job?"

I understood the word "occupation", but at the moment, I was so scared I didn't even care to say so. "She was a cheesemaker," I answered, almost hyperventilating with fear.

As she continued tapping at her computer, I suddenly burst out, "Can you *please* tell me *what's going on??*?"

She stopped and put everything away, giving me her full attention. "There's no reason for you to freak out, okay? Take deep breaths. Just relax. You're being mentally reconditioned in a few ways because of your unique position - an elf in a fortress of dwarves, who's actually capable of keeping your identity hidden. The mental reconditioning will help with a few different things - combat and stealth abilities, for example. It'll also provide us a mental link to you for when we require your assistance. You needn't worry about it getting out that you're an elf - no one will know."

I nodded slowly, taking it all in. "Have you done this before?" I asked quietly, feeling myself slowly calm down.

"Yes, but we've actually never done this successfully with your species," Wari admitted almost sheepishly. "Elves are particularly resistant to mind alteration technology as it is, so we're going to be trying a new approach to try to make the effect last longer than a few weeks. We'll be giving you a special bracelet to attempt to keep your implanted memories from fading."

I had no idea what she'd meant by that, but something else came to my attention, my mind finally processing it. I looked at her suspiciously. "What do you mean, 'assistance'?"

She gave a twisted little smile. "Spy work. You're going to become the perfect undercover agent - you won't even know you belong to us until we need you."

I tugged at my restraints. I couldn't believe what she was saying. "*Belong* to you??" I said in disgust, hearing my voice increase in volume. "Spying on people? I'm *not* going to spy on anyone!"

"Of course you're not, honey," Wari lied reassuringly, walking to my side and injecting something into my arm with a needle. "Just lay back and let the machine finish its magic, deal?"

I felt myself slipping from conscious thought as everything went black...

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I awoke abruptly in a very unfamiliar place.

"Wake up, sleepyhead," a cheerful voice said, startling me from my dreamless slumber.

I tried to sit up, but found my arms and legs firmly fastened down with straps of an unusual fabric. Looking about, I took in my surroundings, and found I was in a room that reminded me of horror stories of mad doctors. A dwarf was standing at my feet, and it was a few seconds before I recognized her: Wari, the lazy nurse from the Spearbreakers hospital. As she approached, I watched, abnormally calm.

"Where am I?" I asked quietly. "I want to go home."

"It's okay, dear," she said soothingly, avoiding my question. "I'm only here to help. What's your name?"

I felt so strangely relaxed. "Vanya."

Wari released my restraints and sat me up in bed, holding out a little golden object. "Do you know what this is?"

I looked at it. It was a bracelet, golden with roses twisting their way around it, and my initials clearly forged into side. "That's my bracelet," I answered in a daze, taking it from her gentle grasp and slipping it over my hand.

"That's right," she said patronizingly. "Good girl. Do you remember your grandmother?"

I looked at her in childlike admiration. "You know about my grandmother?"

She nodded in encouragement. "I know a bit about her, too. Do you remember her job?"

"Yes," I answered innocently. "She was a metalworker. She made this bracelet for me."

"She wasn't a cheesemaker, then?"

I laughed, smiling as I spoke. "Cheesemaker? No, of course not."

"Very good, Vanya!" she said with a nod and a smile. "Make sure you always keep your little bracelet safe." Then she turned to a strange mirror on the wall. "Eric, we're ready to put her back."

I felt myself slipping from conscious thought as everything went black...

~~~

I awoke abruptly in a familiar room I'd grown to despise, yet at the same time call a home. I was lying on the bed-shelf in my Spawn Research Center prison cell.

And I could remember everything I'd just dreamed.

But the dream felt so *real*. Wari, and the computers, and the little device that she'd held that resembled Mr Frog's... Wari talking about my grandmother...

I stopped. My grandmother *hadn't* been a metalworker. I could remember now... I could remember how she used to bring us some of her cheese home from work. I remembered how she used to take me to the market to show me which cheeses were the best, how we would gape over the ones she wished she was good enough to make. She had a little shop I would sometimes help out with on weekends, when I wasn't being tutored. I had been young at the time, hardly eight...

She hadn't been a metalworker at all, and the dream *wasn't* a dream, but an old memory I'd somehow forgotten... perhaps caused by the stupid golden bracelet. The bracelet they'd lied about, making me think my grandmother had made it for me. Making me believe their lies as if they were my own memories.

Thinking about it all made me realize something else: the pull I'd always felt to get my bracelet back was weaker, now... Somehow I simply didn't care as much about it anymore, even *without* knowing it was fake.

I puzzled on it over the course of the day, coming to the conclusion that maybe the bracelet had been designed to *make* me want to keep it close. "*We'll be giving you a special bracelet to attempt to keep your implanted memories from fading,*" Wari had said. Maybe the longer the bracelet was away from me, the more my false memories faded. Maybe the longer it was away, the less pull it had on me, and the less it made me want to have it back.

I remembered the machine that had broken and thrown sparks while I was in the room, and the idea struck me - what if my bracelet was hollow, like those computers? What if it contained "electrical equipment" too?

I decided right then that I needed to destroy it. If it was keeping a hold on my mind, maybe it was keeping me from remembering my sister, too, and with time, that would fade. Maybe destroying it would prove once and for all to Mr Frog that I wasn't the real enemy, and that it was actually Joseph. Wari had to be working for Joseph, too, just like Carena, though they were apparently from different companies - Parasol and Ballpoint.

And at that, I stopped short in my thoughts. *My name had been Carena... Vanya Carena.*

I shared the name of the elven spy who worked for Joseph. There was no way it could be a coincidence, but what did it mean? And how had I forgotten my last name?? How do I even know what memories are mine anymore? If the ones they implanted are just beginning to fade, and the ones they erased are just beginning to resurface, how can I even trust who I am?



*You find the following note appended to the entry, as if she'd written it later:*

That night, as I lay curled on my bed, fast asleep, something hit me in the back. I sat up and looked around until I found the intruding object: a little rock. A glance at the hole in the ceiling revealed nothing, but a glance towards the doorway revealed something I never would've expected to see... not in real life, at least.

It was the face of Urist the Lantern-Jaw... My knight in shining armor had come.  
It was just like a fairy tale.



## Chapter 12: The Rescue

Co-written by Hanslanda

*Vanya's flowing script continues through the following pages, but this appears to be one of the final entries in her journal. Where her next journal lies you cannot say, yet you continue reading the adventures of the atypically dwarven elf.*

Urist the Lantern-Jawed stood in the doorway, peering inwards at me. He wasn't dressed in a suit of shining steel armor like he'd always been before, though, nor did he have his weapon. He looked at me almost in surprise, and suddenly jumped as if startled out of his thoughts. "My god..." he spoke loudly, "It's you!"

I hadn't expected him to remember me, and I felt a tinge of color creeping into my cheeks as I stumbled through my reply, "I'd hope I'm me, but I'm not so sure these days..."

I felt almost ashamed to be sitting before him in such a sorry state, but he didn't seem to care, only shaking his head at me in wonderment. "You saved me. You tackled a spawn, completely unarmed."

"I..." I hesitated. I'd tackled *him*, not the spawn. I wondered if maybe it wasn't me he was remembering after all, but I worried that if I denied it, he'd leave. "Yes, I guess I did... I just had to save you." The last part was true, at least.

He paused for a moment, taking everything in. All I could take in was the fact that *he* was

there, talking to *me*. *Me*, the skulker girl no one ever noticed, holding a conversation with the most handsome dwarf in the fortress.

It could've been Christmas.

Urist grabbed the portcullis bars with his hands and shook them gently, testing their strength. He asked curiously, "But why are you in here?"

A prison cell twenty feet from two imprisoned spawn really wouldn't have been my choice for the location of a first date. I shook my head disappointedly, wishing I was somewhere else. Finally, I cautiously said, "I know too much..." I couldn't tell him the truth: that I was accused of being a spy. That would *really* not be the way to make a good first impression.

He looked at me suspiciously. "You know too much? About what? What could you possibly know that would give someone the right to put you in this hellhole?"

I paused. I did know too much... but it had little to do with Spearbreakers. "Mr Frog's plans, I guess. Or maybe Spearbreakers itself," I lied, shrugging and hoping he wouldn't keep asking questions.

Fortunately, he didn't. "Well, no one deserves this. I'm going to get you out - I owe you that much, at least. Give me a few hours, and I'll get you out of here. But first... Miss, what is your name?"

I smiled despite my best attempts to hide my blissful ecstasy: my crush actually cared enough to ask my name. I gave it to him eagerly. "Vanya. My name is Vanya." Then I paused, shocked at what I'd done.

*I'd given him my name. My elven name.* Since he'd arrived, I'd been so happy that I'd forgotten: I'm an elf. My heart sank, my hopes shattered: *all* dwarves hate elves. In shame, I covered my pointed ears with my hands, silently cursing my heritage.

Urist interrupted my thoughts with a frown and a shake of his head. "You saved my life. Being an elf doesn't change that."

I looked up at his face, my eyes widening in surprise.

"Wait for me," he said quietly as he turned away, vanishing into the shadows, "I will return soon, Vanya."

I could hardly contain my excitement and happiness. Urist didn't care! Elves are so often discriminated against (for obvious reasons), but Urist didn't care; he was willing to give me a chance. I laughed happily, the sound of my voice echoing through the dim, flickering light of the Spawn Research Center. I was smiling, twirling, dancing about the room as I gathered up my few belongings, my thoughts often straying to the brave, handsome, gentlemanly dwarf with the lantern jaw.

I'd never been so happy.

I waited for him, sitting on my bed and watching out the portcullis bars, dreaming of true love and romance. So wrapped up in my thoughts was I that I didn't notice the footsteps in the hallway above, until a rope fell from the feeding hole in the roof of my cell. I glanced upwards - it was Urist, holding the rope tightly. I ran over to it and tried to pull myself upwards, but found to my embarrassment that I could hardly lift my own weight. Exercises in a prison cell only go



so far towards keeping your muscles in good condition.

"Help!" I whispered up to him.

He began pulling me upwards as I climbed, and with our combined effort, I was soon at the top.

Smiling as prettily as I could, I thanked him gratefully. He only nodded in response and handed me a cloak. "It'll hide your ears," he explained. "It's raining blood above, so no one will question it."

I took the hooded cloak and put it on, pulling the hood down over my head. He was already leaving towards the workshops, and I followed, having to almost jog to keep up with his long strides. "Wait!" I whispered. "Where are we going?"

"There's an early elven caravan here," he said, never slowing his pace. "If I can get you up there, no one will expect a thing. It's too dangerous for you to stay at Spearbreakers anymore"

I nodded in disappointment, feeling a familiar sinking sensation in my chest, any thoughts of romance having been soundly beaten into dust. "I won't forget you, Urist," I whispered quietly. But he didn't hear, and we continued towards the stairs.

A loud drumming began, a rhythmic *rum-pum-pum-BOOM-pum*. Urist halted his movement, and I almost slammed into him. "Damn it!" he cursed, scowling. "How did they know?"

I didn't understand. "What?"

"The drums - it's the call for all military units to station themselves at the caravan. They know we're coming. We are going to have to go down instead."

"What??" I exclaimed again, this time in surprise. "I can't go down there!" I was fine in the upper layers, but the mines?? So deep underground? "I can't see in the dark like a dwarf, you know..."

He sighed ruefully. "We have no choice. We must go."

I nodded slowly, biting my lip. Urist grabbed my hand and took me with him, and for a moment, his touch was the only thing on my mind, and it strengthened my resolve.

We passed several soldiers on the way towards the stairs, none of whom paused to look at us. Anyone would've mistaken us for a blacksmith and his wife - a thought I took an odd sort of pleasure in. But it wasn't long until we were on our way down. However, several flights below I could see soldiers checking the ears of passing dwarves. "The stairways aren't safe," I told Urist, pulling at his arm to slow his descent. "There's only one stairwell in Spearbreakers, and they'll be watching for me."

"Do you have a better idea?" he asked doubtfully with a raised eyebrow.

I nodded. "I'm basement class..." I admitted. "I know of hidden passageways most people wouldn't dream of."

For a moment, I actually thought I saw him smile. "Lead the way," he said, stepping back to follow.

I led Urist back up the stairs to the living quarters. Past the Spawn Research Center there was an old mine with numerous tunnels branching off from it, leading underground. Most of them were small, dark, and tight... but being terrified of small spaces is better than being terrified of how the Hammerer is about to smash your skull.

We turned the corner and smashed into a giant of a dwarf, wearing full armor and carrying a massive warhammer. I fell backwards in surprise.

The giant furrowed his brow threateningly and spoke, rumbling in a deep voice. "I'll ask ya to not touch me without permission, thank - " His glance fell on me as I got to my feet behind Urist. Recognition slowly spread over his face, and he looked at me in suspicion. "Wait, is that a futigi... fugiti..." he stumbled over the word, pointing at me. "A runner?"

Urist stepped forwards, his muscles bulging as he threw a powerful right hook that caught the giant square in the nose, sending him several steps backwards and his warhammer clanging to the floor.

I hadn't expected Urist to hit him; it came as a complete surprise. I heard myself yell in astonishment.

Urist heard me yell, too, and looked in my direction. My eyes widened in fear as I saw the giant pull back for a punch. "Urist!" I screamed, trying desperately to warn him.

He turned back, barely in time to dodge the punch. He threw a counterswing, but the giant stopped it in midair, catching the punch in his huge palm as easily as if it had been all in play. With Urist's right hand caught firmly in his grip, he pounded a fist into Urist's side, knocking the wind out of him.

I looked around to see if anyone had noticed and would come to help, but no one had. Turning back, I saw the giant toss Urist onto the ground like a ragdoll, towering over him and pummeling his face with punches that surely would've knocked me unconscious. I felt as though I could feel every blow Urist received, my eyes tearing up at his pain. It had all been to protect me...

"Stop! Please, stop!" I cried out, rushing forwards and grabbing the giant's arm, throwing myself in the way.

He looked at me in surprise, and his face seemed to go blank as he processed what was going on, his arm hovering in midair. Finally, he called, letting Urist go. "I... I'm sorry, missus," he said slowly, an ashamed look on his face. "I din't mean to be upsettin' a ladyfolk like yourself... I just... He hit me first... I din't... I'm sorry." He was honest, and he seemed to be gentle at heart. But I was still mad at him.

I offered Urist my hand, pulling him to his feet. "I thought you were going to arrest us," Urist said, feeling his nose tenderly.

The giant looked at Urist as if he was retarded. "Arrest you? I jus' wanted t'ask why she was runnin' away. I'll tell ya I don't think I've ever heard of anybody stealing anything or anything... I just figurt you made Splint angry - he gets angry a lot; goes through so many mugs."

Urist shook his head. "What she did isn't important. We have to hide; someone will have heard our little scuffle."

The giant nodded. "Let's go into my room, right here. I'll keep watch."

We were ushered into the big soldier's tiny room, which seemed much too small for him. He took position outside, watching the hallways.

I ripped a small, tattered piece of cloth from the sleeve of my blouse and began to wipe the blood from Urist's face. "I'm so sorry," I whispered. "That was all my fault."

Urist took my hand gently in his and moved it away, looking at me curiously. "How was it your fault?"

"If I hadn't yelled, you wouldn't have looked towards me, and you would've won."

He let go of my arm, smiling and shaking his head. "He outmatched me anyway."

I didn't believe it for a second. "But you're so brave. Fighting spawn, rescuing me from prison, attacking an armored soldier with your bare hands..." I paused, glancing away in embarrassment. "I wish I wasn't always so afraid."

He chuckled and gave me a little crooked smile. "Oh, I was very afraid. I thought that spawn was going to eat me, and that big fellow was going to demolish me."

I never could have expected him to say that. "You were afraid??" I asked incredulously. "But you never act like it!"

Urist shook his head. "Fear doesn't make you weak. Courage is doing something brave, even when you're scared. Being afraid keeps you sharp - it keeps you alive."

His words seemed wise, and I puzzled over them for a moment, looking at him in wonder. A soldier with a sharp mind is a rarity, especially in these parts... I began to wonder just who he'd been before he came here.

Unannounced, the giant-dwarf burst into the room, and I could hear soldiers yelling in the distance. "They're a'comin'!" he said. "Come on, let's get ya'll outta here all quicklike!"

Startled out of my thoughts, I did something I still can't believe I did - I leaned forwards and gave Urist a brief kiss on the lips. As he leaned away in surprise, I pulled my hood down tightly over my head, terribly embarrassed. I'd never felt my face so hot before.

Urist recovered and grabbed my hand, pulling me behind him. It was all I could do to follow. I was half in a blissful dreamworld of my own making, reliving the brief kiss in my mind as we rushed back towards the stairwell. Giant-dwarf led the way, bowling over soldiers like kittens as we descended into darkness. Down, down, down we went, far past the deepest I'd ever been, and yet still on we continued.

Without warning, he stopped, looking at us with a grim determination. "I want you two to go down until you see a fresh-carved hallway. Run through as fast as you can, I'll stay here. Meet up with me in the old malachite vein."

Urist didn't move. "Who are you? And why are you helping us?"

Giant-dwarf smiled. "I'm Hans. You seem like nice folk, and no nice lady deserves to be killed." He waved us away. "Now go on, scoot! Run on ahead, fast as you can, and don't stop!"

Soldiers poured down the stairwell, far behind us. I could hear their steel and adamantite boots clanging against the cold, hard stone as they ran.

Urist turned and led me forwards at top speed, following Hans' instructions, between a huge number of pillars that lined the walls of a tall, narrow hallway.

I looked behind us. The soldiers were running towards us, past where Hans had stood only a moment before. I prayed he was all right.

Seconds later it was my own life I was praying for, as behind us, pillars began collapsing. For every pillar that shattered, a huge section of the ceiling far above caved in, flinging boulders and debris in all directions. The collapsing of the pillars increased in tempo, getting faster and faster, and sending up a huge cloud of dust that threatened to swallow us whole.

I screamed in terror, but my voice was lost in the incredible cacaphony of falling rock.

"Run, Vanya!" Urist shouted, spurring me on as we sped past pillar after pillar. "Don't look back!"

I did as he ordered, feeling the shockwaves pounding into my back; feeling the earth shake as the ceiling collapsed closer and closer to our heels, the falling stone threatening to crush us alive. The rushing dust crept forwards until it enveloped us even as we ran, and I tripped, pitching us forwards in a heap just past the last pillars as they, too, shattered and fell.

A gust of air and choking dust rushed past us as the end of the hallway crashed shut with all

the finality uncountable tons of earth could muster, the rocks piling themselves only feet from where we lay panting, at the edge of a deep chasm.

We were safe, separated from the army of Spearbreakers by a mighty wall of rock.

As we got to our feet, coughing on the dust, we heard several more crashes as a few remaining pillars collapsed, somewhere deep within the shifting rubble.

At our feet was an invisible ledge, and what seemed like miles below where we stood, I could faintly make out the scattered, flickering fires of the forgotten beasts that lurked beneath the fortress. But neither the light nor the heat reached upwards to us from the depths, and everything around me was the blackest of black.

"Urist," I whispered, "I can't see..." The last of the torches had been crushed within the hallway that Hans had collapsed behind us, and unlike a dwarf, I couldn't see in the dark.

I felt a strong hand take mine. "I'll lead you," Urist said, and we continued onwards into the thick blackness.

"What now?" I asked him finally. "There's no way I can leave, they'll be watching for me."

"They're after me, too, now... I guess we could stay down here," he suggested, though I could tell his heart wasn't in it.

I shook my head. Even with Urist with me, walking among deep chasms in total darkness wasn't my idea of romantic, even *after* having been a resident of Spearbreakers for several years.

"No," I said. "I don't like it down here."

There was silence for a while between us, before he finally spoke. "You kissed me."

With all the excitement that comes with almost getting crushed to death, I'd forgotten. I blushed deeply. "I... I'm sorry," I began. "I didn't -"

He chuckled, seemingly amused. "It's okay, I'm not upset."

I bit my lip pensively. "But I'm an elf... No dwarf could ever love an elf."

Urist stopped walking, and I felt his hand rest gently on my shoulder. "If you matter to someone, they won't mind that you're an elf. *I* don't mind. I can't get involved for other reasons, but you being an elf has nothing to do with it."

I didn't believe him, really. "You can't get involved," I repeated quietly to myself, a saddened sigh of disbelief escaping my lips as I tried to take it in.

"I'm married," he explained softly.

I was in love with a married man. My foolish heart had chosen for its first love someone I could never have. I couldn't help the tear that rolled down my cheek as I spoke. "That... would explain things..." I mumbled, stumbling through my words.

"Not entirely," he responded quietly, sighing. "She left me before I came here, and took my child with her. She said I wasn't the same person anymore, after all the terrible things I'd done. And... I think she was right."

I wiped the tear from my cheek. I'd had no idea he'd been through so much... He seemed so depressed - I wanted to comfort him. "Well, if you're a hero *now*... you must've been at least inspiring before."

His hand left my shoulder as he replied, "I'm not really that much of a hero. I get lucky

sometimes, I guess, and I try to do the right thing... I've known heroes, and they all have something... something *special* about them." his voice trailed off.

"I think you *do* have something special about you. You seem to have a purpose..." I paused in thought. "I wish I had a purpose..." I let my sentence hang in the air unfinished, as thoughts raced through my mind. "My bracelet!" I gasped. I couldn't believe I'd forgotten about it. Suddenly, I knew what had to be done.

"What?" Urist asked quizzically.

"I have to destroy it! Mr Frog has it. If we can destroy it, I can get you pardoned."

"Why?" he asked, sounding confused. "What's so important about a bracelet?"

I hesitated, unwilling to explain everything. Being an elf was bad enough, but my being an elf who'd had her mind rewritten was something he'd be unlikely to believe. I shook my head. "I... I can't tell you," I said reluctantly. "It's the key to a puzzle Mr Frog's been trying to figure out. We have to destroy it."

"All right," he sighed resignedly, "we'll destroy it. But how do we accomplish that? We're at least a mile underground, far from any help, alone, and being hunted by soldiers of Spearbreakers caliber. We have no supplies, no weapons, and you can't even see in the dark."

"We're *not* alone," I reminded him. "Hans told us to meet him at 'the old malachite vein'."

"Vanya, I don't even know where that is," Urist said gently, deflating my hopes.

Then something strange happened. Out of the blackness, a strange green-white light shone, so bright I could just make out Urist's face. It appeared to be coming from something attached to his belt, and he took it out, looking at it in fearful awe. It was a broken jade spearpoint, and the whole thing was glowing with a ghostly light, tiny runes engraved in its surface glowing the brightest of all, as if a great power shone through them. As he rotated it in his hands, the glow seemed to dim and brighten, depending on where he pointed it.

Urist laughed nervously, his chiseled features dimly outlined by the spearhead. "This is insane. I've lost my mind, haven't I? Please tell me you see this too."

"I think it's pointing the way," I said hesitantly, brushing the surface of it delicately with my fingertips in wonder.

The nervous smile left his face. "I'm not crazy, then... This is... This is too much, Vanya."

I looked up at his face and beamed at him in delight. "I *told* you there was something special about you." It was surely a gift from the gods; one of them was showing us the way, and our mission could not fail. Well, unless it was Armok... then we'd likely die gruesomely in a sadistically hilarious manner, but I tried not to think about that possibility. Somewhere up there, someone was looking out for us.

Nodding slowly, Urist spoke. "We... We'd better go, then. Vanya... I think you have a purpose now."

We set off swiftly in the direction the spearhead pointed us. This time, we weren't fugitives fleeing blindly. No, *this* time... we were on a mission from the gods.





Hans, the miner/soldier. Art by Splint

## Chapter 13: A Confrontation

Co-written with Hanslanda

*You flip through the pages of the stolen journal, searching for another entry, but this next appears to be the final one in the series. It, as all the others are, is undated and unsigned, save for a tiny five-pointed star at the end, which you've come to believe is Vanya's self-chosen symbol.*

When you're in the undesirable basement class, people are always looking to hunt you out like a common rat. In most fortresses there are small rewards for bringing us in, and during hard times, even other skulkers might turn against you for a bit of currency. As a result, if you trust everyone you meet, you invariably wind up as zombie food. When you're an elf on top of that, in a culture with racism so ingrained in them that they find elves unacceptable, it's hard to make yourself trust anyone at all.

That's all it really is, in the end. It's racism. Most dwarves are prejudiced against elves to such extremes that they believe themselves to be better in every way. But what if you're an elf raised in a dwarven culture? What if you're brought up to believe that your own kind are horrible, heartless, tree-hugging, flesh-eating monsters? I have the added problem of not even knowing anymore what parts of my memory are real.

It's hard enough when you can't trust or love anyone else, but *I* can't even love or trust *myself*... just because of who I am.

~~~

Urist and I continued onwards through the darkness, following the guiding light of Urist's magical spearhead. I'd heard of things like this happening in stories, but to see it happening firsthand was almost too much to believe, and with my crush by my side, I felt as if I was traveling in a dream.

Urist broke the silence hesitantly as we walked, his voice echoing through the caverns. "You know, Vanya... it is possible that Hans is only a trap."

I shook my head and brushed my hair out of my eyes, tucking it into my hood. "No, I know people. Hans is too honest and simple-minded to do something like that."

He looked at me curiously. "How are you so sure?"

"I'm a skulker... eventually you gain a sense of who can be trusted."

He nodded slowly, thinking. "All right. I will trust your judgment."

We soon reached the old malachite vein, and the spearpoint's glow faded to nothingness, leaving me once more in utter blackness as I felt about for Urist's sturdy form. He noticed and took my hand, and together we continued onwards.

Suddenly I heard the soft stomp of shoed feet, and someone rumbled, "I'll ask ya kindly to say who you are, and don't ya take another step."

"Hans, it's only us," Urist replied in a low voice.

Hans breathed a sigh of relief. "Oh, good, I was worried there. Well, I've got an idea to get you out of here. I've got my pick with me, and we could dig a -"

I interrupted him softly. "We're not leaving, Hans."

"We need to get to Mr Frog's quarters," my companion added.

Our benefactor sounded suspicious. "Now, I don't mind helpin' you folks, but I can't be havin' you hurt Mr Frog - that's goin' too far."

I shook my head, hoping he could see the gesture in the dark. "I don't want to hurt anyone," I assured him. "I just need to get to my bracelet. It's important."

"Well..." Hans said, thinking it through, "so long as you mean it. I'll help you get to the bracelet, but it's going to be really hard. There's soldiers everywhere upstairs. They're watching all the main hallways like hawks. Everyone is being searched, and there's a few squads down here searching for you, too."

"They will be sorry if they catch us," I heard Urist say grimly beside me. "I won't kill anyone, but I will not pull my punches, either, if it comes to violence."

Hans seemed to agree. "It's true a broken nose heals. Come on, now, let's get you two back up there - follow me right quick."

"Wait, Hans," Urist said, pulling me after him. "You said a moment ago that we could dig our way to freedom... Could you dig into one of the unused hallways around Mr Frog's room, or perhaps a ventilation shaft?"

"That'd be easy - I could get us real close like. But ya'll need to know, mining is noisy work once you get going - they'll know we're comin'." I could almost imagine Hans grimacing as he added, "And I'm sorry, missus, but it'd be terribly messy."

I laughed softly and replied, "A little mess is the least of my worries."

Urist and I sat down in the darkness and waited for Hans to finish, talking occasionally to ease

the monotony and break the silence. Urist seemed unwilling to relate many of his past adventures to me yet, nor did he seem overly eager to pry into my life, but he did make for good conversation, if you didn't mind doing a lot of the talking - and I didn't. It had been longer than I could remember since I had someone who would actually *listen* to me, and it wasn't *too* too long before I found myself relating much of my past to him, scooting closer to where he sat until we almost touched. Occasionally he would ask a question or respond to one of mine, but mostly, he just listened and let me talk. I like that about him - he's a true gentleman, and there are far, far too few of those remaining in the world these days.

It was several hours later before Hans returned, saying he'd finished the shaft. "Just follow close to me, now, hear?" he said, as Urist took my hand to lead me. When we reached the tiny tunnel, Hans continued on ahead, but Urist put me in the middle, saying he would be rearguard, just in case.

We started forwards, ducking to avoid the low ceiling, and I felt my old fears return: the walls were so close around me... almost as if they wanted to crush me between them, like the collapsing hallway we'd escaped earlier that night. I tried my best not to, but I began to hyperventilate, the sound of my breath joining the sounds of our shuffling feet echoing through the tunnel.

Hans seemed to guess at my fear and started talking. "Yep, this here gabbro is very stable. Hardly ever shifts on its own. We aren't in an earthquake area. No sir, this stuff ain't movin' any time soon. The way I dug it, this tunnel is perfectly safe in an earthquake anyways. I know a couple things about tunnels. I'm a good miner, don't worry."

Though I felt bad about how he thought I didn't trust his work, I was too scared to worry about it overmuch, trying not to whimper in fright.

Finally, finally, we made it to the end, leaving the freshly mined passage and entering a wide, open area.

"See?" Hans said, patting me roughly on the back. "We made it just fine. Perfectly safe, as I told ya."

I nodded shakily, shivering gently, my eyes closed tightly. "Mmm-hmm... I'm fine, I just... I just need some light."

I felt around frantically for my friends, and felt Urist's careful grip as he took my hand in his. "What is it?" he asked quietly, his voice seemingly amplified by the rock walls around us. "Are you all right?"

I swallowed and tried to calm myself as best I could, but it didn't help enough. "I'm fine," I managed after a moment. "I usually don't mind the dark, but I can't stand small spaces, and the dark makes it so much worse." They were quiet, and suddenly I realized they were likely staring at me curiously, and I blushed. "I'm fine, really," I attempted to reassure them, opening my eyes, though everything was still black as pitch. "Let's just go."

"I ain't never met a dwarf what got scared of the dark before," Hans intoned deeply. "Why can't you see in the dark?"

I grimaced slightly and pulled down my hood, tucking my hair behind my pointed elven ears.

Hans whistled softly, and said, "I ain't never met no elf before... I thought you was a dwarfgirl this whole time. No wonder you don't like the dark none - you lot are used to moonlight and forests, ain't ya?"

He was stereotyping me, but at least he hadn't said something along the lines of "you'd better not think of eating me". Dwarves are generally taught that elves need to eat sentient creatures to survive... and that wouldn't have made for a very comfortable conversation. Still, he hadn't said it scornfully, and most dwarves would have.

"I was raised as a dwarf," I explained hesitantly, "so I don't care for moonlight much more than you do... but I still can't see in the dark."

Hans chuckled. "I think your ears are pretty. I wish mine were pointy-like." I giggled in spite of myself, and he continued in a whisper, "Wait, do you hear better than us? Was I talkin' really loud to you, like I was shouting? I'm so sorry!"

I actually laughed a little; in a way, his concern was cute. "No, you're fine," I said with a friendly smile. "I don't think I really hear much better than you do... but we really *should* get going, though."

So we set off again, Urist leading me. After a short while, we began to enter the torch-lit hallways of the fortress proper, and I began to recognize my surroundings again. I gave a sigh of relief. We were walking through the apartment level of the fortress, and Mr Frog's room was just around the corner ahead. But as we turned that final corner, I realized we'd made a serious mistake.

Standing idly outside his door was none other than Mr Frog himself, and standing behind him was a squad of the best Spearbreakers soldiers: Draigneau, Fischer, Feb, Jack Magnus, and Awl. As he saw us, a sly grin tugged at the corners of his lips. I seemed to notice before my newfound friends did, and I grabbed their hands, frantically trying to pull them back.

Mr Frog spoke to those behind him with a satisfied smile. "And here she is now. As I told you, Fischer, she's very predictable." Then he frowned, narrowing his eyes suspiciously. "Those two with her - aren't they your soldiers?"

"Not anymore," Fischer growled in her deep voice, pulling her pike from behind her and sending it into a rapid spin with the flick of her wrist. "Boys, let's fuck 'em up." The others in her squad readied their weapons, and she led the charge against us.

"Let's go - back to the tunnel," Urist commanded, turning and leading us back the way we came at a run. I'd had a good night's sleep, and though the sprinting came easy now, I was sure my legs would be sore the next morning.

As we turned the second corner, we almost smashed into a couple macedwarves, their weapons already drawn.

"I was hoping we could skip this part," Urist sighed.

Hans laughed jovially, a great grin on his face. "Aw, I love me a good scrap!" he roared, charging forwards almost joyfully. Urist followed him closely behind.

Hans threw his full weight against the macedwarf on the left, bowling him over and sending him sliding over the smoothed floor, his armor clinking. Urist's charge only knocked the other back a step, but he followed it up with a punch to the nose. His opponent heavily swung his mace, but Urist ducked to avoid it and rammed his shoulder into the macedwarf's stomach, picking him up by the arm and slamming him roughly on his back. At the same time, Hans punched the other in the head, knocking him out. The second macedwarf kicked Urist in the stomach as Hans rushed over and grabbed his leg, swinging him in a circle as if it was an Armokian Hammer-toss, and sending the poor soldier spinning into a wall, unconscious.

I watched in horror. What they were doing was considered traitorous, and it was all to protect *me*. Fischer would have them killed if she caught them.

Suddenly Urist caught my hand and almost pulled me over as he led the three of us out of the trap. "Faster!" he called out as we ran for our very lives, but it was useless: several large squads of soldiers emerged from a hallway far ahead of us and began to approach at a jog. With Fischer somewhere behind, and no side hallways in between, we were trapped.

Urist turned to me and grabbed my arms gently, looking into my eyes with a grim determination. "Vanya, you have to go *now*. You'll only get one chance."

I shook my head, tears pooling in my eyes as I looked into his. "I can't leave you," I whispered. "They'll kill you; I'll never see you again, and I only just found you!"

Urist shook me gently. "Vanya, you said I had a purpose, do you remember? *This* is my purpose - to buy you some time to do what you have to do. I owe you my life, and now I'm repaying the debt by saving yours."

I started to cry. "But you'll *die*!" I cried out in anguish. "You *can't* die!"

His jaw set. "You said wanted a purpose. This is it. Destroy your bracelet so Mr Frog will pardon you as you said he would, but be quick. Don't cry for me, Vanya. You gave me an extra year to my life, and without you I would already be dead."

I sniffed, trying to control my weeping. "I'll never forget you, Urist..." I whispered, as he and Hans turned from me and began to run towards the far corner.

"Follow closely!" Urist called out over his shoulder.

I ran forwards, blinking back the tears to keep my eyes from blurring. Ahead of us, Fischer's squad rounded the corner.

Hans roared and charged forwards, met with battlecries from the approaching dwarves.

"For Sarvesh!" Urist yelled, lowering his head like a bull and hurling himself courageously into the fray as soldiers stumbled backwards, stunned. Hans raised his huge fists and sent first one, then another legendary fighter sprawling on the floor.

My eyes blurred with tears I was unable to keep back as I passed them, helplessly watching as Fischer pounded her mighty fist into Urist's side.

I turned the corner as the rest of the Spearbreakers army closed in, surrounding my two friends. I knew in my heart that they had no chance, and I swore I'd never forget Urist's bravery and unselfishness. If I ever bore a child... I'd name it after him.

I didn't have long to reflect, however. As I turned onto Mr Frog's hallway, I found myself toe to toe with five armored swordsdwarves, and I'd forgotten to cover my ears after showing them to Hans. "It's the elf!" one exclaimed with a growl, and they pulled their weapons.

I'm not sure how to explain what happened next. It all happened so quickly I didn't have time to think, or even understand what had saved my life.

As the first swung his blade out towards me, I found myself leaping forwards over their heads, springing off the leader's shoulders and landing a solid kick on the back of his head. They watched me in surprise as I flew through the air, landing firmly on my feet. They whirled to face

me and struck out with their weapons, which glinted evilly in the torchlight.

It was all as though it was reflex - not a thought was going through my mind. I felt paralyzed with fright, but my arms seemed to move by themselves, parrying two of their weapons with my hands on the flats of their blades; positioning one of them to block the third. Time seemed to crawl, and I leaned backwards horizontally to dodge the fourth's wide arc, which whistled over my face as I caught another soldier beneath the jaw with my outstretched foot and sent him tumbling slowly away, cracking his head against a wall.

As I righted myself, a blade stabbed towards my chest like lightning. I leapt lightly into the air to avoid it, landing barefoot on its flat side and springing upwards over their heads again in a flip. They yelled in anger as they noticed their fallen comrade, but I, upside down and vertical above them, grabbed two of their heads with my hands and smacked them together with a strength I hadn't known I had.

I landed on my hands and one knee, and my eyes seemed to clear, everything returning to normal. I looked upwards in time to see two unconscious soldiers crumple to the ground.

The last soldier dropped his sword in shock at the sight of all his squad mates lying listless at his feet. He seemed about my age, somewhere around twenty, with a short beard and a handsome face. He looked at me as if I was an alien from another world, and held up his hands as if to ward me off as he began to slowly back away. "Who... what *are* you?!?" he gasped, terror in his eyes.

Getting painfully to my feet, I took in what I'd done, my eyes widening in astonishment. "I'm... I'm sorry, I have no idea... I didn't mean to -"

"Stay away from me!" he yelled, retrieving his fallen sword and stumbling backwards. "Just stay away!"

I bit my lip, wanting desperately to apologize. I hadn't meant to hurt anyone. "I'm sorry!" I said again, taking a step closer. "Please, you have to understand, I don't know how I..." My efforts were useless - the young swordswarf turned and sprinted down the hallway, his boots clanging against the floor, jabbering almost madly about monsters in the fortress.

I brushed my hair out of my face, replacing my hood sadly as I knelt and checked for the pulses of the fallen soldiers.

But I *was* a monster - I knew that now. How else had I defeated five swordsmen in under a minute? How much else had I forgotten, how much else had Parasol erased from my mind?

I was relieved to find that I hadn't killed anyone, but I wasn't safe yet: behind me, I could hear the familiar stomp of metal boots as the entire Spearbreakers army approached where I sat. Standing quickly, I ran forwards towards my goal: Mr Frog's room.

I threw open the door in a haste, rushing inside and closing it fast and hoping that Fischer hadn't seen where I was.

"It's unusual for someone to put themselves into a trap they know exists," a deep, all-too-familiar voice spoke. It was Mr Frog, putting away some equipment and stepping out of the shadows. "...but it's even more unusual for someone without military training to take down five adept soldiers. How did you accomplish that?" he asked curiously, removing his sawpike from a wall.

"You know I'm not a spy," I reminded him, trying to reassure him and buy myself some time. My eyes darted about the room, looking for my bracelet, but I didn't see it anywhere.

He switched his sawpike on, and the buzzing sound sounded newer, even sharper somehow. "But do I really know that, now? Perhaps my potion didn't work at all, and all you told me were

lies." Mr Frog advanced slowly, cautiously, holding the spinning blade out far ahead of him. I began to back away to avoid what would be certain death at his hands.

"I didn't lie," I told him quietly. "I found out things after you left - things I hadn't known before. But where's my bracelet?"

Suddenly he leapt forwards with a mighty swing. I fell backwards and scooted away from him - once, twice, thrice he struck the spinning blade downwards towards me, and I only just barely managed to roll away from each stroke as it clanged against the floor, throwing sparks onto my arms and shredding the cloak Urist had given me. Finally I managed to get away, leaping to my feet and running to the other side of the room.

"Come, I know about your apparently extensive combat training now," Mr Frog said soothingly, trying to tempt me into attacking him. "You need not hide your abilities anymore. Strike me down - I have no training, no experience... only a weapon." He walked between the many tables, spinning his sawpike idly in his hands as he approached.

I prayed for something like the miracle of Urist's spearhead, or what had happened with the swordswarves outside Mr Frog's room, but nothing happened. "Mr Frog, I need you to listen to me - I need to tell you something important!"

"Then say it," he said simply, stabbing towards me with his blade.

I leapt backwards and smashed my back painfully into a table, barely ducking in time as the screaming weapon swung around a second time for my head. I crawled beneath the table and clambered to my feet on the other side. "*I need my bracelet!* I can't explain until I have it!" It was close, and I could tell - I could feel the old longing to keep it safe beginning to return. Suddenly, I didn't want to destroy it - I just wanted to take it and run far, far away. The gears in my mind seemed to shift, and I decided that that's what I'd do: I'd take my bracelet and run.

Mr Frog stopped, looking at me curiously as if I was on display under a magnifying glass. "Why did you always want your bracelet so...?" he asked, half to himself. "You seem almost obsessed with it even now - what does it do that's so important? Does it open a portal to Ballpoint? Is that it?" As he spoke, he brought his weapon down towards my head so quickly that it grazed the back of my cloak and blouse as I leapt away, ripping apart the cloth. I started to hyperventilate again in fear, and tried my very best not to cry. I didn't answer him, but followed the strange, obsessive feeling my bracelet seemed to produce towards the other side of the room. Then I saw it - a familiar golden glint.

As I ran towards it, I heard Mr Frog's mocking voice behind me. "So you found it, did you? I'm sorry, but you're too late," he laughed, pulling a lever on the wall.

The room began to fill with a purplish gas, pouring in through the ceiling everywhere as if it didn't exist. I tried to take a deep breath and hold it, but I wasn't fast enough - my throat began to burn, followed by my eyes and lungs. I choked, my chest convulsing sporadically, and as I tried to make my way to my little golden keepsake, pain seared my skin like magma.

"I designed this just for you, Vanya," Mr Frog said with a deep, overdramatic breath as he willingly filled his lungs with the poisoned air. "Ahhhh... To me, it smells like the best merlot from my private stocks, but to you... Well, at the moment, I doubt you even care."

The room began to swim, and I grew dizzy, stumbling forwards almost blindly towards the tiny glint of gold, my eyes beginning to twitch. I couldn't even force myself to breathe. "Mr Frog, stop!" I tried to bring myself to say, but my lips felt immobile and numb, my tongue swollen in my mouth. Suddenly I pitched forwards onto the ground as my legs seemed to turn to jelly.

"Shhhh, it will all be over soon," the scientist said as he approached, but in my ears, it sounded

like the echo of the dead. Then I remembered Urist's sacrifice.

With a last, desperate effort, I reached the table, shakily pulling myself up the leg and grasping at my bracelet as the blackness began to encroach upon me, colors swirling in my mind. The last thing I remember was falling to the side, my bracelet shattering unnaturally against the floor, and the surprised yell of Mr Frog, sounding so, so distant. As everything dimmed, I remember thinking that if this was death, it was far more painful than I'd ever been told.



Chapter 14: A Deal with the Devil

The entry ends, and the pages afterwards are clean except for the jagged gash created by Mr Frog's mysterious weapon. The tale seems... unfinished, somehow. You reason, logically, that if Vanya had managed to write down the previous entry in her journal, she must've still been alive at the time of the writing, and therefore, Mr Frog's poison didn't kill her... though it certainly seemed like it could have from her description.

Setting the old journal aside, you sift through some of the other paperwork on the table - diagrams, schematics, blueprints, recipes for various drugs - and you finally find what you'd hoped to uncover. It's a dark-bound journal with a golden star emblazoned on the cover... a star with five points. Lifting it gently from the shifting parchments, you open it and begin to read.

When you're a little child, you see everything in black and white: there are the good guys, and then there are the bad guys; there are the knights in shining armor, and then there are the evil dragons that only eat dwarven maidens. As you grow older, you begin to understand that the world is more complex than you'd ever realized... that there are gray areas that can't be called "good" or "evil", and deeds that cannot be called "right" or "wrong", but are somewhere in between. The complexity makes things more interesting, but it makes things more difficult as well. Still, eventually you lose sight of this grayscale perspective of the world, and you learn that amidst all this black, white, and gray, there are other areas... and you learn to see the world in true color. But it doesn't make things more beautiful... instead, it makes the world uglier and even more confusing. It's like when you don't want to hurt or anger someone by telling them you won't do something, but you don't want to do it, either: it's not right, and it's not wrong, but neither is it neutral. You have only the best intentions, but no matter what you do, you end up causing harm; you try to be good, but you cause evil all the same. Life is like that sometimes.

I'd always thought of Mr Frog as pure evil... like the old dragons in the fairy tales. But if you think about it... the stories never showed the dragons from their own perspective: the last remnants of a dying race, alone in the world and trying desperately to survive, living far from civilization in an attempt to give themselves a chance. The knights always hunted them down, slaying every one of them, all because their weak stomachs couldn't handle anything but the softer flesh of a ruling-class female dwarf. The dragons weren't necessarily being *intentionally* cruel and wicked... it's more than possible they *loathed* what they were forced to do to survive. They just wanted to *live*... just as the princesses the knights in adamantine armor swore to protect did.

It occurs to me now that Mr Frog might not be evil at all, but neutral, and doing only what he believes he must. There might be ways to do things that would cause less damage, but he doesn't see them, or maybe doesn't care: he always takes the quickest path.

When I came to him, doing only what I believed I must to save my own life, I felt as though I was making a deal with the Devil. Unfortunately, it ended prematurely, with my lying limp and lifeless on the floor as I lost consciousness...

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Later, I awoke, choking uselessly as it dawned on me that I was breathing - I was *alive*. Curiously, I opened my eyes and looked around.

I was lying on Mr Frog's bed, and he was sitting on a chair next to me, mixing something in a glass with a strange utensil. A cluster of empty syringes lay discarded on the lampstand next to him, and my left arm felt oddly sore.

"Good, you're awake." Mr Frog said, handing me the glass he'd been stirring. "Drink this - you'll feel better."

With an effort, I sat upright and took it carefully in my hands. As I sipped at the liquid, I almost gagged. "It's so bitter!"

"That's irrelevant. Drink it," he ordered again, insensitively.

I did. Though I shuddered at the terrible taste and started to cough violently, I soon felt strength beginning to return to my sore muscles.

Mr Frog took the empty glass from my grasp and set it aside. "You weren't supposed to survive that gas poisoning. During the past few hours, I went out of my way to create several impromptu potion recipes just to keep you alive. You should be thankful."

"Thankful?!" I said in disbelief, still choking. "You almost killed me!" Finally I managed to stop coughing, slowing my breath to keep it from happening again.

"And I would have, too, had you not managed to reach your bracelet." His gaze drifted away, and he shook his head slowly as if disappointed with himself. "A whole year, and I never thought to look inside it - my tests showed the composition to be gold, and it weighed as much as I would have expected."

"Where is it now?" I asked, hoping he would show me. As much as I'd liked my bracelet, I wanted to see what had happened to it.

"Come and see."

Mr Frog had moved it to a table and arranged the pieces in a circular fashion, almost like a puzzle. The shiny gold I remembered always having seen lay at the outside, scratched and shattered - but it was hardly more than a thin plating. Inside was another, darker metal, and nested within that was a strange green ring, etched with golden lines.

"What is it?" I asked in surprise, touching the otherworldly pieces. "Magic?"

"Of course not," Mr Frog scoffed. "The design doesn't even remotely resemble that of a magic-based system. Barring an extremely-clever disguise, this device is technological in nature. It's a circuit board, powered by electricity. The heat from your arm kept it charged and running, and the star-shaped charm contains a powerful compact transmitter. I haven't often seen work of this quality."

"Do you know what it does?"

"I have a few hypotheses..." Mr Frog said slowly, turning towards me with a raised eyebrow, "but somehow I feel that you already know."

I nodded cautiously. "I do... I'm pretty sure I do, anyway..."

I stepped away and watched him apprehensively, but he only nodded, turning his attention back to the shattered bracelet. "You'd best tell me, then." He leaned over and began tracing the golden lines on the circuit board with a hovering fingertip, muttering to himself.

I knew what I had to do, but I was terrified. I'd seen it firsthand when the room had filled with gas earlier. Then, suddenly, I remembered what Urist had said to me as we'd hid in Hans' room, hours before: *"Fear doesn't make you weak. Courage is doing something brave, even when you're scared. Being afraid keeps you sharp - it keeps you alive."* I needed to be courageous.

"No."

A thick silence filled the room after I spoke. After a minute, Mr Frog turned his head towards me, an expression of disdainful surprise on his face. "No? What do you mean, 'no'?" It clearly wasn't something he'd expected from me.

I swallowed uncomfortably, but pressed onwards, my voice quavering. "I mean 'no'. I won't tell you unless you promise to do a few things for me in return."

He rolled his eyes, turning back to the shattered device on the table. "You don't exactly have anything to ensure my cooperation, foolish girl."

"I have knowledge," I pointed out, stepping closer. "I know things you don't, and you want to know them."

Shaking his head, still focused on his work, Mr Frog replied, "Every scrap of knowledge your feeble mind contains could be revealed to me with a simple biochemical cocktail like the one you drank in the Spawn Research Center half a year ago. I only desired a quicker alternative, and that is asking you directly."

I had a hard time believing it had really been half a year, but said, "I could refuse to drink it..."

He chuckled and turned to me. "Really? You? Tell me, Vanya, when was the last time you had a decent meal?"

My stomach seemed to twist as he reminded me of its emptiness. I didn't know what to say.

"I thought so," Mr Frog said smugly. "It's not always out of a lack of hospitality that we don't fatten up our occasional prisoner of war. Hunger is often a man's greatest weakness if he's not expecting any foul intent. But I'm curious - what is it you're wanting?"

"I want you to promise not to kill me, and to make Fischer let Hans and Urist go free..." I said carefully, though my hopes were already shattered. Then it hit me: I had no idea how long I'd been unconscious in Mr Frog's bedroom. "If they're still alive..." I added, biting my lip.

His response eased my mind in some ways. "They're still alive, but likely not for long. Their execution by the Hammerer is scheduled for today, but that's in about an hour. You have until then to convince me that you have something you can offer me. You still know too much, you know, but I wanted to understand what task your bracelet was designed to accomplish. My questions were poorly worded when I spoke to you in your cell, I see now - what if you believed you weren't a spy, but a permanent fixture, for example, or an agent? You would be able to deny my accusations without as much as the slightest hesitation."

"But what if I can't manage to convince you?" I asked quietly. I feared I already knew the answer.

His response was what I'd expected. "I'm going to learn your bracelet's secrets one way or another, but, as you know things that can endanger my livelihood, and by extension, the fortress, I'm still bound by duty to terminate you... unless you can prove your value to me. The fate of your fellow conspirators is also at stake. So which will it be? Will you assist me, Vanya?" he asked, sitting down in his bedside chair and crossing his arms.

With a heavy sigh, I began to explain all I knew about how my bracelet came to be, relating my newfound memories of Wari and my trip to Parasol. He listened with interest, occasionally asking an inconsiderate question or suspiciously pointing out a possible inconsistency, but overall he remained silent. Talking to him tends to make you feel on edge... even when he *isn't* trying to kill you.

Finally, I reached the end of my tale and searched his face for any signs of expression, but he kept his thoughts well-guarded as he pondered his newly gained knowledge, sitting motionless in his chair as I stood before him.

After several minutes of silence, I decided to interrupt his thinking. "Is that enough?" I whispered, praying the answer would be "yes".

Unfortunately, the answer was a lot more long-winded than that. "What you've told me meshes with what I know very closely..." he said slowly. Then he stood, straightening and facing me. "I'm going to allow you into my confidence, Vanya, as it appears beneficial for us to work together in the foreseeable future."

"What?!" I burst out in surprise, louder than I'd intended. "Work together?! Why??" The last thing I'd wanted was to spend any more time with Mr Frog than I already had. I just wanted to be *me* again, the little skulker girl nobody noticed, and nobody knew was an elf. It had been over a year since I'd been "invisible", and I hated how everyone was always looking for me now. I just wanted to live my life in peace.

"Cease your interruptions and I'll explain," Mr Frog said in an annoyed tone. "I already knew about Wari's Parasol employment. She and I trade favors, and I allow her to remain in the Spearbreakers hospital so that we actually have a *real* doctor around, instead of a typical dwarven maniac. However, she'd neglected to tell me she'd ever captured you... Though I can't be certain your involvement was unwilling," here he narrowed his eyes at me, "she apparently had intended you as a fallback agent. I assume she discovered you in the hallways of the fortress and took you to Parasol directly, realizing your potential as a spy."

He stood and began pacing slowly back and forth, his brow furrowed in thought, speaking quickly as he fired out the information streaming through his mind. "Logic dictates that she couldn't have transported you to Parasol in plain sight, and nor could she have knocked you unconscious and carried you there, as it would've created a spectacle. I've often wondered where her transdimensional portal is... and she would've been forced to take you to its location while fully conscious, and erase the memory afterwards. Therefore, it's possible that I can retrieve the memory from your mind, and not only can we then uncover the location of her hidden portal, but also know the exact coordinates of Parasol... which is again, how you can assist me. If you were actually a fallback agent, then you are officially an employee of Parasol, which means you can enter their base of operations unhindered. In addition, and intriguingly, the picture of Vanya Carena in Ballpoint's file closely matches your appearance at first glance. Though your last name is different, I might be able to pass you off as her and get you back into Ballpoint. Among other things... well, I have some data I need retrieved relating to my experiments, and this would be the perfect opportunity."

"My last name *is* Carena, but she's not me," I said quietly.

"Is that so? The design of your bracelet's circuit board imitates that often used by Ballpoint... I wonder if perhaps Wari cloned you to create a duplicate 'spy' in Ballpoint... and therefore



Ballpoint's Carena is actually a mole for Parasol."

I shook my head. "No, she's actually working for Joseph."

Mr Frog stopped pacing abruptly. "Who?" He seemed confused.

"Joseph," I answered. "The one who helped you create an amnesiac for Talvi...?"

"I created Talvi's amnesiac..." he stated slowly, recalling the events. "As you already know, Talvi knew too much, and rather than kill her outright I decided to create a chemical mixture to reset certain memories in her mind."

"But it didn't work," I pointed out. Then the idea struck me: *maybe, somehow, Mr Frog didn't remember Joseph at all*. "Do you really think the second amnesiac you made would've worked any differently? Or would you have her killed inconspicuously... like in a cave in?" I asked him, recalling the conversation I'd overheard between Splint and Mr Frog in the dining hall.

He did a double take and looked at me, wide-eyed in bewildered surprise as he whispered, "Holy pitchblende... you're right." I smiled impishly, pleased with the abnormal reaction I'd gotten out of Mr Frog, as he continued, "I *couldn't* have created the second amnesiac... because..."

"...Because you didn't have the appropriate equipment," I finished for him, quoting what he'd told me before.

"Yes..." he agreed slowly, shaking his head to clear it and resuming his normal, calm expression. "Someone has altered my memories... Joseph, you say?"

I nodded in response.

"Who is this 'Joseph'?" he queried.

Mr Frog was looking at me curiously in a new light, and it seemed almost as if all of a sudden, he felt I was his equal. Though it felt admittedly good, I regretfully didn't have the time for it. "I *will* tell you," I promised him, "but first I need to save my friends. How much longer do I have before it's too late?"

"Right, right," he said absentmindedly, glancing at a small device on his wrist. "You have about five minutes left... You're going to need to hurry." Then he stood, walking over to a cabinet and removing a hooded cloak from a stack. "This is mine," he explained as he brought it over, "but you're going to need it to get through the hallways with the security presence as high as it is... It's possibly a bit long for you, but it will have to suffice. Put it on while I write out a letter of pardoning."

I put on the heavy cloak, pulling the oversized hood carefully over my ears and trying to adjust the rest so it wasn't so baggy. When I finished, Mr Frog handed me a sheet of parchment crossed with runes. "Go quickly to the barracks," he advised. "Come directly back to me when you're done, and do not stray! If you do, I will know," he added gravely, tapping his temple. "I have eyes everywhere."

I nodded in response and hurried to the door, rushing into the hallway. I was on a mission again, but this time, it wasn't for the gods. No, this time... it was for Urist.

I sprinted through the corridors of the fortress as fast as I could, mindful of the huge cloak flapping behind me. Dwarves turned to look at me in surprise as I passed, muttering to themselves, but I kept my hood clutched tightly over my head with a free hand, and no one stopped me or took a second glance. I sprinted up the stairs, past the farms, and finally burst unceremoniously into the barracks, panting with exertion.

Urist and Hans were bound tightly in the center of the room, kneeling with their heads resting on a rough block of stone. What scared my heart into my throat was the fact that the black-hooded executioner, or Hammerer, as dwarves call it, had his weapon raised for the killing strike.

"Stop!" I yelled with as much force as I could, just as the Hammerer's swing came downwards towards Urist's head. My voice rung out through the huge, earth-walled room, and to my great relief, the Hammerer halted to see who'd given the order.

A small crowd of dwarves sitting on hastily constructed chairs turned their heads in surprise, and Fischer stalked towards me from where she'd been overseeing the execution. "Explain yourself!" she said roughly, but then paused briefly as she realized who I was. "*You* again..." she growled with all the intimidation of a honey badger as she began to storm towards me, drawing her pike from where it hung behind her back. "This will be the last time."

I pulled out the little parchment Mr Frog had given me, waving it frantically in the air as she reached me. "Wait!" I cried out. "Mr Frog wanted me to bring this to you!"

Scowling, Fischer lowered her weapon, snatched the paper out of my hand, and read it. She seemed rather unhappy about what it said, crumpling it up into a ball. "I hope you know what you're getting into, runt," she spat at me with an ill-intended smirk as she turned away. "Show's over, people, Mr Frog pardoned them. Weaver, release them!"

I breathed a sigh of relief as the crowd got up from their chairs and began to mill about, slowly working their way out of the room. Weaver, the executioner, slit the bonds of my two friends, and I rushed over to them, smiling brightly. It was the first thing that had ended well since Urist had rescued me.

"Urist! I'm so glad you're alive!" I exclaimed happily, as I threw my arms around him. But my feelings were mixed - on one hand, he was still alive... but on the other, he appeared to be in a lot worse of shape than when I'd first seen him.

"Be careful," he almost gasped in pain, loosening my arms. "Be a little gentler. I'm glad to see you, too."

Hans came up beside him, a head taller at least when they stood side by side. "Good ta see ya, missus," he said with a smile. "I thought we weren't comin' back from that scrape."

"I'm sorry, I came as fast as I could," I told them. "Are you both all right?"

"We are fine, Vanya," Urist assured me.

"V... call me 'V' when we're not alone," I whispered. I didn't want anyone else to know my name.

"All right. But why did Mr Frog order our release?"

I bit my lip. "I promised Mr Frog I would work for him if he let you go..." Neither of them responded, only staring at me in openmouthed surprise. It made me feel uncomfortable. "I didn't have any choice," I explained. "I couldn't let them kill either one of you."

Hans looked at me in pity. "When are you supposed start workin' for the dwarf, d'you know?"

My gaze dropped to the floor. "Right now..." I admitted quietly. Then I looked back at Urist. "But I wanted to spend some time with you, first..."

"Mr Frog ain't one to cross," Hans said, pursing his lips. "You need to get back there quick. Anyhow, I'll say it's been a wild time, but I gotta get back home. And thank you again, missus." With a respectful (but clumsy) nod, he turned and left. My heart sank at his words. The joy of knowing they were still alive was beginning to fade away, replaced with the sadness of not knowing when I'd see them next.

But Urist only looked me over silently, an unfamiliar glint in his eyes... I wanted so badly to know what he was thinking, to know if he approved, but he kept his thoughts hidden from view. "Hans is right, V..." he said slowly, stroking his beard. "Mr Frog can be a dangerous dwarf when he feels like it, if the rumors can be believed... and we'd expected to die as we tried to save your life."

With a sad smile tugging at my lips, I pushed him gently. "I *had* to rescue you, Urist. I couldn't let you die."

"But to force yourself into Mr Frog's employment... why would you do that? You must have heard the stories too."

I looked up into his eyes. "Urist," I began, and stopped, his name lingering on my tongue.

Right then I wanted to tell him everything: how I cared about him, how my heart always leapt for joy within me whenever I felt his touch, how I loved talking to him and how his eyes were the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen... but all I could manage was the faintest whisper. "I *had* to."

He looked down at me, watching my face carefully. Finally, he slowly nodded. I wondered if somehow, he understood what I couldn't put into words. "Thank you, Vanya," he said quietly. "You've saved my life twice, and I won't ever forget that."

"But what if I never see you again?" I asked, praying that I wouldn't cry in front of him. I felt my mouth twisting into a frown.

He shook his head. "Armok willing, you will," he said softly. "But thank you. You've given me new hope. My best wishes to you, V." Saying this, he kissed me lightly on the forehead and turned away, leaving me alone in the barracks as the scattered remnant of the crowd milled about the edges of the room. As I watched him go, stray tears trickled down my cheeks. Saying goodbye forever to the person I cared about, twice in one day, was far too much for me to handle gracefully.



## Chapter 15: Employment

*This is the second entry of V's third journal. Her script is more flowing than it's been in the past, as if this time she was using a finer-quality pencil to write with. However, the narration appears to be different than her typical style at first, which is unusual for her. You read onward all the same.*

A young woman walked through the halls of the fortress, seemingly oblivious to the chaos swirling around her. Dwarves passed by, pushing giant wheelbarrows at a jog; others stumbled along carrying heavy wooden bins filled to the brim with all manner of items. Young children played tag, rushing past and enjoying their few years of childhood as well as the military fortress could allow.

The woman noticed none of these, her dark hood overshadowing her face like a clouded storm. She walked with a purpose, just like all the other dwarves, her feet padding noiselessly against the cold stone of the corridors as she made her way onwards at a brisk pace towards the deeper apartment levels.

She'd heard, of course, the recent news. The hallways were always abuzz with the chatter of passing friends, and it wasn't hard to listen in. The sieging zombies were dead, and the necromancers slain. The common consensus was that it was ample cause for celebration, and

Splint himself (the newly-appointed overseer, taking his second term) had lately organized the greatest party the fortress had ever seen in its young life. Even those of the basement class were happy: for some unknown reason, possibly in light of recent events, Splint had mandated the carving of a "skulker barracks", where even the homeless would finally have a home. Everyone appreciated this, especially the upper class dwarves, who were glad that they wouldn't have to look at them anymore.

However, the young woman didn't share their mirth. She saw no cause for celebration. She walked with downcast head, her cloak clutched tightly about her. Though her pace was brisk, her step was heavy. She'd lost a person she held very dear, and she felt that no blessed ray of sunlight could ever pierce her veil of sorrow. If one had cared to look closely, they might have noted a slender finger brushing a tear from her cheek, or perhaps seen two oddly shaped ears faintly outlined in the fabric of her oversized hood.

The young woman walking through the hallways of Spearbreakers was none other but me, and I was beginning a new life in the employment of my former enemy.

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Reaching Mr Frog's door, I hesitated, wiping away what remained of my tears and steeling myself against my indecision before I finally turned the knob and entered.

"Welcome back," intoned the cold, unwelcoming voice of Mr Frog. "You're late."

"I came as quickly as I could," I said quietly, aware of the fact that my voice quavered from my recent weeping.

He stood across the room, bending over my shattered bracelet on the table and tapping it with what seemed to be red and black pencils with long metal tips, as he read some sort of display on a small box beside him. He straightened, putting aside his equipment. "Not quickly enough," he answered, leaning against the table and regarding me with an amused expression. If he noticed my moist eyelashes, he made no signs of acknowledgement. "I told you I have eyes everywhere, did I not?"

"Several times." I was beginning to wonder what he meant by that. I suppose I ought to have noticed the first time he said it, as I ran from him towards the old garbage dump to hide. The garbage dump has been reopened, as I understand it... possibly due to his warning that it was an excellent hiding ground to thieves. It might also have been partially because we needed somewhere to dump the thousands of bones that lay piled in the blood plains aboveground.

Mr Frog approached and held out his hand, scattering my thoughts to the wind as I pulled myself back to the present. "I'll need that cloak back now."

I slipped out of it and handed it to him, shivering as the cold air of the room caressed the bare skin of my back where my blouse had been ripped apart.

Mr Frog seemed to notice my discomfort. "You'll need better apparel, obviously..." he said with a grimace as he turned away to store the cloak in his cabinet. "However, the improbability of your wardrobe is a relatively unimportant matter, and can be postponed. You've much studying to do, if you're going to be my assistant, and it would be most efficient if you began immediately." Saying this, he walked to a nearby desk and bent down to press a button on a silvery box that sat beneath it. A rectangle of light lit up the top of the desk.

I caught my breath and walked towards it. "A computer," I guessed, awestruck. "Isn't it?"

He nodded, moving past me and gathering several glass utensils from a table. "Excellent. You aren't as illiterate as your appearance would imply." From Mr Frog, it was a compliment. "It's a desktop computer, created by myself using a conglomeration of technology from several distinct sources. Unlike its unwieldy predecessors, my model's control surface and display alike are the flat surface of a desk, and therefore, its functioning's efficiency is increased." He was working quickly as he spoke, and though I grasped little of what he said, I got the impression that it was something he was proud of. "Just begin reading," he ordered. "If you see an article you want to read, tap the screen where it is. Nothing is counter-intuitive, and it should be sufficiently idiot-proof, even for you."

I glanced back at him with narrowed eyes at the insult.

"No offense, of course," he said, leaning out from behind his tall glassware apparatuses with a sardonic smile.

Turning back, I looked at the desktop. "The Fundamentals of Real Life," read the top of the display in large bold runes. Curiously, I held my hand hovering above it, and lowered it slowly. The lighting of the display neither dimmed nor disappeared, even when my fingertips touched the surface of the desk. Pressing gently with two fingers, I pushed away from me, and watched in fascination as "The Fundamentals of Real Life" scrolled upwards and out of view past the top of the rectangle of light. It felt amazing to be interacting with it - to watch it do what I wanted it to. It wasn't magic; it was technology... and it was wonderful.

I knelt beside the desk and looked over the silver box that sat on the floor beneath the desk. It was humming quietly, as if there was something whirring about inside. There were clear panels on the side that might've been possible to remove, but at that particular moment, I wasn't interested in the computer's inner workings. I was more interested in the odd slots on the front.

Two of them seemed to match Talvi's key almost exactly in size and distance apart.

I anxiously got out the little envelope that Talvi had given me, now badly worn, and so, so carefully dumped the contents into my hand. I looked over the little key I'd carried about. It had two metal bits that were hollow, lined inside with strips of gold... I'd noticed it before, but hadn't really ever given much thought to it...

I'd carried a piece of a computer with me for over a year and had never even realized.

Eagerly, apprehensively, I fit the teeth of the little key into the slots on the front of Mr Frog's computer and caught my breath as they slid into place perfectly.

"Hello, and welcome," spoke a voice. I stood suddenly, my heart pounding, my eyes widening as I saw a human face clearly visible on the desktop. As I came into view, it seemed to turn its eyes and look straight at me, though it was only a flat picture.

"Damn it, what have you done?" groaned an exasperated Mr Frog, putting down his flasks and starting towards me. "You just sat down, and you've already found a way to create complications, have you?"

The computer spoke again. "Voice pattern of 'Mr Frog' recognized. Retrieving data... You have no new AI Messages."

I looked at Mr Frog and back to the desk, then back again. "I..." I stuttered, "I just... I didn't know, I thought... I just -"

The scientist noticed the key inserted in the front of the machine, and abruptly slowed to a halt. "An Identity Drive..." he spoke slowly, tilting his head as he gave me a puzzled look. "How did you manage to come across one of those? I only ever had one of them, and I lost it five years

ago..." While he spoke this last, his eyes widened gradually as realization began to spread across his face. He hurried past me to the desk, tapping the glowing screen in several places. Then, in a clear voice, "Disclose message content, non-administrative users."

"Message One; User 'Talvi Diamondknight'; Recipient 'Splint'; Subject 'Joseph'" rang the strange voice, echoing slightly against the stone walls of the room. It sounded artificial somehow.

Mr Frog turned to me with an expression of astonishment. "You've kept this for how long?"

"Over a year..." I whispered, worried he might burst out angrily at any moment.

He only shook his head slowly, his gaze idling away from me. "Every record I have of this 'Joseph' is gone - I did a search while you were rescuing your friends... All I can assume is that whoever he is, he managed to wipe everything I had on him clean..." He turned back, his eyes sparkling with the eager delight of a scientist making a breakthrough, an intruding smile breaking across his typically neutral facade. "And you managed to keep one piece, one potentially important piece... You kept it safe. But this is wonderful!" The smile faded as he turned back to the desk, but the sparkle in his eyes remained. "Open message one, deactivate voice identity recognition, override user privileges," he commanded the computer, leaning over the display.

The face disappeared, replaced with another: that of my old friend, Talvi.

"Splint, is that you?" Talvi asked hesitantly, looking forwards blankly.

"Yes it is," Mr Frog responded. "What do you need to tell me, Talvi?" He turned to me briefly and whispered as an aside, "This computer isn't equipped with a camera," as if it explained everything.

"Well, Splint," Talvi continued in her familiar accent, "I've been wantin' to tell ya' for... *Ever* so long, now... There's somebody real scary-like tryin' t' mess stuffs up - I jus' thought you oughta know... He said he's gonna try t' destroy the fortress."

"All right, Talvi," Mr Frog said calmly. "Who is it?"

"Well, I don't rightly know his last name, but his first one is 'Joseph'... You do believe me, don't you, Mr. Splint? I know it's not somethin' you'd be all likely to believe and such, but I don't want my covies killed anymore'n you want Spearbreakers to fall..." The image of her face flickered briefly, as if she had looked to the side and back in a split second.

"I believe you, Talvi," he answered reassuringly. "Tell me everything you know about Joseph."

"Okay..." she began carefully. "I met Joseph a while back - he was in Mr Frog's room an' he wanted me to take him wit' me... So I did... But he's wanted me t'*do* things, Mr. Splint - things I rightly know I oughtn't should! He was my friend at first, talkin' to me and tellin' me things that were goin' on outside... He said he had eyes everywhere."

I glanced at Mr Frog briefly, wondering again what exactly that phrase meant.

Talvi's face flickered a few more times and continued. "It did *seem* like he could see ever'thing an' all, but after a tad I found out there was a lot of places he couldn't see none. But then he wanted me to steal stuff from Mr Frog's room, and he told me how much Mr Frog cared about me and how Mr Frog wanted to be with me and how much Mr Frog thought I was purty an' such..."

Mr Frog gave a snort of something vaguely akin to laughter.

"But none of it were true! Mr Frog don't love me none, sure's anything. He hit me a few weeks

back, even, so I knows he ain't all Joseph said he were... but anyhow... He wanted me to steal stuff from Mr Frog's room, an' he wanted to know about our 'security' and how many cameras Mr Frog had up. I know Mr Frog has cameras up an' all, but I don' know how many, and I weren't gonna tell Joseph nohow..."

"What's a camera?" I interrupted quietly, stepping closer to Mr Frog.

He appeared as if he was about to answer, but Talvi answered for him. "They're a lil magic thing you kin look through t' see anything you want without e'en havin' to be there. I thought you might ask, Splint. It helps Mr Frog know all that's goin' on, an' he *does* have them everywhere, not like Joseph."

Mr Frog glared at me, grumbling under his breath that I shouldn't speak.

"Anyhow," Talvi's image continued, her posture shifting in an instant, "Joseph got mean when he figur'd out I weren't gonna help him. He started threat'nin' to destroy th' whole fortress, and kill my covies if I didn' help. He said we weren't of any importance rather than location, or somethin'... And then he said -"

"Talvi..." Mr Frog said, interrupting her.

Her image flickered again and she stopped mid-word. "Splint?"

"Do you know who Joseph works for? Or who he is?"

She shook her head. "I ain't even all too sure he's e'en a person. I think he might'n be jus' like Mr Frog's messages on this little key, an' just a picture that talks to you. Mr Frog's messages don't do anything but yell at me to give 'is stuff back, though."

Mr Frog chuckled, scratching his beard thoughtfully. "But who does he work for?"

"He don't work for nobody," Talvi said, her image disappearing for a second. "He says he's got a place called 'Eris', thass all I know 'bout that. I's got a friend who he once said looks like somebody at another fortress: 'Ballpoint'... Is V there, Mr. Splint?"

Glancing at me curiously, Mr Frog answered her, "Yes she is, Talvi - why do you ask?"

"Joseph saw V once, he did, an' he wanted to know who she were. He wouldn't talk to me much o' none after that... But he did say she looks jus' like somebody o'er there that works for 'im. A 'mole' he said, but I'll tell you sure as a splinter's needle cain't sew cloth outta mushrooms, I's seen her myself, and she don't look a thing like moles. Too big, anyhow, but she does look a lot like V..."

Mr Frog remained silent for a moment, and the only sound in the room was the computer's soft hum and the occasional static sound of Talvi's flickering image. "Can you show me what Joseph looks like?"

Talvi disappeared, replaced with a still image of the man I'd come to fear more than even Mr Frog himself: Joseph.

"That's him," I whispered, taking a step closer and pointing. "That's Joseph - Talvi's right. You used to talk to him. I actually saw you make a deal with him. He said he wanted the promise of a favor in exchange for the amnesiac that I injected into Talvi."

"Did he now..." Mr Frog mused. "Interesting... Talvi, do you have a picture of V?"

"I took one once," Talvi replied as Joseph's picture disappeared, only to be replaced with one of myself, wearing the old, ragged hat I wore before I found my beanie. I was shocked that she had a picture of me. I could even see the bottom of my ear in it, it was so clear.

"Excellent," said Mr Frog. "Do you have a picture of the mole?"

My face disappeared from the glowing display, and Talvi's resumed its original position. "I have a little bit of one." Talvi's face disappeared and the face of Carena appeared on the screen, blurry and hard to see. The viewpoint was from inside the little cavy tunnel. I hadn't noticed it

before, but Carena's face *did* look unnervingly similar to mine. It looked so close that I couldn't help but think that it might almost be more than just a coincidence.

"Did Joseph ever tell you where Eris is located?"

"I know more, but I'll have t'tell you in person."

Mr Frog furrowed his brow momentarily. "Do you know if Joseph ever came to Spearbreakers?"

"I know more, but I'll have t'tell you in person," she repeated with the same intonations. Mr Frog only grimaced.

"Has the mole ever visited Spearbreakers?" he asked.

Talvi nodded in response. "Yes."

"Has the mole ever been to Eris?"

"I know more, but I'll have t'tell you in person," Talvi's flickering image said once more.

Mr Frog stepped back from the desk and spoke quietly in disappointment. "That's about all we're going to get out of this file. I possibly shouldn't have accepted that amnesiac as you say I did, she knew a lot of things I'd really like to know. It's likely all gone now." Then, louder, "Computer, close message, exit program." Talvi's face disappeared abruptly, replaced with the text, "The Fundamentals of Real Life".

Beside me, Mr Frog scratched his beard thoughtfully. "It would appear," he stated slowly, "that you're already beginning to prove your worth as my employee..."

"Thank you," I whispered. "So you're not mad at me?"

He jumped as if startled out of his thoughts. "No, not at all, not at all. In fact, it would appear we're going to have to hasten your training. I'll need time to plan, but I think I'm going to be sending you to Ballpoint. You look so similar to Talvi's mole that you ought to be able to successfully impersonate her."

My eyes widened, partially in fear. "I'm going to Ballpoint *alone*? I don't even know what it is!" I didn't want to be forced into spy work, as it seemed he wanted.

Mr Frog grunted and returned to his work over at the apparatus-covered tables. "It's a company. They're interdimensional time travelers, just like Parasol. Their technology development level is advanced beyond anything you dwarves – or elves, rather – currently possess." Saying this, he finished stirring a flask and brought it over to me, picking up a book from another table on his way. "I'll need you to drink this - perhaps we can uncover some more of your lost memories with it."

"Will it be bitter?" I asked cautiously, taking it in my hands.

He scoffed, "Bitter? Does taste really matter so much to you?"

I hesitated for a moment and nodded, frowning a little bit as he glared at me derisively.

"Hrmph... fine," he said finally, handing me the book and taking the flask back.

I looked it over in my hands, turning it and gently opening its parchment pages to look within. It was a beautiful journal with a leather-bound hard cover - and in the center of the front cover was a golden outline of a five-pointed star. I tilted it, catching the torchlight and sending a reflection dancing across the room. I smiled brightly with pleasure - it was the first gift I'd received in years, it was gorgeous, and best of all, it was *all mine*.

"I had it made for you earlier, express order," Mr Frog explained as he returned with a tall glass. "I figured you were going to need something a little better than that blood-spattered thing

you've been using, and I have your original one here somewhere... But here you are. Drink this; you may find it more to your taste."

I switched the book to my left hand and took the glass, drinking it carefully. It tasted of roses and sweet-scented petals, as if he had somehow collected fields upon fields of wildflowers and somehow put them all into a little glass. I'd never heard of such a thing being done before; it was unusual, but delicious all the same.

"How did you do that?" I gasped once I had finished, wishing there had been a little more, and that I hadn't drank it so quickly.

"How did I do what?" he asked unconcernedly as he took the glass from my grasp and walked away. "But it doesn't matter. I'll provide you with better apparel in the morning. In the meantime, you'd best get some sleep, Vanya." He pushed a button on a column. I jumped back in surprise as the shale wall to my right seemed to split and pull away from itself, revealing a doorway through which I could see a little wooden bed.

I was going to have my own room. I almost cried in happiness, clapping my hands to my mouth - Mr Frog may have been evil in nature, taking skulkers from their homes and performing experiments on them, but his show of hospitality far outmatched that of Fischer. A real journal, a room, a bed and new clothes were luxuries I'd only dreamed of the past eight years.

"I hope you don't mind the fact that the bed is made of wood," he smirked, wiping out the glass I'd used with a cloth and starting on the others he'd used. "It's my guest room, and usually, my guests don't mind."

"Not at all," I breathed in wonderment, putting one foot ahead of the other as I seemed to glide forwards almost in a dream. "It's perfect..."

I sat down on the edge of the fur mattress, testing it gently, and finally threw myself onto it with a little laugh of joy, feeling myself sink into the soft folds. It felt wonderful compared to sleeping in the hallways with a ragged blanket, and especially compared to the cold stone of a shelf in a makeshift prison cell.

That night, I smiled myself to sleep, tucked cozily in a warm bed for the first time since I was twelve. The terrors and tragedies of the day were all but forgotten, though in my dreams I thought I saw the face of Urist...

He was crying.



Chapter 16: Dwarf College

Vanya's journal entries continue on the pages following, and for many more after that. The parchment sheets are considerably less cluttered than her previous journal, likely indicating she wasn't nearly as idle. The following entry is dated, but the first line is smudged, as Vanya appears to have traded her pencil in favor of ink, which she wasn't used to using. All you can make out is that it was written during year 207, Splint's reign, early spring.

If Mr Frog is the Devil, then his laboratory (what he calls his room) ought to be considered hell. It is therefore ironic that I was so blissful those first few hours after arriving, and that his domain was such a wonderland for the inquisitive mind. Yet my enthusiasm gradually faded as I realized how hard he was going to push me, starting early the next morning.

"Get up! Get up!" someone cried, startling me out of my dreams.

Not even fully awake, and with no idea of what was going on, I rolled out of bed in fearful surprise, tripping over the covers in my attempt to stand. "What's going on?" I asked, bewildered. I had no idea where I was.

"It's time to get to work! I trust you slept well."

"What?" I mumbled, trying to figure out what was going on, as I clumsily pulled the sleeve of my shredded blouse back up onto my shoulder, as it had slipped downwards as I'd turned in my sleep. I blinked, trying to clear my bleary eyes, and made out a figure rushing back and forth as if doing morning chores. It was only then that I remembered all of the events of the previous day, and that I was in Mr Frog's guest room.

"I've brought you clothes that ought to fit," said Mr Frog, laying them down on a low stone table. "It's nothing flashy or 'pretty', you understand, but simply normal apparel, modified to be partially acid-resistant. You'll need it. There's a shower in the corner, as well as a sink, hairbrush, toothbrush, towel... get cleaned up and report to me promptly."

I rubbed at my eyes to clear the sleep from them. "Thank you," I said, trying to gather my wits, but Mr Frog had already left.

My first shower took me a little while to figure out, but eventually I managed. I'd never heard of or seen such a thing before - usually dwarves took baths. Still, it felt wonderful, almost like bathing in the rain on a warm summer day, without having to worry about catching a cold... but it's very undwarfy: what dwarf likes standing in the rain?

Before long, I was clean, dressed in pants and shirt, my hair brushed neatly with a new beanie over it to cover my ears. And I had shoes - *new* shoes, made from giant emu leather.

I opened the sliding stone door and walked into Mr Frog's main room - his laboratory. For a few minutes, I stood idly as I watched him scurry about from table to table with beakers of liquids, apparently doing some sort of experiment. Finally, I decided to ask, "What time is it?" It felt far too early to be up, and I still felt sleep-deprived. When you're used to sleeping on a stone shelf without a blanket, lying on a bed can make it hard to get to sleep.

"It's half past six," he responded, sending a cold stare in my direction. "You spent forever getting yourself cleaned up. I hope you learn to be more prompt in the future."

"Are we going to eat breakfast first?"

"There's a sink in your room, and I placed a nutrition bar in your right pants pocket," he said, not even offering a glance in my direction. "Eat that and we'll worry about actual food when we have more time."

I felt in my pocket and found it - a little brownish bar that smelled vaguely of mushrooms, but without the sweet plump helmet smell. I nibbled at it, and found it substantially more edible than the stale biscuits I'd had as prison rations. Turning to Mr Frog, I asked curiously, "Why don't we have much time?"

He walked past me quickly with a bubbling beaker, headed to another table as he responded, "I *never* have as much time here as I'd like. It's one of the fundamental flaws of this universe, not at all like universe Beta-17XG. There, you could spend hours doing nothing, and *still* manage to accomplish exactly what you wanted within your preferred length of time."

The flasks he was mixing suddenly gave a huge puff of yellow smoke, and he looked on in

satisfaction, pouring the concoction into an apparatus with a long, twisted neck. "That will need to boil for a while," he told me, walking hurriedly over to his computer desk. "We don't have much time *right now* because the drug you consumed last night was experimental and possesses a short lifespan. Come over here and we can begin."

I sat down, and Mr Frog began assaulting me with questions. As he explained it, he theorized that my missing memories weren't gone at all, but only "altered to trigger natural automatic blocking". He'd said he wasn't sure how much I could recover with having been so close to my bracelet the day before, but he'd given me something meant to "counteract the alteration process".

"Think back over your memories of Wari," he said coolly, leaning against a pillar. "Do you remember her taking you anywhere?"

I thought back, my memories moving through my head rapidly like butter, as I grasped to keep hold of them. "I think I do..." I replied uncertainly. "I was terrified the whole time, wanting to beg her to let me go, or scream for help, but too afraid of the scalpel she held... and of it being found out that I was an elf. I remember her taking me somewhere, but it's all blurry - not at all like half a year ago in prison, when you gave me that other drink."

Mr Frog grimaced. "Blurry is fine. Do you remember where she took you? She would've taken you to her transdimensional portal. Do you know where it is, or what it looks like?"

"I..." I began, and suddenly stopped, looking at him in astonishment. "She took me to *your* room! And she took me..." I stood, looking about the room as I reenacted in my mind what I could remember. As the memory reached its end, I walked and stood next to the hoop I'd seen so many times before - the giant oval of wood through which the air shimmered. "She took me here," I told Mr Frog, looking back at him. "The same place Carena went through. I remember she was working with the controls on this box to the left," I added, pointing at the button-covered console attached to it, "but I don't remember what exactly she was doing... it's too blurry."

Mr Frog regarded me carefully, a grave, concerned expression on his face. "That's my transdimensional portal..." he said after a moment. "We'll have to try this again when the bracelet's effect wears off more, to see if you can remember what coordinates she input." He shook his head and began pacing about the room, scratching his beard in thought. "This is terrible news... If my room is being used by Parasol, Ballpoint, *and* Eris, it's incredible that I haven't stumbled into anyone by accident yet... But now at least I know why I constantly find my traps disarmed."

I wandered back to where he was. "What would happen if someone happened to come through while you were in here?"

He only shook his head grimly in response.

On a whim, I tried to see if I could remember my sister any better, and though I had a dim memory of practicing swordfighting, there still didn't appear to be anyone else in the room. I was very disappointed, and diverted my thoughts elsewhere as quickly as I could to avoid becoming depressed. "How was I able to take down those four soldiers outside your room?" I asked. It was something I'd been curious about - and had never had explained.

He rubbed his forehead as if to clear his mind. "Honestly, I have no fitting hypotheses on that event at the present time. If Parasol implanted 'combat abilities' in your mind, then the increased distance from your bracelet for a year should have weakened them to the point that they wouldn't work at all. Not only that, but you should've been able to easily defeat me each time we fought.

Instead, and contrary to what might be expected, your abilities seemed to *weaken* as you came into closer proximity of the device. Now that it's destroyed, the abilities may eventually return, following the same behavior they did before... but I have no predictions as of yet on how long that will take.

"But come," he continued, picking up a notebook from the table beside him and scribbling notes down. "We have a mission that must be accomplished, not only for my continued and assured safety, but for that of Spearbreakers."

I didn't like the sound of "mission", but I was curious all the same. "What would that be?"

"There is a special, important device that I accidentally left at my old office at Ballpoint - however, they likely moved it to the storage facilities following my disappearance... It's a PEA - a 'Personal Electronic Assistant'. You've held one before..." His pencil slowed, and he looked at me from his notebook suspiciously. "Why *were* you holding it, anyway?"

I wasn't completely sure what he meant. "What?"

He sighed at me. "It's metal, it's got a little screen on the front."

"Oh!" I exclaimed. "The little thing Talvi stole from you."

"Yes, exactly."

"I was... talking to Joseph..." I felt guilty about it suddenly, and Mr Frog's accusatory glare wasn't helping. "I didn't know who he was at the time!" I said defensively. "The PEA was buzzing and I accepted the call it on accident - I was trying to turn it off so it would stop making noise."

Mr Frog gave me a piercing stare for a moment, before turning back to his notebook, jotting something down. "Hrmph," he grunted, "You're currently incapable of lying anyway, thanks to what you drank last night. But before we sidetrack ourselves any further, let's get back to the matter at hand. You're going to need to infiltrate Ballpoint, posing as Carena - if you're any good as an actress, no one should question it unless they know her well, and few are likely to. At some point we'll need to investigate her, as she's our only link to Eris, but for now I just need that PEA. It contains blueprints for semi-automated weaponry and defense mechanisms that I *must* have in order to adequately protect myself from intruding agents."

I shook my head in fright. "Me, at *Ballpoint*?? I didn't think you were serious before!"

"I'm *always* serious," he shot at me. "Either way, you have no choice in the matter, unless you'd like to leave my service and be handed over to Splint. He has an especial hatred of your kind, and I'm sure you wouldn't enjoy his brand of hospitality."

Thus, my training began. During the next few weeks, Mr Frog would have me study for hours and hours on end. "*I'll be compacting everything you need to know into concentrated segments. You'll need to keep an open mind, ignore everything you **thought** you knew up to this point, and pick up other things as you go along,*" he once told me early on. And that was exactly how it was.

The schedule was strict: Get up at six, get cleaned up in as short a time as possible so Mr Frog wouldn't yell at me for impromptness (later, I would learn to shower the night before to save time in the mornings), eat a nutrition bar (he kept changing the recipe) and help Mr Frog with various dangerous and potentially fatal experiments until lunch. I actually think he was training me in his field of study: wearing a lab coat and a pair of goggles, I would assist him in whatever way he requested, mostly mixing beakers and measuring out ingredients. Though I never saw his test subjects, possibly because he didn't want me to, many of the things we mixed were

particularly nasty, such as a potion to separate the skin from the flesh. He taught me the various properties of the ingredients as we went along, occasionally testing me to see if I'd listened... but I guess bioneurological chemistry isn't my best subject: I pretty often answered wrong, to his extreme displeasure. But really, in all honesty, Mr Frog isn't a very good teacher. He expects me to know things without him explaining them first, and gets annoyed when he has to.

Following our typically late lunch, and all the way until he sent me to bed at nine o' clock, I studied, and I learned so, so much... for a girl who dearly loves books, the latter half of my days were a paradise. I sat at his desktop computer for hours on end, poring over article after article until my eyes ached. I learned about physics and electricity, different races I'd never heard of, the ways of Ballpoint and Parasol, but more than anything else, I learned about technology. It wasn't *actually* magic, but at first, it did *feel* like it... had I come across it a few years before, I would've probably believed it *was*.

I learned about vehicles and weapons, how computers work, retinal scanners, thermal crystals, electric generators, different types of drives, robots - anything and everything... it was a whole world I'd never known existed.

Actually, it technically doesn't exist... well, not in *this* world, anyway... we haven't invented it yet for ourselves. Mr Frog says there are seven dimensions: X, Y and Z are the first three - your location in space. Then there's Time, #4, and then there's Alternate Timelines(#5) and Parallel Universes(#6). Messing with the last three can be dangerous and create paradoxes and time loops (and is actually against interdimensional law, according to what I've read), but the final dimension is where Ballpoint and Parasol are located: space-time "bubbles". Basically, they're artificial universes. Mr Frog says it doesn't count as an actual dimension in his opinion, and ought to be classified as #5.1 instead of #7, but he's not in charge of that.

It felt like reading the best fairy tale *ever*.

~~~

My structured schedule continued until one day after Mr Frog came back from his work. "Come here, stupid girl," he ordered, walking in the door with a small wooden bin. He cleared a space on one of his cluttered tables and sat it down. "Stupid girl" was his nickname for me, and he clearly felt I'd more than earned it. I was used to it by then, and there were a lot of worse things he could've called me, anyway.

I walked over curiously. "What's going on?" I asked, hoping he wouldn't take too long to explain. I badly wanted to get back to reading about particle physics.

As he spoke, he laid out several dark gray garments on the table, along with a couple pieces of computer equipment and some oddly shaped mechanical devices. "I'm getting annoyed with the constant breaches in Spearbreakers security, and I fear it won't be long until Ballpoint launches an actual attack on me. I think... I *think* you might be just about ready for the assignment. As a result, I'm sending you to Ballpoint Technologies." He didn't sound very sure of my abilities, and that didn't exactly help my confidence.

"Today?" I asked in dismay. Unlike him, I was *sure* I wasn't ready.

"*Of course* today, why else would I be bringing you this equipment?" was his terse reply. "I measured, and as I suspected, my old Ballpoint suit would be too large for you, even with adjustments made, so I had to custom-order a new one. Never mind where it came from."

"You *are* unusually tall for a dwarf," I noted with a mischievous smile.

He only grunted in displeasure. His height was a subject he didn't particularly enjoy, and his response could've almost been out of spite at my comment: "I'm going to have to give you a haircut. You clearly haven't had one in forever, and nobody's going to believe that you work for Ballpoint with it reaching halfway down your back, well-brushed or not."

I recoiled, backing away from him and putting my hands on my beanie as if to protect my hair. I'd been growing it since even before I was a teenager, and I was proud of how long it was. More importantly, I *really* didn't trust him with a pair of scissors. "No, you can't touch it!" I protested. "I'll just pin it all up under my beanie; nobody will notice!"

"You can't wear your beanie there," he retorted. He began to assemble a few pieces of machinery, tubes flopping about like tentacles. "People would notice you - hats aren't something normally seen at Ballpoint."

"Helmets are!" I argued, still adamant that he wouldn't touch my hair. "I read that on your computer. I'll wear a helmet, and you won't have to touch my hair!"

"Ha!" he said, unamused. "Only contractors and guards wear helmets, and Carena is a *spy*."

"But my ears!"

"*Are* something normally seen at Ballpoint - they have a number of elves employed, among other sharp-eared species," he finished for me, picking up the dark grey suit and holding it out with the command, "Go try this on."

Twisting my lip, I snatched it from him and stormed off to my room, closing the door behind me. As I slipped out of my lab clothes and into the suit, I tried to formulate some sort of plan to keep him from cutting my hair. Unfortunately, it wasn't long before I was more occupied with noticing how tight-fitting the Ballpoint clothes were: it seemed to hug my legs and body, and the fabric definitely wasn't made of pigtail fiber - it actually looked somewhat shiny. I'd never seen anything like it before; fabric wasn't something Mr Frog had wanted me to study.

Though the majority of the suit was a dark gray, the seams were dark blue. Several areas were reinforced on the inside (and that's as much as I'll go into that, in case Mr Frog reads this), but the sleeves at the lower arms were somewhat enlarged. In a show of defiance, I made sure I put my beanie back on before I left the room.

I walked back to him, feeling almost naked - when you wear heavier clothing and then wear something light, I guess you'd feel that way anyway, but it felt so... *alien*. It almost felt like I *wasn't* wearing anything, though in actuality, I was fully covered from my ankles all the way to my neck.

"Hold still," Mr Frog ordered, putting a hand on my arm to bring me to a halt. As he walked around me, looking me over with a sort of bland approval, I felt color rise to my cheeks.

"Excellent," he said dryly. "A perfect fit. Ballpoint spy suits are designed for agility, which you should find preferential. Come, follow me."

We walked over to the table with the wooden bin, and he turned, grabbing my right arm and holding it upwards as he inserted the tubed machinery into my sleeve. "I'm not sending you in there unarmed," he explained as he worked. "I tested this earlier today during a small goblin raid, though my dratted dwarven crossbow failed. Shoddy manufacturing, I would say - during his reign, I warned Paintbrush-turkey not to draft the better mechanics - such as myself - into the army, but he stubbornly refused to comply."

"What is it?" I asked, as he inserted a second one into my left sleeve.

"It's an invention of mine. It pumps a sodium thiopental mixture through elastic tubing directly

into the target's bloodstream, rendering them unconscious almost immediately. You *do* remember what sodium thiopental is, correct?"

It caught me off guard, and I wracked my brain to think of the answer. Sadly, I wasn't quick enough, and he pursed his lips in disapproval. "Stupid girl," he muttered. "Just make sure they're not already about to kill you when you use it, and you'll be fine. To fire, just flick your wrist upwards in the way that Spiderman does."

"Who?"

Mr Frog grimaced. "Never mind." He lowered my arms and patted my sleeves to make sure it wasn't too obvious the weapons were there. "Just don't flick your wrist unless you're trying to knock someone out, and stand close to compensate for the limited range. Also, it's not very accurate."

I nodded absentmindedly, thinking. "Why don't you just use those tripwire dart traps you made, but without the tripwire?"

"Because, that -" he began, but stopped midsentence. I could almost see the gears whirring in his mind as he thought about it. "Actually... that might work..." he said slowly, nodding cautiously with a raised eyebrow. "I'll have to look into that... it would definitely solve the range and accuracy problems, but sodium thiopental wouldn't work quickly enough with the smaller dosage. Still, excellent idea, Vanya..."

I smiled. His approval wasn't something I received often.

Suddenly he snatched the beanie from the top of my head, picking up a comb and pair of scissors from the table. "Now, let's get to work on that hair."

"No!" I begged. "Please, I'll just tuck it into the Ballpoint suit, nobody will notice!"

He actually laughed. "Ha! Contrary to your severely mistaken opinion, *everyone* would notice. Turn around."

And so Mr Frog cut my hair, mumbling to himself from time to time about how it "wasn't perfect yet", while my hair was steadily clipped shorter and shorter. It took him quite a while to be satisfied, during which I shed more than a single tear, but he finally, finally finished. "Just a few inches past the shoulders... It's actually passable, for my first attempt, I believe," he said proudly, walking around me and admiring his handiwork. The words "passable for my first attempt" brought a few extra tears to my eyes, and I dreaded seeing how I looked. I especially didn't want to look at the floor: I was afraid I'd break down if I saw how much he'd cut off. But he seemed pleased with it, stepping back and looking me over with a smile. He stood there for a moment, his eyes seeming to glaze over as if lost in thought, as if reliving a memory of a different time.

I felt my cheeks redden again as he looked me up and down. He noticed, and the smile vanished. "You're going to need to quit that infernal blushing. That, more than anything else, will give you away. Other than that, you look like a normal Ballpoint employee now. Nobody will give you as much as a second glance."

I was upset, and for good reason. He'd just cut away at one of the few things I'd held dear. "How am I supposed to stop blushing?" I asked incredulously. "It's not exactly something I can control!"

"Incorrect!" he stated coldly, walking over to the little wooden bin. "*Everything* can be controlled with practice. Well -" Mr Frog halted suddenly, sporting a thoughtful expression. "*Actually*, typical dwarven stupidity might be an exception to that, but your blushing can be avoided simply by keeping your mind on your assignment. You *do* remember everything I

instructed you to do, yes?"

I nodded, and he walked back to me with a little card, putting it in my hand. I recognized what it was immediately - I'd studied it in one of the articles on Mr Frog's computer. It was an identification card; a forgery of Carena's real one, with *my* picture instead of hers. It had a very official appearance. Looking up again, I saw Mr Frog standing at his transdimensional portal, pulling levers and pressing buttons.

"Come on!" he urged. The wooden frame of the hoop telescoped into a tall oval, the air within appearing to coalesce and ripple like water, the same way as I'd seen when Carena herself had passed through. It wasn't without a twinge of fear that I thought about it: Just on the other side, it wasn't Spearbreakers anymore, but Ballpoint - enemy territory.

"Just step through when you're ready, but best to do it quickly," Mr Frog said loudly over the whirring, buzzing noise it produced. "Avoid retinal scanners if at all possible; they'll give you away immediately. I don't have schematics of their headquarters, but as far as I remember this should drop you right in the middle of the storage area! Just accomplish your objective and hurry back!" Saying this, he slipped a circular device off the console - a return portal activation bracelet. According to what I'd read, without it, I wouldn't be able to get back.

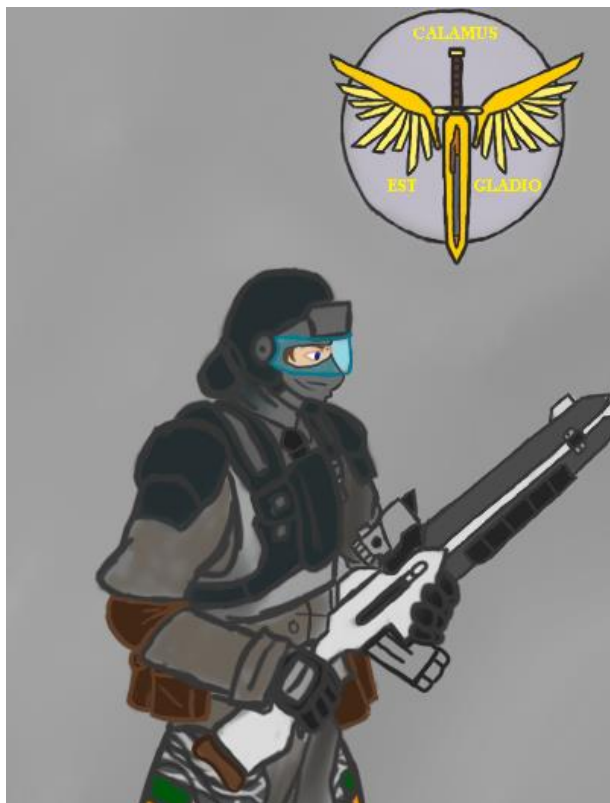
"What if I'm not ready??" I asked worryingly, slowly backing away from the rippling light. "I may *look* like a Ballpoint employee - in *your* opinion, anyway - but I don't know how to act like one!"

"Common sense, stupid girl! Common sense." he said reproachfully, walking over and grabbing my arm to pull me towards the portal. "Also, don't talk to anyone you don't have to. Now get through there before you terrify yourself through overthinking everything!"

He placed the bracelet in my hand, and sent me through the portal with a shove. For a moment, everything went black, and I felt a broken, twisting sensation, almost as if I was a pencil seen through a glass of water. Then, just as quickly, it was over, and I had my first glimpse of the inside of Ballpoint Technologies.







An example of a Ballpoint contractor/mercenary, along with their insignia. Art by Splint.

## Chapter 17: Enemy Territory

*This is a quality hard-bound journal. On the item is an image of a five-pointed star in imitation gold leaf. The star is glinting on the cover. The image relates to the painting of a star in imitation gold leaf on the cover of Vanya's third journal, "The Journal of Employment", in the early spring of 207. This item menaces with sheets of parchment.*

Instants after materializing in another universe, I almost fell off a ledge. Despite Mr Frog's "superior intellect", I almost died, and I'd only just gotten there.

Leaning back with my arms to regain my balance, I sat down carefully to avoid falling, and took a good look around. I was sitting on a narrow, perforated steel walkway, at what seemed to be fifty feet above a massive garage area. Parked below me were rows upon rows of tanks and trucks - vehicles that required neither yak nor horse to move. Scattered among them I could see a good number of Ballpoint employees wandering about their business, unaware that I sat high above, watching. It felt impossibly bizarre to be seeing these things firsthand, as I'd only learned of their existence a few weeks before. It actually felt akin to a dream - one of those strange ones where you wake up and think, "where did all *that* weird stuff come from?"

I tried to take it all in, assuring my disbelieving mind that it *was* real, and I *wasn't* imagining things, but that only seemed to make it worse. Lightheaded, I tried to stand and stumble back to the portal, but unhappily discovered that it'd already closed.

I was on my own.

The garage looked old and battle-worn, with scorch marks, rust, and bullet indentations

adorning the iron walls. Everything was out in the open - the metal crossbeams, vent pipes, even electrical cables - it had a very utilitarian feel to it. Girders adorned the ceiling above me, and framework steel pillars stretched downwards from them to the floor.

Without warning, the huge wall to my right began to transform, and I jumped in startlement, almost falling off my perch. The wall seemed to wash itself away, revealing a grim, dark landscape, dotted with dead and rotting trees and scattered magma flows. I stared at the dismal scene in amazement, guessing that I was gazing through a portal, hundreds of times bigger than any I'd ever read about.

As I watched, several of the vehicles below me started, driving out of the garage and into that other, strange world - which honestly looked much homelier than Spearbreakers'. Then, just as quickly as it had opened, the great doorway closed again, and all that was left was a great, blank wall.

I made up my mind then to get moving. I had no idea where I was, I was terrified, bewildered, and awestruck all at once, and at the same time, I knew I had to hurry... it wasn't a good combination for me, but it made me very, very badly want to get home. I couldn't do that until I accomplished my mission. What complicated things the most was the fact that Mr Frog obviously hadn't put me where he'd wanted to.

Slipping on the little bracelet he'd shoved unceremoniously into my hand, I started forwards along the walkway, heading away from the portal wall and hoping I was going the right direction.

As I reached the end, a metal door split in the middle, sliding apart and revealing a long hallway. After hesitating for a moment, I walked through, worried they might slam shut as I came between them... but no such thing happened. The hallway on the other side looked newer than the garage, its metal surfaces free of rust or dent, and somehow it felt even more alien.

I was inside Ballpoint, wholly and utterly alone.

As I walked cautiously through the trapezoidal corridor, trying not to stare at the bare electric lights that lined the sides, I tried to plan what my next move would be. *"Get to the storage warehouses as quickly as possible,"* I remembered Mr Frog instructing me. *"All the buildings are connected by concrete-covered walkways due to the radiation-contaminated environment outside, so you shouldn't have to worry about finding the right one."* The problem was, I had no idea *where* I was, or how to even *get* to the storage warehouses.

Ahead of me, the corridor split, and a helmeted guard walked in my direction, a gun clearly visible in his hands. It was the first gun I'd ever seen, and it immediately put me on edge... but even worse, he seemed to notice my uneasiness.

"State your business!" he ordered, quickening his pace. "This is a restricted area!" He wore full armor: dark gray, thick, ribbed stuff that caught light rather than reflecting it, likely made out of materials I'd never even heard of. It didn't look as strong as adamantine, but it looked a lot lighter than steel.

For a moment I stood dumbstruck in terror, sure he was going to kill me. As his words slowly registered in my mind, I pulled out the little ID card and held it up to him. "I'm Vanya Carena," I managed, "I guess the portal put me in the wrong place." I tried to act casual, but inside, I was trembling.

With armored fingers, he took the identification card carefully from my hand and looked at it through his black-glassed visor. After what seemed ages, he glanced back at my face. "Vanya

Carena, Level 3 spy?"

I nodded, swallowing. "I was wondering if you could help me... I'm trying to get to the storage district, and I'm not too sure where I am."

"No problem, little mix ups like this happen on occasion." He handed my ID card back and pointed behind him with his weapon. "Keep going that way, sweetheart, first corridor to the right, and just keep walking."

I smiled, almost sighing with relief. "Thank you so much," I said gratefully. I hadn't expected him to be so friendly.

As I passed him and continued down the hallway, I could almost feel his eyes on me. I'm not sure if it was my imagination or not, but when I reached the corner and turned, I thought I heard him wolf whistle...

The corridor continued onwards, occasionally turning or splitting at an intersection. It should've been more than enough time to calm my beating heart, but the chance meeting with the guard had fully impressed upon me just how much danger I was in by simply being at Ballpoint Tech, and I was even more worried about my safety than before. If it hadn't been for the cooled air of the tunnels, I'm sure I would've been sweating.

Finally the trapezoidal hallway ended at a door. As I approached, it slid open, and I almost cried out in dismay at what I saw.

It was a giant open area like the garage, but instead of vehicles, I saw row after row of short, square buildings, separated by empty walkways. Through the door of the nearest I could see several bunk beds and cabinets lined up against the walls.

Among the buildings, soldiers milled around in their dark gray armor, going about their business. If the guard I'd passed could be trusted, I was going to have to walk right down the middle of it all.

Biting my lip, I took a deep breath and started through the door, encouraging myself as best I could with Mr Frog's words: *"You look like a normal Ballpoint employee now. Nobody will give you as much as a second glance."*

It soon became clear that this wasn't the case.

As I walked forwards, holding my head high and trying to act like I had a reason to be there, I heard men whispering among themselves as I passed, and occasionally they laughed rowdily after I'd gone. I felt it was at me, but I made up my mind to ignore it and hurry to the other side of the room, just to get it all over with. I tried to imagine that they always did that, and that it wasn't at me at all, but the occasional whistle I heard wasn't helping my self-imposed illusion... and then something happened that put the possibility of coincidence completely out of my mind.

Just as I neared the other side of the room, I jumped as I felt someone roughly slap my behind. My first impression was again that I wasn't wearing anything, and I felt color rushing to my face, but this time it wasn't simply embarrassment - it was partially out of anger. I spun and found myself looking at the grinning face of a muscled soldier.

"Hey, baby," he crooned with a wink, as if his behavior was perfectly acceptable. "Wanna go out and get a drink after my shift?" Behind him, his buddies laughed and elbowed each other.

My hand moved to where he'd hit me as I stared at him in openmouthed shock. I could hardly believe anyone could be so rude. "Of course I don't!" I managed to gasp out, backing away from him and his group.

He grinned wider, as if he enjoyed my reaction. "Oh ho ho, playing hard to get, are we? Daddy

*likes.*" He approached me, giving me a dirty look amidst his comrades' encouraging jeers.

I continued backing away, scared out of my wits for my safety. I was unsure of what to say or do, and sweating in earnest now. Mr Frog hadn't said anything like this could happen - he'd said *nobody* would notice me; that I wouldn't stand out at all. I'd rather have shoved myself into *any* little tunnel than go through something like this, and I was hyperventilating with fear, afraid of what they'd do to me.

It wasn't long before I found myself backed against a wall, as my antagonists slowly closed in, inappropriately casting their eyes over my body.

"And what's a pretty girl like you doing in our neck of the woods, hm?" the man asked rhetorically with a deliberate lick of the lips. "Love that sexy getup. Mmm, mmm, mmm."

"Get away from me!" I cried out loudly in a panic, swatting away one of their hands. "Don't touch me! Get away!"

My cries were answered by a yell to my left. "Hey, leave her alone!"

The soldiers backed up a few steps, craning their necks to look past each other in the direction of the voice. Between them I could see a heavily-armored female approaching at a brisk pace.

"Get away from her boys, you heard her," she said with a roll of her eyes.

With some grumbling, they obeyed, turning and ambling away, chuckling to themselves and stealing glances at me over their shoulders.

I relaxed my tensed muscles a bit, closing my eyes and breathing an actual sigh of relief. My heartbeat still raced, but at least it was over. I almost broke down and started crying.

"Hey, you all right?" my savior asked, and I looked up at her face. She was human, clearly, and she looked a little amused. The collar of her dark-gray armor sported a name in white letters: Bugi. "Not smart for you to be wandering around in here. Carena, right?"

I hesitated for a moment. "That's right... Do you recognize me?"

"I've seen you once or twice," she replied. "A girl like you tends to stand out around here. When I've seen you, you seemed to like the extra attention, but I guess we all have our bad days, right?"

I nodded in response. This was *really* not a good day for me.

"Thought so," she said with a knowing look. Then curiosity stole over her face, and she asked, "What are you doing down here in the barracks, anyway?"

"I was just passing through," I explained, shrugging.

Bugi raised an eyebrow at me. "Passing through? Barracks dead end, honey."

"What??" I exclaimed in surprise. "I thought I was going towards the storage district... I asked a guard, and he -"

She interrupted me with muffled laughter. "Heheheh! Could've guessed. Yeah, somebody played a little prank on you. Storage district, you say?"

"That's right," I answered. "I'm honestly a little lost..."

"Happens to the best of us." It sounded like a conversational lie, but her words following it heartened me: "I think I could spare a few minutes to get you pointed in the right direction - sound good?"

I smiled with real joy: right in the middle of enemy territory, I'd found a real friend, like a ray of sunshine in a darkened cave. "Yes, and thank you! ...and thank you for keeping those men off of me."

She was already walking back the way I'd come, motioning for me to follow. "Not a problem, honey!" she said over her shoulder, and I hurried after her to keep pace.

As we walked back through the barracks, huge lights among the scaffolding twenty feet above casting faint shadows between the low buildings, no one dared stop us or even whistle.

Apparently Bugi had earned a great deal of respect from the men: a single glare from her was all it took to send them slinking back into the shadows. For the first time since I'd arrived, I felt safe.

She moved quickly, taking powerful strides with her longer legs. I had to rush to keep up with her, and it wasn't long before we reached the end of the barracks, choosing a different corridor than the one I'd entered through. The tubular lights on the walls seemed to fly by with a purpose as we turned through different intersections; Bugi knew the hallways well.

Finally, she stopped, and I almost bumped into her. "Far as I'm taking you, Carena," she said, turning to me. "Warehouse is just up ahead and to your left, can't miss it." This said, she turned and left at an equally brisk pace.

I'd hardly remembered my manners before she was already turning the corner. "Thank you!" I called after her, but I wasn't sure she even heard. She wasn't doing it for thanks or profit, but only for the principle - like a true friend. For a moment I regretted that I'd never see her again, but that faded away as it was replaced by new worries: I wouldn't stand a chance without Bugi if there were soldiers in the warehouse, and they treated me the same as the ones in the barracks had.

A memory of Urist's voice came unbidden to my mind: *"Fear doesn't make you weak. Courage is doing something brave, even when you're scared. Being afraid keeps you sharp - it keeps you alive."* Maybe I'd never see him again, but he still had a special place in my heart. He *always* would. If you really care about someone, you never stop.

I had to be *brave*. "If not for me, then for Urist," I whispered, and my own words seemed to bring me confidence as I heard them.

Gritting my teeth, I stepped forwards firmly with all the purpose of a charging bull, my eyes fixed on a point at the end of the hallway. Mr Frog wanted his PEA, and Armok be damned if he wasn't going to get it.

If Urist could've seen me, I'm sure he would've been proud.

I turned the corner to the left and found myself facing an open area. At the far wall was a row of closed double doors, patrolled by a single guard who was walking away from me down the line. As the guard passed in front of the doors, they didn't open like the others at Ballpoint had, and I realized they must be either locked or opened manually. I halted for a moment, then stepped forwards, my dark boots clipping across the floor as I walked forwards. I'd shoved everything else out of my mind; I was going to succeed for Urist.

And then my thoughts began to wander... one of the hazards of thinking of the one you care most about. I began to fantasize about what would happen if I succeeded: maybe Mr Frog would allow me to leave, and I could go and be with Urist again...

My mind was still half on my fantasies when I tapped the guard on the shoulder from behind.

The guard turned to me. "Yes?" It was a female's voice, though coarse. "Do you need assistance?"

I nodded. "I need to get in there," I told her, pointing at the row of doors. "Do you think you could help?" I was on a roll - nothing could stop me...

...Except for her response. "Where's your access key?" she asked expectantly.

It threw me completely for a loop, and my mind slowly drifted from my castles in the clouds to the present situation as I puzzled over what she'd said. "Acc... Access key?"

"Yeah, your access key." Her voice took on a suspicious tone. "It's required for entrance... Don't you know that?"

"I..." I paused, lost for words. My eyes glanced away at the row of locked doors, bordered by little pads of buttons. "I... It's my first time being sent down here..."

"Key's required for entrance, inserted in a keypad. Can't get in otherwise." She sounded extremely suspicious now, and I could imagine her eyes narrowing at me from behind her visor. "Who sent you down?"

I didn't have an answer. "Um... I... I don't know, someone told me to retrieve something for them and bring it back." I knew I wasn't a good liar, and she could probably tell. I was beginning to panic, fright clutching at me and forming into a knot in my throat.

She shook her head, light glinting on her helmet. "That's against company protocol. What's your operating number? And what's your name? I have to report this."

"Report it??" I exclaimed in shock. I was trapped - hopelessly ensnared. Thoughts poured through my mind as my train of thought crossed from one rail to the next. There was no way I'd be able to escape, and even if I tried to run, she'd be more than capable of gunning me down. I'd never see Urist again, I'd never see Spearbreakers - I'd never even see *Mr Frog* again, and I honestly preferred seeing him again than the possibility of torture, or worse, imprisonment with Ballpoint offenders. If sexual harassment was overlooked at Ballpoint as normal, I couldn't imagine what terrible crimes someone would have to commit to be considered a *criminal*. The men in the barracks hadn't given it a second thought, and nobody would've stopped them if I hadn't cried out for help.

Suddenly an idea sprang forth from my bewildered mind. It was sketchy at best, I knew, and my voice faltered as I spoke. "Why would you have to report it?" I asked her plaintively. "Isn't this the barracks? I'm just supposed to be fetching a helmet from someone's bunk!"

The moment it was out of my mouth, I was sure it would never work, but contrary to that belief, it did.

She laughed rudely. "Barracks? You're new here, then." She grabbed my shoulder and spun me around, pointing back the way I'd come. "They're that way, kid. Somebody just pranked you. I'd do it, too... if I was off-duty." Her voice took on a cruel, boisterous tone as she said this last, and she shoved me forwards roughly. "Now get on out. Learn to use maps, kid."

I was safe, but also devastated. As I walked back through the hallways, it wasn't long before I realized I was also utterly lost - there was no way I'd be able to figure out how to get back to Bugi, much less the garage. I tried finding a set of stairs to get to the roof, but I found nothing but corridor after corridor, their ribbed walls sloping inwards towards the ceiling. Finally I gave up, wandering aimlessly about the Ballpoint infrastructure, wondering how I'd ever escape. A few times I passed a guard, but with my head downcast they took little notice of me, walking by without so much as a glance. I was walking in circles, and I knew it, but I didn't know how to stop.

After a time, I remembered the bracelet Mr Frog had put into my hand, and I looked at my wrist - it was still there. Though I hated to go back empty-handed, I didn't see what else there

was I could do. I'd done my very best, I figured; Mr Frog had simply expected too much from me.

After all the guards were out of sight, I slipped the lightweight device off my hand and held it up, pressing the little silver button on the side. As I watched, the air inside the empty circle rippled with a quiet, high-pitched buzzing sound. It was sending my coordinates back to Mr Frog's portal - it was an old invention of his, and he'd explained how it worked. Unfortunately, moments later, the bracelet quieted, and the air within it stilled.

I freaked out. "It *broke?!?*" I exclaimed in dismay. "How could it *break?!?* Now I'll *never* be able to leave, and -"

My panicking was interrupted by a quiet hum, as the air before me shivered, shuddering into a mirroring pool of water, ovoid and reaching almost to the ceiling.

I stared at it for a minute, open-mouthed, my last words hanging in the air. "...Oh," I managed, feeling stupid. I stepped through it almost eagerly, unafraid of the strange twisting sensations this time. I was ready to go home.

~~~

"Are you serious?" Mr Frog was fuming with rage, pacing rapidly about the room like a growing thundercloud. "Stupid, stupid girl! You accomplished *nothing!* Did you not bother to consider pickpocketing a key before you blithely ran away, ecstatic with the expectation of returning to your squalid little world? Skulkers are thieves by nature; no complications should have existed during your assignment!"

"We'll just try again!" I insisted. "I'll do better next time, I promise!"

"There might not even be a 'next time'! With your notably abnormal behavior they could possibly detain you for questioning and mental examination if I send you there again!"

"I could've gotten sexually assaulted in the barracks!" I cried out in protest, tears in my eyes. I'd never seen him so angry before. "You said nobody would notice me, but *everybody* did! *Everybody* was looking at me, and it's all because of this ridiculous suit you made me wear!"

"It's Ballpoint protocol for employed spies to wear that same highly dexterous apparel! Now cease bemoaning your previous plight, it's irrelevant!"

"Just because *you* don't have any concept of sexuality doesn't mean -" I stopped in fright as Mr Frog stormed over to where I stood, his lips twisting threateningly with a controlled wrath as he glared in contempt, towering above me.

Mr Frog stopped, his face inches from mine. With his furrowed brow, bushy beard and well-trimmed hair, he looked fiercer than a wild elephant as he spoke slowly, threateningly: "Don't *ever* question my character again."

I stared at him in terror, biting my lip and trying to back away, but he grabbed my arm and held me close to keep me still. My arm began to ache from his firm grip - I felt my hand going numb as in a low voice, he growled an ominous warning: "It will be the last mistake you make."

I heard myself whimper in fear, and he shoved me away roughly in disgust, turning away. I stumbled backwards, tripping over my boots and falling to the ground as he stalked towards the door, his hands clasped behind his cloak. It was only then that I remembered: Ballpoint had questioned his character, and he'd left them; he'd made them regret it. There must be something in his past... someone he cared about who'd accused his character, maybe. *Something* must've made him that way, and for a moment, I wanted to understand who he really was.

My thoughts were broken as he turned to me abruptly, his hands still clasped behind his back. "Put on some regular clothing. We're going somewhere tonight." His voice was calm again - almost portentous.

I got to my feet in surprise. "Going somewhere?? We've never gone anywhere before..."

"No, we haven't," he agreed. "But tonight will be different. I had a second plan in case you didn't succeed, though I didn't expect you to fail so miserably. Nevertheless, it needs to be put into effect."

I looked away. If he'd meant for me to feel ashamed, it'd worked. "What?" I asked, prompting him. "What is it?"

"None of your concern," he said in a slightly raised voice, unclasping his hands and heading for the door. "Meet me in the workshops in precisely twenty minutes, and make sure your ears are covered." With this, he left, closing the door behind him.

The suit was a bit of a pain to get back out of, but I finally managed, folding it and putting it away. Before long I was fully dressed in my normal clothes, ready to leave. I checked the clock on the wall - dwarves didn't make clocks, but Mr Frog had taught me to read them anyway - I still had five minutes.

I left Mr Frog's laboratory with a quickened step, trying to get to the workshops before the five minutes were up. Unlike him, I didn't own a wristwatch, but I thought I could estimate the passing of time well enough on my own.

A few minutes later, I arrived, opening yet another one of the many doors and walking in amidst the hustle and bustle of dwarves going about their work. It wasn't long before I spotted Mr Frog, sitting at a table with two other dwarves.

My heart skipped a beat as I realized who they were: it was Urist and Hans! A giant smile broke over my face - it was by far the best thing that'd happened all day, and possibly all week! I rushed over and threw my arms around them in delight - first Urist, then Hans, and they returned my embraces gladly.

"Strange," Mr Frog said dryly, sipping from his mug, "I never get that response from her. I must assume you are already on friendly terms, unless all elves are that enthusiastic about meeting dwarves." He glared at me icily for a moment, as if reminding me he hadn't forgotten about my little misadventure. "I'll be expecting the three of you in my room tomorrow morning, as the sun rises. You don't have much of the day left, so I would recommend you get some sleep soon." Then, he stood and left, his cloak billowing gently behind him as it caught the musty air.

I turned back to Urist. "I'd thought I wouldn't see you again - I'm so glad you're doing all right!" I exclaimed. He smiled, and I felt myself melting in his gaze.

"It is good to see you, too," he responded with a smile.

"Glad t'see ya in such high spirits, missus!" Hans said with a nod. "Mr Frog's been explainin' some stuff to us - he said you might oughta explain it a little better."

I looked at them curiously - first one, then the other, searching their faces for answers - I didn't understand what they meant.

Urist seemed to notice. "Mr Frog said we would be on a mission together. He implied you would be better able to teach us." He raised an eyebrow at me.

I blushed and looked away, embarrassed. "Mr Frog's not a very good teacher, no," I said.

Then, as the rest of what he'd said sank in, my eyes widened, and I gaped at him in disbelief. "Wait, a mission together?? Both - all three of us??"

In response to my question, Urist nodded. I laughed with joy and excitement, my voice ringing clearly through the halls of the mighty fortress. I felt blissful - bliss is the only word that could describe it.

Urist smiled at my joy, and told me, "That is what he said. He also mentioned disguises and advanced technology... Do you know what he could mean?"

I hesitated for a moment, but then realized that Mr Frog had clearly wanted me to sum up my knowledge. If I was going on a mission with Urist and Hans back to Ballpoint, they would need to know quite a few things so they understood what was going on. I was so excited; I hardly knew where to begin. "All right," I started, calming myself down, though the smile never went away, "First, you're going to need to ignore everything you think you know about science, and keep an open mind..."

I knew right then that I would *love* being a teacher.



Chapter 18: Jealousy

Vanya's flowing script continues on the following pages, but your mind is preoccupied with something else: what language did the soldiers of Ballpoint speak? Vanya, by her own admission, was bilingual - she knew dwarven and elvish. In the previous journal she'd proved it, writing in two different languages. You put the book down for a moment, musing. Vanya had been able to converse with the Ballpoint soldiers she'd mentioned in the previous entry, so despite largely being human, they either spoke dwarven or elvish. After further thought, you decide that it must have been dwarven: after all, why would Mr Frog bother sending Urist and Hans there if they couldn't speak the language? Satisfied with your conclusion, you pick the journal back up and begin to read.

Usually, everything feels better when you're not doing it alone. It's always nice to have a friend by your side, or be able to show someone what you've accomplished. Or even just to have someone with you as you die. Loneliness is a depressing feeling to have, but if you feel supported by your friends, you feel as though you can accomplish everything. This goes for all sentient races, and not just dwarves: elves, humans, and mountain barbarians feel that way too. Even goblins would rather not be alone, as they enjoy bragging and showing off their war trophies. In a way, we're all the same: we're social creatures. We need each other to be happy.

...Except for the Spawn of Holistic. Unlike the rest of us, they don't really care if anyone of their race knows of their triumphs... All they want to do is kill. It doesn't matter if their killing makes a difference; it doesn't matter if the people they're killing were going to die anyway. Maybe it's not really a want, and it's a *need* - maybe they *need* to kill: they don't seem to have a choice, anyway. The moment they turn from sentience to the wretched monsters that they are, they become pure evil - with no exceptions. There's just no such thing as a "good" Spawn.

But then there's another race that's born evil: the goblins. From the moment they set foot in this world, opening their little eyes for the first time, they're evil. Somehow, it doesn't seem fair... They don't really have a choice in it. Like the Spawn, it's almost like they're *forced* to be evil. For

the rest of us, we start out neutral and choose our path, but goblins...

And what if a goblin saw how much harm he was causing and didn't like it? What if he wanted to stop hurting and start helping others instead? He'd be put to death for heresy by his own society, all because he wanted to make his own decisions. It's unfair, in the end... and in a way, I can't help but feel sorry for them.

All the same... at least they enjoy the company of those they're with.

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It was early morning, and I was getting dressed in my hated Ballpoint spysuit. I was sleepy, and my eyes were still a little blurry. I'm not much of a morning person, and I'd much rather sleep in, but Mr Frog had woken me up, saying I needed to be ready "early" today. In my opinion, six o'clock is *already* too early. Five is ridiculous.

I'd spent the evening before teaching Urist and Hans about technology and Ballpoint, and they'd listened to every word I said. It was funny, watching the looks of disbelief and uncertainty on their faces. Urist in particular looks cute when he's confused; sometimes I just wanted to laugh tackle him with a hug.

But they were coming! Urist, Hans and I were going on a mission together, and I was *so* excited. I almost dropped my hairbrush a couple times as I stood at the mirror, brushing it carefully. I'd seen how Urist was looking at me the night before - he liked me. I was almost *sure* of it. Now I was fantasizing about how I could let him know that I felt the same way.

I was actually looking at my hair without feeling regret at what Mr Frog had done to it.

I'd been ecstatic lately.

A buzzer sounded, echoing through my little bedroom. The walls are soundproof - the only way that Mr Frog could let me know he wanted me was either to open the door (and risk my being less than decent), or sound the buzzer. Usually he didn't care either way, but somehow I felt that my friends had arrived. With a few extra brushes to my hair, trying to arrange it as best I could for Urist's sake, I left the mirror and walked towards the door.

I paused at my beanie as I passed it, wondering whether I should put it on... I couldn't wear it at Ballpoint, but I didn't want to remind Urist that I was an elf, either... I was ashamed of my ears, anyway.

The buzzer sounded again, interrupting my thoughts. "Fine!" I yelled pointlessly, pushing the button beside the door. The wall slid away, revealing the faces of three dwarves: Mr Frog, Hans... and Urist.

Urist and Hans had a couple of Mr Frog's special weapons slung over their backs: Urist had a sawpike, and Hans had a "buzzhammer", which is like a warhammer, except it has a buzzsaw blade at one of the flat ends. The extent of their disguise was how they were both wearing dark gray clothes: Ballpoint's color. *They* didn't have to wear a tight, skinny outfit.

But that last detail was lost on me as I smiled at them happily, lost in my fantasies, unsure of what to do.

Mr Frog quickly answered that question for me. "Get over here, stupid girl," he ordered brusquely, walking over to the hallway door. "I've got an errand to run; I'll be back in a moment.

Take the opportunity to say hello, or whatever it is you socialites do." With that, he was gone.

I walked towards the middle of the room, stopping short before the little table-lined walkway where Urist. "Hi!" I said with a smile, my eyes lingering on Urist. His eyes met mine, and I looked away, embarrassed.

"You didn't cover your ears this time..." he said thoughtfully.

I blushed and wished I could turn invisible. "I'm sorry," I began apologetically, "I'd cover them if I could, but -"

Urist interrupted, trying to ease my thoughts. "It's all right, Vanya. I don't mind." He hesitated for a moment, and ventured, "You look nice."

Basking in the compliment, I looked at him, meeting his gaze. "Really?" I tried to smile as prettily as I could, hoping for more.

Urist opened his mouth as if to speak, but before he could manage, Mr Frog burst back into the room. "That's taken care of!" he said, seemingly annoyed as he closed the door and stalked towards the portal machine. "Do you remember your mission objectives?"

I followed him with my eyes and nodded, as he began to set the console for our journey. Mr Frog had rehearsed our objectives with me the night before. First, we were supposed to find an access card of a high enough level to allow us into the warehouses. After that, we were supposed to get Mr Frog's PEA and return. It all seemed very simple at the time...

The portal hummed, and with a whish, the air within it coalesced again into a shimmering, rippling surface. The looks of surprise and wonderment on Hans' face almost made me laugh, but I kept quiet so as not to embarrass him. I think Urist saw me smiling, though.

Mr Frog, however, didn't feel anything close to mirth as he saw Hans begin backing away. "No, you don't!" he said with a scowl, rushing over behind the giant of a dwarf and pushing him forwards with ease. "You have to get in there. Vanya, you go first! Lead them through so this buffoon doesn't get terrified and run out on us!"

For a moment, I paused, struck by how similar in height Mr Frog was to Hans.

"Move!" Mr Frog ordered. I felt my feet rushing me forwards towards the portal in response.

Moments later, I felt my consciousness twisting as I traveled through nothingness.

I "came to" in a dimly-lit, metal-clad room, illuminated only by one of Ballpoint's trademark trapezoidal corridors, visible through an open doorway. Except for the portal behind me, everything seemed quiet, and I stepped back and turned around to look at it in curiosity. I'd never seen someone exit a portal before, and I wondered how it would look.

Urist appeared, first his leg and then the rest of him, as he stepped through at a brisk pace, gritting his teeth as if he felt he'd be ripped apart, or worse. My expression changed from curiosity to surprise as he ran into me, tripping and knocking us both to the icy metal of the floor.

For a second I lay there, wondering what had happened, and why I felt a heavy weight pressing down on me. Against the cold floor, wearing Ballpoint's thin spy suit, I felt naked again. As my eyes adjusted to the dim lighting, I began to make out the strong outline of Urist's lantern jaw, his face hovering inches above mine. Then it began to dawn on me - Urist was lying on top of me.

"Ah! Get off!" I yelled in a panic, trying to get out from under him. My face burned in embarrassment. I liked him, yes, but we were sort of in an intimate position... *too* intimate for my tastes, really.

He struggled to his feet in a hurry, trying not to step on me or trip over me again. I scooted backwards across the floor and got up.

For a minute or so, we stood there awkwardly, trying to say something or explain, but not finding the right words. It was very... uncomfortable.

"I didn't mean to fall on you," he finally said. He looked abashed by what he'd done, and I couldn't help but want to assure him that it wasn't really that big of a deal.

"It's all right," I answered, almost whispering, getting to my feet. "It wasn't intentional. You didn't see me there, and I was in the way. It's my fault, really."

"No, the fault is mine," he replied. "I should have been watching."

I took a few steps closer, looking up into his eyes. "It's okay, really."

For a moment, we stood there, looking at each other. Right then, I felt *sure* he cared about me; for a moment, I felt sure we were just about to kiss. My heart fluttered as if it'd grown wings, like I'd flown away to a dream world, and I tilted my lips up closer to him, almost begging for him to make a move.

Without warning, there was a noise from behind him - heavy stomping boots and a loud "- but Mr Frog, I don't *wanna* go in -" that cut off abruptly as Hans plowed into both of us, knocking us down with me, once again, underneath.

After we'd untangled ourselves and had apologized a second time (I couldn't help but glare at Hans for ruining our romantic moment), we assessed our situation. Mr Frog had already closed the portal from his side, and there was no going back through.

"So... You've any idea where we are, missus?" Hans asked me, looking around the room.

I shook my head, though I knew the gesture was barely visible. "There should be maps on the floors of the intersections - I saw them last time I was here. Once we get there, we can figure out where we are."

Urist spoke. "Did Mr Frog inform you of where to find the access key?"

"No..." I replied slowly, remembering. "He just said that only people who have them are higher-ranking officers."

"Well," rumbled Hans, "let's go find one, then."

We left the little room, and I led my friends through the hallways at a good pace.

Once, I glanced backwards to see where they were, and to my relief they'd kept up. "We are still here," Urist said. "No need to check."

I nodded absentmindedly. "There's an intersection in front of us, see?" I pointed ahead at where another hallway crossed ours. "On the floor in the middle there's a map; it should be marked with different places, and we'll be able to figure out where we are."

"Oh, one of them 'you are here' maps, ya mean!" Hans said knowingly with a smile. "Spearbreakers don't have any of them."

I started to laugh, but abruptly stopped: a dwarf-sized figure, clad in the heaviest armor I'd seen at Ballpoint, turned off the side hallway up ahead and started towards us.

Consciously trying to look natural, I slowed my step a bit. "Just keep walking, don't look at him," I whispered to my companions, trying my best to act brave. I actually think I did a good job. "And don't attack; that gun he's carrying is huge. If it's a guard, he should just walk on by..."

Unfortunately, that wasn't what happened at all. "Halt, state your business," ordered a woman's voice, as the helmet's visor lifted to reveal the face of a battle-scarred female. "I'll need to see

your ID." She stopped a few meters in front of us, waiting expectantly.

I got it out quickly, trying not to offer any resistance. I especially didn't want Hans or Urist to go battle-crazy. I wasn't sure if they would: we hadn't really gotten to that... "Vanya Carena," I said, holding out my little card. "I'm a -"

"Level 3 spy," she interrupted with a glare. "Yes, don't look surprised, I know the uniforms' color code. You're supposed to be down at the southeast quadrant. Why are you over here?"

I opened my mouth to speak, but Urist spoke as he stepped past me, arms folded. "Who wants to know?"

The dwarven woman pulled herself up to her full height - several inches taller than me. "I'm Commander Acetalyta, it's my business to know," she said as she stared down at us.

Urist looked over his shoulder at me with a smile. "Convenient," he murmured, and then turned again to face the commander.

"Where's your identification?" she asked. "Don't you have it with you?"

I didn't like Urist taking control - *I* was supposed to be in charge. "They're with me," I spoke up. At the same time, I was beginning to worry that our mission had already failed: The commander looked at us suspiciously as a result of my comment.

Urist spoke again, calm and collected as ever as he stepped slowly closer to her. "We're on an assignment," he said. His voice was like chocolate. "But... if you would like..." he continued, almost seductively, "I could come back after it's done."

I opened my mouth to protest, but couldn't produce a sound. I couldn't believe what I was hearing. He was *flirting* with her!

"Well..." she said slowly, her expression softening as a smile stole over it, "I think that might be against protocol..." She looked back at Hans for a moment. "I think I might have to take you two down to security."

"Mmmm, sounds like she caught us," rumbled a voice I would've ordinarily found sexy, and I turned towards Hans in disbelieving surprise as he stepped past me to stand with Urist. "Guess you'll have t' take us in." They seemed to be in on whatever was happening, and "security" was obviously a poorly disguised metaphor.

"Let's go, boys." Commander Acetalyta began walking down the hallway at a slower pace, swinging her hips with Hans and Urist close beside her. "You two are in biiiiigggggg trouble," she crooned, and I almost vomited.

"You can't go yet!" I protested, trying to keep my voice level. I wanted to yell at them for so many things, not the least of which was the fact that they were abandoning me.

And then, Urist turned around and tossed a little card at me. "Don't wait up for us, Vanya," he said, *winking* as they turned the corner. He actually seemed to enjoy it.

I was left alone in the hallway, standing silent, dimly aware of the passage of time. Finally, I shook my head in disbelief and bent down to the floor to pick up the little card Urist had tossed. I felt my heart soften slightly as I read the label: "Level 8 Security Key, Property of Commander Acetalyta." I had a way into the warehouse district... but at what cost?

Dejectedly, I walked forwards to the intersection, reading the map on the floor. A bright blue "you are here" marked where I stood, and it wasn't difficult to tell the way to the warehouses. With an effort I started in that direction, but as I walked my mind began to wander, and I remembered what Urist had said only minutes before. He hadn't specifically flirted with her, but

his seductive voice still lingered in my ears: *"If you would like... I could come back after it's done."* Even then, I could imagine him in a dark room with Acetalyta, his lips on her, her hands moving over his chest. It was horrid, and my vision blurred as a tear formed and fell down my cheek.

That surprised me. I'd known Urist for over a year, and he'd often been on my thoughts... But did I *love* him? Would I be happy for him if he'd found someone he liked? Part of me desperately wanted him for my own, and for that filthy skank to keep her grubby little hands off him... but at the same time, I wanted him to be happy.

I shook my head angrily to clear my mind, roughly brushing away my tears. It's impossible to love someone right after you meet them! It wasn't love he felt for her; it was lust!!!

Walking onwards through the corridors, I quickened my step as if I could escape my thoughts; I couldn't let it get to me. Urist and I were friends, and nothing else. I couldn't possibly love him, could I? We'd only spent 12 hours together, at the best.

I also had to admit to myself that I'd never really been "in love" before. My whole life, I'd always avoided people... all out of fear of finding out who I was. Urist had been the first one who'd been different. He hadn't cared what I was.

But now he was off somewhere with that woman, that *Ballpoint Commander*. In my mind, I could see him making out with her, her giggling at his low voice, clothes lying on the floor... I could almost hear her detestable voice moaning in wicked pleasure. It was the worst type of torture imaginable: the torture of the heart. It was slowly, cruelly murdering me inside, and I desperately wanted it out of my head.

Fortunately, it wasn't long before something happened to draw my attention. Turning the corridor's corner in front of me were forty or more armed guards, marching in long lines, four abreast. Not knowing what else to do, I got to the side of the hallway and waited for them to pass, hoping I wouldn't be questioned.

They marched past me without giving me so much as a glance, acting very professional and orderly, much unlike the off duty mercenaries I'd met in the barracks. In a way, I admired their level of control - dwarves could never hold such perfect formations for more than a few seconds... even when standing still. But at the same time... every soldier there reminded me of *my* soldier, Urist. It was tugging at my heart; every one of them a cruel slap to my cheek, my thoughts an icy prison from which I couldn't escape.

Finally, they passed by me without incident, and I continued towards the warehouses. I was almost there, and I had the key in hand... but I'd paid dearly for it.



## Chapter 19: Despair

*This is an emu leather-bound journal. You're pretty sure there's nothing new to be said about it at this point, but the next entry menaces with the dried imprints of fallen tears.*

Jealousy forces disquieting images into our minds. In reality, what we imagine might not even be true, but people in love tend to think illogically. If it gets bad enough, you find yourself mistrusting even your best friends... I'd never had it happen to me before, and I was flailing about, trying to find solid ground to stand on. It was as if I'd been cast into deep water; as if thrown over the side of a dwarven cargo barge, only to realize I couldn't swim. I was drowning in my own mind, and there wasn't any air to be had. But I didn't want to see it as "jealousy" at all.

I tried to convince myself everything was all right, but my thoughts were flowing too swiftly through my mind. *Urist was only trying to get the key for me*, I told myself. I wanted to believe it. With all I had, I really did. The idea lifted my spirits briefly, only to be crushed by recurring memories in my mind: Urist's seductive voice; how smooth he'd been; how much he'd seemed to enjoy it. It couldn't possibly have been the first time he'd picked someone up like that, I was sure of it. I hated the thought, and it made me feel wretched, but I didn't know what else to think.

I wanted to hit something, or kick something. I wanted to go back and yell at him for following his own desires instead of staying with me and completing the mission. At the same time, I was faintly aware that his abandoning me wasn't the real reason I was upset: I *liked* him, as *more* than a friend. I'd never really thought about it until then; I'd always brushed it out of my mind because of what it meant. Handsome or not, gentlemanly or not, he was a *dwarf*. I was a horrible, no-good elf. If I was to be judged by the actions of my own kind - eating the dead, being religiously hypocritical - I almost *deserved* to be killed. More importantly... how could an elf have children with a dwarf?

I took a deep breath and tried to calm myself. It was only a flirt; *only a flirt*. That was *all* it had been, and now I was overthinking everything.

Up ahead of me the hallway opened into a large room: the entrances to the warehouse. I knew I needed to put all of it out of my mind for the moment and finish my job, or else someone would probably notice. I'd been lucky enough to avoid the guards so far... but what could I do against even one?

A guard was pacing back and forth, patrolling the wide row of double doors. After hiding for a moment, I calmed myself as best I could and walked towards the nearest door. In the keypad to the right of it, there was a little slot where you could fit a card. Not sure what else to do, I inserted Commander Acetalyta's into it, and to my immense relief I heard a little "ding", and the doors slid open.

I glanced back at the guard, who was walking forwards at a slow, steady pace, gun in hand. He didn't appear suspicious, and I felt glad of it: so far, everything was going smoothly. Taking the card back and slipping it into my sleeve, I entered the warehouse.

I froze just inside the entrance, gaping in fearful awe at the tall towers of metal shelving. They seemed to rise at least four stories from the floor, and went back deeper than the garage, or even the barracks. Between them, the occasional armed guard silently strolled, striding slowly through as if ghosts from another realm. I paid little notice to them, more occupied with the question of how I was going to find Mr Frog's PEA with row upon row of shelves to search.

The sound of a metal door sliding shut behind me snapped me out of my thoughts, and I began to walk forwards with a hesitant step into the massive chamber. To my right, there was a stack of backpacks, with a sign that read, "Return after use". I knew I wouldn't be able to return it, but I figured a backpack would probably come in handy, so I took one. Slinging it over my shoulder, I walked down an aisle between the two nearest shelves, looking in wonderment at all the different devices stacked upon them: things I knew I'd never be able to identify, much less comprehend.

Suddenly I jumped, looking upwards as I heard the loud noise of whirring electric motors. Thirty feet above me, some sort of massive mechanical machine was climbing between the

shelves like a spider. Its eight legs were clinging to opposite sides of the aisle, and I instinctively ducked as it passed overhead. The rider in the pod looked down at me and nodded in acknowledgement as his vehicle turned the corner out of sight, maneuvering its legs in an otherworldly manner.

I felt overloaded by the new sounds and sights, and all I could think was that I wanted to go home. "Culture shock", Mr Frog would later call it. Honestly, even had I known the name, I wouldn't have cared. I felt a little dizzy and sick to my stomach, but I tried my best to ignore it.

"Are you all right?"

A blonde-haired human guard, looking about my age, walked towards me with a concerned expression on his face. I hadn't even known he was there. "Yes... I'm all right, just -" I began, and paused: it shouldn't have been so obvious. I examined his face suspiciously. "Why?"

The man looked at me with a curious expression. "You just look... lost, somehow," he said, looking at me thoughtfully. "Plus, I'm pretty good at telling when somebody's off their game." There seemed to be a hint of loneliness about him.

"Off their game?" I wanted him to go away, but at the same time, there was something inviting about him... almost attractive.

He laughed. "Yeah, you look like you're hiding from a ghost."

I smiled and shook my head, glancing downwards. "No... not really a ghost... just problems." He seemed to see right through me.

"Problems? Wanna talk about it?" He was definitely the chattiest guard I'd ever heard of, but right then, I was thankful for it. It had taken my mind off my troubles.

I hesitated. "I can't..." I replied, trying to sound regretful. "I'm busy."

With a knowing nod, he smiled disarmingly. "No problem, just figured I'd offer. If you wanna discuss it over lunch, I get off in an hour..." he hinted, raising an eyebrow hopefully.

"No, I..." I frowned and stopped for a moment, looking at his deep blue eyes, his close-cropped hair. Without meaning to, I remembered Urist's betrayal - how he'd run off with the commander without so much as a goodbye. Now a guard was practically asking me out. In a sort of vengeful way, it felt good, and I felt myself open up to him a little. "You know what..." I said slowly, letting a smile creep across my features, "yes. Yes, why not?" Looking back now, I realize I'd completely forgotten where I was, though I hadn't forgotten what I was doing. "But could you help me with this first?"

He appeared happy that I'd agreed, and it made me feel guilty. "Sure! Whatcha need? And what's your name, by the way? Mine's Halion."

"I'm trying to find something, but I don't know where to look. And my name is... Vanya..." As my name formed on my lips, I remembered my accursed elven heritage. Then I realized something surprising. He wasn't an elf, he could see *I* was an elf, and it mattered so little to him that he'd actually asked me to lunch. In my opinion, he'd one-upped Urist. I felt a tinge of anger as his name crossed my mind again, but soon it passed.

Halion had taken a little portable computer out of his pocket and was typing letters into the keypad. "What is it you're looking for?" he asked, glancing up from it at me.

I hesitated, worried that my quest would give away my identity. I glanced around nervously for an exit in case I needed it. "...I'm looking for a PEA that used to belong to someone named... Mr Frog. Would it list that anywhere in there?"

I tensed up, biting my lip anxiously, but to my relief he didn't seem suspicious. Instead, he nodded, tapping the keys as he spoke. "Yep, shouldn't be hard to come up with. ...Ah, here it is



already! You're looking for section XFY, position 1393, level 3. That's..." He looked up from his computer for a moment, visually scanning through the shelves. Lifting a careful finger, he pointed towards my left. "That's that way. Just walk past the aisles until you see 'XFY', and then -" He stopped abruptly, putting a finger to his ear, a blank expression on his face.

After several seconds, I queried cautiously, "Is something wrong?"

"No, it's..." he stopped again, listening. "I just got a call on the comm channel - backup military units are wanted at a 'situation' down in D-sector - that's me. Looks like I won't be getting off in an hour," he frowned. "Sorry about this, guess we'll have to talk some other time."

Fortunately by this time I'd regained my wits enough to remember I wasn't even going to *be* there in an hour. "It's all right, you just go do what you need to." Somehow, I still felt slightly disappointed.

He nodded dejectedly, shutting his computer off and putting it carefully in his pocket. Another two guards brushed past us, headed in the direction of the door. "You coming, Halion?" one called over his shoulder.

"Yeah," he replied, raising his voice over the distance. "I'm just helping someone out." His voice lowered again to a normal tone as he said, "I'm really sorry, Vanya. Nice meeting you, though." He turned, walking quickly towards the door.

I stood silently as he left, only remembering my manners as he walked through the doors. "Nice to meet you too!" I called after him, but my voice echoed eerily in the quiet, cavernous room.

Mr Frog had always said Ballpoint was pure evil. In his words, "*You mindless brutes of Ballpoint Tech - all you can accomplish is petty thievery and senseless destruction!*" I'd only been here twice, and each time, I'd met someone friendly and helpful. I was beginning to realize that if Ballpoint *itself* was "evil"... it didn't necessarily mean that *everyone* here was evil. They were simply employees doing their job to earn a living. Bugi and Halion were friendly, and it seemed likely that many other people in Ballpoint were.

As I walked quietly down the aisles towards my destination, I began to wonder if maybe Eris, Joseph's company, wasn't all evil, either.

Before long, I stood at my destination: XFY, position 1393. The number was marked on the shelf, and the third shelf from the floor was marked 'level three'. Unfortunately... the spot was empty. Around it were arranged an odd assortment of other PEAs of various designs, but Mr Frog's was missing.

I stopped, frowning. Unless Halion had given me the wrong information, the PEA should've been *right there*. I straightened, looking down the aisles for someone to ask, but the warehouse seemed strangely empty. I could hear footsteps in the distance, but for the most part, the guards seemed to have left.

Not knowing what else to do, I took the backpack off my shoulder and began scooping all the nearby PEAs into it. If Mr Frog's was simply misplaced, I wanted to be *sure* I had it.

~~~

Several minutes later, I was walking down the bulb-lit hallways of Ballpoint's unending corridors with a full backpack slung over my shoulder. Leaving the storage area had been easy:

nobody had bothered to check me or stop me, not even the guard outside. In a way, I'd expected it to be more difficult.

As I walked, my mind began to wander again...

Halion had wanted to get to know me. He'd shown interest and actually asked me to lunch. What had Urist done, the whole time I'd known him? It'd been months since we'd escaped, and not *once* had he tried to visit Mr Frog's place. He'd never shown any interest in me at all, instead acting as unemotional as a rock. Was I really that unattractive to him? It wasn't his reaction to *everyone*: as soon as he'd laid eyes on Acetalyta he'd tried to seduce her. Was that all he saw women as good for?

Had I completely misjudged him?

I remembered all our conversations, and how he'd acted so gentlemanly and sweet. I remembered his kindness; his understanding. I remembered how he'd almost sacrificed himself to save my life, and my stance towards him began to soften. *Maybe he really did care about me*, I thought, but it wasn't long before I brushed it away with a startling realization. If he'd been trying to get me into bed... *he'd been going about it completely the right way*.

I turned another corner and crossed an intersection, briefly glancing at the floor map. I shook my head slowly, staring at the floor and trying to work it all out. Somehow, I'd had his entire personality all wrong, right from the beginning. He'd *used* me; he didn't care about me at all. As soon as someone easier had come along, he'd forgotten little Vanya, not even caring enough to take my feelings into account as he seduced the commander *right in front of me*. Was I really that worthless to him? There had been *months* where he could've asked me out or made a move on me, but he'd never tried. Was it that he just didn't care? Did he actually find me unattractive?

It hurt. I couldn't sort everything out in my mind, no matter how I tried, but I knew one thing: I was never going to fall for Urist's lies ever again.

Hans had been there too, I remembered... but I didn't feel so hateful towards him. He'd never really done anything to indicate he might like me as anything other than a friend.

A guard rushed past me at a jog. She was aiming a weapon as she ran, as if she expected to encounter an enemy at any moment. But there *weren't* any enemies in Ballpoint, I reasoned. Well, technically, no enemies except...

My eyes widened as I remembered: *I* was an enemy. I didn't have to wonder. Hans and Urist were in trouble.

I rushed forwards, sprinting after her until I caught up. "What's going on?" I asked breathlessly, slowing my pace to match her steady one.

"Not sure. Breach in D-Sector," she replied, her voice shaking in time with her steps. "Sounds like there might be heavy casualties - think a bomb went off in there, or something, but can't tell much - channels are clogged."

My feet slowed for a moment and I fell behind, as she ran ahead around the curve in the corridor. *Heavy casualties??* What had they done?? I quickened my pace again, praying that everyone - my friends and Ballpoint's employees - were all right.

Up ahead, I heard yelling and the alien, unfamiliar sound of gunfire: sharp blurps and rat-a-tats echoing through the cold metal halls. As I turned another corner, heading towards where we'd

arrived, I saw a sight that chilled me to the bone: fallen soldiers lying against the walls, coated in their own blood. The acrid smell of acid, smoke, and burning flesh filled the air. I tried my best to ignore it, walking carefully past the bodies to avoid stepping in anything.

As I turned another corner, I sighted a face I recognized: Halion, lying face up in a pool of blood, panting heavily, his eyes clenched tightly shut.

Crying out, I rushed forwards, falling to the floor by his side. I was dimly aware of the warm, sticky feel of blood soaking into the fabric of my suit, but I didn't care. Tears sprung to my eyes as I examined his wound - a deep gash carved across his torso. With every heartbeat, more blood gushed forth, and as my tears fell like trickling rain I pressed my hands against the cut, trying to close it to keep his life force from spilling to the ground.

He gasped with pain, opening his eyes and looking at me. "Va... V... Vanya... I..." he stuttered, stumbling painfully through the sounds.

I could feel his chest convulsing beneath my hands as he tried to speak, his warm blood flowing between my fingers, and I started sobbing. "Please, don't speak," I whispered through my tears. "You won't die. You *can't*... Just stay calm; *stay with me*."

"I... Va..." he tried to say, and then he stopped. I felt his chest go limp beneath my fingertips as he quieted, the sound of his last sigh gurgling with blood.

I didn't even have to wonder. He was dead. He'd shown me such kindness, and he was *dead*, and it was *all my fault*. If I'd never come to Ballpoint in the first place, he would still be alive, along with everyone else. I'd never seen someone die before, and to see someone die right in front of me as I'd tried to save him...

I staggered backwards, reeling, sick to my stomach. Death has a bitter flavor, a sick, feverish one, like a cold sweat and vomit. Right then I wanted to run somewhere far away and hide, and never have to look at anything or anyone again.

Gunfire echoed down the hallway, but it sounded like naught but a ghost's whispers, aged and distant. I stumbled and fell to my knees again by Halion's side, lowering my head to his and weeping openly. He'd been so kind to me, and now he was... gone.

Something exploded down the hallway, sending pieces of shrapnel clattering and ricocheting against the walls. A piece bounced to a stop beside me, and I raised my head, looking at it, my mind slowly pulling itself out of the gloom.

I had to go.

But now, I was angry. *Urist and Hans* had killed him, not me. So many people were dead, and it wasn't my fault, but theirs. If they'd done what they were supposed to... if they'd stayed with me instead of running off with that *woman*... none of this would've happened. I heard the sound of another explosion echoing from far away, amidst agonized screams of men and women.

This had to stop.

With a new rage filling my veins, I got up, feeling Halion's blood trickling down the legs of my suit. I heard the gunfire echoing around me, but I stepped forwards firmly, my pace steadily increasing as I passed the corner, running past the medics who were tending wounded; past the armed guards taking cover behind doorways.

The hallway intersected with a larger one, heavy metal doorframes interspersed at regular

intervals all along it. Ballpoint soldiers were crouching behind the nearer ones, firing spurts of bullets down the hallway. At the far end, a few hundred feet away, I saw a gun emerge from behind a doorframe and fire several rounds before disappearing again - my friends were there.

In total disregard for what was going on, I sprinted forwards, passing the Ballpoint soldiers that were taking cover. "What are you doing?! You're going to get yourself killed!!" I heard one yell incredulously. "Hold your fire! Hold your fire!" another one shouted from behind me. For a moment, the gunfire stopped, and all was silent but for the pained moaning of the injured, and my light footsteps down the battle-scarred hallway.

"She's with them!" someone yelled, and gunfire erupted again as I ducked behind the doorframe, across the way from Urist and Hans.

"Where have you been?" Urist asked, spraying a few more shots blindly. "We weren't sure how to find you again."

I felt fury welling up in me again, just at the sound of his voice. "I knew how to find *you*," I spat out hatefully. "Just follow the trail of the dead, and discarded women."

"What?" Hans looked at me curiously, seeming hurt.

I sighed, frustrated. "Not you, Hans. Though I'm sure you've done your share of killing."

"Vanya, take this." Urist called out to me over the din, tossing me something.

It was unexpected, and I barely managed to catch what he threw. I paused, examining it in surprise. "It's a gun... I don't want a gun!"

He fired a few more shots down the hallway. "I must scout out the corridor behind us. When I go, fire that to suppress the enemy."

Putting it down, I shook my head negatively. "I'm not killing anyone! I *hate* guns! And you've killed too many people already!"

Urist appeared to grow frustrated. "Vanya, I need you covering me, or I could die."

In the back of my mind, the thought occurred to me that if Urist died, it might almost be well-deserved. The fact that I could even think such a thing shocked me, and I pushed it away.

"Unlike you, I care about the safety of other people. Even the 'enemy'!"

He hesitated, looked at me curiously for a moment. "Just fire it," he said finally, turning and sprinting down the hallway behind me.

Several Ballpoint soldiers appeared in front of us, taking aim. Not knowing what else to do, I snatched up the gun in my hands and pointed it down the hallway, pulling the trigger and praying that I wouldn't hit anybody. As I fired, my arms shook violently, and the gun's muzzle drifted rapidly towards the ceiling. I hadn't been expecting the recoil, but it did its job anyway: everyone ducked back behind the doorframes.

I put the weapon back down. If that was the last time I ever touched a gun, I'd be glad of it.

"You okay, missus?" Hans asked concernedly from the other side.

"I'm *fine*," I shot back. Suddenly I noticed he was tending a wound, wrapping a bandage around his arm with his teeth. I hadn't even realized he was wounded, and I felt awful for snapping at him. "It's just Urist," I explained. "And this isn't my blood," I added, making an offhand gesture at my dripping legs. It reminded me of Halion's death, and the thought cooled me a little. I knew that Hans, at least, wasn't faking his personality, and I didn't feel as hostile towards him. Actually, I felt bad that I'd snapped at him, and was on the verge of apologizing when I heard the piercing sound of someone firing a weapon close by. I looked back and saw Urist rushing forwards with his rifle, throwing himself up against his side of the doorframe as the

enemy's bullets clacked against the walls.

"Was it any good?" Hans bellowed over the noise.

Urist nodded, wincing at the loud clangs the projectiles were making. "The hallways behind us appear to be clear, and there is an empty room nearby. We will need to exit through them to a safer location. Vanya, do you have the portal device?"

I rolled my eyes. "Yes, of course I do," I answered. "Can't you see it on my wrist?" I shook the bracelet meaningfully.

Urist didn't reply, firing another round of shots down the corridor instead. After a few moments, he peeked out and fired a second volley. He seemed calm, but I'd never been in combat before, and the battle raging around us was making me nervous. A million feelings were mixing in my mind; I was tired, I was panicked, I was hurt, and I was agitated and confused. All I was sure of was that I wanted to get away from it all.

"Aren't we going?" I asked impatiently. "If we wait, they'll just have time to bring more soldiers in..." Again, he didn't respond.

I decided to venture a peek myself, poking my head out from behind cover. Down the hallway, I could see a few soldiers crouched against the far side. One of them, a woman, jumped out when she noticed me and fired a few shots. I jerked my head back quickly. "Oh, look, Urist, another girl! Why don't you go flirt with her?"

That finally got a reaction out of him - an actual double take. He appeared hurt and confused, and though I partly felt bad about it, a darker part of me enjoyed his reaction.

My enjoyment was interrupted by someone - the woman - rushing in front of us. I heard a burst of gunshots and threw myself against the floor, terrified. When I felt brave enough to look up again, I saw her lying on the ground, blood coming from several wounds. "Oh..." I said, shocked. "Oh... You *SHOT* her. Oh, well, lovely! Do you do that with *all* women when you're done with them?"

Urist only glared at me angrily, something I'd never seen him do before. I shrank back a bit. "Vanya," he shouted, keeping his voice level, "on my signal, run for the corner behind us." Hans fired a few more shots down the corridor as he spoke.

Urist had almost gotten himself shot when he'd tried running for the corner, only a few minutes before. "What???" I asked incredulously, open-mouthed. "Are you trying to kill me?!"

"Just trust me!"

"Trust *you*?? Are you serious?!"

"Of course I'm serious!" he yelled gruffly in frustration as he struck out with his sawpike, beyond my field of vision. I heard the scream of a spinning blade, and the yell of someone falling to the floor. My head was in a whirl - I didn't even know what to think about anymore. "Do you want us to die?" he asked heatedly.

"Why would I??"

"Now! Hans, Vanya - run!" Urist ordered, and I leapt to my feet. The three of us ran down the hallway as Hans and Urist fired a constant spray of shots backwards.

"No more ammo!" Hans suddenly yelled, and moments later, we turned the corner into a little room. I heard bullets pinging behind us against the floors and ceiling: it'd been a narrow escape.

The room was filled with crates of various sizes, and was as dim as the room we'd ported into when we'd arrived. I took off my bracelet and pushed the little button on it, watching expectantly as the air spiraled into a shimmering mirror. In just a few seconds, the portal would be ready.

The three of us started when an unfamiliar dwarf suddenly jumped out of the shadows, holding

a submachine gun. Reflexively, I flicked my wrist out at him as Mr Frog had taught me, and I saw several thin, stretchy tubes fly in his direction.

"All of you, freeze!" the dwarf yelled in an authoritarian tone. "Drop your... wea..." His eyes slowly closed, and he fell to the floor, the elastic tubes from Mr Frog's weapon stretched to his chest, bouncing up and down slowly.

I held my breath for a moment, staring in shocked surprise as it struck me that I might've killed him. "Wait, is he dead??" I asked, panicked. "Mr Frog said it wouldn't kill anyone... He *can't* be dead!"

Hans seemed on edge. "Guys, we need to go right now," he warned. At the time, no one seemed to hear.

"Is he dead'..." Urist muttered. "Does it matter?" He walked over and picked up the dwarf's weapon. At the same time, the tubes detached themselves and snapped back into place under my arm, making it sting a bit.

Oblivious to everything, I stared at the body, and to my relief I could see the man's chest rise and fall with gentle breathing. "'Does it matter'..." I repeated quietly, absentmindedly: Urist didn't even care. The enemy was the enemy to him; he didn't care if they lived or died; he didn't care about casualties or the feelings of their families. Right then, I decided that it must be nothing to him but statistics. I figured that the pain he caused people must mean nothing to him, whether it be romance or war.

Urist interrupted my thoughts as he stormed back over, glowering at me. "Now would you mind explaining exactly what I'm doing that's pissing you off so much?"

I snapped my attention from the unconscious figure and glared at him flagrantly, narrowing my eyes. "What do you *think* the problem is? Haven't I given you enough hints already? Or are you pretending to be dumb?"

That ticked him off. "What are you talking about?" He leveled a piercing gaze at me, but I stood my ground.

"You know perfectly well what I'm talking about!"

"Guys, we gotta get out of here! Those soldiers will be here any second!" Hans interrupted loudly, but we were too involved in our argument to even notice.

"Would you kindly answer my question instead of avoiding it?" Urist said. It seemed almost sarcastic in my ears.

"'Would you kindly,'" I scoffed. "Oh, you act so mannerly and gentlemanly, but then you try to get into bed with the first woman you see!"

Both of us exploded at each other, arguing and spitting insults like a verbal catfight. I wasn't even listening to what he was saying, and I don't think he was listening to me, either. We were trying to outshout each other, pretty much, and I'll admit he was winning. I couldn't yell as loudly as he could.

"SHUT THE FUCK UP!"

Urist and I stopped midsentence, looking at Hans in surprise and confusion at his outburst. Hans didn't even bother to explain. Scooping us up in his huge arms, he plunged into the shimmering portal.

Everything twisted from reality to a dream as the world transformed from three dimensions to six, to two, to fifty...

We collapsed into Mr Frog's room in a heap, space feeling solid once again. And once again, I was underneath everybody. At least this time, I was facing downwards... but Hans was crushing my leg. Pulling it gingerly out from under him, I tilted my head up from the floor and saw a dark cloak a few feet in front of me. I followed it upwards with my eyes to the unamused, expressionless, critical stare of Mr Frog.

We all got to our feet, brushing ourselves off. Mr Frog shut off the portal, officially ending the mission. It was finally over, and I was very, very glad of it. Everything was quiet - peaceful.

Urist's deep voice interrupted the serenity as he addressed me angrily, continuing our previous conversation. "Trying to 'get into bed' with her? How could you possibly think *that*?" Somehow, I took it as him insulting my intelligence.

I spun and glared at him, my hair whipping about my face. I brushed it out of the way. "Your secret's out, Urist," I said. "You can quit playing charades now and come clean." Beside us, Hans turned away and shook his head resignedly, while Mr Frog stared at us in blank confusion, looking back and forth at us as we argued.

"I have no secrets," Urist shot back.

"It's all been an act! You've been faking your personality, acting like you actually cared about people; acting like a gentleman when in reality you're nothing but a player!"

"...What," Mr Frog said flatly. I hardly heard him.

Urist didn't hear him at all. "A player?? I've told you before, I'm *married*. Are you thick-headed?" I'd forgotten, honestly... but it gave me something else to lash out at him for.

"So you were cheating on your wife when you tried to seduce Commander Acetalyta?" I hated the name.

"Is that what you're upset about? I wasn't seducing her! I was distracting her so I could steal the key."

"Yes, 'distracting her' with your deep voice and muscled arms."

Urist stared at me in disbelief. "Obviously there is no way you will believe me. Why is this bothering you so much??"

"You *abandoned* me!" I said accusingly. "You *lied*, you -"

"*Silence!!!*" Mr Frog roared threateningly. It shocked me back to the present, and I looked at him in surprise. "Did you complete the assignment or not?" he queried.

I pursed my lips, slinging the bag off my shoulder and thrusting it at him roughly. "Here." Then I turned back to Urist, still fuming. "I thought I knew who you were. I *trusted* you."

He paused for a moment, looking at me strangely, as if an idea had just come to him. "You *do* know who I am."

"You ran off with the commander!! It was right in the middle of a mission, too!"

"I had no choice. But Vanya..."

"And what got the army after you? Did she figure it out as I did? Did you *shoot* her??" I was fuming, dizzy, and almost in tears. My lower lip was trembling; I didn't want him to see me cry.

"Vanya, stop this," he said, stepping forwards and grabbing my hands. He was trying to calm me down, but it only made me more upset. "Just listen. You're overreacting."

My mind was in a fog. "No I'm *not*!" I cried out in protest as I pulled away, rushing towards my room. "I can't believe I fell in love with you!!"

I closed the door behind me as tears streaked my cheeks, and I looked down at my bloody clothing. I'd gotten up that morning thinking it would be the best day of my life, but now... it was the very worst I could remember. Even worse than when Mr Frog had employed me, even worse than the prison cell near the Spawn. It felt as though nothing in the world could ever be beautiful again.

I peeled off my Ballpoint suit and dropped it into the sink. Turning on the shower, I sat beneath the spray of water as it washed over me like rain, holding my legs closely to me as I wept. The bloodstains on my skin reminded me of Halion's death, and I rubbed at them, but they seemed to refuse to go away. I gave up, lowering my head onto my knees, the warm water trickling down my back.

I cried.

~~~

Later, I sat on the edge of the bed. My eyes were stinging from recent tears, my wet hair draped over the shoulders of my regular clothes. I felt clean, though I'd been unable to scrub the feel of Halion's death from my hands. I also felt quieter, and regretful of how I'd been upset at Urist. I'd gotten angry with him for something that wasn't really his fault: we'd only been friends, and nothing more. I'd never had the occasion to feel jealous before, and I hadn't been expecting it. Halion's death had only compounded with the problem, and had gotten me upset at him, when in reality, it wasn't really his fault at all. I realized Urist had been telling the truth: he'd only been trying to get the key. Now, instead of seeing the image of Urist's 'flirting' in my mind, I could see his wink as he tossed me the key; how he'd said "*Convenient*" when we'd met the commander.

I felt awful. I knew I needed to apologize for so many things that I'd said, but I also knew that Urist had probably left. Even so, the more I thought about it, the more I knew: if I wanted to keep our friendship, I was going to have to hunt him down and apologize.

Getting to my feet, I started towards the door, determined to find him, no matter where he was.

It wasn't until later that I realized: I'd told Urist I loved him.



## Chapter 20: The Nightmare

*The style of Vanya's script changes over the following pages - it becomes darker, almost pained, as if she'd struggled to write the words. No longer the flowing script it always was, it appears almost... tortured. Many of the lines are crossed out, or smudged beyond recognition, but you do your best to read what's there.*

The mind is a safe haven. If all the rest of the world goes to hell around you, so long as you have a strong mind that you can trust, you can remain level-headed and calm. It's part of why only the stronger-willed are able to survive at Spearbreakers - in a way, Spearbreakers *is* a hellhole.

But what if that's actually true, in a more literal sense? What if Spearbreakers *is* Hell? The Spawn, violent and disfigured though they are, are still but dwarves. As they never die, where are their souls? I would imagine their souls and minds remain within their bodies, feeling every



ounce of pain as their nerves are shredded in the transformation process, watching helplessly through blackened eyes as the monster that controls their body gnashes and slices at their former compatriots. They're trapped... in a hell all their own. I imagine they must want nothing more than to believe none of it is real.

What if the mind can't be trusted? What if there's a chance it's not always telling the truth, or that it lies outright, all the time? What if it conceals things from you, or invents things that aren't real? What if you aren't who you seem to be?

But on the other hand... what if you *want* to believe it lies? What if you'd rather falsely believe it's untrustworthy, rather than believe that what you see, feel, hear and know is real?

It would be an escape, those beliefs; to believe that none of it is real. To believe that you're not actually a Holistic Spawn, and you're not actually murdering your friends, and your body isn't twisted into a hellish form.

But when you distrust your mind... you invariably lose your sanity. Still... if revealed to be a monster... being weak-willed enough to lose your mind would be a blessing.

I almost wish I could.

~~~

My plan was to hunt Urist down and apologize - to tell him that I was sorry, and that I hadn't meant what I said. I'd only been upset - I could see that now. He didn't deserve my accusations, and I knew it. Jealousy can cause great wounds between friends, and I didn't want this wound to be deep enough to destroy what we had. After how I'd acted, a relationship was out of the question. Though I'll admit I found that thought terribly depressing, I didn't want a friendship out of the question, too.

Snatching a cloak from my little cabinet and throwing it on, I pulled the hood up over my head and took one last glance at the mirror before I left. My eyes lingered on the stony frame, stained with specks of Halion's blood from when I'd tossed my Ballpoint suit into the sink.

Forcing my eyes away from it, I walked to the door and pressed the button. It opened smoothly, and I started towards the laboratory door.

"Where are you going? Stop." Mr Frog stepped into my path, examining me critically. "You can't leave." He was stirring a reddish liquid in a flask.

I paused for a moment in surprise. "...Of course I can leave..."

He glared at me. "If you leave, you'll be snatched up and taken to Ballpoint."

"...What?"

"Stupid, stupid girl," he muttered, turning to the table beside him and adjusting several dials on his equipment. "Did you really believe your survival was entirely your own doing?"

I searched his face, trying to understand what he was getting at, but I soon looked away, unable to meet his piercing gaze. "I don't understand."

"Your little Ballpoint excursion would've been a guaranteed miserable failure had I not taken the initiative precaution of acquiring a reasonable quantity of their soldiers and repositioning

their assigned coordinates to the current iteration."

It made no sense to me. "What?"

"'What', it's always 'what' with you," he muttered scornfully, stepping forwards. The torchlight from behind cast a shadow on his face, and it made him seem even more ominously dangerous than usual. "What it means," he said slowly, "is that a battalion of Ballpoint mercenaries is cleaning up the aboveground area to inhibit the necromancers from raising corpses. Baron Splint believes them to be nothing more than allied soldiers from a distant realm. Bedside fairy tales, honestly. Complete rubbish. Somehow he sees their advanced-tech suits and thinks 'foreign'. At any rate, in exchange for their assistance, they get to do a thorough sweep of the fortress, looking for Parasol agents – which I've carefully gotten out of the way."

"Okay..." I was beginning to understand. "I'll just keep my hood up, then, and nobody will notice."

"No." He turned back to what he was doing, walking away as he stirred the liquid in the little flask. It seemed that to him, at least, the conversation was over.

I didn't want it to be over. I *had* to talk to Urist. I had to explain and apologize, to keep our friendship alive. I'd never had any real friends before, and I cherished what we had together. It might have been almost nothing to someone else, but for me, it was rare. An actual, real, true friendship was a very significant thing to me, and I would've done anything to keep from losing it.

"I helped you!" I protested, trying to convince him. "I risked my *life* to help you."

Mr Frog either didn't notice or ignored my sense of urgency, but I knew him well enough to know I was making him angry with my persistence. "Do you believe I owe you compensation?"

"Yes! I did everything you wanted. Please," I tried to convince him. "They won't even know I'm there. I used to be a skulker - I'll keep to the shadows."

He swore under his breath. "Stupid, stupid girl. They *will* know you're there. Moreover, despite my best efforts, you *did* somehow manage a complete and utter miserable failure."

"But the bag -"

"- was filled with useless PEAs absolutely unrelated to my intentions," he finished for me with a glare.

"But yours wasn't there!!"

Mr Frog slammed empty the flask down on a table so hard that the glass cracked. He stormed over to me, all but grinding his teeth in anger and frustration. "Did you touch the empty space?"

I shrank back, and he seemed to tower over me. "...what?"

"Did you touch the empty space?" He repeated it slowly, sarcastically, as if I had trouble with the dwarven tongue. As he continued, his volume gradually escalated. "Did you forget everything you read about cloaking and image transference? It *was* there. If you'd touched the 'empty' space, you would have felt it under your hand! You simply didn't *think*!! *Curse* you and your kind!"

For a moment, he reminded me of my grandfather, and I cringed, afraid he would strike me. Instead, he turned away, muttering in disgust. "'Stupid' doesn't accurately describe your measure of unintelligence."

I stood gaping in frightened silence at his outburst. It hadn't ever occurred to me that it could've been invisible. It was all so new to me - I was having trouble grasping all the new ideas and keeping them straight in my mind. But could I really say that? He thought I was stupid

already. On the other hand, was it really my fault I'd been born into a different universe?

"Return to your room," he ordered, controlling his voice carefully. "Leave me to my thoughts."

Back in my room, I sat down on the edge of the bed. I was somewhat ashamed that I'd failed Mr Frog again, but at the same time... if he'd just thought to explain things better, or point out beforehand that it might've been invisible... I would've known to look. He had a certain level of contempt for anyone with an "inferior intelligence"... like me. It wasn't my fault, though; I couldn't help not being as smart as he was. To him, it didn't matter. It simply *was*, and it wasn't something I could be forgiven for. Now that I think about it, though... I can't see him ever forgiving someone at all. His heart seems twisted with hatred. There must've been something that was done to him or by him in the past to make him this way, but I don't know what it could be.

It made me wonder... Was he actually the 'good guy'? If this was simply a story like a fairy tale, and not actually real life, would he be the good guy? Or was he the evil villain?

Was I even on the right side at all?

I laid back, resting my head on the little featherwood pillow, trying to redirect my thoughts. I thought over everything that had transpired between Urist and I - our little argument, my sarcastic comments, leaving through the portal, our heated insults.

Suddenly my eyes widened and I sat upright.

I'd told him I loved him. I couldn't believe it - I hadn't even realized I had at the time. I'd been so focused on everything else; it had just slipped out... I wondered if he'd heard, but soon tried to reassure myself that it wasn't possible. He *couldn't* have heard me, right? I definitely hadn't heard myself... But the more I thought about it, the more it nagged at my heart and soul. I felt that he *had* heard, and I wondered where he was. I wondered what he thought of it. A ray of hope struck me for a moment, like a beam of sunlight filtering through a darkened cave. I wondered if maybe he felt the same way, and maybe he cared about me too. I remembered how he'd taken my hand to try to calm me... His gentle touch with roughened hands...

But now I had no idea when I'd be able to see him again. Would his feelings fade, if they were even there? Would I even see him again at all?

~~~

The months rolled by uneventfully. Mr Frog seemed to have lost any use for me, other than menial tasks such as mixing flasks or crushing ingredients with a mortar and pestle. He rarely even allowed me to use his computer anymore; he seemed to have completely lost faith in my abilities. What had once been a paradise became a limbo, and I was trapped. The Ballpoint soldiers, while they carried out their duties and continued to clean the corpse fields on the blood plains with amazing speed (or so I was told), continued to comb the fortress, looking for me. I'd heard nothing from Urist, or Hans, and I didn't even know if they were still alive. I was afraid that Ballpoint might have captured them, but Mr Frog refused to "waste his time" going out of his way to gather information on them. As far as he was concerned, I was nothing but a failed experiment.

Actually... I'm probably lucky he's kept me alive at all... though as time has passed, I *have* become aware that he's been slipping things into my food to test them on me. I'd become his

testing cavy - his guinea pig.

One night, after battling a particularly bad stomachache from whatever he'd fed me, I had a nightmare that would haunt me to the end of my days... mainly because it wasn't a nightmare at all. It was a memory.

~~~

I stood in the darkest depths of the fortress, near the forges Mr Frog had built during his reign as overseer. Dust drifted about, faintly visible in the dim torchlight. I couldn't see as well as the dwarves, and I was thankful Splint had installed extra torches for Fischer's sake. The air felt thick and heavy, and my skin prickled with heat from the open pits that dotted the floor. Though currently devoid of lava, it wouldn't be long until that had changed: the open pits were connected beneath me by a huge room. Draigean's plan was to flood it with magma so that Spearbreakers' smiths could build more magma forges. But that wasn't scheduled until tomorrow.

To my left, I heard a swirling noise, the air seeming to shimmer and ripple like gentle waves. I rushed over to the anomaly and pulled a pistol from my ragged blouse - my disguise - holding it at the ready. Moments later, a dwarf exited the open wormhole, looking about in surprise at the unexpected surroundings. He was garbed in traditional Ballpoint attire: dark gray clothing. I was behind him; I had the advantage. Stepping forwards, I grabbed his arm, pressing my weapon to his neck.

"Do you feel that? You know what this is," I said meaningfully as I disarmed him. "Put your hands up. Don't speak or try to get away."

He didn't speak, nor did he act fearful; he was a soldier. Both Parasol and Ballpoint were porting their agents into the young fortress, trying to get a firm foothold. It seemed odd, almost contrived, that Spearbreakers could become the epicenter of the Spawn plague, but it had. As a result, it was the central location of the war. My job was to eliminate threats as my employers twisted their wormhole exit points towards my location. It wasn't my job to ask why I was doing it.

I started forwards with the dwarf, keeping him steady as we walked in between the forges, in between the rows of open holes in the floor. I could tell he was watching for an opening where he could escape, and I didn't want to give him that opportunity.

Suddenly I threw my weight against him. With a shout, he stumbled and fell to the left, into one of the open pits. I stepped closer to the edge and looked down. A handful of upturned dwarven faces returned my gaze: assorted soldiers and agents, spies and scouts. They were Ballpoint's elite, their disguises perfect. I only knew who they were because of the orders of my employers.

"Are you going to let us out?" a woman in the room below asked me. "The floor down here is strangely hot..." She cuddled a little baby in her arms, wrapped in linens.

I didn't respond, instead walking to the far side of the room, and pulling a very conspicuous lever. I could hear gears grinding, turning; I could feel the weight of an entire floodgate beneath my hands as the lever slowly moved. More noises ensued, as I heard the Ballpoint agents begin to panic.

Emotionless, I walked back past the open pits, watching in satisfaction as magma slowly crept over the floor, pouring in from the magma sea beneath the raised floodgate.

"Let us out, I beg of ye!" an old gray-haired dwarf yelled. "We're going to die if y' don't!"

I reached the hole he stood beneath and looked down at him dispassionately. Most of the dwarves had already retreated to the far side of the room, and I shifted my gaze from him. He was too old and slow to escape, struggling with his cane as he was, and I needed to make sure the others didn't try.

A few of the agents began crying; others began to yell and shout in panic. I watched as one tried to build a makeshift barrier of loose stones, before he realized it was pointless. Still I stood silently above as a sentinel; a jailer; an executioner. This was my duty, and I felt calm.

To my right, a dwarf was climbing the smooth walls of one of the pits, struggling for finger grips. I walked slowly in that direction until I stood directly above him. He looked up at me pleadingly. "Please... We won't come back, I swear to you. Don't do this!"

I pointed my pistol at his head, but then moved it a few inches to the left. A bullet ripped through his shoulder, and he fell to the ground below, yelling in pain, but his cries were soon drowned out by the agonized screams of the aged dwarf, far to my left. I could see smoke beginning to rise from the pits.

Turning from the wounded man, I patrolled back between the holes, watching for anyone who attempted to escape. Many were too frightened to attempt it. Most couldn't even find a foothold.

A noise behind me caught my attention, and I turned on my heel, looking at the hand that was clawing its way over the edge. I stepped forwards briskly, peering into the face of the woman with the baby. Tears were in her eyes.

As she saw my cold stare, she seemed to understand her fate. "You're going to kill us all..." she said in horrified disbelief, her voice breaking as her eyes wandered. As I aimed my pistol, she looked back up at me. "Wait! Wait!" she pleaded, sobbing. "Please! Please wait!" The woman held up her little child. It couldn't have been more than a few months old. "Please, at least spare my baby! Take him, *please!* He's done *nothing wrong* - you don't have to kill him too!"

I looked at the child as it squirmed in the cloths, whimpering. For a moment I considered. The baby was well within my reach. The dwarven woman looked at me hopefully, desperately. "*Please... find it in your heart to save my little boy!*"

With a distasteful, scornful frown, I placed the bottom of my shoe on the woman's face and kicked her back into the abyss. Her head cracked against the stone below, and she fell silent, blood pouring from her shattered skull. The little baby lay next to its mother, crying, as the magma inched steadily towards them. Moments later, their garments caught fire from the heat. As the magma enveloped them, a plume of smoke and the baby's brief but tortured screams filled the air. Satisfied, I turned away and continued my task.

For good measure, I began to pour buckets of lye into the openings atop the remaining dwarves, ignoring their cries as the flammable, corrosive liquid bit into their skin, blinding them if it happened to get into their eyes. The magma approached, and they spontaneously combusted, screaming in unbearable agony as the flames licked around them.

And I felt nothing for them.

I continued my patrol, vaguely glad that I was almost done. As I passed the halfway point between the far walls, a tiny voice spoke from the stairwell, twenty feet away: "What's

happening?"

I spun and aimed my pistol at the intruder, only to see it was a little child, holding a little stuffed gorlak doll. "Leave," I ordered, lowering my weapon. My own voice sounded cruel and unfamiliar in my ears.

"I heard people yelling..." she said, looking me over as fear began to grip her features. "I thought someone was hurt..." Then she looked past me and saw the smoke-filled air, the roaring fires reaching upwards from the pits. Her eyes widened. "Are people burning?!" she asked in terror, panicked. She rushed forwards, crying, "We have to save them!!"

"Stop," I said, but the child didn't seem to hear, her shoes pattering against the ground as she passed me. "Stop!"

The little girl did so, looking up at my face. She was wearing a little smock embroidered with images of gems and artifacts. She couldn't have been older than four, and her golden hair had been carefully braided into little pigtails. Had I been anyone else, I would've thought her cute. Instead, I looked at her icily. "You shouldn't have come down here," I growled, aiming my weapon.

Her lip trembled, and a tear rolled down her cheek.

I pulled the trigger.

She screamed briefly, falling backwards as the bullet flew through her chest, ricocheting off the slate floor. She'd moved before I'd fired, and the bullet had missed her vital organs. The little child looked up at me, sobbing in pain and terror, trying to get away, blood pooling and smearing as she weakly scooted across the floor.

It didn't even cross my mind to say I was sorry, as I fired a second round between her eyes.

~~~

I awoke in the middle of the night, panting and sweating as I turned my light on, holding my head in my hands and trying to calm my rapid-beating heart. "It was all just a dream, all just a dream," I repeated, trying to breathe deeply. "It was just a dream, just a dream." But as I tried, I remembered more of the nightmare - *parts of the nightmare I hadn't even dreamed*. I could remember dragging the little girl's body to one of the pits before tossing it in, smoke curling towards the ceiling; I could remember kicking her little gorlak doll behind a cluster of barrels.

Suddenly I began to fear: what if it wasn't a dream at all, but a memory?

Panicked, I threw on my clothes, terrified, hardly remembering to grab my beanie before I rushed out of my room, through Mr Frog's laboratory, running blindly through the empty hallways to the stairs as tears cascaded down my cheeks. It *couldn't* be true. It *couldn't* be. It *had* to be just a dream. It felt like a memory, but how could I ever have done such a thing? How could I ever be so heartless, so cold? I *wasn't a murderer!* I'd never killed *anyone!*

I finally reached the forge level, hundreds of feet below, and began moving barrels aside almost frantically, looking for the little gorlak doll. I thought that if I could prove to myself that it didn't exist, then I could calm myself - I could prove that none of it had been real. I just wanted something - *anything* to assure me I'd never done those horrible, horrible things.

As I moved another empty barrel, I saw it - the little gorlak doll. I froze, staring at it in shock. It'd gathered dust with time, but it was the same as I'd seen in my dream.

My muscles seemed to give way, and I collapsed to the floor. Scooping the little doll up, I hugged it to my chest, and sobbed. I cried for all the people I'd murdered; I cried for the innocent little girl. I didn't even want to know what other fell things I'd done while I'd worked for Parasol, but the thought that I'd killed more than once tore into my soul.

I was a monster. My mind wasn't my own; my actions weren't my own; not even my *memories* were my own, and how was I supposed to be able to tell how much I'd forgotten? I didn't know who I was anymore - I'd *never* known who I was. How was I to even know that I didn't still wake up in the middle of the night to kill?

As I lay on my side, crying, curled up into a ball and holding the little stuffed toy, I wished I'd died many years before. I wished none of it had ever happened - the only good thing I could recall doing in my entire life was saving Talvi, and that had been largely by the hand of Joseph, my enemy. I didn't know anything for sure anymore. I just wished I'd never been born.

Insanity would've been a blessing.



## Chapter 21: The Caves

*This is a leather-bound journal that once belonged to Vanya, the formerly homeless elf who had lived in hiding in Spearbreakers. Though in the employment of Mr Frog at the time of her last entry, you cannot help but wonder how much longer it lasted.*

I don't know how long I laid weeping on the floor of the forges, clutching the dead girl's little gorlak doll and trying fruitlessly to wish the memories away. The memories were in *my head*, but how could they be *mine*? How could I not remember killing so many Ballpoint agents until now? More importantly... how could I have killed them at all? I'm not a killer...

The more I thought about it, the more I feared that maybe the nightmare I'd had was the *real* me showing itself at last. I tried to ignore those thoughts, pointing out to myself that I *hated* violence... but I was forced to acknowledge the fact that I didn't know anything for sure about myself anymore. Parasol had altered my mind so much when they made me a fallback agent that they'd even made me believe I'd had a sister, if Mr Frog's analysis could be trusted. Somehow, I still felt as though she'd been real... that all my memories about her *were* real, even if I couldn't remember what she looked like, or sounded like. Though I couldn't recall anything about her physical appearance, I could remember her personality... or at least, I thought I could. I didn't know anything for sure anymore. If I could kill two dozen Ballpoint agents and not feel a thing... what kind of person was I? I'd never considered myself "good"... but now I seemed to be far worse than "bad".

I wept a few more tears, curled on the magma-warmed floor behind the barrels, and held the

little dead girl's gorlak doll at arm's length. It was an ugly thing - green with huge yellow eyes and a bulbous body supported by spindly legs. Its mouth was huge, taking up most of its form, and had two huge stone teeth poking up like inverted fangs. Still... despite how ugly it looked, it had all the appearance of having been loved at some time: all the wear and tear of a beloved toy. The seams beginning to weaken, and the stuffing was squashed a little flat.

I'd murdered its owner. I'd killed the little girl who it'd belonged to, at some point, years ago... all because she was in the way. I hadn't even batted an eye... but now, reliving the memories yet again, I couldn't hold back the tears, and I clutched the little doll close to me again, wishing the little child was still alive. I rolled over towards the rough, dusty wall, leaning forwards til my forehead brushed against it.

Why had I been working for Parasol to begin with? Why couldn't they have just left me alone? Even if I was an elf; even if I was a skulker... what right did they have to take me from my home in the alleyways of Spearbreakers and turn me into one of their own kind? I may not have been an official resident, or a dwarf, but I'm a person, too. Who did they think they were, acting as if the fortress was theirs? Acting as if the world was theirs? Acting as if lives, hopes and dreams were nothing more than statistics? They're monsters... abominations just as bad as the Spawn themselves, taking without asking, and not giving anything in return.

And they'd turned me into one of them.

I shook with sobs. I wanted to die - I wished that none of it had happened. I knew what it was like to lose someone you loved - I'd lost my little sister to the hospital's malpracticing doctors a couple years before. I wanted to apologize to the little girl's parents, even though I knew I'd never be able to make amends. Weaver, the Hammerer, would likely kill me for it - the punishment in Spearbreakers for murder was fifty hammerstrikes, and that meant death.

I could vaguely remember that I was in the forges - there were pools of magma not fifty feet away I could throw myself into...

"V!" someone whispered urgently from behind.

I recognized it at once: it was Urist. But I didn't care: my mind was full of how horrible of a person I'd been, to massacre so many people without even flinching. "Go away," I whimpered. "I don't want you to see me now." I know I must've looked awful, but that was the furthest thing from my mind.

His deep voice continued. "V, we must leave this place."

I didn't care how desperate he sounded. It'd been months since I'd seen him last, and though I'd missed him, he didn't have the slightest idea of what a monster I was. "Urist, go away!" I begged. "Please, just leave me alone!" Even as I said it, I felt myself wishing that he wouldn't - that he would realize I was hurting and try to help. I imagined him sitting down beside me and listening, telling me he cared about me and that everything would be all right.

My fantasies were shattered when he roughly pulled me to my feet. "V!" he whispered fiercely, spinning me around to face him so quickly that I almost dropped the little doll. "We



must leave this place *now*."

It took me by surprise, and I stared at him blankly through my mussed hair, looking over the lantern jaw I'd wanted so, so badly to see again, less than a week before. It seemed pointless now to want him. After all, how could *he* want me, if he knew what I was? A little whimper escaped my throat.

Urist grabbed my hand and began to pull me hurriedly towards the entrance of the forges. I felt myself stumbling behind, barely able to keep up with his pace. But I didn't *want* to follow - I didn't want to go anywhere or do anything. I tried pulling away from his grip, and he responded quickly.

"Listen, if we do not leave now, the Ballpoint soldiers that Count Splint has cleaning up the aboveground are going to kill you!"

Splint was a *count* now? He'd only been a baron, the last I heard. "Let them kill me," I muttered despairingly. "I don't deserve to live anyway."

He threw an incredulous glance back at me for my words, but continued down the hallway without hesitation. Moments later, he pulled us into a darkened alleyway next to the stairs. "You must be completely quiet," he warned. "I could hear them on the stairs above me for much of the way down - they know you are down here. They have been looking for both of us, and if you make any sound, they will know where we are."

His words echoed, muffled, through the little hallway, and I searched his face. "They're after you, too?" I'd been hoping they wouldn't know who he was.

"Indeed," he intoned slowly.

"Then let them just find *me*," I whispered, brushing a tear from my eyes. "I deserve to die."

He looked at me curiously, his expression just barely visible in the dark. "What are you talking about?"

I hung my head and looked away. "Urist... I've done horrible things... I... I didn't remember them until earlier tonight, but..." I stopped, aware that my words didn't make sense.

For a moment, there was silence, before Urist placed a finger on my cheek and gently turned my face towards him. "V..." he began quietly, "your past actions do not determine who you are. What matters are the decisions you make in the future, and how you learn from your mistakes."

His words were sweet, and while they did calm me somewhat, he didn't fully understand. "Urist..."

"Quiet now," he whispered, moving his finger to my lips. He looked towards the stairs silently, listening.

It wasn't long before we heard the stomp of a number of heavy boots coming down the stairs, amidst quiet conversation. Though their voices echoed towards us, I couldn't quite make out most of what they were saying until they'd reached the bottom, just around the corner.

"We 100% sure this is her?" one asked.

"Dunno, HQ says it was dark and the image was blurry. Suspect was running or something."

"But she matches the description, yeah?"

"Yep. If it's her, we get to leave this dump."

Their whispers faded into the distance as they continued towards the forges, and still Urist stood silently, waiting, listening, almost as if he was holding his breath.

"Now," he whispered, grabbing my hand again and pulling me forwards towards the stairs. I couldn't keep up with his pace, and stumbled, falling to the floor. He stopped to pull me to my

feet.

"Hey!" a voice yelled from down the hallway. "Who are you?" The Ballpoint accent was unmistakable.

Urist muttered under his breath, "Run!" We made a dash up the stairs, and I groaned inwardly as I thought of the 1500 stair steps between the forges and the living quarters. The thought of the Ballpoint soldiers right behind us terrified me, and I ran onwards frantically as Urist led the way, hand in hand.

"Urist!" I cried out, as we rapidly climbed step after step. Urist easily managed two at a time, and I was getting the nagging feeling that I was just slowing him down. "Urist, wait! Where are we going?" As I spoke, I stuffed the gorlak doll into my blouse so I would have a hand free.

He didn't slow as he responded, "I stored our Ballpoint weapons in a cave farther up. It is only a few times as far as the forges to Simon Tam's palace."

The mayor, Simon Tam, had ordered a series of huge rooms built for himself at the beginning of his first term, deep underground. Guards stood stationed by the door, and very few people were allowed in to see what he was doing. I'd only heard whispers... always something about a sister, or medicine. I don't think anyone really knows what's going on in there, but the walls in the stairways for many floors above it are filled with little passages and tunnels... many hardly wide enough for a dwarf.

"Here," Urist finally said, panting and pointing into a little hole in the wall. It was so small I couldn't even imagine either of us fitting. "Climb in there," he urged. "I'll follow you."

Whether it was an illusion or not, I don't know, but I thought I saw the inside of the tunnel twisting and shrinking ever so slowly, as I stared into its shadowed depths. "I can't go in there..." I whispered, frightened. "Look how small it is! It'll collapse and kill us!"

Urist roughly shook his head. "Vanya, I know you hate small spaces, but Hans *himself* dug this tunnel - he said it will be safe! Do you want the Ballpoint soldiers to catch up with us?"

I shook my head, wide-eyed, and then looked up at his face: grim and set with determination. I could hear heavy footsteps echoing upwards through the huge spiral staircase, and I knew them to belong to the enemy. Turning back fearfully towards the hole, I put my arms up and started to pull myself into it. Urist helped me from behind, lifting me and pushing me forwards.

I've never been in such a small tunnel before. It seemed to squeeze me even *without* the assistance of my fears: I could feel my shoulders and hips brushing against the walls. Urist seemed to be having an even harder time of it. The fabric of his clothing rustled loudly as he followed behind. It was so, so tight... I closed my eyes and plodded forwards blindly.

Too much had happened that night. It had shaken and bewildered me in every possible way, and all I wanted was to sleep. I didn't care where, even if it was on a cave floor, or outside on the grass, just so long as it was peaceful.

I yelped suddenly as I found nothing beneath my hands, the floor seeming to disappear beneath me as my feet moved me forwards, and I fell. Time seemed to slow as I felt myself blindly tumbling downwards in the frigid darkness, and I braced for the inevitable collision against the floor, praying that my death would be quick.

... I think I fell a total of three feet... In my defense, though, it was three feet in the dark. I had

no way of knowing I was so close to the ground.

"Vanya?" a voice whispered. "Are you all right?"

I was lying on my back where I'd fallen. I looked up towards the source of the sound, but I saw nothing. "I think so..." I whispered back. "I can't see in the dark, remember? I didn't know when the tunnel was going to end." I stretched out my arms and legs, gratefully feeling of the wide-open space where I was lying.

"Indeed..." he muttered. I had a feeling he'd forgotten, but I wasn't sure. As I listened, I heard a rustle of clothing and the sound of Urist leaping forwards. With a heavy thud, he landed past my feet. "Come, give me your hand."

I sat up and held out my hand, moments later feeling the warm, comforting feel of Urist's grip. You can learn so much about a person from their hands... Urist's were firm, and calloused with years of honest work. They felt safe; trustworthy.

He pulled me easily to my feet. "Follow me," he spoke quietly. The silence that enveloped us seemed to make it louder than it was.

I followed behind him as he began to move, brushing my hair back out of my eyes and tucking some of it under my beanie. "You'll have to guide me," I warned him.

He didn't respond, only walking onwards with careful, confident footsteps that echoed gently through the dark.

We continued for a time in silence. I didn't like it. I could hear the dripping of water, the scraping of feet echoing faintly in the distance; the sounds of underground creatures. "Urist... You didn't have to rescue me..." I ventured, my voice echoing in the emptiness. "I would've deserved death by their hands." I heard the soft splash of a shallow pool beneath my feet as we walked onwards, spraying tiny droplets of cold water on my legs.

He was silent for a moment, pausing as if thinking. "Was what you did in your own defense?" "No..."

Urist paused again before speaking. "Do you regret it?"

I nodded before remembering that he might not be looking in my direction. "Yes," I said. Tears sprang to my eyes and my voice faltered as I remembered the terrified face of the little blonde dwarfgirl. "I wish I'd never done it at all... I... I wish I could go back and change it... there's nothing I want more." My mind swam with mixed emotions; I felt as though I was falling through open space. All I wanted was for him to catch me.

Urist stopped and turned. I felt him take my other hand in his. "Vanya..." he said quietly, "that is all that matters. I, too, have done horrible things I greatly regret. But because I regret them, I won't repeat those choices. Your past does not determine your future."

As he spoke, far, far above, the clouds broke, sending a single ray of moonlight filtering through the caverns, shining through the roof. As if by magic, twisting, wavy reflections illuminated the walls, as the moonlight reflected off the surface of the pond in which we stood. I looked around in wonder, in awe at the incredible display of beauty... and then I looked back at Urist's face. His features... firm, clear-set... the handsome lantern jaw I'd once come to know him by...

"Urist..." I whispered softly, lost in his amazing bedroom-brown eyes. Suddenly I remembered what I'd wanted to talk to him about, and I looked away in shame. "About what I said about

you... after the Ballpoint mission..."

"It's all right," he replied reassuringly. I glanced back at him, and he met my gaze, looking at me with a strange, thoughtful expression.

The moonlight shifted, and I felt it falling directly on my face. It made me feel more open, somehow. "I never meant to hurt you..." I continued, my lips trembling with regret, "I just... I..."

How does a person explain that they love someone who they can never have? I tried to calm my trembling lips; tried to still my beating heart, but to no avail. I wanted to laugh, I wanted to cry, but more than anything I wanted to throw my arms around him and just *be*. "Urist, I..."

"Shhhh... It's all right," he repeated soothingly. "I understand." He had a look in his eyes I'd never seen from him before... a look that could only mean...

It was only then that I realized: Urist loved me, too.

The moonlight shifted again, throwing moonbeams upon the walls, glittering gems catching the reflections and throwing them about in a beautiful cascade of colors; the shining elven moonlight combining, intertwining, with the solid dwarven stone. I knew what was coming as he slowly moved his head towards mine, and I arched my neck in return, my lips tingling in eager anticipation of the inevitable kiss. Time was meaningless. I felt his arm behind the small of my back; I pressed closer towards him, my fingertips brushing lightly against his chest. The troubles of the world melted away. I closed my eyes, in a world of bliss. Somehow... amidst all the chaos, amidst all the worries and problems of my life... there was peace... so sweet, beautiful, and serene... and I'd finally, finally found it.

"GRRRrrrrrOOOOOOAAAAAAARRRRRRRRRR!"

Urist pulled away from me, spinning towards the noise, his feet splashing in the water and sending muddy ripples everywhere, spoiling the reflections on the walls and darkening the cave. I felt my heart sink as I realized our moment had been ruined a second time.

From the shadows, an alien form stomped out - spindly legs, a round body, a gaping mouth and huge, slitted yellow eyes. "A gorlak..." I whispered, removing the little doll from my blouse and re-examining it. It was the first real gorlak I'd ever seen, and only slightly shorter than me.

"I will take care of it, Vanya," Urist said, taking up a well-practiced defensive stance towards the creature.

"Don't kill it!" I said pleadingly. He looked back at me for a moment, and then nodded.

The gorlak roared a second time and charged at Urist. That surprised me. From what I'd heard, gorlaks were peaceful creatures. "Urist!" I shouted in fright, covering my mouth in horror as the beast gored at him with its tusks. But Urist leapt out of the way with incredible skill, spinning around behind it and delivering a solid punch to its cranium. The beast moaned and fell to the floor, splashing in the shallow water and panting. Somewhere above us, a cloud seemed to pass before the moon, and the moonlight dimmed.

"I said I would take care of it," Urist said as he returned. "It was not a problem."

I nodded quietly, looking at the heaving form lying in the water. "Let's just go, Urist..."

"We need the guns," he replied negatively, taking my hand and leading me towards the edge of the pool, further into the caverns.

Before we'd walked more than three steps in that direction, we heard a low growl, and Urist slowed, signaling me to stop. Seconds later, several greenish shapes emerged from the shadows in front of us - gorlaks. I backed away from them, and Urist followed, but we didn't get very far

before we heard a second set of growls from our left, and then more from our right. Dozens of them poured out into the little moonlit pool.

"We're in a gorlak nest..." I whispered in stunned realization.

"But how? So close to the surface?"

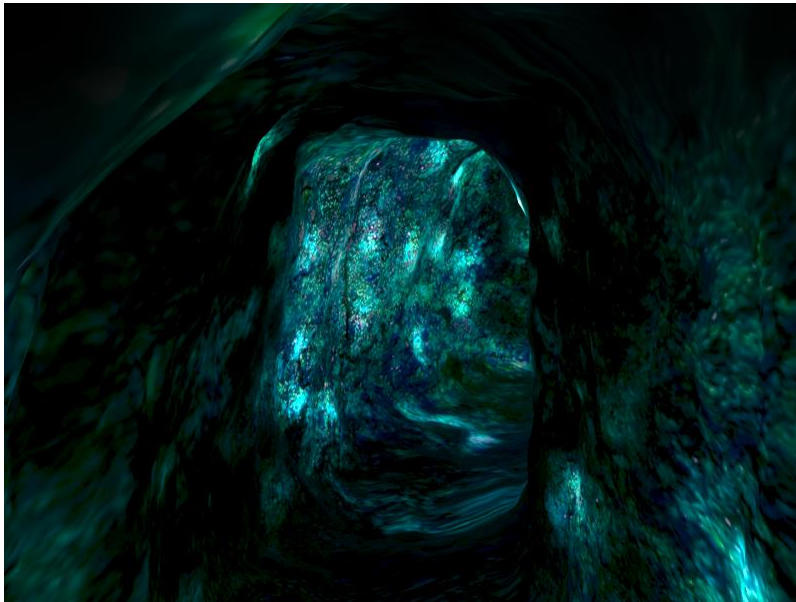
I didn't have an answer, and could only shake my head in dismay. "Let's run..." I urged him. "We can fight some other time..."

Slowly he nodded in agreement, trying to keep a vigilant eye on all of them. They growled at us, baring their tusks - they were clearly ticked off. When several of them investigated their fallen family member, their volume increased dramatically. I didn't have to know much about them to know they were murderously angry. We turned and fled for the doorway, only to find even more of the creatures blocking our path.

"There's no way out!" I whispered hopelessly.

Urist didn't seem so sure. "Vanya," he commanded, taking control of the situation, "Keep your back to mine at all times, and stay close! Do not be discouraged. We have a chance of surviving this."

For the life of me, I couldn't see how he could be so optimistic with forty toothed monsters ringing us on all sides.



A tiny portion of Mr Frog's mossy tunnels stretching beneath the fortress. Art by Talvieno.

## Chapter 22: Gorlaks

*The leather-bound book appears to be nearing its end - no more than a few entries are left. For a moment, you stop reading, glancing around for a fourth journal, but after several minutes you give up. Mr Frog's laboratory, where you now stand, is well ordered, dusty as it is, and there don't appear to be any journals following this one of Vanya's. You glance forwards through the pages of the one you hold, skipping ahead, wondering if Vanya died at some point. The final words read, "To lose her a second time... I hope I never see him again." As it sinks in, you wonder... what exactly did she mean?*

Urist explained to me once why soldiers fight for their countries, and he did it in a manner I could understand... I found it difficult to believe at first, but eventually I accepted it... because when it comes right down to it... it's true.

Corporations, countries and fortresses are a lot like people. They have personalities, they can be good or evil, and they can be that infamous gray area. And just like people... they have problems. Some people can learn to love them despite these flaws; they can learn to devote their lives to them. And when the one they love is in trouble... they'll do anything to protect it from harm.

They have fights too, just like people. Sometimes they fix it with words, but other times it breaks into fistfights and bloodshed... They have little quarrels and grudges; they have dreams and desires. None of them want to die... and they're willing to fight for their survival.

There's always more than one way to look at something.

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The gorlaks that surrounded us numbered twenty at least, and I was beginning to panic.

"Urist..." I whimpered, "What are we going to do?"

"We are going to stay calm," he said, looking back at me coolly. "Mr Frog trained me in an advanced combat and training simulation room with others like Fischer herself. We will be fine."

"*You'll* be fine!" I cried out unhappily. I scooted closer to him as the gorlaks slowly, cautiously approached. "They're going to kill *me*, though!"

Urist's response stopped me in surprise. "I thought you wanted to die." A wry smile tugged at the corner of his lips.

"I..." I didn't know what to say. "I... I don't know..."

Knowing that Urist loved me changed things, but I didn't want to tell him that. Suddenly I had something to live for. It didn't matter if my sister had been real or a dream; it didn't matter that Mr Frog believed I was a failure. "I don't want to die anymore," I said, looking away. My eyes wandered back to the gorlaks that surrounded us, growling sinisterly.

"I am not going to let you die. Just stay close."

Somehow it quieted me, and I stood behind him, my back to his, watching the huge, tusked faces as they came ever nearer. They were protecting their nest... they saw us as a threat. They also weren't intelligent enough to realize we were just passing through.

"Now!" I heard Urist yell, as he grabbed my hand, almost yanking my arm out of its socket as he barreled through the nearest side of the ring. The gorlaks appeared just as surprised as I was as we bowled them over onto their backs.

The gorlaks remained behind us, growling and roaring at us as we escaped. "Urist, that was brilliant!" I laughed, as we ran through the caves. Everything was pitch-black again, but I didn't care. When you come seconds away from losing your life, little things like that feel trivial. For now, I was safe.

At least, I *thought* I was, even if only for a few minutes. "We went the wrong way," Urist finally said in his deep undertones.

"What?" I was silent for a moment as I processed it, my merriment fading from my face. What do you mean, 'the wrong way'? We escaped... We're headed back to Spearbreakers now... ..aren't we?"

I couldn't see him, but I could imagine the slow shake of his head, as he chuckled grimly, "It is always 'what?' with you." He slowed to a stop, and I matched my pace with the sound of his to keep from slamming into him. "Fortunately, we have the guns," Urist said in somber satisfaction, and I heard the creaking hinges of a chest opening, the sound of someone digging through metal objects within. "You will need to carry one of them."

"What?" I began. "No! I'm not going to -" Urist pressed a cold metal object into my hands, and I stopped, feeling of its shape. It wasn't hard to discern that it was a weapon.

"If you do not put it to use, we may die as we pass back through," Urist warned.

I puzzled it over in my mind, my feelings mixing and conflicting with each other like oil on water. "I don't want to die..." I whispered, my voice like an echo. "But... I don't want to kill anyone... or anything..."

Suddenly I heard the chest slamming shut, and it startled me. "Come." Urist took my hand and began to lead me through the dark at a slower, quieter pace. I felt over the heavy weapon in my hand, testing its weight, and then I realized... I didn't even know which end was the front.

Urist and I walked a while farther, pausing every now and then to listen, or in Urist's case, look. Before much longer, I was able to make out the reflection of moonlight on the muddied crystal pool, far ahead of us between the gently waving corridors carved through the rough, cracked rock.

"There it is..." I whispered, once again awed by its peaceful serenity. "But where did all the gorlaks -" Urist quieted me with a finger to my lip. I understood what he meant. We couldn't make a sound. I had hopes that we might not even have to fight anything at all, and that they'd retreated into the shadows.

We reached the edge of the pool chamber, and I listened carefully, my eyes wandering over the darkened ripple reflections on the walls, as embedded sheets of gemstone shimmered with an eerie beauty.

Eyes ahead, Urist motioned for me to follow him, and I did, stepping as silently as I could across the little pool. I was quieter than a dwarf was, I'd noticed before. I didn't really know how that was even possible, and it'd never proved so useful before. I only wished Urist's little splashes in the water as he walked could make less noise.

I heard it before Urist did – the low, ominous rumble of a gorlak. I don't know how it managed to sneak up. I spun, looking behind us into the eyes of a huge alpha gorlak, readying itself to leap upon us. It wasn't even three feet away.

"Urist!!!" I yelled, throwing myself against him to try to knock him out of the way, just as I had done two years before at the depot. This time, however, either I misaimed my leap, or he stepped out of the way: I slipped beside him and fell as the gorlak charged Urist, knocking him onto his face in the cold pool. I scrambled for my weapon, trying to figure out which direction was the front, but Urist was ahead of me.

Urist spun, even lying down, and scooted backwards away from the creature as he fired rounds into its face. The gorlak managed to take several steps forwards, shuddering as the bullets ripped through its skin, and finally fell prostrate to the floor. Little slow-spreading specks of blood dotted the water around us, and around the dead creature it reddened to a deep crimson.

"Vanya, get up. We need to go," Urist said. He grabbed my hand, and for once, he didn't seem calm. A quick glance around the room told me why: hordes of gorlaks were standing in the

shadows just outside the room. They'd witnessed our actions... and they looked very, very angry.

"There's so many..." I breathed, glancing about at them in bewildered fright. I felt my legs raise me from the water beside Urist, felt the assault rifle level itself in my hands. "I don't want to die..." I whispered, and my voice increased in volume as I repeated it: "I don't want to die, I don't want to die, I don't want to die!" Only minutes earlier I'd discovered the happiest thing I'd felt since my sister had died: love. I didn't want to lose it. "I don't want to die..."

"Then don't." Urist said simply.

Biting my lip, I braced myself for the recoil and pulled the trigger.

Click.

Urist had given me Hans' empty weapon by mistake.

The multitude of greenish, tusked beasts rushed towards us, roaring in unison as they charged. I readied the gun like a mace - it certainly felt heavy enough. I only hoped it would be.

"Armok hear me!" Urist shouted, his voice echoing, reverberating through the caverns as he raised his subrailgun, and with a long, loud yell, he fired into their ranks, blood splashing and spattering everywhere. I turned away just in time to sidestep a charging gorlak, bringing the assault rifle down with a loud crack on the back of its head, watching as it careened away, stumbling and coming to an abrupt stop against a wall. A second gorlak charged - a third, a fourth, a fifth, seven, twelve - it was all I could do to avoid being gored, ducking between them and jumping out of the way as they charged like raging bulls, oblivious to each other and anything around them. Several collided and fell, but I only glanced at them for a moment before smashing a second one in the tusks as it passed. I can't imagine how Urist was able to dodge so many and fire at the same time.

"Vanya!" I heard him yell, and I looked back at him in the center of the pool, all but his lower body concealed by the darkened, angry shapes of confused gorlaks that milled between us - I was standing at the edge of the room, separated from Urist by dozens of the creatures.

"Urist, I'm okay!" I called back, dodging another gorlak. Suddenly one knocked in the back from behind. I flew forwards into two more. They were slow until they charged and built up speed, but they were clumsy. Even so, there were so many.

"FOR ARMOK'S GLORY!" Urist yelled as a battle cry, raising his weapon and firing towards the ceiling. It cracked as the bullets from his subrailgun slammed into it. First splinters of stone and dust cascaded and scattered at the impacts, and finally entire boulders broke away with loud, resounding cracks, crushing the bewildered beasts below as they cascaded downwards. I tried to struggle to my feet, one gorlak after another knocked me aside, bruising my arms and legs. Finally I came face to face with an alpha gorlak that stood over me, ready to gore me with its tusks. A second stepped on my arm, a third on one of my legs - they may look short, but they're incredibly heavy.

I tried to get away, but I couldn't move, and I heard myself scream as the alpha propelled itself towards me in a furious charge.

I lay trapped on the ground beneath the weight of several gorlaks, unable to move. The beast charged, and I was sure it was the end, looking into my foe's large, overbearing yellow eyes as it

came.

But it never reached me... instead, it erupted in a mass of entrails and blood, severed cleanly in half. Gore splattered my face, and everything seemed to quiet as its lower body stumbled forwards, bouncing, rolling with inertia, legs flailing, spilling guts and organs at my feet even as its upper half spun in the air above.

With a sickening squish, the upper half landed atop its lower body, and the halved eyes stared at me glassily as the corpse seemed to deflate, sinking to the floor in a pile of misshapen flesh. The gorlaks around me moved away in surprise, freeing my limbs, and I leapt to my feet.

"*Get DOWN!!*" someone roared from behind me. I reflexively threw myself out of the way and into a corner. I heard a whir, and a screech of metal - across the room, a row of gorlaks exploded messily, their shredded faces gaping as they crumpled to the floor. When I spun in the direction of the sound, I saw someone I'd never thought I'd be grateful to see.

Mr Frog stood in the entrance to the moonlit cave, wearing a grim, menacing expression, and carrying a huge weapon that looked like a tall "T". From his chainmail quiver he pulled a foot-long metal bar, slamming it down firmly on the weapon with a reverberating clang. With a multitude of clicks, the bar expanded, spiraling into the shape of a serrated disc, and it began to spin... faster, faster, faster, until the air itself seemed to scream as its toothed edge sliced through. The gorlaks were almost upon him, and then, with a screeching whir, it shot forwards, sending gorlak blood and limbs spraying in all directions as their bodies flew apart. I saw the blade strike the far cave wall with a screech like chalk on a board before it exploded, sending shrapnel everywhere.

I looked quickly back towards Mr Frog where he stood, his cape billowing, fluttering majestically behind him in the wind from his weapon. He caught my glance and narrowed his eyes at me. "Just stay out of the way," he growled, scowling in hatred and disgust at the twig-legged creatures that charged him en masse.

Another bar slammed down, spiraled, spun, screamed through the masses of gorlaks as they imploded everywhere, and still they charged - another bar, another shot, and again, again - limbs left bloody smears as they flew against the walls; sliced tusks rolled and spun about the ground, tripping up the few creatures that were still alive.

I was so distracted I didn't notice the gorlaks that were charging me until it was too late.

"YAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!" I heard Urist yell as he leapt up the wall nearby, firing his weapon down onto the heads of the gorlaks as he ran in my direction atop the gems and crystals that protruded from the stone. Another whir, another slice - Mr Frog's weapon obliterated another line of gorlaks, spraying gore and innards.

"Are you all right?" Urist yelled out to me as he landed to my left and knocked a charging gorlak backwards with the butt of his weapon.

I could only bring myself to nod, wide-eyed at the chaos around me. Gorlaks were running in all directions, no longer out of hatred of our intrusion, but in blind fear.

Mr Frog approached us rapidly with furrowed brow, his cloak billowing behind him as he pulled his hat back into place upon his head. "Stupid, stupid girl..." he muttered, "what have you gotten yourself into?" Then, louder, "Both of you, come with me," he ordered. "You've attracted Ballpoint's attention, and we must leave this place *now*." Saying this, he turned and left through

the entrance to my left.

I felt Urist grab my hand, and together we fled the crimson pool, headed back towards Spearbreakers.

"Sus the Second and a few other dwarves are working to distract the Ballpoint soldiers," Mr Frog informed us as he led us briskly through the dark, shining a flashlight to light the way.

"Vanya, you've really gotten yourself into trouble this time."

"I wasn't meaning to," I managed after a moment. I was still somewhat shell-shocked from all the bloodshed I'd witnessed. "I had a memory... I had to see if it was true..."

Mr Frog stopped and spun, shining his light in my eyes as he peered into my face. "Define 'memory'," he said slowly, leveling an icy gaze.

My mouth opened as if to speak, but I couldn't make a sound. I did hear far-off footsteps in the cave, though.

The scientist heard them, too. "Bah," he muttered. "They come quickly. We'll discuss this later." Saying this, he continued forwards towards a wall. Upon reaching it, he pressed his hand firmly against it, almost as if testing the sturdiness of the rock, but then it began to move... The edges of the wall seemed to glow faintly with a bluish light as a greenish circle formed on the floor, casting an eerie gleam around it. It wasn't long before the wall had completely disappeared. I glanced over at Urist to see his reaction, but was disappointed to find that there wasn't enough light for me to tell anything.

"Come," Mr Frog said, switching off his flashlight and motioning for us to follow.

He led us forwards for several minutes, through dim tunnels lit only by hanging bioluminescent moss. Stepping on it extinguished the faint light the moss created, and I soon found myself carefully stepping around it. Mr Frog didn't seem to care, continuing at his usual brisk pace.

"I sincerely regret that you commandeered such an ill-advised receptacle for your Ballpoint weaponry," Mr Frog spoke, shattering the stillness. "That was a ridiculously imprudent decision, Urist. A wisely chosen storage facility is conveniently located and accessed without complications in dire emergencies. Moreover, you've moronically decimated one of my more recent biological experiments."

"Those were *your* gorlaks, then..." Urist said. He sounded almost accusing, and I don't blame him. I was angry myself.

"Of course, you harebrained dolt." The insult rolled coolly off the scientist's tongue. "Any line of hypothetical reasoning differing from that is preposterously nonsensical. How else would I have known to bring my prototypical serrated disc launcher? It's only half-finished... I regret that its firepower is as yet underwhelming, but it cannot be helped."

I gaped at Mr Frog's back in astonishment as we continued walking. "That was a *prototype*? 'Half-finished'? It *slaughtered* those poor creatures!" I paused for a second, confused by a new thought. "Why were they attacking us, anyway?" I'd always believed that gorlaks were peaceful.

"I was instilling aggressive tendencies in them through selective breeding processes. But it is irrelevant now - the experiment was a failure. And that was *your* fault, stupid girl." He sent an icy glance in my direction as he continued onwards down the tunnel.

Urist glanced over at me, his face barely visible in the dim, blue-green moss-light. I couldn't meet his gaze, and looked away, feeling my face grow hot.

Mr Frog halted abruptly, turning back towards me with a suspicious stare. "And what was the

occasion of this idiotic midnight escapade? What 'memory' was it that you had?"

I didn't want to tell Mr Frog I'd killed so many Ballpoint agents... I didn't remember anything about it other than that memory, and I hadn't even known about it until tonight. It hadn't *seemed* like it was me, either. I felt the little gorlak doll in my blouse. I remembered the terrified look on the little girl's face, and I felt my throat tightening. "I don't know..." I whispered.

The stare deepened to a piercing glare. "You... don't... know..." he intoned slowly, scratching his beard. "I seriously doubt the feasibility of that statement."

Urist spoke up beside me. "She's been through a lot tonight," he began in my defense. "Perhaps if she -"

"Excuses!" Mr Frog said, holding up a hand to signal Urist to stop. "It is insufficient to explain this thoughtless bumble. Now, *you*... Stupid, stupid girl..." He turned to me, speaking as if the words were acid on his tongue. "Memory. Explain. *Now*."

My lip trembled. I was seconds from tears; I didn't want to cry in front of either of them, and I especially didn't want Urist to know the extent of what I'd done.

"Mr Frog, stop this," Urist said, stepping in front of me. "Give the girl a chance to calm herself, or you won't get anything out of her."

My heart froze at the ensuing silence, and I worried that Mr Frog might do something terrible. The windless air, thick with tension, seemed more difficult to breathe. Finally, Mr Frog spoke. "Very well..." he said slowly, "you may leave us, Urist. I will give her 'a chance to calm herself'."

"...leave you?" Urist asked in confusion. "I do not know these paths."

"We stand in an intersection," Mr Frog replied, pressing on the wall to his left. With a bluish glow, it scrolled down into the floor with the rumble of machinery. "Take this path; it will place you near the barracks. Vanya and I have a different path to follow."

With one last, long look at me, Urist slowly turned and left. I watched him wistfully as he walked away through the moss-lit side tunnel, wondering when I would see him again.

The wall scrolled back up into its original position, blocking my view of my friend, and Mr Frog opened a different hallway to his right. "Come," he commanded, leading me forwards into the darkness.

After walking a while, we finally emerged in the upper layers of the fortress, just below the watchtowers. Together, Mr Frog and I climbed the spiraling stairs of our oldest tower until we reached the top, fifty feet above the plains. There was a cold breeze in the night air, flowing from the west, and I tucked a few stray strands of hair behind my ear from where they blew across my face. The light of the moon far above provided faint illumination, and I looked up at it where it lay among scattered clouds. I'd forgotten how beautiful it was... it had been five years since I'd seen it last... five years since I'd seen the sky. Five long years since I'd felt the wind on my face. My heart calmed its anxious beating as I felt myself relax, and I took a deep breath. I could smell fir and feather trees, the sweet scent of long-aged oak. Far above us, the stars twinkled in the sky - myriads upon myriads of them, like tiny needle pricks in the heavens through which shined Armok's fires.

I walked over to the fortifications, laying my hands gently on the rough stone and gazing up dreamily at the serene beauty of the night. I inhaled again, catching the faint, sweet smell of rain. I felt so free... so alive... caught up in wonderment at it all.

"What are we..." I breathed in a whisper, "to spoil such beauty?"

Behind me, slow, soft footsteps approached. I looked back at Mr Frog, who had an atypical expression on his face. He looked calm and thoughtful. "That's the elf in you talking," he spoke quietly, stopping beside me and gazing upwards. He didn't sound accusatory, only observant.

Looking back up at the sky, I considered his words. I'd always tried to be a dwarf, even if I knew I wasn't. "No..." I said quietly, "We bring out the beauty of the living stone. It is ugly 'til we smooth it, 'til we engrave it with our love. 'The beauty of earthen gems sparkles brighter than the trees; better a single engraved hall than a thousand unfelled forests,'" I said, quoting an old king. I was silent for a moment. "I may be an elf, but I have the mind of a dwarf..." I whispered thoughtfully, almost with a touch of pride. "Even so... I still respect beauty... but that doesn't make me an elf."

"And I respect serviceability," Mr Frog added. "That doesn't make me a goblin. But remove your gaze from the starlight - look down below us in the fields."

I did so, and was shocked at what I saw. Gone were the meager entrances I'd passed through when I'd migrated to the fortress, instead replaced with moonlit towers and wide, paved roads of stone. It glistened beneath the moon with recent rain, and scattered puddles reflected the light with a silvery gleam. Mr Frog pointed to my left, and I followed his hand with my eyes, up sturdy bastions of shale, up columns and beautiful fortifications that rose steadfastly from the ground. Patrolling the far-off torchlit towers and walkways were dwarven guards, their adamantine armor glinting as they walked.

"It's beautiful..." I said, both awed and confused, "but how is this all here? I've known nothing of it until now..." I thought for sure I would've heard something of such a project.

Mr Frog turned from the fortification and started walking away. I turned and followed him slowly with my eyes as he walked to the other side of the tower, and looked up in amazement at a massive metal fist raising its middle finger towards the sky. I'd never seen anything like it before at all, not even at the mountainhome. I could only shake my head in disbelief.

Finally, Mr Frog spoke, raising his voice to send it through the chilly night air. "It was Ballpoint," he said simply. "Count Splint wasn't satisfied with cleaning up the corpses. He paid the Ballpoint soldiers with hundreds of mugs and ingots of iron, and kept them here. We didn't build these beautiful structures - after all, how could we have, in so short a time? No... Ballpoint has taken over Spearbreakers. All the Parasol agents have either fled, or died. Wari is gone, too. This is why they're still here, and how they can keep watch for you. It's part of why Urist had to leave earlier this year."

His words puzzled me. "It was Ballpoint?" I asked. "But it's all so beautiful..."

"Do not be fooled, young one. Evil can create beauty as well."

"Young one?" I repeated. I hadn't wondered before... but how old was Mr Frog exactly?

He answered my unasked question, pacing slowly across the stone rooftop. "I am three-hundred and twelve years of age, Vanya. I was here when Ballpoint released the Spawn... It's not something I'm proud of... but now, in my own way, I'm making amends."

"*Three hundred years?*"

"Gnomes live longer than dwarves..."

For a time, I watched him, suddenly realizing how he seemed so wise, so ancient. Gnomes... it was something I'd only heard of in fairy tales. However, Mr Frog had come from a different world... one I would probably never see. I thought it all over silently - Ballpoint, and Spearbreakers, and Parasol... and the ever-lurking threat of Joseph and Eris.

"Mr Frog..." I said quietly, "I have something to tell you. The reason I left my room tonight..."

The old scientist listened as I explained my recent revelation, nodding and scratching his beard thoughtfully. Finally the tale ended, and I quieted, wiping my moist eyes with my fingertips.

"Hmm..." he mused. "There is no need for you to feel guilty for those actions."

"What?"

A flickering smile crossed his lips. In the open air, he seemed more relaxed, and less threatening. For a moment, I could almost see him as a grandfather, telling his grandchildren bedtime stories. "Always, always 'what'. You should attempt to discern the reasoning behind a person's statements before engaging in blind speech," he advised. "But in this case, I shall explain.

"Your actions weren't your own, Vanya. An agent of Parasol was controlling you. This is what a 'Fallback' or 'Sleeper' agent is. They 'sleep' until awakened, and then 'sleep' while they perform their duties. Your actions weren't your own. They were Parasol's."

"But..." It seemed all too easy to place the blame on someone else, almost as if it was a trap I was stumbling into. "But I still did those things - I killed those people."

"And then your memory was erased when the objective was complete. Your agent side went back to sleep. I have only a slight knowledge of the psychological tendencies of Parasol... but now that I know more about your situation, we might be able to learn more from those hidden memories of yours... I might be able to recover some things that have lain hidden for quite some time."

"Another remembrance potion?" I asked.

He nodded as he turned back towards the steps. "Correct. Now come - it is late, and tomorrow starts sooner than you think."



Chapter 23: The Revelation

This is a journal. It is bound in giant emu leather. You vaguely recall Count Splint's attachment to the birds, and find it somewhat amusing that someone would use them in this manner. On the cover of the journal is a five-pointed star in gold leaf. As you remember, the dwarves found very little gold beneath Spearbreakers, and you marvel at how Mr Frog apparently thought Vanya merited such a gift. Or, perhaps... it meant so little to him that he gave it away freely. Perhaps you'll never know for sure.

I lay on the bed by Mr Frog, listening to him repeat things softly in my ear as the drugs took effect... I'd always been skeptical of hypnosis, but... everything seemed to be fading. My last thought was that maybe there was something to it after all.

A door exploded inwards through the white-tiled room, leaving deep gashes in the huge red-and white Parasol emblem on the floor as it careened down a far-reaching hallway. A squad of Ballpoint soldiers rushed in through the breach, fanning out and securing the perimeter of the lobby. The area was oddly empty, given how its wide-open expanse seemed to suggest it had been built for potential crowds. As the soldiers scanned the area, a receptionist ducked behind a smooth, shiny desk of black marble, about to call for reinforcements, but he wasn't fast enough -

a railgun round ripped through the barrier of stone, flinging the man into the wall. The man never knew what hit him - his limbs flew everywhere, spilling blood in artful arcs as they pirouetted through the air.

"Get them in here!" the commander shouted, opening the visor on his dark-gray helmet and revealing a battle-scarred face. "We don't have much time to do this - that battle down at engineering will only keep so many of those Parasol bastards occupied! They're a distraction, not our protection!"

Behind him, two soldiers rushed in, leading two young girls who were bound at the wrists. Their ages appeared to be around 14 and 17, and they were clearly terrified. "Let us go, please!" the older one cried, tugging uselessly at her captors. "We haven't done anything!"

"Shut them up," the commander ordered, and the girls received firm cuffs to the head. "Gently, you idiots!" the man roared. "Intelligence claims they need to be conscious during the operation! I want them unharmed! Where the fuck is Intel, anyway?"

"Here, Commander Raza!" a man yelled, panting as he ran towards them down a side hallway. He was wearing a white Parasol uniform, but he held up a blue Ballpoint shoulder patch as he ran. "Dark Agent Jensky, reporting for -"

"Shut up, soldier, and get in line!" Raza growled. "Where's the room?"

"This way, sir."

Raza began spouting orders. "You two, bring the girls. Up-top wants this done quick. The rest of you, protect them, delta-bravo initiative. We'll likely be encountering heavy fire as we go, so expect the worst. Snipe any cameras you see with your lasguns, and let's *MOVE!*"

As one, the squad filed back into formation. The younger of the two girls whimpered as the soldiers dragged her forwards. She could hardly keep up.

"It'll be okay," the older one promised her, just above a whisper. "Just stay calm. We'll be fine." Her quavering voice belied her true feelings on the matter.

"I don't wanna die!" the younger girl whimpered, in tears. "I don't wanna die!"

The older girl looked wistfully at the other as they jogged along, and then her bound hands, as if wishing she could put her arms around her and comfort her.

The scene dissolves in a bright-white flash of light.

Gunfire erupted from a hallway on the left, and the girls found themselves pulled roughly to the ground.

A Parasol squad had lain in waiting as the Ballpoint team had progressed, and had caught them by surprise. Two Ballpoint soldiers fell, their brains and organs splattered on the walls. "COVER, MOVE!" Raza yelled, jumping back after firing a few well-placed rounds into Parasol skulls. The Ballpoint team regrouped behind the corner. As the older girls watched, Raza gave several hand motions, which the soldiers seemed to understand. As one force, they leapt around the corner, sprinting forwards as bullets flew from the muzzles of their guns, the gap narrowing quickly from ten feet to one. Raza reached the enemy and sliced through two of their helmets with his buzzsaw bayonet, blood splashing against the insides of their visors as the soldiers fell dead to the floor. Behind them, the two girls lay on the floor, staring in wide-eyed horror at the dead soldiers. Neither of them could remember having seen battle before.

"Get them up. Renson, Famar, take them. Jensky, how far are we now?" Raza barked out as he

returned, warm blood still splattered across his armor. His crew answered promptly, and the little entourage continued down the spotless corridors of Parasol. "We're going to need backup..." the commander muttered. He considered the whole operation foolhardy and pointless, but he wasn't about to disrespect his superiors. Bad things happened to disobedient soldiers... usually either executions or exile, and sometimes both. He'd heard the tales - scientists placed in the middle of their own deadly experiments as punishment. At Ballpoint, such things as alcohol and drug abuse were enough to merit death. He knew better than to disobey orders.

The scene dissolves in a bright-white flash of light.

"Here it is," said Jensky, holding a fake eye up to a retinal scanner. A door beside it opened with a whish.

Commander Raza held up his hand. "Quiet," he ordered. Everyone listened, and they soon heard the telltale sounds of footsteps. How the commander's ears were so sharp, the rest of his squad had no idea. Soon he was working a battle plan, this time in quieter undertones. "Jensky, get those girls in there. The rest of you, take up defensive positions. You three, set up the plasmid generators, we're going to need some cover. I'm estimating twenty... thirty enemy units, two lines, light weapons. B-model battlesuits, slight wear. I doubt they'll have anything heavier than an assault rifle, so explosives shouldn't be a problem. Now *move!*" This last was uttered quietly, but with great emphasis, and the soldiers hurried about their tasks, setting up devices that created low, translucent, bluish walls of light that shimmered with contained energy. The soldiers took cover, crouching against the blue walls and aiming their weapons in the direction Raza indicated.

Jensky did as asked, roughly pulling the girls into the darkened room and closing the door until it touched. A row of chairs sat lined against a console, and through a sloped window, they could see a brightly lit, white-walled room lined with machinery, and a sloped operating table.

But Jensky didn't seem to care about any of this. He led the younger girl down the steps and into the operating room, and then locked the glass door behind her, turning to the eldest with narrowed eyes. "Vanya Carena..." he muttered, with a grim, wicked, hateful expression. "I've wanted to get my hands on you for the longest time..."

"What?" she asked, starting to back away, but too late - a firm backhand caught her across the cheek. Her head hit the wall with a crack, and she crumpled dizzily to the floor. Behind them, the younger girl started banging with her bound fists and screaming as she watched the other's torment helplessly. Outside the room, gunfire echoed, and bullets ricocheted about the halls as the skirmish commenced.

"You know *exactly* what!!" Jensky fumed, walking forwards and towering over his stunned prisoner. "You outright *murdered* over a dozen Ballpoint agents, and one of them was *MY WIFE!!!!*" With this last word, he sent a well-aimed kick at the girl's chest, knocking the wind out of her. He watched with a hateful sneer as she struggled to catch her breath.

"Please!" she gasped out, holding up her bound hands as if to defend herself. Tears streaked her dirty face. "I don't know what you're talking about -"

A cruel kick to the side of the head interrupted this last, followed by a solid stomp on the girl's fingers. She screamed in pain, and Jensky seemed to enjoy it. "I don't know what you're talking about," he mocked in a high-pitched voice, snarling viciously. "You *killed my wife and son*, you little fucking bitch! We got it all on camera!"

Vanya rolled over and started to scoot away, trying to get to her feet. The heavy metal stock of

a subrailgun caught her squarely in the back, and with a pained moan she fell back to her knees.

"You filthy little bitch..." the man fumed, "*He wasn't even a year old!* He couldn't have done a thing to you! And you killed them both!"

Behind them, a little girl pounded relentlessly on the glass door, her screams muffled by the material. "Stop! Stop! Let her go!" she cried, but no one heard her.

"It wasn't me!" Vanya protested, scooting away from her intimidating antagonist. "I didn't do anything! I've never killed anyone! I'd never -" The barrel of Jensky's weapon caught her across the arms, then across the legs as he swung at her with livid, half-aimed strokes.

"That was my *FAMILY*, you sick fuck!!" Jensky yelled, his face contorted with rage. "Losa would never hurt *anyone*!! She didn't deserve death! And you kicked her back into the pit along with my little baby!!!" The man punched the girl again in the face, then kicked her in the chest, sending her backwards into the wall.

"I didn't do anything! I didn't do anything!" she screamed in fear as Jensky approached. Below the hem of her skirt, the painful gash on her leg dripped with blood. She had a nosebleed, and every bone and muscle was sore from the blows. She felt it all.

The soldier ripped her old, grayish beanie from her head, revealing her pointed ears. "I guess that's about what you'd expect from an *elf*," he muttered, spitting to the side as he muttered the hateful word. The young woman looked at him in terror, trying desperately to get away. Jensky halted her escape by standing on her bare foot.

"Vanya! Vanya! No! She didn't do anything! Stop!" the little girl screamed from the other side of the door, pounding violently on the glass as she watched the man grab the older girl by the hair and pull her to her feet.

"You have no idea how much pain you've caused me," he growled venomously, his lips twisting in anger as he glared at his captive. Tears spilled from her eyes at the intense pain from her scalp, and she found it too painful to cry out. She was sure that at least one of her ribs was broken from his kicks. Vanya squinted her eyes shut, bracing herself for whatever he was going to do next.

The little girl watched in horror as Jensky aimed the muzzle at her sister's tear-streaked face.

The scene dissolves in a bright-white flash of light.

A battle-stained Ballpoint squad stepped gingerly over the body in the middle of the floor as they took positions inside and outside the series of rooms. Raza had arrived just in time, firing a bullet into Jensky's head before he'd had a chance to kill the older of the two captives. "I said they're to be *unharm*ed!" he yelled. "Where's the medic? Get this girl patched up, and get the little one strapped onto that table! And where the fuck is Kannan?!"

"Right here, sir!" a dwarf said, rushing into the room. Vanya stared at him in surprise - it was Dr. Kannan from Spearbreakers. She recognized him. A return glance from him seemed to imply that he recognized her, too.

Vanya sat quietly as a medic patched her up with technology she'd never even dreamed of before - special salves that seemed to erase pain; odd foaming gels that could patch cuts almost instantly. She turned, looking into the brightly lit room beside her, watching as the soldiers unbound her sister and strapped her onto one of the tables. "What are you doing?!" she screamed, struggling against the medic's grip, trying to get to her feet. "Let her go! Don't hurt her!"

"Vanya!" her sister cried out, tears pooling in her eyes.

The elder sister somehow managed to break free, rushing forwards down the little staircase,

headed to her sister's side, but she never reached her.

Raza appeared, growling in annoyance, and taking Vanya by the arm with a grip of steel, he escorted her out of the operating chamber. "Neither of you will get hurt, if you don't resist. Understood?" Without waiting for a response, he turned to his team and singled two of them out. "You two get her situated," he ordered.

"She's my sister!" Vanya said in protest, trying uselessly to pull away from Commander Raza.

"That doesn't matter," someone laughed mockingly from behind. "It won't be long before we take her away. You won't be seeing her again, you little shit."

The commander spun. "Shut up, Renson!" he ordered. "Do your fucking job and quit trying to upset them!"

"Just stay calm!" Vanya called out to the younger girl, twisting around to look back towards her. "I promise I'll find you! Just stay calm, don't give them any reason to hurt you!" The girl on the table started sobbing. "Stay calm, Salaia! Deep breaths. They won't hurt you, they promised!"

"I don't want them to take me away! I don't want to lose you!"

"You'll never lose me!" Vanya cried out, her voice shaking with repressed sobs. "We'll be together again, I promise!"

The glass door between the two sisters closed, the clear material swirling with darkness as the room behind it faded from view.

The scene dissolves in a bright-white flash of light.

A girl lay on an operating table under a bright light in a strangely alien room, among technology that seemed to come from beyond the stars. She was scared, but somehow she felt peaceful. Whether it was the shot they'd given her or not, she didn't know. They'd told her she was going to forget her sister; they'd told her she was going to forget many things. As two gray-suited soldiers lowered a device onto her head, she closed her eyes and thought as hard as she could about her sister. She *wouldn't* forget, she thought defiantly. She'd never forget. She hadn't seen where they'd taken her, but someday... she *would* find her sister again. She was sure of it.

The talk of soldiers echoed through the room, but they were but ghostly voices, only faintly audible, like the whispers of the wind. "Do whatever it takes. Wipe anything in her head it looks like Parasol changed; anything that looks out of place. Wipe anything associated with strong bonds, and that should get her sister. Do it as forcefully as you have to. I don't want to have a mess to clean up after this."

A quiet hum reverberated through her mind and soul. She felt disconnected from the world for a moment, as her mind became clearer, rearranged, separated from itself.

The scene dissolves in a bright-white flash of light.

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I bolted upright suddenly in the chair, my vision clearing as if emerging from underwater. I could hear the sounds of machinery in the distance as it echoed down the hallways and through the unyielding stone.

"My sister *was* real!" I gasped, staring in shock at Mr Frog. "Her name was Salaia, and she

was *real*!"

He nodded slowly, thoughtfully. "So I heard..." Mr Frog responded. "You described the events very clearly while under hypnosis. You would make a good writer or journalist, if you lived elsewhere."

I thought back over my memories, and suddenly, for the first time - I could remember my sister. In every memory where she'd been, I could see her. No longer was her face mysteriously missing... I could imagine it perfectly: every little detail, from the point of her ears she kept under an old sun hat, to her little nose, her dark hair, and her silver-green eyes that matched mine exactly. "How could I have forgotten her..." I could see it in my mind now - her nimble dancing as she and I fought with daggers in the mountainhome arena - her terrified expression as we moved through Spawn-infested territory. I saw her walking beside me with her possessions as we walked among the other migrants into Spearbreakers, hidden in the rear. I saw her laugh as we ate a stolen meal, I could remember awakening in the middle of the night just to check to see if she was okay.

*I could remember her. And she was real.*

"It wasn't your fault that you forgot her," Mr Frog said. "Certain memories of yours were erased, and rather roughly... if it consoles you, you never completely forgot about her. You simply believed she was dead, and in your mind, that explained what had happened. You thought you couldn't recall her because you didn't want to think about her anymore, to save yourself from further pain."

"But where is she now?"

Mr Frog stood from where he sat on his bed and began pacing about the room, scratching his beard thoughtfully. "It would seem to me..." he began, "that they took her on as a spy. They obviously observed you as you killed their friends, and realized that an ally such as yourself would prove useful to them... However, you were already marked by Parasol... so they chose your sister."

Then it dawned on me, and my eyes widened. "Carena..." I whispered.

The old scientist nodded slowly. "Precisely."

I looked back into my mind; saw Ballpoint's Carena standing in the room, talking to Joseph on a PEA. She had pointed ears like mine, as I'd noticed before, and she looked so much like me it was incredible I hadn't thought of it. With the help of Mr Frog's potion, I could remember even the smallest details... ...right down to the golden bracelet on her wrist.

This reminded me of something else. I felt myself thinking back to my mission at Ballpoint, just before I met Halion. A woman was walking down the hallway ahead of me, and I'd followed her. "*Not sure,*" she'd said. "*Breach in D-Sector. Sounds like there might be heavy casualties.*" On her arm: a golden bracelet.

I'd been so close to her, and I hadn't even had a clue.

Mr Frog's voice interrupted my thoughts. "This also explains how your combat abilities vanished," he said slowly. "Ballpoint covered it over, but that change required your bracelet to maintain it. When you got came into close proximity of it after a year, it removed them again, but during that previous year the abilities gradually came back to you, thus permitting you to take down the trained soldiers in the halls."

"But why wasn't I able to use them when Jensky was attacking me?"

"Simple," he said, turning away towards the door, his cloak undulating gently. "You weren't trying to fight back."

~~~

I approached Mr Frog later that night. It wasn't something I'd ever done before, as I'd been worried I'd upset him, but this time I really didn't care.

"Mr Frog..." I began hesitantly, watching him intently.

He looked up from his work, surprised, and removed his glasses. "Yes, Vanya? Is there a problem?"

"I want to save my sister."

The gnome nodded, putting his glasses back on and peering over his schematics, making a couple careful notes with his pen. "I had a feeling you would make that request."

"All I have to do is destroy her bracelet, and then her memories will come back eventually." He didn't respond this time, and I tried again. "*I need* to save her, sir..." I knew from experience that this last part would agitate him, and I was hoping it would allow me to gain his full attention.

It did. He put his pen down and looked at me carefully. "And *I* need my PEA, but you seemed to be incapable of retrieving it throughout your unsuccessful attempts. And don't call me 'sir'. Call me 'Mr Frog'. Not 'Mr. Mr Frog' or 'Sir Mr Frog' and especially not 'Mister'!"

"I know you want your PEA... And I'll get it for you. I promise. Send me again, this time I'll manage it," I said, trying to bargain with him. I didn't have much to go on, but he seemed to be in a good mood - "good mood" meaning "not going to bite my head off immediately".

"If they find you, they will know who you are," he warned. "They will likely kill you."

I swallowed. I'd thought this over before. "I know..." I told him. "But *I have to try*. I promised I'd protect her, and I have to get her back. Even... Even if they kill me," I finished quietly. After four years, I knew that my sister was real. I knew for sure who and where she was. I was jubilant that she was real, and that I could remember her, but at the same time, I knew she was in great danger where she was. And I really, really didn't want her to work for Ballpoint.

Mr Frog nodded and turned back to his work. "Very well."

His nonchalant response made me do a double take. "What?" Was it really that easy? "That's it? You'll let me go?"

"Of course. I actually requested that Talvi create a suit for you several months ago, but I decommissioned it when it became clear that Splint was keeping the Ballpoint soldiers around. I commissioned it again earlier today, upon discovering information on your sister's true identity from your recent revelations. I will require that you be content to wait several months until the Ballpoint soldiers evacuate the premises and everything settles down, of course, but -"

He stopped abruptly - I'd leapt forwards and given him a hug, tears of joy in my eyes. "Thank you, thank you, thank you!" I laughed happily. I hugged him for a few moments, blissfully ignorant of the fact that he really, really didn't appreciate the gesture.

"That's enough of that," Mr Frog said sternly, pushing me away with a gentle hand. "Go back to your room and get some sleep. You have much studying to do tomorrow."

I nodded, and with a final "Thank you!" I started towards my room, unable to wipe the smile from my face.

That night I lay in bed, tasting her name on my tongue. "Her name was Salaia..." I whispered,

a loving smile tugging at my lips as I said it. I had a little sister.
I couldn't wait to tell Urist.



Chapter 24: The Search

Vanya's leather-bound journal continues in her flowing script. As always, neither date nor signature adorns the pages. The only identifying mark is Vanya's five-pointed star at the end of the entry. There are only a handful of pages left before the writing disappears. You aren't looking forwards to the end of Vanya's journals, but still, you read onwards, curious as to what happened to the girl.

Time seems to go faster as you get older. I don't know why, but I heard talk about it around the fires, back when I was a skulker lurking in the halls of the fortress. Some dwarves claim it's a little bug growing in your head, and it messes with your "internal time bells". It sounds like something Mr Frog would call "nonsensical pseudoscience". Other people say that your brain slows down as you get older. I don't know if this makes sense or not... I seem to faintly recall seconds passing by quicker when I was a child - it seemed I had to say "one blood-sacrifice, two blood-sacrifice, three-blood -sacrifice" so, so much slower than I find natural now, when I was counting seconds. I'm currently 21, I think... or possibly 20... it's hard to know when you don't know what day your birthday is.

There's a third theory, though, that makes more sense to me: that you experience time by events you remember, and you remember unfamiliar events better than familiar ones. This might explain why I remember helping Talvi so vividly, even two years later... and why the day-to-day life with Mr Frog seems to speed by so quickly, though the days themselves seem slow.

It's been several months since my last entry, and a lot has happened at Spearbreakers... Reudh is the new overseer now, for one thing. He insists everyone call him "Lord Reudh", but I think that's silly. I'd prefer to say just "Reudh".

Mr Frog has trained me extensively in his field - he's also discovered that I'm apparently very good with mechanics and masonry... I'm not really sure why. It just comes easier to me than theoretical neurodynamics.

Not much noteworthy happened until one afternoon in early Spring. Mr Frog had told me earlier that something was up, and that Count Splint had ordered all the Ballpoint soldiers out of the fortress... He said a lot of them were injured, but he didn't say why. I decided to find out for myself. I'll admit that I was also more wanting to know why exactly Wari had thought it acceptable to force a girl to kill dozens of people that she didn't even know. Those murders I committed still haunt my nightmares at times... I wish I'd never remembered it.

That afternoon, after Mr Frog left, I took a hooded cloak out of my room and put it on. I figured it might be wise to hide my face, just in case Ballpoint soldiers were still around, and my ears needed to stay hidden regardless. With them tucked carefully away beneath my hood, I left Mr Frog's laboratory and walked down the door-lined, torchlit corridors.

On my way to the stairs, I passed several dwarves who caught my attention... One I remember in particular seemed like he didn't have a friend in the world... I felt a little sorry for him, honestly. Another was a redheaded girl... She seemed oddly muscular... but there was something

wrong with her shadow... I don't know what, really. It just spooked me a bit. What spooked me most was when I happened to pass Paintbrush Turkey, who had been overseer while I'd been imprisoned. He had a mohawk and a horseshoe mustache... he looked absolutely brutal. It's small wonder he was able to whip the army into shape so quickly during his reign.

Soon, without seeing a single Ballpoint soldier, I reached the hospital level. The walls had been smoothed and engraved since I'd seen them last, and they looked very beautiful... even if most of the scenes *were* of dwarves dying miserably in combat with zombies and Holistic's Spawn. I also saw a great number of cavy engravings... Talvi had been one of the artists. She's a lot better than she used to be.

As I approached the hospital itself, though, I heard the deep-voiced yelling of an angry dwarf. I was curious to see what was going on, but more than that, I wanted to find Wari. If she was anywhere, I was *sure* she'd be in the hospital. Sneaking in through the double doors, I hid myself among the rows of coffins at the northern end of the room.

"GET YOUR FILTHY MUCK-STAINED HANDS AWAY!" the deep-voiced dwarf roared, threatening to fling a doctor to the other side of the room.

Mitchewawa was there, too, attempting to calm everyone down. "Just put him down! That's a good soldier. We don't need to build a hospital for our docs, now, do we?"

"Don't patronize me!" With that, the doctor went flying across the room with a scream, landing in a heap on a hospital bed and rolling off onto the floor. "Tell these idiots to keep their meddling hands off of me, Mitch! It's just a scratch, as I told you before. My kidneys don't need removed, my blood proof is fine, and there's no reason to amputate my arm! Get these fools away!" Blood and gore coated the dwarf, and it looked like she'd wrapped intestines tightly around one arm, almost like a self-improvised bandage. I guessed it was a she, because the dwarf didn't have a beard.

"Everyone, stand back and remain calm, please," Mitchewawa called out, holding his arms up and waving the advancing doctors back. "Let's just let our little recruit calm down a bit."

"Recruit?!" the dwarf yelled angrily. I winced, sure that Mitchewawa was going to be the next one sent airborne. Fortunately, at that moment, another dwarf burst in through the doors noisily, clad in full adamantite armor. I recognized him at once: it was Jack Magnus. Everybody knew about him: he was handsome as anything with how neatly he kept his brownish hair, and capable (or so the rumors said) of defeating goblin sieges single-handedly.

"So is it really true?" he asked with a grin, looking around at the cowering doctors with a humorous expression. "Did the great Fischer really get injured?"

"Shut up, Magnus," she growled, taking off a boot and shaking a few dozen teeth out onto the floor. "It's just a scratch. If Count Splint hadn't ordered me to check in at the hospital, I wouldn't be down here at all."

Jack Magnus grinned even wider. "So it's true! Fischer, the Incredible Superdwarf, the Culler of Horrors and Ender of Reigns, really *was* wounded in combat!" If he'd been anyone else, I would've thought he had a death wish, teasing Fischer the way he was.

"Not my fault," she growled, giving Jack Magnus a glare that probably could've melted obsidian. "I was asleep, unarmed, *unarmored* and there were *twenty* of them! And the scratch was from when the bed splintered when I tried to use it as a war hammer. I'd like to get my hands on the fool mason that designed it..."

Jack whistled slowly. "Really... Just twenty? Those foreigners weren't really so bright after all,

were they?" He rolled his eyes, as if at their stupidity. "Any idea why they were after you in the first place?"

"No," Fischer said bluntly. "But several of them screamed 'the P.E.A. lied' as I was bisecting them."

"If you'd had a weapon on you, they wouldn't even have managed to say that," Jack Magnus chuckled. "PEA... Any idea what that could mean?"

"How am I supposed to know?" Fischer gave an approaching doctor the finger, and he lost consciousness, falling to the floor in a dead faint. "Anyway, I'll see you later, Jack. I have business to take care of." With this, she stormed out of the room.

Everything quieted down after that. A couple dwarves walked in with dustpans and started sweeping all the loose teeth off the floor, while Jack Magnus went over to talk to Mitchewawa. I couldn't hear them, but I walked quietly out of my corner towards the middle of the room, looking about for Wari. The only problem was that she didn't seem to be there.

I didn't have long to wait before Jack Magnus seemed to finish his conversation. "See you later, Mitch," he said, walking towards the door. Mitchewawa turned away and started talking to the medical staff. From across the room, I thought I was able to make out the name "Wari". I perked up and listened intently.

"- few months. Why do you ask?" a nurse was replying.

"The hospital seems somewhat under populated, mate. Where have all our docs gone off to?" Mitchewawa asked. "And why does everyone have a Johnny Bravo hairstyle?!"

"Under populated? This is between shifts - *everyone* is here! But not for long - I get off in five minutes."

"Hey there, sweetheart. Everything all right?" a nearby voice said, startling me so badly I fell over.

It was Jack Magnus, and he was talking to *me*. "I... I don't..." I stuttered, trying to regain my wits. He's handsome and friendly, but somewhat intimidating at the same time... then again, soldiers always put me on edge at first. Well... except for Urist.

Jack Magnus chuckled and helped me to my feet. "Hey, easy, girl! I didn't mean to startle you." He gave me a friendly, charming smile. "Just wondering if you're all right - you look off your game. I know just about everybody here in Spearbreakers - I like to keep on top of things, you see. I haven't seen you around before - you new here, or...?"

"Yes... no... well, sort of..." I said, groping for words. I worried he'd figure out who I was, if he kept staring at me like he was. "It's all right, though. I'm just looking for someone." It wasn't a lie, and it wasn't a very clever attempt to get him to leave. It actually had the opposite effect.

He gave me a helpful smile. "Well, I'm the man to ask, then. Who might it be? Did you come down here to see if the Almighty Fischer was wounded, too?" He grinned, giving me a wink.

I couldn't help but smile at his jest. "Well, not exactly... I'm looking for someone named 'Wari'... do you know where she is?"

He looked at me curiously for a moment. "No... I'm curious, though... why would you be asking?"

That froze me in my tracks. I didn't really have an answer ready. "I... I just want to ask her a few questions."

He gave me a long, serious gaze. "Interesting... You know, this is the second time today that

someone came asking for Wari. The first time was a dark-haired fellow. Haven't really seen him much before... He reminds me of those foreigners, really." A grin slowly crept over his face at that thought. "Boy, we really sent them packing, didn't we?" he laughed.

"Yes, you did..." I gave a polite smile to mask my nervousness. "Do you... Might you know who he was? Or where he went?"

"Sure thing, sweetheart," he said, putting his hand on my shoulder and leading me out of the hospital. Then, pointing down the hallway: "Straight thataway, and take a left to the stairs. Go all the way down to the forges - every time I've seen him, he's been around there. The name's Draconik, I think."

Now I had a lead. "Thank you," I said, smiling genuinely. I'd never thought such a strong warrior could be so good-natured. He seemed bright, too. "I'm very grateful for your help, Mr. Magnus."

He tilted his head a bit and nodded. "Just call me Jack," he said with a disarming smile. "And what can I call you?"

"Vanya." I blurted it out before I even thought about it. At his confused expression, I added quietly, "My parents hated me..." I hoped it would explain the elvish name.

He laughed. "It's no problem, still a nice name, and not one you hear very often. See you later, sweetheart."

I felt myself warming to him. "Thank you, Jack," I said gratefully, starting down the hallway at a quick pace.

"Oh, and Vanya!" he called out. My face burned with embarrassment... I really wish I hadn't told him my name. "If you do find Wari, let me know where she's gotten herself off to, will you?"

I glanced back at him for a moment to nod, but he'd already turned and started walking towards the dining room.

My second trip to the forges felt longer than the first. I'm pretty sure I heard a few restless spirits whispering about in the graveyard as I passed through... who puts a graveyard halfway down a staircase, anyway?

I soon passed Simon Tam's room and saw several people hauling out furniture. When I asked what was going on, they replied, "Simple - Dr. Tam isn't mayor anymore." I didn't really have anything to say about that, and continued onwards.

It wasn't long before I reached the forges. There were several dwarves hammering away at armor, and a couple more smelting ore, but I didn't see anyone "strange". I did see Talvi, though, finishing a beautiful iron helm. I started towards her to say hello, but I hardly managed more than three steps.

"I heard you were looking for me," a man intoned ominously from behind. Leaping away reflexively, I spun around and found myself looking into a shadowed face topped with neat black hair. "Calm yourself. I did not mean to startle you..." He had a slow, menacing voice, and he appeared oddly thin. He was wearing a white lab coat like Mr Frog's.

I backed away from him anyway, wishing his face wasn't concealed in the shadows. "Who are you?" I asked. "Are you Draconik?"

For what seemed like the longest time, he didn't respond, only looking me over. "That is what they call me here, yes... And why are you looking for Wari?"

I didn't answer. *Something doesn't seem right about this dwarf*, I thought. *News can't possibly travel that fast. The only way he could know what I was talking to Jack Magnus about only minutes before is if...* "You're from Parasol, aren't you?" I asked suspiciously, glancing around for something to defend myself with.

"You get straight to the point," he mused, removing a device from his cloak. "A good quality. But hush, not so loud here. I haven't finished disabling all the cameras. If you know of Parasol, I assume you also know of Ballpoint..." He held the device - a PEA - up towards me, and a brief flash of light blinded my eyes.

"Vanya Carena, Parasol sleeper agent..." he said, seeming puzzled. "But your file says you haven't been activated... so how could you know of Parasol?"

"I *have* been activated," I whispered hotly. "I remember *murdering* dozens of Ballpoint agents, right here in the forges."

Draconik leveled a piercing gaze in my direction, peering at me curiously as if I was some sort of specimen under a microscope. His dark eyes almost made me shiver. "Now, that isn't right..." he muttered, almost to himself. "You shouldn't remember that, had you truly been activated." He stepped forwards quickly, throwing back my hood before I could react. "Elf ears... But Sleeper technology oriented towards your species doesn't exist..."

I flushed, more with anger than embarrassment, and pulled my hood roughly back over my head. "Keep your hands off me," I whispered.

He ignored it. "What business do you have with Wari? What questions?"

"I want to know why she made me kill so many Ballpoint agents."

His response was quick and concise. "She couldn't have. It's not the Parasol way. We have regulations, you know. What's more, your files clearly state that you have *not* been activated."

"But she *did* activate me," I protested. Then I hesitated, thinking up a quick lie. "I'm a secret project. I'm the first elf sleeper. They would've kept me hidden from any of the unclassified files that *you'd* be able to access, and -"

"Silence!" Draconik commanded in a quiet, forceful tone. I stopped in mid-sentence. "You should show respect in the presence of your superiors, agent. I am of higher rank than you assume. Clearly, yes, you have been activated to a certain extent, but I would venture a guess that your memory alteration failed, as it always has with our attempts with your species."

"But -"

"Nonetheless," he continued, speaking over me, "I am bound by duty to turn you in... But perhaps there's something you could do for me... A favor of sorts..."

"I wonder if I might ask: A transdimensional being with his eye on Spearbreakers... has a company of his own, separate from Ballpoint and Parasol... who am I thinking of?"

I was silent.

"His name starts with J..." Draconik prompted.

I had to force the name to my lips. "Joseph of Eris," I whispered.

A slow smile spread over the dwarf's face, and he stroked his long beard, deep in thought. "Indeed, you are correct. You may have information I might find useful..."

"I must speak to Wari," I replied firmly.

"Of course, agent. But when you return... I would like information on her whereabouts, as well as any information you could provide me on Joseph. Is that acceptable to you?"

I nodded cautiously. "You don't know where Wari is, either?"

"No. But I know where a man who *does* know resides... Regretfully, he distrusts me too much to give me any clues. He considers me one of quote 'them'. I do not believe he's fully sane. He is

certainly not well-balanced."

"Who is it?"

"Orodogoth, soap maker."

"But... Spearbreakers doesn't have any soap..."

"Precisely."

I soon found myself in the long, unfinished hallway that led to the abandoned hospital. Draconik had informed me that Orodogoth would most likely be 'hiding' near the soapmaker's workshop, which someone had decided to build far from the rest of the fortress.

There was a strange, foul smell in the air, emanating from a room ahead of me... it smelled like waste, acid, and rotting meat... mixed with pepper and paprika. It made me want to sneeze, but I did my best not to, walking onwards to the doorway. When I got there, I looked around the corner cautiously. "Orodogoth..." I called quietly. "Are you here?"

An odd-looking dwarf jumped out, flinging sand at my face with what amounted to a battle cry: "Pocket sand!" I turned my head away and felt the fine grains hit the side of my hood, but a little got past.

"Cut it out!" I cried out, trying to brush the painful substance out of my eye. "I just wanted to ask you a few questions!" Turning back, I took a quick look at him. He was incredibly twig-like, with a scrawny beard and an orange cap that seemed completely out-of-place with his dark purple cloak.

"And how do you know my name?" he spoke in a suspicious monotone, narrowing his eyes. "You're with *them*, aren't you..."

"I'm not with anybody!"

"So you say..." he said, glaring at me. "And yet you speak my name in broad daylight... ..or moonlight... whichever may be the case..." He grunted and continued in his slow monotone. "The walls have ears, you know... and eyes. And mouths, too, if they feel like it..." He gave me a jittery glance, taking out a pipe and sticking it between his lips. "Would *you* like us to be eaten by a wall?" he growled.

"What?" I asked, looking at him blankly. Draconik had been right: this guy was nuts.

He jumped back a pace, grabbing something off the floor. "Sh-sh-sh-sha! Say hello to the Allegro X9J, code name 'Redeemer': 73 decibels of hyper-silenced quad-barrel war cry, capable of blasting a ten-foot hole through solid rock, and all at a price I can't really afford."

I looked at Orodogoth curiously for a moment. Finally, I said, "That's a log."

He held it up and caressed its "barrel". "You only *think* it's a log. And so it looks to the untrained eye. I can look at it and see the most powerful handgun ever devised." It was almost comical.

"How do *you* know about guns? I don't think you'd kill me, anyway, and guns kill people."

"Wrong," he said flatly, puffing on his pipe. "The *government* kills people." Saying this, he tossed his log to the side. "...and yes, it's a log," he admitted quietly, before drawing himself up with importance. "But yes... I am the All-Powerful Orodogoth, maker of soaps, both fine and deadly."

I had to try really hard not to laugh at him. "Can't I just call you 'Orod'?" I asked, half-teasing. "Your name's a bit of a mouthful."

"Can I call *you* Xel-ca Crr'smabeth Chrr'r, Evil Mantis Queen Overlord of Scyk-bek?" In response to my raised eyebrow, he narrowed his eyes again, continuing with satisfaction, "My point is made."

"Mantis Queen?"

"One of *them*. All government figures are actually giant insects in disguise. If you'd seen what I've seen..." He leaned awkwardly against the wall and blew a crooked smoke ring. "...then you'd think twice before falling into their traps."

"Are you serious?" I laughed. "What about Count Splint?"

He nodded slowly, adjusting his cap. "If he wasn't before, he is now. Scythods, they call them. Scaly green skin, and the eyes... oh gods, the eyes..." He took another puff, looking thoughtful.

"...I never actually saw the eyes."

"Okay... Can I ask you a question?"

"Of course," he replied, smiling with a grim amusement, "but will I answer?"

"Yes?"

Orodogoth laughed nasally. "Ha ha ha. Of course not, you twit. I'd be more likely to join *them*."

My heart sank at his mockery, but then I got an idea. "I could tell Splint what you know about him..."

"You wouldn't," he said, but I could hear the doubt in his voice. "You're bluffing - they'd kill you, too."

"Maybe I don't care if they do." I honestly didn't believe Splint was a bug at all, and I'm very sure Orodogoth was making the whole thing about the Scythods up... though it's possible he believed it himself. He was just that crazy.

He looked at me for quite a while, puffing on his pipe with crossed arms as he thought. "Hmm... You know... I think you might be crazy, Xel-ca..." he said in the same gravelly monotone, "And not in a good way, like how that cockroach felt after I swapped its blood with dwarven ale..."

"You did *what*?"

He narrowed his eyes and shifted his weight. "I could tell you... but then I'd have to kill you."

"I thought you said only the government kills people," I said, pointing out a flaw in his logic.

"That's what they *want* you to think. Now... what is this 'question' you want to ask, Xel-ca?"

Finally, I thought. "I'm just wondering where Wari is. Do you know?"

He gave me a glare. "So you *are* with 'them'... I thought so... You believed you could just waltz up and kill us, but then, so did *he*!" he exclaimed somewhat menacingly, pointing towards the center of the room. I followed his finger, only to see a frog impaled upside-down on a stick.

It was getting a little too weird for my tastes. "I'm not a bug, I'm not the government, and I'm not 'them'."

"Prove it." He paused, and then smirked triumphantly. "You can't, can you... I didn't think you could. I have the perfect soap for you, my egg-laying friend... It's pretty and pink... and filled with insecticide." He threw open a nearby chest and started rummaging through it, muttering.

I could only think of one way to "prove it" to him, and I didn't like it. Still... I didn't see that I had a choice. Glancing away for a second and feeling awkward, I threw back my hood with a sigh. I could almost sense Orodogoth's gaping stare, and I felt my cheeks redden.

"Oh... You're an *elf*... A tree hippie." He stared at me nervously. "You're not going to eat me, are you?"

"I *don't* eat people."

He narrowed his eyes. "That's what they *all* say... but at least you're not an insect... Things would've gotten messy if you had been. Still, I have the perfect soap for you, my wood-loving friend..."

I sighed. I was tired of stereotypes. It was bad enough being an elf, even without everyone assuming things about you. "I'm just as much a dwarf as you, except for my ears." Putting my hood back on, I tucked my hair into it carefully, asking, "Can you *please* tell me where Wari is now?"

"Oh, yes... yes... right... She's in my headquarters." He shifted his eyes around nervously, and then slammed the chest shut, shuffling past me and peering out into the hallway. I watched him quietly. Finally, he appeared satisfied, turning back to me. "Can you talk in code?" he whispered.

"What?"

"Code... we need to talk in code. And keep your voice down!" He glared at me, and then started walking overcautiously across the room, motioning for me to follow. As he went, he began muttering quietly over his shoulder, "The teddy bear is in the trumpet; my legs are worth more than toothbrushes filled with cyanide; and buckets of ore will be our administrators. Your ears are very large."

"My ears are -" I whispered, but he cut me off, interrupting my protesting with a sharp hiss.

"Shhhhhh! We're almost there..." He tiptoed a few more steps, and then knelt, pulling open a floor hatch. He continued his slow muttering, staring at me piercingly. "The chickadee is under the statue; the cheesecandy is everywhere; your face looks like a honey badger. ...Comprende?" He said this last in a long, slow monotone. He obviously expected me to understand, but I didn't understand a thing he'd said.

"Could you speak plainly?" I asked plaintively.

He rolled his eyes in exasperation. "Gods, it's like talking to a lunatic. Just get down there."

Walking over to the hatch, I started down the ladder beneath it. I only hoped the madman above me was right, and Wari was actually below me.



Chapter 25: Wari

Vanya's journal continues in its usual manner, but without her usual philosophical portion. You cannot help but wonder why.

The ladder was nothing more than a series of handholds carved into the stony wall of a vertical shaft. When I began to descend, Orodogoth closed the hatch above me, and everything abruptly grew as pitch black as if someone had doused a candle. I closed my eyes, trying to calm my heart, which was just starting to race... I hate small spaces so, so much... I remember looking downwards and seeing nothing but a pinprick of light far, far below me. While I'm fortunately not really afraid of heights, the sight of how far the narrow shaft continued downwards unnerved me. I don't actually remember much of the climb... just that I continued downwards steadily, one foot after another, eyes tightly closed, praying to the gods that I would be all right, and that the tunnel wouldn't cave in around me.

Finally, finally I reached the bottom, feeling solid rock beneath my feet once more. I turned, opening my eyes with a little sigh of immense relief. I was *safe*, and that was all that mattered to me, though I wasn't looking forwards to climbing back up to the top: down is always easier than up. I don't really know why that is... perhaps because you feel you're returning to the earth, rather than climbing away from it. Gravity makes us feel safe, but only while standing on a solid surface.

Calming myself, I took in my surroundings. It was small, and stockpiled with various barrels

and medical supplies, and furnished with a few tables, chairs, cabinets and beds. It actually looked almost as if someone was expecting an apocalypse. It wouldn't serve more than a few people, but they'd likely be able to survive for years without trouble.

A quiet rustling behind me interrupted my observations. When I spun about to see what was making the sound, I found myself staring into the face of a nurse with shoulder-length gray-blond hair, who was holding a wrench like a club, just about to strike. As she peered at my unhooded face, she seemed to recognize me... an event that seemed to astonish her.

"It's *you*!" Wari exclaimed in surprise, lowering her improvised weapon. "I thought you died years ago!" She dropped the wrench onto a table next to her and began examining me, looking in my eyes, my mouth, my ears, muttering, "You seem healthy, and that's a good sign..." The woman grabbed my hands and pulled up the sleeves of my blouse, pausing for a moment at the result. "Your bracelet is missing..." she said slowly, looking up at my face. "Where is it? I can only assume you're here because you know what happened... but where's your bracelet?"

"I destroyed it," I told her acridly, pulling my hands away. "You had no right to do what you did. I'm better off without it."

She shook her head quickly. "No, you don't understand. In doing what we did we ensured you'd be protected – we gave you combat skills, stealth skills, we –"

"It's all gone, and I'm glad of it," I told her, maybe a bit too angrily... she looked hurt. "I'm sorry... but really, it's all gone. Ballpoint took it away, but not before you activated me."

"I don't – wait, what?" She looked at me almost suspiciously, a quizzical expression on her face. "What do you mean, I activated you? You've always been inactive."

"I *killed* people, Wari! I *murdered* them!" Emotion was creeping into my voice, and I tensed my lip, trying to keep it from trembling as I went on. "I *remember it*, Wari... I killed so many Ballpoint agents, and I didn't even know what I was doing. I never knew what I was doing! My mind's a jumbled mess; I don't even know who I am anymore!! You took me and you *used* me... I never wanted to be an agent! I never wanted to murder *anyone*!!" I began shaking with anger, and I paused for a moment, trying to calm myself.

"Shhhh, sh sh sh sh sh..." Wari said softly, trying to put her arms around me. I stepped away coldly – I didn't want her empathy. There was no way she could understand. "Carena, we didn't –"

"I *remember it*, Wari!" I cried out again, tears beginning to sting my eyes. "They're in my nightmares still! I can still hear their screams, their pleas for help! They *burned alive*!! I burned them alive, and it's all because of you! Don't touch me!" I pulled away from her again, but weakly, trying uselessly to stem my emotions. I was tired of the lies. I was tired of being conned, tricked and deceived. I was tired of the timewar, and Parasol, and Ballpoint, and all their evil, scheming ways. I just wanted to be left alone. Was that really too much to ask?

"The little girl..." I whispered despairingly, giving a twisted glance towards her concerned face before looking away. "There was a little girl who had nothing to do with it... and she's dead because of me. I murdered a little girl just because she saw me..." I could see her face in my mind... I could feel her little gorlak doll in my blouse pocket... I always keep it with me now. I started crying, shaking uncontrollably as I fell limply into a chair, covering my face with my hands. It had been a long time since I'd cried... I'd been trying to hold it in. Now it was out... and I couldn't stop, even with someone I considered an enemy less than five feet away.

Wari only stood there silently as the tears fell down my face, watching with a confused, sympathetic look, her lips drawn tightly together. I wanted to hit her... I wanted to make her feel

the pain I'd felt... to make her understand the pain that so many people had gone through, all because of me... all because of her. But at the same time... I didn't feel anyone had the right to inflict so much agony on another. Not even someone who had gone through the same at their hands. I felt conflicted and confused. I wanted to cry, I wanted to scream, I wanted to run away and never have to deal with any of it again. I had an edging desire to slap her in the face, too.

"Carena..." the nurse said finally, "I never activated you. That's not how Parasol works, anyway. We don't just execute enemy soldiers because they're in our way. We have laws, a code, a way of doing things."

I swallowed and made an attempt to breathe slowly, though I found a lump in my throat. "That's what Draconik said," I told her quietly, refusing to meet her gaze. "I didn't believe him, either."

"You talked to *Draconik Sankis*?" Wari moaned in distaste, rolling her eyes. "Oh, great. No, really, that's wonderful – all our problems are solved," she said, gushing with sarcasm. It gave me the strong feeling that she didn't like him, but really, I didn't care.

Sniffing, I wiped my eyes with the back of a finger, glaring at her. "I remember what I did, Wari... You tried to block it out, but I remember."

She shook her head roughly. "No, you don't understand. *We never activated you.*" She sat down in a chair across from me with her elbows on the table, and folded her hands in front of her. "I'm the head of my department. *Me*, not Sankis. I would know if we'd activated you. I would've had to give the order. And Carena..." She paused, trying to get my attention. "Carena. Carena, look at me."

I did, but reluctantly.

"Carena, I never gave that order. Parasol never activated you."

I didn't trust Wari very much, but it seemed as though she was being sincere. I'm a good judge of character, usually... We were silent for a while, as we both pondered what it could mean, trying to understand.

Finally I asked, "Might it have been Eris?"

She did a visible double take and almost fell off her seat. I stifled a laugh, but I couldn't help the sad, flickering smile that passed over my lips. Still, her icy gaze following it quickly wiped the smile away, and she looked at me through narrowed eyes, seeming as uncomfortable as if I'd just spoken treason. When she finally spoke, it was with a hint of accusation. "...Eris? What would *you* know about Eris?"

By this point, I'd gotten it thoroughly into my head that Eris was a secret I really wasn't supposed to know about... and something that few people did. "I know some..." I replied hesitantly, watching her face carefully as I spoke. "I... I don't know that much, really... and I'm not sure I should talk about it..."

She pursed her lips. "You really don't trust me, do you." It was rhetorical, and more of a statement than a question. "I can't say I blame you. Carena..."

"Vanya', please."

She nodded. "Fair enough – Vanya, then. Do you recall how we met?"

I tried to remember, but with no success. "No..."

"Let me remind you." She leaned forwards, making eye contact over her folded hands. "I found you in a side alley outside the hospital one night, asleep with your sister."

"Salaia..." I whispered breathily. Her name still felt slightly alien, but at the same time... as normal as my own.

Wari nodded, her voice taking on a softer tone at the memory. "You never told me her name..."

but when I stepped closer to you, you awoke. You realized who I was, and pleaded for me not to take you to the hospital. And that's when I saw your sister's ears – her cap had fallen off her head while she was asleep. It surprised me so much that I actually blurted something along the lines of 'You're elves!' ...Which of course frightened you even more. You stepped in front of her and literally begged me not to take your sister. You begged me that if I had to do my duty and take you to Mr Frog, the overseer, to only take you. You even told me you'd come willingly to the hospital so that I could 'experiment on you', just so long as I left your sister alone."

My eyes filled with tears as I listened.

Wari continued. "But I don't 'experiment' on people – that's what Dr. Kannan did, before Mitchewawa deposed him. And I told you that... and I felt for you.

"Vanya..." she began quietly. Her voice was quavering, and it wasn't until then that I noticed that her eyes were moist with the threat of teardrops. "I grew up in an elven forest retreat with my older brother."

"But... you're a dwarf..."

She swallowed and nodded rapidly, her lips twisting as she tried to maintain her controlled expression. "I know. And my older brother was, too. He kept his beard trimmed to keep me safe, taught me how to stay hidden, taught me to never reveal who I was to anyone. But then, one night... they came for him. Someone had given him away... and when they took him, they..." She paused, trying unsuccessfully to compose herself. "They *killed* him... I was only nine years old... He was eighteen... He was only eighteen. Earlier that night, he'd told me that no matter what happened... he would always love me. He wanted me to remember." A tear fell down her face, and she brushed it away ashamedly. I felt one fall down my face as well, and I put my hand on top of hers, where she held them clasped together on the smooth granite of the table. "He'd told me to disown him – to say I wasn't his sister. It felt so wrong, like I was betraying him, like it was *my fault* they were taking him... but when they took him, they left me alone. I didn't understand what was going on at the time – I didn't realize they were going to *kill* him... I... I'll admit I always hated elves after that."

"And I'm an elf... I'm so sorry..." I whispered, biting my lip. I hated that my kind could be so cruel... not that we're any crueler than dwarves can be, but it's no excuse.

She nodded briefly, brushing the tears away with the back of her hand. "I know... But when I saw what you were doing, it reminded me so much of him, that I... I couldn't help it. It almost brought me to tears even then, to see you stand up to me like that... to *willingly sacrifice yourself* in her place... I wanted to save both of you. I wanted to do for you what my brother couldn't do for me.

"As we happened to need an elf right then, I chose you. I chose you so that you could keep your sister safe, like Lokum tried to do for me. The combat skills were part of the package... but the other skills... I added those into your program on my own."

"I... I had no idea..." I said, shaking my head in disbelief. Part of me wanted to believe it wasn't true, and that Wari really *was* the enemy... but no one could fake what she was clearly feeling. "I always thought you were the enemy..."

"I'm a *friend*," she said firmly, putting a hand on mine. "You can trust me." At my nod, she continued. "When I found out that Ballpoint had taken your sister – wait..." She paused uncomfortably. "You *do know* that your sister is alive, don't you?"

I nodded in response. "Ballpoint took her and made her an agent."

"Yes, they did... When they made her an agent, there was nothing I could do... But I told you she'd died at Kannan's hands. I hated to bring you the news, especially as it was a lie, but how

could I explain about Ballpoint? You didn't even know about Parasol then."

"I remember you telling me." And I did... very well. "I'd considered that the worst day of my life."

She grimaced. "I'm sorry, Carena – Vanya, I mean. I lost a lot of good employees when they did it, but I didn't want you to wonder anymore."

"She's an agent of Joseph's, too..." I whispered.

That made her sit straight up in her seat, pulling her hands away from mine. "What are you talking about?" she asked almost harshly. "How could you know about Joseph?"

I felt as if I was treading on unstable ground. "I... I talked to him once... I saw Carena – my sister – talking to him, too. But I didn't know she was my sister then."

She shook her head in bewilderment. "You *talked* to him?! And how didn't you know she was your sister?"

"Ballpoint took me in with her when they edited our memories and made her an agent..."

She actually stood up in surprise. I think she was a little flustered, too. "They did *what*?! They... They..." She made little noises for a few seconds as if she was trying to speak, but finally sank back down onto the stone chair, her eyes wide. "Oh my god... You poor, poor girl. You remember it?"

Glancing away, I nodded. I didn't *want* to remember, but I did.

"Oh my god..." she mumbled in bewilderment, "oh my god. *Twice*... The brain should only be altered once like that... It's no wonder you called your mind a jumbled mess. And are you sure your sister is working for Joseph? And that you talked to him?"

"She was talking to him on a PEA and working for him..." I explained. "And yes... Joseph said I'd 'furthered his cause greatly.' He said I'd done exactly as he expected."

"Oh my god. I need a cigarette," she said defeatedly, standing and walking over to a box and digging through it, mumbling to herself, "I can never find anything in here..." Finally, she stopped, taking out a strange instrument. I watched as she used it to light a little paper tube and put it in her mouth. I think it was like a pipe, just a different shape, because after a moment, she breathed out a little cloud of smoke. "That's better..." she muttered, leaning up against a wall and looking at me in amazement. "I think I've figured it out now..." She didn't seem very pleased.

"What?" I didn't know what she meant.

She blew out another cloud of smoke. "It wasn't Parasol that activated you, but Joseph. Joseph used to work for Parasol, and he'd have access to the codes – he used to have a very high rank at Parasol, actually – while he was a fellow employee, he was more of an employer. He knows just about everything about us. He could've had one of his goons hack into our system and manipulate your mind directly from there."

I didn't like the way that sounded. "What do you mean, 'manipulate my mind'?"

"I mean he made you kill a lot of Ballpoint agents to level the playing field. You wouldn't have known what you were doing. When he was done, he would've cut the link and you would've woken up and been regular old Vanya. That's what a sleeper agent is. *That's* why you killed all those people, *that's* how he knew about your sister and recruited her, and *that's* how he knew what you would do in any given situation. I'm betting he pulled you into one of his Batman gambits." She took a deep drag on her cigarette and blew out the smoke triumphantly.

I nodded slowly, taking it all in. "*I've been watching you for some time,*" I could remember Joseph saying. "*You've done exactly as I expected – no more, no less. You've actually furthered my cause greatly – far more than the dull-witted Talvi ever managed.*" It all made sense... and it explained so much. Those words took on a completely different meaning now. He'd called me

his "assistant"... I'd had no idea he meant it so literally.

One thing didn't make sense, though. "'Batman?'" I asked.

Wari grimaced. "Never mind," she said dismissively. "But now that we know all of this... How would you like to help me out with a little work?" She walked briskly over to a cabinet and opened it, revealing a computer console and several small screens showing various areas of the fortress.

"I need to get back to Mr Frog soon..." I told her cautiously. "He'll want to know where I went, if I'm gone when he gets back."

She laughed. "Mr Frog, eh? So *that's* where you've been hiding all this time... Oh, don't worry about that old coot; I'll have Orodogoth tell him for you. So... are you in?"

"All right... yes," I replied. I didn't know what she wanted me to do, and I was hoping it wouldn't take too long. What I wanted most was to rescue my sister, and I could only do that with the help of Mr Frog.



Chapter 26: The Final Entry

Though it had always appeared in hindsight that she held a special importance to this old fortress you stand within, few people spoke of her, and if they did so, it was only in passing. She was almost a taboo topic at Spearbreakers, and for good reason – the dwarves were willingly allowing an elf to live among them, in an age where prejudice and racism ruled the day. As a historian, you've dedicated your life to learning about this near-forgotten border fortress. You know perhaps more about the installation than anyone else – yet this single elven maiden has continued to elude you.

This is the final entry in her journals. Whether she continued elsewhere, you cannot say. So much remains unexplained – how did the girl become so well known among dwarfkind, and so hated among her own? From whence sprang the tales of her standing against entire armies of elves, from whence came the campfire tales of how she'd led armies to victory against Ballpoint? Of how she survived a scythod attack alone? Of how she took on even Parasol itself with a small group of friends at her side? Surely some of them are poetic exaggerations... but how did they come to be? Although doubtful, you pray that these questions will be answered in her final entry.

I have important news... some much more exciting than other little bits, but something important is going to happen soon. I'd really, really like to put it down right now, and skip everything else... but I have to do this in order. I do want to be an author, after all, and books where the narrative skips around are difficult to read. I have to practice not doing that. I used to be a lot worse about it... but that was when I was little. I always had to keep to myself, back at the mountain home, to keep the other children from finding out who I was. It gave me time to write, and time to think. It also gave me a lot of time to spend with my sister...

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As I walked up the stairs towards the apartment levels, I ran back over Wari's words in my mind...

*"There's someone new in the fortress – he arrived with the last migrant wave. I can't find anything on him, not that that's unusual. I have trouble staying organized. At any rate, it seems*



*almost as though he may be working for either Ballpoint or Eris. He's not a Parasol employee. I've seen him carting bins of scrap metal **to his room** – obviously that's highly unusual. The bins are always emptier when he leaves with them, but so far I think I'm the only one who's noticed."*

I left the stairwell and continued towards the living quarters at a steady pace. I was somewhat uneasy about the whole thing – I didn't want to work for Parasol.

*"His name is Tomio. I haven't found any information on his last name, but that's largely because Orodogoth is the only link I have with the world outside his little safe room, or 'headquarters,' as he calls it. Where he got all this Mountain Dew from, I have no idea, but he claims you can't survive an apocalypse without it. I hate the stuff."*

Finally, I arrived at my destination, and I slowed to a halt outside Tomio's door, trying to remain inconspicuous... but looking back, what *isn't* conspicuous about a cloaked, hooded girl who's glancing about like she thinks Fischer's after her?

*"I need you to break into his room and figure out what he's doing, and who he's working for. Feel free to take anything back here you think might help me. Honestly, I think he's trying to take the fortress down. That implies that he's working for Eris... and yes, I know you're not cleared for that level of classification. Draconik is going to give me hell for this, I'm sure."*

*"How am I going to get into his room? I can't pick locks..."* I remembered telling her.

*"No? What about... ahhh, I see... So Ballpoint tried to wipe away the skills we gave you. There might be a solution for that, but I'll explain when you get back. Just take this lock pick. Most doors in the fortress are relatively easy to unlock – **I said 'most'**, mind you. Oddly, no one ever tries to unlock a door. It baffles me. Just hurry there, get what I need, and get back."*

I waited until everyone was out of the hallway, and then took out the little strip of metal she had given me, placing it into the lock of Tomio's door. After quite a bit of wiggling, I heard a soft "click" that seemed to echo through the quiet hallway, and I put the tool back into my pocket. Turning the doorknob carefully, I walked inside.

The place was a mess... little bits of scrap metal lay scattered haphazardly all over the smoothed granite floor, as well as sheets of paper, coated with doodles and sketches in a way that vaguely reminded me of some of Mr Frog's blueprints. There were a few pieces of furniture: a bed against the left wall next to a cabinet that apparently doubled as a nightstand. In the right corner, Tomio had loosely draped a piece of canvas over something unidentifiable. There was also a closet... since when did dwarves in Spearbreakers get a closet?

More than anything else, it stank. In fact, it *reeked* of *fish*, of all things. I haven't smelled anything as strong since I was hiding from Mr Frog in the abandoned dump. I wasn't nauseated by it, but I really, really didn't want to stick around any longer than I had to.

Closing the door quietly behind me, I walked over to the bedside cabinet and opened it, looking over all the shelves. There wasn't much in it besides a few fish bones, scrap metal, and a diary... I decided the diary was something Wari might want, and slipped it into my cloak.

After closing the cabinet back, I peeked under the bed on a whim. When I saw what Tomio had hidden beneath it, I gasped. It was a huge lump of adamantine – the forbidden metal. I felt myself fall under its spell, my fingers creeping towards it of their own accord. It was light, I reasoned... I could easily take it out of there and move it somewhere else... If I sold it, I'd be rich enough to travel to a human city, buy a house, write a book...

Suddenly I realized what was happening. "*No!*" I whispered fiercely, snatching my fingers back. "I'm an elf; adamantine should have no effect on me..." I knew the words were a lie even as I said it, and I felt my fingers drawn irresistibly back towards the lustrous sky-blue metal. I

stopped myself again, repeating, "I'm an elf, I'm an elf, I'm an elf, I'm an elf." With an effort and a furrowed brow, I forced myself to my feet and took a step away from the bed, leaving the lump of metal where it lay. I smiled a little in triumph: I could master the temptation.

Without warning, the door to my left opened. I tried to jump away towards the closet to hide, but I slipped on some of the blueprints, falling on my back. Tomio himself walked in with a hoe over his shoulder. He saw me immediately, looking at me in surprise. "Who are you and what are you doing in my room?! I locked my door, and you still got in... Well, only one way to –"

Without even giving him a chance to finish, I kicked out at his stomach in self-defense – I didn't want him to kill me with his weapon. Unfortunately... I may have aimed a little bit lower than his stomach... All the same, it had no effect on him. My foot stung as if I'd just kicked solid rock. "What are you??" I breathed, wide-eyed in fear as I tried to scoot away... but he was too quick, and something heavy struck me across the head...

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I awoke sometime later, only to find I was bound with rope, my mouth was gagged, and I couldn't see a thing. I could move, though, and I felt about with my feet, soon deciding I was in Tomio's closet. Kidnapping is unheard of among dwarves... What *was* he? I'd heard stories of trolls with flesh of stone, but Tomio looked like a dwarf... *Looked* like a dwarf, at least. I'm pretty sure he wasn't...

Then it hit me. I was in a tiny closet. The old phobia of small spaces came back, and I started hyperventilating. I tried to calm myself, but instead, I started to panic. The gag made it even worse – I could barely breathe. I felt like I was about to pass out, dizzy from a lack of oxygen.

I needed to calm myself. I tried to think of things that had helped me before: open fields, puppies, the sky... and finally, finally, I managed to get my mind off where I was.

Wiggling about a bit, I found that he'd skipped binding my chest area for some reason... I tried to take advantage of it, and after several more minutes of wiggling back and forth, I managed to slip an elbow up through the gap. After that, it was easy, and I felt around in the dark until I found the knots, working with them until I had a second arm loose. I removed the gag and took a deep, deep breath. Sometimes there's nothing as wonderful as a breath of air. Even if it does smell like fish.

Continuing with the knots, I eventually managed to free myself. There was no way he hadn't seen my elven ears... he was yet another person who knew. But if he tried to tell everyone what I was... I'd be able to tell them about his stolen lump of adamantine. The punishment for that was 50 hammer strikes from Weaver. In simple terms, that means death. Normally I'd never betray someone like that... but it would be his death against my own, and he'd just kidnapped me. I was afraid he'd done it for sexual purposes at first, but he hadn't even searched me: I still had his diary beneath my cloak.

But it didn't matter. I was *free*. Standing, I turned the knob and walked forwards triumphantly. I'd just escaped bondage *and* a kidnapping. *Nothing* could stop me now.

I wound up with a faceful of the back of the door... he'd apparently locked me in. It didn't take me long to unlock, though, and I left, headed for Orodogoth's safe room. I was glad to finally be away from that place.

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Wari stood before me, idly flipping through Tomio's diary. "This is great. Thank you, Vanya," she said, sitting down in a chair with the book in her lap, and turning to the first page. After a moment, she took a pair of glasses from her shirt pocket and put them on, absorbed in the pages.

I stood there for several minutes, watching her in silence. I wanted to ask her something, but I felt too timid to try. I felt I almost deserved a little help from her... after all, I *did* help her out first, and my head still stung from where Tomio had hit me. I'd gone through quite a bit for her, actually.

Finally she glanced up at me distractedly. "You're still here?" She waved me off with the back of her hand as she turned back to reading. "I don't have anything else for you to do right now, I'm sorry. You can go back to Mr Frog."

I decided to voice my question. "Wari..." I began, "I think I may need your help in something... I don't know if it can be done, but..."

The agent removed her glasses, looking up at me in curiosity. "Is something wrong?"

Suddenly I found I was unsure of the whole thing myself, and I hesitated before continuing. "Well... I need to save my sister..."

She stared at me with slight disapproval, giving a slow shake of the head. "This isn't the best way. Are you *really sure* about this? Really, really, really sure?"

I nodded. "When they separated us, I promised her I'd find her... I *love* her, I... I want her to be safe. Wari, I want my sister back..."

"You'll have to go to Ballpoint..." she warned.

"I've been there before."

"Your sister won't remember you," she went on, as she put the book on the table and got to her feet. "Ballpoint would've replaced any memories they thought might compromise her loyalty. Vanya... even if you manage to get past all the guards..." Wari paused, grimacing, as if she hated to say the next words. "...your sister *herself* will try to kill you."

I nodded. I'd thought it all through before a hundred times. "I know..." I told her, my voice hardly a whisper. "But I have to try. I *have* to. Even if she *does* kill me."

I watched as she walked around the table towards me. I could see the emotion in her eyes, and as she slowed to a halt, just for a moment, she looked at me almost as if she was lost in a memory; almost as if it wasn't really me she was looking at... but someone else. Someone she loved. "Wari," I said softly, "I want to know if I can make her remember me... even while she's wearing her bracelet. I want to know if I can convince her I'm her sister. I don't want to wait for its effects to wear off to take her home... I don't want to leave Ballpoint again without her, even if she doesn't remember me yet... just so long as we're together again."

Wari's lips twitched as she stared at me in silence. "I understand," she finally managed. "If Lokum, my brother, was still alive... I'd do anything I could to save him."

"Even if you knew you might die," I said quietly.

She gave a quick nod and looked away, wiping her eyes. "Even if I knew." She paused, and then threw her arms around me, muttering, "My god, you remind me so much of him sometimes."

It had been years since someone had given me a hug... The only people I could ever recall giving me one were my sister and grandmother... but other than that... not a soul. I returned the embrace gratefully. Sometimes, just knowing someone cares can bring light to the blackest of worlds.

Wari shook a few times with repressed sobs, but quickly quieted herself. After a minute, she

pulled back, putting her hands on my shoulders and looking me in the eyes, smiling through her tears. "*No one else* could ever love her like you do; no one else could ever know her better. You know more about her than *anyone else* in this dimension or any other. Vanya... if *anyone can* manage it... it's you."

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The months went by quickly. I studied everything I could under Mr Frog's watchful eye, as he taught me the subtle secrets of masonry and mechanics, and the inner workings of Ballpoint and Parasol: how they think, how they work. I know he wanted his PEA... but I think there was something else driving him... Sometimes I caught him looking at me as if lost in a memory... as if there was someone I reminded *him* of. Since I'd come to work for him, I'd eventually grown to think of him almost as a father... the father I'd never known. He'd seemed to become almost protective of me, and I often wondered why.

I did get back to Jack Magnus and Draconik to tell them that Wari was all right. Jack Magnus offered his friendship... apparently he'd been asking questions since we'd met... and somehow, he'd learned I was an elf. It blew me away that a soldier who'd fought elves himself could be so open to one of my species. Draconik, on the other hand, offered his assistance instead, volunteering to teach me Parasol's standard combat techniques. I spent many hours with him, training and studying, though I'll admit I'm nowhere near as skilled as he is... I'm only "adequate" at best. He offered to teach me ranged combat, too... but I refused. I'm of the opinion that if you *must* kill someone... if you can't look them in the eyes as you do it... you shouldn't touch them at all. I think that to take someone's life without giving them a chance is a cruelty.

I occasionally went to visit Wari, too, and keep her company. As the weeks grew by, we grew closer, becoming good friends... Usually we just talked about whatever came to mind... but sometimes she would try to teach me, or help me out with my quest, like the time she explained Ballpoint's reshaping of my mind, and how the abilities Parasol gave me might show up again someday: "*Imagine a painting of masterwork quality. Now imagine someone else comes along and changes parts of that painting with a cheaper paint, putting a completely new layer on. Now imagine that someone else comes along and puts on touches of his own, adding a new layer of cheap paint. Without the bracelet we designed for you, parts of that top layer will peel away over time, and maybe little bits of the layer beneath it, too... but it's hard to say just how it will happen.*" It's how I took down those soldiers in the hallway outside Mr Frog's room – Ballpoint's layer of mindshaping had "peeled away"... but getting close to the bracelet again put it back, even stronger than before. Wari had a gift for explaining things. It wasn't the only thing she explained, but it's the only one I remember right now...

During my trips through the fortress, I occasionally caught a glimpse of other people I'd met. One was Talvi, who looked at me almost warily as I passed... there was something different about her, but I couldn't put my finger on it. Another, Fischer, glared at me with hatred as I walked by. Count Splint seemed to allow my presence, but grudgingly. I saw Kannan once, too... he did a double take as he saw my face, and I hurried away, careful never to pass him again.

I met the current overseer, Reudh, too. Everyone clearly hates him... he seemed to be an outcast, just like me. I stopped to tell him that I felt for him... and remembered to say his honorary title, "Lord". But then he stalked me for a bit and creeped me out... scared me, even.

I've tried to avoid him since. Even more than Kannan or Reudh, though, I've been trying to avoid Tomio.

Mitchewawa saw me once, too, exclaiming, "It's you!" But this time, he wasn't angry, and he didn't want to throw me to the zombies for breakfast... Instead, he asked me if I could ask Mr Frog to spike the booze supply again to "increase civilian efficiency". Apparently, it's something Mr Frog has done before... and I can't really say I'm surprised.

So many people know I'm an elf... Mr Frog told me he'd had Splint mark me in the records, and I'm an official member of the fortress now. Splint knows, Talvi, Fischer, Jack Magnus, Orodogoth, Count Splint, Mitchewawa, Draigean, Tomio... and yet, for the most part, they're fine with it, and that surprises me. I've wondered many times... how could a military fortress with such a dark reputation be so acceptant of an elf? The only thing I can come up with is that Spearbreakers is already so much of a hellhole compared to the outside world, with all its miasma, and "foreign mercenaries", and zombies, Holistic Spawn, goblin sieges, blood rain... that nothing really surprises people here anymore. They've seen it all.

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Mr Frog came to me earlier today with a set of armor... it was Ballpoint gray and lined with carbon fiber, and came with a cloak, boots, and gloves... all black. It looked very high-tech, and not dwarven at all.

"I overcame exceptional difficulty in arranging procedures to acquire these garments, and I'd appreciate your acquiescence in pre-use testing so we can understand what requires custom modification," he told me. I'd grown used to his style of speech... he basically meant he wanted me to try it on. I took it to my room, stripping out of my clothes and putting on the uniform one piece at a time.

I'd never felt carbon fiber before... it's a dull grayish material, as light as adamantite and supposedly as strong, though it can't hold an edge. Whoever had made the suit had lined the insides with it, and everything was a perfect fit... even the knee-length cape, which felt warm and comfortable fastened around my neck.

Once I had everything on – boots, gloves, breastplate and all – I stood in front of my mirror, spinning about and looking at myself. It felt... majestic... The cape was a bit over the top for my tastes, though... and I wasn't sure if the smoke grenades attached to the belt were real or not. Really, I didn't even know how to use them. I kept looking, noting the little pouches and buckles for... who knows what... and in one of them, I discovered a sheathed black dagger that was much too big for me.

That's about when I found the gun holster, and the silvery pistol within. I pulled it out, holding it up and examining it skeptically. It too was a bit too large for my hands... I could just barely reach the trigger. Putting it back in the holster, I removed both and turned on my heel to leave my room, headed for Mr Frog.

"Well?" he asked when he saw me, his arms crossed. "Do you approve?"

"I don't like the cape or the gun," I told him, handing him the latter. "What is the cape supposed to do, anyway? It seems like it would get stuck in things like doors."

He nodded thoughtfully. "Oddly enough, capes rarely seem to catch on obstacles... although I

can understand your reasoning behind wanting to remove it. It is primarily ornamental. However, this weapon is crucially important to your self-defense. I advise you reconsider." From Mr Frog, that meant "You're going to use it whether you like it or not."

I shook my head firmly. "I'm not using a gun."

"Stupid, stupid girl. How do you expect to survive a second expedition through Ballpoint, should circumstances prevent a smooth departure? Through the power of friendship?" He said this last with a hint of disdain.

I knew going in unarmed was a bad idea... but I didn't want a gun – not knowing what they're capable of. "Where are those knives I fought you with, three years ago?" I asked him. "They felt so much more... *natural* when I held them. Not like this one," I said pointedly, pulling out the large black dagger from its sheath. "I can hardly get my fingers around it, and it feels so clumsy."

"Hrmph," he muttered, giving me the evil eye and walking over to a cabinet. He soon returned with a cardboard box with the two sheathed daggers inside. "Silver vampiric blades," he said quietly. "Formerly property of Stova, from when she fought alongside Splint in the Vampiric Wars... but Talvi took them when she died. Splint couldn't bear to look at them." Mr Frog paused, removing one of the knives from its sheath and holding it up. It shimmered and glinted coldly in the light. He looked at it thoughtfully for a moment, and finally spoke. "They were originally the prized possessions of a high vampiric lord... eternally stained with the blood of fallen dwarves." His voice grew quieter as he continued, almost to himself, "They used to lick these, you know... after the battle was over, they would lick the blood of their enemies from their blades..." He finally stopped completely, looking at it almost with regret, as if it recalled a memory he'd rather stayed buried. I watched his face, wondering once more... who *was* he? He never revealed his past, not even if someone asked directly... He was so mysterious. It was as if he was always trying to run; always trying to forget...

He started suddenly, looking back at me and replacing them in their case. "They're beautiful weapons. Only vampires were as skilled in the implementation and crafting of silver alloys. Their edges are as sharp as steel... and at least as strong. But why these, of all things?"

"They felt right in my hands..." I explained softly, but now it seemed an unworthy reason. I'd had no idea they used to belong to Stova... or vampires... though I could remember Carena – my sister, rather – saying something like that to Joseph.

He only nodded. "Fair enough. If you are satisfied, you may remove your Ballpoint gear and store it until we are ready. It is improbable that you'll have long to wait. Possibly only a few weeks."

I'm excited, but really, really nervous, too... I know how risky it is, but I *have* to try to get my sister back. I'm willing to do anything to manage it. Anything at all. I'd... I'd *kill* for her, if I thought it could bring her back... if I thought it could keep Ballpoint, and more importantly, Joseph, from manipulating her. I feel awful writing that down, but it's true.

I've had a horrible life, really... an elf growing up among dwarves, an abusive grandfather, little food, few common comforts, living homeless in garbage heaps and abandoned alleyways, multiple interdimensional corporations messing with my mind, screwing up my memories, forcing me to act how they want me to act... It's almost as if Armok himself hates me... almost as if someone up there wants to make my life as miserable as possible. But my sister stayed with me through it all. If I can just get her back... it'll make everything better.

I'm going to avoid writing in this journal until I get back, whether I succeed or fail. Putting useless words in between there and now just seems wrong somehow. When I *do* get back... I'm

going to make a very long entry (long even for me) about how it went.  
And if I succeed... my sister's going to write it with me.



*The journal ends here. Nothing else from the young writer graces its pages – not a story, not a sketch – and you can't help but wonder...*

*Did she die?*

*The question can only remain unanswered. You flip through the pages one last time, scanning them in vain for anything that might inform you of her fate, but finally resignedly lay her third journal atop the others. It seems fitting that they should rest here until the end of time, gathering dust – one of the last mysteries of Spearbreakers, that mighty fortress of old in which you stand.*

*But you've found you've grown almost attached to the young woman. She'd written her hopes and dreams, her trials and fears in her three journals so clearly that you almost feel as if you know her, and it's with a heavy heart that you turn towards the door and leave Mr Frog's ancient, dusty laboratory for the last time.*



Art by Splint

## Interlude

*You exit the laboratory for the last time, solemnly closing the door behind you and locking it – but not without a tinge of regret. So many secrets remain uncovered... How was it that not only*

*Spearbreakers, but the whole of dwarfkind accepted her, and collectively made her into a legend?*

*Disappointed, you accept that you may never know the answers, and return to your camp in the old dining room. You pass dusty engravings on the wall, carved by Simon Tam and Talvi, dwarven characters of lore themselves, and dead for hundreds of years. Talvi's trademark cavy engravings seem to stand out as remnants of a bygone era, lending a fantastical feel to the already ancient fortress. You walk the halls of legends... yet will you ever know their true stories?*

*Three days later, you're startled from your midday meal by an unusual event – the air before you shimmers and coalesces, and you get to your feet in surprise, your half-finished plate falling forgotten from your lap. The fork clatters loudly against the floor, a sound that seems distant in your ears as two figures emerge, suited all in white but for black accentuations. On their arms: the Parasol emblem. "Parasol..." you say in bewildered astonishment. "You're from Parasol!"*

*The figures remove their helmets, revealing a blonde-haired man, and a dark-haired woman with silver-green eyes. Although she's beautiful, you're far too immersed on the moment to even think of romance, and she nods in response to your exclamation. "Yes, we're from Parasol."*

*"But this is incredible!" you exclaim. "I'm Dr. Urist Jones, of –"*

*"And I am Dr. Thian Russ. We know who you are, Dr. Jones," the man says with a respectful nod. "In fact, we've been watching you for some time. We think you may be able to assist us... if you'd be willing to oblige." He turns and proceeds towards the portal with his companion.*

*You and hasten after them. You don't have the time to gather anything... but no matter. "Of course I'll come!" you say in excitement. "I thought Parasol had turned to dust years ago!"*

*Dr. Russ looks at you solemnly over his shoulder as they disappear through the rippling anomaly, and says three words: "Parasol is forever."*

*You step through after them, and nearly gasp at what you see. "My gods..." You stand in an underwater chamber, the ceiling at least a hundred feet above... For years afterwards you'll struggle in vain to describe it, for the beauty is otherworldly: a cathedral of giants, complete with glass walls and steel beams, towers, buildings, embattlements rising up all around you, continuing far into the distance, the water outside as crystal-clear as if it's naught but a glass of fresh water. Alien creatures, shimmering in iridescent beauty, sail gently by outside. Your eyes follow the steel beams towards the ceiling, and come upon the largest crystal chandelier you've ever seen – shaped as a giant umbrella. Directly beneath it, immaculately crafted into the tile floor, is the Parasol emblem: a red and white parasol... and the red isn't stone or paint, but magma flowing beneath glass. The entire place glows radiantly, but you cannot pinpoint the source of light: it seems to come from everywhere at once. "My gods..." you whisper again, awestruck.*

*Behind you, you hear a buzz, and you turn in time to see the silvery, watery air inside a twenty-foot megaportal ripple into nothingness, leaving a giant oval of steel standing in silent solitude.*

*Only one question remains in your mind. You spin to the two Parasol employees, who watch you with amusement. "Why do you want **me**"?*



*"Come," they say, and you follow. You soon find yourself at a sort of minecart station... but instead of a minecart, they're white and steel floating platforms. Your host and hostess lead you onto the nearest, placing their hands flat atop a soft black console and closing their eyes... Smoothly, without the slightest sensation of movement, the air around you shimmers, and the car moves forwards into a huge glass tube, the glass parted at intervals by rings of steel, with a single bar of light stretching along the bottom, far into the distance. Back at home, you have crude light bulbs, but this is beyond anything you've heard of. You can't tell that the vehicle is on any tracks at all.*

*You can only look in wonder around you at the ocean, which soon begins to fly by faster, and faster, until the steel rings are so much of a blur you can't even see them anymore. And yet, there's no wind – no sensation of movement, not even when you switch tracks or turn down a different path. You'd expect such majesty of Heaven, or Valhalla, or Olympus... But of a place crafted by dwarven hands?*

*"Vanya herself rode this tunnel," Russ suddenly says in a soft voice, turning back towards you. His hands remain on the dark console.*

*"Vanya went to Parasol?" you ask. "Then the stories are true."*

*He nods slowly. "The stories are many things. My companion desired that we take you by this path so that you might travel the same that she did, her first time here."*

*"She came here more than once?" You try to query further, but Russ turns away, and the question remains unanswered.*

*You finally arrive at your destination and exit the vehicle. This area looks older, somehow, and the lights are dimmer. The walls are no longer glass, but steel and stone. The Parasol employees lead you down several stone hallways to a steel door, on which dwarven runes read: "Vanya Carena".*

*"Did she live here?" you ask.*

*The woman shakes her head, without giving you a glance. "No," she says quietly. "This is her tomb."*

*The door opens, and you follow them inside. The chamber is simple – befitting of the elven girl, you feel. The ceiling is a standard 10 feet tall. Neither silver nor gold adorn the walls, only chests and cabinets, locked behind glass doors. At the same time... you somehow feel that this place is almost held in reverence by your hosts. You look at them in askance, but they only lead you further into the room, towards the end of the chamber. Before you is a casket, guarded by a Parasol soldier. The guard stands motionless as you approach and peer into the coffin... and you gasp. Beneath its glassy surface, you see the face of the young elven woman, perfectly preserved. Her hands, arranged carefully atop the gentle curve of her breast, clutch a single rose of platinum.*

*"This is Vanya?" you ask them, and they nod. "She only looks asleep... but she's been dead for hundreds of years, hasn't she?"*

*"For us, yes," Russ says, seeming uneasy. "But for my companion here..."*

*"...she's hardly been gone a month," she finishes for him quietly.*

*You glance at her quickly as you note a tremble in her voice. "Who **are** you?" you question her, puzzled. But she only shakes her head, and your question hangs awkwardly in the air, yet another unanswered mystery.*

*Russ changes the subject. "Vanya's body is kept in a preserved state through a time bubble. In this room, time passes normally. But in that casket... time doesn't pass at all."*

*You look back from him towards Vanya's body, and note the red color of her lips, the telltale point of her elven ears, the waves of dark brown hair arranged about her shoulders. "How did she die?"*

*You realize it was the wrong question to ask, as the woman suddenly turns and leaves the tomb in such a hurry that you feel you've upset her.*

*The weight of a hand comes to rest upon your shoulder, and her companion speaks. "Come with me," he says in a firm, quiet tone.*

*You nod, following him to the edge of the room, where sits a table. Upon it, there are several books, stacked atop each other. The man motions for you to sit, and you comply, noting as you do that etched upon the top book's cover is a golden pentagram – a five-pointed star. **Vanya's** five-pointed star. "This is hers?" you ask.*

*He nods. "Yes, but we cannot translate it. Vanya's name isn't natural elvish, and neither is the written or spoken language she used. After the journals you already saw, she only used her elvish script, writing in her elvish language... an obscure tribal dialect, it was used by so few individuals that it was virtually unknown, even before she died."*

*Carefully, reverently, you open the book at random. "It's a journal," you say. "I can read the script... What would you like me to do?"*

*"Read it aloud," Russ suggests. "There's a recorder built into the table. Take your time, Dr. Urist Jones." With a respectful nod, he turns and leaves the tomb, possibly seeking his companion, leaving you alone but for the guard and Vanya's quiet form.*

*And so you begin.*

## Chapter 27: Salaia

*This is a cardboard-bound journal, standard except for the golden pentagram which graces the front cover. The script is elvish, and flowing. You vaguely recall seeing her use it in her prison journal, but fortunately, it is one of the many languages you know.*

*"You're not in Kansas anymore."*

*Those were the first words I heard when I set foot inside this place... Yes, they're odd first words... I think it's a reference to a book or something. I don't really know.*

*It's so different here... It's not hard to imagine that it's another world. But at the same time, there are elements of things that are the same... It's amazing. Everything's amazing.*

*It's been a long time since I wrote a journal entry, but apparently I'm supposed to now. That's what they do here... everyone keeps notes and journals. I don't really have a problem with it... I just wish I had my old journals with me. I don't look forwards to writing my stories all over again.*

*~~~*

*I stood in Mr Frog's laboratory, wearing my new Ballpoint suit. I felt... tall... like I could take on the world. Today was the day I was going to see my sister. Though very much afraid of what might happen, I somehow felt sure of myself. I felt confident, even.*

*Mr Frog's low voice rang clear across the room as he paced, hands behind his back. "This*

espionage attempt will be assuredly different than the previous excursion for all three of you." I stole a glance at Urist as Mr Frog continued, but both Urist and Hans, standing by my side, stayed as erect and motionless as soldiers... which they were. "If Ballpoint reaches the conclusion that you intrude upon their primary location of operation, they will appropriate everything they possess towards your capture. After the convoluted destruction you created during the previous catastrophic escapade," here he glared at us, "you'll require the incorporation of complete discretion into your technique if your intentions involve survival." He ceased pacing and turned to Wari, giving her a nod. "Wari," he said, indicating he wanted her to continue where he'd left off.

"We'll be putting you here," Wari said, tapping a large map with a ruler. She continued, but I was so excited I could hardly hear her. I was with Urist again, and I was going to find my sister. So much had happened in the last several weeks...

Splint and someone named Rose had discovered "a conspiracy", and it had turned out that Reudh's odd behavior was due to alcohol poisoning... something unheard of until now. For some reason, Mr Frog suspected Ballpoint.

Wari and Mr Frog had started working together... actually, Mr Frog seemed to be siding with Parasol, even if he wouldn't join them outright. He'd changed a lot since I met him... he was no longer just in it to survive. No longer was he doing things only for the sake of science. Instead, he said he was doing what he was doing because he felt it's *right*. He never said it... but I think he thought *I* was the reason for that change.

Tomio and Wari were involved in something, too, so long as I'm talking about Wari. I'm not exactly sure what... all I know is that she got onto me once for not watching my back as I returned to Orodogoth's "headquarters". She said he'd followed me back, and that Talvi almost found her, too.

Talvi had started working out... and like everything else, she'd excelled at it. She managed to get herself down at least fifty pounds... and she sure did look muscular after that. Whenever I passed her in the corridors of the fortress, she would give me a strange look, though...

"Vanya!" Someone startled me from my thoughts. "Are you even listening?"

I nodded. "Yes, Wari... Mr Frog's miniportal is going to put us in the storage facility at Ballpoint."

I saw a frown flit across her face, as she prompted, "And...?"

Unfortunately, I hadn't listened well enough to know, and I could only shake my head, ashamed.

Mr Frog had been leaning against a wall with his arms crossed, watching us, but now he came forwards. "You'll exit Ballpoint Technology's premises without contacting your sibling. Though I assure you I'm deeply apologetic, there simply isn't going to be an opportunity."

"What?!?" I exclaimed, glancing about at everyone's sympathetic expressions. "But... you can't! I've waited so long! I *have* to get her back!"

"No." Mr Frog shook his head sternly. "It will compromise the mission. I *need* that PEA to ensure the survival of this military outpost, and the most successful approach to this particular problem involves brevity."

"I am sorry, Vanya," Urist said regretfully, tilting his head slightly towards me.

I turned towards him indignantly. "You *knew*? You *knew* I wouldn't get to talk to my sister?" I couldn't believe it. Why would Mr Frog have told him, and not me? And would Urist not have

told me? He'd only been back for a few weeks, and Mr Frog had tried to keep us separated as much as possible.

"Stupid, stupid girl," Mr Frog muttered under his breath. "Your survival is critical to the success of the mission. Contacting your sister is dangerous, and there's no guarantee you'd succeed in converting her. However, there *is* every indication it would slow your return, and more importantly, you could be killed. I can't allow that."

I stared at them openmouthed as Mr Frog activated the portal and handed me the portal bracelet. Urist and Hans walked through, Hans giving me a sad frown as he left.

"Go on," Wari whispered from behind my left shoulder. "I'm sorry. You'll get her back someday, I promise."

For a third time I walked through the shimmering air, praying to the gods that it wouldn't be the last. I was more than upset... I just wanted to get the mission done with.

Everything shifted... space unraveling, twisting... I felt dead, duplicated, disconnected from reality, disjointed questions running through my mind: *is this what ghosts feel like?*

I stood inside Ballpoint.

"Shh," Urist warned me, pointing at a chatting group of soldiers far ahead. We stood in a darkened corner of Ballpoint's massive storage warehouse, the towering pillars of shelving holding up the ceiling so far above. Urist and Hans stood in front of me.

I grimaced and whispered back, "What do we do?"

"Hans and I are going to create a distraction," he said quietly. "We will meet you back here when it is done. You have the location of Mr Frog's PEA, so get it, and come back here to wait for us."

Their plan seemed too dangerous, and I didn't like it. "When did you discuss this?"

"You spent a long time gettin' into the portal, Missus," Hans said in a low voice. "We will be fine, don't you worry. The hallways here are mostly empty, y'know."

I didn't even have a chance to protest... they left so quickly.

It wasn't long before it happened: the mass of chatting, laughing Ballpoint soldiers suddenly quieted and jogged towards the exit. Urist and Hans had clearly succeeded. Praying they were all right, I left the shadows myself, moving towards the shelving coordinates of Mr Frog's PEA. I had them written on my hand in pen: "XFY, 1393, 3"... just like Halion had told me the last time I was there... The memory of him crossed my mind again, and the memory of the woman I'd talked to just before I'd seen him lying dead on the floor... the woman with the golden bracelet. The woman who was my sister. I hadn't even recognized her at the time.

Giant mechanical spiders, the warehouse's automated caretakers, traversed the shelves overhead as I walked through the aisles. Nobody seemed to be piloting them, and I wondered why...

Much of what happened after that was because I couldn't stay focused on my mission.

~~~~~

I stood in front of the empty shelf again, just where I'd been the time before. Holding my

breath, I reached out, carefully, carefully moving my hand downwards through the empty space, and soon felt something solid beneath my palm. The air shimmered, and a PEA appeared. It was Mr Frog's, and it looked just like one of the ones I'd seen him using at Spearbreakers. I slipped it into one of the pouches at my belt, turning back towards our rendezvous corner with a sigh... But then, I stopped, stunned...

Before me stood my sister.

She wore a suit similar to the one I'd worn each time I'd come to Ballpoint before - tight fitting and sleek. Even so, I felt like I was dreaming. She looked so much like me... only younger... she looked to be about 16. Memories rushed through my mind - playing together, eating together, laughing together...

Her words, dark and ominous, broke the silence. "When I heard there were intruders in the fortress, I knew you'd come here. I studied up on you after you came here last - you've been trying to impersonate me for years. You actually almost ruined my good name last time..." She drew a long, slender sword from a sheath at her waist as she spoke. "This time, you won't be leaving here alive. I am the *only* Vanya Carena."

The dream was shattered. "Look at me! Look at how much alike we look!" I tried to reason with her, feeling panicked and short of breath. "We're sisters!"

Carena only laughed hatefully, saying, "Looking alike doesn't mean anything." With that, she lunged, her weapon slicing through the air.

I threw myself sideways, landing on my shoulders and rolling to my feet as Draconik had taught me. She lunged again, and I jumped through the shelving, tumbling out onto the other side. I was hardly through before Carena leapt in after me.

"Fight me, you coward!" she roared angrily, slicing at me again with her blade. I jumped backwards again, slightly unsteady on my feet. "Quit dancing away like a fool!"

"I *won't*! I won't hurt you!" My voice trembled as I spoke, and I suddenly realized just how afraid I was of what she'd become.

"Then you will die even faster." She lunged again, and I sidestepped the stroke, but hardly in time - her blade slid across my leg. If it hadn't been for the carbon fiber armor I'm sure she would've severed it.

She looked at my leg in surprise. "Armor?"

I ignored her question, backing away and trying to put distance between us. "Carena, think back: do you remember who you practiced swordfighting with, in the mountainhome barracks?"

She looked up from my leg, drawing a sharp breath. "So you've been researching me, as well... For your information, I studied alone. And I became quite good at it, too." With these words, she made a running jump, flying through the air. I barely managed to duck below the blade as it whistled over my head. As she landed on the ground behind me, I turned and ran as fast as I could down the aisle. I knew the only chance I had was to keep away from her. I couldn't dodge forever.

"Come back here!" Carena screamed at me. Although I didn't look back, I could tell by her voice that she was running after me. "I'll shoot you!"

"My sister wouldn't shoot someone in the back!" I yelled back as bravely as I could. I knew my sister well enough to know she would *never* kill someone at range. I just hoped they hadn't altered her mind to the point that I was wrong. I turned towards her, walking backwards while she approached me at a sprint. "Wasn't seven pretty young to be forced to leave home alone?" I called out in askance. "Don't you think your grandfather would've sent someone with you?"

"I hated that man!" she yelled, the loathing apparent in her voice. "I ran away from home, and no one came with me!" She reached me, slicing at me again and again, her sword twirling about. I ducked, dodged, sidestepped, and found myself backed against the corner of a shelf. She struck again, meaning to sever my head. I knew her moves. I could remember. We'd practiced together, years before.

I ducked, and the sword flew across the thin metal of the shelving corner. Slowly, it slipped, and I backed away from her as she watched it, her eyes widening as she realized what she'd done. All the way to the ceiling, the entire stack of shelves began to tip...

My aggressor stood motionless before them, looking upwards in stunned surprise. "Carena, run..." I urged her, turning hesitantly on my heel and starting to sprint away. "CARENA, *RUN!*"

My yell seemed to snap her out of it, and as we fled, the shelves began to fall, cascading items - computers, weaponry, armor - pouring down behind us with an unimaginable noise. The entire set of shelving on my right seemed to rip itself away from the floor with a shuddering groan, twisting and crashing against the opposite side of the aisle. I looked up and watched in horrified fascination as they crushed one of the giant metal spiders between them in a shower of sparks. The damaged vehicle fell in smoking pieces to the floor, its clanging and clattering lost in the din.

I finally escaped, rushing out towards the warehouse doors and pausing to catch my breath. Carena did the same, turning to me and muttering, "That was *your* fault."

I rolled my eyes. "Oh, sure, put the blame on me," I said sarcastically. I didn't realize it was a death threat until too late.

Carena came at me again in a fury. I ducked and dodged, sidestepping her strikes as best as I could, but she was learning. Suddenly she carved a sweeping stroke so close across the air that I had to throw myself backwards. She caught me behind the leg with another attack, and I fell onto the floor. As she swung towards my face to finish me, I snatched my vampiric daggers from my belt, holding them up in a cross, and caught her blade. She looked at me, panting, trying in vain to drive her sword closer to my head. I was panting, too, and sweating. I could hear Wari's voice in my mind: "*You know more about her than anyone else in this dimension or any other. Vanya... if anyone can manage it... it's you.*"

"I *know* you!" I yelled, sending her weapon to the side and scrambling to my feet. She sent another swipe at me; I deflected it. "You didn't have to carry any luggage to Spearbreakers, remember? I carried it for you! *I* carried it! You were only ten! You had a crush on one of the boys in the caravan!"

"I didn't carry *any* luggage!" she roared, striking with so much force that I slid across the smooth concrete floor as I blocked. "I never had anything! *Anything!*"

I leapt back, trying to put distance between us, and prayed Urist would come back soon. I thought that if we could just get her to Spearbreakers, Mr Frog would be able to convince her... and we could take away her bracelet... I could see it glinting: a golden ring around her wrist, shaped just like the one that I'd once called mine. "You're not like this!" I insisted, as she approached me cautiously. "They're controlling you with that bracelet! It's not real gold, it's just a device designed to control your mind!" She hesitated, and it fueled my confidence. "You need to destroy it."

It was a foolish suggestion to make. "My *parents* gave me this," she said, scowling. "My grandfather tried to keep it from me, but I've had it since I was a baby." She leapt at me again. I deflected her blade towards the ground, where it struck so quickly it even threw a few sparks.

She couldn't remember my strategies, or she'd have beaten me already... it was the one advantage I had. I knew her tactics.

"Don't you even know why you hate your grandfather?" I asked, trying to hit something she would've wondered about. "Haven't you ever stopped to think about it?"

But she didn't respond, striking violently, rapidly at me. I blocked, dodged, deflected, but finally she struck so hard it knocked one of my daggers from my sore hands. It skittered across the floor, and she kicked it away with her foot. She didn't seem triumphant about her accomplishment, though... only confused.

Taking her confusion as a sign that I was succeeding, I continued, even as she struck back at me. "You used to share a bed with someone at the mountainhome, don't you remember?" She struck again, and I deflected, gripping my dagger tightly with both hands.

"It was a friend," she said, though her voice betrayed her doubts.

I jumped and rolled to the side, getting to my feet and backing away. "It was *me*!" I shouted. "It was me! Our grandfather hated us! You don't remember why you hated him, but that's because of *why*!"

Her lip trembled as she ran at me again, flinging her sword with reckless abandon, trying to remove my head. I blocked her messy strokes as best as I could, and a hope welled in my heart: *I was getting through to her.*

"You don't remember! You couldn't remember! Ballpoint made you forget me, Carena! I'm Vanya! I'm your sister!"

"*I don't have a sister!*" she screamed in a fit of rage, whipping out with her sword so quickly I couldn't even see it. It struck me across the back of the arm, piercing the carbon fiber armor and biting into my skin. I screamed in pain, dropping my second dagger and clutching tightly at the wound.

"You *hit* me!" I cried out in fear and disbelief. "You *hit* me!" My eyes welled with tears at the pain.

"I'm *not* your sister!" she growled, kicking my weapon away in disgust. Her face was contorted with loathing, frustration, confusion... I'm not sure even *she* knew what she felt. She looked... scared.

I tried to scramble away as she approached, but found to my dismay I was backed against a wall. I didn't have anything left to pull. I was sure it was the end... but I still wasn't giving up on her: "You don't remember why you hate your grandfather because of what he did to me," I said quietly, tears streaking my face. "When he was angry, he would hit me. He wouldn't hit you, but he made you watch."

Her sword quavered visibly as she made a clumsy strike at my head. Ducking to avoid it, I heard it embed itself in the wall above me, the metal reverberating. Letting go of it, she pulled out her pistol and aimed it at my head.

"He gave you sweets afterwards to try to drive us apart," I whispered, shaking with repressed sobs and praying for a miracle. "But you remember *that*, don't you, Salaia?"

The name struck her with all the force of a chiming bell tower, and she seemed to pause, her pistol beginning to tremble as she processed it. *She remembered her name.* I could see it in her eyes: the doubt, the wondering, the questioning. So many things she couldn't explain, and I was explaining them for her. She backed up slowly, shaking her head and uncomfortably gripping her pistol with two hands to try to steady it. "No," she said forcefully, unsure of herself. "It's not true. You're *lying*!"

I got to my feet, keeping pace with her as she backed away; ignoring the pistol aimed at my

breast. "You don't ever remember having to get food for yourself at Spearbreakers, or anywhere else - I always got it for you," I said quietly, my hope refreshed. "You don't remember who took care of you when you were sick, but that was me, too. I was always there, protecting you. I *loved* you, Salaia."

"Shut up," she said quietly, and then in a desperate scream: "SHUT UP!" Her pistol shook in her hands, and she gritted her teeth, aiming it alternately at my head and chest as she began to shake with sobs.

Stepping forwards, I pressed myself against the pistol, knowing full well that my life was on the line. Even if she killed me, I was going to get my sister back. "You don't remember having the bracelet before Spearbreakers because *Ballpoint* gave it to you. It's made to make sure you don't get your old memories back," I said, my voice breaking with emotion. "*This isn't you! Your name is Salaia, and you're my sister!!*"

For a moment, she paused, looking at me with doubtful, wondering eyes. Then, so, so slowly, watching me, she removed a trembling hand from her pistol, slipping her bracelet over her fingers. Her eyes left mine as she held it up, looking at it in the light. It rested there for a moment, seeming to take on such a paramount of importance as a framed image. Her eyes slowly shifted from it and back to mine, her lip trembled, and then... *she dropped it*.

As if in slow motion, we watched the bracelet together as it fell slowly towards the floor, spinning, tumbling end over end... and then, hitting the ground... it shattered... sending little golden pieces splintering in all directions.

Salaia's mouth fell open as her gaze wandered back up, up, to the quivering pistol she held at my breast, and finally to my eyes. A single tear rolled down her bewildered face. "I..."

Her sentence hung unfinished in the air: I heard a gunshot from behind us, and a bullet struck her chest, her weapon falling from her hand. Her face froze in an expression of pain and surprise.

"*NO!!!*" I screamed, rushing forwards to catch her as her body crumpled to the ground, coming to a halt among the golden pieces. I started crying in earnest. "Please, Salaia, don't die... please..." Blood began to stain the dark gray of her Ballpoint suit, and she lay there with her eyes tightly shut, moaning in agony. I heard yelling coming from the direction of the warehouse doors, explosions, gunfire, the ricochet of bullets, but it sounded worlds away, and I prayed to every god I knew of for a miracle.

Salaia whimpered with pain, her eyes fluttering open as she struggled to focus on my face. I sobbed, clutching her hand tightly. "Please, stay with me," I begged her, my voice trembling. "*Please*. I promised I'd come back for you, do you remember? We're going to go back to Spearbreakers. Everything's going to be okay. We're going to be together again, just like we used to be." I felt her squeeze my hand in response as she nodded weakly, blinking back tears. Slowly, deliberately, she moved, trying to get up.

Suddenly her face exploded in a spray of reddish mist, as someone fired two more rounds into her forehead.

"Vanya, are you all right?" a deep voice rumbled, grabbing me by the hand and pulling me

roughly to my feet. Someone slipped my daggers into their sheaths. I looked up in shock...

It was Urist.

"You *killed* her..." I said quietly, wide-eyed, shaking my head as I tried to take it all in.

"I saw her from the door when I entered - she was about to kill you. I had no choice. Now come, we must hurry." Turning, he pulled me after him, firing a fusillade of shots towards the warehouse doors. Hans followed us, raining bullets towards our pursuers... I couldn't even keep up, stumbling as Urist dragged me along at a rapid pace. My legs refused to work.

I couldn't believe it. My sister was dead. I tried to pull away, tried to rush back to her body on the floor, but he held my wrist too tight. I shook, doubled over with sobs. "You *killed* her!" I screamed, flailing uselessly against him. "*You!* You monster, *you killed her!*"

"Vanya, I did what I had to!" Urist yelled, tugging me along with one hand as he fired shots with the other. "*Everybody dies*, Vanya! One Ballpoint soldier's life isn't worth losing you." A grenade landed beside us, and Hans swatted it away with a huge hand. Urist pulled me down as an RPG rushed overhead. The incessant sound of gunfire pounded in my ears, distant explosions echoing through the aisles.

I was in a daze... I felt dizzy, sick, and I couldn't even think straight... but more than anything else, I felt enraged. I'd lost my sister for a second time... and this time, she was never coming back. And it was all because of Urist. "Did you even stop to wonder who she was?" I shouted through my tears. "Would you even have *cared?*"

"Enough!" Urist yelled in frustration. "Are all of our lives worth that of a single Ballpoint soldier? *Get that portal open!*"

Struggling with the portal bracelet, I jerked it clumsily off my wrist, wiping my blurring eyes uselessly with my fingers. I pressed the button, and the air within it spiraled into oblivion. Moments later, a larger portal formed before me, and without even waiting for Urist and Hans, I stumbled through.



Chapter 28: An Invasion

"I never knew..."

You look up from the journal in surprise at the dark-haired woman who sits across the table from you. You'd been so absorbed in what you were reading you hadn't even noticed that she'd entered.

"I never knew..." she whispers again, wiping her eyes absently with the tip of a finger.

*"What do you mean?" you ask her. "What do you mean, you 'never knew'?" There's a brief silence as neither of you speak, and you tilt your head curiously, venturing a further question: "Who **are** you?"*

But she only shakes her head and composes herself, saying, "Don't. Please, just continue reading..."

You hesitate for a moment before you oblige, watching her. She stares back at you with her fingers folded in front of her face. Then, giving up, you turn the page and begin reading the next entry.

Mr Frog told me once that the universe is like a floating soap bubble, and that Parasol, Ballpoint and Eris are like tiny bubbles stuck to the outside of it. I never really grasped how accurate his analogy was until I saw proof of it myself. It extends so much farther than he said... the smaller soap bubbles can be *inside* the main one, floating there by themselves, moving about

with little effort. It's odd to think I'd spent most of the past couple of years living in a tiny "soap bubble" inside a bigger "soap bubble", but then, I never really figured it out until after it had gone...

~~~

I fell, nothingness whirling about me like a funnel cloud. Nothing existed; not space, not light, not sound... and somehow, I was able to breathe... but I didn't really want to be breathing at all... I'd lost my sister. While she'd been alive, she was all that I'd lived for; she'd been all that I'd cared about... and then she'd died. Or at least, I thought she did. Suddenly, one day, I'd found out she wasn't dead at all... and then, just as suddenly, she was gone, again. This time, I'd *watched* her die. I'd held her hand in mine as she'd breathed her last... and I never even got to say goodbye.

I didn't really care about anything anymore... but that didn't mean I wasn't in pain.

Without warning, I materialized on the other side, stumbling forwards and falling to my knees as I wept loudly for my sister's death. Salaia... sweet Salaia... she'd never done anything wrong. She didn't deserve death. *I* had never done anything to deserve *any* of the things that kept happening to us. It seemed the universe itself took a perverse, sadistic pleasure in watching me suffer. Tears streaked my blood-spattered face, and I didn't even care to wipe them away, taking off the accursed PEA that hung at my belt and tossing it bitterly to the side.

Then, it dawned on me: Where was Mr Frog?

I looked up, and what I saw stunned me into silence. I wiped my eyes to clear them, but it couldn't be denied: I wasn't in Mr Frog's laboratory anymore. Looking about in bewilderment, I wondered what had happened. The ceiling and walls, made of rough, unchiseled stone, were far too close... The room was smaller than it should have been, and completely empty: there wasn't a piece of furniture or lab equipment anywhere in sight. Mr Frog's miniportal sat behind me, and a stone door stood framed in the wall to my left, exactly where I would've expected it to be... but apart from that, little was the same.

Carefully dragging myself to my feet, I walked to the door and peeked out. The hallway outside was empty, but it was familiar enough for me to know: I was in Mr Frog's room. ...Or at least, what *used* to be his room.

As I looked about, I noticed a squad of Ballpoint soldiers stationed down the hallway, far to my right. Shattered as I felt, it wasn't hard to figure out that Ballpoint had attacked Mr Frog. I decided it was probably because he sent me in again.

Behind me, I heard a loud hum from Mr Frog's portal, followed by Urist's and Hans' muttering and exclamations as they too realized that Mr Frog's laboratory had vanished. I scowled at the very thought of them, and forced myself into the hallway, closing the door as I went. I didn't want to talk to Urist, and more than that, I didn't want *him* to talk to *me*.

I didn't really care that my ears were visible. I didn't care that Ballpoint was everywhere. I didn't care if they killed me. I simply didn't care. What did I have to live for? Feeling sick and lightheaded, I staggered slowly in the direction of the contractors, hoping that they might know who I was, and end the nightmare that had kept me in its clutches for far, far too long. I didn't even feel I was a part of the world anymore, so why should I remain?

A voice shouted in the distance. "Vanya! I know what happened!" I struggled to bring my eyes to focus on the group of Ballpoint soldiers as they began struggling with their captive, who reached out for me. "Vanya, don't give up!" It was Wari. I felt myself warm ever so slightly to her voice. "There's still hope!" she yelled. "Leave and get to Parasol!"

A few of the soldiers began beating Wari with their weapons to quiet her, while the rest began jogging towards me. I watched them with deadened eyes as they approached... but with every strike the others laid on Wari, I felt her agony with her in my heart, a teardrop sliding down my cheek.

"I *promised* you, Vanya! I don't make promises lightly!" Wari shouted at me, her voice distorted with pain. "Vanya, run!"

Still they approached, less than 30 meters away, and yet I still stood silently, unable to will my leaden limbs to move. I processed what she said... but my sluggish mind couldn't remember what she'd promised. Yet, in the back of my mind, there was a little glimmer of hope... just a little... that she was talking about my sister.

They were almost to me, and I tried in vain to move.

"VANYA, RUN!" Wari screamed.

Finally, my legs obeyed, and I stumbled in the opposite direction, step, by step, by painful step, and as I ran, I began to gain speed, until my legs seemed to fly, my surroundings blurring as I fled.

"*RUN, VANYA!*" she screamed after me. "*NEVER LOOK BACK!*"

And I ran.

Even if my sister was dead... even if I hated Urist... there was still Wari. There was still Mr Frog. There was still Jack Magnus, and Draconik, and Splint, and most importantly, there was still Spearbreakers: a horrible fortress filled with wonderful people.

Scattered dwarves glanced at me as I passed them, fleeing through the hallways and up the stairs, but if they noted my strange armor or elven ears, they said nothing. I saw groups of Ballpoint soldiers, clad in dwarven armor... I could hear the occasional hum of portals, the sound of clashing weapons and muffled screaming of civilians.

Spearbreakers was under attack.

I ran out towards the entrances, through the upper hallways, and into Jack Magnus. The collision knocked me backwards onto the ground.

"Whoa, there! Slow down!" he laughed, pulling me to my feet. "What's the hurry?" Then, quietly, "Vanya, your ears are uncovered..." He removed a cap from his head and put it on mine, curiously examining my face. "Are you okay, sweetheart? You've been crying."

I quieted my heavy breathing as best as I could. "Where is everyone?" I asked, feeling the hat gently with my hand, pulling it over my ears.

"Cleaning up after the last siege..." he said, quizzically searching my face. "What's wrong?"

I looked up desperately at his face. "Jack, Spearbreakers is under attack. It's... it's the mercenaries. They're back. And..." I hesitated, but I had a feeling it wouldn't be long before he knew everything. "...they're after *me*."

"The mercs?" He raised an eyebrow in surprise, adding, "We sent them packing almost a year ago, now. Wait, that caravan of soldiers in the trade depot - is that them, too?" With a frown, he nodded his head towards the courtyard behind him.

Looking past him in that direction, I saw a squad of contractors jogging towards us. "Jack," I

whispered pointedly. He spun around, and even as he did so, he pulled his axe from where it hung at his side.

Jack Magnus turned back once more over his shoulder, giving me a nod. "Vanya, I'll hold them back for a minute. You get somewhere safe. Tell Mitch to sound the alarm, and then find Fischer." He set his feet in an attack stance and waited calmly, tapping his axeshaft against his hand.

I didn't stay to watch. Turning, I began running towards the Hospital, where Mitchewawa usually was.

Down the stairs I went, tripping and stumbling, trying to keep myself moving. I felt exhausted, wanting to fall asleep and never wake up. As I continued down the hallways towards the hospital, I passed Reudh, on the way to his office and sifting through an armful of paperwork. On a whim, I slowed my footsteps and turned around - if I couldn't find Mitchewawa, Reudh would do just as well, though I still felt a little guilty about how I'd wrongly judged him.

"Lord Reudh?" I asked, panting.

"Is something the matter?" he asked quickly, lowering the papers he was studying.

"J... Jack..." Surprised, I paused and tried to collect myself. I'd never had a problem with stuttering before. "Jack Magnus wants the alarm sounded. Spearbreakers is under attack... It's the mercenaries."

As I spoke, concern etched itself across his face. "Certainly! It will be done at once! I am dreadfully sorry if you've been attacked! Might I be able to assist?" He looked at me inquiringly, almost hopefully.

I shook my head numbly, trying to keep up with the rapid pace of events. "No... No. But thank you."

I started to leave, but then I stopped. Turning back, I gave him a quick kiss on the cheek - just a peck - as a sort of apology. With that, I left, running back towards the stairs.

As I began to ascend Spearbreakers' spiral staircase towards the barracks, I heard soldiers shouting, "There!" I didn't wait to find out if they were talking about me. If they had the way blocked, then there was no way for me to find Colonel Fischer, and so I made a change of plans. There was still one way out of the fortress... Mr Frog's mossy tunnels. Praying I would be able to find my way through them, I turned around, going back down the stairs. I felt bewildered, sick, and dizzy... but my legs were moving. I hoped that was enough.

When I reached the apartment level, I heard a familiar voice yelling in the distance: "*Pocket sand! ...Squirrel tactics!*" I looked through the doorway as I passed and saw a group of contractors clutching at their eyes. Orodogoth helped Wari escape them, and they entered a portal together, just before it dissipated.

I watched the contractors for a moment... and then an idea wormed its way into my mind... Ballpoint was after *me*...

"Hey!" I yelled, wincing at how sore my throat was. The soldiers pointed at me and began running... and I did the same. Down, down, down... One foot after the other, one step after the next.

I soon passed Tomio on the stairs. He was standing by a group of levers on the wall, so silently that I didn't even know he was there until he grabbed my arm. "Stop!" he cried out, pulling me to a halt. I made a weak attempt to get away, but he held me tight. "Calm down!" he

hissed. "There's something Wari wanted me to tell you."

I stopped struggling and examined his face suspiciously. I could hear Ballpoint soldiers above us on the stairs, coming down after me in a tumult of footsteps.

"'Honeycomb', she said." He grimaced, as if saying something so nonsensical hurt his pride. "She wanted me to tell you 'Honeycomb'."

"What?" I asked. "What does that mean?"

He shrugged. "She said it was something she wanted you to remember." The heavy sound of iron boots approached, and Tomio spun me around, sending me down the stairs with a shove. "Get to Orod's headquarters!" he called out. "Don't worry about me."

As I hurried down the steps once more, I heard the clanking and grinding of machinery far above, Tomio's shouts, and the agonized yells of Ballpoint soldiers. I never found out what he'd done to them... Tomio the inventor... I'd never thought he might save me in the end - he didn't even like me.

And I ran. All I ever do is run, leaving everything I know and love behind me. It's all I've ever done; it's all I've ever been able to do.

I fled down the stairs, past the coffins in the upper hallway, down to the level of Orodogoth's workshop. The corridors were empty but for Rose, one of Splint's hammerguards, who looked at me strangely. It wasn't long before I reached the corner and turned towards Orodogoth's workshop, but then I stopped: far down the hallway was a group of gray-clad soldiers, and at their head walked a familiar figure: Commander Acetalyta.

I felt a slight rage in my heart towards her, but just briefly... just until I remembered why I was upset. I'd thought Urist had seduced her. The thought of him only made me angrier, and I forgot for a moment where I was.

"It's her!" the commander shouted accusingly, her voice echoing against the stone. "Get her!" As one, they rushed towards me, drawing their weapons. I turned and fled back the way I had come, the Ballpoint contractors in hot pursuit. But I was tired... I hardly had anything left, and I knew they were gaining.

As I passed Rose, I halted for a moment, looking at her pleadingly. We weren't exactly friends... in fact, we'd never talked, but I didn't have any choice. "Please," I panted, "I need help. They're after me."

Her brow furrowed in the flickering torchlight, and she nodded. Far above us, the great drums of battle began to beat, muffled by the stone, and we looked up towards it as one for a moment. Reudh had sounded the alarm. They were rallying the troops. I prayed it meant they would be able to save the fortress.

Looking back at me uneasily, Rose tucked her hair behind an ear. "Go," she told me. "I'll take care of it." I nodded gratefully and staggered away, forcing my protesting feet once more into a run. I was headed for the caverns, and Mr Frog's mossy, hidden tunnels.

Rose was a newer recruit... I've never heard what happened to her. If she died because of me... I don't think I could live with the guilt... I don't want to think about it.

Time seemed to slip away as I ran down the massive, spiraling staircase that descended all the way to the magma seas below. I don't remember much of it. Somewhere along the line, I met Talvi, who was coming up the staircase from the forges. I felt glad to see her... but at the same time, I felt dizzy from exhaustion. My side, my legs, even my lungs ached.

"Miss Talvi," I said quietly, thankfully. "I'm so happy to see you." I swayed, clutching at the

wall beside me to steady myself, trying to calm my breath. My heart thudded in my chest so hard I could feel it was shaking me.

She hung back for a moment, looking at me curiously. "V... You look tired, y'do... Like a mushroom pudding that ain't got any fat..."

"I'm very tired," I nodded in agreement, gulping. My mouth was so dry, I found it hard to swallow. "I need to get into the caverns."

She ignored what I'd said, seemingly suspicious. "Those're some strange clothes you're wearin', they is... Reminds me of somethin', but I cain't say fer sure what it do..."

"Miss Talvi, please, focus," I begged her. I didn't even consider it might sound rude. "I need to get to the caverns, but I can't see in the dark, and I don't know the way. I need to get to where Mr Frog did the experiments with the gorlaks."

She nodded slowly, looking me up and down with a careful eye. "I know where that is... Y'passed it a while back, tho'... Lemme take y'there. 'Kay?"

"Thank you, Miss Talvi," I whispered, following her willingly back up the staircase.

Talvi walked ahead with a torch as she led me through the caverns. If I'd been thinking about it, it would've struck me as odd that she was so silent... but my mind was on my sister. The image of her face as she'd looked at me that last time... that quizzical, puzzled, bewildered look... it was burned into my mind, and as we walked, I felt tears rolling down my cheeks. Talvi looked back at me once or twice, but she said nothing encouraging or sympathetic.

Together we traveled up through the caves, through dark and dusty passages that Talvi and so few others knew... and finally emerged upon a ledge above the cavern proper, deep chasms looming at our feet.

"We're here, V," Talvi said quietly. She didn't turn around.

We obviously weren't there. "Miss Talvi, this isn't it. We're going somewhere else. Did you forget?"

Her voice was quiet, ominous, as it broke the eerie silence of the caverns. "Yes I did." She turned towards me, the flickering torch she held in her hand throwing shadows across her face. She furrowed her brow, and it was only too late that I realized what was going on.

With a scowl, she stepped forwards and shoved me roughly backwards.

"*Talvi!!*" I screamed, stumbling, slipping, sliding down the steep-sloped lip of the ledge on which we stood, panicking as I tried to find somewhere to grab. "Talvi, what are you doing?!"

She approached me slowly, menacingly. "*I did* ferget, V... I fergot a lot o' stuff, an' it's all yer fault."

"What are you talking about?!" I said, panicking as I tried to claw my way back up the steep slope. Talvi gave me a kick, sending me sliding down even farther as my fingers dislodged rocks and pebbles. "Talvi, *stop!*" I screamed. I was only a few feet from the edge.

"You know full well what I'm talkin' about, V gurl," she spat. "Don't you dare play dumb with me! Do you think I'm a stupid cavy? Is that it, V? You don't think I remember none?"

I clawed desperately for a handhold, and finally found one, halting my descent, but not soon enough: my legs, rolling on pebbles and loose stones, slipped over the edge and fell. I was dangling by my arms. Looking behind me at the massive cavern, I could see the fires of Ugeth flickering over a hundred feet below. The cruel irony of the situation struck me... I'd done this same thing to someone, years before...

"I remember ever'thing, V," Talvi muttered, approaching me slowly, torch in hand. "You *betrayed* me, you did. Same as a monkey's tail. I remember you shovin' that needle into my arm."

Her face twisted with hatred, and her voice escalated to a yell. "I took you in, V! I pr'tected you! We was friends!"

"Miss Talvi, please!" I begged, trying to pull myself back up. "We can *still* be friends!" I was terrified. Less than an hour before I'd been convinced I had no reason to live... but somehow, hanging from the lip of a cliff, everything was different.

"NO, we CAIN'T, V! You stole Mr Frog right out from unner me, you did! You're workin' for *them*!" She spat to the side. "That uniform, V. It'd take a fool not to notice it, and I ain't no fool! Same as the coconut who ate 'is brother!" She paused for a moment, thinking. "I wanted t' be that coconut, y'know... I ain't never tasted a coconut before..."

"Miss Talvi, I don't want Mr Frog!" I said, beginning to cry. "You can have him!" My foot finally caught a ledge, and I started to climb back up, hoping Talvi wouldn't notice.

She looked at me icily. "V, you betrayed me, and I *did* ferget stuff, an' it's all 'cause'a you! I don't e'en know *what* I forgottened! But you did it, V!" She walked forwards carefully down the slope and stood directly before me, glowering with hatred.

I looked up at her in fear, pleading with my eyes. "I did it to save your life, Miss Talvi! If I hadn't, Mr Frog would've killed you!"

She made no response, pondering what I'd said.

"I'm your V girl, remember? *Your V girl*. I'm a *friend*. Please, Talvi, help me back up!"

But Talvi shook her head. "No, V. You betrayed me," she said heartlessly. "Three times, you did. First with th' needle, then stealin' Mr Frog, then joinin' those mercs and bringin' 'em back to Spearbreakers t'murder us all."

I couldn't believe that sweet, sweet Talvi would be so cruel. "So you're going to betray me in return?" I asked quietly.

She hesitated, thinking it over carefully. In the silence, I moved up a little with my feet against the rock, climbing back up. One arm after the next, I slowly gained height, leaning forwards.

Suddenly, she spoke, with a decided tone. "Yes." Snarling, she rested her foot on my face and pushed me backwards into the abyss... As I fell, the last thing I saw was her torchlit face, watching in grim, hateful satisfaction.



The caverns, ablaze with Ugeth's fires. Art by Talvieno

## Chapter 29: The Caverns

*The journal continues in its flowing elvish script on the next page, so you know Vanya couldn't*

*have died. At the same time, you're somewhat skeptical as to whether or not someone could've survived such a drop, and curious as to how she managed it.*

Air flew past me with the sensation of wind, as I fell faster, faster... Fifty feet passes by quickly; I hardly had time to tightly close my eyes and take a breath.

Water enveloped me as I arrowed into the depths, plunging deeper, deeper... I'd landed in the cavern lake. I began to swim upwards, arm over arm, kicking my feet, looking above at the fires flickering above the surface, drawing nearer, nearer as the pressure about me lessened...

I finally broke the surface, choking and gasping for breath as the roaring of flames assaulted my ears. I didn't know how much water I'd swallowed, but it was enough to make me feel even sicker than before. As my head and stomach swam, I glanced about at the otherworldly scenery reflected towards me off the water from the distant shore: giant mushrooms lit ablaze, smoking pieces crumbling and falling to the ground. All around me floated bits of charred wood and fungi; flecks of ash filled the air, some still smoldering with a red glow as they floated past me over the gentle waves.

With a determined effort, I propelled myself forwards through the polluted, lukewarm water, one arm at time, weakly kicking my feet as the shoreline approached. My mind was a haze... looking back, I don't really know what drove me on.

The earth greeted me slowly, and I felt land beneath my aching arms. Stumbling forwards, I fell to my knees upon the welcome cavern floor, coughing and choking as I tried to clear my lungs. It took me a while to stop, and left me feeling even sicker. I ended up vomiting water, wiping my hair back clumsily over my head to keep it out of the way.

In the end, I fell asleep right where I was... passed out from exhaustion at the edge of the cavern lake.

~~~

My dreams were troubled and repetitive... Talvi and Urist stood before my sister and I; Talvi stabbed me with openworked daggers, while Urist riddled my moaning sister with bullets. Behind them, Joseph's face smiled mockingly, dancing just beyond shadows.

I stood up suddenly, looking about and panting with terror. As I realized where I was, and what had transpired, my fright gave way to grief, and I began to cry for my sister's death.

Crying is a strange thing... It's an expression of emotion, and yet it doesn't require anyone nearby for it to accomplish its purpose. At that moment, I couldn't think of anyone who could comfort me, anyway. The only ones I would've gone to were Urist and Talvi... and both of them had turned on me. The two people I considered my best friends had betrayed me... and I'd lost my sister. I'd almost lost my life... and right then, I wished I had. The anguish ripping through my heart was unequaled by any pain I'd ever felt. I'd never lost someone I'd cared about before... If Talvi *had* stabbed me to death, as I'd dreamed, it would've been a kindness.

Images of my sister's face flashed in front of my eyes in the dim firelight... That confused, bewildered look she'd had as she'd considered what I was saying...

"Salaia..." I cried. I clenched my fist, whispering, "Oh, Salaia..." I'd been *so close*. I'd gotten her to question who she was – to question whether she really belonged to Ballpoint. In spirit, I'd gotten her back...

In my mind, I saw the bullet hit her chest as she tried to speak; I saw two shots fired into her forehead even as she struggled to stand...

"I HATE YOU!" I shrieked suddenly, screaming into the darkness. "I *HATE* YOU, URIST!" A fresh torrent of tears cascaded down my face, and I fell forwards weakly, clawing my fingers into the dense cave moss as I wept. To think I'd loved him. To think the one I loved could betray me like he had... it was too much to bear. "You should've known," I muttered brokenly. Then, louder, "You should've known it was her!" I clawed my fingertips deeper into the mossy floor, and my breath quickened with rage. "YOU SHOULD'VE KNOWN!!"

The gentle sound of lapping waves and crackling of fires answered me, and I could hear the faint echo of my own voice: "*You should've known...*" I collapsed weakly onto my side, holding my knees.

"I *loved* you," I whispered. "I loved you, and you betrayed me. You *betrayed* me, and you'd said you loved me, too." I wiped a tear from my nose. "You *lied*."

The accusation seemed to echo in my mind, and it somehow depressed me even further. I didn't *want* to hate Urist... I wanted to love him. He'd been the first one I'd really felt something for... even if it had all been for nothing.

I felt broken.

I lay there for quite a while, hugging my knees close to me and shivering. It wasn't until I heard the faint echo of Ugeth's roar that I felt compelled to move. "*Onino-imio queca*," I swore quietly, getting to my feet and wiping my tears away. I knew that if Ugeth returned, he would set me ablaze, just as he'd done to the mushrooms, and that thought seemed to fuel my efforts. Putting one foot after the other, I walked between the towercap and fungiwood mushrooms that loomed far above, seeking shelter in the cavern wall. The smoke stung my eyes and specks of ash clung to my damp clothes, but I was thankful for the flames. Without them, I would've been blind. The cavern seemed to glow red and yellow, the lights flickering wildly about as it drew air towards it through the caverns.

After a search, I finally found what I was looking for: a small, natural tunnel in the cavern wall. Although I had to stoop to enter it, it wasn't long before I'd tucked myself away just inside.

My sister's face seemed to haunt me as I tried to fall asleep. After a while, I took my hand in my own, imagining it was hers... Somehow, it was a comfort to my tired mind, and at long last, I floated away into a world of troubled dreams.

~~~

I awoke sometime later, and found the massive cavern to be eerily silent and still. The fires outside had mostly died down. After wandering about for a little while, I managed to find some wild plump helmets. The little purple-tinted mushrooms weren't nearly as large or appetizing as the cultivated ones from Spearbreakers' farm, but they were still edible. The lake water, though dirty, tasted fresh to my parched lips. After gathering up a good deal of the wild mushrooms, I sat down to eat what amounted to a very meager meal.

As I chewed, I looked through what possessions I had. Jack Magnus's woolen cap, though damp, hadn't fallen from my head. I still had my vampiric daggers, too, reminding me of so many people I'd come to care about. Then there was the little gorlak doll, tucked away in a pouch at my waist. I took it out and looked at it for a moment, and the thought appeared: had the little

pigtailed girl had a sister?

Shaking my head, I placed it aside and picked up a few more plump helmets from my little pile, but they tasted bitter on my tongue. I'd never wondered before whether the girl I'd murdered had a sister or not. Now, after losing a sister of my own... I could imagine the anguish she would've been in to learn her sister was dead. No, not even dead, just... missing. She wouldn't even have known whether her sister was still alive – it was a different kind of torture entirely.

With a sigh, I picked up the little doll and placed it back in one of my pouches, and as I did, I realized I was still wearing Mr Frog's portal bracelet. A wave of hope and relief washed over me, and I got quickly to my feet, removing the bracelet and pushing the little button... but nothing happened. Whether the water had ruined it, or it had only had enough charge for one use, I didn't know. I put it dejectedly back on my wrist and continued my little breakfast.

It didn't make sense, somehow. I'd lost my sister once before, or so I'd believed. I'd truly believed my sister was dead, when Wari told me, and yet that fact didn't make losing her now any easier. Maybe I'd held some subconscious hope that Wari was lying, and my sister *was* alive. Then again, maybe somehow I'd known in my heart that she wasn't actually dead.

The world felt so empty with her gone.

*I felt empty.*

After I'd finished eating, I began gathering supplies. I filled one of the two pouches at my belt with water and sealed it carefully. I filled the other pouch with plump helmets, and tucked the little gorlak doll carefully into my belt. Some things I never wanted to forget, no matter how painful they were. Other things, like my sister's death... forgetting it would have made my life so much easier.

Unlike a dwarf, I couldn't see in the dark, so I hunted until I found a piece of fungiwood to serve as a torch, lighting it with the embers of a fallen towercap. Once I'd overcome a few final qualms, I turned, and with a heavy step, I began my journey towards the surface.

~~~

My original destination was "up"... a little vague, but the fact that I didn't know the way back to Spearbreakers was a weight that never left my mind. I thought that if I could just reach the surface, I'd eventually be able to find the fortress... but as I progressed higher, farther through the caves, I realized I could *never* return. Talvi would simply try to kill me again, and she'd probably get away with it, too. The dwarven code of ethics was against killing other dwarves, but a dwarf that killed someone of another species could simply say that someone had coerced them into it. If the attacker said their victim was an enemy, other dwarves would consider it completely acceptable.

The climb was slow, and inconsistent. At times I found myself perched atop steep ledges, high above open chasms... other times I found myself crossing flat expanses, empty but for webs and giant mushrooms. Early on, suicide was always on my mind... but I couldn't bring myself to starve, or drown, or even jump off a cliff. I hated that I couldn't control my survival instincts.

Although I never had much trouble with food, water quickly became an issue. Whenever I passed even the smallest stream, I always stopped to refill both my pouches, and the dagger-carved towercap flask I'd made.

"Day" and "night" mean nothing when you're underground. My schedule was simple: walk, eat, sleep, repeat. I never knew how much I slept, and I'll never know just how many days I spent

underground... but it felt like an eternity. When you have things on your mind you'd rather ignore, that eternity becomes a hell all its own. Every other dream was a nightmare, and every waking moment, Urist and Salaia consumed my thoughts. I knew I'd never see either of them ever again, but for some reason, I wanted to see Urist one last time. Part of me wanted to punish him, to hurt him in the way he'd done to me... but another part of me was ashamed of those thoughts. And then, a little corner of my mind wanted to see him again, just to *see* him. I questioned whether liking him was betrayal to my sister, and I didn't have an answer... My heart was torn. My tears were frequent.

Once, I thought I heard him calling for me through the caverns... *Vanya... Vanya...* but it was only a trick of the caves, or possibly my ears. To keep from attracting predators, I tried to stay completely silent... and the only sounds I ever heard were the shifting of air currents, the dripping of water, and my own quiet footsteps.

Sometimes it was all too easy to believe that Spearbreakers had been just a dream, and that I'd *always* lived in the caverns... that I'd never lost my sister, and that there had never been a "Urist" or a "Mr Frog"... At times like that, I clutched the little gorlak doll tightly in my hand and knew it'd all been real. I vowed that someday, somehow, I'd make up for what I'd done to its onetime owner.

One word spurred my feet onwards: *Parasol*. It was all I had left. It was the only place that I could really make a difference. It was the only place that I knew I'd be accepted.

Finally, one night, I heard the sound of thunder echoing towards me. It took me a bit to realize what it was, but when I did, I dropped my dwindling supply of wood, rushing towards it in excitement through the tunnels. I soon found myself at the mouth of a cave, looking out by torchlight at blood-red rain falling on an already macabre landscape.

I'd finally escaped the caverns.

I'd never seen anything so beautiful.

~~~

The next morning, I began walking in the sunlight, for the first time since I'd arrived at Spearbreakers, so many years before. The landscape was familiar... ten miles away to the east, past the rolling blood plains that stretched far to the north, the Amber Barb mountain range loomed. To the west were the Jungles of Binding, where Spearbreakers was, and when I climbed a hill, I could see the shimmering waters of the Amethyst Ocean a couple miles to the southwest.

Not knowing where else to go, I started towards the Amber Barb, meaning to head as far from Spearbreakers as possible. I didn't want to go back... not even to see Mr Frog, or even Wari again, though I'd come to think of her as my best friend.

Though the landscape was familiar, it didn't make the scenery any less grotesque, and it still sent shivers up my spine. Dried, sticky blood was coating absolutely everything. Dead trees poked their blackened, twigless trunks up from the ground like skeletal hands clutching for a victim, bloodstained vultures resting on their rotting branches. The sky was gray but for scattered, dark red clouds floating high above. After the morning blood-mist fog cleared, I could see for miles... and unfortunately, so could everyone else.

I'd hardly been walking more than a few hours before I heard the first sound of life. "HALT, SOLDIER!" someone yelled, and I spun around to see a six-man squad jogging towards me, wearing gray uniforms... *Ballpoint* gray. They carried guns, and could easily outrun me if they tried; I knew right away that fleeing was pointless.

They slowed as they reached me, keeping their guns trained on me as they suspiciously examined my Ballpoint hybrid suit. I kept my arms up in the air in the "see? No weapons" gesture Mr Frog had taught me. "I'm unarmed!" I told them, hearing my voice shake. My thoughts strayed to the daggers at my hips, and almost grimaced – I knew they'd notice. "I'm not going to hurt anyone."

"Name, soldier? Rank?" the leader asked me, smoking a cigar out of the corner of his mouth. "That's some odd getup you've got there..." He had a buzz cut and a close-shaved goatee, even though he was a dwarf.

For a second, I felt relieved they weren't attacking, and tried to think up some name to tell them, but that didn't last long. One of the soldiers whispered in the commander's ear, and his expression changed.

"Vanya?" he asked, tilting his head in surprise. He made my name sound like an accusation, as if he'd called me a murderer. "She's Vanya Carena?" He glanced towards one of his soldiers. "Leroy, pull it up, let's see."

My eyes danced nervously between them as I watched, holding my body stiff and motionless.

Leroy tapped on a PEA for a moment and held it up to the commander, who shook his head with a smirk. "Can't believe we found her," he muttered, looking back at me. "Vanya Carena..." he chuckled. "Sorry, girl, but you're tagged 'K.O.S.' in the records. You know what that means?"

I shook my head, though I had a very, very bad feeling about it.

"It means 'Kill on Sight'", he said loudly, taking a puff from his cigar. He reloaded his weapon with a dramatic flourish and aimed it at my head, shaking his own with a smile. "Sorry, girl," he laughed.

"No, wait!" I screamed, panicking. "Please, wait!!"

My pleading was interrupted by a sight that's remained etched in my mind ever since... All about us, the earth erupted violently, clods of reddish dirt flying in all directions. By the time it had fallen to the ground, three of the soldiers were already dead, blood gushing from the headless stumps of their necks as they crumpled aside, as lifelessly as ragdolls.

"Aw, *FUCK!!!*" the commander shouted, emptying his assault rifle into the nearest creatures with a terrified, warlike yell.

It was with horror that I realized: Orodogoth had been right. The creatures were just as he'd described: eyeless, alien monsters with a toothy, three-part mouth at the end of a headless neck-stalk. Their upper arms were like scythes; their lower arms like claws; their four long legs arching into large, menacing spikes.

He'd called them "scythods".

They swarmed around me, clicking with their mouths as their feet stabbed into the earth. One or two of them fell to the Ballpoint fusillade, but the attack had disoriented the soldiers, who were firing desperately in all directions.

"Don't kill me!!" one shouted, throwing down his weapon and falling to his knees. Moments

later a spiked arm stabbed into his chest, lifting him up into the air, yelling with pain until the beast crushed his skull against the ground.

In the same instant, another sliced its scythe-arm across a soldier's throat. Her head rolled to the ground, and others sliced away the arms and legs of the falling corpse.

At last, only the commander himself remained of his squad. The tallest of the creatures stomped forwards, clicking loudly with its teeth, and snatched the assault rifle from his grasp with a clawed hand. The dwarf looked up at the towering creature in terror, and tried to draw his sword, but the scythod leader grabbed him by the throat and lifted him, kicking and screaming, from the ground. It seemed to take a sort of sick, sadistic pleasure in dismembering one limb after the next, while the commander writhed, screaming in agony. As the scythod lifted its foreleg up to stab him through the chest, I turned away, covering my eyes. I couldn't watch.

The commander's dying scream echoed in my ears.

And finally, the only one left was me...



A basic CG example of a scythod. Art by Talvieno

## Chapter 30: Scythods

*You glance up for a moment at the woman sitting across from you, but she only stares at you silently, waiting for you to begin the next entry. Dr. Thian Russ is nowhere to be seen. With a feeling of discomfort, you turn the page and continue reading.*

It can be difficult to switch from one culture to another, especially when they are worlds apart. What seems horrid to one person can seem perfectly acceptable to someone else. It's how they're raised. If you were raised to punch your elders violently in the face, and taught that it was a sign of respect, you wouldn't have an issue if you saw someone else doing it. Our behaviors and cultures aren't "pre-programmed"; they're learned and taught. Unfortunately, even knowing that doesn't lessen the shock nearly as much as you'd think.

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I turned around in time to see the commander's dismembered corpse falling to the ground, and I felt my stomach turn as I saw one of the "praying mantis" beasts slit his abdomen, his intestines gushing from the wound. But the tallest scythod, the leader, scraped its scythe-arms together with a loud scraping noise, clacking loudly with its teeth, and as one, the two dozen scythods fell silent and stood still. Alone, the tallest began to stalk towards me, its spike-legs thudding into the moist earth: *thud-thud, thud-thud*, like the beating of my heart. I backed away, but two scythod guards grabbed my arms from either side. The others cleared a way for their leader, who slowed in front of me.

I always found it odd how they have no eyes... You don't know where to look, but I assumed its "head" was where mine would've been. Its teeth are strange... three jaws lined with teeth that come together in the middle to make a triangle. Eye contact means so much more to us than we ever seem to realize.

The scythod began waving its neckstalk, quietly clicking its teeth as it seemed to examine me. A whimper of fear escaped me as its mouth lowered towards my neck.

The noise seemed to surprise it, and it backed away a pace. For a moment I thought I'd scared it, but it lifted one of its leg-spikes and slid the side slowly along my throat... I thought it was going to kill me.

Suddenly, it withdrew, clacking loudly. A human wearing an old Ballpoint uniform climbed from one of the craters at the far side of the group, assisted roughly by the scythods, which seemed to spit at him hatefully. He approached at a jog, stumbling whenever the creatures kicked it, and finally came to a halt beside the scythod leader.

He had close-cut red-brown hair and an unkempt beard, as well as a weak jaw. Though he was shorter than the average human, he was still taller than me. I expected a human language from the man, but instead, he made a clicking, grunting noise, which the scythod responded to in kind, almost impatiently. Redbeard seemed to protest, but finally turned towards me and spoke... in broken elventongue.

"Hello, master person tree," he said slowly, stuttering, "I... I be good to make meet you. Please do... Please be do not eating me later now." Hesitating, he grimaced; clearly he knew his vocabulary was lacking. If it hadn't been such a tense situation, it would've been amusing, but I took that last phrase as an insult.

"I speak dwarven, if that's any easier for you..." I muttered crossly.

"Oh, good," he sighed with relief, almost smiling. "Yes, I do." Beside him, the scythod started chattering roughly.

"I don't eat people," I berated the man. "That's racist and -"

But he interrupted me: "The Warmaster Kythraka'l Scylk demands you state your race and allegiance."

"You clearly already know I'm an elf, so why don't you just tell him that?" I asked in annoyance. "And why aren't they killing me?"

"I know, I'm sorry," he whispered, glancing fearfully at the scythod on his right. "He won't believe me if you don't say it first. They aren't killing you because -"

The leader, Scylk, whacked him over the head with a closed claw-hand and started chattering, and the man, cringing, started to relay what I'd said in Scylk's own tongue.

"...Allegiance? Are you Parasol?" he asked, almost pleading with his eyes.

I felt no pity for him. "I belong to Spearbreakers," I said quietly.

"Spearbreakers?" his eyes widened in surprise. "But that's a *dwarven* -" A stream of clicking chatter interrupted him, and the man began conversing with the scythod, who began waving his leg slowly in my direction... almost curiously. It seemed they smelled with their legs, which was odd, but... after all I'd seen and done, it really didn't seem as otherworldly as it might have.

Finally, Scylk turned to me, clacking and hissing through his teeth. "His Warship asks if you were enslaved," the man translated.

I glanced from the man to the creature curiously. "No... no, I... Of course not," I stuttered in surprise. "Everoc dwarves don't keep slaves, and Spearbreakers is acceptant of anyone, no matter the race." I caught my breath - it felt odd to hear myself speaking those last words.

After some more chattering, some in my direction, the man spoke again. "His Warship says he is intrigued, and asks that you stay with us for a time... as a prisoner." He gave a sort of apologetic smile.

"Do I have any choice?"

He shook his head rapidly, whispering, "They'll kill you if you refuse."

I looked at the claw holding me on my right, then my left, looking slowly up the arm to the scythod's sharp, bloodstained teeth, and looked back at the human. "I will stay," I said in quiet resignation. It was better than going back to Spearbreakers, I thought.

Scylk clacked his scythe arms together, chattering loudly. A roar erupted from the creatures as everyone did the same, shouting in unison, and they all seemed to relax. The two guards released my arms and left. I watched quietly, standing shell-shocked at the edge of the milling group as they began to eat their fallen enemies... as well as their fallen comrades. I turned away as I saw them ripping at the commander's chest, fearing I was going to be sick.

A hand lowered itself onto my shoulder. "I'm sorry if I insulted you," Redbeard apologized.

I shrugged out from under his palm and looked at him accusingly. "Not all elves are like that," I said, irritated. "I've never eaten someone's flesh in my life. The only meat I eat is of animals."

"Elves don't eat animals," he tried to point out, raising a finger.

"Well, *I do*."

He stood there quietly, motionless, looking me over with his eyes. I sat down on the ground, wishing he would go away, but he didn't. It felt... awkward. After a while, I spoke, largely to break the silence. "Aren't they going to take my weapons? Or could they not tell I was carrying daggers?"

Redbeard paused for a second before he spoke. "The Warmaster mentioned your weapons had an odd smell... But they don't take weapons from captives."

"And what if I tried to fight my way out or escape?"

"They'd kill you," he said simply. "We got off on the wrong foot, and I'm sorry," he said, trying to sound friendly. "What's your name?"

I wanted to tell him to leave, but there didn't seem to be much point to it. After all, there was no telling how long I'd be kept prisoner. There was no reason to hold a grudge. "I'm Vanya," I finally answered. "What's yours?"

He hesitated for a moment, as if struggling to remember. "I'm, uh... I'm John Smith."

"John Smith'," I echoed thoughtfully. "That's an odd name."

"As odd as 'Vanya'?" he joked, sitting down next to me. "As odd as giant praying mantis creatures, as odd as blood falling from the sky?"

I couldn't help but smile. "You have a point."

"That I do," he said with a nod. "Are you from Ballpoint too?"

Shaking my head, I glanced over at the chattering creatures to my left. "No... This armor I'm wearing isn't Ballpoint-made," I explained.

John raised an eyebrow, saying, "It *looks* like it's from Ballpoint..."

"It's not." I picked up a bloodstained pebble and tossed it away. "Mr Frog made it for me."

He choked. "Mr... Mr Frog? Are you serious?" Then he stopped, trying to collect himself. "The Mr Frog, the one who was responsible for Ballpoint pushing forwards the Miranda amendment?"

"The what?" I got the part where Mr Frog was apparently famous at Ballpoint, but he'd lost me after that.

"The Miranda amendment," John repeated. "It's where..." he stopped and ran his hand through his hair, apparently lost for a way to describe it. "Never mind. I heard they sent him to Spearbreakers, trying to kill him with his own creations."

I glanced at him curiously. "What do you mean?"

"He's the one that modified the Spawn and re-released them. He was one of the heads of the project, actually."

I was stunned. I didn't know what to say, or how to react. His accusation seemed absurd, given what I knew of Mr Frog. "What?"

"It's true," John said in a nonchalant manner, twiddling his fingers. "Didn't you know?"

Shaking my head roughly, I exclaimed, "It *can't* be true! He's a good man! He would never do something so horrible."

He tilted his head to the side thoughtfully. "Well... I guess you could say it's because he's a 'good man' that they kicked him out."

"I don't believe you," I whispered, sinking my head into my hands. Little pieces in my mind were starting to fall into place: how Mr Frog knew so much about the spawn, how he loathed them, how he was helping Spearbreakers defeat them in any way he could. But I didn't want to believe it.

John continued explaining. "He saw what Ballpoint was planning to do with the Spawn and he didn't like it, or so people say. He started to drink, started to make his own drugs and self-medicate... and then one day he straight-out told the head of the project that he didn't want to take part in it anymore. So... they sent him to Spearbreakers."

That sounded a little closer to the Mr Frog I'd come to know, and I couldn't deny it. "Why would they send him to Spearbreakers?"

"Well, they were *going* to kill him straight out, but the trial got hung up on moral issues... A number of people revolted, saying Mr Frog was right and that Ballpoint should terminate the project. So... the commander-in-chief passed the Miranda amendment to Ballpoint law. It says..." he stopped and ran his hands through his hair again, thinking. "It says anyone showing signs of dissent should be killed off as in discreet a manner as possible, without trial or warning, to keep from upsetting the rest of the contractors and causing a riot. The official story was that Mr Frog was doing research at Spearbreakers, and that's what he was told, too... but then somebody leaked the truth about Miranda, and everybody knew."

"You were there?" I asked, refusing to meet his gaze.

He gave a little crooked smile, and then frowned. "I was one of the people who revolted."

At this, I raised my head from my hands and looked at him in surprise. "You?"

"Is that so hard to believe?" he asked quietly, looking off into the distance with a sigh. I didn't

respond, only wondering how someone so seemingly spineless could have taken a stand for what he believed.

And we sat in silence, side by side, while the scythods finished their meal.

Before an hour had passed, a scythod approached us, talking, and John translated: "Vanya, come on - they're on the march."

With escorts on either side of us, we followed... but they let us walk free. They never laid a hand on us to bind us... even though one of them would occasionally kick John in the back, or snap at him loathingly.

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That night, we rested under a moonlit, lightly clouded sky. Some of the scythods carried crude water skins, and others carried packs of meat; they let us drink as they made camp. Afterwards, a shorter scythod came by and gave John and me each a slab of meat... I didn't want to touch it.

"It's capybara meat," John tried to assure me, picking pieces off of his. "They don't give their prisoners the flesh of sentient creatures."

"But it's *raw*," I protested pertinently. "I can't eat raw meat."

He only grimaced, gingerly putting a chunk into his mouth.

A scythod stomped up from behind me, hissing at us. John answered, seeming very disquieted, and the two held a brief conversation. Finally, I turned around and broke in. "This meat is raw," I said as clearly as I could. "I can't eat it." I glanced back at John, who was shaking his head violently and waving his hands for me to stop, and mouthing "don't go there".

The scythod turned its mouth towards me in surprise, clicking a couple times, and then chattered at John, who clacked and hissed back. Without another word, the scythod stomped away.

"Why'd you have to do that?!" John whispered in frantic agitation. "They almost *killed me* when I made that request."

"I won't eat raw meat," I said quietly, trying to steel myself against my fears, which I was surprised to find weren't there.

"Just *eat* it! They'll *kill you* if you don't," John warned.

I shook my head, saying, "I don't care."

And I meant it.

Two scythods stomped up behind me, and I turned, watching them approach as their spindly forms threw dark shadows on the ground. "It's Warmaster Scylk," John moaned. I shushed him.

Scylk began chattering sharply, but his tone softened as John spoke. Finally, lifting a leg in my direction, he seemed to sniff me, and then he turned and spoke to his officer, who left. Moments later, the officer returned, clumsily grasping a piece of flint and steel in the tips of its scythes, which opened like some kind of strange, webbed hands. In its claws, it grasped bundles of wood, and in a few moments, John and I had a small fire between us. John could only look on with a comical expression of dumbfounded surprise.

I laughed at him, holding my dinner close to the fire on a stick, trying to get it to cook.

Scylk seemed to order his officer to leave, and then, chattering to John, sat down beside us - an odd sight for such a long, stiff-legged creature. I wasn't expecting that... nor was I expecting

him to speak to me.

"Your ways intrigue me, Alaf," John translated, whispering "*he means 'elf'*" as he did. "What is your name?"

"Vanya," I replied carefully, wondering why John hadn't told him himself.

"Spala," Scylk hissed, speaking slowly.

I shook my head, and then wondered if he could even see the gesture. "No, *Vanya*."

"Fana," Scylk said, trying to match my sounds, but then he clicked his claws and tapped me on the shoulder. "*Spala*."

I turned towards John for assistance. "What does 'Spala' mean?"

"It means 'Storm'," he explained quietly. "His Warship is giving you a name that he can pronounce. A scythod's speech is very limited."

I nodded, thinking. "Storm" wasn't that bad of a name, really. Then, curiously, I asked, "John, what does he call you?"

He only grimaced and shook his head.

Scylk began clicking again, and John continued to translate. "Spala, why are you here, if you do not share the blood of Ballpoint, or of Parasol?"

"I'm fleeing my home."

This brought an agitated stream of chatter from the warmaster. "Spala, one should never flee their home. One should embrace it for what it is, no matter how cruel."

"I almost got killed," I tried to explain, though I doubted he could understand. "One of the previous overseers tried to kill me."

Scylk spoke again: "I will tell you a story." Then, sitting by the firelight, through John's hesitant translating and Scylk's incessant chattering, the old scythod told me the story of his people.

"For many years, my people lived on the planet of Piscyth - a rocky, violent world with numerous volcanoes that spewed boulders into the air, trying to crush us with their weight. There were beasts larger than we were, and constant warring separated my people. Though the world was cruel... we found it beautiful. We had an entire world all to ourselves, and could do as we pleased, though we often went hungry for want of meat. But we were free... and we did not value that freedom as much as we should have.

"Humans and dwarves came through the air-gates, which you call 'portal'." He pronounced the last word correctly, which surprised me. "The humans and dwarves called themselves the 'Klascoryf' in our tongue, which is to say 'ball-point'. They attempted peaceful talking with my people, but we would not listen, trying to kill them for their meat. There was a war... and in the end, they prevailed, capturing many scythods. Klascoryf said they would pay us in 'money' - little pieces of metal. We had no use for it, so they said they would give us ways to show our worth in battle, as they thought us violent. But that is not why we always fought. We fought for food. There is already much food at Klascoryf. They offered us many things, but none was what we wanted. We wanted to be free; we wanted to go home. Death is honorable among my people, and being eaten more so... but dying alone, with your corpse tossed into the garbage to rot... there is no death more cruel. They learned we saw things this way, and used it. And so, we served Lonne's people for many years."

I leaned towards John, whispering, "Who is Lonne?"

He grimaced. "It's the name they gave me. It means 'incest'... they can't pronounce the 'j'." He glanced away in embarrassment.

Though shocked, I had to stifle a laugh, and failed. Scylk ignored it and went on, pointing upwards with a claw.

"Spala, look above you at the stars." He waited, and when I had, he continued, looking upwards with his mouth. "I can feel the wind..." he said. "I can feel the pressure of the sky on my body. I can tell you it will not rain tonight, though the air is moist. And yet, I cannot see the stars, for I have no eyes." He paused for a moment, waving his arm about slowly, deliberately. "This world has not the musical, sweet-smelling volcanoes, or the pleasant dust storms of Piscyth. No, it has vistas and oceans, trees and rainbows. The beautiful parts of this world are heard with eyes... and my people have none." Scylk paused, as if hesitant, and looked back at me. "We've missed our home, Spala."

I actually felt a sort of sympathy for him. He was alien to me, but to his people... my entire world was alien. In a quiet tone, I asked, "Did you ever try to go back?"

He clacked his scythe-arms together in response. "Yes, we did, and that is why we are here. Several years ago, Klascoryf made us use their air-gates onto this world. They told us to kill Parasol." He had trouble with the word, but pronounced it in Dwarven. "We refused, and left, moving to the mountains. We built a place to live... but we cannot call it 'home'.

"If we ever returned to Piscyth, the other scythods would try to kill us as they always had, and they might even succeed. ...but that will never stop us from trying."

He sat there quietly for a moment, and the night was silent but for the crackling of our fire, the sizzling of my meat, and the far-off sound of scythods. I thought over what he said, but nothing seemed suitable as a response.

With a grunt, Scylk shifted his weight, reaching a claw into the fire. Pulling out my meat, he skewered it with a stick and handed it to me. "Eat your food, young one." Saying this, the old warmaster stood and stomped off into the distance.

I sat there for a time, chewing slowly and looking up at the starry sky... looking up at the moon, covered by wispy, iridescent clouds... and wondering what it would be like to live your whole life without ever seeing the beauty that was there.



## Chapter 31: Repressed Rage

*This is a cardboard-bound journal. All craftsmanship is of standard quality. You wonder where Vanya was as she was writing it, and how she had enough time on her hands to recount her journeys in such great detail. Nothing she wrote answers your many questions, nor is any of it marked with dates; only that five-pointed star.*

Scylk was right: I needed to return to Spearbreakers, even if Talvi was going to try to kill me again. I still need to go back, really... and someday, I will. I hope it won't be long until I can... everything I knew and loved was there, not here. It was a cruel place, and there were people there I didn't like, and many that didn't like me... but the good always seemed to outweigh the bad. Then again... perhaps I just see it as better simply because I'm not there anymore. I've had plenty of time to think about that, and many other things...

Over the next few months, I began to notice more and more about my captors. They had an ashen-gray color to their skin, or "chitin", and I could start to tell them apart when I looked

carefully. Some had slightly mottled appearances; others had subtle stripes running down their neckstalks or legspikes. Warmaster Scylk was a darker shade of gray, and he had a deep, dark scar on the back of his right armscythe, almost like a burn that had never gone away.

The schedule was even simpler than the one I'd experienced in the employment of Mr Frog: wake up, eat, walk, eat again, and sleep. If the scythods smelled humans or dwarves on the wind, we burrowed under the ground and waited. When they heard soldiers walking overhead, they would burst out from under the enemy's feet and kill whomever they could find, just as quickly and efficiently as they'd done with the Ballpoint soldiers who had almost killed me. The scythods *loathed* their enemies, relishing the thought of destroying them, and they always treated the commanders cruelly, to the point it seemed they extracted a sort of deviant pleasure from torturing them. It didn't matter if it was Ballpoint, Parasol, or even a passing caravan. They sought to destroy any human or dwarf they could find, with an almost religious passion.

I spent a lot of time with Scylk as we traveled, talking to him through John, during the long marches. For some reason, he seemed softer towards me than anyone else. I received an almost preferential treatment from the others because of it.

Not having much else to do besides walk, I slowly began learning their language... it's not that hard, really; it's simpler than dwarven, but it conveys its meaning very well. Sadly, I couldn't manage to master speaking it. My clicks all sound the same when I try. John helped me sometimes after we'd made camp, trying to teach me. I didn't mind, really. He had a higher-pitched voice that was pleasant to listen to, and I was grateful for the help.

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It was dark that night... The clouds above us hid the moon and stars, and the only light we had was our little campfire. To my left I could hear the chattering of scythods as they told each other stories, but outside the ring of firelight, everything was as if enveloped in a black mist.

John sat down on the other side of our little campfire, resting his back against a dead tree that seemed to shiver with the cold as it felt his touch. "No, it's '*kylk*'," he told me, laughing. "*Kylk*. Say it again."

I frowned, furrowing my brow in frustration. "That's what I've *been* saying! *Kylk!* *Kylk!* What am I doing wrong?" I had every reason to be frustrated: I'd been trying for fifteen minutes.

He leaned forwards, shaking his hands in emphasis. "*Cylk!* You're saying '*cylk*' – '*club*' – not '*kylk*'! '*Kylk*' means '*grip*'. It's very different."

"I can hear the difference, but it sounds the same when I say it," I protested, rubbing my hands together and holding them closer to the fire to warm my fingers.

"That's because you're not putting your teeth into it, and your '*kh*' sound isn't hard enough," he explained. He always made it sound easier than it was. "Try it again."

I shook my head in resignation. "Maybe some other time. How did *you* get to be so good, anyway? Did Ballpoint put the knowledge into your head or something?" I smiled, waiting for the inevitable reaction.

It brought a grimace from him, as mentioning Ballpoint always did, and he shook his head firmly. "No, I learned it on my own before Ballpoint ever found me."

""You've never mentioned your time before Ballpoint before," I said, scooting closer to the fire.

John seemed to deflate, his mood ebbing away. "Well... um..." he hesitated, staring off into the darkness. "There's really not that much to tell."

"I'm sure there is," I prompted him. Then I stopped, watching his face quietly, and finally, on an uncomfortable note: "You seem like you feel guilty about it..."

John grimaced again and gave a single nod. "It's not something I like to remember..." With a clear sigh, he slumped against the tree, staring into the fire, and began his story.

"Ten or so years ago, I lived in a large human settlement bordering an elven forest far to the northwest of here. We farmed throughout the year and offered the produce as tribute to the elves. In exchange, they let us live, and... only ate a couple of us. It was hard, but it was life. We didn't know anything different."

I felt ashamed of my heritage, and opened my mouth to speak, but John had expected it: he was already dismissing it with a wave of his hand. "Don't apologize," he said. "I know you're ashamed of being an elf, but it's not your fault. I don't hold it against you. Not everyone of a race are the same, after all..."

I nodded silently in agreement at this last, and waited for him to continue.

Finally, he did. "One night, I was I that was wandering outside the town border. I'd lost a friend – Niwira – to one of the elves' war tigers, and I wanted revenge – but instead of revenge, I found Chiktylk.

"A scythod name," I noted.

John nodded, looking up at the stars thoughtfully. "Chiktylk was the first I'd ever seen, or even heard of. He'd fallen from a cliff and broken his leg, but I could tell from the start that he was intelligent. He was weak from starvation – I brought him food, set his leg, let him heal, and as the months passed, I gradually learned his language... He grew to respect me, and in return for saving him, he helped me hunt down and kill the tiger that had killed Niwira. Revenge was sweet, but that feeling didn't last long."

"You felt guilty about it?" I guessed.

Chuckling dryly, John shook his head. "Not really. The war tiger happened to be the favorite pet of one of the elves' druids. The elves retaliated, sending soldiers our direction down the forest road. The townsfolk saw them from afar and panicked. They *cursed* me when they found out what I'd done, but when I showed them Chiktylk... how sharp his scythes were, how agile and fast he was, how tough his chitin... they rallied. Using me a translator, Chiktylk armed my friends with whatever we could find – hoes, shovels, knives, pitchforks, scythes – and we readied for battle. Chiktylk had lost his tribe on Piscyth to Ballpoint, and he wasn't willing to let the same thing happen to us. 'It is better to die than to be a slave to another's will,' he told us, and it became our war cry: 'Death before slavery'."

Pausing, John grimaced, his voice taking on emotion. "The elves didn't spare a thing... They sent their entire army out for us. Arrows gushed from the sky, blotting out the stars. Our families hid in the houses, and arrows fell through the thatched roofs. But even as our recruits cowered in fear, Chiktylk stood firm, as if relishing the feel of combat. The elves' wooden arrows couldn't pierce his chitin, and he rushed forwards, massacring them as if they were made of straw. They fled, screaming in terror... Though we'd lost many people, we'd won."

"The town hailed Chiktylk as a hero, but he announced, through me, that the victory had spurred his resolve, and he wanted to return to his own kind. Our makeshift army volunteered unanimously to accompany him across the blood plains, to defend him from the spawn... but we never even made it that far."

John stopped, staring through the fire into the distance. After several minutes, he sighed, and went on. "It was less than two weeks in... Ballpoint attacked us in the night. Some of us escaped,

but Chiktylk didn't make it – they executed him at gunpoint before he could even approach. Ballpoint told us that we'd seen more than we should have, and that if we wanted to live, we'd join them... But not one person quavered, chanting 'death before slavery'. One by one, Ballpoint went down the line, executing people I'd known my entire life..." His voice broke, and he turned away. "And then they came to me."

I put my hand on his arm and spoke softly, trying to comfort him. "You didn't want to die, John..."

He shook his head violently, brushing his eyes roughly with the back of his arm. "No," he managed, choking with emotion as he spoke through clenched teeth. "I betrayed Chiktylk, I betrayed my town, and even betrayed my own family. I served with Ballpoint for *seven years* as a contractor, moving with their armies and wiping out the enemies of the highest bidder. It's what they do. It doesn't matter if it's women and children, it doesn't matter if it's a monastery or nursing home – if the people paying Ballpoint's checks ask for it, Ballpoint does it. They don't have any allegiances other than money and themselves."

"I'm sorry, John," I whispered, shaking my head listlessly. "It's okay; it wasn't your fault."

His own name seemed to anger him, and he got abruptly to his feet, scowling. "No, it's *not* okay," he said, his volume steadily increasing. "My recon squad got attacked by scythods on my first mission here, and I *begged them* not to harm me, that I'd serve them if they let me live. They saw my usefulness as a translator and kept me alive, even as they killed *everyone else* in my squad – even though they *hate* me." He jerked his head towards me, clenching his fists, his eyes smoldering in the firelight.

I scooted back in fear and got to my feet, frightened at this sudden, unexpected change in him. "John, calm down," I whispered.

But he didn't listen. "The scythods *despise* us, Vanya," he shouted emphatically. "They *loathe* dwarves and humans, and they have *every right to!* Ballpoint did the same thing to them that they did to me, but the scythods *stood up* for themselves! They *didn't* run, or cower in fear! They *didn't* avoid death - they *embraced it!* The only reason they ever worked for Ballpoint at all is because they couldn't stand the thought of dying by firing squad. *And that's exactly what I let happen to Chiktylk.*"

"John, sit down, *please!*" I begged. "Stop being so –" Suddenly, I halted, staring in astonishment at a tall, shadowy form that stalked into the firelight behind my friend. John looked at me curiously, and then down at his shoulder as a huge armscythe came to rest upon it. I could dimly make out a long, dark scar, and I knew at once who it was.

Warmaster Scylk stepped out into the firelight, hissing. "You are loud, Lonne," he said slowly, clicking his claws. "Your words carry far, and all the camp has heard you." Scylk could understand dwarven, as could many others of my captors.

John seemed to shrink, his brief rage dissipating. He glanced away awkwardly, replying in a quiet tone, "I'm sorry, your warship. I was retelling the past, and it upset me."

Scylk clicked his claws again in disapproval. "Do not hate those who die cruel deaths. The past is dead, and it dies the cruelest death of all." He paused for a moment to let it sink in, and then continued, "Now, come. It is cold, and we must move when the sun sends its warm rays upon us. Get some sleep, young ones." Turning, he stomped away, his legspikes thudding into the damp earth.

"He's right, John," I said softly, after the warmaster had left.

With a frown, John sat, idly tossing a few pebbles into the fire. "I know," he said finally with a

sigh. "Let's just go to bed."

I nodded in response. "Goodnight, John."

"Goodnight, Vanya."

Lying down on the cold ground, I closed my eyes, thinking thoughts of home until I fell asleep.

My dreams were troubled that night...

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He'd found me.

I stood before him amidst darkened, swirling mists, glaring at him heatedly with long-repressed rage. "That was my *sister*, Urist!" I felt my fists clench themselves, my nails digging into my palms. The stern, yet apologetic look on his face made me burn inside, and I found his chiseled lantern jaw as attractive as a dead moth. "Didn't she *look* like me to you? Didn't you see the resemblance?!"

"Vanya, I -"

"*Don't* say my name!" I shouted. My heart twisted as he said it, an agonizing reminder of how much I'd used to love hearing my name escape his lips. My heart was torn between loving and loathing... and that only made me hate him even more.

"Please," he said, stepping forwards and reaching for my hand. I swatted it away and stepped back, wishing I could burn through him with my eyes. He looked up at my face; I watched his pained expression coldly with a hardened heart. "Please, think back to the good times we had together," he begged. "You loved me as I love you. You misunderstand what happened. *Look at me*. Why would I betray you?"

They floated in front of my eyes again: Hans' room, the little peck I'd given him; the caverns, him throwing me forwards as we escaped the collapsing ceiling, looking up at his eyes in the glowing light of his spearhead; the gorlak pond, the gems sparkling in the moonlight... but I brushed them away indignantly. "Answer my question," I told him.

"I was under attack at the time. She was going to kill you. That's all I saw."

I slowly shook my head, staring through narrowed eyes. "And she wasn't shooting me. Did you notice? Did you even *look*??"

"I did not have enough time."

"Oh, you killed her because you 'didn't have time'?"

"I *shot* her because of that reason. If I had not killed her, you would have stayed by her side. You are too sensitive for battle."

"There's no such thing!" I yelled, shaking with fury. "If *anything*, you're too *insensitive*! She didn't have to die! *Halion* didn't have to die! You've *murdered thousands*, Urist! You're a *killer*! That's all you are! That's all you do! That's all you're capable of!"

His calm was slowly disappearing, just as I'd known it would. "I only meant well!"

"Well, of course you did!"

"It was for the best!"

"That's a lie!!"

"It saved your life!!"

"I would rather have *died*!"

It struck him as a blow, and he stepped back a pace, shaking his head in disbelief. "You don't

mean that," he said quietly.

I thought I saw the glimmer of a tear in his eye, and I drank it in as nectar, my eyebrows furrowing with contempt. "You could never understand, Urist. You'll *never* understand. You don't care; you don't care at all. You only wanted me for yourself; you never cared about how I felt. When did you ever tell me I was beautiful? When did we ever sit and talk, even just for a few minutes?" I grew quieter as I fought back tears. "When did you ever tell me how special I was to you?" I brushed my eyes roughly, hating that he still meant enough to make me cry.

"We never had the time, Spala. I'm sorry."

I looked up at Urist suddenly, confused. "What?"

"Spala, I..." He looked down at his hands with a curious, alarmed expression as they began to disappear, dissolving at the fingertips, spreading upwards past his wrists.

I stepped back from the dissipating apparition in terror. "Urist, what's *happening* to you/?"

He looked at me one last time, longingly, regretfully - a painful image that would linger in my mind for days to follow.

And he was gone.

"Spala..."

"Spala."

I found myself in a blackened, breathless void, groping desperately for a handhold and finding nothing but a solid spike of bone.

It lifted itself; I felt the sharpened tip, heard it slice into the damp earth a few feet away.

"Spala."

The dream lifted, though the night remained. "Warmaster?" I ventured quietly, my voice hardly a whisper.

"You were talking while asleep, young one."

His words brought to mind the entire dream. My heart felt heavy in my chest. "It was just a bad dream," I muttered.

"Does something trouble you?" He spoke so softly I could hardly hear him, but I felt a gentle claw rest itself on my shoulder.

"No..." I said, then paused. "No... I'll just go back to sleep. I'm sorry for waking you."

The claw patted my shoulder reassuringly. "You did not awaken me. Would you like me to relight the fire?"

"Yes, and thank you," I replied softly.

It was but minutes before the little campfire was burning again, and I stared into it, my eyes burning with tears. My heart ached like nothing I'd ever known.

I liked the nightmares about the forges better.



## Chapter 32: Old Stories

*Vanya's fourth journal continues onwards into its sixth entry, and you continue dictating as you translate from her beautiful elven script. It seems that she wrote all of this at once - perhaps even on the same day. But you can only speculate as to why she would break it up into multiple entries, as she's as yet given no clues.*



The next morning we arose with the sun, eating a quick breakfast and continuing the journey. John seemed more distant than usual... almost ashamed. I didn't want to tell him, but I understood how he felt: I'd done horrible things in my past, too. I still considered myself to blame for it.

The day itself seemed melancholy, and that afternoon, blood began to rain from the sky as we walked – the first rain I'd seen since that night at the cave. I choked at the horrible smell as the thick, red liquid soaked my armor, and tucked Jack Magnus's woolen cap away in a pouch at my waist to keep it clean. Around me, the marching scythods raised their mouths to the sky, drinking the liquid almost eagerly as it trickled down their narrow, ashen bodies. I didn't find it nearly as refreshing. Before long, it was dripping down my hair and into my eyes. I hoped it would stop quickly, and that I would have a chance to bathe. Sadly, I didn't have any choice but to keep walking; if I fell too far behind, my captors would sense it, and they'd come back to get me. They were always watching.

A scythod spoke suddenly from behind my shoulder, clacking and hissing through its teeth. "You do not like the rain, Spala," it noted carefully.

Its voice startled me, and I spun around, choking on my breath. The scythod was tall, and bore a familiar scar on its armscythe. "Warmaster Scylk, I... I didn't know you were there," I stammered in dwarven, trying to recover from my surprise. "Your warship," I added. It was the first time, besides the night before, that John wasn't there to translate.

Scylk laughed: he rubbed the serrated edges of his scythes together to produce a musical chirping noise. "There is no need to add such titles," he told me. "Lonne does it out of fear and regret."

"Sorry, Warmaster..." I said quietly. "And no, I do not like the rain."

"I can understand," he replied, stomping forwards until he walked beside me. He lifted his mouth for a moment, drinking in the falling liquid. I watched him, shielding my eyes from the weather with my hand. Finally, he lowered his neckstalk and spoke again. "To a scythod, this rain is like your 'can'dy'. However... if your can'dy fell from the sky, we would choke on it in disgust, for we cannot eat it, much like how you cannot drink this blood."

I nodded thoughtfully, and then clapped once to show my agreement. "Warmaster, why do we always march?" I asked. "Where are we going? No one will tell me."

"We seek Klascoryf soldiers," Scylk said. "We patrol our borders. Most of these young scythods that walk with you are only eight years of age. They are sons of this world; sons of 'Avarok'." He clicked his claws. "No, I say it wrong."

"Everoc," I guessed.

Scylk clacked his armscythes together in response. "Yes."

For a moment I hesitated, then made up my mind to speak. "Warmaster... You could defend your borders better if your people wore armor, and wielded weapons in their claws," I suggested.

The warmaster was silent for several minutes, but finally, he spoke. "Listen. What do you hear?"

I gave a prompt response: "I hear the rain."

Scylk chattered in stern disapproval. "No, Spala. Close your eyes. Trust your feet to keep you safe; focus on your ears."

As we walked, I closed my eyes, listening, and stayed silent for a moment. "I can hear the wind," I said slowly. "I can hear the distant rumbling of thunder. I can hear your footsteps, and I can hear mine and everyone else's. I can hear myself breathing..." Suddenly, I stopped and

laughed softly at the sound Scylk was making. I opened my eyes, smiling and shaking my head. "And I can hear you clicking your claws again. What am I doing wrong?"

"Your ears are weak because you have never trusted them," he told me sagely. After pausing for a moment, he spoke again. "I hear my warriors talking about how they like the rain. I hear the muddy soil under your feet, and the babbling of a distant brook; I hear a dead tree crumbling to the ground, its rotten wood soaked with blood. I hear birds crying, unable to fly through the air with such blood-soaked wings. And to the east... I hear distant rumbling... but it is not thunder. Spala... use your eyes now. Look to the east. What do you see?"

I peered through the rain and mist, and far, far off, I could make out a distant mountain range. "I see the Amber Barb," I said carefully. As I watched, tiny shapes fell from the sky, leaving thread-like trails of smoke as they plummeted into the hills. "Something is falling onto the mountains from the sky."

"Yes," said Scylk in a solemn manner. "I can hear it, but cannot see it. I use what I am best with, and so do you."

"If I practiced with my ears, I might be as good with them as you," I pointed out.

The old warmaster seemed to do a double take, and he halted, as scythods continued to march past us. "Young Spala," he spoke finally, a hint of approval in his voice, "Well said..." Slowly, he started to walk forwards again, and I followed.

"What is falling onto the mountains?" I asked.

The warmaster seemed to curse, hissing out several words I'd never heard before. "They are the weapons of Klascoryf. Klascoryf seeks to kill my people, to keep us from joining 'Parasol', to strike at us for quitting their service and turning on them. But we will *not* join Parasol, for they are dwarves and humans, too."

"I'm sorry," I whispered.

"Do not be, young one," Scylk responded quietly, clicking his claws distractedly. "My people will be fine. Boulders always fell from the sky on Piscyth, and they were harder to hear... but these cause more damage..." He paused, lost in thought. Suddenly, he clicked his claws and spoke again. "No, let us speak of something different. I overheard the story of Lonne last night, now let me hear the story of Spala." He tapped me on the shoulder with a claw. "Do not leave out anything."

As we walked, I told Scylk how I'd grown up in a fortress of dwarves, and how dwarves hated elves. I told him of how Ballpoint and Parasol had altered my mind; I told him of how I'd thought my sister died. I told him about Talvi, and about Mr Frog, and Urist, and Wari, and I told him of that hope I'd had... that hope that my sister had still been alive. I told him my memory of her, when Ballpoint had altered our memories together, and how I'd promised I'd get her back... and of how I'd failed... of how she'd died in my arms.

Though I tried my best not to, I started crying, a gesture Scylk didn't understand, and he halted his pace. Salaia's death still pierced my heart, but I'd pushed it aside the past six months, trying to ignore it... I'd tried to forget *everything*, really. Now that I was talking about it to someone, it seemed all too recent again.

It was painful.

At some point, it had stopped raining, though the red clouds still hovered darkly overhead. The air stank with the scent of blood, but in the west above Spearbreakers, the sun hung low, and the clouds above glowed with bright-red linings as it cast its warmth towards us through the gap near

the horizon. Despite the macabre surroundings - trees with heavy branches, bloodstained rock, gnats in abundance, and the scattered bones of long-dead animals - the golden sunset lent an almost peaceful feeling.

"I am sorry for your loss." Scylk spoke in a quiet, clicking hiss. "Your sister had a cruel death. I, too, lost someone close to me, in much that way."

I looked at him, wiping at my tears with bloodstained hands. "What do you mean?"

But he was silent, and though I waited, he didn't reply. After waiting for several minutes, I gave up.

As I began to walk back towards the rest of the scythods, I heard him whisper, so softly it was but an echo in my ears: "You remind me of my daughter, Spala."

I slowed my pace in surprise, turning back to him. "You had a daughter?"

"I do not like to speak of it." He turned away, facing the sunset and letting the sunbeams warm his chitin for a moment as he stood in silence. "I have a wife and son," he said finally. "My son remained on Piscyth. My wife lives in the mountains. But my daughter had a cruel death."

Scylk's voice was quiet, almost melancholy, if that could be said of a series of clicks and hisses.

I stepped closer to him, coming up to his side. "What happened?" I asked softly.

He gave a long, unhappy hiss, and began to explain. "Klascoryf held my people in the bloodplains, readying our forces to attack Parasol. They intended that we should attack with them, but that morning, the wind came from the east... For the first time, we could smell the stone of the mountains. We were trapped within the camp of the Klascoryf by a field of force - a wall you cannot smell. We decided to bring it down and escape. It is sad that Klascoryf discovered our plans, and that my daughter, Kiba, desired to bring the wall down herself. She had studied their technology, and so I gave her what she wanted, assigning her and a few others to disable or destroy their electric generator."

Scylk hissed again sadly, and it was a while before he continued. His soldiers were already far to our north, crossing the crest of a low hill, almost out of sight. "Our plan became one of desperation as the soldiers of Klascoryf marched into the camp with their weapons. Some of the younger scythods attacked Klascoryf's men and dwarves, and a battle began. I did not want a battle. I did not want my people to die. I had not wanted anyone to die.

"I rushed to the force field and prepared to sever all the cables with my scythe, but as I did, I heard a loud crackling of electricity and a horrible wail of pain from the far end of the camp, past the Klascoryf - the voice of my daughter." He clicked his claws. "I had a choice. The soldiers were shouting for reinforcements, and if I rallied my people to save Kiba, we would all die. If I told everyone to stand down, I would save her, but our deaths would be for nothing, and we might never escape."

"What did you do?" I whispered.

"I severed the cables by the force field with my armscythe, one after another. They spouted lightning, searing my arm, but it was not nearly as painful as the loss of my daughter's life. My people escaped... and Kiba's death was because of me."

Silently, Scylk held his right armscythe out towards me, stained with blood from the recent rain. I cautiously brushed my fingertips over the dark scar I'd come to recognize him by, feeling the smooth chitin where it'd been burned. "Does it hurt?" I asked softly.

"Sometimes," he replied quietly, "but I would sear it a thousand times more if I could get my daughter back." He grew quieter, taking a few saddened steps towards the sunset, blood bubbling from the damp earth around his legspikes. "She was a sweet girl," Scylk said thoughtfully, lost in

the memories. "She always refused the privileges and rights of being a Warmaster's daughter, saying she should stand with our people. If anyone died, she was the first to comfort the survivors, even of the enemy... and she had odd little habits, like wanting her meat to be cooked before she ate. Much like you, Spala," he said, turning towards me. "She, too, always seemed sad... she missed our home, and the loss of her sibling. She did not fear death, either. You are more like her than you realize."

"You miss her," I whispered, wiping a stray tear away.

"I will always miss her."

Without thinking, I stepped forwards and put my arms around him - a humanoid gesture. Slowly, hesitantly, he returned it with his lower arms, and for a moment we held this alien embrace; an understanding of each other's pain.

Finally, I stepped back, and he spoke softly. "You see now why I have become fond of you... Your story both heartens and troubles me, Spala... You speak of dwarves that are not cruel; dwarves that are not evil, but kind."

"We're not all like Ballpoint," I tried to reason. "Klascoryf, I mean. *I'm* not like most elves. I was raised by dwarves..."

"Yet, you are not as cruel," Scylk pointed out, tapping me on the shoulder. "You do not share their hatred."

I looked east at the emerging stars, which grew brighter as the sun sank below the horizon. "I dislike my own kind..." I said thoughtfully. "I hate Urist, and I hate Ballpoint, but they have good people, too... What a person does, or feels, or thinks, isn't defined by who they work for, or what they are. People define *themselves*. Ballpoint is a heartless company, so it more easily attracts heartless people, but that doesn't mean that all Ballpoint employees are like that." I paused for a moment, puzzling on what I'd said: I'd never thought about it before.

"You are wise, Spala," he said quietly. "Perhaps, as it sounds, wiser than you know. But Aris't is not to blame for your sister's death."

I hadn't expected that. "What?? What do you *mean*, Urist isn't to blame?"

"You blame Aris't," Scylk said, tapping me on the shoulder with a claw. "He saved your life."

"Scylk, he killed my sister!"

"If it had been a Ballpoint soldier, would you have tried to save them?"

"Yes, but -"

Scylk silenced me. "You said Aris't did not know it was your sister. He had no reason to think it, as 'is'tir F'rok - No, I cannot say it well."

"Mr Frog," I suggested, wondering what he was getting at.

"Yes. He said you would not talk to your sister while you were there. Aris't would not have thought it was her."

"Are you saying it was my fault?" I asked hotly.

Scylk clicked his claws reproachfully. "Calm yourself, young one. He knew you would try to save the soldier's life, and he knew that if you stayed you would be killed. To him, killing the soldier was the correct thing to do, even if cruel. Even had he not fired the first shot of the three, you would not have been able to move your sister quickly enough, with her torn between allegiances. When he entered the room, he saw your sister holding a gun at your chest. He tried to save your life in wounding her, and in killing her, he did." He turned, as if to walk towards the north.

"But he *killed* her! She was my *sister*!" I protested, running after him, trying to get him to understand.

Halting, he faced me one last time. "How do you think he felt when he discovered that fact for himself?"

I started to speak, but stopped in astoundment as his words sank in, watching openmouthed as Scylk stomped away. I'd always been too busy thinking about myself, and it'd never occurred to me... not even once...

Urist would've been devastated.

Suddenly, I knew what I had to do. I knew where I had to be. Though I didn't like to admit it, when I had a problem, I tended to run from it. I needed to stop running, for once, and face the problems at hand. I still couldn't forgive Urist, and I don't think I ever can... but I knew that at the very least, I should give him the chance to try to make amends... for his sake, if not mine.

"Warmaster, wait!" I called, sprinting to catch up. "Wait!"

He didn't slow. "Yes, Spala?"

I slowed to a jog by his side as he quickly covered ground, his legspikes kniving into the damp earth. I didn't know what his response would be, but I knew I had to ask. "Warmaster Scylk, I need to go back to Spearbreakers... even if Talvi kills me."

He lessened his pace gradually until he came to a standstill, chirping with his armscythes. "Why is this, young one?"

"It's my home," I answered quietly. "It was wrong of me to try to run away, just to avoid Urist... in the end, he wasn't the one being cruel to me... *I* was being cruel to *him*."

"Are these the only reasons?" he asked slowly. It felt as if he was testing me.

I thought about it for a moment. "Everyone who knew me would be worried - Mr Frog, Wari, Draconik, Jack Magnus -"

Scylk interrupted. "Do you miss them?"

It was a simple question, but one that, for some reason, I didn't want to answer. Over the course of my life, I'd learned to push people away, almost as a reflex; if I ever let myself get close to them, they usually left when they discovered what I was. Pushing them away before I got attached just made things easier. I liked to tell myself that I was being independent, and I was a stronger person for it... but... Spearbreakers was different. "Yes," I said quietly, hanging my head. "Yes, I miss them." Then, "I miss my home."

Scylk clacked his armscythes together loudly in approval. "Then let us return you, Spala!" he said, lowering himself towards the ground. "Climb onto my back," he urged, and after I had, sitting between both sets of legs, he raised himself and started forwards at an incredible speed. The wind tugged at us as we ran against it, flying over the damp, red loam of the bloodplains, towards the rest of the scythods.

It occurs to me now that maybe the reason he told me about his daughter was to try to spur me into wanting to return to my home.

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That night, Scylk gathered together his squads and stood before them; a mighty general before his soldiers. I watched from the back, eager to hear what he would say. Scylk didn't often make speeches.

"We are going to the West," the warmaster chattered loudly, his clicks echoing between the hills. "We are going to Spearbreakers." Not a sound issued from the gathered troops, but from their body language I could tell they didn't like the sound of it. "It has been said that the dwarves

of Spearbreakers are unlike the dwarves of Klascoryf - we march to test this fact. If they accept us, then we will remain with them for a time. If they prove themselves to be like Klascoryf, we will kill them!"

I gasped, my eyes wide. "What?!" I yelled. A multitude of clacking scythes drowned me out.

A voice hissed at my elbow: "Vanya, shh!" Turning, I saw it was John.

"What do you mean, 'shh'?" I echoed in a quieter tone, trying to listen to Scylk as he continued. "They're going to destroy Spearbreakers!"

John shook his head and looked away. "If it's like what you've always told me, they won't."

I hated how distant he seemed. "You're coming with us, too," I said cautiously, watching him.

"I know." He hardly responded at all.

"You'll have to be careful not to let on who you are; nobody at Spearbreakers knows about the timewar between Parasol and Ballpoint," I added.

I got my reaction, but it wasn't what I'd hoped: John grimaced and started to walk away, hands shoved into his pockets.

"John?" I asked after him, worried.

Without turning, he halted.

"John, what's going on?"

There was a period of silence between us. Scylk had resumed his speech, and suddenly the scythods before him erupted in another burst of applause.

This time I said it with a little more force. "John??"

In a voice so quiet I could hardly hear him, he said, "They'll all know before long anyway."

I cocked my head at the back of his curiously, taking a step closer. "What are you talking about?"

"Someone hired Ballpoint to destroy them."

I was left staring in shock as John - head hung, shoulders slumped - walked away into the night.



Chapter 33: Parting Ways

You pause from reading aloud for a moment and look around the little tomb in which you sit. Dr. Thian Russ has not yet returned, but the mysterious woman sitting across from you seems completely absorbed in the journal, and returns your glance with a cold, distant gaze. You feel you should speak to her, but you hesitate. In the end, you decide to continue to read and translate Vanya's ancient, elvish script. Perhaps, you feel, she will open up to you eventually, and the mysteries surrounding her will solve themselves.

I doubt that around any star, in any galaxy, in any universe, dimension or timeline, there exists a single sentient species that doesn't feel pain. I don't mean physical pain... I guess that's conceivable. I mean emotional pain. No matter how hard we try to pretend or block it out, when we lose someone we love... it hurts.

Spearbreakers was faintly visible in the west: a fortress of walls and towers standing tall above the dense, bloodstained jungle forests. A month had passed since Scylk's speech, and the journey was slow. Although scythods could run fast, they took their time in moving, always being

cautious. It wasn't like them to make an abrupt decision, and that was exactly what Scylk had done... While he was out of earshot, some of his soldiers would speak softly against him, though there were just as many who would defend him with an equal fervor. I wasn't sure what to think, and I didn't really have much of anyone to talk with. Scylk was always busy, and John didn't seem to feel like talking most of the time, almost seeming as if he was intentionally avoiding me. For the first time since I'd found the scythods, I actually felt like a prisoner.

Ballpoint patrols were becoming more and more frequent, and we had to stop more and more often to dispatch them. Sometimes some of the scythods were injured, but nothing like what had happened when they'd found me. I was the exception in their tactics: they'd been careful not to injure me, and had ended up injuring themselves. A few of the scythods still held some resentment towards me for that soldier's death, and the increased frequency with which we met Ballpoint's patrols seemed to strengthen that resentment.

The blood plains were becoming far more dangerous than before.

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*"Kathafa pibilk! Kloss Lorta!"*

It was night, and the scythod's cry startled me from my sleep with the opposite effect of a bad dream. Instead of leaving a nightmare as I awoke, I was entering one: *"Kloss Lorta"* is their name for the Holistic Spawn.

I heard a blood-chilling screech, a sound I'd come to know very well from my prison days. I didn't even have to ask what it was. Other screeches, one after another, followed the first... multitudes, it seemed. My heart pounded wildly in my chest, and I looked about in horrified bewilderment, trying to decide which way to run.

The moon broke through the clouds above me, and I suddenly beheld a terrible sight: less than a thousand feet away, a few scythods were trying desperately to defend themselves as at least fifteen Spawn hacked them to bits.

"They're over here!" I screamed, but my efforts were of little worth... Scylk's army was already charging past me in scattered disarray to meet the threat. I bit my lip and fell to my knees, praying to the gods with all I had that we'd survive.

In the moonlight, it was hard to tell what happened... the scythods clustered around our aggressors, whirring and clacking. They sliced with their scythes, while the Spawn sliced with their claws, gnashing with their teeth. The scythods followed suit, employing their teeth with terrifying efficiency. "The heart!" I heard them yell from time to time. "You must stab them in the heart!" I heard them cursing and calling on their gods for assistance, echoed by the enemy's unearthly demonic screams. The battle seemed to last forever, and it was impossible to see who was ahead.

Finally, finally, as the first whispers of sunrise teased the tips of the eastern mountain range, everything quieted. I rushed over to see what had happened, half-afraid of what I'd find.

"*Stop!*" the warmaster clacked forbiddingly. I halted my pace, unsure of whether or not he was talking to me. It turned out that he wasn't. "You must not eat their corpses. If you do, we will become as the Kloss Lorta." He was speaking to his troops, who stood clustered around a great number of mutilated corpses.

"Warmaster, our dead cannot remain here as they are!" a brown-tinged soldier protested.

"Fully four of our own! It is dishonorable! We bring shame to our enemy, ourselves, and *our dead!*" Half a dozen scythods chattered their agreement. As I drew closer, I could see that most of the scythods seemed to be limping or nursing wounds. Scythod blood is strange... it's green, but... if it makes sense, it's a *greener* green than "green"... I don't know how else to describe it.

"We have no choice, Klade," Scylk said with finality. "If anyone here has been bitten, they, too, must be put to rest, lest we release one of these monsters upon ourselves."

Anger tinted Klade's voice. "Is there no other way? Can not our injured be healed? We are stronger than the petty dwarves, the loathed *kliskik!* We can take what they cannot! They are hateful, evil to begin with! They are *pak!*!"

The warmaster stomped his forelegs into the ground, clacking his teeth with force, almost shouting. "There is *no choice!* I have *seen it*, Klade! They will turn, as dwarves do, into a twisted mockery of our kind! We *cannot* allow that to come to pass! It is more shameful and dishonorable than even *this* death." He paused for a moment, and seemed to calm, slowing his breath. "You are my right hand, Klade, and your words hold much weight, but this must be done. I hate it just as much as you do."

I watched, dumbstruck, as two scythods walked forwards from the ranks – one with a broken arm, the other with a bad limp.

Scylk solemnly rested his scythes on their upper shoulders and spoke softly. "You will be remembered with honor, Por'bak, and Chal'lk. For though your bodies cannot be consumed, your spirits will become one with her holiness, Lacsä, and your memory shall live on forever."

The other soldiers gave a solemn roar of agreement, and Scylk pulled back his scythes. I turned away, tears edging down my face... I couldn't watch their execution. They offered themselves so selflessly, when they had so much to live for otherwise... had I been in their position, I don't know if I could've done it.

The sound of a scythe bit cruelly through the air, followed by two soft thuds that spoke much louder than their volume. Turning back, I saw their bisected bodies, lying on the ground amidst a semicircle of quiet, somber scythods. One by one, they turned, walking back past me towards where they'd made camp, until only Scylk remained. I watched him for a moment from afar, wondering why he stayed. Suddenly he lifted his neckstalk to the sky, letting out a long, bone-chilling wail that pierced my heart and made me shiver as it echoed across the plains. Anyone could've understood that cry: it was the voice of anguish and despair.

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Later that morning, K'bahth, one of Scylk's officers, told me that Scylk desired my presence. I followed the soldier back, and Scylk greeted me quietly, asking K'bahth to leave. Scylk's right upper shoulder bore the slash of a Holistic Spawn's claw, and his chitin elsewhere seemed badly damaged. He'd been in the thickest of the fight, I later learned.

After K'bahth was out of earshot, Scylk spoke hesitantly, with a feeling of regret. "Spala, we cannot go forwards to Spearbreakers. I am sorry. We are not equipped to deal with the Kloss Lorta, and have taken heavy losses. None of us wish to continue."

"I understand, warmaster," I said quietly. After the battle, I'd expected it, really... "I'll continue on my own, if that's all right with you... Spearbreakers is close enough for me to see it."

Scylk clicked his claws in disapproval. "I cannot allow that," he chattered firmly. "It is far too dangerous for even a scythod, and the skin of an Alaf is far softer. You must remain with us. In addition... you should begin avoiding Klade's company."

I looked at him cautiously with a sense of foreboding. "...Why?"

"Klade lost his daughter this morning," the old scythod explained. "I myself had to execute her... I feel he harbors some resentment towards me for it. He possesses a strong, independent spirit, and may try to harm you.

"Okay..." I pursed my lips. "Then where are we going?"

"Home," Scylk replied, and then, almost apologetically, he added, "or... such that it is. We return to the Amber Barb. We do not have enough soldiers remaining to continue patrolling the blood plains."

"And I'm coming with you..." I whispered, my eyes widening.

He clacked his scythes. "You guess well, young one. You will be safe among my people, and perhaps," he said hopefully, "perhaps you can lend us your skills that Mr Frog has taught you, and build us a portal to return to our true home, Piscyth."

I almost gasped, a smile spreading over my face. "Could I come, too?" The idea of leaving Everoc behind forever strongly appealed to me. "I would love go to the stars..."

Unfortunately, he didn't seem to approve of the idea. "It would be dangerous for you, Spala... We will talk about it later, perhaps. First we must make it to the mountains."

A loud, harsh voice hissed out from behind me, biting into the cool air: "We will not be going to the mountains." I spun around and saw a gray-brown scythod clicking his claws distastefully. "My soldiers enjoy the rain here, and it will become our home. We have women among us, and can create a new colony on this world. Boulders do not fall from the sky here, nor do winds and rain eat our skin like acid. It is beautiful, and we shall stay."

Scylk seemed indignant. "Your soldiers, do you say? Tell me, Klade, when did they become yours? I am a Warmaster of our people and a member of the high council of Scask. I am the son of the Grand Mystic himself. It falls to *me* to lead our armies."

"Not anymore!" Klade countered. "You have led us to ruin, Scylk! Your fondness for this Alaf has nearly destroyed us!" His words rang out loudly, and the other scythods began to cluster around us as he continued. "You follow her advice as if it is your own, taking us right into the stronghold of the dwarves! Do you truly believe they will be any different from the Klascoryf? They will enslave us! They will kill us if we do not serve them!"

"This is mutiny, Klade! This is treason!" He was nearly trembling with rage.

"No!" Klade hissed. "It is an insurrection. You must step down, Scylk. Your whole army is against you."

A scythod stepped forwards. "That is untrue!" he clacked. "Though I would enjoy staying on the blood plains, I trust the warmaster more. He is the finest soldier I've ever had the privilege of knowing."

Scylk turned briefly. "Thank you, K'bahth. You are a fine soldier as well, brother." Then, to Klade, "It would appear you assume wrongly of our people. We may be tattered, but together we still number fourteen, and we will stand as one!"

"Lies!" Klade spat through his teeth. "Your speeches are empty and worthless!" He turned to the gathered crowd. "Who among you really wish Scylk to remain warmaster? Which of you are fools that would follow him?"

There was a silence for a moment, and then, a loud clacking of armscythes.

"Over half," Scylk said tersely.

Klade turned and stomped forwards angrily. "But six still wish you deposed, and others may follow! You are old and weak! You are unfit to lead!"

"I am as strong as any, young Klade!" Scylk roared. "You are foolish and affected by the recent loss of your daughter! I, too, have lost a child to a cruel death! It is still no cause for this idiocy!"

Klade seemed outraged. "'Idiocy'?! You call sensibility 'idiocy'?" He stopped, turning back to the crowd. "Do you see now who leads you? Your beloved warmaster is backwards! His mind is addled! He is *weak*!"

My blood boiled; I couldn't stand it any longer. "Listen to yourself!" I shouted at him. "You're just upset! I've lost someone I've loved, too; I understand how you feel! Honor her memory, and don't do something you're going to regret!"

Like lightning, the soldier spun around, slicing towards my chest with a scythe. I didn't even have time to react. There was a loud clack as his scythe stopped short, inches from my throat – Scylk had stopped Klade's armscythe with his own.

"Do not *ever* speak of my daughter, foul Alaf!" Klade growled hatefully, his voice strained through the force he was putting into his scythe. "You stain her memory with your words."

"We do not kill prisoners, Klade," Scylk interrupted ominously. "That, and treason, is punishable by exile."

After a final, futile effort, Klade reluctantly withdrew his scythe. "I challenge you, Scylk," he hissed. "By the laws of our people, I challenge you to a death duel."

There was a pause. An astonished murmur seemed to run through Scylk's little army, but Scylk retained his cool presence. "By the laws of our people, at least one-third of those present must desire it," the warmaster noted.

"Over one-third have!"

"Yes, but we should ask again now that they've seen your reasoning, and your actions," Scylk replied with a knowing hiss. "Who here desires us to duel to the death?"

This time, even I, with my untrained ears, could hear the number of scythods that clacked their scythes: it was only two.

Klade stopped short in amazement. "You are all fools," he hissed. "All of you!"

The warmaster spoke calmly again, with the formal air of a seasoned general. "And you, Klade, are a traitor, and thus must be exiled. I think you may actually find that to your preference, as you do not wish to return to the mountains. You may live out your life to the end, here on the blood plains. We are done here."

With that, Scylk turned and began slowly stomping away through the red mud. Klade, however, stayed where he was, dumbfounded by the warmaster's words. "You would *abandon me*, Scylk? *Me*, your right hand?"

Pausing, Scylk spoke softly. "I did not abandon you, Klade. You abandoned me."

~~~

We traveled far that afternoon... it was clear that the scythods felt as though they were fleeing something, but whether it was the Spawn, the ghosts of the dead, or even the dishonorable battle, I can't say. Everyone was quiet and somber. There was a brief shower of blood later towards the evening, and none of them seemed to enjoy it. There wasn't any joking conversation, or any of the typical chattering one normally heard. It was like a funeral... it actually reminded me of The Master's.

That night, I sat by my little campfire as I always did, cooking my supper on a stick over the flames. There was a slight wind fanning the flames, and whisking dried, dead leaves across the

ground. John wasn't around, but that wasn't unusual anymore. After his outburst, he'd grown distant... he'd started to stray away whenever I came near, almost as if he was ashamed to be around me.

Suddenly, a voice spoke out on my left. "Alaf? Spala?" Startled, I turned from the fire and strained my eyes into the darkness, trying to see who it was. A tall, dark gray scythod stomped towards me into the flickering light, with John by his side. "Spala, you must come with me."

Putting my supper to the side, I got to my feet. "Who are you?" I asked. I could tell from the scarless armscythe that it wasn't Scylk.

"I am K'bahth, but it matters not," he said. "Come. Scylk desires your presence."

Scylk sat before a flickering fire, waiting patiently for us. With a claws on our shoulders, K'bahth silently guided John and I to sit, and then took a seat by the fire himself.

"Spala... Lonne..." Scylk spoke, almost hesitantly. He seemed regretful... almost sad.

I was getting worried. "Is something wrong?" I asked, trying unsuccessfully to read his body language.

He ignored my question. "K'bahth and I, and the other elders, have discussed our situation after this morning's events. I regret to say that you will not be coming with us to the Amber Barb."

I almost got to my feet in surprise. "What?? You can't leave me here!"

"Did you forget about me?" John asked me, seeming agitated. He grabbed my arm and pulled me back down.

"I am sorry," Scylk told us quietly. "Today's events have reminded me that some of our people, back at home, do not like the fact that I am Warmaster. If you were to remain with me, you would not be prisoners anymore, but members of my people. Scythods treat duels to the death as personal matters. Eventually someone will attempt to kill you both, to strike at me. I cannot allow that."

My head was spinning. "What... Then... what am I going to... Where..." I paused, trying to collect my thoughts. "What's going to happen to us? We won't last a week on the blood plains! You know that, Scylk!" I glanced over at John, who didn't seem nearly as concerned.

"My brother will stay with you, to keep you safe, and guide you to a settlement of Parasol," the warmaster explained.

From beside him, K'bahth spoke. "I have already accepted. It would bring me honor to assist you, Spala."

After eight or nine months of traveling with the scythods, it was hard to take in. "But I've spent so long with you. Please, please let me stay!" I begged. I didn't want to have to face Parasol again, with all its reminders of my sister and Urist. "I'll be careful, I promise! And... I didn't even know you *had* a brother."

"Half-brother," said K'bahth quietly.

"Full in spirit," Scylk said, tapping him on the shoulder with a claw. "But Spala, there is no option. You would not be safe among my people. They would look at you as they do the dwarves, as they do humans, as they do the Klascoryf. They are prejudiced. They are not yet ready."

"But why Parasol?" John interjected. "Why not a human settlement?"

"Parasol settlements are closer," Scylk pointed out sagely. "They have portals, so they can send you wherever you desire. More importantly, Spala is one of them."

I hated hearing that. "But —"

"That is enough," Scylk said firmly. "I did not call this meeting for a discussion, only to give information. You will depart in the morning with K'bahth and Klade."

That was too much. "Klade?!"

K'bahth clacked his scythes, chirping humorously. "Did you think I was coming along for my own amusement?"

I slept fitfully that night.



## Chapter 34: The Blood Plains

*To your great annoyance, the next two pages of the journal are stuck together. You hold it up to the light, and through the thin sheets, you can make out dark outlines of text, so you know they aren't blank. You bend them a bit, hoping they'll separate without much effort, but as you do so, several pale blue sheets of paper flutter to the table from further on in the journal. You pick them up and look at them curiously, noting that the handwriting is in human, not dwarven or elven. It's clearly not Vanya's at all.*

*"What is this?" you ask the woman across from you, holding up the fallen sheets with a quizzical expression.*

*She shrugs. "You think I know?"*

*"You're the only one around to ask," you point out, carefully inserting the sheets with the others. As you do, you notice a number of other loose sheets, of varying size and quality. However, you ignore these, figuring you'll read them when you get to them, and you turn back to your two stuck pages. After carefully pulling them apart, you continue reading.*

Leaving someone is hard, if you care about them. Even if the person's bad qualities outweigh their good, you're afraid, subconsciously, that they'll be different when you get back. People change. It's something you learn early on in life... It's something you try to forget... it's something you never can.

We *fear* change. It doesn't matter what it is that's changing, so long as it doesn't change often. We all have that weakness. And... I am no exception.

It was late autumn of 209. It was the dry season, and it hadn't rained for several weeks. Stray, dead leaves tumbled across the plains from distant trees. Scattered, sparse clumps of bramble and thorn bushes caught them sometimes, holding them captive until they rotted. The sky was always an inhospitable gray, and the morning sun did little to brighten it, or bring back that old, familiar sky-blue color, while the low-hung crimson clouds only reinforced the gloom. The scenery was always this macabre, but now that I was finally leaving it behind... *I didn't want to.* I wanted to stay with Scylk.

"Warmaster," I said in a pleading tone, "just give me a chance. I *know* I can help get your people back to Piscyth. They wouldn't try to kill me if they thought I could return them to their home, would they?"

There was a brief silence between us, and we stood side by side, watching the leaves as they fluttered by. After a moment, Scylk held his mouth upwards as if tasting the wind, and then turned it back to me. "I am sorry, Spala," he clicked with a tinge of regret.

I felt a sinking feeling in my chest. "You can't send me away like this, Scylk. There's nothing for me here anymore, you have to understand," I said earnestly, placing a hand on his scythe.

"Everyone I loved is gone. I don't have anywhere to go. I want to come with *you*... I want to see the stars."

He gave a quiet chuckle, chirping with his scythes. "Lucky girl," he said softly, "look around you. Look at whom you have traveled with since last winter." Scylk gestured towards his soldiers behind us, and tapped me on the shoulder. "You want to come to the stars, but Spala... the stars have already come to *you*."

I couldn't argue with it, and I felt a lump in my throat. "Scylk, I don't want to leave you... You've become almost like a father to me."

He clacked softly. "What you say honors me, and warms my soul. I would be proud to call you a daughter, if we meet again."

"But what if we never do?"

"Then we shall not, but nonetheless, I am sure we will."

He seemed more than confident as he said it... it seemed almost as if he *knew*. All the same, I wasn't so convinced. "How can you be so sure?"

"Young Spala," he chuckled, "I am aged over three hundred of your years, and a child of the Grand Mystic. I see things others cannot. One day, we *will* meet again. It will not be until I persuade my people that not all Dwarves and Humans are evil, but one day... we shall. Our paths are crossed too tightly to forbid a second meeting, and if you do not come to me, then *I* will come to *you*." This time, he didn't wait for me to argue, instead placing a clawed hand on my shoulder and guiding me forwards. "Now go, Spala. Lonne awaits you. May the winds be at your back and the rocks fall ever from your trail."

It was the last time I saw him.

I approached my little group uncertainly, wondering what I should say. Two of them I'd "met", if you could call it that, the day before. Only a couple of the scythods had really ever taken the time to speak more than a few words to me. The third member of the group, John, I knew well... but he was still so, so distant, and something about his new attitude made me reluctant to trust him.

"Are we going now?" I asked, looking at K'bahth. He and Klade were easy to tell apart: Klade was a brownish ashen-gray, and K'bahth was dark gray except for several faint greenish stripes on his legspikes. Scythods tell each other apart by smell and voices, but sight was good enough for me.

"We are," he answered solemnly. "Where will we go?"

I thought for a moment. "To the north," I said finally. "We go north. Scylk said there's a Parasol base in that direction."

K'bahth clacked his scythes. "Yes, so there is, but it is far."

I turned away from him and started walking up the side of the next hill. "It can't be too far. It's only ten miles from Spearbreakers to the mountains. The blood plains aren't that large; we've only been traveling in circles for the past year." I said this last with distaste, talking loudly over my shoulder as they began to follow. "Imagine how far we'll get if we walk in a straight line!"

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We *did* travel far that day, something that the scythods had never done in all the time I'd been their prisoner. They'd taken care to keep themselves concealed whenever possible, traveling among the hills and taking roundabout paths. Though the wind was against us, I led us straight

northwards. I considered the choice more intelligent than an "overcautious" route.

As I soon learned, there was a reason that Scylk had always led his army with such care...

Mid-afternoon, Klade stopped us with a hiss.

"Something on the wind," he hissed. "I smell... danger."

John scoffed. "How do you 'smell danger'?" he asked skeptically in their tongue.

"Do not mock; I smell it too," K'bahth said brusquely, with a worried tone. "Make haste, we must tunnel." He began to dig at the soft earth with his scythes and claws, shoveling it away behind him.

Klade sent a distasteful hiss in my direction. "We should not have traveled so quickly, Alaf. It is Kloss Lorta that I smell," he said, and began to dig by K'bahth's side. "It is coming from downwind, so they smell us, and are very close."

Crossing his arms, John asked nervously, "Holistic Spawn? Can't we just outrun them?"

I shook my head. "Even with all their limbs severed, they can move as fast as a dwarf can sprint. They're too fast," I explained.

Frowning, John shot a sideways look at me and got to his knees to help the scythods. He seemed terrified out of his wits, and I didn't blame him. Little was as dangerous as the Spawn of Holistic.

I stood there alone, feeling helpless... feeling as if I'd led everyone into a trap. I watched as their scythes and claws sliced through the dirt, deeper and deeper.

"This won't be enough," I warned. "If it's spawn, it won't stop them!"

John spun around towards me with a glare that knocked me back a step. "Then get down here and help us!" he growled, and went back to digging, panting heavily.

"No..." I whispered. None of them heard me, and I was glad of it. I felt as if I was half insane. Thoughts raced through my mind, knowledge of stealth and camouflage, but I had no idea when I'd learned it. "If we just dig a tunnel like we do for the Ballpoint soldiers, it won't be enough," I breathed, trying to grasp at the thoughts as they whirled by. "No, we need..."

With dancing eyes, I scanned the area, searching, and my gaze came to rest on a nearby blood oak.

"I'll be right back!" I called. "Keep digging!"

I rushed over to the solitary tree and began climbing its reeking trunk. It was dead, and it looked like it had been for a while: the bark was coated in hanging moss, quivering fungi, and congealed blood. It was the most disgusting thing I'd seen in a while, but I ignored that as best I could, climbing to the first colossal limb and stomping on it with all my weight.

It wouldn't crack.

Thankfully, I remembered my daggers, and drew one out, looking at it in the grayish light. It'd been forever since I'd had reason to use them.

Gritting my teeth, I grabbed the branch and stabbed it, twisting left and right until I heard a loud groan. Slowly but steadily, the bark split, revealing the whitish wood beneath as gravity began to take hold. As it gained momentum, a series of loud cracks pealed through the air, and the huge branch twisted downwards, crashing against the ground ten feet below and severing itself from the tree. I jumped down lightly after it and started dragging the branch towards the ever-deepening hole. It was a lot heavier than I thought it would be, and I struggled with it, trying to get a good grip.

"What do you think you're doing?!" John half-screamed at me from the pit he was helping dig.

"What good is *that* going to do?"

At his tone, I felt a flicker of anger towards him. "It'll help keep us from getting killed, but I need your help!"

Muttering, John set his hands against the lip of the pit and pulled himself out and pulled himself out. Dirt flew past his shoulders as the scythods dug, and he started towards me with something akin to a death glare. "What is *this* supposed to do?" he asked, flicking a hand towards the foul-smelling branch.

I tried to push his attitude out of my mind, but unsuccessfully. "If we just dig, the Spawn will still know we're there. They'll *smell* us, John; they'll see the fresh-dug earth. Help me get this over there, now!" I was a little harsh, admittedly, but I was frustrated.

Muttering curses, he grabbed the other side of the branch, and slowly, we began making progress towards the hole. "We'll need to break it up when we get there and set it on fire. K'bahth has some flint and tinder in his pack, so he can take care of it."

"It'll suck all the air out of our hole," John said critically, shaking his head. "It won't work. We'll suffocate even if they don't find us."

"The burning part doesn't have to be on top of the entrance," I pointed out, and then turned to him again. "Why are you acting like this, John?" I asked softly, frowning. "What's happened to you? Why have you changed?"

He didn't respond, or even acknowledge that I'd spoken. He only continued to drag his side of the branch, as I struggled with mine.

"You've been like this ever since you told me the story about your past..." I went on, guessing at the source. "I don't hold any of it against you, you know..."

He hesitated for a moment, readjusting his grip on the fallen limb to buy himself time. "I hold it against myself," he muttered. "Spearbreakers is going to be destroyed, the scythod will be wiped out, and Parasol will be gone. After that, everyone else on Everoc will die. Nothing can be done about it, and I used to be *part* of the reason they'll fall." He halted his pace and looked at me. "Isn't that enough to make me bitter?"

I had mixed feelings about what he'd said, and I felt my lips twisting into a frown. "It's not enough to make you bitter towards *me*," I said quietly, glancing at him through narrowed eyes as I continued to tug at the blood oak's rotting wood.

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I lay in the tiny tunnel, hardly daring to breathe, praying silently to the gods for our safety. Above and to my left, between the crossed rotting branches, the smoke from our fire blurred my view of the cloud-strewn sky. Klade, K'bahth and John lay noiselessly beside me, and we waited.

We'd heard their blood lust screams as they'd approached. They *knew* we knew. They hadn't bothered trying to sneak up on us.

Another screech echoed through the tunnel, a blood-curdling cry I knew all too well from my prison days. As John and I watched, two of them came into view. I'd seen Spawn before, but the look of horror on John's face showed very clearly that he'd never gotten so close a look. They were hideous; their charred and shriveled flesh clung tightly to their bones. Their ribcages were split open as if on hinges, with rows of sharp teeth down the gash in their chest, opening and closing as what body fluids they had left trickled down them like saliva. Their transformation had stretched their arms and legs to unnatural lengths, with huge, sharp claws in place of their hands... Their bloodshot eyes seemed to bear a deathless gaze, but you could still see signs that

they had once been dwarves. One's beard was braided down the sides, and the other sported long sideburns. Even so, I found it difficult to feel sorry for them while looking at what they'd become...

They walked around our branches, sniffing loudly at them. One of them walked too close to the flames and I saw them lick across its chest, but the murderous creature didn't even flinch. They seemed to speak to each other through quiet shrieks, almost like the squeals of pigs. They didn't seem to be able to smell us, with the awful stench of the burning blood oak all around, but I was still sweating with fear.

Without warning, one let out a screech so loud that it startled me, and together, they left, heading towards the north, galloping forwards with their long arms.

"They left," John whispered, wide-eyed. "That was... gods, that was *awful*."

I nodded. "We should stay here for the night, to let them get as far away from us as possible."

"I agree with Spala," Klade chattered sullenly. "It is wiser to remain here."

I hadn't expected that from him. "Thank you, Klade," I said softly. He didn't respond, but from then on, I felt a little safer around him.

The night passed slowly, and with the foul smell from the rotting blood oak, it was difficult to sleep. Sometimes I thought I heard the faint sounds of someone screaming distantly, but I couldn't be sure. It bit at my heart that someone might have died because we hid instead of fought, but what were we to do? Except for my daggers, we were weaponless, and they're worthless against Holistic Spawn.

The next morning, we all got up, ate breakfast, and set off again towards the north. It was quiet - nobody really seemed to care to talk, until finally, K'bahth spoke up.

"Last night, I heard a human screaming to the north," he clicked quietly. He seemed torn between whether or not he should relish the thought.

Klade's feelings weren't so mixed. "As did I, and I am glad," he hissed. "If the Kloss Lorta killed humans because they couldn't find us, then we did well."

"Don't say things like that," I said. "Not all humans belong to Ballpoint, and there are plenty of good humans out there that do, or used to." I caught John's eye; he gave me a nod of acknowledgement. It made me smile with hope.

The farther we walked, the more we were sure that we were approaching civilization.

"I smell humans on the wind," K'bahth said thoughtfully, waving a foreleg about. "They are close."

"Is it Parasol?" John asked.

Klade scoffed in return. "How are we to know? You all smell alike, *human*."

I glanced across the plains, shielding my eyes from the rising sun on my right. Far to the north, I could just barely make out a line of trees, their bare limbs unstained by blood. "We're close to the end of the blood plains; I can see the end," I told my companions.

"We should travel east now," K'bahth replied quickly. "The foothills of the Amber Barb are before us."

"Wait," I said. "I think I see something." I thought I could make out a few tents nestled among the trees. "I wish I had binoculars," I whispered.

"Aren't you an elf?" John asked. "Isn't your eyesight better than mine?"

"It's not as good as you'd think," I admitted, and continued peering northwards. "I can see



tents... There are a couple people moving among them." I stopped and looked back for a second at John. "How many leagues do you think we traveled yesterday?"

"At least fifteen," the man replied. "There still shouldn't be any settlements close by."

A scream rang out in the distance. There was no denying it this time.

"They need help!" I said, turning to the scythods. "We need to help them."

"Are you mad?" Klade hissed, twisting his mouth towards me. "We lack supplies or medicine. They are humans. Let them overcome their problems on their own."

"We're going towards a Parasol base," I replied curtly, turning and starting north at a brisk pace. "They have medicine there, and better medicine than anyone native to Everoc has."

John jogged to catch up with me and grabbed my arm. "Vanya, we can't let them know about the timewar. If they see the scythods..."

I looked down at his hand. "It won't be long before they all know anyway, John. You said so yourself."

It was good enough for him, and he let go, matching his pace with mine. K'bahth and Klade soon caught up with us, their spikes thudding into the ground, and I glanced back at them for a moment. *I only hope the scythods don't scare them to death*, I thought with a smile.



(Lord) Reudh during his reign. Art by Splint.

## Chapter 35: An Unexpected Meeting

*You glance at the woman across from you for a moment, wondering why she's so silent. She returns your stare almost mechanically, and for a moment, you enter a sort of staring contest. She wins.*

*"How did you know Vanya?" you ask. "You said you knew her, which means you're a time*

traveler."

"That's not something that should be discussed," the woman says in a low voice, glancing around for cameras. "I could get in trouble for that; don't mention it again, please."

"But -"

"Please, just keep reading," she prods you. And so you do.

An hour passed slowly, and then another. The distant camp drew closer, the reddened, blood-soaked earth shrinking between us. Finally, the humans seemed to notice that we were there... and they seemed terrified.

"Please don't kill us!" I heard a shout. "We have no ill will towards you!"

My eyes widened. I *knew* that voice.

"Reudh?" I called. "Lord Reudh?" Starting to walk faster, I peered towards them, and could easily make out Reudh's shape. It *was* him.

John rushed forwards in front of me and turned his head, looking at me crazily. "Are you serious? You know them?"

I nodded. "He was an overseer at Spearbreakers... I have no idea why he's out here." I broke into a jog, rushing forwards towards my old acquaintance. The scythods behind me followed suit.

As we approached, I got a good look at the two humans that stood beside Reudh. One, though short, had the muscular build of a farmer, and was holding a wicked-looking knife. The other had the looks of a warrior, but held his sword a little awkwardly. For the most part, they ignored me, gripping their weapons tightly as they nervously anticipated combat with the eight-foot scythods. A skirmish was the last thing I wanted. "I'm a friend; lower your weapons!" I yelled, and to my relief, they complied.

Reudh seemed to recognize me. "Vanya? Is that really you?" he called out, beginning to jog forwards.

"It's me! I'm Vanya; we're friends! I saw you a couple times at Spearbreakers!" I shouted back.

He seemed to fly over the ground towards me, and we met in the middle, looking at each other gladly. He tried to embrace me, but I shrank away from him in awkward confusion. Unless I'd forgotten something, we didn't know each other *quite* that well.

"Um..." I said, looking at him curiously, "How are you?"

Awkwardly, he tried to turn the embrace into scratching his reddish-brown beard. "I am doing well, Vanya! It is so good to see you again!"

One of Reudh's companions spoke, coming up behind him. "So this is her, Lord Reudh? The girl we've been hunting down?" It was the man I'd thought looked like a warrior.

That confused me even further. "Hunting down??" I asked. I glanced over at John, who was smirking.

Reudh seemed to beam, almost unable to take his eyes off me. It felt a little creepy, but somehow cute at the same time. He turned to his companion and spoke excitedly. "Yes, Tedaz! I am only too glad to finally find her!" To me, he said, "I have searched for you for months! But oh, my dear, you look like you have been through quite a lot."

I looked down at my imitation-Ballpoint uniform, bloodstained as it was. Though I hadn't had anything to change into for the past year, the stitching had held up well. My thoughts went to my unkempt hair, and then to my ears. *He doesn't know I'm an elf*, I thought. I tried to casually cover one ear with a hand, and turn the other side of my head away from Reudh, so he wouldn't see. I

hated that I'd forgotten to put Jack Magnus's cap back on.

However, Reudh noticed, and took my hand gently from my ear. "There is no need, Vanya, dearest," he said softly. "I know you are an elf, but I mind it not."

It surprised me. I started to make a grateful reply... but did a double take instead. "Wait, 'dearest'?" I was completely bewildered. "What do you mean?"

Reudh's other companion, the odd little farmer, walked up by his side. "Well, Lord Reudh, this is your girl, eh? Haha, yes, I can see why you like her! Mighty fine, she is, if she got cleaned up a tad."

I went crimson. "What do you mean, 'his girl'? I only met him once!"

John had been chuckling beside me, but now he burst out laughing.

I glared at him. "This isn't funny!" I couldn't figure out if it was all a joke at my expense, or if they were actually serious.

Behind me, Klade started chirping in amusement, startling Reudh and his companions. "You were right, Spala. Coming here was well worth it."

The crimson of my face deepened with embarrassment. "Reudh!" I said sharply. "What's going on??"

K'bahth found it funny, too. "It seems you have a suitor, Spala."

Reudh eyed the scythods worriedly for a moment, and then turned back to me. He seemed to feel a little defeated by what I'd been saying, but he pressed on. "I love you, Vanya. You are the apple of my eye, the treasure of my soul. I feel for you what I have felt for no other dwarf." He was very sincere. "Ever since we met that fateful day in Spearbreakers and you kissed my cheek, you've held my love. I have faced many dangers in trying to find you, and willingly, for I knew in my heart you were still alive! And here you are, sweetest Vanya, loveliest of maidens. My quest is at an end." He paused for a moment, thinking, and looked regretful. "I am sorry you had to find out like this, but you *did ask*."

I pursed my lips, and an awkward silence followed. I hated to hurt him, but he had to understand that I didn't feel the same way towards him. Honestly, had he just shown up a year earlier, after Urist had killed my sister, I might have done things with him I would've later regretted, wanting to fill that empty space he'd left behind... but now it was different. "Lord Reudh," I began carefully, watching his face, "I..."

An abrupt scream pierced the air around us.

"What was that?" I asked suddenly, changing the subject.

Reudh frowned. "It is Lurit, a friend of mine, the lasher of our party. Two Holistic Spawn came upon us at sunset, and though we defeated them, Lurit lost his foot. The Spearbreakers doctors taught me much about medicine, and I cauterized the wound, but he is still in great pain."

John's jaw dropped, his eyes widening. "You *cauterized it*??"

The swordsman, Tedaz, nodded. "He did a fine job of it, too," he said respectfully.

"Let me see him," I requested. "Maybe there's something I can do."

I didn't really think I'd be able to help, but I hoped it would give me time to come up with something to say to Reudh.

My companions followed Reudh to one of the tents. They were too short for the scythods to enter, and I told them so. They waited outside as the rest of us went in.

Lurit, an overweight man with graying hair, lay on a cot in one of the tents. He looked... well, awful. His skin had a grayish pallor to it, and though unconscious, he was shivering and sweating.

"Reudh, he doesn't look very well," I said worriedly. "It looks like he'll die if we don't get him some better medical attention." At Reudh's hurt expression, I added, "But you've done a good job so far."

"Did you keep the foot?" John asked.

The farmer, Strohe, snorted. "'Did you keep the foot,'" he repeated. "What good would *that* do?"

"We buried it so the wolves wouldn't come," Tedaz explained, sheathing his sword.

John sighed and facepalmed, shaking his head. "It's the dark ages all over again," he muttered under his breath. "I'd gotten used to civilization; I forgot about all this."

"Can we move him?" I asked Reudh urgently. "We need to take him with us, and from the looks of it, we'll have to do it quickly."

Reudh hesitated, but nodded. "I would be careful with moving him, but I would say it's possible, yes. Your pack animals ought to be able to carry him, I'd think. What *are* they, anyway?" At these words, some very offended chattering erupted from outside the tent.

"Shh," I whispered. "They're not pack animals, they're 'scythods'. They're intelligent, and they understood everything you just said."

"Scythods?" Strohe said loudly. "I ain't never heard of them. Where do they hail from?"

I glanced meaningfully at John, questioning. "Might as well," he said, giving a noncommittal shrug. Reudh and his companions watched us curiously.

"What is it?" Reudh asked innocently.

I sighed. There was so much to explain, I hardly knew where to begin. "All right..." I started hesitantly, "First, you're going to need to ignore everything you think you know about science, and keep an open mind..."

Teaching Urist and Hans about Ballpoint and Parasol had been a lot more fun.

An hour later, John, K'bahth, Klade, Reudh, Strohe, Tedaz and I sat around their smoldering fire. Reudh sat across from me, and K'bahth and John sat by my side. Our party was on one side, Reudh's was on the other.

"This is a lot to take in," Reudh sighed, shaking his head. "So... our 'mercenaries' were actually... Ballpoint's soldiers? Yes?"

I nodded.

"And they're a civilization that's not from this world, here about the Holistic Spawn."

"That's right," I said. "They're fighting Parasol for control of the planet."

"They call it 'The Timewar,'" John added.

Strohe laughed. "My wife ain't ever gonna believe this. Heck, I ain't sure if *I* believe it."

"Typical of a human," Klade muttered. K'bahth shushed him.

Reudh leaned forward. "Vanya, none of this needs matter. Come back home to Spearbreakers with me! We can live a peaceful life together for the rest of our days."

I swallowed uncomfortably. "Lord Reudh, I... I have... something I have to tell you..." He had to understand how I felt towards him, but all the same... I wished I didn't have to hurt him so.

He listened, giving me a curious expression. An awkward tension filled the air so thickly you could almost breathe it.

"Are we done here?" John suddenly asked, looking uncomfortable.

"I think so," Tedaz said, giving my friend a knowing glance and getting to his feet. "Let's go take down the tents and get ready to move."

Amidst mild chattering, everyone stood and walked away, leaving Reudh and me alone by the dying campfire. We, too, got to our feet, looking at each other uncomfortably for a time. He seemed to know what I was going to say, but that didn't make it any easier.

I felt a gentle breeze in my hair; cold air on a northern wind. It was soothing, yet biting at the same time. It was... bittersweet.

"I... I don't share the same feelings for you," I finally managed, frowning apologetically. "I'm sorry, really, I am, but..."

He gave me a sad smile. "I understand, Vanya. I didn't come because you love me, I came because I love you." I could tell my words were knifing through his heart.

"I'm sorry, Reudh," I said, trying to soften it. "Maybe someday, but right now, I'm still sore from... After everything with Urist and my sister, I just don't feel like being in a relationship. Not so soon."

"I understand," Reudh said, suddenly digging through the pack that hung by his side. "But that reminds me, now that you speak of Urist. He gave me something he wanted me to give you, if I ever found you." Moments later, he withdrew a little package, holding it towards me. "Urist sends his regards," he said quietly with that same sad smile.

I hesitated, my hand hovering over the brownish wrapping, and finally took it from the dwarf. "Thank you. I'll open it later," I said quietly, putting it into one of the pouches at my waist. "But Lord Reudh, we can't go towards Spearbreakers. It's far too dangerous; you've already seen it yourself. The Spawn... it's like their numbers keep multiplying."

He nodded silently. Behind him, a pained scream erupted from Lurit's tent. Reudh looked over his shoulder at it for a moment, and then back to me. "We must get Lurit somewhere he can be taken care of, Vanya, be it Parasol or no."

"What about Strohe and Tedaz?" I asked, glancing towards where they were packing up the tents.

"Strohe can't stay from home too long. He has a wife to take care of. Tedaz... I believe he'll follow me wherever we go, though he's not as good a fighter. As for me, Vanya," he said cautiously, moving his hand towards my face. I reached forwards to stop him, but changed my mind, and he brushed several strands of hair from my eyes with a thoughtful expression. "As for me, Vanya," he continued slowly, "I will go with you, wherever you go." As an afterthought, he added, "So long as you will permit it, of course."

"As a friend?" I asked.

He gave a single, solemn nod. "As a friend."

A grateful smile flicked at the corners of my mouth. "Thank you, Lord Reudh. And yes... you may come. I would be glad to have another friend with me."

He flashed a smile at me as he dug something else out of his pack. "Just 'Reudh' is fine. And I have something for you as well, if you would but give me a moment." He finished searching, drawing out a crescent-shaped comb and holding it up. It caught the light of the morning sun, and its silver teeth glittered radiantly, sea-blue gems sparkling like wine. It took me a moment to realize he was actually giving it to me, and when it finally registered, it blew me away.

"Oh, Reudh," I gasped, my eyes widening. "You *can't* give that to me; I can't take that!"

He smiled, gazing thoughtfully at me. "I can, and I am, Vanya. For your hair... so it will always look as beautiful as the day we met."

I blushed, struggling for words. "It's not that I can't take it, it's just... I... It's too *beautiful* for me."

Reudh gave a chuckle and shook his head slightly. "On the contrary, I would say that its beauty pales in comparison to yours!"

He held it out to me, but I only stared at it, agape. After a lifetime of never receiving anything I didn't work for, it was hard for me to accept a gift. "Reudh, I... It must have cost a fortune, I'd never be able to repay you for it!" The only other truly valuable thing I'd ever owned was my golden bracelet, and it'd only had a thin plating of gold.

The dwarf laughed, shook his head, and placed it in my hand, closing my fingers around it. "I will hear no excuses, my dear," he said, beaming at my reaction. "I had it crafted just for you, and traveled hundreds of miles so I could lay it in your hands! It is a gift, not a loan, and that shine in your eyes is more than payment enough. I will accept nothing in return." He paused for a moment, quietly closing his pack, and then looked back at me. "I am fond of giving gifts, you know," he said, and with a smile, he left, going over to help Strohe pack up the provisions.

My gaze traveled downwards to the palm of my hand as I uncurled my fingers, examining the silver comb. It was studded with sapphires arranged in the shape of three five-pointed stars. Questions filled my mind, and I lifted my head, opening my mouth to ask them, but found to my discomfort that Reudh was no longer in sight. Reluctantly, I looked back downwards, the breeze gently ruffling my hair, and I wondered how he'd known my symbol.

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When everything was packed, we set off for the east. The men carried Lurit, the wounded lasher, on a makeshift stretcher. It took all four of them to lift him and keep him steady. Meanwhile, the scythods and I carried the tents and provisions. I'd wanted to leave the tents, as they were easy to see from a distance, but Reudh wouldn't hear of it. I told him I would only sleep outside anyway: there was no way I'd bunk with anyone else. He countered by saying he was planning on giving up his for my sake. It was kind of him, but I still didn't like the idea.

On occasion, Lurit would let out a scream of pain and fall unconscious again. There wasn't any way to keep him quiet, and I hated that... If there were more Holistic Spawn lurking about, they'd be sure to find us. With how slow our progress was, I knew there was no chance of us escaping them. But as the day wore on, Lurit awoke less and less, as he steadily grew paler. His leg looked horrible, with purple veins stretching out ever farther from the cauterized stump of his leg.

Around noon, K'bahth approached me. "Spala, do you hear it?" he asked.

I listened. "No," I answered cautiously, "hear what?"

"Gunfire," he replied promptly, clicking his claws.

"I hear it as well," Klade offered. "Alaf, do you not hear it? It comes from the east."

"I'm sure I'll hear it soon," I sighed, wishing my hearing was as good as theirs.

As we continued, the sound gradually became clearer, until even John and the others heard it.

"Yep, it's gunfire," John said, shielding his eyes from the sun with a hand as he held a corner of Lurit's stretcher with the other. "Sounds like a railcannon to me, but I can't tell how far away, or who it belongs to."

"What's a railcannon?" Tedaz asked, worrying with his corner of the load.

John had trouble describing it. "When a dragon and a ballista get together and have a kid, that's a railcannon. ...Sort of." He offered a joking grin, as if it explained everything better.

"Seriously?" Tedaz asked, his eyebrows raised.

I shook my head, almost laughing at John's analogy. "A railcannon fires a big piece of metal at incredibly high speeds... fast enough to set the air on fire just from the friction." It wasn't completely accurate, but it gave them a good idea of what we were hearing, or so I hoped. "It's a weapon," I added.

"An' we're going *towards it*??" Strohe asked incredulously. "Are you batshit crazy, girl?"

"Amazing," Klade hissed snidely, "A human with common sense. Alaf, you could learn a lesson from him."

I clicked my teeth at him. "Quiet, Klade. You're not helping." It didn't matter to me whether or not Reudh and the others could understand him. *I* could understand him, and I didn't want to listen to his sarcastic commentary all the way to the Parasol base.

Finally, as the sun dropped behind the western horizon, we reached the bed of a little clear-water creek that wound its way between the hills, and came to a halt.

"I think we're getting near," I said quietly. The intermittent sound of the railcannons echoed loudly all around us.

"From the echoes, I would say they are just beyond that next hilltop," K'bahth said, listening carefully. "However, I only hear one railcannon, and its shots seem to be missing its target."

"What?" I asked, looking at him. "Why would -"

"It's cover fire," John answered my unfinished question, motioning to the others to set Lurit on the ground. "That means they're on watch."

Reudh shook his head resignedly. "It is so strange to think that there have been people from other worlds living so close to home, and yet, we never knew!"

"It's part of interdimensional law," John explained distractedly as he scanned the horizon. "Time travel, time-space manipulation, and alerting the natives are strictly forbidden. Parasol broke the second by putting Syrupleaf in stasis, but it saved this universe. Armok would have destroyed it otherwise. Since we can't alert the natives - that means you, Reudh," he added, turning towards the dwarf, "using air vehicles is forbidden."

"Are you part of Parasol?" Tedaz guessed.

John's response was dismissive of the subject. "Nah, I used to work for Ballpoint. But really, what are we going to do? If they're on a military-level alert, we won't be able to approach without them opening fire."

"We could tunnel to them," K'bahth suggested, and then lowered his mouth to the stream to drink.

I shook my head. "That wouldn't work," I argued, frowning. "They would assume we're trying to kill them, and even if we told them otherwise, they'd kill us. And if they see John in his uniform, they'll assume we're Ballpoint."

"You're wearing a Ballpoint uniform, too," John pointed out.

"It's just gray. Mr Frog made it," I replied, puzzling over the situation. Reudh seemed surprised when I mentioned Mr Frog, though. "But you're right..." I continued, "What we need to do is send someone over there alone to let them know we're on their side... if it's just one person, they won't feel threatened, and one person by themselves would be the least noticeable." I stopped for a second, nervously pondering my decision. "I'll go," I said finally, biting my lip.

"I will not hear of it!" Reudh burst out, walking forwards. "I'll go before we send you. I volunteer myself."

"I'll go," Tedaz piped up, followed by Strohe.

"None of you have any experience with the timewar," Klade clicked dryly. "And K'bahth and I

would be too conspicuous." John translated what he'd said for the others.

"I'm the only one who can go," I told them quietly. "I used to be a skulker; I know how to stay hidden."

Reudh seemed surprised. "A *skulker*?"

His reaction made me laugh. "I still would be, if it hadn't been for Mr Frog," I added.

"She has a point, though," John said grimly, folding his arms. "She has to be the one to go."

Grimacing, Reudh said, "Fine. But Vanya..." He came over to me and looked into my eyes. For a moment, he seemed torn between whether or not he should give me an embrace, but finally decided against it. "Stay safe. Please?"

I nodded silently, but my thoughts were elsewhere as I set off for the base of the next hill, following the little creek.



Chapter 36: Infiltration

"So, time travel is illegal," you muse aloud, watching for the woman's reaction.

She glares at you warningly. "I said drop it."

Unfortunately, being an archaeologist, you could never resist unraveling a good mystery, and the woman across from you certainly presents you with one. You make up your mind to figure out who she is, no matter what it takes. For now, however, you are content with reading the next entry in Vanya's journal. And so you begin.

When Reudh asked me to keep myself safe, my thoughts were elsewhere.

Who *was* I? I'd mentioned my skulker background, but volunteering for a dangerous mission was so far removed from what I'd used to be. Who had I become? And why had I changed? I knew I wasn't the same person I used to be, but... why? Somehow, I missed the *old* me: the girl who used to be afraid of everything; the girl who saw magic everywhere she looked; the girl who felt that all the world was beautiful.

The girl who always ran.

Maybe, I thought, maybe sometimes, change can be a good thing.

But in my heart, I knew why I'd become a different person, though I couldn't stand to think about it. It was because I'd lost Urist, and more importantly, because I'd lost my sister. There was no sunshine with her gone, only an emptiness devoid of shadows. If I died, what did it matter? What did I have to live for anymore?

I found the direction of my thoughts disturbing, and swallowed nervously, trying to put it behind me as I set off for the base of the next hill, following the little creek.

We were in the foothills of the Amber Barb mountain range, but the blood plains still stretched into the distance as far as I could see. My bloodstained armor would be a good camouflage, I knew, but I needed to do something with my hair and face, in case I was caught. If my experience with Ballpoint was anything to judge by, interdimensional soldiers have a certain fondness for well-groomed elven women, and I could use that to my advantage. It had been a while since I'd bathed, and I hated that, but I consoled myself with the knowledge that elves don't have nearly as bad a problem with body odor as dwarves.

After I was out of sight of the others, I knelt by the brook beneath a tangled tree and began splashing water on my face and hair. It was clear, clear enough that I could see little water-worn pebbles embedded in the bottom. The swath of clear earth stood out in stark contrast to the

bloodstained terrain around it, and seemed almost inviting.

It took me at least a good ten minutes before I was satisfied, but I finally decided my hair was clean. Sitting up, I got Reudh's comb out of my pouch and started brushing my hair with it. For all its beauty, it did the job just as well as a copper one would have, but I was thankful I had it.

After I'd finished, I put the comb away, put on Jack Magnus's cap, and took a deep breath before starting forth once more. I felt cleaner, fresher, and more confident, but I was very worried about my safety. Several times a minute, the railcannon's crashes echoed around me, followed by a loud, distant thud. I knew I was in danger just by being anywhere nearby.

Creeping forward along the ground, I was careful to take advantage of any bramble bushes or trees nearby, moving slowly and staying in the shadows. I thought back to my skulker days, remembering how to stay "invisible", and I think I did well, for being out of practice.

There was a ledge of rock in front of me, and I crept forwards towards it cautiously, staying low. When I reached it and peeked over the edge, I was greeted with an otherworldly sight.

Before me was a deep trench that seemed to split the earth in two, at least 300 feet long, fifteen feet across, and at least two stories deep. I could see right down the middle, though the deeper area was heavily shadowed. There seemed to be doorways and walkways in the sides of the trench, but it was hard to tell in the twilight.

As I looked everything over, I came up with a plan: I would sneak into their camp and talk to them, *before* they saw me. If they saw me first, they'd probably shoot me. I would have to be careful.

A sudden explosion broke my thoughts, drawing my eyes to its source: a single turret, its long barrel poking out above the far side of the trench. It was the railcannon, and even from where I lay, I could make out the red and white Parasol logo emblazoned on its side. Suddenly, it fired again, seeming to rock backwards with the recoil. At the same time, the hilltop far too my left erupted with a plume of earth, at the base of a huge, upright ring of metal. My eyes slowly traced the railcannon's path back to the trench, down along the valley, which was covered in debris: destroyed tanks, smoking mechsuits... it was a war zone, but no one seemed to be fighting. Really, apart from a few people in the Parasol trench, the entire area seemed completely devoid of life.

Another blast at my left drew my attention again, the spray of dirt reaching only halfway to the top of the 30-foot metal ring. Though I knew what it was, I had no idea how it was here. It was a megaportal... the largest I'd ever heard of. It didn't seem to be turned on, but as I looked closer, I could see several people in Ballpoint uniforms milling around its base. The Parasol cannoneer seemed to be loath to hit it, carefully aiming his shots around its base.

A single shot from that railcannon would utterly destroy me, and I knew it. With this in mind, I crawled cautiously over the rocky ledge and began to slink downwards. Slowly, quietly, I inched my way forwards. From where I was, all the way to the trench, there wasn't any cover to be had; not a bush, not a tree, only small craters and fallen rocks that made my journey all the more difficult.

Suddenly, I hit my head against something... *hard*. I backed up, gingerly rubbing the sore spot and trying to stay quiet. After a few minutes, I looked upwards, and was astonished to find that there didn't seem to be anything there. After waving my hand around in front of me a bit, I found that while I could definitely *feel* something there, I couldn't see it. It was as if there was some

giant, invisible barrier blocking my path.

Mindful of where I was, I looked back down at the trench, and found my point of view was too low to see the bottom, or even anyone inside. This emboldened me slightly, and I got carefully to my knees, feeling along the invisible surface, slowly working my way higher and higher with my hands. Whatever I was touching didn't seem to end anywhere near.

"What *is* this?" I whispered, bashing my fist against the wall, which is what it felt like: nothing happened, besides my hand starting to hurt.

I soon found that I couldn't move forwards even when I put my whole weight against it, which was eerie: it really didn't look like there was anything there. On a whim, I looked upwards, and that action sucked away any hope I'd had: there was a giant, shimmering dome above the Parasol trench. From so close, I couldn't see it, but the farther away I looked, the more obvious it became.

The trench was shielded. There was no way I was getting in.

At least, so I thought.

With a whoosh, the bubble disappeared, and without the shield to support me, I tumbled forwards onto the ground. Recovering, I leapt to my feet, only to knock my head solidly against the shield. It *hurt*, and I had to fight to stay quiet. As I bit my lip, gently massaging the second bump on my scalp, I felt around... and discovered to my dismay that the bubble had closed *behind me*. I was trapped.

I laid myself flat against the ground as quietly as I could and began crawling forwards, hoping nobody had seen me. My plan might still work.

A feminine voice knifed through the air. "Stand up and put your hands on your head!" I jumped, startled, and the voice rang out again. "Do it *now*!"

As I got to my feet, my heart sinking in my chest, I looked around for the source. My eyes quickly came to rest on a human woman standing less than two hundred feet from me, holding a pistol in her hands. I had no idea how she managed to get so far from the trench without my noticing, but I did as she asked, putting my hands up on my head. It was hard to see where she was in the dark... it was almost as if she was cloaked in shadows.

"I'm not here to hurt you!" I shouted, praying that she wouldn't shoot. "I work for Parasol!"

She ignored what I'd said. "Don't move!" she yelled. There was something about her voice that seemed familiar... almost as if I felt a certain kinship with her, and unless I was imagining things, it sounded like she was as scared as I was.

As she began walking forwards, keeping her weapon trained on me, I took a closer look at her. She was wearing a Parasol uniform: white with black stripes and sky-blue detailing, fitting closely to her slender form. She didn't really look that threatening, and seemed to be about sixteen or seventeen... It made me wonder why she was a soldier at all. Oddly, she was only a few inches taller than me... and that's short, for a human.

I started taking a few steps forward, myself, closing the distance. "I don't have any guns! I'm just -"

"Stay where you are!" she yelled, adjusting her two-handed grip. She actually seemed frightened... yet somehow excited at the same time. "I'll shoot you!"

I stopped and remained still as she picked her way around little craters and rocks, closing the gap to about ten feet. Then, she stopped, and after brushing her long, wavy brown hair out of her eyes, she put her right hand to her side and unfastened a PEA from her hip. "You don't *look* like

Parasol... Hold still," she ordered, trying unsuccessfully to one-handedly tap on its screen. Finally, she gave up. "I'm going to lower my weapon," she said, watching me with fearful, cautious eyes. "Don't move, got it?" Her eyes seemed to stand out, being such a bright blue.

"All right," I said softly, watching her. From so close, she hardly seemed threatening at all, even *with* a weapon. She seemed too *pretty* to be a killer, if that makes any sense.

"I mean it! Don't move!"

"I won't move," I promised.

With an uneasy glance, she shifted her weapon in her hand so that she could hold the PEA, too, and started tapping at the screen, holding it slightly towards my face. After a moment, her eyebrows furrowed, and she looked almost as if she'd seen a ghost. It was as if she couldn't believe what she was reading. "Vanya Carena..." she whispered.

"You've heard of me?"

She snapped out of it. "No! No, not at all! I just... It..." she looked aside for a moment. "Hello."

"Hi," I replied, trying not to smile.

"I'm Katie Okablokum." She holstered her weapon, stepping forwards and offering her hand. "My PEA says you're telling the truth. I just can't believe there's anybody else from Parasol out here, that's all," she said nervously.

I shook her hand. "It's nice to meet you," I said, relaxing my tense muscles. "I *wouldn't* be here, but for a series of unusual events..."

"Katie!" someone yelled. Katie jumped visibly, startled by the shout. I leaned to the right to look around her, and saw a dwarf slowly walking towards us, about a hundred feet away. I raised an eyebrow in mild surprise. I hadn't expected anyone working for Parasol to have such long hair, or to be wearing such casual clothes - jeans and a long-sleeved, plaid shirt. The jeans alone seemed otherworldly... it was the first time I'd seen any, aside from on Mr Frog's computer, and they looked very strange on a dwarf...

Katie turned around and started walking towards him, motioning for me to follow. "It's okay, Jonah," she called. "She works for Parasol, too."

"Katie, you shouldn't have closed the gap," Jonah chided, in an almost fatherly way. "Your pistol is a *ranged* weapon. She could've knocked it out of your hands or pushed it aside."

"She said she worked for Parasol. I had to scan her," Katie replied defensively, passing him. I stopped and stood still, watching the scene unfold.

Jonah crossed his arms, smiling humorously at my new acquaintance. "And what if she'd been lying to bring you closer?" he asked pointedly. "I said I'd be along in a moment, and Saemin's on his way, too. You wanted action, and I was going to give you some, but you need to be more careful. You should've waited until we were here to back you up."

I spoke up. "Who's Saemin? Is he in charge here?"

"Ha! No," Jonah laughed, sparing me a glance. "Not remotely, unless you mean in charge of Katie, to which I'd say, 'maybe'."

Katie spun around, seemingly hurt by Jonah's amusement. "He's a friend of mine, Vanya," she said hotly.

"Really, now? Do you regularly french kiss all your friends, Katie?"

Color rose to her cheeks. "That's private!"

A loud, deep yell interrupted them. "Katie, you okay?" A young man was climbing up out of the trench. His tanned arms and legs were heavily muscled, to the point that he reminded me of

Hans. "I heard yelling. Sorry I'm kinda late."

"Saemin, everything's fine," Jonah called to him. "It's just a girl from Parasol." He paused, and tilting his head, he turned to me and asked, "What *are* you doing out here, anyway?"

Behind him, Katie giggled loudly as Saemin picked her up. With an effort, I pulled my eyes away from them and answered, "I heard there was a Parasol encampment around here, and my friends and I are seeking shelter. I'm wanting to teleport back to Spearbreakers, as are a couple other friends of mine." There was something about Jonah that seemed sad, but I couldn't put my finger on it.

He chuckled sadly. "Parasol *encampment*? Hardly. There are only a few of us left. I've got some things to say about Spearbreakers, though, and in particular, to that Count Splint fellow. Thanks to him, Ballpoint has practically overrun the continent. Still... Spearbreakers is pretty far away from here, isn't it, miss...?"

"Vanya Carena," I answered his prompting. "I'm from Spearbreakers, but I've been traveling for a while. Do you have a portal we could use?"

Jonah shifted his weight, taking an older-model PEA from his pocket and tapping at its screen. "Sure, we do. See up there on that hill?" He flicked a thumb towards the hilltop to my left, towards the huge megaportal I'd noticed earlier. "That beautiful portal up there is ours, property of the Umbrella, put here over two hundred years ago. Sadly, Ballpoint's captured it, curse their souls, and it's the only one in the region. If they figure out how to operate it, they'll pour their best troops through and wipe us out. Our shield is tough as hell, but it won't stand up to that kind of assault. And guess what?" He gave me a sardonic smile. "They captured it three months ago. I'd expect them to figure it out any day now."

"What??"

"You heard right. Who's with you, anyway? You said you had friends?"

I hesitated, and began counting them off on my fingers. "Two scythods, three humans, and a dwarf."

"Scythods?" He looked at me suspiciously, raising an eyebrow. "Didn't Ballpoint domesticate those?"

I felt a little offended. "*Nobody* domesticated them - they're as intelligent as we are. Oh, and we also have an injured human who needs immediate medical attention," I added, remembering Lurit.

Jonah didn't respond; he just kept tapping at his PEA. Finally, he stopped, holding it out and peering at it as if he was nearsighted. Grumbling, he took a pair of glasses from his shirt pocket and slipped them on. "Here you are," he mumbled, and then, louder, "Vanya Carena. Yep, you check out all right. Says you're 'guaranteed trustworthy' by some Dr. Sankis fellow. Draconik... Never heard of him." He slipped the PEA into his pocket and lifted his chin. "Not in my department," he said proudly. "I used to be a theoretical physicist, before all this mess. My wife and I were..." he trailed off.

There was a silence between us for a moment, and he turned back towards the trench. "Saemin! Get Trebor out here, she's got wounded!" Saying this, he turned to me. "We'll reminisce some other time, miss." And he walked away, shoulders slumped, scratching the bridge of his nose.

"Trebor" was a skinny young dwarf sporting a shock of rumpled, black hair. He was dressed in loose-fitting Parasol medical scrubs, and was hauling a matching medical chest. He looked a few years older than me, but it couldn't have been by much.

"I'm Trebor," he grinned, shaking my hand firmly. "And you are?"

"Vanya," I replied, taken a bit off guard. "It's nice to meet you."

"And it's a pleasure to meet *you*!" he replied smoothly. "Largely because you got me out of latrine duty. I owe you a debt of gratitude. Would you like it in cash or checks?" Beside him, Saemin laughed at his jest. "Anyway, Vanya... Eh, I don't know if that name suits you. Mind if I call you 'Hotlips'?"

I grimaced, my stomach turning. "Please don't." The thought occurred to me that maybe cleaning myself up hadn't been the best idea I'd ever had. "Let's just go, please?"

"Certainly, my lady, to the ball it is!" he crooned. "Unfortunately, I spent so much on gratitude that our horse-drawn carriage is one beast short, so I'm afraid you'll have to lead."

His sense of humor switched around so often, it almost made me dizzy. "They're straight ahead. Lurit is in bad shape, so we'll have to hurry," I said, starting to walk in the direction of my friends, though impeded by the gathering darkness. "Did you bring a light?"

His response was prompt. "I really don't think now is an appropriate time to be smoking, Hotlips. Lurit is in bad shape! He's more trapezoid than square!" I glared at him, and he seemed to soften. "Easy, girl! Only joking around. Saemin, get the lamp out, but don't start it up yet."

Saemin pulled a long glass cylinder from behind his back and fiddled with the end of it. Slowly, it began glowing with a bright, white light that illuminated a huge area around us.

"I said *don't* start it up!" Trebor hissed in a whisper. "Armok's beard, it's like talking to a human."

"I *am* a human," Saemin replied, chuckling, and flipped it back off.

Trebor nodded dismissively. "We'll wait until we're out of the camp until we start it up," he explained, glancing at me. "If those Ballpoint soldiers see it, they'll start shooting."

I nodded. "How will we get through the shield?"

"Not the same way *you* did, that's for sure. It opens briefly for every railgun shot; that's why we fire it at random intervals. You're lucky it didn't slice you in two: you would've had to put up with me while I sewed you back together." The dwarf grinned at his own joke, and then grew more serious. "We're actually already through the shield: the Captain opened it for us to pass. Anyway, what's the issue with your Lurit friend?"

"A Holistic Spawn clawed his leg off," I explained, stepping over the little brook as we reached it.

"Whoa, wait a minute there, Hotlips," Trebor said, grabbing my arm. "Are you completely sure it was clawed, and not bitten?"

I pulled my arm away from him crossly. "What does it matter? Only dwarves turn, and Lurit is human."

"That's the way it *used* to be, my uninformed friend," Trebor said, motioning for Saemin to turn the lamp back on. "Ballpoint gave them the ability to adapt, and I'll have you know that the newer ones are capable of changing just about anything that's sentient or commonly domesticated!"

Saemin fumbled with the lamp, and finally got it to start up. It cast an eerie white glow around us, and I couldn't imagine what Reudh and the others would think when they saw it. I turned to Trebor, who was ahead of me now. "I'm pretty sure it was clawed and not bitten."

"Pretty is what *you* are," he retorted. "I want guarantees. What have you done with the wound? And did you keep the foot?"

"No, they buried it before we found them and cauterized the wound."

Trebor choked. "They *cauterized it*?! Armok's beard. I'd say it's the dark ages, but the people

around here are wearing a little too much clothing for that to be true," he said, shooting me a glance.

I found myself sorely tempted to take my cap off, hoping that seeing I was an elf would get him to quit making such perverted remarks, but I didn't. Instead, I only led the way in silence, determined to ignore it.

Even *Klade* had been easier company.



Chapter 37: Parasol Camp

This is a hard-bound journal. On the item is the logo of Parasol Industries: a red and white umbrella. The logo is standard. The image relates to the Founding of Parasol Industries in another universe on an unknown date. On the item is a star in imitation gold leaf. The star is five-pointed. The image relates to the birth of Everoc's Vanya Carena in the year 188 PS.

Saemin, Trebor and I rounded the last bend and found ourselves face to face with my friends, squinting at the light Saemin was shining in their eyes. They had their weapons readied: Reudh had a pike, Tedaz had a longsword, and Strohe had his knife. John stood in the back, holding a wicked-looking whip, and the scythods stood on either side of them, legs tensed.

Without a warning, Klade sprung forwards, his scythes poised to swing.

"Stop!" I cried out, ducking and shielding my head. "It's only me!" Klade landed at my feet and stepped backwards, unsure. The others started lowering their weapons.

"Hold up, what's going on here?" a wide-eyed Trebor asked. He jumped behind Saemin, who pulled a pistol from his side. "You brought us into a trap, Hotlips?"

At the sight of the gun, John readied Lurit's whip again and started to edge forward. "Don't even think about firing!" he warned. "These scythods can move faster than you can blink, and you're outnumbered five to one!" He glanced over at me, scowling. "Damnit, Vanya, if they captured you, why'd you bring them here??"

"Let her go free, I command you!" Reudh ordered, stepping forwards in an attack stance. "If you don't, you will be dealing with *me*!"

"Back off!" Saemin boomed, leveling his weapon. "I'll shoot!"

I leapt to my feet, raising my hands towards both parties. "Stop!" I yelled, looking at one, and then the other. "Please, just stop! Nobody captured me! They're friends! There's no reason to fight!"

"There is always a reason to fight, if you look hard enough," Klade growled, sniffing towards the Parasol soldiers with a foreleg.

Trebor peeked out from behind Saemin. "I'm a doctor, if that eases your mind; I don't fix battles, only wounds," he offered helpfully.

The tension gradually dissipated, and I breathed a sigh of relief, hanging my head. "Thank you," I whispered in prayer, and looked towards Reudh. "Lord Reudh, where is Lurit?"

"Over here, Vanya," he replied, pointing into the darkness behind him with his pike.

Trebor walked forwards at a brisk pace, motioning to Saemin to bring the light. When we reached the old man's stretcher, Trebor knelt beside him and opened his medical chest, folding out all the little trays inside the lid. Then, carefully, he pulled away the strips of cloth Reudh had wrapped around Lurit's stump.

"Armok's beard," he whispered. "It's no wonder he's unconscious." Hurriedly, he pulled out a few syringes, and, after swabbing an area on Lurit's arm, administered the drugs. He followed

this up by taking out a little vial and spraying something on the purplish, reddened skin.

Lurit awoke at once, howling in pain. "Gods, what have you done?!" he yelled, trying to scoot away from everyone. The scythods hissed at the noise, scurrying away.

"Hold him!" Trebor yelled. Reudh and Tedaz rushed forwards to assist. After the struggling, screaming man was secure, Trebor snatched another syringe from his container and slammed it into Lurit's calf. Lurit's eyes widened, his mouth agape, and then, slowly, he collapsed back onto the ground, unconscious.

"What happened?" Reudh asked.

Trebor shook his head in shock. "I have no idea," he muttered, furrowing his brow. "That shouldn't have happened at all. It was just an antiseptic..." Turning and looking towards his friend, he caught sight of Strohe, who was staring raptly at the tubular light in Saemin's hands.

"You like the light, do you?" Saemin asked quietly.

Strohe looked up and nodded vigorously. "It ain't like anything I ever seen before. Heck if I know how it works."

Chuckling, Saemin glanced back at Trebor.

"We have plenty more where that came from," the doctor muttered, shaking his head and turning back to Lurit.

"Trebor, we needa get back," Saemin prodded. "Ballpoint woulda heard his screaming, and they'll be coming for us."

Trebor continued staring at Lurit in confusion for a moment, and then gradually collected his thoughts. "Right," he said, nodding and starting to close up his medkit. "Saemin, you take him. The rest of you... Gather up whatever you're taking with you, and *be quick*."

With a crooked smile, Saemin handed his light tube to Strohe, who took it with a childlike expression of awe. "Hold that for me," he chuckled. Walking over to Lurit's limp form, he bent down and scooped him up in his arms as easily as if he was a sack of plump helmets. Though Reudh and Tedaz gaped at the man's strength, John crossed his arms, unimpressed. As for Strohe, he was too absorbed in the light he was holding to even notice.

Trebor nodded with approval, and then glanced around, looking everyone else over. We all stood silently, waiting for direction. "Okay... let's go," he finally said, taking the light from Strohe. "I'll need a hand free if I'm going to work this light, so... Hotlips?"

I glared at him.

"Carry my luggage, if you would be so kind," he smiled, holding his medical kit out to me. "I'll tip you when we get to the room."

Everyone was staring, waiting to see what I would do, and it embarrassed me. I gave up and just took it from him, not wanting to start a fight, and found it wasn't very heavy at all. Everybody else seemed to relax a little, and we started back towards the trench.

"Make as little noise as possible," Trebor warned in a whisper, jogging ahead of us with the light. "If Ballpoint figures out we're out here, they'll be on us in a second. Hawkins is watching, but Ballpoint may still get off a few shots."

"Hawkins?" Reudh asked, shifting his bundles on his shoulders.

"Our gunner," Saemin said over his shoulder, panting from the weight he was carrying.

"Okay," Trebor whispered, "Hide under the covers, guys – I'm shutting off the light." With that, he flicked the switch at the end, and the glowing tube quickly faded to black.

"I can't see a darned thing!" Strohe growled, tripping over a rock.

Trebor snorted. "Don't stare at the light next time," he said, rounding the next corner. "Okay, everyone, stay –" he stopped abruptly, staring at the megaportal's hill.

I bumped into him, unable to slow down fast enough, and someone else bumped into me from behind, poking me in the back with something sharp. "Ouch!" I hissed.

"Run," Trebor ordered, pulling away and starting to do so himself.

I started jogging forwards, peering at the hill, and soon saw why the doctor was worried: several tanks were swiveling their turrets in our direction. *Tanks*. They're like big, armored machines, and they can roll faster than horses... Their guns can destroy almost anything. Glancing behind me, I saw that everyone else was straggling behind, confused. "Do what he said!" I hissed loudly.

The hillside exploded above us, showering pebbles and dirt on our heads. Reudh screamed.

"Run!" I yelled, putting on a burst of speed to catch up with Trebor.

Behind me, everyone got the message this time, rushing forwards as quickly as they could. K'bahth easily caught up with me. "There are three vehicles on the northern hills," he clicked.

"I know," I answered between breaths. A boulder behind us exploded violently, scattering dust and shards of stone against my head.

We heard a familiar crash as Parasol's railgun fired a round; off in the distance, a billowing fireball lit up the night sky.

"Keep up!" Trebor shouted, leaping down the ridge I'd hid behind less than an hour before. Saemin soon followed, carefully picking his way down the slope. A shell exploded twenty feet to his left. "Don't worry," Trebor called jokingly, "We're safe as long as they keep aiming at us. Looks like they expected armored soldiers."

Everything brightened suddenly; the moon came out from behind the clouds. Although it was just a crescent, it was enough for us to see by... and enough for Ballpoint to see by, too. As John and the others ran down the Parasol side of the ridge, K'bahth shouted: "Missile! Stop!"

I spun around. In an instant, John had already translated what K'bahth had said, and Reudh and the others stopped abruptly, just in time. The ground between us exploded in a fireball.

"Move!" John shouted again. I turned and kept moving forwards, sprinting to catch up with Trebor. An artillery shell exploded in front of me, tossing up a plume of earth, and I heard another blast coming from behind.

"Strohe!" Reudh yelled, running back for his companion.

"I'm all right, your lordship!" Strohe said, standing shakily as Reudh helped him up. "Just got knocked off my feet, is all."

"Hurry!" I shouted, praying we'd all make it alive. I was sure I was inside the shield's radius by now, but the others were still fifty feet away.

K'bahth gave another warning: "Missile!"

John started to translate, but I yelled over him. "Ignore it! Run!! *Sprint!!*"

The men put on a final burst of speed. As they reached me and slowed to a halt, we heard a hissing in the distance, followed by a hum; the missile exploded inaudibly against the bubble shield, which rippled with a silvery shimmer that soon faded away. Far away on the hill, there was another explosion, and a cloud of fire and smoke billowed into the air. I nearly collapsed with relief.

"Yes!! Haha, you made it!" someone exclaimed loudly, laughing. I turned and saw Katie a couple hundred feet away, running towards us from the trench. Between her palms, she held a glowing sphere of blue-white light. "The Captain does a great job with the energy shield, doesn't she?"

Nobody else seemed nearly as energetic or jubilant, only shuffling forwards towards the trench

as lights began to appear within it, illuminating its length.

"Hotlips!" Trebor called from up ahead. "Bring that medical kit and follow me! The rest of you, stay put and wait for Jonah – he'll be up here soon."

Katie looked first at Trebor, and then at me, raising an eyebrow. Then, she clapped, and as if by magic, the glowing sphere between her palms completely disappeared, and she jogged forwards, slowing and turning, matching her pace with mine. "Hotlips?" she asked in a whisper. "Really?"

I glanced over at her and hesitated. Something about her seemed vaguely... unusual. Brushing the feeling aside, I frowned and nodded. "I asked him to stop, but he wouldn't."

She laughed. "He calls me 'Snowflake'."

"I'd rather have 'Snowflake' than 'Hotlips'," I said, managing a weak smile.

We reached the trench, and I looked around. Trebor was already at the bottom, thirty feet below, but Saemin was making his way carefully down a series of stairs carved into the dirt walls.

"Hurry up, Hotlips!" Trebor called out. "Don't take the ladder – I don't want anything happening to that chest!"

I started down the stairs, following Saemin.

A heavily armored blonde-haired dwarf emerged from a doorway next to the doctor, her arms crossed. "Why 'Hotlips'?" she queried, unamused.

"No reason, sis," Trebor replied, fighting a smile. "It just seemed like it suited her."

"Hmph," the woman grunted, and craned her neck upwards to look at me as I descended another flight of stairs. "Soldier, get your friend situated, and then come to my office. Trebor, you too." This said, she left, going back through the doorway. Trebor left as well, motioning for Saemin to follow him down the trench.

"I'm not a soldier," I muttered, frowning my brow.

On my left, Katie nodded. "I didn't think you were a killer. You don't even seem like the type that would wield a gun. Even so, the captain will probably call you 'soldier' until she gets to know you."

I glanced over at her thoughtfully as we reached the base of the trench, going in and out of shadow as we passed the lights affixed to the walls. "You're very perceptive for a human..." An idea struck me. "You're *not* all human, are you..."

She laughed in delight, and with a finger, she pulled back her long, wavy hair, revealing her right ear. It had a blunted point to it. "I'm part elf, part dwarf, and part human," she said, before putting her hair back. "And *you're* very perceptive, too, for a dwarf."

It startled me, and I looked over at her quickly. She gave me an impish smile and playfully snatched Jack Magnus's cap from my head. I grabbed at it reflexively, trying to keep it on, but she was too quick. "Stop it!" I hissed.

"You're *not* all dwarf..." she whispered with a smile, giving a meaningful nod at my ear before carefully placing the cap back on my head and straightening it. "I *knew* it! You're part elf, too."

"I'm *all* elf," I countered, readjusting the hat.

She gave me another impish grin. "How do *you* know?" she whispered, dancing away. Then, louder, "I'll see you at supper, okay?"

"Okay," I answered hesitantly, watching her disappear through a doorway behind me.

I'd never encountered someone from multiple species before... I hadn't thought it was even *possible*. Confused, I followed Saemin down the trench, trying to put it out of my mind.

Before long, I Saemin led me through a crude doorway and into a well-lit room: the infirmary.

Taking a good look around, I found it was the first place there that appeared otherworldly: the walls, floor and ceiling were covered with metal panels, and four beds were backed up against one wall, covered in long sheets of paper. Next to each were a number of monitors, most of them turned off. Trebor stood behind the nearest bed, holding his blue-gloved hands in the air, a sky-blue cloth cap over his hair. Though it had been too dark to notice before, I found that his beard was clean-shaven.

"Right over here, Saemin," Trebor said, smiling, "I'm all dressed up with nowhere to sew."

Carefully, Saemin set the unconscious Lurit down on the bed and left the room. I set the medical kit down on one of the other beds, looking at Lurit worriedly. "Will he be all right?" I asked.

Trebor was already moving quickly, hooking Lurit up to the monitors, which lit up, displaying numbers and graphs, many of which fluxed with Lurit's heartbeat. "Don't worry about a thing," he assured me. "I've never lost a patient. Matter of fact, I never lose *anything*."

I nodded cautiously and swallowed.

"Have you seen my stethoscope?" he asked suddenly. I wasn't sure if he was joking, but he answered before I had a chance to ask. "Kidding, kidding."

"Are you really the only doctor here?" I asked, awkwardly watching him rush between Lurit and the cabinets at the edges of the room.

He glanced up for a moment as he filled a syringe with a bluish liquid. "There were others, but I'm the only one left. You might try Jonah, though – Ballpoint's mistaken him for a battlefield medic several times, I guess because he's the mild-mannered type."

"It was *once*," someone said from the doorway. I spun around and saw Jonah standing there, a smile edging at his lips. "Instead of telling tall tales about me, Super Mouth, why don't you try leaping off a tall building in a single bound?"

"Can't help it, Jonah," Trebor grinned, injecting the liquid into Lurit's arm. "My stories are more powerful than a locomotive."

"And with great power comes great conversation, I know," Jonah replied, shaking his head with a smile. He started to leave the room, looking over his shoulder at me as he did. "Vanya, come. The Captain has been waiting for you. And Trebor, you come, too, once you're done here."

I didn't hesitate, following him out of the infirmary. He was silent the whole way there.

"You're an elf."

I was standing across from "The Captain" in a little room near the surface. Jonah was standing to the side. The Captain's "office" wasn't much more than a little room with wooden boards holding up the walls, a few chairs, and a desk at one end. The thing that stood out the most was the table that stood between the captain and me: there was a rough clay model sitting in the middle of it. It had little needles stuck here and there in its surface, and a wire ring standing upright on a little hill in the center. It didn't take me long to figure out that it was a crude map of the surrounding area.

"You're an elf," she said again, looking at me suspiciously. "Remove your hat."

"She's an elf?!" Jonah exclaimed, astonished.

Reluctantly, I did so, putting Jack Magnus's cap into one of the pouches at my waist.

Jonah scratched his beard, shaking his head. "She *is* an elf... How about that..."

"Does it matter, ma'am?" I asked respectfully, feeling my cheeks grow warm. I already knew what they were doing; they were singling me out because of what I was.

"You will address me as '*Lieutenant Almory*,' Sleeper, and *never* as 'ma'am'," she said with a harsh glare. "You will say 'sir' if nothing else. I am your superior officer, and I expect you to respect me."

"Yes, sir," I said quietly. If she wanted me to call her "sir", I didn't have a problem with it. "I thought you were a captain, though..."

"I *was* a captain. I used to be an admiral, even. But that doesn't matter anymore." She dismissed it with a wave of her hand. "Why are you here? And why have you brought a Ballpoint soldier along with you, and those scythods?"

"*Ex*-Ballpoint, sir," I corrected her. "We're seeking refuge, and trying to get back to Spearbreakers." Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Jonah frown for a moment at the mention of the fortress.

"There isn't any refuge to be had here, Sleeper," Lieutenant Almory said sternly. "This is a dead end. Spearbreakers is portal-shielded, as of a year ago, following a Ballpoint attack. Nobody can get in. Ballpoint is going to wipe out this encampment any day now, and nothing can be done about it."

I hesitated, glancing at Jonah's face for a moment. He hadn't even flinched at what she'd said. "Are you really going to just sit here and wait for the end?" I asked.

Behind me, I heard someone enter the room, and soon saw a dwarf pass by me to my left, coming to a stop at the table. He had short-cropped, spiky blond hair and a matching mustache, and was wearing green pants with a red shirt that sported large, white flowers. With a curious expression, he reached out and rubbed a finger against my arm. I started to move away, but on catching a glare from the Lieutenant, I stood still.

"Ballpoint gray," the blond-haired dwarf said, furrowing his brow at the little blood-free patch on my armor, and then at his bloody fingertip. "You're wearing Ballpoint gray? Why?"

Everyone in the room stared at me suspiciously.

I felt uneasy. "Mr Frog had it made for me," I explained.

"Really?" Lieutenant Almory mused. She seemed surprised, though it was hard to tell. "Which one?"

That stopped me cold. "Which... which one? ...What do you mean?"

"There are two. One at Spearbreakers, and one... elsewhere."

"I... I've only ever heard of *one*," I stuttered, lost. "I knew the one at Spearbreakers."

Blond-hair smirked in the direction of Lieutenant Almory. "The clone," he said.

Almory glared at him. "Quiet, Hawkins," she warned.

My eyes widened as I put together the pieces. "He's a *clone*? Then... that explains why his memories... It was Joseph, wasn't it?" I asked suddenly. It explained so much.

Everyone seemed taken aback as the name left my lips. "How do you know that name?" Almory questioned, taking a step closer and staring me down threateningly. She was intimidating, and though my heart raced, I tried my best to breathe steadily.

"Sir..." I began, quieter, "With all due respect, I think I know more about Joseph than you do... Mr Frog noticed some of his memories were missing after he made a few deals with Joseph... I talked to Joseph myself once. If Mr Frog is a clone... If..." I almost gasped, my mind racing. "If the *original* Mr Frog is at Eris..." I looked at their faces, and could tell from their glances at each other that I'd figured it out. "He *is* at Eris, isn't he..." I smiled, a hint of triumph in my voice. "Joseph took Mr Frog to Eris, cloned him, kept him there, and sent the clone back to Spearbreakers, right?"

"Might as well tell her, Almory," Hawkins said, a smile twitching at a corner of his lips.

"Seems she knows pretty much everything already."

Lieutenant Almory sighed and clasped her hands behind her back. "Parasol received word from Eris four months ago, in the form of a messenger. Someone in Joseph's employment arrived with a message from Mr Frog, routed through someone called 'Silena'. Parasol assumes she's a powerful leader at Eris. In the message transcript, Mr Frog noted that Joseph cloned him, and he gave the coordinates of Eris's dimension. Unfortunately, the coordinates were only of a spot within the dimension, and not of the entry portal, which is the only way to get inside the complex. The rest of the dimension is portal-shielded. The message wasn't much help, but it's our best lead."

"Am I late?" someone asked behind me, loudly slamming the door as he came in. I spun around and saw a grinning Trebor, likely fully aware that he'd interrupted us.

"There you are, Trebor," Almory said in an annoyed tone. "I thought you'd taken a vacation."

"Are you serious, sis? A *vacation*?" he asked incredulously, taking a seat near her and leaning back in his chair. "*Crystal City* is a vacation. *Earth* is a vacation. This is a fungus convention in Hell."

"I am glad you could join us, either way," Almory murmured, shifting her gaze back to me. "How do you know so much about Mr Frog, Sleeper?" she asked curiously.

I honestly preferred "Hotlips" over "Sleeper". The first almost sounded like a compliment... the second just sounded demeaning, the way Lieutenant Almory said it. "I was Mr Frog's personal assistant, up until a year ago," I explained. "He sent me on a few missions to Ballpoint. That's why my armor is gray – it's so that I would blend in." As I spoke, an idea began to form in my mind, and I paused, deep in thought, my mind racing. "If you'll allow me, Lieutenant Almory," I carefully began, "I think I know how to keep Ballpoint from killing us... I think I know how we can win this battle."

I'd never strategized before, and I found it a little fun.



Chapter 38: A Plan

The journal continues, without any indication of how Vanya felt as she was writing it. Though you've decided she wrote it all long after, you're not sure how or when. You think it's possible that she wrote it when she returned to Spearbreakers, but nothing you've read has indicated that it might be the case. In fact, you think it's just as possible that she was actually at Ballpoint when she wrote it... possibly even somewhere close to where you are now.

As soon as I said I thought we could win the battle, everyone started telling me it was impossible. I didn't even have a chance to begin.

"If you think I can just fire at the portal, you're wrong," Hawkins said, tilting his head with an amused smile. "It's mag-shielded. Anything I shoot at it curves away. Trust me, we've already tried. It's not something we really wanted to do, but! We did try."

"There are other limitations, too," Lieutenant Almory said coldly. "They've jammed our interdimensional communications, and we have no way to contact Parasol. Our short-range communications systems don't reach any farther than twenty miles. Ballpoint has Portal Interference Generators set up at different points around us, and we can't portal out, or in."

Jonah nodded in agreement. "If there was anything we could try, I've already thought of it," the dwarf said apologetically. "No offense to your kind, but I doubt you could come up with anything I haven't, anyway." This last came close to ticking me off.

Trebor laughed and folded his arms behind his head. "Jonah, remind me to stop by your place later for scones and a cup of ego." His jest went unnoticed.

"I may be an elf," I said, trying my best to remain calm, "but that doesn't mean I'm stupid, or that I'm madly in love with nature. If you'll just give me a chance, I'll -"

"You're an elf?" Trebor seemed surprised, sitting up and cocking his head sideways. "Kinky. As you're not 'madly in love', then perhaps -"

"Trebor," Almory scolded, "Time and place. You're here because you're my brother, not because I want you to hit on women."

Trebor laughed dismissively. "Sorry, sis." I was starting to feel very uncomfortable around the man.

"If you'll just give me a chance," I repeated slowly, "I'll explain." I took a few cautious steps towards the table, and upon reaching it, I pointed at the trench in the clay model. "This is us, right?"

The lieutenant nodded. "I'll humor you for now. Tell me your thoughts."

I moved my finger from the trench to the other side of the megaportal's hill. "And this is where Ballpoint is? Behind the hill next to the trench?" At Almory's nod, I continued, moving my finger back to the trench and tracing a path as I spoke. "If I was to start here, at the trench, and walk around these hills to the side, coming up on the back of the Ballpoint camp... they would think I was with them, since I'm wearing Ballpoint gray. If you created some sort of diversion or distraction, I could get over here, to the megaportal."

"Mr Frog taught me a lot about portals," I went on. "If you gave me the right coordinates, I could open it to somewhere in Parasol, so our troops could come through."

Hawkins swore under his breath in Human, a smile breaking over his face. "*Mon rithma...* I think she's really onto something!"

"It won't be enough," Jonah pointed out. "You might be able to get into their *camp* if they were distracted enough, but not to the portal."

Frowning, Almory spoke harshly. "It won't work at *all*."

Everyone stopped and looked at her.

"Ballpoint will be on her in seconds. She's an *elf*. She can't blend in well enough to fool them, and there's not a tree in sight."

I looked at her indignantly. "I've lived in dwarven fortresses all my life, and no one ever knew I was an elf," I stated with a touch of pride. "It's not that hard."

She ignored me, gesturing in my direction. "Anyone can tell an elf from a dwarf just by looking at them, anyway, and Ballpoint has so few elves employed that she'll stand out."

With a dramatic flourish, I snatched Jack Magnus's cap out of its pouch and placed it on my head, pulling it over my ears, and stared at her.

Hawkins gaped, almost laughing. "*Mon Rithma*," he said in awe, "Almory, she's right. Look at her now. With the ears covered, she looks just like a dwarf. Well..." He paused, tilting his head slightly. "She's a little skinny for a dwarf, but still. Wow."

A triumphant smile crept across my face. I was fine with "skinny".

"Call me 'Lieutenant' while we're not alone, Hawk," Almory told him quietly. To me, she argued, "It still won't work, Sleeper. If we make a distraction of any sort, they'll just be on the alert, and even more likely to find you."

"What if we draw them towards here?" I asked, running my finger down the hill, between the portal and trench. "You've already implied that they can't break through the shields, so it would be safe."

Jonah shook his head. "They wouldn't attack at all," he countered. "They'd see the shields were up, and they'd ignore us."

"What if we lowered them?" I asked.

Everyone looked at me as if I was crazy.

"Not like that!" I added quickly. "Just long enough to draw them closer. Then we put them back up."

Hawkins was against it. "They'd shoot my turret, first thing," he said, crossing his arms.

Quickly, I thought up a way around it. "Then we do everything while it's still dark, and we move the turret to the other side of the trench."

"Have you looked at it??" he asked incredulously. "Do you have any idea how much that thing weighs?"

I'd seen it. "Not too much for fifteen people to move, I bet."

Jonah stepped forwards quietly, scratching the bridge of his nose and staring at the model on the table. "There is another option we have," he began cautiously, glancing up at Almory. "It's a bit of a secret, but... we have a prototype mag-deflector shield here... It's ancient technology, but... it might offer us a little protection against long-range weaponry. Even though we're right at the base of their hill, we might manage to throw them to the side."

"I know how to work it," Hawkins offered. "Figured it out last summer."

"It still won't be enough." Almory shook her head slowly, still against it. "There's a *reason* we use the energy shield instead of the mag-deflect." She seemed to be growing very annoyed at my persistence.

"What about the scythods?" I offered, brainstorming. "If they dug a long tunnel right beneath the hillside, Ballpoint's tanks would fall into it as they rolled over."

Everyone stared at me quietly, deep in thought.

"Okay," I started again, laying it out for them from the beginning. "Tomorrow, we help the scythods dig a tunnel under the hill. They dig, and we take out the dirt."

Jonah raised a cautionary finger. "And dump it where?" he asked, pointing out a potential problem.

"The caverns, maybe," Trebor joked. "Or just up here. Whole place is a dump anyway, right?"

I went on, tracing my finger across the surface of the clay model. "Tomorrow night, we move the turret from one side of the trench to the other. Then, Lieutenant, you lead a small squad of people over to the Ballpoint camp and do little things to make them angry. Little things like blowing up vehicles and tents, and drawing their attention back and forth from one side of the camp to the other. Then you get back here as fast as you can, making sure they follow you. You lower the shields and turn on the mag-deflector, and Hawkins mans the gun until they figure out where we moved it.

"Meanwhile, I take a long path around the hill and come up on the other side. While they're launching an attack on the trench, they'll be distracted enough that I can get to the megaportal and open it up for reinforcements. Ballpoint is destroyed, and we win."

Almory's face twisted as she started to hyperventilate with anger. "Do you have any idea who we are?" she asked.

"Calm down, Almory," Hawkins said, stepping towards her carefully, trying to put a hand on her shoulder. "It'll be all right."

She smacked him away, seething with rage. "Can it, Hawkins. Sleeper, this is Parasol's Auxiliary Squad 48D. We're not elites. We're not extensively trained. We're not even *soldiers*. We're misfits; a cobbled-together squad of filler soldiers to make Parasol's ranks look bigger and

more intimidating. These people were never supposed to see combat at all! Before the Time War, Trebor was a medical student, Jonah was a theoretical physicist, and Hawkins was a shuttle pilot."

Hawkins raised his hand with a smile.

Almory went on, fuming. "Katie - Katalina Okablokum was training to be an archiver at Parasol, and Saemin Lo is a construction worker. The only people here who have any military background are Tames, Martin, and I, and Martin hasn't even been able to get up for months! He's a biomech, and his legs are malfunctioning." She stepped forwards and slammed her hand fist on the table, seemingly ready to bite my head off. "These are *my people*, Sleeper, and I will *not* needlessly put *any* of them in danger!!"

Silence fell in the little office, everyone hanging their heads in shame, except me. I stared Almory in the eye. I could see the pain there; I thought I knew why she was lashing out at me.

"You've lost someone close to you, haven't you," I guessed quietly.

Hawkins jerked his head up quickly and started mouthing, "Don't go there!"

The lieutenant looked at me strangely, her voice deep with restrained fury. "...What."

I looked downwards at the table with my eyes, careful not to meet her gaze, to keep from angering her. "I've lost someone close to me, too," I said softly, idly tracing my fingertip across the clay model. "I lost my sister, during a mission against Ballpoint. There was nothing I could do to save her." At the memory, I stopped, looking back up at her face. "I can repair Martin for you," I offered. "Mr Frog taught me as much as he could about electromechanics and bioneurology... And during the battle, if Ballpoint gets too close, all you have to do is turn the energy shield back on. I'll die, but you'll be safe. If I can't get the megaportal to open, I'll blow it up. I'll die, but you'll be safe."

Almory's face was expressionless as she bored into me with her eyes, but the others seemed more emotional: Jonah gently shook his head in dumbfounded shock, Trebor fell back into his chair, and Hawkins whispered, "*Mon rithma...*" It seemed I'd gained a measure of respect from them.

"And Lieutenant," I continued quietly, looking around at everyone, "If we sit here and do nothing... your people are going to die anyway. My people will, too." I looked back at her dark, brown eyes. "Do you really want all of us to die without putting up a fight?"

Another awkward silence hung thickly in the air, everyone unwilling to talk after I'd been so bold, possibly for fear of angering Lieutenant Almory. After several minutes, Jonah spoke to her. "Captain, if she repairs Gearbox, he could be our ace in the hole... Ballpoint doesn't know he's here. And if Katie was to teach Vanya her deflection spell, Vanya would have a much greater chance of success... I think it could be done."

"I'm for it," Trebor put in, getting up. "It sounds like a good plan to me."

Almory turned her head to glare at him.

Hawkins stepped forwards, too, although he was visibly nervous. "Almory -"

"*Lieutenant*," she corrected him under her breath.

"Lieutenant," he began again, "I think it's a good idea, too..."

She rolled her eyes and directed her glare toward him, instead.

Hawkins held up his hands in a "don't shoot" gesture and blurted, "But that's just my opinion! Perfectly fine if you don't take my advice."

"It has *no chance* of working," she warned, frustrated. "I am *sure* of it. I'll bet my finest sword

on it, even: she will die before she ever reaches the portal."

Trebor raised a hand. "I'll take that bet," he said, grinning sheepishly.

"I don't think it's so hopeless," Jonah admitted, wary of Almory's wrath. Hawkins nodded in agreement.

Almory glanced around at everyone, seemingly a volcano ready to erupt. Finally, she sighed and gave in, to my immense relief. "Fine. We'll try it. But we won't tell anyone else the whole plan until they need to know; it would lower their morale. We'll let them believe that the visitors will be enough to turn the tide. And you," she said, pointing at me, "If I get the *slightest idea* that the mission is at risk, I *will* be closing the shields and leaving you out there. Understand?"

"I understand, sir," I answered, nodding.

"You are all dismissed. I'll join you at the mess hall in a moment."

"That was gutsy," Hawkins said after we left, shaking his head at me as we walked back down the stairs to the base of the trench. "I thought she was going to shoot you. Gotta be more careful around her, okay?" He halted on the steps, sniffing the air. "Mmm, smells good! *Mon rithma*, what has Katie cooked up for us this time?"

"Smells like rations, steam-broiled," Trebor joked loudly. "If I had amnesia, I could say it's been longer than I could remember since I had it last. Hmm... I wonder what she's cooked us for dessert," he said with a sarcastic smile.

"Likely more of the same," Hawkins laughed, "but it smells different this time, somehow." He and Trebor rushed ahead, leaving Jonah and I alone on the steps as we descended.

I looked over at him nervously. "Is Hawkins with Almory?" I asked, worrying I was being too nosy.

He laughed at my question, folding his glasses and putting them into his shirt pocket, beside his gray-edged beard. "Are they together, you mean? No, they haven't even admitted they like each other yet; everyone seems to know they're in love but them. We don't say anything about it, though. I doubt the captain would have it, anyway. She's too 'by the book' to have a military relationship, and aside from that, she's already openly against Katie and Saemin being together. Being with Hawkins would be hypocritical of her."

The mess hall was bigger than I thought it would be... but it wasn't nearly as ornate or impressive as the dining hall at Spearbreakers. As I looked about, I saw that it had long plastic tables, metal folding chairs, and walls of dirt instead of stone. It had a homey feel to it, a sort of comfort, like they had tried to fix it up. There were odd decorations here and there, like a plaid white and green cloth hanging against a wall, a few plastic wreaths of holly, and a candle stub in the middle of every table.

John, Tedaz, and Strohe were sitting quietly at one of the tables, slumping in their chairs and looking around awkwardly, as if they felt they didn't belong. There was another table pushed up end-to-end against theirs, and the Parasol employees sat at that one, chatting. I recognized Trebor, Hawkins, and Saemin, but the other man at the table - a human - was unfamiliar. He had scraggly brown hair and a stubble of a beard, and was wearing a dark leather trench coat. Though he looked battle-worn, he seemed comfortable where he was. While the other three cracked jokes, he sat silently, watching a doorway at the far end of the room. There was a window next to it, and through it I could see Katie, walking hurriedly back and forth.

"Go sit down," Jonah prodded me, going on ahead and taking a seat by Hawkins. Feeling nervous, I pulled out the chair to the right of John and sat down, scooting forwards under the

table. It was so silent at our table that even that act alone seemed intrusive. John only turned his head towards me, and then looked away.

"Where is Reudh?" I asked.

Across the table and to my left, Tedaz raised his head. "He's been in the kitchen with Katie," he answered, pointing at the window on the far side of the room. "He thought the soldiers could use some of our food."

"Katie cooks?"

The swordsman shrugged. "I guess," he answered, and changed the subject. "It feels odd being here, one of only a couple humans."

"We're all humans," Strohe pointed out, meaning him and John.

"But look at the Parasol troops," Tedaz said. "Only two of them are. The rest are dwarves."

"Katie's pretty tall for a dwarf," Strohe chuckled.

I looked at him with a quizzical expression. "You think she's a dwarf?"

The odd little farmer laughed. "Being human myself, I can tell ya for sure that she ain't one."

For a moment, I puzzled over this. After living around dwarves my whole life, I could tell that she wasn't a dwarf... but I'd thought she was a human. Being one-third of three species, everyone seemed to think she was of a species different from their own... With racism and prejudice as big of a problem as it is these days, I couldn't imagine how much trouble that had given her while she was growing up.



Chapter 39: An Evening Meal

The only thing that separates this entry from the previous is Vanya's trademark star. You get the feeling she wrote this entry immediately following it.

"Dinner is ready!" Katie called, carrying a few steaming trays of food into the room, layered on her arm. Reudh entered behind her, a tray in each hand. His clumsiness stood out in stark contrast to the graceful sweep of her arms as she placed her trays on the table, one after the next. "Sorry it took so long!" she apologized. "Reudh and the scythods offered us some of their food supplies, and I thought it would make a special treat for everyone." With that, she twirled and started back towards the kitchen for another set of trays.

"*Mon rithma!*" Hawkins exclaimed, staring at his plate like a kid on his birthday. "*Real* food!"

"It's really good!" Saemin chuckled through a mouthful.

Reudh sat his trays down carefully in front of John and Trebor, and then straightened, saying, "Potatoes, corn and salted pork! It's travel food, but you won't find better this side of the capital! I chose carefully." He started walking towards the kitchen, but stopped and looked over at me with a thoughtful, curious expression. "Vanya, what is the meat that the scythods gave us?"

I didn't know. "Whatever they caught last," I said, shrugging. "It's usually okay."

Reudh gave an uncomfortable nod and continued towards the kitchen, having some difficulty drawing his eyes away from me. He almost bumped into Katie, who was traveling back with another set of trays.

"Careful!" she laughed. "I don't want to drop it! We can't waste any of this. Here, take your plate," she said, turning her arm carefully towards him. He took it gratefully, and with a respectful nod, sat down across from me, next to Strohe. Katie sat a plate in front of me, and then another to my right. "This is mine," she whispered, and then left, rushing back to the kitchen.

I followed Katie with my eyes as she walked around the table, and then stopped as she passed

behind Reudh. He was staring at me, fork in hand, as if he didn't want to believe what he was seeing.

"What is it?" I asked.

Reudh motioned towards my head with a finger. "That hat... where did you get it?"

I glanced around, unsure why he was asking. "From Jack Magnus, back at Spearbreakers... why?"

A worried frown flicked into view, but he tried to hide it. "Were you friends with him?"

I was beginning to feel worried, myself. "I guess you could say that... Why are you asking?"

He sighed and put his fork down. "I have some news that I regret I must tell you, dearest. Jack Magnus died last winter."

"What?!" I exclaimed, a little too loudly. A few heads turned in my direction, and there was a lull in conversation from everyone else. After they started talking again, I said quietly, "What do you mean, 'Jack Magnus died'? He was one of the best soldiers in the fortress. He *couldn't* have died." I didn't want to believe it. It couldn't be true. I wanted to believe that maybe Reudh was just lying to get rid of his competition.

Katie interrupted us, going around the table and setting a mug of beer in front of everyone. As she passed me, she whispered, "If you want water instead, I can get it for you."

I shook my head, so distracted that I hardly noticed her. "No, it's okay."

She nodded and left, walking back towards the kitchen with an empty tray.

A lump formed in my throat. "Reudh... that day I kissed you on the cheek... was that the day he died? Was *I* the reason Jack Magnus died?"

Reudh shook his head roughly. "No, he died later that year! It was in the middle of a Spawn siege! He gave his life protecting the fortress. Quite gallantly, too, I might add."

I wanted to cry. "Did they at least give him a tomb?"

Reudh gave me a little smile. "Cheer up, sweet Vanya," he said softly. "He didn't stay dead." At my horrified expression, he added, "No, no! I don't mean he became a zombie! Not at all, my dear!"

That confused me even further. "Okay...?"

"From what I understand, someone named Draconit... Draconis?"

"Draconik," I prodded, as Katie sat down beside me and started eating.

Reudh nodded, picking his fork back up. "Yes, Draconik. Draconik brought him back, though he had a body made of metal. He died several more times after that, but Draconik brought him back to life each time."

I stared blankly, frowning with a corner of my mouth. "...What? A body of metal?"

Katie raised an eyebrow. "He sounds like a biomech. I didn't know dwarves have that technology," she said, popping a spoonful of mashed potatoes into her mouth.

"...They *don't*," I said slowly, picking at my corncob. "Draconik is from Parasol."

"Oh!" Reudh exclaimed. "That explains so much, then! I always wondered why he seemed such a queer dwarf."

This made Katie laugh. "You think Parasol is queer, do you? *We* think *you're* a little funny, too, or at least a little behind... though I'd *love* to be in some of your battles."

John leaned forwards over his food to look around me. "Battle isn't as glorious as you think," he said distastefully.

"Says you!" Katie brushed her hair out of her eyes with her fingers. "All I ever get is guard duty. I lied about my age in order to join the army, and nobody will let me fight because I'm 'too inexperienced'. But you should see the Captain! She's *amazing* with her swords!"

Trebor spoke up loudly from farther down the two tables. "She always preferred melee over range, and she got good at it, unlike Saemin over here, who's lucky if he hits the right barn, let alone the broad side of it," he joked, grinning and patting Saemin on the back. "And speaking of Saemin, you new guys should eat a bit faster!" he added pointedly, making sure we heard. "When he finishes his, he'll try to finish yours, too."

Saemin chuckled in a deep voice. "It's not my fault. I gotta eat more 'cause I'm so much bigger than you guys."

"He's telling the truth!" Hawkins offered, scarfing down a hefty forkful of pork.

Trebor nodded solemnly. "Just ask Hawkins, he's had his dinner go MIA more times than he can count. Granted, he can't count past five."

Laughing, Hawkins protested, "I was sick and delirious! Nobody would've known except you judged it funny to tape the whole thing."

"Your honor, I object!" Trebor said, raising a hand. "I *knew* it was funny, and it was. Not quite as funny as when we stuck Jonah up that tree, though."

Jonah shook his head, smiling. "No, don't go dragging me into your grandiose festival of jokes."

"And why not?" Trebor grinned. "For a hobbyist astrophysicist, your fear of heights is toweringly funny, and your fear of water is drowning in irony. And what about you, Tames?" he asked, speaking to the man in the leather trench coat. "You've been awfully quiet all night. If you got shy, I can't imagine who you caught it from."

Tames shifted in his chair. "I prefer to listen," he said simply, crossing his arms behind his half-empty plate. "I do think you're going very far out of your way to impress the new girl, though," he added disapprovingly, nodding in my direction.

At his mention of me, I raised my eyebrows, awkwardly swallowing a mouthful of food. It had been a while since I'd eaten anything so good, and I think I was more focused on the food than their conversation.

"What? Trying to impress Hotlips? Of course not," Trebor said, smirking and waving a hand in front of him as if dismissing the thought. "What about you, though, pulling the 'strong but silent' act?"

"I do this *every* night, Trebor," Tames said quietly. "Or have you not noticed?"

Jonah chuckled, glancing over at me. "I think you're absolutely right, Tames; he's definitely smitten with Vanya."

Tames gave a brief, forced smile of recognition.

"She's not looking for a relationship!" Reudh piped up, meeting my eyes for a moment. "She's said that very clearly! She's not ready." Nobody seemed to hear him.

Trebor grinned mischievously. "If I want to see 'smitten', Jonah, I'll have Saemin practice yoga within a mile of you. You'll be so smitten we'll have trouble peeling you from the wall, floor, or wherever else you happen to stop."

"He's not clumsy like that!" Katie burst out, defending him.

Saemin only laughed, shaking his head. "Naw, I am sometimes!"

Katie sat back, a frown troubling her face as she turned to me and quietly explained, "He's bad with melee weapons, but he's not as clumsy as Trebor says."

"Enough!"

Our heads turned towards the doorway to the trench as we all looked at Lieutenant Almory, who stood with her hands on her hips, fingertips gently brushing the hilts of her two swords.

"We have more important matters to discuss than whether or not Saemin Lo's yoga is dangerous." She sent a very pointed glare in my direction. "We've decided on a course of action."

Saemin set Hawkin's plate down in front of him quietly. "We're not gonna sit around anymore?"

"No. Tomorrow we'll be helping the scythods dig a large tunnel beneath the surface of the hill. Early tomorrow night, under cover of darkness, we'll move the railcannon to the other end of the trench."

"Uh, Captain," Saemin interrupted again, frowning, "I can't lift that..."

She narrowed her eyes at him. "Of course not, which is why I said *we*."

"Sorry, Captain." Saemin's head drooped slightly, and he popped the rest of Hawkin's pork into his mouth.

Tames folded his hands worriedly and asked, "Does this mean we're actually going to attack?"

"Yes it does," she answered, in a voice that belied her feelings on my plan. "Tomorrow night, before dawn, you, Martin, Jonah and I will sneak over to Ballpoint's camp, get them angry, and lead them back here. We'll keep the energy shields down until they get too close, and we'll have the prototype mag-deflector running, since they don't know we have it. With the new manpower," she said, looking at John and Reudh's party, "we'll be able to cause enough damage to cause Ballpoint to pull back from the portal. Eventually, we may be able to retake it."

"Gearbox isn't working, though, Captain!" Katie cried out in dismay. "Martin, I mean. I can't figure out how to fix him, and there's *no way* I can do it in one day!"

"That's the Sleeper's job, not yours," Almory told her. "However... Katalina and Agent Carena, follow me. The rest of you, finish eating and hit the bunks. No late-night partying. I need you all well-rested for tomorrow." Saying this, she motioned for Katie and I to follow her as she left the mess hall.

As Katie and I stood, Tames got to his feet as well, saying, "It doesn't sound like this is going to work... I'm not hungry anymore." He seemed very concerned.

The three of us left the mess hall and entered the trench. Almory was waiting for us outside.

"Goodnight, Tames," she said pointedly, motioning for him to leave. As she did, I heard Hawkins in the mess hall, exclaiming about how Saemin had stolen his food.

"Good night, Captain." He nodded and began walking away.

Almory followed him with her eyes, folding her arms. After he was out of sight, she turned to Katie and I. "Sleeper, do you have any experience in magic?"

"Magic?" I asked excitedly. "Really??"

Almory's eyes bored into me impatiently.

I shook my head. "I've always wanted to learn," I offered helpfully, hoping I was going to learn.

From Almory's expression, I could tell that she'd been hoping to hear something very different. She groaned, looked at Katie and asked, "Katalina, how long would it take you to teach Agent Carena your deflection spell?"

Katie seemed embarrassed. "It's not one I use much," she said carefully, thinking. She seemed uncertain. "I guess maybe six or seven hours?" She frowned and looked down at Almory, who was a few inches shorter than she was.

Almory narrowed her eyes. "You'll do it in five."

"What's going on, Captain?" Katie asked, seeming worried. "Why does she need that spell in particular?"

"There's more to the plan than I told everyone else. Agent Carena's life depends on learning that spell. And you, Sleeper," she went on, "If you don't have 'Gearbox' fixed by tomorrow night, I'm turning you out. I expect you to fix him *first*. If you really want to learn that spell, I expect you to hold up your end of the deal."

"Yes sir," I said quietly, keeping a calm facade. Inside, I wanted to jump for joy.

She nodded with mild approval. "Good. Katalina, I hope you left something for me. That food smells delicious."

Katie beamed. "It's in the temp regulator, Captain. I thought it might be a while before you got here, so I put it in there to keep it warm. I'll get it right out for you, okay?" She started back into the mess hall, watching over her shoulder.

Almory nodded, a gentle, loving smile tugging at a corner of her mouth. "All right, Katalina," she said. "I'll be in soon. You go on." After Katie left, she turned to me, her expression stern and serious once more, but she spoke quietly. "These people aren't just soldiers to me, Agent. I'm their lieutenant, but to them, I'm their captain, and to me, they're my family."

Her sudden change in demeanor caught me off guard. "I... I understand, sir..."

"Good," she said, and re-entered the mess hall.

Her gentleness and loving smiles were things I'd never expected to see from her, but it soon turned out I didn't know her as well as I'd thought.

The rest of supper was just as lively as it had been while Almory was away. While her soldiers respected her and feared her wrath, they enjoyed her company at the same time. Like any dwarf, she could hold her beer, and her jokes were as loud and racy as even Trebor's. They didn't *feel* like soldiers when you were around them... they felt more like family, just as Almory had said.

It left me with a guilty feeling. I'd barged into their world uninvited, and upset their way of doing things. I was asking them to put their lives on the line, but my purpose wasn't to save them... it was to save myself, and get back to Spearbreakers. It was selfish of me, and it made me feel awful inside. I made a silent vow that I would do whatever I could to save all of them, no matter what happened in the end.



Chapter 40: Urist

An idea drifts into your mind, and you look up at the woman across from you, studying her again. The eyes, a silver-green, aren't quite as Vanya had described them, but the woman's wavy brown hair matches almost perfectly. You wish Vanya had provided pictures, but as it stands...

"Are you Katie?" you ask cautiously.

The woman offers you a mildly amused smirk. "Of course I am."

Unfortunately, from the tone in her voice, her response seems as likely to be sarcasm as truth, only making you more confused.

"I told you," the woman says in a more serious tone. "Your guessing is only going to get both of us into trouble. Please, just keep reading. "

With a disappointed nod, you press the button to record and continue reading.

After dinner, Katie sent me on ahead to my room while she cleaned up after dinner. I wanted to help, but Almory said I needed as much sleep as possible for the next day.

"They always give me this kind of job, don't worry about it!" Katie told me. "I'd love to fight battles with everyone else, but they won't let me. I always get stuck with things like this. You go

on ahead!"

"Where do I go?"

She laughed lightheartedly. "It's simple! Just leave the mess hall and head towards the armory, then take the second set of stairs on your right after you pass the latrines, turn right and take the first door on your left."

My mind soon managed to jumble her instructions into a meaningless mess. Fifteen minutes later, she found me wandering the wrong end of the trench, completely lost, and peeking into every door in frustration as I passed.

"Come on!" Katie said as she led me back. She always seemed to be in a good mood, but I could tell she was tired. "I told you to go the *other* direction! Why were you at *that* end of the camp?"

"I got lost," I tried to explain. "I've never been here before."

She laughed. "How do you get lost? There are only two directions you can go!"

"It's a big trench!" I protested, smiling in spite of myself.

Katie only laughed again in response, and continued leading me forwards. "Here are the latrines," she said, pointing at a door as we passed. "Here's the stairs to the generator, shields, computers and comm systems." She gestured at a flight of stairs on our right. "Don't ever go up there, or the Captain will get mad. She only lets me go in there because I'm good with computers. And here's the stairs to the barracks," she added as we began climbing them. "Usually everyone gets their own room, but you'll have to bunk with me tonight. We don't have any more spare rooms." She gave an apologetic frown.

"That isn't so bad," I noted. It was better than bunking with Reudh.

Reaching the top, she opened the first door, explaining, "You have to turn the doorknob, because they're not automatic. You get to pick any bed you want! Well, except for the one on the end, because that's mine."

Walking inside, I looked around, and heard her close the door behind us. The room was dimly lit, and a lot bigger than I'd expected it to be. There were at least sixteen beds in eight stacks, four up against each sidewall, with chairs in between. It was a typical barracks dorm, but the beds drew my attention. "They're stacked on top of each other!" I exclaimed, walking over to the nearest and climbing up the ladder enough to see the one on top.

Katie laughed. "You haven't seen bunk beds before?"

I hopped back down and shook my head. "Dwarves only have single beds. I have no idea why they've never thought about it before!"

"Maybe because they like a more solid feel?" Katie suggested, pushing on the top bunk of the nearest. It wobbled back and forth slightly. "But what about you?" she asked. "Don't you feel better higher up? You're all elf, you said."

"I was raised by dwarves," I said thoughtfully. "I grew up around them... I like most of the things that dwarves like, but there are some things I like that they don't... like the stars."

She smiled, tilting her head at me with an impish smile and shaking it from side to side. "Then how can you say you're all elf?" she asked. "I'm half human, but I spent so much time with my mother that I feel I'm an equal part of elf and dwarf, too." Katie walked over to her side of the room, motioning for me to follow. "You can sleep on the top bunk of my bed," she offered.

"I'd love to," I breathed happily, and I meant it. I felt drawn almost irresistibly to the new experience of a bed so far above the ground. "It must be like sleeping in the clouds."

She found my musings hilarious. "It's not nearly as dandy as you think," she giggled, and

changed the subject. "Do you see the box at the foot of each bed?"

I looked. At the base of each bunk, top and bottom, was a chest with a lid.

At my nod, she explained, "You put your clothes – or armor – in there when you go to sleep, and it's clean the next morning."

"That's a lot faster than washing them by hand," I whispered, opening mine and peeking at the inside. The walls of the chest were thick, but the inside looked like smooth, silver plastic.

"You really *have* lived in dwarven fortresses your whole life, haven't you?" Katie asked thoughtfully, studying me through her dark bangs. "For most of my life I've lived at Parasol. You see this kind of thing every day there!" Suddenly her eyes took on a mischievous gleam. "Did you ever meet anybody you really liked?" she whispered with a gossip-like air.

My excitement slowly faded, and I turned away, sitting down on the edge of a bed. "I don't want to think about men anymore," I replied quietly. Suddenly, I remembered Urist's package and took it out of my pouch.

Katie sat down next to me, leaning forwards and peering at the brown wrapping curiously before looking up at me, her blue eyes almost seeming to glow in the dim light. "What is it?" she asked, worried. "Is something wrong?"

I started to shake my head, but stopped. I really didn't know the answer. "It's from Urist... He's the... he's an old friend."

A corner of her mouth tweaked downwards. "A friend?" She didn't seem to buy it.

"He used to be," I said quietly, turning the package over in my hands. "But that was all we were. He never wanted anything more. I don't know why he sent this with Reudh... or why he sent me anything at all."

She and I looked it over carefully. Urist had wrapped the package in dried rope reed paper, thickly enough that I couldn't really make out the shape of whatever was inside. "If he thinks sending me something will make it any better –"

"Make what any better?" Katie asked innocently.

I frowned. Now that I was holding something from him, he seemed more difficult to speak about. "He killed my sister," I whispered.

"What?!" Her face twisted into a horrified expression, which soon merged into confusion. "But... How..." She seemed almost as if she was about to ask a question, but she shook her head and brushed it away. "Did he do it on purpose?"

With a sigh, I shook my head. "He didn't know it was her... He was trying to protect me."

"Open it," Katie urged.

On her prompting, I did, removing one layer of wrapping after another and letting them flutter to the floor beside my bloodstained boots. The parchment was so thin, and Urist had wrapped it so tightly, that it seemed to take forever before we finally reached a hand-sized box, with a folded note attached to the outside. Setting the package down, I unfolded the note and began to read aloud:

"Vanya,

Four years ago, the day you saved Talvi's life and mine, I rediscovered you in the courtyard following a Holistic Spawn attack and requested Urist's location. It was the first occasion on which you heard his name, but I withheld information regarding the events that occurred immediately following. A rogue agent from Parasol was attempting to release demonic forces upon the fortress by Urist's hand, fooling him through the overuse of hallucinogenics. His name was Iohanne. Iohanne and I fought, deep beneath even the magma forges, and so exhausted was

I from the battle I had shared with you that I would have definitely faced an inescapable failure, if Urist not saved my life, and by extension, the fortress, by killing the agent as he strangled me. Though I passed out, Urist received a vision from Armok, wherein the immortal etched a message on the head of Urist's broken spear.

Though I am against it, he cares for you, Vanya. He foolishly squandered a fortune commissioning a number of these, and sent an identical package with every merchant-infested caravan that has passed through Spearbreakers in hopes of reaching you. This particular package goes with Reudh, a former overseer.

Despite my reassurances that it is pointless and the probability that you survived the fall is extremely miniscule, Urist persists in his illogical delusions and believes you did not perish.

Talvi admitted that she attempted to murder you. Tomio, the current overseer, mandated her imprisonment, and she therefore no longer presents any threat to your livelihood. I would appreciate your prompt return.

Signed, Mr Frog

PS, I write this only at Urist's insistence. He has become my personal assistant in your absence."

"You were friends with Mr Frog?" Katie asked suddenly, looking up at my face. She quieted when she noticed the moisture in my eyes.

I bit my lip, shaking my head. "I wouldn't say 'friends'," I whispered, and then an invading smile twisted against my frown; I felt caught between tears and laughter. "He always called me 'stupid girl'... I was his assistant. I don't think he ever thought much of me."

"He thought enough to ask you to come home..."

I nodded wordlessly, opening the little box. Inside was a crystal jade spearhead, shaped just like the one Urist had always carried with him; shaped just like the one that had guided Urist and I through the caverns with a glowing light, that day he'd risked his life to rescue me from prison. Tears pooled in my eyes as I read the single page that was laid on top of it.

"Vanya, this is a copy of my most prized possession. I would send you the original, but I save that for the day I find you. I am sorry for what I did to your sister. Indeed, I did not know it was her until Mr Frog and Wari informed me, but I have carried a heavy weight on my shoulders ever since. Although almost everyone believes you to be dead, I know in my heart that you are still alive. Please come home, Vanya. Even if you never speak to me again... even if you are only here for a day... please come home. I will await you always."

"He loves you," Katie whispered, but I hardly heard her as I broke down, tossing the package aside, holding my head in my hands as I shook with silent sobs. Putting her arm around me, she sat by my side, holding my hand in hers. I was grateful for it, and together we sat there until the pain in my heart started to fade, and the tears began to subside.

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The next morning at dawn, Katie stood beside the bed and shook the top bunk gently back and forth. "Wake up, sleepy!" she called.

Slowly I awoke, rubbing at my eyes with my fingertips to clear them.

"How did you sleep?" she laughed. "Was it really like a cloud?"



As groggy as I was, I couldn't help but smile at what I'd said the night before. "It wasn't quite like a cloud, but it was still nice," I said, sitting up and holding the blanket close to my skin to keep it wrapped around me. I still felt tired, but it had been a while since I'd gotten such a good night's sleep. "'It's been a while since I slept on a mattress... I've slept in the dirt for the past year."

She grinned. "Come on, get up and get into your clothes. I already made breakfast. I'll see you downstairs, okay?" With that, she spun around on her heel and walked light-footedly out the door. She was already wearing her Parasol uniform.

I let the blanket fall from me and crawled cautiously to the foot of the bed, half-expecting to fall at any second. It felt a little unsafe, but last night I'd been so tired I hadn't cared. I lifted the lid of the cleaning chest, and was pleased to find that my clothes were clean. There was still a slash on one upper arm from where my sister had cut through the carbon fiber padding, but I was fine with it, and put them on quickly; being winter, it was cold. Afterwards, using Reudh's comb, I brushed out my hair – it was just getting to where it had been before Mr Frog had cut it.

As I entered the mess hall, Reudh rose from his seat respectfully. Behind him, Trebor leaned back in his chair, talking around a mouthful of food. "Hey, Hotlips! We weren't sure if you'd gotten lost again! Tames told us all about your little adventure last night." I decided to ignore him.

"You look beautiful this morning, Vanya!" Reudh declared as I approached.

It made me smile. "Thank you, Reudh," I said softly. "Your comb works wonders."

Pleased, he pulled out my chair for me to sit down.

"Wow, a gentleman," Trebor laughed. "I thought they died out with the dinosaurs."

"Only where you come from," Jonah said, nodding to me politely before turning back to Hawkins, attempting to continue his conversation.

Trebor feigned indignation. "I'll have you know I come from a very long line of gentlemen, Jonah," he said, regaining the other's attention. "I simply skipped in line, that's all, and they were too polite to put me in my place." Saying this, he got up, headed for the door to the trench.

As Trebor walked around the table, Hawkins called, "Or perhaps they considered you a lost cause?"

It wasn't until then that I noticed the railgun was regularly firing rounds. "Hawkins, if you're here, then... who's firing the railgun?" I asked curiously.

"Oh, that's Saemin," Hawkins answered, popping a bit of salted pork into his mouth with his fingers. "He takes the night shift. If he didn't, they'd probably already have that portal open."

I nodded, thinking. "That explains why he's gone... Where's everyone else? John is here, and Tedaz and Strohe are too..." At their names, they nodded and waved, though Strohe seemed more absorbed in his drink than his food. "...but where are Lieutenant Almory and Katie? And Tames?"

"I'm here!" Katie called through the kitchen window. "I'll be out in just a moment. Tames monitors the power, shields and communications; he'll probably be up there most of the day. He doesn't like helping with other stuff anyway."

John swallowed and stopped eating for a moment. "The scythods already ate. The Captain is with them, getting the tunnel started." He paused, confused. "Why do you call her 'Lieutenant', anyway? Isn't she a captain?"

"Not exactly," Jonah said, sighing.

Katie came out from the kitchen with three trays of food. "She's a lieutenant, but some stuff

happened before I knew her and... well..." She appeared at a loss for words, and sat one in front of me, one in front of herself, and another across from us. "Trebor could tell the story best, but he just left, so..." She appeared uncomfortable, and made several false attempts to start before finally saying, "I'm no good at telling stories."

"Don't worry yourself," Jonah laughed. "I'll tell it. Hawkins' version would be biased, so you don't want it."

"Hey!" Hawkins protested, openmouthed. "It wouldn't be biased!"

Tedaz chuckled, staring at his food. "After seeing the way you were looking at her last night, I'd say maybe."

This forbidden topic brought on an uncomfortable silence, which Jonah hurried to break. "Lieutenant Almory rose through the ranks pretty quickly. She's a *real* soldier, unlike us, and she strikes like a cobra with her twin blades, which she always keeps handy, if you've noticed. Apart from Tames and Gearbox, the rest of us were part of the squad they reassigned her to command, almost as a bizarre form of punishment.

"During her impressive tour of duty, she attained the rank of admiral, which she soon resigned from – she couldn't stand a desk job. Back at captain, she remained there for a long time, up until about three years ago. Her superiors ordered her to sacrifice her squad as a diversion, so Parasol could take back the region. She knew if she openly refused, they'd just send someone else, so she said nothing to them and tried to create the diversion on her own."

"She disobeyed?" John asked, unimpressed.

Jonah held up his hands over his empty plate. "You haven't heard all of it yet," he chuckled. "She couldn't stand to lose her people, and though her diversion might've been a success, she would've died. It would've worked, but her superiors demoted her as a result of her disobeying orders."

"It was Tames that saved her," Katie pitched in.

Nodding, Jonah went on, "Yes it was. Tames was of the opinion that her diversion wouldn't work, and betrayed her trust to save her life, and, as he thought, the life of her squad, which he was part of. He was the one who reported her. We all owe him a great debt of gratitude. Without him, we wouldn't have our Captain. We still call her 'Captain' out of respect. "

"You're all very close..." John said wonderingly, almost as if he felt it contradictory.

"We are at that," Trebor said, thumping him on the back as he walked back to his seat. "Not many squads are like this. Oh, and Reudh, you'll be pleased to hear that Lurit's awake, eating, and healthy. He should be up tomorrow, but he won't be moving today."

"Like hell I won't!" a voice roared from the doorway. It was Lurit himself, using a metal pole as a makeshift crutch as he wobbled forwards unsteadily. "I'm fit as a lute, just missing a foot!" His eyes shifted around and finally came to rest on Katie. "Hey, Reudh, boy, is this your girl? Fits the description. Pretty little thing, ain't she?"

I leaned out from behind Katie to get a better look at him.

"Whoa, I'm seeing *double*!" he exclaimed, clutching at the wall. "Doc, maybe you better get me back to bed..."

Trebor was already to him. "Armok's beard... Come on, let's go! The drugs I gave you are making you unsteady, and you're still suffering from severe blood loss."

"We're in the blood plains, aren't we?" Lurit roared. "Leave a few mugs outside and gimme some of that!"

Trebor carefully helped him turn around. "That's from a different species, and it's the wrong blood type besides. I get the feeling you're more hot-blooded than most."

"Like hell I am!" the heavyset man shouted. "Whoa, doc... Steady the walls for me, will you?"

Trebor turned his head towards us. "Could I please get some help? He'll have to regenerate most of his blood on his own; I don't have any remaining in storage. There was a plague of wounded a couple months ago, and it's all used up."

Strohe, Reudh and Tedaz jumped up from their chairs and rushed over, helping Trebor lead Lurit back to the infirmary.



## Chapter 41: Biomech

*You're forced to skip over several pages of meaningless scribbles, but Vanya's narrative continues without pause.*

The rest of breakfast passed uneventfully, though everyone was still in good spirits. "It's the food," Katie told me. "A good meal works wonders sometimes. Have you ever wondered why so many marriage proposals are during or after a good meal? The quality of the food opens people up – it makes them more confident and puts them in a good mood."

"You're pretty enthusiastic about food," I noted.

She started to laugh, but a ray of darkness stole across her face, and she hesitated. "I always cooked for my grandmother," she said quietly, glancing away. "She didn't know how to cook."

"I don't know how to cook either," I offered. It seemed to be the wrong thing to say, but Katie brushed it away.

"Finish your food," she whispered. "Casting spells is hard to do on an empty stomach."

After she'd finished eating, Katie left the mess hall with two full trays of food, passing Almory on her way out.

"Agent Carena," the lieutenant called to me from the doorway, "You need to get started on Gearbox. Come with me."

I left my seat, following her out the door and ignoring the "See ya, Hotlips" that I heard behind me.

Almory led me down the trench in the same direction as Katie had led me the night before, taking the first set of stairs on the right, towards the computer rooms. She turned at the first entrance, leading me down a short underground hallway with doors on either side. We weren't far below the surface, but it's hard to tell that sort of thing underground unless you're a dwarf. Abruptly, Almory stopped and turned to me with narrowed eyes.

"I'm putting the lives of everyone in my squad in your hands, Sleeper. I've never done that for *anyone* before, and especially not an *elf*."

"Sir, my being an elf doesn't mean anything!" I said, trying my best to rein my anger in. "I can do anything dwarves can do, and just as well!"

She glowered at me, grinding her teeth. "Dwarves don't eat their enemies," she spat out hatefully.

That ticked me off. "With all due respect, *sir*, I don't eat people, either. I wish I was a dwarf; there's nothing good about being an elf." Too late, I remembered Hawkins' warning about being more careful around her.

She stepped forwards angrily. I shrank back fearfully, but she only backed me against a wall, holding her face close to mine and snarling. "If I lose even *one person*, Sleeper..." she left the

threat hanging, open for my imagination to do with it as it would.

"What about Parasol, sir?" I asked, more cautiously this time. "If we do nothing, Ballpoint gains access to the portal, and with that, Ballpoint will try to destroy Parasol completely. Mr Frog taught me that portals keep logs of all places they've linked to... if Ballpoint manages to access those, Parasol won't stand a chance."

"*One person*, Sleeper," Almory said again, scowling. "I'd better not lose even *one*." She backed away, turning and continuing down the corridor, muttering under her breath about elves.

I was seething. I hated my heritage enough already, without someone having to rub it in my face. I called after her, "What if it saves the lives of everyone in Parasol?" She didn't respond, and like a fool, I kept prodding. "Who are you *really* fighting for, Lieutenant Almory? Are you fighting for Parasol, or yourself and your 'family'?"

That stopped her. She spun on her heel; her face contorted with rage as she drew her swords and marched back towards me. Their blades glinted cruelly in the dim light. I bit my lip at the sight, starting to back away. I was sure I was going to die.

When she reached me, she flung me against the wall and swung a sword at my throat in one smooth motion. I didn't even have a chance to react, and cried out in fear. She glared at me vehemently, panting with fury, holding the cold metal steady against my neck.

"I've already lost my family," I whispered, swallowing involuntarily and feeling the blade bite into my skin. "I don't have anyone left. I lost her saving the lives of two dwarves. *Two*, not millions. She didn't deserve death..."

Something happened... Her expression softened; her gaze seemed to shift beyond me for a moment, and I thought I saw her eyes glimmer with moisture. Suddenly, the lieutenant looked back at me hesitantly, setting her jaw. "We won't speak of this again," she said quietly, sheathing her swords and turning away.

I swallowed again, glad I was still alive, and followed her down the hallway to the door at the end.

"He's in there," Almory said, gesturing with a nod, and then she left. I followed her with my eyes as she walked to the end of the hallway and turned from view. I stood there for a moment, wondering what I'd said that had saved my life, but I eventually gave up and opened the door.

The place was a mess. Boxes of electronic and mechanical equipment lay here and there, scattered and piled haphazardly throughout the room. For a while, that by itself kept my attention – it was as much a wonderland for the inquisitive mind as Mr Frog's laboratory. I felt like a child in a toyshop, peeking into all the boxes and seeing what parts I recognized. Finally, I straightened, looking around for Gearbox, whom I soon found, leaned against the wall in the far corner of the room.

It was the first "biomech" I'd ever seen, even in pictures. The first thing that struck me was how impressive and powerful he looked. He was bigger than even Saemin: he was well over six feet tall, with huge metallic muscles. I guess the best way to describe it was that he was like a walking tank. He wore armor everywhere, even at the joints, all painted in Parasol's colors: white with black trim and sky-blue detailing.

"Aw, great!" he moaned. He had a very gravelly voice. "They sent a *girl*?!"

I jumped, startled, and looked closer. His helmet had split down the sides and tilted open, revealing a young man's face, topped with greasy orange hair. Next to him was a tray of food, the same we'd had for breakfast.

"Aw, wonderful, you scare easy!" he said, rolling his eyes and trying to pick up his fork with

clumsy, armored fingers. "I can't believe they trusted *you* to go poking around my insides."

I swallowed, still shaken up a bit from the ordeal in the hallway, and asked, "Do you know what the problem is?"

He groaned again, shaking his head amidst the muffled whir of electric motors. "They didn't even bother telling you? Aw, this is just great. And a girl, to top it off! A girl who doesn't know anything."

"I'm going to fix you," I assured him, stepping farther into the room and starting to look around for tools I could use. I found several soldering irons and a galvanometer, and picked them up, carrying them in one arm. "I just need to know what's wrong. I can't fix you if I don't know, and I don't know how long I have."

Gearbox sighed and shoved a spoonful of mashed potatoes into his mouth, muttering about "stupid bioparts". It was comical to see such a large man trying to eat with such a small spoon. "Fine," he muttered, intentionally talking through a mouthful, "Here you go." With that, his legs started humming, and the armor on each leg split down the front, soon beginning to expand and fold outwards, revealing two very human-looking knees. The armor continued to fold away until I could see all of his legs and feet.

"Is that all?" I asked.

"That's as much as you're getting," he said, glaring at me suspiciously.

I sighed. "You're going to have to trust me," I told him. "Can you move your legs at all?"

"Oh yeah, of course I can!" he said sarcastically. "No, everything here is fine! No issues at all."

"Okay, I guess not..." I carefully knelt beside him, watching him out a corner of my eye, just in case he would try something. His legs seemed to be half biological, and half machine: metal plates protruded here and there from beneath pale skin; wires spouted from an assortment silvery rods inserted into his muscles.

Gearbox groaned and said derisively, "When you're done staring longingly at my legs, do you think you could, oh, I don't know... *Fix me?*"

I shot him an annoyed glance. "If you cooperate, Martin."

Without warning, he slammed a fist down on the ground so hard I felt it shake, and I fell over. Somewhere beneath us, Trebor yelled faintly, "Hey, watch it, latrines aren't supposed to cave in on you!"

I steadied myself and looked up at Gearbox in fear.

"Don't *ever* call me that, woman," he warned under his breath, shooting me a death glare. "I *hate* that name. Don't think bein' pretty'll help you get away with it."

I nodded fearfully. "Okay, Gearbox, then. I didn't know."

"Damn straight," he muttered.

After an hour or two of searching and studying, most of which we spent in silence, I spoke up. "I found the problem."

Gearbox had closed his helmet back after he was done with breakfast, concealing his face. His voice echoed with a metallic ring, and sounded like it was coming through a speaker. "Really, now?" he said loudly. "An elf that's good with electronics? Seems kinda hard to believe."

"A routing circuit is burned, two burst capacitors are blown, two of your resistor modulators are disconnected, and..." I frowned worriedly.

"Spit it out, girl!" he boomed.

I paused uneasily. "I've never worked on anything like this before, so I don't know much for

sure, but... there's a lot of other stuff in there that doesn't look right... some of your gears are stripped, and I could replace them, but I think they would work better if I put them in a different way." I looked up at him, asking for permission with my eyes.

"Aw, go on and do whatever you want," he said, shaking his head dejectedly. "It's not like you could make it any worse than it already is."

"Thank you," I said quietly, and began to dig around through the boxes nearby for supplies.

It took me the rest of the morning, and a little of the afternoon, but I finished repairing him. Gearbox complained every few minutes about how long I was taking, and I kept telling him that he shouldn't mind because he just sat in there and did nothing all day anyway. Eventually, he just started making actual conversation as I worked. He was a bit of a talker: I learned that he liked fighting, but he hadn't known what he was getting into when he offered himself for a biomechanical operation.

"It's not the battle, and all," he boomed as I snapped a new kinetic memory chip in, "It's the people, see? They all see you and they go, 'Aw, you're a biomech! You can do anything!' But then they won't let you *do* anything, see? 'Aw, you're a biomech! Give it back, you'll break it!' It's like they don't trust you 'cause of what you are, and it really stinks. "

"I get that too," I said, nodding.

"It's like... It's like..." He paused, lost for words.

"Prejudice?" I prompted, trying to help.

He shook his head. "Naw, it's more like they judge you before they know anything about you." I tried not to laugh.

"Hey, what's so funny?"

I shook my head, smiling as I soldered a resistor into position. He may have been a sarcastic jerk, but he seemed a likable one, at least. "They don't do that in Spearbreakers."

"Yeah, I've heard of that place... They get battles pretty frequently there, don't they?"

"Mhm."

"Yeah..." He scratched his "beard" with metal fingers, and it made a raspy sound. "I think I might go there someday, you know? Sounds like my kinda place. They got any good beer?"

I actually laughed that time. "Yes, they call it 'Spearbreakers Bitters'," I told him. "I doubt you've ever had anything as strong."

"Well, hey now," he said, giving a metallic laugh, "I've had some pretty rough drinks in my day. Bet I could beat you in a drinking contest, too, lady." He laughed raucously again. "No offense to you, of course."

"Vanya," I corrected him gently. "Call me Vanya, or V. You can close your armor back now, and try testing out your legs..."

"Sure thing."

I took a cautious step away and crossed my fingers behind my back, where he couldn't see, praying that it would work.

With his armor sealed back, he lifted first one leg, and then the other, bending each knee back and forth carefully. "Hey, what do you know, it works! Thanks, V!"

Suddenly, a roaring fire burst out from behind him. I gasped, looking around desperately for something that could put it out. "No, no, no!" I shouted, panicking. "What's happening?! I only worked with your legs!"

"It's fine," he laughed, quickly righting himself. "It's just jets; easier to get up that way." He turned them off and stood on his feet, bending forwards and looking at his legs. Then,

suspensefully, he took a few unsteady steps.

"Does it work?" I asked.

He looked up at me and nodded before jumping forwards. The ground shook as he landed, but he didn't seem to care. "It works great!" he laughed. "Aw, yeah, this is just what I needed!" He walked over and put a heavy hand on my shoulder, turning me around and leading me towards the door. "You know, for an elf, or even for a *human*, you're pretty good with electromechanics."

I didn't often receive compliments like that. "Thanks," I said softly, smiling, "I was taught by the best."

"Aw, I bet," he said loudly, ducking under the top of the doorway as we left the room. "Let's go see the Captain and see what she thinks, yeah?"

Walking beside a biomech was more amazing than I can describe. Even without actually being in the suit, it *feels* powerful... The heavy metal legs, every piece of which you know you could never hope to lift, move themselves in graceful array, turning the very motions of walking itself into art. You can feel every step through the vibrating ground, and you know that while the biomech – part human, part machine – could crush a rock between its fingers, he's gentle enough to eat with a spoon. Strong but gentle... isn't that what many girls dream about? And the whole time, you know that he's on *your side*... You feel as though you walk among the gods.

But then his loud, staticky, gravelly voice breaks through the dream and ruins it all.

"C'mon, V! Let's go find the Captain!" Gearbox called out, jumping off the second-story ledge and landing at the base of the trench. He turned, and with heavy steps, he rushed forwards towards the armory. I ran after him down the stairs, struggling to keep up. He was fast; it was only seconds before he was at the end of the trench, opening the armory door and ducking beneath the frame, calling out to the captain jubilantly. I heard the sound of gunshots echoing from within, and it wasn't long before I figured out why.

The armory was impressive. There were shelves of weapons, bins of armor, and cases of jetpacks and other equipment I didn't recognize. At one end, dug even farther into the hard earth, there was a firing range. Lieutenant Almory stood at the near side, supervising Jonah and John as they tried to teach Reudh, Tedaz, and Strohe to fire plasguns. Fiery white shots hissed through the air with blinding speed towards the humanoid targets at the other end, but they usually missed.

"There's no recoil," John said, pacing back and forth behind them and watching. "It's not affected by gravity, either. It's simple – point and shoot!"

"These are nothing but tracer rounds," Jonah added, chuckling. "They're slightly more accurate than regular plasma, not being affected by temperature warp."

"But I *expect* recoil!" Reudh said, firing several more shots at the target dummies. "Even crossbows have recoil!"

"This is better than a crossbow!" Tedaz laughed, firing several shots himself, all but one hitting his mark.

Abruptly, a dwarven figure obscured my view of the target range. "Gearbox is doing better than before he malfunctioned. What did you change?" the lieutenant inquired, with the slightest hint of approval.

With an effort, I forced my thoughts back to the present. "I... There were some things that

didn't look right, and I fixed what looked broken."

She nodded. "You did well."

"Thank you, sir," I responded, looking behind her at my friends. "You're teaching Reudh's people how to fight with guns?"

"I want them to be useful if we need them to be," she said. "They don't really possess any useful weapon skills right now. I don't consider the natives' weapons to be of any value."

"What about your swords?" I asked. "Are they different?"

A gentle smile creased Almore's face, and she drew one out of its sheath with her right hand, holding it out to me. "Take it," she ordered. Hesitantly, I did so, watching her face. For some reason I found it difficult to trust her.

The sword looked like any other, for the most part. The hilt seemed to be meteoric iron, with different plates embedded here and there in its surface. The blade was even more unusual, with lines traced in its silvery alloy that reminded me of electric circuits.

"It *looks* a little different," I said cautiously, "But I don't understand. How is it special?"

"Swing it," Almore suggested.

I did, carving a sweeping arc through the air. As it moved, it seemed to vibrate in my hand with a buzzing sensation, but when it slowed, it left me wondering if I'd imagined it. Confused, I did it again, and felt the same thing. "It vibrates," I observed, passing it back to her, "but only when it moves."

She gave a nod of pride and waved her weapon about slowly, watching it. "Quantic vibrations," she explained. "When it moves through space, quantum discrepancies cause the weapon to flux at the molecular level. Swinging has the same effect as drawing the blade across the target. It has no effect on my sheath because the sheath itself projects a secondary dimension," she added, sheathing it.

"It's a beautiful weapon," I said, envying her a little. On a whim, I drew out one of my daggers and held it out to her atop my open palm. "These are mine."

The lieutenant tilted her head curiously. "Where did you get these?" she asked, as she lifted it to her eyes, closely studying the hilt.

"They're vampiric blades," I explained, a little proud of them. "They used to belong to a friend of mine."

"Show me the other one."

I drew it from its sheath and held it out to her, and she took it silently, comparing them. "You know where vampires came from, don't you?" she asked suddenly.

I nodded. I'd heard the story many times. "They grew from the bloodlust of the warriors that tried to defeat the Holistic Spawn," I recalled.

Almore shook her head roughly. "An old wives' tale," she said negatively. "Vampires were a Parasol experiment. Ballpoint attacked, and they breached containment."

"Not true," John said from beside us, and we looked up at him. I hadn't even known he was there. "It was *Ballpoint's* experiment, and they weren't tough enough for us, so we threw them out."

Shifting her gaze back to my daggers, Almore admitted, "I've heard both stories. Still, these blades *are* vampiric, and they're missing their power source. Did you ever remove a power crystal from them? It would resemble the eye of a snake."

I shook my head. "I've never seen anything like that."

"I'll see if we have any replacements," she stated. I nodded in assent, and she walked past me, opened the door, and left.



Taking a step closer to John, I asked, "Where are the scythods?"

He frowned. "They're taking a break from digging. They've already gotten most of it dug out; Saemin and some of the others are working on carrying away the dirt so they can continue."

"How well do you think they'd do with a plasgun?" I asked. I had a feeling they'd do amazingly, if they could hear their target.

A mischievous grin stole over my friend's expression. "I don't know... with four hands and their keen sense of hearing... if they could hear their target, I bet they'd do brilliantly. I think I'm going to find out." Without another word, he rushed past me into the trench, calling out loudly in Scythod.

"Have you eaten yet, Vanya?" Jonah called from the shooting range. Reudh seemed to be getting more accurate with his weapon.

"Not yet," I said. "Is there lunch?"

The dwarf chuckled. "Only the most delicious lunch you'll ever eat on this god-forsaken planet. Hurry over to the mess hall – Katie saved some for you."

Our chances were looking better all the time.



## Chapter 42: Magic

*As you continue, you find runes scrawled across the margins – runes you've never seen before. You hope they aren't anything important, and continue reading.*

After a quick lunch, Katie took me up to our room, eager to teach me the skills I was supposed to learn. After coming in from outside, the barracks seemed dark, while in reality they were well lit, only dim.

"Do you actually know magic?" I asked uncertainly. Despite the almost fairylike quality to Katie's personality, it seemed a little hard to believe.

She didn't reply, but gave me a playful smile and spun around, laughing prettily as she danced farther away, swinging her arms gracefully about her. Then, she slowed to a stop, facing me, and let her arms fall to her sides. "*Winteos, diovaang liagen!*" she called out. For a moment, nothing happened.

Suddenly, I gasped. Feathery light blossomed from her shoulders, curved and bent to form ethereal wings. The ceiling and floor about her glowed softly as the wings wavered gently in the air, almost as if touched by an unfelt wind.

"*Winteos, taunke!*" she called out again, and the wings dissipated, seeming to dissolve into nothingness.

"What *was* that?" I asked breathlessly.

She laughed. "Magic," she said, grinning impishly, and twirled away. "You've never seen real magic before, have you?"

"I've seen zombies raised by necromancers," I offered.

Katie stopped suddenly, growing serious. "That's a different kind of magic. It comes from the demons that reach out from the depths. Every world has an evil side; sometimes it's an alternate dimension, sometimes it's physical. That's black magic. My kind of magic draws power from the gods."

"How did you learn?"

She motioned me closer, sitting down on the edge of her bunk. "Ever since I was little, I've entered in the annual jetpacking competitions that Parasol holds. It's really fun, but kinda hard, too."

I sat down across from her. "You use the 'wings' spell in the competition? Does it help you fly?"

Katie laughed and shook her head quickly. "Yes, but I can't fly. Some spells let you, but I learned everything I know from my grandmother, and she only taught me the 'guiding wings' one. We're allowed to use magic in competitions, and she said she wanted to help me."

"Can you teach it to me?" I asked hopefully, though I didn't know how the wings would help.

"It takes a long time to learn," she said regretfully. "I'll have to start at the beginning. I don't think you'll have time to learn it today."

I nodded with disappointment.

Leaning back, Katie propped herself up with her hands. "Every spell has two parts," she began. "The first part is the name of your god. Mine is 'Winteos', Parasol's god of mystery. You have to be careful with the god you choose. The more your god likes you, the better your spell casting is, and the more you can cast before they stop granting your spells."

"What's the second part of the spell?" I asked curiously.

Katie shook her head. "No, no, you're going too fast! Slow down. What's *your* god? We have to know that first. It's not good to switch between gods a lot, they get jealous."

"Can I use Winteos?" I asked.

"No, that's a Parasol god. He doesn't even know you."

I frowned. "How is a Parasol god in Everoc?"

This question stopped her for a moment, and she answered slowly, as if recalling something she'd heard said long before. "If I'm not wrong... When Parasol came to Everoc, their gods could pass over into Everoc, too... and Everoc's gods into Parasol. But... they fight sometimes. The timewar is as much a war between the gods as it is a war between companies." She looked at me insistently. "You *have* to choose the right god, and it can't be one that hates you. The spell might backfire. Do you know of one that might like you?"

I shook my head. "I never –"

"*Think* about it," she pleaded. "I don't want you to die while I'm teaching you. This is *important*."

Sighing, I thought back over the course of my life. Despite how often I prayed to the gods, I couldn't remember a time when any one of them had visibly helped me.

"Which ones do you pray to?" Katie asked. "Maybe that will help. Which one do you pray to the most?"

"Tetoth, the god of orphans; Akam, the goddess of serendipity, and... Armok."

Katie frowned disapprovingly, staring at me as if I was nuts. "The god of blood."

"Yes." I nodded. "I didn't always, but... ever since I... Ever since..." trailing off, I stopped. The memory wasn't one I wanted to recall, but at Katie's prodding, I went on. "There was a jade spearhead," I said slowly, picking up the one Urist had sent me off the floor at my feet from where I'd tossed it the night before. "Urist and I were lost in the caverns below Spearbreakers, and it glowed with light, leading us back to the fortress. Urist told me it was Armok's doing."

Her eyes widened slightly, and she nodded quickly. "Armok, then. We'll try with Armok first." I cringed. I would rather have cast with the goddess of serendipity.

Katie didn't notice, and went on. "All gods, in every universe, use the same language: the Diavallen. It's because there's a 'creator God' that made all of them, when he made the universes."

While all gods know the languages of their people, you can only cast with Diavallen. Every spell is multiple words of it, like 'deovaang liagen'. You say the god name, and then the spell."

"How do you become good at a spell?" I asked curiously.

"Three things: practice, your god's favoring you, and willpower. It's important you don't use spells too often, or your god will start to get annoyed with you. Praying helps with that." She jumped to her feet. "Okay, are you ready?"

I put the spearhead into my pouch and nodded, standing and walking to the middle of the room. "I'm ready."

"I'm going to teach you 'Shield of Wind'. The Captain says you need it strong enough to deflect bullets."

She might as well have shot me with one. "Deflect *bullets*?!"

Katie nodded solemnly. "She told me the rest of your plan this morning, and I'm not letting you go out there unless you're at *least* as good as I am! It's not one I've practiced much with, but... We'll practice until you're good enough."

Though afraid, I was eager to learn. "What do I do?"

"You call Armok's name, and then call out, 'vendi scild'. That's the spell: 'Shield of Wind'. But not yet!" she added in a rush, stopping me. "You have to hold your hands the right way."

It took some time, but I finally got my stance arranged the way she wanted. "Shield of Wind is a hand-oriented spell. If your hands move from their position, the shield can go away. Powerful mages can hold their hands wherever they want, but since you're just learning, you should hold your hands the easiest way."

It felt awkward. I was holding my hands as if I was pushing a heavy object in front my head. "Can I try it now?" I asked impatiently. Although I wanted to learn magic, I didn't want to wait. We'd used up at least an hour already.

"Okay, go," she nodded, stepping back.

"Armok, *vindi scild*," I called. Nothing happened.

"You're saying it wrong," she sighed. "Let's practice *just* the Diavallen, okay?"

After another hour of practice, during which I became pretty frustrated, I finally satisfied my tutor.

"You have to get the intonations correct. It's not like Dwarven," she kept saying. "You have to say it loudly and firmly, but the intonations have to be *perfect*."

"Okay, go," Katie said again.

I took a deep breath. "Armok, *vindi scild*!" I called out, closing my eyes to calm myself. I heard a rushing noise, and felt a strange feeling... almost as if I was underwater. I could breathe, but it felt as if I was holding an ethereal breath with ethereal lungs. It felt... majestic... powerful... It felt *magical*.

"Oh my gods!" Katie exclaimed, clapping her hands excitedly. "Look! Silly, open your eyes!"

I did, slowly raising my eyelids with anticipation.

A domed shield hovered before me, reaching from floor to ceiling. It was largely transparent, but ribbons of white light faded in and out, stretching from the center to the edge. Tiny sparks flickered erratically across it like lightning, their color a deep, dark red – Armok's color. I could see my friend through it, beaming with pride.

"It's beautiful," I whispered, awestruck. "I feel... strange... Like my breath is being pulled from

me."

"That's 'mana'," Katie explained, all but bouncing on her toes with excitement. "It *is* like holding your breath – you can only cast a spell for so long before you need to take a break. Practice helps." Suddenly, she grabbed a pillow from a nearby bunk and threw it at me. When it collided, I could feel the impact; it felt like it was drawing even more of my breath from me, and I felt the slightest push on my arms. The pillow bounced harmlessly off the shield and fell to the floor. "Look!" she laughed. "It works!"

As she sat to put the pillow back on the bed, I 'let go', moving my hands. With a soft "whoosh", the shield disappeared, and slowly, the breathless sensation began to go away.

"That was amazing!" I said, sitting down. "It felt so..."

Katie nodded knowingly. Then, her jaw dropped, and she pointed a quavering finger at my waist.

"What's wrong?" I asked, and looked where she was pointing. What I saw nearly stunned me with dread and wonder: through one of the pouches at my belt, Urist's spearhead was glowing with an eerie, green shine. Hesitantly, I took it out and looked at it. Katie walked quickly over and sat down beside me, and together we read the minute, glowing runes that had appeared upon its surface:

*Vanya, my favored daughter... Your struggles amuse me. Fight well, my conduit.*

After several minutes passed, Katie wrenched her gaze away from it and looked at me. "You'll cast with Armok from now on," she whispered.

I nodded in agreement, speechless.

After a solemn moment, Katie leapt to her feet and walked to the middle of the room. "Come on, let's try again," she said eagerly. "We'll have to stop and pray soon, but we can keep going for a little while."

I felt amazed, putting the spearhead reverently back into my pocket. I got up, putting my back to the door and getting ready.

Armok had talked to *me*. He sent me a message – *me*, Vanya Carena, the little elven skulker hiding among dwarves. The girl who used to run. The girl who used to be afraid of everything. *Me*.

I felt loved... even if it *was* a bit weird how Armok chose to explain it: "Your struggles amuse me." I guess that's typical of him, though.

It made me feel special.

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"Armok, vendi scild!"

Katie stood at the other side of the room, standing with legs spread apart and rotated, her hands clawed behind her shoulders. "*Winteos, magia arril!*" she called. Her hands glowed with lavender light, and she flung them forwards as if she was throwing a ball. Two magical lights rushed across the room, shattering against the horizontal dome before me with a flash. I felt my shield weaken, but I held it, willing it to stay strong.

"*Winteos, magia arril!*" she called again, and moments later, two more purple spheres crashed into my shield. "You're getting better!" Katie laughed.

We'd been practicing for what seemed like hours, taking breaks to pray every so often. I was exhausted, but Katie insisted that I had to have it as strong as possible.

She planted her feet firmly on the ground in a different stance, and called, "*Winteos, wimir stoirmas!*" As I watched, the air whirled about her icily, streams of lavender lightning arcing from the metal bed frames around her towards her outstretched hands. She closed her eyes, straining with the effort, and I braced myself for whatever she was doing. I'd never seen her use 'wimir stoirmas' before, and had no idea what it would do.

She thrust her arms forwards with a sudden motion. The temperature around me dropped, frigid air blinding me as it swirled past; shards of ice whistled as they shot through, my spell bending their paths just enough to keep them from slicing me to pieces. I felt my mana draining rapidly, so rapidly that I began to feel dizzy. I almost fell backwards from the force of it all.

"Stop!" I cried out weakly. "Please, stop!"

Katie lowered her arms, and I collapsed to the floor, panting, barely catching myself with my hands before my face hit the floor.

She rushed towards me, scrambling to my side. "Vanya? Vanya?" she asked in a worried panic, her voice taking on emotion. "Did I hurt you? Are you okay? Oh, gods, if I hurt you, I'll never forgive myself..."

I forced myself over onto my back, looking up at her worried face with a weak smile. "I'm okay, Katie," I told her, laughing softly. I closed my eyes, wiping at my forehead with the back of my hand. "What was that spell you just did?"

"Winter Storm. I'm sorry; I wanted to see how you would do against it. I didn't realize it was so strong – it's my favorite, but I've never cast it at anyone before." She looked about ready to cry. "Are you sure you're not hurt?"

For a moment, it brought to mind a memory. It was of the barracks at the mountainhome: my sister had hit me with her training sword, and I hadn't managed to block it... she'd done the same thing. "You remind me of my sister," I said softly.

Katie seemed uncomfortable, and looked away, getting up and pulling me to my feet.

"I'm fine," I finally answered, brushing off my armor. "I'm just tired, that's all."

"Are you sure?"

I nodded, motioning for her to go back to the other side of the room. "Mhm. Do it again; I'll see if I can hold it this time."

Unsure, she hesitated, but finally went over. "Okay, ready," she said, waiting for me to start.

"*Armok, vendi scild!*" The now-familiar shield formed in front of me, glowing and pulsating with Armok's power.

Across the room, Katie readied herself, putting herself in a firm stance as she watched me closely.

I braced myself with my feet, concentrating. *Armok, help me*, I prayed.

"*Winteos, wimir stoirmas!*" she called, and again the air whirled around her, frosting over as it spun, lightning sparking from the metal around her.

As she thrust her arms forwards, myriads of icy, crystal shards flew forth at incredible speeds, sparking crimson and lavender as they entered the magical dome, deflected even farther than before. I watched in awe as they turned aside, some of them splintering before they even had a chance. Purple lightning from her hands writhed across the surface of my shield, crackling with power. The display of light was beautiful... it was like watching fireworks, while knowing that *you made them*.

After about thirty seconds, she stopped, breathless, closing her eyes in exhaustion. I let my arms fall limp to my side as the shield dissolved into nothingness, as tired as she was.

"That was so cool!" she laughed softly, raising her head. Her eyes widened as her gaze passed

behind me, and her laugh stopped short. I spun around to see what she was looking at, and the smile faded from my face.

Several feet from either side of the door, multitudes of icy shards had embedded themselves deep within the dirt walls, but what drew my attention the most was the fact that Lieutenant Almory was standing in the doorway, my daggers in her hand. Behind her, soft lights illuminated the inside of the trench, the night sky above speckled with stars.

"That was impressive," Almory said finally. "Katalina, you taught her well. And that spell you were casting seemed especially effective," she added, examining at the icy wall to her left with a critical eye.

Katie smiled weakly. "Thank you, Captain," she said, basking in the praise.

Almory held my daggers out to me. "Agent, here are your daggers. I think you'll find them somewhat more useful now."

I took them, thanking her, and immediately noticed the little golden spheres in the hilt: they looked just like the eyes of snakes.

"Katalina, come with me," she ordered, turning away and leaving.

As she passed by me, Katie squeezed my hand, and we shared a smile. "Thank you," I said.

"Always," she whispered, and left.

I watched her for a moment as she ran down the stairs, following the lieutenant, and then looked back down at my daggers, shifting one to each hand. As I gripped them, the latticework seemed to hum, laced with a blue light that seemed to coil itself about the hilt and blade. Finally, I slipped them into the sheaths at my waist and left the barracks, walking aimlessly down the stairs and through the trench.

"Aw, keep up, you guys!" I heard Gearbox boom. Looking up, I saw him standing on a ledge, lifting one side of the turret and walking slowly backwards. On the other, Reudh's party, Trebor, Saemin and Hawkins were struggling to make pace.

"You're half machine, if I dare say so!" Reudh exclaimed, panting. "It's far more difficult for us, without having metal limbs! It's dark and hard to see as it is!"

"Aw, it's not that different!" Gearbox laughed. "And there's seven of you, too!" I caught his eye, and he glanced over at me. "Hey, you! V! Look at me now! Better than new, yeah?"

I laughed, beaming with happiness. "I added a lot!" I called up. "You're doing great so far!" I continued down the trench, though I still heard them talking behind me.

"Don't I know it!" Gearbox boomed. "I can't wait until we're done with this, though, I'm getting hungry."

Hawkins groaned, stumbling under his corner. "You eat as much as Saemin."

I reached the armory door, opening it and going inside. The scythods were at the firing range, wielding four plasguns each: one in each armscythe tip, one in each claw-hand. At the end of the range was a humanoid figure, dressed in black armor. It stayed at the far end, dashing about at unbelievable speeds, running up the walls and flipping off the ceiling, changing directions rapidly and smoothly.

"Vanya!" Jonah called me over. "You'll never believe it!"

I walked over to him. "What's going on?"

"Do you see the robotic target?" he asked rhetorically, pointing towards the jumping man.

"Watch." In scythod, he said "Start". Immediately, the scythods began firing rapidly, projectiles

hissing through the air, every shot hitting the target's head and exploding in a shower of sparks. No matter how it jumped or dodged, they hit the mark every time.

I gasped, covering my mouth with a hand. Despite my strong dislike of guns, I couldn't deny that it looked amazing.

"I've never seen anything like it, Vanya," Jonah chuckled, shaking his head. "Your friend, John, taught me some basic phrases in their language, and we've been training for the past hour or so... but they didn't even need it. They can *hear* where their target is, it seems. I'd love to do research on just how much they're capable of, once this is over."

"Hopefully, you will," said a voice. I spun around and saw Almory approaching us.

"Sir," I said respectfully.

She nodded in recognition. "Agent, the railcannon is almost into position, and the scythods managed two underground tunnels instead of just one. Things are looking up for us. Are you ready to do your part?"

I nodded. "I'm not sure if I can deflect bullets yet, though," I admitted, raising my voice over the sound of the plasguns. "I'm sure I can at least bend them away."

"Katalina assures me your spells will be more effective on the battlefield," Almory said, turning to the scythods. "You can stop now," she called out.

At this, K'bahth and Klade lowered their weapons. "I do not understand why we never used these before," Klade chattered. "They are extremely accurate at range."

"Old tradition, Klade," K'bahth answered. "Traditions are as mountain passages: they are hard to turn from."

Almory looked at me questioningly, wondering what they'd said.

"They say they like the guns," I explained.

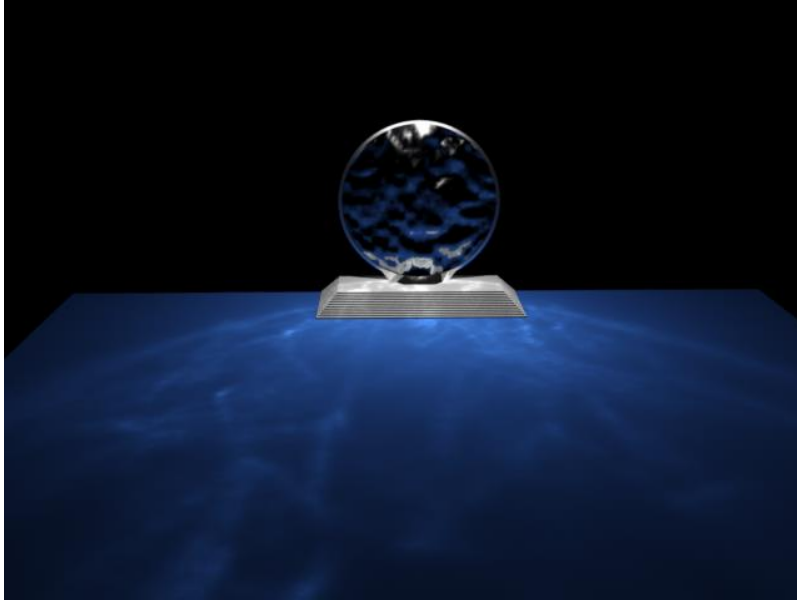
Jonah laughed.

The lieutenant nodded. "You need to eat and get some rest, Agent. You'll be up before the rest of us, around midnight. We'll be up two hours later. That gives you five hours of sleep, if you hurry. Get moving."

"Yes sir," I said, passing her and heading for the mess hall.

Looking ahead to the job I knew I would have to do, I was terrified... but determined. It was like Urist had said: fear makes you stronger, and keeps you alive. With Armok himself on my side... I couldn't see how we could fail.





An example of a megaportal, minus the controls. Art by Talvieno.

Chapter 43: The Battle Begins

When you finally reach the pale blue sheets of paper, you find that Vanya's following entry has clippings of them pasted throughout, as if she was trying to use them to help tell her story.

Among the entry's pages are whole, loose sheets, and among those, the ones that had fallen out earlier.

Supper was just as it had been the night before, except Katie sat next to Saemin this time. I found it difficult to notice anything else. They laughed, talking about everything and anything that came to mind. He listened intently to everything she said, easing her fears and telling her she would do amazingly the following day. He told her she was special to him; she kissed his cheek and they embraced.

I envied her; I'd always wanted something like that. It ate at my heart, nagging incessantly, deflating my spirits. It had been easier when everyone around me was single, too, but now that I could see how Katie and Saemin acted together, I couldn't take my mind off it. I *wanted* to be single so I could avoid the pain of failure... but at the same time, I wanted love. I wanted someone to love me like Saemin did for her.

I wanted someone I could love in return.

After supper, outside the mess hall, I heard Jonah calling my name. I looked upwards and saw him standing at the trench's lip, twenty feet above me.

"Vanya, come up here," he called again, and disappeared from view.

Unsure what he wanted, I emerged from the trench via the stairs and looked around for him. It was a moonless night, as black as charcoal, except for a glow around the trench, and the twinkling stars above. As soon as I'd made out Jonah's shape, standing off to the edge of the shield, I walked over to him, picking my way around the craters, and soon reached his side.

"Vanya, have you ever studied the stars?" he asked softly, looking skywards.

I followed his gaze. "I've looked at them sometimes... Usually I'm underground."

He glanced over at me, and then looked back up. "Every universe... every galaxy... every

world... has a different set of stars; a completely different sky. Every sky is special."

"What's special about ours?"

"Everoc's star is right in the middle of a supercluster, near the center of your galaxy. You haven't even named it yet, but it's special by itself: a loose spiral." He paused, taking a few steps closer and holding his head close beside mine, pointing with his arm. "Your constellations... The Honey Badger," he said, tracing a line across a set of stars with his finger.

I could almost see it with him: it had a bright eye and teeth, its tail a faint glitter of stars.

Jonah lowered his arm for a moment, and then raised it again, pointing and tracing out a longer shape: "The Greatsword." Then, turning, he pointed again: "The Demon's Maw. So many constellations, and every one of them with a story behind it, passed down through the generations."

"I can see them," I whispered, absorbed in the beauty of the heavens. "Do you know all of them?"

"The stars?" he asked. "No one can know all of them."

"No, the constellations," I clarified. "Nobody ever pointed them out to me like this before."

He smiled softly. "You're a bit odd for an elf," he said.

"And you're a bit odd for a dwarf." I smiled too, amused.

He chuckled, leaning close again and pointing out another. "The Soldiers," he said, tracing out a set of stick figures. "Also known as 'The Sisters'."

At this, I stepped away and eyed him suspiciously.

Jonah pursed his lips apologetically. "Katie told me the story of your past," he explained. "There's a story behind this constellation, too. Do you see how the smaller sister is kneeling, looking towards The Demon's Maw? The taller one, on her right, is reaching an arm across the sky for The Greatsword," he said slowly, leaning close again and pointing it out with a finger. "Some dwarves say that when the world ends, the older sister will finally reach the sword, striking down the demon and banishing him, and the world will begin anew... others say that the demon will devour them both, and everything will come to an end."

"I don't understand."

"The world hasn't ended yet," he said softly. "There's still a chance to save your sister."

I spun, taking a step away. "What are you talking about?" I asked, a little angrily. "She's dead!"

"Hush," Jonah whispered urgently. "We could both get in trouble for this. Wari told me about you once, and —"

"You knew Wari?" I interrupted, my eyes widening in surprise.

That was as far as I got. A stern shout interrupted us, emanating from the trench. "Jonah, Agent, get back here and get to sleep! I need you well-rested!"

Jonah gave a gentle smile, turning away and starting back, shoulders slumped, hands in his pockets. "I'll explain tomorrow," he assured me. "Goodnight, Vanya."

~~~

"Wake up," someone was whispering, pushing me with their hands.

I sat up quickly, unaware of my surroundings. "What?!"

A hand clapped over my mouth. "Silence, Agent," Almory hissed. "Get dressed. Your friend is waiting for you outside."

With that, she left the room.

I hastily dressed myself and hurried after her, careful not to awaken Katie, who was still asleep on the bunk below me. After I was ready, I left the room.

The trench was eerily quiet, so much that it spooked me. The railcannon was silent, for the first time since I'd gotten there, and everything was as black as ink. A tiny light-tube, capped at both ends with black plastic, rested on the floor outside the door. I picked it up, walking carefully through the darkness, shining it in my path.

"Vanya!" someone whispered loudly from below.

Holding the light out over the empty space, I could faintly make out a face below. "John?"

"Yes! Hurry up! We were supposed to leave five minutes ago."

"Okay," I whispered back, hurrying down the stairs and slowing by his side. "Where is the lieutenant?"

Almory appeared, holding a weapon. "It's Ballpoint make," she explained, handing it to John. "We snatched it off the battlefield a while back – this is the best one we have."

John looked it over, pulling out the cartridge and snapping it back, flipping open the barrel and examining the inside, looking in the different compartments and adjusting the viewfinder.

"This'll be perfect," he said, giving Almory a nod.

Turning, the lieutenant handed me a computer clip. "Plug this into the portal when you get there. I set it with coordinates for Parasol."

"Yes sir," I said, putting it into an empty pouch.

Almory folded her arms and spoke to both of us. "You have two hours to get over there. Stay out of the light, and don't move into their camp until they start emptying it out. Stick to the plan, no matter what. Understood?"

"Yes, sir," we said together.

She seemed to fight off a sigh. "I'm still sure this is a bad idea," Almory said regretfully, "but this is what we're going to do. I'm going to open the shield. I will open it for a total of five seconds – listen for a metallic clang. That will be the signal. Now, *move*," she ordered, snatching the light from my hands and switching it off.

Together, John and I jogged to the end of the trench and started climbing the ladder. I followed him up, groping blindly for the cold, metal rungs. After reaching the top, he jogged ahead, holding his arms out ahead of him, feeling for the shield.

"Found it," he whispered suddenly. I stopped by his side, and we watched the trench for the signal.

*Clang.*

"Move!" John whispered urgently, and together we rushed towards the west, out through the same path we'd entered through when we'd first arrived at the camp.

I was praying.

~~~

A blue snip of paper is pasted here.

In the black of night, in the depths of a Parasol trench, a commander stood before her little squad. Everyone was suited up, wearing full suits of black-camo armor and a jetpack.

"All right, soldiers," Lieutenant Almory started, looking at the squad assembled in front of her. She didn't seem hopeful, only as determined as she'd ever been. "You all already know what's at stake here. If we don't win this battle, Ballpoint is going to open our portal, wipe us out, and take

over the entire continent. I don't like making speeches, but..." She stopped for a moment, glaring at Trebor, who was snickering at this last. "I doubt we'll all make it back alive."

"We're gonna be all right, Captain," Saemin offered in his gentle way. "Everything'll work out in the end, just like it always does." At his side, his girlfriend clung to his arm, dwarfed by his size. "Isn't that right, Katie?"

The girl nodded, smiling. Saemin bent down, and they shared a brief kiss.

Normally, Lieutenant Almory would have put a stop to it. This time, she let it slide, instead casting a wishful eye at Hawkins, who mouthed, "Just stay safe."

"For Parasol," Lieutenant Almory said. The rest of her squad echoed the words: "For Parasol."

It was a quiet moment, but full of hope.

The lieutenant spoke again. "Katalina, disable the shields. Tames, Gearbox, Jonah... you're with me. The rest of you... get to your positions."

"You show 'em, Captain," Katie said, smiling.

Lieutenant Almory nodded in acknowledgement, putting on her helmet and fastening it, while everyone else did the same. With that, she pressed a button on her palm, and her jetpack activated, propelling her over the top of the trench. Jonah followed last, muttering, "I hate heights."

"We have a few hours until sunrise," Almory said over the comm system, as her squad jogged towards the edge of the shield. "Stay low and don't use your jetpacks until we start back. You know what to do: get them angry."

"Aw, I can't wait, Captain," Gearbox said, struggling to stay quiet. "This is gonna be fun."

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*Vanya's handwriting continues.*

The walk was silent, but long. Neither of us spoke: not only did we not want to give away our position, but we also didn't really have anything to say. Almory had already briefed John on my plan, as he seemed to know exactly what to do. We wound our way through rocks and boulders, keeping out of sight of Megaportal Hill.

After a couple hours, we rounded a ridge, and finally came upon the back of the Ballpoint camp, immediately noticing that something was wrong.

John checked his watch. "It's only 2:00," he muttered, confused. "Nothing should've happened yet."

Though it was almost completely dark outside, I could faintly make out the outlines of abandoned tents dotting the backside of the hill... but there was no one in sight.

"There!" John hissed, pointing. "Their vehicles, their infantry..."

I followed his gaze to the crest of the hill, beside the megaportal... Everyone and everything Ballpoint had was readied at the top: a huge column of tanks, and row upon row of soldiers, waiting in silence.

"It's a trap," I whispered.

John swore, pacing briskly back and forth, staring at the ground. "That's impossible! There's no way they could've known Parasol was attacking them tonight! Unless we'd shown up, Parasol would've just kept doing their thing, sitting and waiting. It's what Ballpoint would expect."

"Maybe the attack is coincidental," I suggested.

"No!" John hissed, brushing past me. "I *know* how Ballpoint thinks. I used to *be* Ballpoint,

remember? They'd be content to wait it out, so long as they got action when it was all over. They don't care about troops, but they do care about their equipment. Striking Parasol like this would net them more losses than they'd be willing to handle, as they would think Parasol would keep its shield up the whole time, except for the railcannon bursts."

I followed him with my eyes. "They're not watching for us, though," I pointed out.

"And why *would* they be?" he asked, cursing under his breath. "We've spent the whole day in weapons training, digging little tunnels in the ground like moles..." John stopped short, his eyes widening. "Moles..." he whispered. "Oh, no..."

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Several blue sheets of paper are inserted here.

"She lowered the shield," Almore radioed suddenly. "Let's move!"

No sooner had the words left her mouth than the hill in front of them exploded with light, hundreds of muzzle flashes brightening the skyline.

The little squad of soldiers didn't even have time to react before the ground erupted beneath them, flinging them aside.

"Retreat!" Almore yelled, leaping to her feet as another explosion set the sky aflame.

"Retreat!"

"Sorry, Lieutenant, this is the end of the line for me," Tames said through the radio as he jetted away. "You know there's no way this could've worked."

Everyone stood in horrified silence as it slowly sank in.

Almore was the first to speak. "Tames?? You *betrayed us?!'*" she screamed in fury. "*How much did you tell them??'*"

Without a word, Gearbox jetted after him, narrowly dodging Ballpoint's shots as he flew through the sky.

"Gearbox, get back here!" Almore yelled. "I order you to stop!"

"Captain, I've had enough of this!" the biomech boomed, flying off into the distance. "That bastard is going to get what he deserves, if *I* have anything to say about it! I'm gonna kill him, just you wait!"

"Gearbox, now!!" she screeched, starting after him as he shrank to a tiny speck in the distance.

Jonah grabbed her arm, pulling her back as dirt fell around them, cannon fire echoing in their ears. "Captain, it's no use!! You know how Gearbox gets!"

Reluctantly, she nodded, watching a huge line of tanks and troops roll down the hill. Behind her, the railcannon began to roar, firing off rapid bursts of shots at the line of enemies; she watched as the projectiles hit their targets, throwing a tiny portion of Ballpoint's line into disarray.

"We'll close the shields," Almore said quietly, adjusting her radio as she sprinted back towards the trench. "Katalina, close the shields. We're cancelling the operation."

The voice of a terrified, panicked young woman answered her, static roaring in the background. "Captain, I can't! Something happened – as soon as I turned them off, the generator exploded! Everything's on fire, and I can't put it out!"

Almore reached the edge of the trench and began shouting orders as she leapt down, level by level. "Hawk! Leave the railcannon to Saemin and see if you can get the mag-deflector started up

on the emergency generator!"

"Yes, sir!" Hawkins shouted over the din. He climbed out of the gunner's seat, sliding down the ladder to the ground. He took off running, but Saemin quickly overtook him.

"Saemin Lo, get back here!" the lieutenant shouted.

"I gotta save Katie, Captain!" Saemin yelled back, leaping up the steps in huge bounds.

"I gave you an order, soldier!" Almory roared, rocketing upwards and landing in front of him.

"Get back to your post NOW! Man that railcannon!"

Saemin clenched his fists, looking furiously at her from several steps below and staring her down. She held firm, glaring at him through her visor.

Around the trench, gunfire echoed. One end exploded in a fireball – the point where the railcannon had been only hours before crumbling to the base of the trench in a cloud of dust.

Saemin swallowed, turning away reluctantly. "Yes sir," he said, rushing for the railcannon.

"Good." Saying this, she turned away. As she ran up the last flight of steps, Almory paused and called out, "Jonah, get Trebor out here, and get Reudh's crew! Have everyone armed and ready!"

"Yes, Captain!" He rushed off, just as the railcannon began firing quick bursts into the enemy lines.

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*Vanya's handwriting continues.*

John jumped, falling over as the hill exploded above them with the sound of a hundred cannons.

"They're attacking," I whispered, biting my lip. "John, what do we do?"

Getting to his feet, John shook his head roughly. "We run, that's what we do."

I spun. "Run??" I asked. "Are you crazy? Our friends are under attack!"

"They're not our friends!" he hissed, picking up his railgun. "We knew them for less than a week."

I wanted to hit him. "How can you be so callous?! They *need* us, John!! Ballpoint doesn't know we're here, so we can still open the megaportal!"

"As if," he muttered, scanning the horizon.

"We can!"

He stepped close, bearing down on me. "We *can't*! We *don't know* if Ballpoint knows we're here! Even if we surrender, Ballpoint will *kill me* for deserting them. There's no way to get up there."

"The whole camp is empty!" I pointed out angrily, looking up at his face. "We won't have any problems getting through!"

Snarling, he spat, "They have soldiers guarding the portal! What do you think you're going to do once you get up there? Kill them? Pretend to be Ballpoint? Pretty them to death?" Sighing, he began walking away, muttering curses. "It's hopeless, Vanya. You're dreaming. There's no way to save them."

"We have to *try*."

By the starlight, I saw him clench his fists, trembling with fury. He spun around to face me. "Do you know what happened *last time* I 'tried,' Vanya?" he growled, and his voice escalated to a near-shout. "I arranged for Ballpoint to get inside Spearbreakers! That was *me*, Vanya!! *I'm* the

one who almost brought down the entire continent!"

I shook my head, agape. "That's not possible..."

"Think about it, Vanya!" he yelled. "Four years! I spent *four years* in Ballpoint! Splint's reign was only two years ago. I'm a translator – a diplomat! They wouldn't give me a position as a soldier because of my nerves! I met with Baron Splint and he agreed to let us into Spearbreakers in exchange for a little manual labor. *I'm* the reason Ballpoint expanded! *I'm* the reason Ballpoint is destroying your friends!!" He quieted, slowing his breathing, and then turned and kept walking away. "I wasn't sure about your idea before, but there's no chance of it working now."

Staring at John, I shook my head, dumbfounded by his sudden change in demeanor. Behind us, during a lull in the gunfire, I heard an agonized scream echoing over the hills. It sounded like Katie; the thought of my friends in danger strengthened my resolve.

"Leave, then," I said quietly, starting for the base of the hill. "I'm still going to try."



## Chapter 44: Darkness Descends

*Vanya's journal continues with its conglomeration of blue and white sheets.*

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Several blue sheets of paper are inserted here.

Hot air rushed past the lieutenant as she burst into the control room, a thick smoke obscuring her vision as it spilled out the door and into the night sky. "Katie!" she shouted. "Katalina Okablokum, where are you?"

"Here, Captain!" The girl was choking, her voice barely audible over the roar of the flames.

"I can't see you!" Almory called back. "Come to the door!"

There was no response but for crackling fires.

Setting her jaw, the lieutenant rushed forwards into the chaos. Flames licked the walls, roaring violently as they sucked the oxygen from the air. In one corner of the room, the generator buzzed dangerously, burst open and spilling toxic liquids onto the ground as electricity arced between it and the ruined, smoking control panels. Almory made up her mind on a direction and started towards the corner of the room with the shield controls. Glass and twisted metal crunched under her feet as she rushed through the thickest part of the blaze, fiery tendrils curling about her limbs. Finally, she caught sight of Katie's motionless body, curled up in a corner.

"Katie!" she yelled, taking off her helmet. "Katie, answer me!" Almory began choking as she tried to draw another breath, and knelt, slipping the helmet over Katie's head. Carefully, she picked the girl up in her arms, and gritting her teeth, sprinted through the flames to the door, the heat singing her eyebrows.

Trebor was in a panic, making excuses as Jonah tried to shove a weapon into his hands. "No sir! Take it away! When I signed up for duty, they told me I wouldn't have to carry a weapon! I'll carry on, I'll carry out, I'll carry off, I'll carry over, I'll carry a tune, I'll carry the one, I'll carry the flu, I'll carry the motion, I'll carry you over the threshold, and I'll even *Jim* Carrey, but I will *not* carry a gun!"

Beside him, Lord Reudh's party were already holding their weapons, glancing about nervously.

Above them, Almory collapsed, choking on the smoke. "Trebor! Quit chattering and get up

here; Katalina's in trouble!"

Trebor snapped his fingers at Jonah. "Raincheck our argument," he said, and leapt up the stairs with his pack. "Sis, what happened?"

"It's Tames," the lieutenant explained, carefully laying the unconscious woman out on the ground. "He betrayed us; he rigged the generator to overload when we turned the shields off."

"*Tames??* Armok's beard..."

"Be quick!" Almory warned, putting her helmet back on. "We have to mount a defense." She stood, rushing down the stairs, shouting orders.

Hurriedly, Trebor grabbed his medical PEA and moved it slowly back and forth over Katie's chest, reading the display; his expression darkened as he read the results. Putting it aside, he hurriedly opened the front of Katie's suit, folding back the lower half and sterilizing a section of her chest with a swab. Tossing it aside, he removed a syringe from his pack, carefully examining its silvery contents.

Katie stirred, her eyes fluttering open, but they closed again quickly as she wheezed violently, grabbing Trebor's hand.

"This'll fix your breathing, Snowflake," he muttered, "but it's going to hurt." Saying this, he held her down and forced the metallic tip deep beneath her skin.

Katie screamed in agony, flailing her arms about as she tried to get away. Her chest convulsed; she began choking violently as if she was trying to cough up her lungs.

The doctor shifted his weight onto her, grimacing and trying to keep the syringe steady. "I know it's not fun!" he shouted, ducking as the wall exploded above him, raining dirt down upon his head. He paused for a moment as she calmed, not relishing the necessary task. "I'm sorry, girl," he whispered, injecting the silvery contents.

Her screams echoed through the trench.

~~~

*Vanya's handwriting continues.*

I looked up at where the megaportal stood, beyond the quiet tents. It beckoned tauntingly, an iron ring against the stars. It seemed so far away.

I cast one last frustrated glance in John's direction. He was standing still below me, off in the distance, hardly visible against the deep crimson of the bloodplains. I watched him for a moment, listening to the thunderous gunfire. Finally, I gave up, turning and starting up the hill on my own with a grim determination. "I spent almost a year with you," I whispered. "If you're going to abandon me now, you were never my friend to begin with."

I went as quickly as I dared, staying behind tents whenever possible. I passed an armory, and felt tempted to pick up a weapon to defend myself with, but quickly chided myself for even thinking it. I hated guns; they lacked the honor of melee. To use a gun was to rob a person of their life without even giving them a chance. It was murder.

But then... wasn't Ballpoint trying to murder my friends? Wouldn't they try to murder me?

The thought did little to alter my ideals, and I kept pressing forwards, getting ever closer to the top of the huge hill.

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Several blue sheets of paper are inserted here.

After several minutes, Katie rolled to the side, coughing a gray, slurry liquid onto the ground.

"There you go, Snowflake," Trebor said in relief, putting everything back into his pack. "I had to re-grow the tissue in your lungs, they were badly burned. Go easy on strenuous activities for a while." The ground above him exploded again, shaking the earth; fire reached across the sky.

Below him, Almory was giving orders. "Trebor, if she's all right, get down here! Reudh, Tedaz, Strohe, Jonah, take your guns to the lip of the trench. Stay far apart and shoot whatever you see! Where... Where are those scythods??"

"Captain!" Saemin shouted. "They have necromancers! Their lines keep coming closer!" Almory answered his call with a brief nod.

Without warning, the scythods appeared, scuttling over from the armory.

The lieutenant pointed towards the tunnel entrance. "Both of you, take your plasguns and go to the end of the tunnels. If anyone falls in, kill them."

Stomping with their legspikes, the scythods hurried away towards the end of the trench and into the darkness.

A dwarf's voice called out over the gunfire. "Almory, the mag deflector's ready, but it'll take some time to rev up on the emergency power."

Looking upwards, Almory saw Hawkins standing on the walkway two floors above. "Good man," she whispered, and then shouted, "Get to the railcannon and take over from Saemin Lo!"

Katie got to her feet and looked around as Hawkins ran past her down the stairs. Reudh's party were standing at the front edge of the trench, their helmeted heads peeking over the side as they fired rapid shots at the approaching enemy. Katie couldn't see the Ballpoint troops from where she was, but from how frantic Reudh seemed to be, she guessed they were close.

Suddenly, with a incredible crash, Parasol's railcannon exploded from a magcel round, broken pieces flying in all directions. The main portion toppled backwards, landing with a solid thud as it dug into the earth at the base of the trench beside its motionless operator.

Katie's heart almost stopped. "*SAEMIN!!*" she screeched, falling forwards and stumbling down the stairs, shaking uncontrollably as she watched a pool of blood grow rapidly beneath his broken form. "*SAEMIN!!*"

Almory's voice echoed up towards her above the roar of the battle: "Katalina, he's gone! Put it aside for now! I need your skills! We *need* that mag deflector running!"

"He's *NOT* gone!!" Katie screamed, tears pouring down her face. "Captain, he needs me!"

"Katalina, get that mag deflector jumpstarted, *now!*"

The young woman fell to her knees, sobbing loudly. "But Saemin!! ...Trebor, help him!!"

There was no response.

"Trebor, *HELP HIM!!*" Katie screamed helplessly, almost choking on her cries.

Lieutenant Almory rushed up the stairs, two at a time, and got to her knees by the trembling girl's side, putting a hand on her shoulder and looking into her eyes. "Katie," she said quietly, "I need your help. We *all* need your help. Do you understand?"

Katie sniveled, nodding and wiping clumsily at her eyes. A napalm shell exploded ten feet to her right, spewing flaming, caustic jelly into the air like a geyser, sticking in little fiery specks wherever it happened to land, spilling down the walls of the trench in little rivulets. As she turned to look, the lieutenant put a hand to her cheek and pulled her gaze back to her own eyes.

"Katie," she said urgently, "We're soldiers. We have a job to do, and we can grieve for him later. Right now, we *need* your skill with electronics. Just get that deflector running, and keep it safe, all right?"

The girl nodded again, gradually beginning to quiet down, though she still shook with silent tears.

"Good girl," Almory said, helping her to her feet. "Now go."

Shaking, Katie ran down through the darkened corridor, entering a door near the end under Almory's watchful eye. She herself was stricken by Saemin's death... but she pushed it from her mind. After all... she had to protect the lives of her soldiers.

Behind her, Strohe screamed as a projectile ripped open his arm, blood gushing from the mutilated tissue. Almory watched him fall from his perch; she saw him land twenty feet below with a sickening thud.

With her attention elsewhere, she had no way of avoiding the shell that exploded by her head.

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*Vanya's handwriting continues.*

I was only several hundred feet away from the crest of the hill. It felt like I was creeping forwards; it felt like I was hardly making any progress at all, with how slow I was going. I hated it then, but I kind of preferred it over what happened next.

On reaching the edge of the line of tents, I found to my dismay that there wasn't any cover between the megaportal and myself. Still... I didn't really have a choice. Though terrified, I swallowed my fears and rushed forwards, trying to gain as much ground as I could before the soldiers at the top noticed me.

It wasn't long before they did. "Name, rank!" a soldier called, shining a bright light in my direction.

I ignored them, continuing my run up the hillside and hoping the 'Ballpoint gray' disguise would hold for a little while longer. I was already halfway there.

"State your name and rank!" came the call again. "Halt! *Halt!*" Then, more urgently, "Halt, or we shoot!"

I heard the sounds of guns cocking to fire, felt a burst of adrenaline rush through my veins as I raised my hands, holding them in front of my head like I'd practiced. "*Armok, vendi scild!*" I shouted. "Armok, help me!"

Light erupted from my fingertips, forming a domed shield in front of me as I ran, rippling as with blood. It wasn't a moment too soon: shots rang out above, the rapid rat-a-tat of machine guns. Hundreds of little sparks lit up the air in front of me as the entire squad began to fire, their bullets curving away as they pierced my spell, leaving bright red trails in their wake.

My heart leapt into my throat as I heard someone shooting at me from close by.

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Several blue sheets of paper are inserted here.

The blast threw Lieutenant Almory forwards, shrapnel shredding the back of her suit and leaving gashes across the backs of her legs, blood running dark against the metal. She landed in a painful heap on the ledge of the second floor, still moving, and tumbled farther, falling to the bottom of the trench beside the railcannon's remains.

"Sis!" Trebor yelled, running from the far end. "Sis!" A blast shook the earth; several tons of dirt cascaded downwards towards his head. Trebor threw himself forwards onto his stomach, scrambling away as the trench began to cave in on itself.

"Trebor!" Hawkins yelled from the railcannon's ladder. "Get over here, she's bleeding! *Mon rithma, mon rithma arinibid!*" he swore, panicking. "Trebor, *run!*"

"I have medical training!" Reudh called, rushing for the stairs. "I can help!"

Jonah soon joined him, yelling, "We have to fall back! They're almost to us now! The tunnels worked wonders when they caved in, but they're rolling the rest of their tanks across their destroyed units and makeshift bridges!"

Tedaz fired several more shots and leapt down, too, not wanting them to leave him behind.

"I'm all right!" Almory cried out, trying to force herself upright. Her back and legs screamed with pain, but she did her best to ignore it. Looking down the trench, she could see Trebor jogging awkwardly towards her, toting his medical chest at his side.

There was a yell from above. Almory watched sluggishly as a timed motion-sensor grenade bounced to the ground, rolling to a stop ten feet away. Still stunned from her fall, she couldn't even collect the energy to shout, as in the dim corners of her mind, she knew it was the end.

"No!"

A figure hurled itself from the wall of the trench, throwing itself onto the grenade. As Almory's eyes focused, she recognized the figure. "Hawk, NO!!" she shouted desperately.

"Hawk, run!!"

The blond-haired dwarf only shook his head and set his jaw, a stalwart expression on his face as he looked across the ground at his lieutenant. "You know I love you," he mouthed, tears in his eyes.

She didn't have the time to respond.

The explosion shook the walls, gore splattering on her visor.

"**HAWK!!**" she screamed, unwilling to accept his bitter fate. Tears clouding her vision, she raised her head to the sky, letting out an unintelligible scream of fury and heartbreak.

"Sis, are you okay?" Trebor called, stopping as he saw the gruesome scene. There was almost nothing recognizable left of the dwarf. As he stood, dumbfounded in shock, Jonah pushed him aside, rushing past. Above their heads, shells began to turn away with loud hums as the mag deflector activated.

"**I'll KILL them!!**" Almory screamed, panting with rage. "**I'll kill them ALL!!**" She charged towards the stairs.

Jonah grabbed her arm, holding her back. "Captain, calm down!" he shouted, wrapping his arms around her and struggling as she tried to twist away. "Honor his memory! Stay and fight! Leaving is suicide!!"

But Almory hardly heard him, giving him a shove and jetting into the sky. Within seconds, she was out of sight over the edge of the trench.

Jonah watched after her, shaking his head. "My gods," he whispered. Reudh and Tedaz arrived, walking up behind Trebor.

"We can't just leave her out there!" the doctor said as Tedaz pushed past. "We have to get her back!"

Swallowing back his misgivings, Jonah nodded. "I know..." the dwarf agreed quietly. "She's turned off her radio... I'll have to go after her."

"Your armor won't take much!" Trebor warned. "It's not as thick as Almory's."

Sighing, Jonah looked up towards the sky, offering a silent prayer. "I know, Trebor," he said

softly.

"Where has Strohe gone?" Reudh asked suddenly, looking around. "Strohe!" he called out.

"Reudh, he's here!" Tedaz had stepped around the fallen railcannon parts, and was waving his arm. "He's wounded, we need a doctor!"

Jonah took a deep breath and started giving out orders. "Trebor, take Strohe to the infirmary. Tedaz, you cover him. Reudh, figure out what's keeping Katie and get her down to the infirmary, too."

"That's it?" Trebor asked, discouraged. "That's the whole plan?"

"It's all we can do," Jonah replied, nodding sadly.

"All right, let's go!" Tedaz shouted, taking control of the situation. "Move!"

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*Vanya's handwriting continues.*

As I rushed towards the megaportal, the squad above firing into my pulsating shield, I heard gunshots ring out from behind. In a terrified panic, I watched in astonishment as first one, and then another Ballpoint soldier fell, shuddering as bullets ripped through their armor.

"John?!" I cried out, not daring to look backwards. "You came back?"

"I had to!" he shouted from behind my shoulder, firing more shots through my shield. "Just do your job! Leave the fighting to me!"

Together we made the final hundred feet at a sprint. As we neared the summit, John clashed with their troops in melee, knocking his gun across one's head, firing shots at another whose face erupted in a spray of reddish mist as he crumpled to the ground.

I stood atop the hill. Everything was black but for the muzzle flashes below; the thunder of a thousand guns echoed in my ears... it was mesmerizing.

The battle stretched out before me, incredible masses of troops pouring down the Parasol side like a tidal wave, threatening to sweep away everything in its path. They were almost to the trench, and though I felt nothing could stop them now, I prayed my friends would be all right. I saw tanks spraying jets of liquid fire, arching through the air and spilling into the trench; I saw portions of the Parasol encampment collapse, so far away; I saw its lights flicker and go dark.

"*Get that portal open!*" John yelled urgently, ducking as a soldier swung an electric mace above his head, rolling away from a spinning blade, firing shots into their chests. On the hillside below, the nearest soldiers turned and began starting back towards us.

Wrenching my gaze away from the battle below, I lowered my hands, and the shield disappeared. Pulling out the drive Almory had given me, I rushed to the portal controls - a gigantic console on a steel platform - and searched frantically for the correct slot. Finally, I found it, pushing the little drive in until it clicked.

Nothing happened.

It was then that I realized that the drive by itself likely wouldn't work... pieces of the console had been taken off, the wires within rigged to various pieces of machinery as Ballpoint had tried to force the portal open.

Behind me, I heard a yell. I spun, seeing John clutching at his chest as he gunned down another soldier.

"John!" I shouted, starting to rush towards him.

He glanced at me, grimacing and clenching his teeth in pain. "Get that portal open, stupid!" he hissed. "I'm doing my job; you do yours!"

Shaken, I turned back towards the portal controls, hoping I could undo whatever Ballpoint had changed.

I'd always wondered how it felt to be on the battlefield... but there is no glory. There is only chaos, and death. I no longer felt that everything would be all right. It was a dead girl that stood atop the hill that night, desperately tracing circuits with her fingertips, rewiring the ancient equipment in an attempt to save the ones she cared about.



## Chapter 45: Desperation

*You continue with the patchwork journal, feeling drawn into its pages.*

~~~

A conglomeration of inserted sheets and pasted snippets follow.

Her heart burning as with fire, Almory carved a path through the Ballpoint troops, swirling with her blades, severing countless limbs as legions of soldiers charged. Chainswords, buzzsaws, molten axes sliced towards her – she flowed around them and stabbed their owners from behind, her swords vibrating as they pierced their armor. A stolen mechoid stomped towards her, towering ten feet above her head – she ignored the grabbing hands and cutting weapons of those nearby and leapt up its leg, plunging her blade through its engine and fuel supply.

Seconds later, the mechoid exploded, sending twisted shards of metal tumbling through the air, killing the nearby soldiers as the fireball consumed them. From within the blaze, a single dwarf emerged, her dark battlesuit glowing with firelight as she rocketed into the sky.

She wanted revenge. Gearbox was gone, Tames was gone, Saemin was gone, Strohe was gone... and most dear to her of all, Hawkins was gone. It had been a forbidden love... but it was a romantic love, all the same. He'd died trying to save her – they'd taken him, and everyone else, away from her. They'd destroyed her family.

As she shot through the air, Ballpoint's bullets buzzed past her like bees, pinging off her armor – a well-aimed cannon shot slammed into her back, and her jetpack exploded, tossing her towards the ground as she spun out of control.

Ballpoint's finest rushed towards her, each eager to be the one to land the killing blow, but they started back in dismay as the engine of fury sliced into the foremost, screeching through her helmet.

"YOU HAD NO RIGHT!!" the lieutenant screamed, pirouetting through their ranks, spinning, stabbing one and bisecting the next, moving smoothly into the next three kills. "YOU HAD *NO RIGHT!!*" Tears spilled down her face, and she let them lie, her mind devoid of any thought but vengeance.

There was a reason Parasol had granted her the title of admiral, once upon a time... but it had nothing to do with her temper.

Without warning, the ground beneath her erupted, throwing her into the air: the victim of a recently-laid landmine.

Across the sloping field, two mantis-like creatures danced, fighting a war that wasn't theirs. They'd taken cover behind burning tanks, hiding within the thick, black smoke. They knew their enemy relied on vision, and they took advantage of it. No one could approach that they didn't hear – no shell could crush them or take them by surprise. They heard everything, and while they couldn't pick one soldier out of a crowd, they could be sure to hit the crowd itself.

Klade rushed from one smoking crater to the next, and on hearing a rocket launcher, he leapt forwards, slicing the way the offending soldier's forearms with his scythes before applying the same practice to his neck. Moments later, a tank exploded in a fireball, the ammunition within cocking off in a gratifying fusillade of pops.

Apart from him K'bahth stood, his four plasguns firing rapid rounds at everyone he heard, as the circle of destruction spread slowly farther, and farther away.

Suddenly, a missile landed nearby with an explosion. A stunned K'bahth tumbled forwards, leaving the protective smokescreen. A rain of bullets pounded down around him, and he struggled to get away. As he did, the melted rubber of a tire – still attached to the axle of the vehicle of which it had once belonged – caught his back legspike.

"Klade!" the scythod clacked desperately. "Assist me!"

Jonah flew across the field, staying close above the heads of the Ballpoint soldiers, looking for his lieutenant. His teeth were chattering – he hated heights, and while it was bearable so long as he was on solid ground, he found flying unnerving.

After several minutes of fruitless searching, Jonah grew desperate and flew upwards for a better view. He only lasted a few seconds before the threat of passing out forced him to close his eyes, but it was enough: he saw where she was lying, a single suited soldier in an open clearing.

Diving, he jetted towards her, landing clumsily by her side. He looked her over: reddened mud caked her suit, the front of her armor torn apart and bubbling with blood. Her legs lay twisted awkwardly to the side, and there was no doubt in Jonah's mind that they were broken.

"Captain!" he cried out hoarsely, checking her over. "Captain!" Hearing no response, he dug into his pack, removing her helmet and injecting a syringe full of painkillers into an artery in her neck.

"Jonah."

The dwarf almost cried with relief. "Thank the gods," he whispered, "you're still alive."

"What the hell are you doing out here?" she groaned.

Jonah ignored her for a moment, resetting his radio frequency and shouting over the din, "Trebor! Get out here, now! She's in critical condition!"

"Get out of here, yourself," Almory mumbled. "They'll do the same to you."

A dark form towered above the ex-scientist, and he looked up, his eyes resting on a Ballpoint soldier.

"Don't think about running away, doc," the soldier chortled. "We'll need your assistance for our own wounded, after we finish killing your people." With that, the soldier walked away, laughing at his own cruelty.

His blood boiling, Jonah fought the urge to shoot the man. "They think I'm a medic," he hissed through the radio. "Just get here as quickly as possible. She's past the scythods' first trench."

"I'm on my way."

"Tedaz, I'm going to need you to take over," Trebor said, rushing about the room and haphazardly piling equipment into a case by the light of a portable tube.

"What's going on?" the swordsman asked, bewildered. "I need you *here*, Trebor! We still don't know where Lurit is, and Strohe needs you!"

Trebor turned to the dwarf angrily as he piled supplies into the medical chest. "Armok's beard, my *sister* is out there!! I've already done everything I can do for Strohe! If Lurit was dumb enough to leave the infirmary, there's nothing I can do." He slammed the case shut, starting for the door. "Do whatever it takes to keep people out of here! Vanya's out there trying to get the megaportal open. If she pulls through, we'll need these supplies unharmed!"

Tedaz gaped as he realized the full extent of Almory's plan. "Vanya??"

"If you have any way of getting hold of Reudh, get him and Katie down here! The mag deflector is worthless at this point. If anything else comes through, shoot it!" Saying this, Trebor rushed out of the room in a haste, slamming it loudly behind him.

Despite their immediate peril, Tedaz couldn't help but notice that Trebor hadn't said "Hotlips".

Trebor rushed into the darkness of the trench and stopped short, stepping backwards fearfully as a line of zombies began to shamble towards him with unearthly moans. "Armok's beard," he whispered, "I wish I'd taken that gun Jonah offered." He looked around in a panic for a method of escape, his eyes soon alighting on a pile of crates, loose stones, and twisted metal. Hoisting his medkit, he climbed up the debris, barely avoiding the clutching hands of the undead as he scrambled away. They were Ballpoint's armored corpses, their suits cleaved across the chest, some stumbling forwards without heads, others oozing thick blood from where someone had stabbed a sword.

As he climbed higher, the debris began to shake unsteadily, and collapsed even before he reached the second floor. The terrified doctor clawed his fingers into the earthen wall as he fell. "I want to live!" he screeched out in terror.

"Like hell you do!" someone roared, the sound of a minigun shattering the air. "You're not dying here!"

In surprise, Trebor looked towards the voice and saw a heavyset human standing atop a huge pile of fallen earth. He'd decked himself out in tight-fitting Parasol armor, his stump crammed into a mechanical limb, his face barely visible in the darkness through an open helmet. "Lurit!" he shouted. "You're alive?"

"A course I am, you twit!" the man laughed loudly, spraying another fusillade of bullets into the shambling dead. "Couldn't stand lying quiet when there was battle about! I headed down to the armory and played around with a few things, but I'm sure you don't mind right now."

Struggling, the doctor made his way up to the second floor. "Lurit, get to the infirmary! You'll be a lot safer there!"

"Forget it, doc!" Lurit roared loudly, taking down the zombies on the ledges above, clearing the path for Trebor even as the severed limbs around him began to move once more. "You did a fine job patching me up! Get out there and save your captain, and I'll hold 'em off! Don't worry your head about me!"

Trebor nodded gratefully, rushing up the final flight of stairs. "You're a good man, Lurit!" Trebor shouted. "I'll steady the walls for you any time!"

A smile tugged at the corner of the old man's mouth. "Likewise," he said quietly over the

radio, and then turned towards the hordes, setting his feet apart in a firm stance. "All right, you muck-headed bastards!" he roared, "It's supptime! Come and get it!"

"That's Lurit," Reudh said, listening to the noise outside. "Do you hear him?"

Katie nodded silently. The two stood side by side, watching the door. Reudh was lucky he'd found her: Ballpoint had nearly killed him when they'd fired down the length of electronics corridor from the surface. Now they sat quietly, waiting for the end, with only one weapon between them. Reudh held a portable light tube, the only source of light in the room, while Katie held his plasgun.

"Is there not anything we can do?" the former overseer asked.

The girl shook her head, stunned. "They destroyed the generators, even the emergency ones. We don't have anything to work with." There was an explosion above – loose dirt fell from the shaking ceiling.

After a moment, a low moan echoed in the hallway outside.

"Zombies," Reudh said immediately. "I would recognize the sound anywhere. We got many of them, during my Spearbreakers days."

Katie seemed to shrink back. "I've never seen any," she admitted quietly, her lower lip trembling.

"It is most likely for the best," Reudh replied with a thoughtful nod. "The sight is not something anyone truly enjoys seeing."

The sound grew louder, becoming clearer, until it was right outside the door.

"I don't want to die," Katie whispered, starting to cry. "I don't want to die!"

"Keep your head clear," the dwarf beside her suggested. "Simply focus, my dear. We'll be all right in the end, I am sure."

With a crash, the door burst open, a huge shape staggering into the room, casting an enormous shadow behind it from the light that Reudh held. Something had peeled back the left half of its face, its skin and clothing soaked with blood, but both of the defenders recognized him immediately: it was Saemin.

Katie choked, her lips twisting tightly into a terrified frown as she shook with tears. "Oh, god..." she moaned, shaking uncontrollably with tears as she turned her head away in horror. Squeezing her eyes shut, she pulled the trigger, sobbing uncontrollably as she filled the body of her lover with plasma.

Reudh watched a stony, dead expression overtake her face as Saemin's body crumpled to the ground. "I am deeply sorry, Katie," he said quietly, but received no response.

After Reudh grabbed the pistol from Saemin's waist, the pair stormed into the hallway, mowing down the deathless hordes with a hail of bullets.

~~~

*Vanya's handwriting continues.*

"John!! I cried out as he crumpled to the ground, the victim of an electric warhammer. "Armok, vendi scild!" I shouted, leaving my work and rushing forwards to protect him with my shield. The Ballpoint soldier swung his weapon towards me; it bounced lightly off Armok's shield as his eyes and face erupted with gore, the victim of John's railgun. My friend was holding his weapon with a single arm, as he tried to push his way back to the megaportal with his legs.

While he did, he clutched at his chest in pain, his armor stained dark with blood.

"Get back to the portal controls!" he groaned with an agonized grimace. "How close are you to being done?"

I backed closer to him, watching the oncoming troops out of the corner of my eye. "John, you're hurt!"

"And you can't do anything about it!" he pointed out, inserting a new magazine into his weapon. "If you want to help me, *get the fucking portal open!!*"

Swallowing, I dropped the shield. I rushed back to the control panel, crouching and continuing where I'd left off, tracing the wires and undoing Ballpoint's damage. Behind me, John fired off a poorly aimed fusillade of bullets at our enemies, laboring for breath.

~~~

A conglomeration of inserted blue sheets and pasted snippets follow.

Trebor ran, watching his PEA for Jonah's coordinates. Ballpoint soldiers mocked him as he passed, laughing uproariously at the doctor's desperation.

As he neared the first trench, Trebor broke into a sprint, leaping across the collapsed tunnel, not daring to look below. He tumbled ungracefully onto the other side, blood, dirt and mud dirtying his smock. Stumbling to his feet, he kept up the brisk pace.

"Trebor! Over here!"

Looking about, the doctor caught sight of his friend, standing and waving his arms beside the broken body of his sister. With a final burst of speed, he reached them, panting. "Is... What happened?" the dwarf gasped out.

"Landmine," Jonah answered grimly.

Almory looked up at him listlessly, her skin pale. "Trebor," she whispered, barely audible.

Trebor knelt, opening his medkit and beginning to work on his sister's wounds, squeezing her hand from time to time. Weakly, she returned the squeeze.

"She's lost a lot of blood, Jonah," the doctor said quietly.

"Trebbie..." Almory whispered, "Am I going to make it?"

"I'm not letting you die," her brother assured her firmly.

In the distance, gunfire still boomed, and all three dwarves could hear the shouts of Ballpoint troops. Jonah could see them beginning to approach, wielding their weapons. "Trebor, I can't stay here," he said. "Seeing *one* doctor is one thing, but if they see two in the same place, they won't believe it. They'll kill us both."

"Stay here and protect us," Trebor suggested.

Jonah shook his head regretfully, watching the tank-like Octavians swivel their guns in their direction. "I have to go."

Sighing, Trebor nodded, bandaging the lieutenant's wounds. "I understand. Just stay safe out there."

Without a word, Jonah sprinted away, shouting and calling the enemy's attention. He fired his weapon into their ranks and leaping down into the nearby tunnel passage, disappearing from view.

Trebor remained silent for a moment, and then the color drained from his face as he dug through his medical chest. Aghast, he realized, "My coagulants... I left them at the trench... I can't stop the bleeding."

Katie and Reudh stood side by side, walking down the hallway at a steady pace. Their weapons blazed, dilapidated flesh peeling from the undead monsters before them with every shot.

Reudh glanced over at the girl for a moment. Her face seemed as lifeless as if she was one of the very creatures she was fighting. "Katie?" he asked, but she only continued forwards as if she hadn't heard.

Lurit stood atop a pile of broken bodies, his minigun's barrel smoking as he surveyed the carnage. At the far end from where he stood, the undead still shambled across the trench, heedless of the burning napalm jelly they shuffled through.

Shots rang out nearby – on a ledge ahead of him, a zombie's head exploded, the creature tumbling backwards into the trench. Reudh and Katie soon appeared where it had stood moments before.

"Reudh, old boy!" Lurit roared. "Glad you felt like waking up this morning! Get down here!"

But Reudh wasn't listening – he was staring in horror at the terrain above the trench's lip.

"Katie, get down, quickly!" he shouted, leaping aside.

Katie stood motionless, dead to everything around her.

"Katie, down!" Reudh shouted again, cautiously leaping down a floor.

Gunshots echoed – Katie's shoulder flew backwards, pulling her with it as she crumpled to the floor. Stray bullets thudded through the earthen wall behind her.

Lurit limped forwards, wielding his weapon. "Reudh, get to the infirmary!" he shouted. "I'll take care of the girl!"

Reudh finally seemed to notice him. "Lurit, you are not supposed to be up yet!"

Roaring with cynical laughter, the man boomed, "Like hell I'm not! There's no way I'm spending another second in that bed when there's fighting to be done!" Reaching Reudh, he helped him to his feet. "Now get to the infirmary already!"

With a nod, Reudh turned and headed back.

On the ledge above them, Katie's form stood shakily, her gun wavering uselessly in her left hand, her right arm dripping with blood. Abruptly, her arm raised, and she fired several shots. A Ballpoint soldier screamed as the plasma burned a hole into his chest, and fell into the trench.

"You!" Lurit shouted at the girl. "Get down and follow Reudh!" He watched as Katie's dazed eyes shifted unsteadily towards him as she fired a few more unaimed shots towards the sky, seconds before the wall exploded behind her. Lurit turned and raised his arm to shield himself from the cascading dirt, and when he looked back, there was nothing left of the young woman. Shaking his head in stunned disbelief, he turned around, only to see masses of Ballpoint soldiers storming down a slope of collapsed rubble on the far side.

Staring grimly, Lurit lowered the visor of his helmet. "All right!" he yelled, straining his lungs as he walked back down the stairs. "Let's go!" With an elongated roar, he revved his minigun, firing an endless stream of plasma into their ranks as they scattered like roaches, running for cover.

Bullets began pinging off his armor, and a railgun slug hit him in the chest, knocking the wind out of him as he flew backwards onto the ground. He sat up with an effort, emptying his weapon in his attacker's direction.

A shell exploded behind him, splashing rivers of burning napalm onto his armor. Lurit roared

with pain and staggered to his feet, unsteadily marching forwards with his weapon blazing, determined to keep them from entering the infirmary.

Jonah ran through the open-roofed tunnel, quickly limping his way around the front ends of fallen vehicles, stepping over dead bodies and firing shots behind him to keep the pursuing soldiers at bay.

He was so intent on the squads behind him that he didn't notice the ones up ahead until their rounds had pierced his chest.

"Klade!" K'bahth shouted, struggling to free himself from the cooling rubber. "Assist me!" In desperation, the scythod dropped his weapons and began to hack at the tires with his scythes and claws.

Klade picked his way through the battlefield at a sprint, shooting multiple shots at any target he heard. Listening, he heard a now-familiar, dreaded sound, and stood helpless as a missile's fireball consumed his friend.

Shouting, the lone scythod cursed the world, the gods, and Ballpoint, moments before he fell victim to their soldiers, their bullets shattering his chitin.

Trebor worked desperately by his sister's side, cursing himself audibly for forgetting to remember the supplies he'd needed. His efforts seemed useless – no matter what he did, the bleeding wouldn't stop, and she'd lost so much already. The best he could do was slow it down.

"Sis, stay with me!" he said, shaking her gently to keep her awake. Her dazed eyes stared blankly, dancing slowly about as she struggled to focus. Her breathing slowed – her pulse had been erratic since he'd arrived. As her eyes began to close, Trebor shook her again, but this time, it produced no response.

In desperation, he dug a pump from his medical chest. Inserting one tube into a vein in his sister's arm, he inserted the other into his own and started the machine. As the device began to work its magic, charting graphs upon its screen, Trebor could feel it drawing the blood from his own veins and transferring it to hers. It wouldn't save her, but he hoped it would keep her alive long enough for Vanya to open the portal.

It was a desperate man that sat on the hillside, watching his sister for any signs of revival.



Chapter 46: The Stench of Victory

This is the final entry containing the now-familiar pale blue sheets. Following this, only Vanya's entries remain.

"John, stay awake!" I cried out, watching him through tear-blurred eyes as I struggled with the megaportal's wiring. I almost had it fixed: they'd backwired the antimatter containment cells through a positronic conductor. Maybe Parasol's portals worked differently than Mr Frog's, but it didn't make any sense to me... that feeling was all I had to go on.

John lay slumped up against the control panels, breathing raggedly, his Ballpoint suit streaked with blood. If I ever dared to try to help him, he yelled at me to keep working, but I'd promised

him that as soon as I had the portal open, I'd do whatever I could.

Suddenly, as I reattached two wires, the portal began a menacing hum, throbbing with power... a deep, ancient sound. The hills echoed with its noise. Glancing around, I could see Ballpoint's troops turning, rushing back to defend the portal.

But the portal didn't open. I was sure something was broken, or misplaced, but I wasn't sure what. On a whim, I removed Almory's computer chip from its slot and reinserted it.

Air rushed towards the megaportal's center at great speeds, whistling as it gathered my hair and flung it at my face.

And all became still.

With a crash, the megaportal exploded with light and sound, almost knocking me to the ground as the air around me began to reverberate, pulsing, heaving like waves on a stormy day. As the hum began anew, the air within the frame coalesced into a rippling mirror.

I'd opened the portal.

The first thing on my mind was John's condition. I sprinted over to him, and even as I did, Parasol's tanks poured through the 30-foot iris, great machines of war, heavily suited troops, biomechs and mechoids, armed with incredible weapons. Everything was black and white, and bore Parasol's trademark red and white umbrella. It heralded a victory... but it meant little to me as I discovered John was already unconscious. I wept by his side, watching the battle through my hair and hoping someone would come and help.

Even as the Ballpoint troops reversed direction, storming back up the hill, Parasol's troops began firing rounds into their ranks. Three of their enormous tanks charged their weapons, their singularity cannons shimmering as they each fired a round. The projectiles blurred slowly towards their target, the air around them warping and spraying sparks; three of Ballpoint's tanks seemed to implode in a cloud of metallic dust.

A giant creature stepped out of the portal... it was like a rhinoceros or elephant, but with legs wider than barrels, its body blotting out the stars. It stomped forward to join the combat, the ground shaking under its weight. It was beyond anything I'd ever dreamed.

Despite Parasol's incredible firepower, Ballpoint's superior numbers prevailed, and they and Parasol met in the middle of the field in melee as napalm shells exploded and singularities hummed over their heads.

Medics emerged from the portal, wearing Parasol scrubs and light armor, carrying medkits that looked like the one Trebor always carried. Getting to my feet, I ran after them, yelling and waving my arms. "Help!" I shouted. "Please, somebody!! My friend needs help!"

A stray railgun round grazed my leg and I fell to the ground, crying out in agony at the sharp, sudden pain. I looked at the wound... it'd left a deep gash, cutting a hole straight through my armor.

"Please! Help!" I called again.

But no one stopped. No one offered to help, or even turned in my direction. Slowly, my resolve faded into hopelessness, and I lay there alone, ignored, clutching at my leg and weeping unseen tears.

~~~

*Several blue sheets of paper are inserted here.*

Almory choked, her eyes fluttering back open as she breathed in a lungful of precious air.

Her brother started crying with relief. "Oh, thank Armok," he whispered. "Sis, stay awake."

Lieutenant Almory swallowed, blinking her eyes as her head cleared. "I'm not in any pain," she whispered, looking about as Ballpoint soldiers rushed past, returning to the top of the hill.

Trebor nodded. He was starting to feel weak from the lack of blood. "Painkillers," he explained briefly. "Vanya made it to the portal."

The lieutenant frowned. "Does it matter?" she asked. "Parasol may win... but have *we*?" Her critical eye strayed to her arm, following the tube to the pump Trebor held, and then to Trebor's arm. "What do you think you're doing?"

The doctor swallowed dryly, rocking back and forth to stay awake. "You needed blood," he said quietly. "I lacked supplies."

Gritting her teeth, she pulled the blood-squirting tube from her arm, and tossed it aside.

"What are you doing?!" Trebor exclaimed in dismay, shutting off the device. "You *need* blood!"

"I won't take yours," she said firmly. "Look how pale you are now."

"Sis, you *need blood*," the dwarf insisted. "You're still bleeding out from multiple wounds. This is the only way I can keep you alive."

"By killing you?" Almory asked quietly, already beginning to feel lightheaded again. "It's better for me to die."

"I *can't* let you die."

"You *can*," she corrected him, moving her hands to her bloodied chest. "I'm not losing my little brother."

Determined, Trebor tried to re-insert the tube into her arm, but she snatched it from him and drew it across one of her swords.

"What are you doing?!" Trebor almost shouted, growing dizzy from the effort.

Weakly, his sister laid her sword back by her side. "I won't let you do this."

"You *have* to!" Trebor begged, starting to weep. "*Please!* How could I live with the guilt of not saving you?"

"How could I live with the guilt of killing my baby brother?" she whispered, looking at him. "I won't let you die here with me. You're going to go back home and finish medical school. You're going to write that book you always talked about, and meet a nice girl."

"No," Trebor mumbled, shaking with tears as he squeezed her hand reassuringly. "You won't die. It's not as bad as you think."

A smile flickered briefly at her lips. "You're a bad liar, Trebbie..." she whispered. "You always were. I'm growing weaker every second." Almory quieted, swallowing painfully as she closed her eyes.

And all was still.

"Sis, you need to stay awake," Trebor whispered. When there was no response, he said, louder, "Sis, you need to stay awake!" With a finger, he reached out and felt her pulse. Tears started to spring forth anew, and he leaned forward, resting his forehead against hers as he wept inconsolably.

And darkness fell around the form of the doctor, crouched beside a dying woman.

*The transcript ends here with a flourish, followed by a signature:*

*"~ Trebor Mallarkus, Field Doctor*

*~In memory of the fallen~"*

~~~

Vanya's handwriting continues.

Holding my breath, I tried getting to my feet, and found that I could stand without much trouble.

I turned away from the battle with a dejected frown, limping back up the hill towards John's body, where I could faintly make out the shape of a medic who was working on his wounds, silhouetted by a portable light he'd placed by John's side. I felt an immense relief at the sight.

As I came up behind the doctor, I asked, "Will he be all right?"

He looked up, startled as if he'd been unaware of my approach. For a long moment, he stared at me blankly. "It's very bad, ma'am," he finally said, taking the light and moving it to assist his work.

Only then did I see the full extent of John's wounds. I spun, closing my eyes to shut out the image as a tear rolled down my cheek.

Amidst a jetpack's roar, a familiar figure landed in front of me.

"Katie!" I exclaimed I rushed forwards to hug her, but she only staggered forwards, dazed. "Katie?" I asked again, looking in her eyes. My gaze strayed, and I noticed the blood streaking her entire left arm, running down from her shoulder.

Struggling, as if it was difficult, she lifted her eyes to my face. She seemed to stare straight through me... almost as if she hardly realized I existed. Her face was an embodiment of terror and hopelessness.

"Saemin's gone," she whispered. "Everyone's gone."

I didn't want to believe it. "Everyone?"

She didn't reply, only shuffling past me and falling to her knees by the medic's side.

"What's happened to her?" I asked the doctor, shaking his shoulder to get his attention. "Why is she like this?"

He jerked away from me and looked at her briefly. "Combat fatigue," he explained, continuing his work. "Sometimes called 'shell shock'. She's from division 48D, isn't she?"

His tone implied he was insulting her, and I felt defensive. "What does it matter?"

The dwarf looked up at me, frowning sympathetically. "None of them were supposed to see combat. It's a miracle they managed to open the portal at all."

Oblivious to what we were saying, Katie slumped sideways onto the dirt.

"Will it get better?" I asked worriedly.

"I need to fix up her arm, but in a day or two, yeah... Apart from a probable case of post-traumatic stress disorder. Now, if you don't mind, ma'am, I need to finish my job." He took a tone of annoyance to express this last.

I nodded, starting dejectedly back down the slope. The battle raged nearby, but I hardly noticed it. I stumbled aimlessly forwards, hoping to find someone I recognized.

I felt like crying... but the tears wouldn't come.

~~~

The first rays of sunlight reached over the tips of the eastern hills, revealing the ruined trench that lay outstretched at my feet. Only days before, it had been a center of life... Maybe everyone within had been doomed to die, but they'd known it. With no hope, they'd possessed no fear, and had only strived to make their last days the best they could.

Then I'd come... and I'd given them hope. I'd made them afraid.

I stared blankly at the wreckage. The sides of the trench had almost completely collapsed, blocking or covering doors on the upper levels. Entire rooms had caved in on the far side, creating smoking, burning pits in the earth above. Twisted metal lay scattered everywhere; pieces of paper fluttered meaninglessly in the wind, tumbling across the deserted paths... the last remnants of a time of order.

But the trench itself was empty; it was devoid of life...

Their deaths were because of me.

Biting my lip, I started down what was left of the staircase, stepping over fallen bodies. I was afraid to look at their faces... I was afraid I'd see someone I recognized.

It didn't make sense to me. Almory had said she would start the bubble shield at the slightest sign of trouble. I wondered if maybe she'd seen the point in what I'd said to her in the hallway corridor, and had put Parasol ahead of herself.

It was with little hope that I examined the tragic scene, limping through the trench's cluttered pathways, stepping carefully around bits of melted rubble. It was a silent, gruesome place. The infirmary was empty, as was the armory. Corpses lay strewn about where they'd fallen. Charred rivulets stretched down the walls and spilled to the ground below where napalm jelly had burned only a little while before, some still flickering with tiny flames. Craters, large and small, pockmarked the walls... chunks of earth lay scattered and crumbling.

"What have I done?" I whispered.

A ringing noise answered my voice, jolting me back to the present. Although it sounded familiar, I couldn't remember where I'd heard it before. Curious, I followed its echo up the stairs to Almory's office and opened the door.

The ceiling had caved in, revealing the brightening sky above, and though the table in the middle still held the clay model of the hill, it had shattered under the weight of the collapsing earth.

I followed the ringing noise over to Almory's desk and swept away the dirt with my hands, digging through ruined paperwork until I found what I was looking for. It was an old PEA, its screen flashing with familiar dwarven runes: "Tap screen to accept call".

For a minute, I hesitated. I'd read the same words four years before... Back then, I hadn't known anything about technology, or portals, or the timewar...

The device continued its incessant ringing, and I picked it up, sitting down in Almory's chair. Holding my breath, I tapped my finger on the screen.

"Hello, Vanya Carena," said a voice.

Joseph's too-perfect face smiled at me from the PEA's screen.

I was too stunned and broken to feel angry. "It's you... Why are you talking to *me*?"

"Why should I not?" he asked with a smile. "I find it worthwhile. Do you not as well?"

His smile annoyed me. People were dying everywhere, and he didn't seem to care at all. "I

don't want to talk to you," I told him quietly. "You'll use me again."

"Not at all, not at all," Joseph crooned. "In truth, I had believed you were dead until a few hours ago, when one of my men sighted you near the portal." He paused for a moment, observing me with watchful eyes. "I suppose you want to visit Parasol and then get back to Spearbreakers, no?"

I didn't answer, wrongly believing it would keep him from learning anything.

"Your silence speaks volumes, Vanya," Joseph continued. "You believe Parasol to be the 'good side' in the Timewar. You believe Ballpoint is evil."

"That isn't true," I said. It felt good to tell him he was wrong.

It didn't slow him down. "Perhaps not entirely, but what you don't realize is that Parasol is no better."

"That's *your* opinion."

"Perhaps so, perhaps so," he replied with a smile, continuing in his smooth, musical voice. It sent shivers down my spine. "However, your lack of information impedes your judgment. Unlike Eris, Parasol and Ballpoint are devoid of any sense of morality. Ballpoint serves money, and Parasol serves science. Ballpoint protects its clients' offers, and Parasol protects its experiments."

"That doesn't mean they lack morals," I argued.

The man smiled unnervingly and raised a finger. "This is true, this is true," he noted. "However, Ballpoint seeks to destroy Spearbreakers, and only for the sake of money. Parasol seeks to protect it, and only for the sake of its experiment."

"The Holistic Spawn," I guessed, wary of any traps he might lay. "Parasol, at least, is doing the right thing."

"Indeed, the Holistic Spawn," Joseph said slowly, tapping his fingertips together. "Tell me, little one... What if Spearbreakers threatened to destroy Parasol's experiment? What if someone hired Ballpoint to protect Spearbreakers? Ballpoint would do so, no?"

I saw his point, and I didn't have an answer to it.

"Eris is different, little one. We seek to destroy those who would seek to destroy the less fortunate."

It was hard to believe he could even *make* such a claim. "You want me to believe Eris is the 'good side', but you try to slaughter millions of innocent people?"

Joseph laughed, a discomfiting sound that bubbled through the ruined room. "Innocent, you say? You call them innocent, even as they pull people from their homes, even as they invade established territory, even as their precious experiments bring tens of thousands of *truly* innocent lives to an end. They genetically manipulate sentient creatures and induct unknowing participants into their ranks as 'Sleeper Agents'?" He paused for effect, and continued, "Participants such as you, Vanya?"

"*You* controlled me, Joseph," I said, beginning to glimmer with frustration. "You made me kill dozens of people who didn't deserve to die."

"The faults of the employees and the faults of the company are the same," he replied smoothly. "Employees may leave their companies at any time, and if they choose not to, then they share their company's ideals."

I furrowed my brow at him angrily. "You made me kill *children*."

"An employee is an employee, regardless of its age," the man chided gently. "Two dozen lives, if lost at the appropriate time, can save millions of others. If those two dozen people had not died, Ballpoint would never have renewed their attack on Parasol, and would not have accepted their client's offer. Many other worlds might have felt their destructive tread."

I hesitated, puzzling over what he'd said, and my eyes widened as I figured it out. "You're the client," I whispered. "You hired Ballpoint to destroy Spearbreakers... you're trying to make them destroy each other."

Joseph gave a slow, solemn nod. "I must. If I do not, they will travel to other planets and dimensions after they destroy Everoc, as they have done many times before, destroying trillions of lives. However, if they fall apart under their own leadership and disband, all those lives can be saved." He smiled gently. "I am not alone in my belief, Vanya. Hundreds of people follow behind my lead, and among them is your friend, Mr Frog."

I faltered for a moment, making up my mind not to let him know I knew about the clone. "He couldn't do it willingly," I offered quietly.

"Perhaps not, particularly not the clone you know. However, the original works for me at Eris, and has developed advanced weaponry and espionage equipment for me. Of course, he has no idea what he is helping create."

I hoped he didn't know about how Mr Frog had sent someone to warn Parasol... but after listening to him talk, I wasn't sure of what he *couldn't* know. "You cloned him?" I asked, feigning surprise.

"It was necessary," Joseph said in terse reply. "We all have a set of ideals, little one. They drive us and make us stronger. While Parasol and Ballpoint serve science and money, Eris serves morality. We serve the greater good. I do not seek to kill Parasol or Ballpoint's employees, but merely to destroy their companies, so they will cease wreaking havoc on the multiverse."

At the time, I couldn't see any flaws in his arguments. I badly wanted to be able to tell him he was wrong... I didn't *want* to believe him. "You tried to kill me," I pointed out. It was all I had left.

"At the time, you would not have worked for me, and Parasol changed the Sleeper access codes. You were an advantage that was dangerous for Parasol to continue to possess. Removing you kept Parasol from killing Kannan, who was detrimental to their position." He paused for a moment and smiled almost fondly at the memory. "I was actually quite pleased when I found you had survived and destroyed your bracelet. A needless death was avoided."

"Perhaps I should allow you some time to think it over," the man said with a thoughtful air. "When I see you have made your decision, I shall contact you again."

And with that, the PEA's screen went dark.



## Chapter 47: Parasol

*You sit in Parasol, a world-girdling company that stops at nothing to further their scientific progress. They've commissioned you, Dr. Urist Jones, a young Dwarven archaeologist, to translate an old text, for primarily historical reasons... Something about this doesn't quite add up to you, and you aren't sure why they're doing it. Across from you sits a woman with dark, brown hair and silver-green eyes, seemingly around the age of 18. She gazes at you expectantly, waiting for you to continue reading from Vanya's journal... and you comply.*

Parasol had won the battle... they'd destroyed the Ballpoint army, and only a few survivors had managed to escape. Klade didn't care, though... I found him early that first morning as I stood atop the hill, gazing down upon the smoking carnage with a listless stare.

"There is no honor in this war," he chattered grimly as he limped up to where I stood. "We have killed too many soldiers... A *hundred* scythods could never consume them all. This is no



victory, as 'Parassol' claims, but a great sorrow."

I agreed quietly. "I think so, too."

We were silent for several moments, but then I asked, "Klade... what about K'bahth? Where is he?"

Klade only clicked his claws and turned away, softly cursing the Klascoryf as he left.

Trebor found me soon after. I was relieved to see him still alive, but he only brought me the news of the deaths of Saemin, Jonah, and Lieutenant Almory.

"I'm sorry, Trebor," I said quietly. "I know how it hurts to lose a sister, too."

He only nodded, slipping a sword and scabbard off his belt. "She would've wanted you to have this," the dwarf told me quietly. "She was a woman of her word... and she lost the bet. Parasol prevailed."

When I tried to put my arms around him to show I cared, he shrugged me off. His joking personality was all but gone... he seemed to have gained a portion of his sister's hatred, and I haven't heard him call me "Hotlips" since. I wish he would, now... it's strange what things you miss when they're gone.

I followed him back to the trench's infirmary, where we found Strohe and Lurit, both barely alive. Trebor, like any good doctor, put aside his feelings and tended to their wounds... but I could see the emptiness in his eyes. He would never say it, but he wished he'd died with his sister. It was a feeling I knew well.

As that first, painful afternoon wore on, Tedaz and I started working to clear the debris out of the cluttered walkway, mostly to get our minds off what had happened. Unfortunately, it wasn't long before a Parasol officer told us the trench was ruined, and it was too dangerous to stay. He told me to move to one of the white tents Parasol had set up on the hillside, away from the wreckage of the battle, and so I did.

Looking through the tents, I soon found Katie. The battlefield medics were treating her, and they didn't seem very worried about her physical wounds. Though her arm and shoulder were patched up before the first day was over, she hadn't been able to take the mental trauma... only the gods know what horrible things she saw. For the most part, I stayed with her from then on, though guilt often drew me back to the trench against my will.

The next few days flew by quickly. While Strohe, Lurit, and Katie's conditions slowly improved, I never saw John again... not even his body... though I did find a dusty, charred message from him, lying atop Almory's paperwork on her desk:

*"From John, to Lieutenant Almory:*

*I realize it's late for me to say it, and I feel ashamed, but it must be said; I haven't trusted Vanya's plan ever since you told it to me, and I don't think I'll be coming back from this. My true name is Escu Honukem, and I come from the village of Helmspear. If by some chance you ever find yourself up that way... let my family know I died fighting our enemies. Don't let them know I was a coward. Don't let them know I ever joined Ballpoint."*

In addition to John's body being missing, we never found the bodies of Tames or Gearbox, either. I assumed Tames had joined Ballpoint's retreating forces... but I hoped Gearbox was all right. I hoped he would head towards Spearbreakers, and that I would find him there someday. As to John himself, I like to pretend he survived. I like to imagine him getting back to his family,

far away at Helmspear - their tears and embraces as they reunite after all those years apart. It's a comforting thought, but it's far from being all that's on my mind.

I often thought about what Joseph had said. I was sure he was lying... After all, how could Parasol lack any sense of morality? Joseph was a liar, I knew, and I resolved not to believe him, but as the medics treated their wounded, I saw little hints of what he'd said. If someone on life support became considered a lost cause, they would let the person die rather than keep him alive. They're calculating people... even more so than dwarves. Dwarves will let an injured soldier lie in the hospital for years. It stood out in stark contrast to what I was witnessing with the battlefield medics.

The fourth morning, I sat in the tent, talking quietly with Reudh beside Katie's bed. Suddenly, she awoke, sitting upright and panting as if she was terrified, her widened eyes dancing about the medical equipment that surrounded us. Her gaze found me and softened as realization overtook her fragile mind; she hung her head, collapsing towards me and crying. I put my arms around her and told her I understood, just as I'd done so many times before for Salaia.

We came closer those next few days than many people come in a lifetime. She became like a sister to me... as Salaia had been, but different. She was a friend.

She was recovering quickly... but she was bottling up what had happened. I've always done the same thing, but Katie is a happy person at heart... she doesn't like for something to get her down. I'm not sure if she'd forgotten the things she'd seen or not, but she never spoke of them again.

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As the week ended, I stood atop Megaportal Hill one last time, watching the sun's setting rays color the graves of the fallen. Reudh stood beside me, as did Katie and Trebor, Reudh, Tedaz and Lurit. Klade had left with Strohe, who wanted to return home. No one in Parasol spoke Scythod, and I lied to the officers about what Klade had said... I told them he was escorting Strohe to the border of the bloodplains. Klade was part of the timewar, and we "natives" of Everoc weren't supposed to know about him, but I didn't care. The way things were going, everyone would eventually find out anyway, so what did it matter?

Eight graves lay out before us, their tenants' names engraved into the dark, metallic headstones with love: K'bahth, Saemin Lo Diel, Hawkins Entomel, Jonah Hylcelon, Almorey Mallarkus Bertran, Martin "Gearbox" Bakerson, Cronan Tames, and Escu "John Smith" Honukem. Their runes glowed with a soft light, and those belonging to Parasol flashed with little video clips of their lives. The images of their faces, laughing at parties, goofing off... normally watching clips like those would make a person happy, but the knowledge that they were gone from the world tore unrelentingly at my heart.

Katie tried to say a little prayer for each of them, but she couldn't even make it to Saemin's before she started to break down.

"I'm sorry," Katie said quietly, her voice staggered with emotion. "I can't do it."

Trebor gave her a light embrace and nodded grimly, trying to keep his voice level. "When we get back home, I'll write a memoir... 'In Memory of the Fallen'. They deserve for Parasol to remember them... it wasn't their fault they died." He shot a piercing glance in my direction as he said that last.

Turning, I walked away, looking over the distant hills and forests towards the sunset. A tear threatened to fall, and I didn't even feel like brushing it away. I felt terrible.

"You care deeply about their deaths, but believe me when I say it is not your fault, sweet Vanya."

Looking over my shoulder, I saw Reudh, who was gazing at me sympathetically. "It *is* my fault," I told him quietly, wiping my face with a hand and turning my head away. "If I hadn't been trying to get back to Spearbreakers, none of this would have happened."

"I agree," Reudh said quietly. "You saved two lives when they all would have died."

Shooting a twisted, scornful glance at the dwarf, I tried not to cry. "K'bahth and John died, too, Reudh!"

"Parasol may yet win back Everoc due to their sacrifice," he countered. "It was a good thing you did! Do not doubt yourself, my dear. Trebor and Katie will live on, telling their story and bringing others to their cause."

I spun to face him, angry and upset. "Reudh, have you *ever* lost anyone?" I didn't wait for him to reply before I went on, "Have you ever lost everyone you loved, and found yourself alone? No friends, no family, nobody left but you? Do you know how that feels?"

"Well, I -"

Though I tried my best, I couldn't hold back my tears. "That's how I felt when I lost my sister, Reudh! I wanted to *die*. I had nothing left to live for, and the only thing that kept me alive was trying to save Spearbreakers from Ballpoint. I never even had a chance to go back for her body." I pursed my lips, stepping forwards and glaring at him through blurred eyes. "Don't tell me I did a good job. Trebor and Katie are suffering more than you know." I paused for breath, and felt guilty when I finally noticed how hurt Reudh seemed at what I'd said.

"I am... truly sorry, Vanya..." he managed in response, wringing his pack in his hands. "I did not... I apologize."

Starting to cry, I closed my eyes and hung my head, wishing I could lie down and never have to get back up. I felt his arm move around my back as he held me close, but I didn't bother to move away. I knew he was trying to help me feel better, but I didn't *want* him to do anything for me... I just wanted him to *understand*.

"I know it hurts," Reudh said finally, "but believe me when I say it wasn't your fault. It was Tames's."

It quieted me, and I looked up at him curiously, brushing the hair from my eyes as I processed what he'd told me. "Tames?"

The dwarf nodded. "He betrayed us by telling Ballpoint our plans. Now come; our friends are ready to enter the portal to Parasol. Are you going with them?" With a gentle hand on my back, he started to lead me away from the sunset.

I nodded. "Yes..." I said, sniffing. "I'm going to Parasol, and then to Spearbreakers"

"And I shall come with you," Reudh said reassuringly. "Where you go, I shall go as well, my sweetest love."

Sometimes he was nice to have around, but others, not so much. I spared a disapproving glance at him for his affections, but he didn't seem to notice.

"Vanya, hurry!" Katie called. She was standing beside the megaportal's rippling, silver surface, holding a kit bag in each hand. Groups of people were skipping in line around her and disappearing into the portal. As I neared her, she explained, "It's set to our destination, but only briefly. We're holding other people up." She motioned behind us, and looking where she pointed,

I saw a squad of white-suited Parasol soldiers standing at attention.

"Then let's go," I told her, starting forwards.

She dropped a bag and grabbed my hand. "Do you have a place to live?"

"I won't be at Parasol long."

"They won't let you leave," she said, picking her bag back up and handing it to me. "I already asked. Admiral Coscar says Sleeper Agents aren't allowed to leave."

This stopped me, and I looked back at her, gaping and stricken with disbelief. "What?? Why not?!"

Katie frowned apologetically, tilting her head. "They said it's classified. I'm really sorry... but if you want, you can stay with me at my dad's house. He's let my friends sleep over before, so I don't think he'll mind. But... um..." She stopped, looking uncomfortable.

"What?"

She grimaced briefly, and then, with a pleading glance, said, "Call him 'Mr. Kenzon'... and don't let him know who you are." At my questioning stare, Katie added, "Please?"

"Okay..." I said, giving a cautious nod as I shifted her bag in my hands.

"C'mon," she coaxed, and side by side, we started towards the towering structure.

As we climbed the steps at its base, I decided that someday, I *was* going back to Spearbreakers... no matter what it took.

And the portal's liquid surface enveloped us, so different from the portals of Ballpoint.

I walked for a moment, blind in the darkness of a metaphysical dimension. I felt a strange sensation, as if I was being funneled through nothingness, yet my legs continued to carry me forwards across an undetectable floor.

Sounds buffeted my ears; everything grew bright as I crossed the interspace threshold and got my first glimpse of Parasol. Katie's bag fell unnoticed from my fingers.

I stood in awe at the portal's base, dwarfed by the gigantic chamber dimly lit with beautiful chandeliers the shape of upturned parasols. The walls were thousands upon thousands of glass panes, holding back a clear, blue sea. Through its crystalline depths, I could see distant shapes: giant cathedrals, beautiful monuments, towers stretching high into the ocean above. Huge creatures swam past in pinks and blues, spinning and dancing through the waters as they trailed phosphorescent ribbons in their wake. Unaware of the passage of time, I followed one's near-magical descent until it disappeared from view behind me.

A hand took mine, and I started, looking up at its owner's face.

"You're not in Kansas anymore," Katie whispered with an impish smile, picking up her bag.

"What? What is 'Kansas'?" I asked in confusion.

She gave a little laugh. "I'll explain later. Let's just get out of here before Parasol's reporters get to us," she said, pointing at the receptionist's O-shaped desk in front of us, where a handful of people were clamoring to get a better shot with their little cameras. "Retaking Everoc is big news, obviously, but they'll pester us to no end."

"Like hell they will," Lurit grunted, watching the reporters jostle each other around with light amusement. Beside him, Reudh held his pike idly, too rapt in examining the beauty about him to notice the reporters at all.

One of them got past the guards and rushed up to Trebor with a PEA in hand. "I'm Yolas Maxtur for Parasol Daily - can you give me a statement about 48D's involvement in battle 7165b8?"

It freaked me out. I started to hyperventilate, my eyes darting from one reporter to the next, then at Katie, who was laughing and talking to Reudh. After hiding who I was all my life, I wasn't used to this kind of attention, and it scared me out of rational thought.

Ducking behind everyone, I crept along the walls in the shadows, hoping they wouldn't notice me. I felt bewildered. Apparently 48D's return to Parasol was a big event, and everything was in such chaos that nobody saw me slink past the guards, moving past a corner of the room to one of the alcoves at the edge. Not even Katie seemed to notice I was gone, and it was with a good deal of relief that I watched the little crowd mill about the receptionist's desk, completely oblivious to my presence.

A voice startled me, bearing a heavy human accent. "You don't like crowds either."

Spinning around, I found myself looking at the stomach of an unusually tall woman. With my eyes, I followed her muscled frame up to a badly-scarred face. I couldn't figure out how I'd not noticed she was there. She didn't appear very old, even for a human... maybe 50 at most.

"Who are you?" I asked uncomfortably, trying not to stare at her disfigurement. It looked like she'd suffered terrible burns at some point in her life.

She sat herself down on the little bench in the alcove, leaning on her cane for support, and chuckled with an undertone of grief. "A more important question is, who are *you*? When a girl is sidestepping the guards to avoid the reporters, it makes her look like she has something to hide... and what's happen to your ears?" she added, leaning to the side and peering at them with an innocent, curious expression.

Reddening, I snatched Jack Magnus's cap from a pouch, pulling it over them. "I'm an elf," I whispered in embarrassment.

She didn't seem to recognize the word. "I haven't saw none of them here before, so I guess you're an offworlder, like me... but you couldn't have work in no mines because you don't have the build for it." She peered at me curiously. "So where are you from, child?"

I hesitated. She didn't seem especially intelligent, but she didn't seem untrustworthy. Then again, I'd been wrong before. "I'm from Everoc..." I said quietly, watching as she raised a surprised eyebrow. "I grew up hiding in a fortress of dwarves... most dwarves on Everoc hate elves."

"A skulker..." the woman said thoughtfully, staring meaninglessly off into the distance as she rested her hands on her cane. "And an Everoccan, at that..."

"I'm just not used to all that attention."

The woman jumped at my words, and then looked back at me, smiling sadly. "I am Eltsha, child. I were a skulker in my childhood years, also." She patted the bench beside her. "Sit."

"My name is Vanya," I replied. Without questioning, I took a seat beside her. It felt awkward... I wasn't sure whether to watch her face, or look away from her scars. More than that, I'd learned from a young age that skulkers couldn't often be trusted. I decided to dig further, asking, "Why are you here?"

Eltsha sighed. "I know they say he was dead, but I was hoping to see my son." She looked over at me, pursing her lips, wrinkled lines crossing her scarred face. "Are you a mother, child?"

"I don't have any family now, but I raised my sister," I offered.

She turned her gaze towards the crowd at the desk. "Then mayhap you know how I feel." She paused for a minute, and continued with a thoughtful sigh, "I keep expecting to see him walk out that portal... calling for me like he use to every time he come home..." She looked back down at me with moistened eyes, smiling at me sadly. "...and he *doesn't* come back, nor will he now. The

dust is taking him away... yet I still hope."

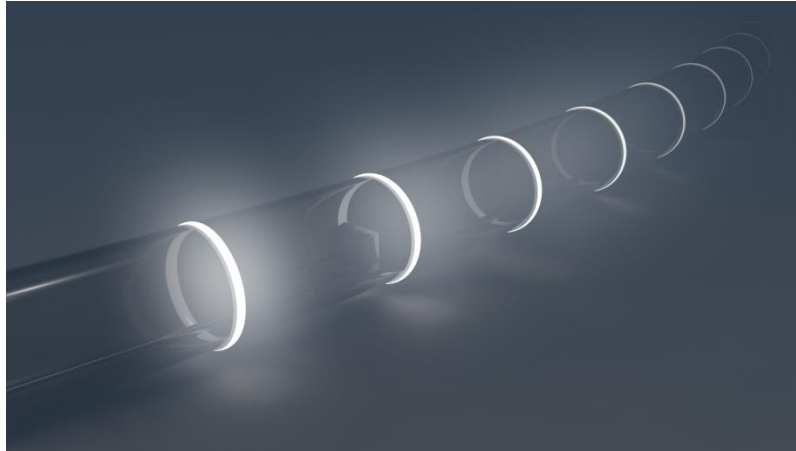
I knew how it felt to lose someone you love. "I'm sorry, Eltsha... I'm sure he was a good man."

The woman nodded quickly. "Oh yes! He was. He always work to provide food for us, and when his sister got sick, he went off to war, because it make more money. But... he couldn't save everyone. No one can save everyone."

A yell interrupted us. "Vanya?" a girl called, her voice distant.

"Go on, child," Eltsha urged gently. "Your friend is wanting you."

As I got to my feet and started back towards Katie, I cast one more sympathetic glance at the old woman, her words echoing in my mind.



A portion of an underwater shuttlecar tube with an empty shuttlecar within. Art by Talvieno.

Chapter 48: Shuttlecar Ride

"If I might have your attention," you hear a voice say from the doorway of Vanya's tomb. Turning towards it, you see Dr. Thian Russ, the man who brought you into Parasol.

"Problem?" you ask bluntly, holding a finger on your page as you glance towards him.

"Indeed... in a manner. You have been reading for over five hours at this point, and you arrived at Parasol late in the day. We need you to stay rested so you can translate with a fair degree of accuracy. Thus, I must strongly advise you come with me and get some rest."

Now that he mentions it, you do feel a little tired, but you would much rather ignore it. So many secrets are explaining themselves within these ancient pages at your hand... but no matter. With a heavy sigh and a respectful nod to the woman across from you, you rise from the chair at the little table and leave the little tomb.

Not much happens of note. Russ gives you a small room to stay in, and you quickly fall asleep. The scenery is interesting, but not as interesting as the books you'd left behind.

After freshening up the next morning, you aspire to take the shuttlecar by yourself, and with a little trouble, you do. Though you marvel at its technology, this is the history of the future. It isn't your line of work, and you feel no regrets as you leave it behind at the station, walking steadily towards Vanya's tomb ahead of schedule.

The mysterious woman awaits you at the table with a smile, her hair done up a different way.

It seemed as though, unlike before, she cared about her appearance. "Good morning," she says quietly, motioning for you to sit.

"You're up early," you say, taking a seat and make yourself comfortable. "Why is that?"

She looks away for a moment, then turns back to you with eager eyes. "Something important is coming soon," she says in a hushed voice. "Something important that changed history from then until now."

"That may be true, but it's also true that you dodged my question," you note, chuckling dryly. "If you know so much about the past, why can you not tell them yourself?"

She hesitates, and grows as quiet as she'd been the day before, the conversation quickly progressing into an awkward silence. "Continue reading, please," the woman says, and so you do.

"Vanya!" Katie called.

As I left Eltsha, I examined the area cautiously, watching for the reporters I dreaded. Fortunately, they seemed to have left, leaving my friends in the middle of the chamber, atop the glowing Parasol logo. Their family members clustered about them, but as far as I could tell, no one was taking pictures anymore, and the random dwarves milling about the room didn't even seem to be paying attention to them.

"Please, Trebor, let me deliver the speech," a pretty, red-haired dwarf was saying. From her bloodshot eyes, I could tell she'd been crying.

Trebor sighed. "I'm sorry, Lydena - this is something I need to do for myself."

"Vanya!" Katie shouted again, spinning slowly about as she scanned the room. I approached her quickly from behind.

"Katie..." I whispered, touching her shoulder. "What's going on?"

Turning quickly towards my voice, she took my hand and led me forwards at a brisk pace. "There's someone I want you to meet," she explained, leading me around the little group to a blonde-haired, lab coat-wearing dwarf who stood on the other side.

I felt bewildered. "What's going on?" I asked Katie.

She ignored me, too busy introducing us to each other. "Solnay, this is Vanya. Vanya, this is Solnay, Jonah's widow."

The pudgy, wrinkled woman gave a gracious smile, and reached forwards, taking both my hands in hers before I even knew what was going on. "Solnay Hyclcelon, Applied Sciences. Good to meet you, Vanya." It was an unusually haunting gaze that she directed at my eyes, a little unnerving, but pleasant all the same. Her accent was a little odd, though... wide-mouthed, I guess, if that makes any sense.

"Mhm," I said, nodding absently as I tried to mentally keep pace with everything. "It's good to meet you, too. I'm... I'm sorry about Jonah. Your husband, I mean," I continued, trying unavailingly to recover.

She gave an expressive frown. "He was a wonderful husband, and a brilliant scientist. At least he's in a better place now. Trebor tells me he died saving his life."

"I wasn't with him when he died..." I managed, uncomfortably.

Solnay nodded rapidly, still squeezing my hands in her warm, moist grip. "I heard all about it, sweetie. I heard you saved all of Everoc."

That got my attention. "I didn't do anything like that!" I whispered. "All I did was open the portal."

"Oh, hush now," she chided, giving my hands one more pat before withdrawing her own. "I

can imagine if I wish that my Jonah died saving a whole planet." She faltered for a moment, as if caught between tears and a smile, but cleared it away with a wave of the hand. "They won't give you any credit for it, you know, so there's no need to worry about speeches. It's not the Parasol way. You're a Sleeper agent, and a native. They won't even mention you were there." Solnay paused, giving it a second thought. "Sorry if that disappoints you."

"Not at all!" I answered truthfully, trying to calm myself. I wasn't used to such crowded places, and the people rushing about made me edgy. "No, I'm very glad of it."

"Aw, well, that's for the best then," Solnay replied, nodding. "Have you met Trebor's family yet?"

I glanced around. Katie had left, but Trebor was still talking with Lydena. "No, I haven't..." I said carefully, but before I could continue, Solnay had already taken me by the hand and was leading me towards them.

"Trebor, sweetie, have you introduced Vanya to your family yet?" she called, getting his attention.

The next fifteen minutes were spent in a multitude of handshakes and nods. Trebor had what seemed to me a very large family - there were over two dozen, and I can't even remember how they were all related to him. They seemed to approve of me, at least, but I found Trebor's younger sister somewhat annoying. Lydena loved being the center of attention just as much as I hated it, and I was greatly relieved when Katie finally reappeared and pulled me away. I was almost shaking.

Katie looked at me strangely. "Are you all right?" she asked concernedly.

I swallowed and nodded, blinking as if it would clear my muddled mind. "I'm not used to this," I explained. It sounded like a horrible excuse.

She gave me another odd glance, but slowly nodded, frowning. "We'll get you home, then."

We walked past the group, passing closely by Reudh and Tedaz where they stood talking. As we left, I heard Reudh call from behind me, "Vanya? Where are you going, my dear?"

I glanced at him and shouted back, "I'll see you tomorrow, Reudh!" In a way, I was glad to be rid of him. In another, things were a lot less "amusing" while he was gone... and I'd known him the longest.

As Katie and I walked through the door and down a dim, white-floored corridor, she explained, "Trebor's family is wealthy. They're renting an apartment for Reudh and his friends, just until they get a job."

"I was going to ask," I lied, feeling guilty: I hadn't even thought about where Reudh would stay. I changed the subject uncomfortably. "Is all of Parasol underwater?"

"Of course not, silly," she almost laughed, struggling under the weight of her bags. "Parasol is a huge city that stretches across an artificial world - our sky isn't real, and neither is our sun, but the planet itself is. Two-thirds of it is underwater, but above sea level, there are underground warehouses and laboratories, buildings aboveground, and towers that stretch far into the sky." She stepped closer and held her bag out to me. "Here, *you* carry something."

Taking it from her, I thought it heavier than I remembered. "Where are we going?" I asked curiously.

She pointed towards a room ahead of us, faintly visible through the glass ceiling. "To the shuttlecar station, and then to my dad's apartment." Then, giving it further thought, she added, "...If he even *lets* me come back home."

"Why wouldn't he?"

A corner of her mouth tweaked downwards. "He doesn't like me much, and we didn't really part on the best of terms. I think I remind him of my mom."

I nodded silently, sensing that she didn't want to talk about it.

A set of doors before us opened as we approached them, and we walked through, entering a huge, pillared chamber. It was bustling with activity, and seemed more utilitarian than the lobby: The floor was a well-worn, translucent plastic, and through it I could faintly make out the shape of metallic tubing. The walls consisted of triangular panes of glass, held together with a steel framework, just like the flat ceiling above us. The only things adorning the massive area were the artificial trees and shrubs lining the walls, but what drew one's attention the most were the rows upon rows of tunnel entrances, far, far across the floor, at the back wall. Each boasted a set of raised, steel tracks that protruded halfway into the room.

"C'mon!" Katie called from up ahead.

Shaking myself back to the present, I realized I'd stopped walking, and hastened to catch up with her.

"Keep up," she said, laughing. "You're eventually going to use one by yourself, so you need to know how they work." Saying this, she stopped by the end of a set of tracks and pressed a button on a column. "The button calls up a car from the loading bay underneath the floor," she explained as she knelt to check the zippers on her bag.

My mind was elsewhere, and I managed an absent nod as with my eyes I followed the four metallic rails to where they disappeared within the darkness of their tunnel: a long, glass cylinder, circled at intervals with silvery rings.

"It's so dark in there," I noted aloud, a little worried. "Do they ever collapse and kill anyone?"

Katie shook her head and got to her feet, tapping the button again in slight annoyance. "Shuttlecars are really safe - accidents are pretty much unheard of. You need to understand something first, though, okay?" She looked at me expectantly.

I wasn't sure what she wanted. "Mhm," I said.

It appeared to satisfy her, and she pointed towards the tube. "The inside of the tubes are in a vacuum to help the car go faster, so you shouldn't put your arms, or legs, or anything else outside the air shield. After a little while, they'll bruise from the lack of air pressure." She appeared frustrated, and tapped the button again, mumbling, "It's being slow again today."

Suddenly, the ground before us slid open with a *whish*. A white platform, adorned only with a large metallic box near its front, rose gently from the darkness below with a hum, coming to a rest just above the floor. It made a quiet clacking sound as it seemed to attach itself to the tracks before it, and then all was still.

"It doesn't look like it belongs here," I observed, frowning disapprovingly. When my friend didn't respond, I went on, "It's just a floor with an ugly metal box... There aren't rails, chairs, walls, or doors." I heard Katie snickering beside me, and looked over in time to receive a knowing smile. "What?" I asked indignantly.

"It's not pretty, no," she admitted, "but that's because it's not meant to be. It's meant to get you where you want to go, and it's the only free way to travel on Parasol. Besides, you haven't even seen what it can do yet." She directed an impish grin towards me and hopped onto the car. "Now, let's go!" she urged. "Help me put my bags in the trunk."

I considered asking what a "trunk" was, but decided against it, following her lead. Hesitantly, I

stepped onto the vehicle, carrying Katie's second bag.

As I watched, Katie grabbed a handle on the side of the "metal box" and slid a panel open, revealing a storage compartment large enough to store four Spearbreakers wine barrels.

"We won't really feel much while we're moving," Katie explained as she knelt and wrestled her luggage into place. "Each car is controlled with its own gravitics system, so the only motion you'll feel is when it switches tracks... besides a little vibration when it reaches the max speed. They have the compartments on here for scientists whose equipment might get damaged from those same vibrations."

"Will the vibrations damage *your* luggage?" I asked dubiously.

She laughed, sliding the door of the compartment shut. "No, I'm just used to putting it there, that's all." Then, she straightened, pointing back at the surface of the "metal box". "What does this look like to you?" she asked.

Raising an eyebrow, I gave it a closer examination. "It looks like a silver-white box of metal with four shiny, black panels on it, in two groups."

"No, what do you think it *is*?" she clarified, smiling and folding her arms. I could tell there was something she wasn't telling me, but I didn't know what it was.

"It still looks like an ugly metal box," I joked, smirking.

"Put your hands on the black panels on the left," she suggested.

I took a step closer and placed one hand on each, side by side. "Okay, what am I supposed to -"

"*Please relax while we make the connection,*" a male's voice said.

I gasped, jerking my hands away from the panels in fright. The voice itself wasn't frightening: it had a gentle, artificial tone. What scared me was the fact that it seemed to come from within my own head. I cast a terrified glance over at Katie, who was almost doubled over, laughing mirthfully. "What was that??" I asked, my fright and confusion slowly morphing into a mild annoyance.

"I'm sorry," she giggled, shaking with merriment. "I *had* to. It's always so funny to watch someone's first time, but I didn't expect to get such a big reaction out of you."

I frowned at her, crossing my arms. "I didn't find it funny," I pointed out. "What *was* that?"

After a moment, she managed to calm herself down enough to speak, a great smile lingering on her features. "It's the control console you pilot the shuttlecar with. That's *supposed* to happen. It connects with your mind through the synaptic nerves in your hands. Put them back on the console now." At my hesitation, she frowned apologetically, pleading for forgiveness with her eyes. "I really am sorry, Vanya... I was just having a little fun..."

That was something peculiar about Katie... I could hold a grudge against Urist, but it was hard to even stay annoyed with her. With a hesitant sigh, I put my hands back on the dark surfaces.

"*Please relax while we make the connection,*" the voice intoned once more, followed by, "*Connection established.*"

Keeping my hands where they were, I turned towards my friend. "What do I do?" I asked helplessly.

She offered a little smile. "Rubywood Apartments'," she said. "Think that."

I did as she suggested, and the shuttlecar accelerated imperceptibly, gliding up a ramp towards the end of the room. When it entered its tunnel, there was a hum and a hiss; a bluish light edged over us as we exited the force field, and a near-invisible cyan bubble formed around the vehicle, much like 48D's bubble shield.

The steely rings around the glass tunnel glowed white as we approached, and when I looked

backwards, I could see them fade to darkness as we left them behind. There was almost no sensation of motion as the shuttlecar began to accelerate to its maximum speed, the rings flying past faster and faster, more and more, until they blurred, and we were going far beyond any speed I had ever imagined possible. To someone who's lived their entire life in dwarven fortresses, technology is always a source of fascination... but this managed to take it a step farther.

"I never would've imagined it was possible... It's so fast, faster than even horses," I murmured, glancing over at Katie, who was watching my face intently. On the tracks beside us, a car flew past in the other direction, so quickly I had to look twice to be sure it was even there.

She smiled. "Of course it is! We have to travel hundreds of miles - if it didn't go so quickly, we'd never get anywhere. But you can control how fast it goes, if you want. You can't make it go faster than this without an override code, but... try making it go slower," she suggested.

Slow down, I thought, consciously trying to direct it towards the panel beneath my hands. Apparently, it acted even on the subconscious level... before I had even started, it was already decelerating, the glowing rings beginning to come into focus and appear solid once more. In less than a minute, we were moving at a slow crawl, the seabed clearly visible beneath us: a rocky surface with a light dusting of plant life.

"Look," Katie whispered, tugging on my shoulder and pointing upwards with her arm.

Following her gaze, I gasped as I saw a finned creature of monstrous size, dappled with pink and blue, just like the ones I'd seen when I'd first arrived. It was floating a few feet above our tube, trailing iridescent, ribbon-like tentacles in its wake as it propelled itself forwards with an almost ghostlike quality. As we watched, it let out a low, deep wail, muffled though it was by the shuttlecar's shield against the tube wall.

"It sounds so sad... What is it?" I asked in wonderment.

Beside me, Katie's face bore an unhappy, absentminded expression. "They're called glowwhales," she replied softly. "Most people think they're dangerous because of their tentacles, but they're actually peaceful animals. There aren't nearly as many as there used to be... people have been hunting them illegally for the past few hundred years." She turned her blue eyes towards me for a moment. "Aren't they beautiful, though?"

"Mhm..." I replied truthfully. I'd never seen anything like it before.

Directing her gaze upwards again, she went on, "They're a mix of several species... just like me. I almost never get to see them now, because my dad hates for me to take shuttlecars, but when I was little, my grandmother took me to see them all the time. She always told me that just because something is different than everything else... it doesn't mean it isn't special."

I wanted to ask further questions. I wanted to learn why they were there, how they even came to exist on an artificial world, what they ate, and so many other things... but Katie didn't seem to be in a talkative mood anymore. It seemed the creature held some special place in her heart, but at the same time, they seemed to sadden her.

"That's enough of that," Katie whispered, pulling her eyes away from it. Stepping closer to the console, she placed her hands on the rightmost set of panels.

"Control transferred to other user," the shuttlecar's voice spoke in my mind.

As we accelerated, I watched behind us as the rings darkened, leaving the glowwhale alone, glowing dimly in the blackness of the sea.

Katie coaxed the car back to its maximum speed. I felt soft vibrations in the soles of my feet, and a quiet hum beneath us, but apart from that, everything was silent.

"We're coming up on a switchpoint," my friend finally said, taking a hand from the controls to point forwards.

Peering far ahead through the glass tube, I could make out a bright speck of light in the distance. "What's a switchpoint?" I asked her.

"Wait and see," was her prompt reply, and we continued forwards at what seemed godlike speeds.



Chapter 49: A Disaster

Much of the previous entry seemed unimportant to you, which is in opposition to what you know of Vanya's writing style. With a curious eye, you continue reading, wondering why her manner should suddenly change.

The "switchpoint" turned out to be a massive, steel building. My first glimpse inside almost took my breath away, I remember... there only seemed to be one room, and from floor to ceiling stretched miles and miles of track, curving, looping, and meeting at conjunctions, all as dimly lit as the rest of what I'd seen of Parasol.

"It's where the cars switch from one track to the next, so that people can go in different directions if they want to," Katie explained, pointing at the different cars flashing past along the tracks above and below, filled with people.

"Aren't we going to slow down?" I asked worriedly.

She laughed. "We don't need to."

I gave a slight nod, swallowing my fears. "It's amazing," I whispered softly. "Where will it take us?"

Katie pondered my question before she responded. "Straight ahead, if I'm remembering right... I don't think we need to turn. The mainland should be just ahead of us. There'll be a little bump as we go over the central point, but it won't be anything to worry about. It should happen right about..." She raised a finger in the air and paused for a moment. "Now."

Nothing happened. I glanced over at the girl skeptically, raising an eyebrow.

Katie gave a sheepish laugh and scratched the back of her neck. "It's been a while," she explained in embarrassment.

A few seconds later, Katie got her bump... followed by an explosion that ripped our shuttlecar from its tracks with a screaming roar of twisting metal. It happened so fast, we were hardly able to comprehend what was going on... I thought we were going to die.

The vehicle shook violently, throwing us to the floor, screaming in terror. Fires danced upwards from underneath as the shuttlecar skidded sideways along the rails with a metallic screech, throwing sparks behind us. The vehicle's shield flickered for a moment, the escaping air sucking Katie along with it towards the side until she slipped, her legs dangling over the edge. Though I threw myself towards her, grabbing for her hand to keep from falling, it was pointless: the entire vehicle careened in the opposite direction as it tilted, sliding off its tracks, sending me falling down its slanted surface towards the edge.

"WHAT'S HAPPENING?!" I screamed, grabbing wildly for a handhold as I slid.

"VANYA, HERE!" Katie yelled in return. Frantically, I caught hold of her outstretched hand; she swung me upwards towards her just as our car slid from its tracks, plummeting downwards

into the depths.

It was chaos incarnate. Smoke began filling our little bubble, their fires rapidly depleting our oxygen as they burned. The control panel smoked and shuddered as electricity flicked across its surface, and we ourselves were weightless as we tumbled through the void. Heat pricked our skin, and the roaring of the flames was unnerving.

I watched as Katie made a desperate lunge for the control panel and placed her hand upon its surface, screaming with pain as the arcing electricity burned into her skin.

"Katie, *DON'T!!*" I shouted, horrified, climbing towards her along the tilted edge of the car. Her efforts weren't in vain: she managed to restore gravity, and the car righted, slowing its fall.

With a reverberating crash, a set of rails halted our ruined vehicle's descent, knocking us back to the floor, though Katie split her lip as she fell. The shuttlecar's metal frame shuddered violently from the impact, and the control panel exploded, throwing sparks as tiny flames spouted from its surface. Then, the shield flickered again, sucking away more of our precious oxygen... I knew it wouldn't be long before it became difficult to breathe.

The car screeched forwards, and sparks flew upwards behind us as the ruined vehicle slid rapidly along the tracks, spinning as it went.

I glimpsed an empty shuttlecar approaching us from afar, and I screamed in terror as it flew towards us, threatening to knock us from our tracks. Without thinking, I threw myself towards Katie and grabbed her, and not a moment too soon. The offending vehicle clipped ours as it passed, sending it spinning towards the other side. Finally, it seemed to catch onto something that abruptly halted its rapid spin, but my heart never had a chance to slow its rapid pace; the back of the vehicle, torn open with a jagged gash, began to spew sparks and fires that crackled powerfully. Without hesitation, we scrambled towards the front to avoid the heat and flames.

Katie was crying, clutching her damaged hand close to her in agony as she tugged in vain at the storage compartment's sliding panel. "Vanya!" she shouted over the roar, "Help me get the trunk open!"

Together, we shoved at the door until we'd forced it open, even as we continued sliding down the rail we had chanced to land on. I foolishly looked behind us, and the back edge of the shuttlecar exploded, spraying sparks and twisted bits of metal into my face.

I was terrified out of my wits and in agonizing pain, my forehead throbbing to oblivion, but my friend continued unrelentingly. She grabbed me with her good hand and pulled me through the little gap we'd made, into the compartment. I climbed through after her and helped force the door shut again, curled up in the darkness, the violent sounds outside muffled by our little prison's walls. Moments later, we felt a jar, and our padded chamber tilted us to one side, Katie falling on top of me as the car slid from the rails and fell a few final feet to the ground, flattening out with a series of uproarious clangs. When they stopped, we could hear the control panel above our head sputtering for several seconds before it died with a whining hum. All was silent but for the sound of Katie crying, and my own rapid breaths.

My old fear of small, dark spaces was returning. An image flashed before my mind: two puppies in a tiny shoebox. There was room enough to move, but not enough to sit, and it felt for all the world like the walls were closing in on me, trying to crush me to death. "I don't like small spaces, Katie," I moaned loudly, hearing the fear in my own voice.

"We only have a small amount of air!" she warned in a whining tone. I felt her moving beside my legs, trying to turn around. "You need to slow your breathing."

"It's quiet outside now!" I scrambled frantically for the door handle at my feet. "We can go!" I felt for it, and finally found it – but Katie's hand was already there.

"There's no air out there, Vanya! The air shield is gone!"

"There's hardly any air in *here*!" I tried to jerk her hand away from the door, but she held firm. A hand brushed my cheek; I yelped in pain, pulling my hands back quickly to shield myself.

Katie was moving, trying to position herself upright. "I'm sorry! I'm sorry! What happened?"

I cautiously felt at my face. I was bleeding; blood was trickling down from a painful gash on my forehead, and smaller cuts burned everywhere else. "My face is bleeding..." I whispered, and then I remembered: "Oh, Katie... your hand!"

I heard the rustle of clothing. "I'll be okay," she whispered back. "It just hurts."

Uselessly, I nodded, and tried to get back to the handle. "We need to get out of here."

"We can't!"

"We *can*!" I hissed back at her. "We'll last at least a minute without air, and we can get the air shield back up."

She caught my hand and pushed me back. "It's ruined! We'll *die* if we go out there!"

"I'd rather die there than here! This place might as well be a coffin!!" I shouted. My words rung in the still air, and I regretted what I'd said.

Finally, Katie whispered, "At least we have a chance in here. If you open that door, you'll kill both of us." A whimper entered her voice, and she paused. "I don't want to die, Vanya..."

It was the final nail. I stopped struggling against her and lay still in wide-eyed terror, my breathing fast and shallow.

"Calm down. Deep breaths," she whispered soothingly. "We're safe now." She felt about for my hand, and found it, taking it in hers. "Take slow, deep breaths. We need to stay calm and quiet to preserve our air."

I nodded again, the thought that she couldn't see me never entering my mind. Tears swam in my eyes as I slowly calmed my breathing, thinking of wide-open fields, Salaia, a warm bed, and Spearbreakers... anything but puppies.

"Thank you, Katie," I whispered, giving her hand a squeeze. "What happened?"

"I don't know," she answered simply. "Shuttlecars never explode like this."

"Can you think of anyone who would try to do this to kill you?" I asked.

Her response was quick. "No, no one..."

After a brief hesitation, I ventured, "Will anyone come save us?"

There was a long pause, and the silence was almost unbearable. Finally, she whispered so faintly I could hardly hear her: "I don't know. I doubt anyone would think we could've survived."

And for an eternity, Katie and I lay there facing each other, praying silently to our gods for rescue.

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A loud clang echoed through the walls, startling us both.

"What was that?!" Katie gasped.

Before I had a chance to reply, another clang rung out, followed by a scraping, dragging noise as the ruined vehicle seemed to shift outside the confines of our little cage.

"They're saving us!" I cried out, pounding at the door.

The walls shrieked as some unseen instrument sliced into the shuttlecar floor. Two more sharp clangs rang out, a crash, and with a metallic scream, a jagged tear appeared above our heads, air rushing through the gap as light spilled in to take its place.

"Let us out!" my friend yelled frantically, pounding at the door. Towards me, she cried,

"Help!" as she tried to force open the compartment door.

I crawled forwards, the air exploding urgently from my lungs as it rushed into the vacuum. With an effort, we managed to get the sliding panel to move... but only a few inches. I looked at Katie's terrified face in the dim light; watched her speak words that never reached my ears, and together, we realized there was no way we could get it open.

The floor vibrated; something sliced silently through the panel wall, just above our heads. Katie and I scooted backwards in fright as it sliced through a second time; again, and again – the entire wall fell to the ground and a hand reached through the gap, menacing with the hope of rescue. Without questioning, Katie and I scrambled for it in desperation; one by one, it drew us out of our claustrophobic prison and back into the light.

It was Reudh. Like a conquering hero, he stood with a firm stance atop the shuttlecar's ruined exterior, his adamantine pike stuck upright into the silver metal at his side as he pulled us to our feet, thrusting us towards a shuttlecar that waited only feet away.

As I stumbled through the cyan barrier, that first breath of fresh air hitting my lungs, I felt I had never tasted anything sweeter.

Katie lay on her back, gasping for breath. I turned and looked at Reudh in time to see him pull his weapon from our ruined vehicle and leap back onto his own, his cloak billowing back as he breached the airshield and got down on one knee beside us.

"Vanya? Katie?" he asked quickly. "Are you all right? I was following behind you and saw what happened! By all the gods, I am truly glad to see both of you still alive!"

I started crying with relief. "Reudh..." I began, but threw my arms around his neck instead. "Thank you so much." I'd never been so happy to see him before.

"Reudh... you're awesome," Katie whispered, smiling up at us from the floor as she brushed the hair from her face.

"I thank you," he responded politely, returning my embrace. Then, holding me at arm's length, he examined my face, frowning sharply. "Vanya, you are badly hurt... We must get you to the Parasol hospital at once!"

Katie was getting to her feet. "Reudh, Parasol has lots of hospitals," she pointed out.

"Then we shall travel to the nearest," he said, undeterred, and turned away from me towards the console panel, confidently placing his hands upon its surface.

"Where did you learn to pilot a shuttlecar?" I asked him.

"I watched Katie teach you, of course," he replied smoothly. Then, he paused, and a minute later, he turned haltingly to Katie, a confused expression on his face. "It refuses to move. It says we must remain where we are."

Katie nodded. "It's the SCCS," she said as she got to her feet. "The Shuttlecar Control Service."

She didn't get a chance to explain – a second car quickly pulled up on the track alongside us, coming from the opposite direction. Four full-suited Parasol soldiers, as tall as humans, stood at attention on its floor, none of them even touching the controls as the vehicle slowed to a halt. Before we could react, two of them turned and leapt across the gap, landing softly beside us.

Reudh didn't spare a moment. "These women are injured! They need medical assistance," he told them, putting a hand on one's shoulder before drawing it back, startled.

The soldier in question turned towards him smoothly. "I am here to serve," an artificial, dwarf-like voice intoned. The other soldier withdrew a device from a pouch on its leg and began to scan

me from head to toe.

I glanced at Katie, and she seemed to know what I was asking. "They're androids," she explained. "It's their job to keep the shuttlecar transit system safe." Even as she spoke, the other one had already started to scan her, too.

"This is astonishing!" Reudh said, awed. "Machines that act like people... it is marvelous!"

Mine finished scanning me, and one of its fingers flipped open, revealing a tiny nozzle. "Hold still," it intoned, placing a hand gently on the back of my head as its open finger sprayed something onto my face. I winced: it stung and made my face go numb. "Your wounds are contaminated with an iapetous compound," the being said. Its finger flipped shut, and a second flipped open, revealing a tweezers-like device. "Do not move," it intoned again. With fast, quick motions, it began picking at my face, removing and discarding little specks of metal.

I didn't dare to move. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see the other one brushing something onto Katie's hand. Reudh was watching in fascination.

The SCCS officer working on my face began to smear some sort of silver material onto my face. "Do not touch the affected area for two hours," it ordered. "Wash your face carefully tonight. Your forehead will scar, but will be treatable." Its fingers flicked shut and it stepped backwards to stand beside its twin. Though I didn't realize it at the time, I later learned it had stitched shut my wound.

Somehow, I found the notion of humanoid robots very disturbing... I wanted them gone. "You can go now," I suggested cautiously, glancing back and forth between them and Katie, who was examining her hand as she flexed her fingers.

"Thank you for choosing Shuttlecar Transit," they said together, their voices indistinguishable. As one, they leapt back to the other car and assumed their previous positions, and their vehicle moved away, accelerating into the distance. I followed them with my eyes as they left. Then, feeling the weight of Katie's stare, I turned towards her in askance.

She was gazing at me curiously, idly brushing her lips with a finger. "You don't like them?" she queried.

"I don't know," I began uncomfortably. "Something about them makes me uneasy."

Fortunately, Reudh saved me from further commentary. "All right," he said decidedly, stepping forwards between us and placing his hands on the control panel. "Let us be off! Where shall we go, Katie?"

Katie responded, and the car began to move, but I wasn't listening to their conversation. My mind was elsewhere.

I *knew* why I didn't like them... I didn't know when, or where, or how, but I'd encountered them before. The memories were just beyond my grasp, slipping past my fingertips... and though I tried my best to focus my thoughts, nothing solved my problem.

A tiny bump shook me from my quiet place and back to the fast-paced world of Parasol as we sped down the tracks, and this time, there was no explosion.

"I can still hardly believe you survived that fall," Reudh was saying, glancing back at me.

"It was Katie," I admitted, and then a curious thought struck me. "Katie, you said you almost never ride on shuttlecars, but when it derailed... you knew exactly what to do..." I watched her face, puzzled.

She frowned nervously, her gaze falling to the floor. "It's my dad," she said with a quiet sigh. "Before I was born, my older half-brother died in a freak shuttlecar accident. It was my dad's fault, and he's never forgiven himself for it. He's afraid of shuttlecars now, and he thinks he'll lose me the same way." She sighed again, and lifted her head, shaking the hair out of her face.



"When I was little, he would run drills with me in our living room on what I should do if anything bad happened, teaching me override codes and stuff... but later on, he decided it would be safer to ban me from shuttlecars completely."

"He sounds like he loves you very much," Reudh said, as I tried to imagine how it felt.

She offered a sardonic smirk. "You'd be surprised," she muttered. "Dad hardly lets me do anything. He's a weapons instructor, but he never even let me watch him work – 'too dangerous', he says." She sighed again, folding her arms and staring ahead of us. "He probably already knows we're coming."

And silence fell on our little group as we continued towards our destination, at a total loss as to why anyone would want to kill my friend.



## Chapter 50: Kenzon

*"Good morning. I am glad to see you already at work," a voice calls from the door of Vanya's tomb. You turn, and see an expressionless Dr. Thian Russ walking towards you, carrying several steaming mugs. Their contents are soon detailed, as he explains, "I brought coffee."*

*You take a sip, and find it an unusual beverage, and not exactly to your taste. You can't recall them having anything like "coffee" on Everoc. "Might I just have a beer?" you ask.*

*Thian Russ, a human, looks at you queerly for a moment. He lacks your dwarven metabolism, and can't quite seem to understand it, but he finally nods and leaves.*

*Shooting a glance at the woman across from you, you notice she's not having any difficulty with this "coffee", and in fact seems quite accustomed to it. You begin to feel a sneaking suspicion of who she is...*

The rest of the shuttlecar trip was quiet. We sped through the underwater tubes, the light-rings flashing by like lightning, and eventually, we approached the looming hulk of the mainland, shooting up its slope. When we emerged from the water, climbing rapidly into the dusky sky, I saw a sight that will stay with me until the end of my days... It was an entire city made of metal, stretching all the way to the horizon; tiny vehicles hovering in the air, speeding back and forth between the buildings; gigantic towers arising from the ground like trees, each bearing the Parasol logo on its side.

"The capital of Division 3," Katie told us quietly.

We passed through another switchpoint building, and though I held my breath for fear that the vehicle might derail, nothing happened. The shuttlecar continued smoothly onwards, taking a path to the upper right when the tracks split. Without incident, it exited the huge building, curving up between the towers of the city. From time to time, the tube would pass against one, a shielded hole on one side, giving access to the building.

I noticed that the closer we got to her home, the quieter Katie grew, almost as if the thought of home was depressing to her. It confused me... and at the time, I couldn't imagine why.

Finally, as we neared one of the towers, the shuttlecar began to slow. I couldn't really tell anything different about it... it looked like all the others, and we came to a gradual stop beside an entrance, hundreds of feet above the ground. A railed, blue-carpeted ramp slid out to meet us, gently stopping by the car's side. On looking through the airshielding, I saw a beautiful room, furnished with what I later learned were sofas and benches, and decorated with potted plants and paintings. Even by itself, it seemed almost kingly... so far beyond anything I'd ever seen.

"You people *live* here?" Reudh asked, as awestruck as I was.

Katie shrugged. "Where else would we live? Let's just go." Then, as an afterthought, she added, "And make sure you call my dad 'Mr. Kenzon'. He'll get offended if you say 'sir'."

The three of us started down the ramp, passing through the airshields with a hiss. Before we had even left the walkway, a muscled, balding human was marching towards us briskly, a stern expression on his face. "Katalina Wilya Okablokum," he growled crossly, "You have caused me more *grief* over the past two years than a lifetime of military experience has brought me."

"Dad, I *had* to go," Katie started, stepping forwards, but her father interrupted.

"You didn't have to do *anything*!" When he reached her, she looked up at him defiantly. After a moment, he seemed to break, putting his arms about her. "I'm glad you're all right," he said softly, a trace of emotion in his voice.

"Dad, I..." Katie started, but she seemed taken aback by the embrace, as if she wasn't used to it. She was just starting to put her arms around him when he stepped away.

"Don't you *dare* ever use a shuttlecar again!" Kenzon told her. "When you need to go somewhere, I'll take you there myself."

Katie seemed to hate the idea. "But, Dad -"

"*No!* I won't hear of it as long as you live under my roof." He glared at her for a moment. "Now, explain to me what happened with the shuttlecar. First the SCCS notified me that it crashed and all aboard were lost. Then I got a *second* message telling me you're alive and coming home." He folded his huge arms, giving an expectant, questioning stare.

Katie directed a helpless glance in my direction, and Kenzon followed her gaze, doing a double take as he noticed Reudh and me for the first time. Redirecting his eyes at his daughter, he leaned forwards and hissed, "What is *she* doing here?"

My friend seemed distressed. "It's not what you think," she began defensively.

Kenzon seemed livid. "Do you know what you're getting yourself into?! Do you have any *idea* how many problems this could cause?? It's *illegal*!"

"Dad, it's not like that!" Katie talked over him as he continued raging.

Beside me, Reudh spoke loudly, interrupting them. "Mr. Kenzon, in all due respect, it is not the girl's fault!"

Mr. Kenzon straightened and examined the dwarf suspiciously. "And who are you?" he asked with a hint of disgust as Reudh seemed to shrink back under his gaze.

"He's the dwarf that saved your daughter," I offered, hoping a change of subject would calm him. I didn't know what was going on, but I had a feeling it had something to do with the fact that Reudh and I were from Everoc.

"Saved? ...What?" Kenzon asked, confused. He stopped, as if rearranging his thoughts. "Katalina... what exactly happened on that shuttlecar?"

She seemed relieved to have the subject changed. "I was coming here with my friend, Vanya, who is a Parasol agent that I met a few weeks ago," she began, carefully enunciating her words, "when the shuttlecar derailed at the switchpoint and fell to the ground. The shield went out and Vanya and I hid in the trunk to preserve our air."

Kenzon narrowed his eyes. "Katalina, I'll believe a lot of bad things about those contraptions, but one does not simply 'derail'."

"There was an explosion," I offered.

It had a desirable effect: the man halted abruptly, staring at the floor and scratching his clean-shaven chin, deep in thought. After a pause, he murmured, "That isn't natural... it sounds like foul play." He turned back towards Reudh commandingly. "How do you tie into all this again? And who are you?"

"I am Reudh," the dwarf explained modestly. "The door on the 'trunk' was stuck, so I sliced it off with my pike... It was no great feat."

It seemed to put Mr. Kenzon into a good humor. He offered a brief smile, walking past his daughter to shake Reudh's hand. "A man of arms... I like that. And you saved my daughter's life, too. I'd like to thank you properly for it... Come over to Kenzon's Armory next Wednesday if you'd like – I'll give you free lessons. I'm a Weapons Instructor by trade, and I could probably teach you a thing or two."

"I thank you very kindly, Mr. Kenzon," Reudh said with a respectful nod.

The two men stood there for an awkward moment. Finally, Kenzon nodded towards the waiting shuttlecar, gave a strained smile and said, "Goodbye."

Reudh glanced hesitantly in my direction. "Yes... I will see you next Wednesday." With that, he turned, heading back towards his vehicle.

After Reudh had left, Kenzon turned to me, frowning in annoyance.

Katie spoke up quickly to defend me. "I told Vanya she could stay with us... She thinks someone is trying to kill me." She was trying to distract him from the former by changing the subject without giving him time to object, a tactic I eventually picked up from her.

"Don't be ridiculous," the man scoffed, raising a scornful eyebrow at me. "Why would anyone want to kill my daughter?" Then, he hesitated, doubt entering his eyes. "All the same, I'll hire a private investigator to look into it."

"It was probably just a freak accident," his daughter said.

"That's even less likely. And as for you, *Vanya*..." He said the name distastefully, as if it soured on his tongue. "I will allow you to stay at my home. But it is *temporary*!" he added, spinning quickly back to Katie with a glare that quelled the excitement in her eyes. "Now, let's go."

Several hallways and technological marvels later, we arrived at Kenzon's apartment, which sat conveniently just across from the elevator. While there was a slot beside the door for a card, just like the ones at Ballpoint, all he had to do to gain access was speak. The door opened smoothly of its own accord, revealing a room far larger than any I'd ever seen at Spearbreakers.

"This is an *apartment*?" I remember asking in astoundment, to which Kenzon replied, "Apartment? No. This is a sitting room."

Though dim, it was wonderfully furnished, with a sort of "modern-rustic" theme. A chair and three green, backless, bench-like objects surrounded a low wooden table in the center of the room, elaborate designs carved into its wide, dark legs. There was some sort of device in the center, but I couldn't tell what it was. Apart from that, there were shelves all around the walls, filled with model naval vessels: some carried full sails, others strange columns, others with no obvious propulsion at all... Kenzon had a hobby of collecting them. Aside from that, there were other pieces of furniture arranged here and there, photographs, and other alien oddities that I've since grown accustomed to. Strangely, one corner of the room was almost dark, and looked like it had been untouched since he'd redecorated – it was the only portion of the room with Parasol's theme.

"Are you going to keep staring, or are you going to come inside?" Kenzon asked sardonically in annoyance. "Does it not suit your elvish sensitivity?"

"Dad, stop it," Katie broke in, grabbing my hand and pulling me in. "Vanya, let's go. I'll show

you my room."

As she led me inside, Kenzon called after us, "I've already eaten, but you may find something in the cooler."

We stood in the sitting room. Kenzon had already went into his own room, but Katie stood outside her own, trying to get her door open.

"You don't like him," I noted cautiously, observing her reaction.

"How can I?" she replied with an exasperated sigh, punching combinations into the lock. "He won't let me do *anything*. He treats me like a child, and he won't even act like I'm his own daughter... more like I'm a prison inmate, or something."

"No, he doesn't..." I corrected her thoughtfully. "I've been in a prison before. ...sort of."

"I know," was her absentminded reply.

I started to nod, but stopped as I realized something odd. "Katie, I never told you about that... How would you know?"

She punched a few more failing combinations before she realized what I'd said. "Sorry, I wasn't thinking," she said, glancing back at me with a guilty frown. Then, she walked towards one of the potted plants down the wall – a real one, not one of Parasol's fakes – and dug her fingers into the dark, damp soil, pulling out a dirty card. "He never found it," she whispered, smiling, and swiped it down the pad. At once, the door unlocked, popping open. Katie grinned. "Yes!! He changed the lock, but I can get past now. I'll reset it later. C'mon!"

The first thing I noticed was that Katie's room was better lit than the rest of the apartment. The second thing I noticed were the gold and silver statues sitting on the dresser at the back wall, which was covered in posters of different people.

"What are those?" I asked curiously, walking over to the statues. Their creators had skillfully worked into the shapes of dwarves and humans, all wearing jetpacks on their backs. Some stood on pillared platforms, others simply on the base. Still others lifted two-handled goblets.

"I got them for my jetpacking competitions," Katie said proudly.

"Okay, but what *are* they?" I asked again. "What do they do?"

She paused a moment, raising a surprised eyebrow at me. "They're trophies... Haven't you seen trophies before? They don't do anything. They have trophies on Everoc, don't they?"

"Not like this," I answered, wishing I could read the human writing at their bases. "You have to remember how I grew up."

She tilted her head and nodded. "I guess so." She pointed at one of them. "I got this one when I won first place overall, but everyone else was sick that year, so... And this one I got for getting second place in the Diving Style competition," she went on, pointing at another. "And this one was when..." her voice trailed off. I cast a glance at Katie's face in time to see her mouthing "Saemin" as her eyes glazed over with a distant stare.

"Katie?" I asked.

With an effort, she pulled her attention back to me. "Yeah, we should keep going." She sighed, and stepped away from the dresser, but she still seemed lost in a memory. "There's not really much to show you in here. Not that you'd find interesting."

"I like the bed," I said thoughtfully, trying to keep her from feeling down. It was a single bed, and pink wasn't really a color I liked overmuch, but it looked so comfortable, especially with how sore and tired I felt.

It seemed to amuse her, and she smiled faintly. "You like the bed?" she asked.

"Yes, I do," I confirmed, smiling myself. "It looks very... soft."

Though Katie managed a laugh, it sounded sad, and she remained quiet.

When she didn't reply, I glanced about the room at the other furnishings – posters on the walls of different people, a desk with a mirror on the back, a cushy chair, and a bookshelf full of books. This last caught my eye. "You have so many books!" I exclaimed, walking over to it and eagerly examining its contents.

"I like old classics," she explained from behind me. "I don't like 'modern' literature, especially not something from Parasol... Parasol doesn't look too fondly on entertainment. Not 'sciency' enough."

I hardly heard her, too busy reading the bindings: *Dracula*, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, and *The Wizard of Oz*, among many others.

"You can read them," she offered. "Just come get one from my room whenever you want."

I spun around excitedly. "Really?"

She laughed softly at my expression. "Of course, silly. C'mon, I still have to show you your room." She turned, and I followed her across the blue carpet and out into the sitting room, down the wall to a second door. "It's the guest room," she explained, swiping her card and messing with the buttons. "It's where my grandmother used to stay, but I think you'll like it."

I wasn't so sure.

Katie went on, "I'm setting the combination to 33584... can you remember that?"

Nodding, I assured her, "Mr Frog made me work on my memorization skills while I was his assistant... so '33584' shouldn't be too hard to remember."

When she was finished, she swung the door open, waving her hand over the light panel. What I saw left me breathless: the walls looked like marble, the floor a soft white. There was a dressing table like the one in Katie's room, and a lavender double bed, tucked up under a window revealing the nighttime cityscape. I found the silver lamps in the corner beautiful. There weren't really any other furnishings besides a dresser, and everything looked a little dusty... but it was far more than enough for me. Except for the bed, it reminded me of Spearbreakers.

"Why does he keep it sealed off?" I asked in wonderment. "It looks like no one has been here in a long time... but it's so beautiful." I glanced over at Katie, who frowned uncomfortably.

"It was my mother's room," she whispered hesitantly. "She never married my father, but stayed here until she disappeared... I don't know much else about her, though."

"You don't?" It was an innocent question.

With an uneasy hesitation, she changed the subject. "I need to go fix us something for supper. You can make yourself comfortable, or something." With that, she left hurriedly, almost as if fleeing unseen ghosts.

~~~

When Katie had supper ready, she came and led me to the apartment's kitchen/dining room. She didn't seem to want to talk, but I didn't like how quiet she was.

"This is good," I eventually said, trying to start a conversation. I had no idea what I was eating, but it tasted okay: some sort of brownish meat, and little greenish vegetables.

"I'm sorry," Katie apologized. "My dad never cooks, and there's almost nothing here to eat. He had *me* learn to cook when I was little – he thinks it more 'fitting' for a girl. 'Girls should know how to cook for their men,' he always said. But it looks like he's stopped eating at home, and there's almost nothing here."

"Girls *should* know how to cook," I said, giving my opinion. "Though I don't know how..."

She frowned. "Vanya, you're from Everoc... that's how they think there. *I* think girls should be able to learn whatever they want. Most people in Parasol believe that, but my father doesn't... He won't let me anywhere near his military gear, and he won't teach me how to fight." She paused, and continued in an unhappy rush, "I think it's just because I'm a girl. He used to say he wished I was a boy." She permitted herself an annoyed glance in the direction of the doorway, which seemed out of character for her.

I watched her quietly. After a moment, I said, "He loves you, you know..."

She turned quickly back to me, wiping her mouth with a napkin. "You think? You hardly know him."

"No..." I admitted, "but he's so worried about your safety. Maybe he's afraid you'd get hurt if he taught you how to fight. Maybe he's afraid he'll lose you."

"Of course," she replied, rolling her eyes. "He's afraid of losing anyone at all. He lost his father when he was my age, and he lost his son and wife later. Then he lost my mother, but he won't talk about her. If he lost me, he'd bury me away in a darkened corner of the apartment, too."

"The dark corner of the sitting room," I guessed.

Katie nodded. "That was her favorite place. While my grandmother lived here, it was her favorite place to read, too. She wouldn't let him change it." She sighed, and picked depressingly at her food, an elbow on the table, her head propped against her hand. "Sometimes I wish I could just get away from here forever, and never have to see him ever again."

It hurt me, somehow... I'd always envisioned families as sticking together through thick and thin. "Would you really do that?" I asked softly. "Leave, and never talk to him again? Disappear into the night?"

She didn't answer.

"Katie..."

She put her fork down, looking distressed. "No, I wouldn't do it. I hate saying it..." She hesitated. "...I hate saying it, but I would miss him. He causes so many problems, and he won't let me do anything. I know you'd say family is important, but sometimes he makes it so hard to get along with him." She looked about ready to cry.

I felt the urge to give her a comforting hug. "You're tired, Katie... You should get some sleep."

With a resignative nod, she slid her chair back and stood. "I'm sorry I don't make better company," she whispered.

Getting to my feet, I shook my head. "No, you're a gracious hostess."

The girl managed a weak smile. "I've had lots of practice," she answered, and took our plates across the room, setting them in the sink. She pressed a button, and I heard a hum; when she pulled the plates from the sink a moment later, they were clean, and she put them away in the cabinet. "Goodnight," she said, and headed towards her room, rubbing at her eyes.

That night I slept fitfully... I heard Katie screaming in terror more than once, followed by the sound of her door opening, and Kenzon's loud but worried voice. The first time, I could hear her crying... the others, if she spoke at all, the walls muffled the sounds, and her father left quickly. The third time, she screamed "Saemin" very clearly, and I decided she was having nightmares about his death.

"Only the gods know what horrors she saw that day," I whispered, offering Armok a quiet prayer for her. I've since learned what she saw... Seeing someone you care about twisted and

violated in such a manner, and then having to kill them... I can't imagine the pain it would cause. It reminded me of my nightmares of the forges.



Chapter 51: An Ignored Heroine

Vanya's Parasol journal continues.

The next morning, Katie awoke me early, knocking on my door. It was still dark outside, and the city lights shone faintly through the window.

"Vanya, come on! We need to get dressed!" she called quietly. "The ceremony is today."

"What? What ceremony?" I called back, throwing the covers off my legs and hurriedly putting my armored suit back on from the cleaning-box at the foot of the bed. Afterwards, on opening the door, I found Katie waiting outside, wearing a pair of pale pink pajamas. "What ceremony?" I asked again.

"The military awards ceremony," she explained awkwardly, uselessly grasping for words. "Merit in battle, and all of that, annoyingly long speeches... So, yeah!"

"But we just got here!" I protested. I didn't want to go, really... it didn't appeal to me at all. "How could they want something like that so soon?"

She laughed, motioning for me to follow her. "It's a Parasol tradition," she explained. Once inside her bedroom, she pressed a panel on the wall. It slid sideways, revealing a small closet filled with shelving, all packed with folded cloth.

"What's all that?" I asked, a little nosily.

She didn't seem to mind. "My old clothes," she explained. "You can't wear that *armor* everywhere, silly – you'll stand out. No, you need something that blends in." She paused thoughtfully. "Think of it as hand-me-downs."

"Okay..." I said. "I don't want to have to wear your old clothes, though. –It feels wrong of me," I added hurriedly at her hurt expression. "I feel like it would be greedy to take it from you." I'd felt this way before.

"Don't be silly," she laughed. "I'm *giving* it to you. There's a difference."

It didn't feel like much of a difference to me.

After digging around for a minute, she pulled out a black skirt and held against my waist. "This looks like it'll fit," she said, and then pulled out a fancy, gray blouse. "Raise your arms," she ordered, holding it out by the shoulders.

I did, and she measured it against me, sliding her hands down a sleeve to test the length against my arm. "*This* looks about the right size, too. You're lucky we have the same build, or I might not have anything for you to wear." She handed them to me and pulled out a set of knee-length black boots, too.

"All of this?" I asked in amazement as she laid a striped jacket and pantyhose atop the growing stack.

"Of course, silly. It all matches. ...*If* you can wear the shoes, which might not fit. You'll need to shave your legs, though, so I left a sonic hair remover on the dressing table last night."

"I've never tried matching things before..." I admitted in embarrassment, trying to steady the pile in my arms. "I don't know how it works."

Katie laughed, tilting her head at me. "I can tell. You wouldn't wear that armor if you had any fashion sense. It needs some sort of black accessory to make it work."

I swallowed guiltily. "Like a cape?" I asked, remembering the one I'd refused to accept from

Mr Frog.

"Yes, exactly. Now go put those on while I get dressed."

Everything fit. The shoes did, too, though they were a little too small and pinched my feet.

When I was done, I stood in front of the dressing table and examined myself in the mirror, trying to ignore the scabs from where the exploding metal had sliced my face the day before. The clothes felt... strange. The hose in particular felt cold on my legs, the shirt felt itchy, and the thin, horizontal, black-and-white stripes on the jacket seemed glaringly unnatural to me. I didn't really want to wear any of it, and I really, really hoped Katie knew what she was doing. At the same time, it looked similar to what I'd seen people wearing the day before, so I finally gave up. There was no way to take my daggers, or Almory's sword, so I left them lying on the dressing table and went to leave my bedroom.

I found Katie's father waiting outside the door, and took a surprised step back, looking up at him. "Mr. Kenzon?"

He examined me critically for a moment. "You look so much like Katie did when she was younger..." he mumbled, and then his eyes seemed to focus. He spoke in a quick, hushed tone, as if trying to keep Katie from overhearing. "Vanya, I need to talk to you about something important."

"What??"

He gave me an annoyed look and went on, "I would rather not speak to you at all, but I need your help."

That was the last thing I expected. "You think you can trust me?"

"Don't question my sources," he advised coarsely, brushing the topic away with his hand. "Just listen. I hired a private investigator last night, and after examining the shuttlecar's debris, he determined that someone had rigged a grenade to go off when the car hit the switchpoint. You were right – someone is after my daughter."

I processed it quickly, trying to remember everything I knew about grenades. "Why? Why would someone want to kill Katie?"

The man sighed, reaching into his pocket. "'Why' doesn't matter. I need you to give this to her after I leave this morning, and *make sure* she accepts it." He held out a pocket-sized PEA.

I reached out for it. "What is it?" I asked, as he set it in my hand.

"It's just a PEA. If anything goes wrong at all, make sure she lets me know. Can you handle that?"

After starting to nod, I hesitated. "How does it work?" I asked innocently.

Kenzon gave an exasperated sigh, and seemed to switch gears. "Oh, I hate this," he muttered, and then, louder, "I'm going to give you a high-level shuttlecar override code. You can't tell *anyone* I gave it to you or we'll both get in trouble. Understand?"

"Yes... You're letting her take a shuttlecar?" He kept surprising me.

Kenzon rolled his eyes, stating in a hurried, annoyed voice, "Look, I wish there was a way around it, but the other methods of transportation require authorization and supervision by an adult Parasol employee, and I have work today." I started to speak, but he guessed what I was going to say. "Yes, I *know* you're a Parasol employee, but you're also a dimensional native, so they won't accept it. Listen carefully. If she tries to do anything but come *straight back*, use this code to bring her back home. Just think it into the console." He tucked a slip of paper into my

jacket pocket. "Can you do that for me?"

He was staring into my eyes with an expectant, urgent expression... Just that once, with his defenses down, he was being open about how much he cared about Katie, even if indirectly. On one hand, it felt like I was betraying her... but on the other, I understood his desire to keep her safe... I would've done the same for Salaia. "I promise I will," I told him sincerely. I paused, and carefully suggested, "You love her very much, don't you..."

The man glanced uncomfortably towards her door. "I don't want her to get hurt," he said, dodging the question. "I know she hates me for it, but I have to keep her safe."

I frowned up at him sympathetically. "She's all you have left," I said quietly. "She does love you, though."

Mr. Kenzon dug his hands into his pockets. He started to turn away, and I saw a hint of a sad smile trace his lips as he muttered, "Sometimes I wonder."

At that moment, Katie's door opened and she walked into the sitting room, looking back and forth between her retreating father and me as she pieced everything together in her mind. Then, she walked over to me and asked quietly, so as not to let him hear, "What was he talking about?"

I hesitated as I noticed she was wearing the same Parasol uniform she'd worn the night before. "Nothing important," I finally said, hoping she wouldn't ask anything else.

She appeared mildly annoyed with my response. "Okay," she said, and turned away, starting towards the kitchen.

That made me start worrying I'd offended her... I had a feeling it was the fact I hadn't told her what her dad had said, but I'd promised him I wouldn't until after he left. Normally, I would've told her everything, but I was a little afraid of her father. "Is everything okay?" I asked, hurrying after her.

"Yup."

I frowned. "Are you sure?"

"Mhm."

"You're not upset at me?"

"Nope."

Though I strongly felt she was, I didn't know what to do about it. "Are my clothes okay?" I asked, hoping it might start a conversation.

Katie didn't even bother to turn around, getting bowls and a box out of cabinets. "They're fine."

While I didn't like how she was acting, I felt it was my fault, and I hated it... after all, if I hadn't decided to keep everything from her, she wouldn't have been upset.

Kenzon called to us from the sitting room. "I'm going to work – I'll see you later tonight, Katie."

"Bye, dad," she called back, pouring little flakes of stuff from the box into her bowl.

I watched her for a moment, and after he'd left, I took out the PEA. "Katie, here. He wanted me to wait until after he'd left to give this to you."

She made eye contact with me for the first time in the past five minutes, and then reached deliberately for the device, setting her bowl on the countertop behind her, forgotten. "He actually got me a PEA? He's never let me have one of my own before... I've had a military PEA, but that's different, and Parasol property..."

"He wanted you to call him if anything bad happened." It was possible I was telling her more than I should have, but I felt it was justified.

She rolled her eyes. "Oh, so *that's* why..." Katie said, as if it explained everything. "Fine. Why didn't he just give it to me himself, though?"

I didn't know the answer to that one. "I don't know..." I said truthfully.

Slipping the PEA into her pocket, she shrugged it off. "Let's just eat breakfast. Have you ever had cereal?"

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After an unusual breakfast experience, followed by Katie's insistence that she fix my hair, we left Mr. Kenzon's apartment and headed to the shuttlecar port. Before long, we'd boarded one, and were gliding towards our destination. Dawn broke over the horizon, a false star's brilliant rays shining between the buildings and glinting off their metallic surfaces, lighting even the dark sides with a blaze of reflected light, dancing in complicated patterns as the sun rose slowly.

"Where are we going?" I asked her, tugging at my itchy blouse and jacket. It reminded me of the override code.

"To the Vynalus Forums," she replied, the morning's problems already forgotten. "You'll love it," she assured me. It's absolutely beautiful."

Katie wasn't lying. After we'd left the shuttlecar, I began to see just what she'd meant. Strange trees lined the outdoor avenues through which we walked, each reaching hundreds of feet into the sky; great fields of grass stretched out between the sparsely crowded pathways, all the way to the building ahead; majestic waterfalls tumbled in rows from its glass parapets, spraying mist as they fell elegantly into crystalline pools below. I'd never seen anything like it, nor have I since.

"It's so beautiful," I whispered. "How do they get the grass to stay so short?"

"They mow it," my friend explained, trying not to laugh at my ignorance.

Though I didn't know what she meant by "mow," I knew it definitely wasn't something the dwarves at home had ever done.

Finally, we reached the great, circular building. A guard stood at the door, letting everyone in one by one, and when he got to us, he sent us to a different door, where a second guard let us in separately.

The dwarf stopped me as I passed him, speaking in a low voice. "Don't make a scene or announce yourself. You are a normal guest. You are not to reveal your identity or nationality. Understood?"

"Understood," I echoed quietly, looking at his helmeted face in bewildered surprise. Solnay had said they wouldn't talk about me, but I hadn't realized they'd be so careful to enforce it.

"C'mon!" Katie called from up ahead, and I followed, jogging forwards. For the first time in the past year, my armor wasn't encumbering me... it felt nice.

Following the flashing, scrolling signs on the walls, we eventually found ourselves outside the ground floor of a colossal auditorium, with many of its thousands of soft, blue seats on tiered balconies above. My friend quickly ushered me inside, explaining she had to go backstage and find Saemin's mother.

It wasn't long before I found my seat in the first row... or, really, it found me. Reudh and Solnay had been watching for when I would appear, and he called me over as soon as I walked in the door. His eyes lingered on my inflamed scabs, and though he told me I looked "splendid" in my "Parasol raiment," I strongly felt otherwise. I was never overly pretty, and the scabs only

exacerbated that fact. People who tell you you're pretty just want something from you, I think... Reudh isn't a bad dwarf, but he isn't above it. He would marry me in a second.

As I watched, Katie walked onto the stage to stand beside Trebor. It wasn't long before someone approached the podium onstage and quieted the gathered crowd. He announced himself as General Baltus, and began a lengthy speech, his voice projected across the incredible chamber. After a while, his tone shifted, speaking of my deceased friends from 48D. He told of their bravery; he told of how they'd taken on a force a hundred times their size, and won, but at great cost. He spoke of heroics and honor, glory and a noble cause...

He was lying through his teeth. There isn't any nobility or glory in combat... honor is meaningless, and heroics get you killed. You're fighting for your life, and nothing else matters to you. Even so... it was inspiring the way he said it. As he went on, I could almost sense the emotions of the people around me... It was a rekindling of spirits... a rallying of hope. It was a sense of patriotism, as if everyone felt the same for their company as they might for a nation. Yet, all was silent.

When the general finished, he stepped back, calling a name: "Almory Mallarkus Bertran". While Almory's father ascended the steps, Solnay whispered from beside me that Almory's husband and two children had died in the crossfire of a Ballpoint attack on Parasol's civilians, a story everyone there knew well. Her father accepted Almory's Medal of Honor, and with a practiced military salute, he headed back to his seat.

Hawkins Toamula had no family, but the general mentioned him anyway.

As the general called out another name, "Jonah Hylcelon", Solnay rose and climbed up to where the general stood, accepting Jonah's Medal of Honor quietly and leaving the auditorium.

Gearbox's name was called next, and a teary-eyed, slender girl went to accept his medal. As Baltus handed it to her, she broke down, prompting a collective "aww" of sympathy from the crowd. She couldn't stop crying, and someone had to lead her gently away.

Finally, General Baltus called Saemin's name, "Saemin Lo Diel", but no one came. At the back of the stage, I noticed Katie and Trebor standing at attention, waiting silently for their turns... Katie met my eyes as she searched the crowd, but all was silent. No one came, and an uncomfortable moment ensued as the general disappointedly placed the medal on the podium and turned towards my two friends, calling Katie's name.

Even from where I sat, I could see the teardrops glistening in the bright lights on her face as she walked forwards, accepting her medals one at a time. She didn't receive the same Medal of Honor that the others did, but several smaller ones.

The general asked her if she wanted to make a short speech of acceptance, but she seemed tongue-tied... eventually she managed an awkward "thank you" that echoed unnaturally through the chamber, and went to resume her place at the back of the stage.

The Parasol general called "Trebor Mallarkus" to the front. With head held high, a stalwart expression on his face, and jaw set firmly, Trebor complied, seeming far more confident than Katie had. When the general asked him the same question, he nodded silently and took a place at the podium.

"Friends," Trebor began in a bold tone, his voice carefully modulated, "my fellow citizens and employees of Parasol: We are here today to celebrate a victory... that is not just any victory. We are here today to mourn a loss... that is not just any loss. We are here *today*... to find a way to mend a wound... that is not just any wound."

Trebor went on, carefully detailing the events leading up to the final battle... an altered version of the story, without mentioning Reudh's party or me. He mentioned the scythods, though... and he mentioned John, a former employee of Ballpoint, who had "left his old home behind, and left his new home a better place." It was Almory's plan, Trebor said, to distract Ballpoint and open the portal, and John who attempted to carry it out. "It would have gone well," he went on, "if it hadn't been for Tames."

It hurt a little that he would cut me out of his speech, and especially that he would give John and Almory the credit... but I understood why, and listened carefully as he went on, telling parts of the story I'd never heard: what had happened after I'd left. He explained that Tames had betrayed them and overloaded the power generator, destroying the shield and leaving them defenseless.

Trebor was magnificent. He continued in a rushed, flowing manner, without ever giving the hesitant General a chance to interrupt. He told how Saemin had manned the railcannon until the last, and how Hawkins had thrown himself onto a grenade to save the lives of his squad. He told how Almory had sought to avenge his death by carving a path through the Ballpoint troops, and how Jonah had given his life in an attempt to save his comrades. Some of the crowd wept quiet tears, as in a voice hinting at emotion, Trebor described how he'd held his dying sister – his captain – in his arms as she died. He told how he'd tried to give his own life to save hers, and how her last order was for him to let her die, so that he might live. His audience listened intently, hanging on every word.

"These are your soldiers!" Trebor cried out powerfully, reaching to their hearts. "*These* are the men and women you send to fight your battles. It is *not* just any wound we seek to mend today, but an immeasurable one! Yet, it *can be mended!* You, my friends, my fellow citizens, have the power to change the fate of many such as they. It was Tames – it was *Tames* that destroyed Auxiliary Squad 48D. It was not a enemy that brought us to our knees; it was not an enemy that killed my squad mates, no – it was *one man*, the *weakest link*."

"We must bind ourselves together as one!" Trebor called out. "We must become what 48D could not: a whole with a common goal. It is up to *you*, my fellow employees! It is up to *you*, the scientist, the office worker, the mechanic, the engineer – it is up to *you* to follow John Smith's example, and make our home a better place! If we stand divided, we shall fail, but if we stand united as a single group, all progressing towards the same goal, *we shall prevail!* For unity is a virtue our enemy could never command."

It hardly seemed like Trebor anymore... War and death has such power to change a person. At the time, I wasn't sure if Trebor just wanted to honor his sister's memory, or if he wanted revenge... and I knew he blamed me for what happened to Almory.

It scared me.



## Chapter 52: One Small Truth

*At long last, Dr. Russ returns with your beer, seeming a bit peeved to be acting as your errandboy.*

*Taking it from him, you pop the cap and taste it. "Not bad," you say critically, "though it lacks the 'oomph' I'm used to." You turn back towards him quickly enough to see an annoyed expression vanish from his face. You don't trust him, somehow... possibly because the dark-haired woman across from you doesn't seem to. In fact, she seems to bear a strong dislike*

*towards the dwarf.*

*"If everything is in order, I have other research to attend to," Thian says, walking briskly to the door. As he leaves, he motions a couple guards inside, whispering something to them. You strain to hear what he says, but to no avail, and you turn a disconcerted eye back to the page.*

Having finished his speech, Trebor stepped away from the podium. Everyone around me rose to their feet, applauding ear-shatteringly, but he didn't seem to care. After waving the general away, he left through a back exit, not even bothering to talk to anyone.

Beside me, in a voice loud enough that I could hear, Reudh called, "That was superb! Was it not?" but my eyes were on Katie as she left the stage, motioning for me to follow.

It was a madhouse. The entire audience seemed to be talking as they started filing out the rows, overcrowding the narrow aisles and spilling into the front... it was all I could do to weave my way between them, dodging left and right, twisting carefully around to avoid bumping into anyone. I later learned that it wasn't even supposed to be over yet, but Trebor's speech had thrown everyone off. They all *thought* it was over.

With some effort, I managed to leave through the exit Katie had used, and found her right outside the door, talking to Solnay.

"You really should come down to where I work sometime, sweetie," she was saying, holding Katie's hands tightly in her plump ones. "Oh, Vanya!" she shouted, her face erupting into a wide, gracious smile as she caught sight of where I stood. "I was just telling Katie, you two should really come down to where I work sometime! I'm sure you'd love it there."

"That's all right," Katie said. "Vanya and I will be busy for a while... Trebor!" she shouted suddenly, almost as if to change the subject. Pulling away, she rushed towards him through the crowd, leaving me alone with Solnay.

The woman turned her attention to me, smelling heavily of soap and perfume. She was a friendly person, but a little too pleasant, if that makes any sense. "You really should come down to where I work. I don't ever get visitors," she said regrettably.

I'd already lost track of Katie, so I humored Solnay for a moment. "Why not," I said in acquiescence, trying to make conversation. "Where do you work?"

"Applied Sciences, sweetie. I told you that before, remember?" She gave me a patronizing smile.

I could only nod in return. "I don't know what that means, though..."

Solnay laughed – a happy, nasally sound that vaguely brought to mind a vision of someone strangling a duck. "It means I *make* things," she explained exuberantly. "*Lots* of things – things that help Parasol grow, things that help our soldiers out in the field... things that you and my Jonah probably used while fighting Ballpoint." The name of her husband seemed to sober her mood, and the smile gradually faded from her face. "I... I need to go now... I'll talk to you some other time, all right?"

"All right," I replied, watching the interweaving crowds envelop her as she walked away, leaving me feeling very much alone.

It was a feeling that faded quickly. "Vanya?" Katie asked concernedly, coming up to me from behind. "Where did Solnay go?" It was hard to understand her through all the noise.

I turned, pointing in the direction Solnay had gone. "She said she had to leave," I explained. "Where did *you* go?"

Her eyes paused for a moment, searching where I'd indicated, but finally drew themselves

back to me. "I had to talk to Trebor and find out what was wrong. It wasn't like him to just *leave* like that..."

"What *was* wrong?"

"He didn't feel the ceremony did them justice," she explained briefly. I got the feeling she had a different opinion of it all... there was an uneasiness in her expression as she thought of him. "He wants me to meet him at his place in a couple days so I can help him write their story." With that, she glanced back at me quickly and took my hand with an impish smile. "C'mon, it's almost noon. I wanna take you shopping."

"Noon?" I asked in confusion as she led me hurriedly through the crowds, dwarves and humans continuing to spill forth from the auditorium. "How could it be so late already? We weren't in there very long at all."

She laughed. "We were in there for almost four hours! Old Baltus took forever to deliver his speeches, and then Trebor talked for a good twenty minutes."

My imaginative mind began toying with the theory that time flowed different in Parasol's universe when you weren't watching... it was a childish theory that was easy to disprove, but really... I hadn't thought more than an hour had passed.

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My first impression of the Parasol market was that it was the most active place I'd ever seen... People rushed back and forth in sparsely populated groups, whirling about, making their way calmly to their destinations. Above them, colored lights flashed; transparent displays hanging in front of shops flashed with images of the wares within. It wasn't underground, but it might as well have been – there were no windows to be seen, an added bonus for a dwarf. It was all in the uniform Parasol white, black, and blue, with metallic-blue walls, white lights far overheard, and blackish trim. Everything seemed to "pulse" with some underlying power, as if everything moved with a purpose.

"Welcome to Division 3's main mall," Katie said proudly. She gave a bubbly laugh, watching my awed expression with mirth. "I never thought it would be so much fun taking you everywhere!"

It took me a moment to process what she said, my mind was so overloaded with new sights and sounds. "Is that why I'm here?" I asked. "I don't have any Parasol money..." I stopped, considering what I'd just said, and I laughed. "I don't even know what you *use* for money... or if you even use money at all."

"Of course we use money, silly," my friend teased. "And I'm going to buy stuff for you. I was getting paid for serving in the military, even if that wasn't why... why I was... why I joined..." Her voice trailed off, her eyes blank. For a time, neither of us spoke, though people curved past us as regularly as before, going to and from the shuttlecar station behind us.

"Katie?" I asked quietly, gently touching the back of her hand with my fingertips.

She jumped, glancing downwards, and then up at me with a surprised expression. "What?" she asked briefly, and then she seemed to deliberately calm herself, forcing her thoughts away from unpleasant places. "...Right. We need to um... Shopping. So... yeah! C'mon, let's go."

In a way, the "Mall" reminded me of the Spearbreakers marketplace... In another way, it wasn't like regular dwarven architecture at all. My skulker's eyes, sharp as they once were, couldn't find any safe alleyways for a homeless citizen., and there weren't any poorly-dressed

people anywhere in sight. It looked as if there wasn't a basement class at all.

I asked Katie about it while she browsed around through a shoe store, looking for something that would better fit my feet. She told me that Parasol *did* have a basement class... but they were all taken away to "homeless shelters" and typically never heard from again. Rather than ignoring the problem, or trying to fix it, they covered it up. It seemed cruel to me... but then, I was biased: I used to be part of the basement class, myself.

While we spent the next two hours looking at shoes, I spent the hours before[that just trying to *keep up* with Katie, as she'd led me excitedly from store to store, showing me everything the Mall had to offer. I wasn't sure, but I thought it might have something to do with her trying to forget about Saemin.

"Is there anything else you need?" she asked, looking me up and down as I left the store in a new pair of boots.

"I'd like a journal..." I started to say, but I felt guilty about it immediately. "Anything will do, really," I said hurriedly. "I used to have a journal made of bits of posters, but Mr Frog took it away and I never saw it again."

She raised an eyebrow. "I always heard *good* things about Mr Frog, whenever he was mentioned... He isn't super famous or anything, so you never heard much, but it was always good when you did. Did he really just *take* it?"

"He thought I was a spy," I explained quietly. It brought Joseph to my mind, and again I started pondering what he'd said. I still refused to believe he'd been telling the truth... but from what I seen, Parasol seemed to care less about their employees and more about their goals. With an absent mind, I followed my friend as she led me from one store to the next, seemingly unsatisfied with most of the journals we saw.

"Here!" Katie exclaimed suddenly, a smile breaking over her face as she lifted a journal off a high shelf. "The cover is only compressed cardboard, not leather like you'd be used to," she explained apologetically, holding it out. "It's of good quality, though... Here, look at it."

I took it with a hand and turned it over to see the front. My heart seemed to stop as I saw the design painted on its red-brown cover: a golden, five-pointed star. With a suspicious, curious expression, I turned my eyes upwards towards Katie's smiling face.

"A pentagram," I said softly, leveling a piercing stare at her. I would believe many things – I knew I was a gullible person... but this was too close for coincidence. Out of the hundreds of journals we passed, she'd chosen *this*... one the only set of journals inscribed with the symbol I considered mine.

Her smile slowly drew itself into a confused frown. "Yes...?"

"Why did you choose this one?" I asked. I felt a strong distrust towards my friend, for the first time since we'd met. My symbol was a personal thing, something I never told anyone about. Not even her.

Katie looked uncomfortable. "It had a five-pointed star on it," she said uneasily. "I thought you might like it."

"What reason would you have to think I would like it?" It was hard to hide the suspicion in my voice.

"I... You mentioned there was a star-shaped charm on your sister's bracelet, when you told me about it at the trench..." She hesitated, her eyes flicking about towards passersby. "I thought

maybe you would like something to sort of... remember her by..."

My gaze softened as I thought it over. It made sense, in a way, though there still seemed to be questions left unanswered: If I'd been by myself, I would've picked the exact same journal.

"Do you not like it?" she asked worriedly. "We can get another one if you want – I didn't... I just thought..."

For some reason, I found her concern slightly amusing. "It's fine," I said softly, smiling a little in spite of myself. "It's perfect. Thank you, Katie."

She swallowed nervously. "Let's go check out," she finally said with an uncertain glance towards a clock. "It's getting late."

I felt a little guilty for not trusting her, really... I suppose that it's partially because of my skulker origins, but I know that's no excuse. The only person I'd ever trusted implicitly was my sister. It's hard for me to learn to trust someone so quickly... especially if they have a knack for intuition.

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Katie and I had a difficult time getting back to Rubywood Apartments... She thought she would try to please her father by walking back instead of taking the shuttlecar. When I asked how far away we were, she said "close".

In Spearbreakers, "close" meant "five minutes away." In Parasol, it seemed that "close" meant "eight city blocks and a taxi," and I had to learn what a "taxi" was while I was using it. Something seemed to hinder every step of our path, be it a malfunctioning elevator or a high-strung security guard, and my friend wasn't in the best mood when we walked in the door.

Kenzon was in the main room, sitting comfortably in the cushy green chair I'd noticed the night before and watching as hovering images played above the device in the center of the table. The sound of voices emanated from it, lilting softly through the air. "You didn't bring groceries?!" he exclaimed incredulously. "What are we supposed to eat if we don't have groceries?"

"Dad, I just got home yesterday," Katie pointed out, closing the door behind us after we'd entered.

Her father all but growled at her, narrowing his eyes. "Don't give me excuses, Katalina. As long as you're under *my* roof, you'll live by *my* rules. You always got the groceries before. Just because you thought you were 'mature enough' to join the military," he scoffed, "it doesn't mean you can shirk your chores now. We all have our duties, Katie, and it's time you start behaving responsibly."

"I'm almost an adult!" my friend said heatedly. "My eighteenth birthday is in just a few months! And I *am* responsible."

"An adult??" Kenzon spat. "An uneducated highschool dropout, maybe." With a snarl, he stood, muting the device on the table with a wave of his hand. "You still haven't learned the *meaning* of responsibility."

"I'm more responsible than you, at least!" Katie started, clenching her fists, her face scrunched up in a semblance of anger. "You wouldn't even come to the ceremony today!"

"Don't talk back to me!" the man replied crossly, storming over to her. He was a full foot taller than she. "I had *work*, Katie. The fact that I wouldn't shirk my duties makes me *far* more responsible than you. Not only that, but what about your squadmates?" he asked cruelly. "You



were responsible for their lives, and almost every one of them died. I think that illustrates my point perfectly."

Katie stopped, speechless at her father's low blow. I felt like I shouldn't be there, but I was torn between leaving and defending my friend. What happened at 48D wasn't her fault, and I felt a little angry that her own father would accuse her of it being so.

Her father seemed to realize this, too. He frowned regretfully, grimacing as he sank onto a nearby couch. "I'm sorry," Kenzon said, turning away. "I shouldn't have said that. Look, Katie... just order something from the catering division." With that, he unmuted the device in the middle of the table with another hand wave and started watching.

"Vanya, I'll be back in a minute," Katie whispered, looking at me apologetically. "I'm sorry you were here for that. He never acted like that while Grandma was around."

"He shouldn't act like that even with her away," I whispered back, but I'm not sure if she heard me... She was already on her way to the kitchen.

With my new journal under my arm, I hesitantly approached Kenzon, intending to reproach him for being so rude to his daughter.

He looked up before I had a chance. "Have you ever seen a televiewer before?"

That stopped me. "What?" I asked, unfamiliar with the word.

A corner of his mouth tweaked upward, and he scratched the bald spot on his head, making an awkward gesture towards the pyramidal device on the table. "Most people call it a 'crystal' for how it makes the images, but I'm old-fashioned – I say 'televiewer'. They called the first ones 'tubes', but I can't imagine why... Just look at it for a moment. Sometimes it takes a minute to get it right."

I did. As I stared at it, he flashing images seemed to rearrange themselves in my mind. They began forming pictures and shapes, and I soon realized I was seeing and hearing people, moving smoothly through translucent, three-dimensional images. "It's people," I whispered in surprise, enthralled by the new technology. Then, curiously, I asked, "What are they doing? I haven't seen anything like this before..."

"Definitely not. This is something you'll only see on Parasol," he said with a touch of pride. "And, to your question... it's the news."

"News?"

"Right now they're going on about how the communications division was broken into." He sounded a little disapproving. "The media is always trying to put their own spin on things to beguile people into watching, and they're putting too much importance on it."

"Too much?" I'd thought Parasol's security was perfect.

Kenzon chuckled dryly, a hint of grimness in his voice. "Things like this aren't unusual anymore. Ever since Ballpoint attacked Civilian Resources back in 200 PS, everyone is paranoid. It's nothing important anymore – probably just people trying to find out where their loved ones are... Lots of people were hoping General Baltus's speech today would put an end to that, but, obviously it didn't. That was on the viewer just a few minutes before you got here, by the way."

"Trebor's speech made more of an impact," I said, wondering if that explained it.

"Yes, I saw." He nodded and his neck around towards the kitchen doorway as his daughter emerged, bearing a sulky expression. "Katie? Did you order something *yet*?"

She gave a half-nod, clearly annoyed. "I ordered Oriental." As she passed behind his chair, she motioned for me to follow her.

"Thank you for your time, Mr. Kenzon," I said, and hurried away before he could call me back.

I entered Katie's room in time to see her flop onto her bed sullenly. "Do you see why I hate him now?" she asked with a sigh, staring up at the ceiling.

Before answering, I closed the door softly, wondering if she'd meant for him to hear. "He doesn't seem very fatherly..." I noted.

"He never was," Katie answered off-handedly, covering her eyes with an arm. "He could've skipped work for a day. He knew about the ceremony – I told him this morning before I got you up. He just didn't care."

"It just seems wrong to me," I said quietly, agreeing with her sentiment. Then, a thought entered my mind. "You've *always* tried to make him happy with you, haven't you?"

She got up with a lazy air, rearranging herself to lay stomach-down towards me, her head propped up on her hands, saying, "Yep. My entire life. I wasn't a bad student at school, but I wasn't good enough for him. I tried lots of different things... if I ever showed him something I was proud of, he would dismiss it not important. Afterwards, he would actually have the nerve to ask why I was upset." She rolled her tired, half-closed eyes. "Then I started jetpacking, and though he was proud of me, he never went to see any of my competitions. Only Grandma did, before she disappeared. *She* actually *cared*."

"And you think he doesn't?" I asked cautiously.

"Of course!" she said, drawing herself back up to a kneeling position. "After he misses the ceremony, he gets mad at me 'cause I didn't bring supper home. What kind of father *does* that?"

"Not the best," I admitted, "but he still loves you."

"He never shows it," Katie said testily. "And before you say 'he might if you did first,' he never even gives me a chance to love him. He's so cold... unfeeling. It's all my mom's fault, for disappearing. She should've stayed." She hesitated for a moment, as if feeling conflicted about whether or not she should discuss the taboo topic. "Vanya, if you were in my place... No. If you could go back in time and convince my mother that she needed to stay... would you?"

For a minute, I wasn't sure what to say. "I don't know," I answered eventually. I didn't want to tell her "no"... but I could tell she held a grudge against her mother for abandoning her family. "Time isn't something that should be toyed with," I added, paraphrasing Mr Frog.

She laughed sardonically. "Funny to hear that coming from you."

"What?" I didn't understand. "Why is it strange I would say that?"

"You *always* break the rules!" she replied pointedly. "You run away from home, you stay off the census lists at Spearbreakers, you broke into Mr Frog's room, stole stuff from him, broke into Ballpoint, talked to your sister even though you weren't supposed to, and *now* look at you!" She gestured at me meaningfully with a flourish. "Vanya Carena, Dimension Traveler," she said in a grand, satirical tone. "You're not even supposed to *be* here, and you tell me *I* should follow the rules??"

I frowned and glanced down uncomfortably, staring at my booted toes. "Do you wish I wasn't here?" I whispered, hurt. I wished she hadn't mentioned my sister.

"I didn't mean *that*, Vanya... I just mean..." She paused, trying to reword her thoughts. "Look... If you can do whatever you want, just 'cause you 'have to', why can't I do the same?"

"It's not a good thing," I protested, lifting my head. "I've been homeless ever since I ran away! I got abducted by Parasol *and* Ballpoint, and spent a sleepless year in prison with the Spawn because of what I did to Mr Frog. And I... I lost my sister because I broke the rules to try to talk to get her back." I started shaking silently, but I was determined not to cry over her again. "It's *my* fault she's dead, Katie! I always blamed it on Urist, but it was *me*! I could've escaped and

come back for her later, but I did what I *wanted* instead of what I was *supposed* to." I paused and lowered my head again, wiping a tear from my cheek with the side of my hand. My voice was hardly a whisper as I finished, "Getting Salaia back wasn't worth losing her."

I'd never thought that realizing one small truth could bring such a strong depression to my heart.



## Chapter 53: An Unexpected Visit

*This is a cardboard-bound journal. Its dwarven script flows in an elven manner, which is a rare sight. You wonder for a moment how Vanya could know elven at all, given the fact that she arrived at the mountainhome when she was three. There doesn't seem to be any clear explanation, unless it could possibly be that there's something she's intentionally not writing in her journals... But what, you wonder, would she keep so hidden?*

I'd never looked at it that way before... I'd never thought that I could be responsible for Salaia's death. Maybe I'd blamed myself, but I'd always thought it was Urist who killed her, all by himself. He fired the bullets that killed her, yes, but... it was so hard to take in; so hard to accept.

Katie sat on her bed in silence, staring at me in a sort of empathetic pity. "Vanya..." she began.

Turning away quickly towards the door, I brushed the tears from my eyes and waved her off. "Katie, don't," I whispered. I wanted to be comforted, but at the same time... I'd realized what a horrible, horrible person I was. I'd blamed Urist the entire time, when it hadn't been his fault at all. He'd wanted to protect me, and if I'd done what I was supposed to, Salaia wouldn't even have been there for him to shoot. It wouldn't have been hard to evade her, and I *could have*. If it wasn't for me, she'd still be alive.

All I wanted was to hide away where no one could see me, and cry.

At dinner, I hardly noticed the food. Katie and her father argued, but I can't remember what they said. There was only one thing on my mind... and it was the one thing I didn't want to think about.

After Mr. Kenzon retired to his room, Katie tried to comfort me again. Though she did her best, I just felt so empty... like there was a gap in my soul. Nothing could fill that void, not even a friend... I'd devoted my life to protecting Salaia, and in the end... I'd done far worse than simply failing.

*I killed my sister.*

Eventually, Katie asked me to write down what I was feeling, in the journal she'd given me. "It might help," she suggested. I only told her that I'd consider it, and though unsatisfied, she gave up and left.

After standing for a while, so many thoughts whirling through my unwilling mind, I went to that darkened corner of the sitting room and curled up on a soft, white chair. Taking my new journal and pen out of the plastic bag I'd brought them home in, I opened it up to the first page. I was going to write about my sister, partially because Katie had asked me to, and partially to try to straighten it all out in my mind. I hoped that somehow, it would ease the pain.

It took me several minutes to get started... I was out of the habit of writing journals, and I sat there idly, tapping the pen against my lips. I'd made my last entry at Spearbreakers, I remembered, before the third mission to Ballpoint. That gave me enough to start with.

*You're not in Kansas anymore, I wrote. Those were the first words I heard when I set foot inside this place... Yes, they're odd first words... I think it's a reference to a book or something.*

*It's been a long time since I wrote a journal entry, but apparently, I'm supposed to now. I guess I don't really have a problem with it... I just wish I had my old journals with me. I don't want to write my stores all over again.*

*I stood in Mr Frog's laboratory, wearing my old Ballpoint suit...*

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The next morning I awoke to a peaceful beam of sunlight shining through the window. Somehow, in such an ordered place, I expected to hear time bells chiming the hour, like in Spearbreakers... They'd always awoken me before.

As I lay there, the thought occurred to me that I didn't even know what time it was. It might even be late in the afternoon, for all I knew, and I flung back the covers, getting out of bed in a hurry. With a little more caution, I hid behind my door as I opened it and peeked out, looking to see if anyone was awake. Katie was sitting on a sofa in the sitting room, tapping at her new PEA with a finger. She didn't seem very concerned about the time, and that eased my worries. Quietly, I closed the door back and began getting dressed, putting on what I'd worn the day before. It was all I had, besides my armor.

Several minutes later, I was sitting on the stool in front of the dressing table, staring blankly at the mirror. It seemed that the demons that had troubled me the night before weren't going to go away just because I'd slept: I was trying to imagine Salaia's face in place of mine.

A soft knock at the door startled me to my feet, and I had to catch the stool with my fingertips to keep from knocking it over. "Are you awake?" someone called quietly, their voice muffled.

I hastened towards the sound, turning the knob and opening the door a crack.

Katie's worried face looked back at me. She smiled, but it quickly faded. "Are you feeling any better?" she asked, concerned.

Nodding, I answered, "Mhm," and opened the door the rest of the way, slipping out past her. "How late is it?"

"It's not noon yet," she replied, walking ahead to the kitchen. "You need to eat – we'll be getting groceries today. Or..." She stopped short before the dining room, casting an anxious, worried glance over her shoulder. "I could get them myself, if you want to stay here."

"I'll be okay."

Breakfast was the same as the day before... it was cereal. I'm sad to say it had already lost its novelty... bits of food floating in a liquid isn't really much more than a strange form of soup. I'm not sure why the people of Parasol seem to like it so much, apart from how quickly you could eat it. Then again, the breakfast bars Mr Frog had always given me were even faster to eat, and you could carry them around wherever you went. Cereal didn't really have any advantages.

Katie sat across from me, watching me eat almost eagerly with her intense, blue eyes. "We need to get you more clothes," she said disapprovingly.

It was so abrupt and unexpected that I almost laughed, but stopped, confused. "But you gave me these yesterday... They're clean, too... why can't I wear them?"

She laughed at my naïveté. "You can't wear the same thing every day. You have to have a selection of things to choose from. Oh, and clothes *always* look better after they've been hanging

up, not rumpled and wrinkled like that blouse."

Glancing down, I almost knocked my bowl over. "It's not that wrinkled," I protested as I looked it over. "There are only a few wrinkle lines in it, and they're harder to see than they could be."

"Careful with your milk!" Katie warned, laughing. "Wrinkles look bad on that blouse. But don't worry – I'll help you out later today, maybe, after we go and get groceries... and maybe a few other things." The familiar, impish smile stole across her face, but her eyes were sad, as if she was only faking it for my benefit. "Look at me – my clothes aren't wrinkled, see? They've been hanging up in my wardrobe." She was wearing a short black dress, and a fancy, faded pink jacket with puffy upper sleeves, her hair draped around to one side. From where she sat, I couldn't see her legs, but I was sure she was wearing knee-length black boots... it seemed to be her favorite thing to wear.

"I see," I told her, nodding. She looked pretty, really... enough that imagining her in the military seemed ridiculous. It wasn't the last time that I wondered why she'd joined.

"C'mon, finish eating and let's go," Katie finally said, interrupting my silence as she stood and started walking towards the sitting room. "We should try to beat the afternoon rush, and I'm going to need to fix your hair again. We aren't so tight on time anymore, so I'll be able to do a better job."

Katie spent some time fussing with my hair before we left, almost seeming to enjoy it the same way she had the day before, though I didn't much like the way she pulled at it. Really, I'd never bothered much with my hair at all. "Grandma always used to put my hair up," she'd explained in an innocent bliss as she twirled it with a comb. "I've never had anyone to do it for."

"I don't want it to look special," I stated carefully, feeling the urge to brace myself against something as she continued to tug. "I just want to blend in."

She laughed. "You'll be fine," she assured me. "I didn't have enough time to fix it how I wanted yesterday, but you'll look great, I promise!"

Watching her in the mirror, I saw her reach for the scissors. "Don't cut my hair!" I shouted suddenly, twisting away from her in a panic and holding a hand up to defend myself, worriedly feeling about with the other to make sure she hadn't removed anything. It hadn't grown out all the way, but it was getting there, and I hated how short he'd left it.

"Calm down!" Katie said, astounded at my reaction. "Quit freaking out! I'm just going to trim it! You won't lose anything."

"That's what Mr Frog said, and I barely had any left!" My voice sounded almost accusing.

Katie quickly sat the scissors down on the countertop and walked towards me with a hurt expression, hands raised. "Look, I put them down. See? Let me just show you."

Untrusting, I let her approach. Even now, I'm not sure why I'm so sensitive about my hair... I guess it's just part of who I am, like being afraid of small spaces, or how I can't sing, or how I used to like puppies and dogs.

With a quick, deft motion, she swept up a lock of my hair in her hand, evening it out with a brush she snatched from her pocket, and held it up for me to see. "This is all I'm cutting off, okay?" An array of short, uneven hairs poked out from between her fingers. "You haven't been taking care of your hair, and you have split ends."

My throat felt constricted as I swallowed. "Okay..." I said uneasily.

She picked the scissors back up and made a few quick snips across her fingers, scooping up

first one, then another lock of hair, evening them off. "See? I'm already done... Why were you freaking out, anyway?"

I felt at my hair, and there didn't really seem to be anything missing, which half-surprised me. A few short tips lay on the floor at my feet, but other than that, I couldn't tell any difference. "I don't know..." I lied, feeling a little guilty for not being comfortable with telling her. When I was little, my grandfather used to threaten that he would cut off the tips of my ears to make me look more like a dwarf, using a pair of haircutting scissors... it's a fear I've had ever since. I know it's irrational, but it's so hard to get rid of things like that. I didn't think Katie would understand.

After a quick brushing and a hair clip, she decided she was done. Then, once she'd offered a few brushing tips, we were out the door, headed to the elevator across the hall.

The "mall" wasn't really a "mall," if you go by the definition Katie gave me... it was more a mishmash of every kind of store you could think of, separated by wide, dim walkways beneath metal roofs high above. If you needed something, you could find it there... a trip to the food-related side showed me this. I'd never seen so much food in one place, and it was all sitting out where people could get to it. They would pick up what they wanted, take it to the cashier, and buy it. In Spearbreakers, you simply chose from what the cook was cooking, or what you could find preserved in a barrel. Here, they expected you to do the storage and cooking yourself.

Baking items, condiments, meat, vegetables and more all went into the baskets I was carrying. Katie led me around excitedly, explaining whatever came to mind as the baskets in my hands grew heavier and heavier. At first, she seemed very happy – she even declared she was going to teach me how to bake. Unfortunately, the longer we continued our little trip, the more it became obvious that something was bothering her.

While we walked down a frozen food aisle, I ventured the question, "Katie, is something wrong?"

Her eyebrows came together worriedly. "It's Saemin's mother... She should've been there yesterday. Did you see her anywhere?"

I didn't even know who she was, and I shook my head apologetically.

"It's not like her," Katie whispered, staring at her feet in troubled confusion. "She *loved* Saemin. She wouldn't skip his awards ceremony. She would honor him by being there."

"Maybe she had to go to work?" I suggested.

She pursed her lips, tilting her head and giving me a troubled look. "Don't compare her to my dad, Vanya," she chided gently. "My dad doesn't love me anywhere *near* as much as Saemin's mother loved him. She should have been there... I think something else is going on."

"Like what?"

"Like..." She stopped and gave it some thought, but she didn't seem to be able to come up with anything. Suddenly, she burst out, "I don't *know* what! I was always good friends with her. Dad never liked Saemin, but Saemin's family always liked *me*. We were good friends, and I *know* them. Something isn't right."

I nodded to say I understood, and then guessed at what she was leading up to. "Are we going to go figure out what's going on?"

She smiled. Giving a sharp nod, she answered, "Of course. I want to find out why she wasn't there, and I want to help if I can."

"Should we put all this back?" I asked, wondering. She spun around to see what I was talking about, and I lifted up the two heavy baskets of food.

"No," Katie said decidedly, "We'll take it with us. I said I wanted to help, remember?"

After Katie had paid for everything, we headed towards Saemin's old house... which, according to her, wasn't too far away. We still had to take a hovertaxi.

Flying was amazing. Until Mr Frog had taught me otherwise, I'd always thought air travel impossible, but Parasol didn't really have roads... all the vehicles flew through the air. Even then, as excited as I was, Katie tried to keep me busy showing me a "video game" on her new PEA. I didn't take too much interest in it, really... There's so much to do in life – why would anyone waste time on a game you have to play by yourself?

Before long, the hovertaxi set us down in a narrow corridor before it took back off into the sky with a intrusive hum, its white underside blending with the grayish clouds above as it faded into the distance. We were actually outside for once, and I loved it. At least, I did at first.

Metal doors lined the ground level in the little roofless corridor, but the white paint was peeling in places, and grimy in others. Graffiti marked the walls, and it wasn't all in Dwarven, either. A lot of it was in languages I couldn't even read. It was the first place that really looked like people lived there.

"This doesn't feel as... artificial as everything else," I noted thoughtfully as we walked down the slum-like corridor. "It's so cold, though..." It was more than cold; it was frigid, and the wind nipped at my nose and ears, making them sting. I couldn't help but shiver a little, and I wished I'd had a jacket to bring with me, like Katie's pink one.

"Parasol is a cold planet," Katie whispered. "They say Ballpoint is hot, but here, it's always cold. It's not a real planet, so heating it costs a lot. ...And keep your voice down! Security doesn't patrol the low-income housing as much, and we don't want to attract attention." She paused for a moment and took her purse from her shoulder, slipping it into one of the plastic bags of food she was carrying. I paused while she did, guessing she was trying to keep anyone from thinking we were carrying money. It made me nervous.

After she was done, we continued forwards. In a whisper, she called my attention to how there were ladders on the lower walls leading to upper balconies, and alleyways on the second floors, and other balconies higher and higher into the sky. After I'd run away from home, I'd visited a number of dwarven fortresses with a bedroom scheme eerily similar.

"Tens of thousands of people live here," Katie told me, looking above us at the sliver of sky visible between the towering stacks of balconies. It was hard to believe: we didn't see anyone at all. It almost felt abandoned... the inhabitants had blocked access to the windows, either barring them, boarding them up, or welding over them with sheets of metal... Katie said it wasn't so much because nobody lived there, and more to keep thieves away.

"I thought Parasol was a company," I said softly as we climbed a set of stairs to the second-floor balcony. "How does it have problems with crime?"

"*Everyone* has problems with crime," Katie pointed out in a whisper. "It's just that Security doesn't come here as much. Protecting wealthier people gets them paid more, and it isn't as dangerous. Here, people hate Security, and see them as stuck-up and immoral. Elsewhere people like them. It's just how things are." She paused for a moment. "And it has its own economy... I guess it's sort of part company, and part nation... like Ballpoint."

Conversation came to a standstill as a dirty, tangle-bearded, tattooed dwarf shuffled down the walkway towards us, a bottle of booze in one hand. He eyed us shiftily for a moment, and my heart beat faster as we approached each other. Sensing my apprehension, Katie reached behind her and took my hand in hers, squeezing it softly. She was shaking... she'd been there before, but

she was just afraid as I was.

Fortunately, the man passed us without incident, and Katie and I let out a sigh of immense relief.

"It's always like this," she whispered. "It's just how life is down here. You stay quiet and hope nobody notices you, or you get mugged."

I followed her down a side passage into an enclosed alleyway, and we passed one door after another, first on the left, then on the right... The layout reminded me a little of Parasol's trench back on Everoc. It was almost as dirty, too.

It wasn't long before Katie stopped in front of a particularly worn-out door. "We don't knock," she explained in a quiet voice, holding her head close to mine. "We ring the doorbell." Turning, she pressed a button next to the door, but nothing seemed to happen.

"Is it broken?" I asked. "I thought they were supposed to make noise..."

"They *do*, but only inside," she whispered in return.

We straightened as the door opened a crack, an eye appearing to give a wary examination. Katie seemed pleased, and her mood lightened my apprehension a little. Unfortunately, the door closed back just as quickly.

"Was that it?" I whispered unhappily. I was disappointed that we'd come all that way for so little, but before Katie had any chance to answer, the door opened wide.

The tall, muscled woman spoke slowly, age apparent in her voice. "Katie, welcome. I haven't saw you for a long while. And Vanya... it is good to see you, also."

"Eltsha?!" I blurted, staring in astonishment at the old woman leaning on her cane. "*You're* Saemin's mother?"

Looking back, it shouldn't have come as a surprise... but it was, all the same.



Chapter 54: Surprise and Tears

You look up as you notice the woman across from you stifle a giggle at Vanya's discovery of Eltsha. Looking around, you notice that the guards have, for the moment, left the room. You take advantage of the opportunity and ask, "Really, who are you?" She says nothing, but the question quells your slight mirth. "Are you Lydena, Trebor's sister? Or are you perhaps Wari?"

She seems to enjoy the second question: her gray-blue eyes dance with merriment, and she seems to open up a little. "I'm not anyone you've read about yet," she tells you.

You'd fully expected her denial. With a smile, you ask what you've really been wondering. "Are you a daughter, or descendant of Vanya?"

For the first time, she doesn't shut you down. Instead, she leans forwards, with a playful, almost conspiratorial look. As you move closer, she whispers in your ear, "No. I'm not. Please... just keep reading. I promise I'll tell you when the time is right."

"Can that be now?" you ask, half as a joke, while you lean back disappointedly in your seat.

"You haven't read my story yet," the woman says, "but you will. I'm sure of it. For now... just call me 'Sally'."

Standing outside the shoddy doorway, I gaped in surprise at the first person I'd met when I'd entered Parasol: Eltsha. She looked just as she did then, though dressed differently: a woman that

looked to be older than she was, tall and muscular but hobbling with a cane. "I didn't think I'd ever see you again!"

Katie twirled around in surprise at my outburst. "You *know* her?"

Eltsha smiled softly. "Aye, child," she said with a nod, regaining Katie's attention. "We met not two days ago, in the lobby."

"Why didn't you come over?" Katie asked with a slight frown. "I wanted to talk to you... I *missed* talking to you, Eltsha, why didn't you come?"

"I dislike crowds, Katie," Eltsha reminded the girl, turning around slowly as she spoke. "You know that as well as any, but I were there all the same. Before the cold does kill you, come inside, now."

After directing a confused glance in my direction, Katie hurried inside after our hostess, motioning for me to follow. And so I did, stepping carefully over the low threshold. Katie waited until I was in, and closed the door behind me, sliding the locks into place.

Though warmer than the alleyways, the house was even more of a mess. There wasn't any carpet... just a cold, steel floor bearing so many deep scratches and scuffles it seemed incapable of reflecting light. A cheap metal table sat inside the living area, stacked with paperwork and illuminated by a single hanging bulb. There were several wobbly plastic chairs sitting around it, and heaps of plastic garbage bags in the far corners of the room. A ragged, dirty couch furnished one wall, which was decorated with a carefully hung photograph of Eltsha's family, including Saemin. Other than the framed picture, the wall itself was grimy, and though smooth, it bore dents and peeling paint.

Giving me a cautionary look, Katie led me after Eltsha around the table in the sitting room to the kitchen beyond, which wasn't in any better shape. The sink was empty of dishes, but there were practically no cabinets. A plastic patio table sat in the middle, surrounded by four assorted chairs. A refrigerator sat in one corner, and there was a scantily laden bookshelf in another, sporting only a few cans.

"We brought you food," Katie said, setting the bags she was carrying on the table. I did the same, trying not to make it obvious I was looking around. It felt rude of me to stare, especially when the house was in such a state, but at the same time, I could understand it... I'd once lived in poverty, too.

"I thank you, child," the woman said, smiling gratefully. Opening the refrigerator, she leaned on the door as she bent to look inside. "Would you like something to drink?"

"No, it's all right," my friend responded quickly. "I just wanted to know if you were okay, and if..." her voice trailed off.

Eltsha didn't seem to notice the unfinished question. "Aye, that I am, indeed," she crooned as she shut the door back. "With my knee hurt as it is, I cannot find a stable job, yet someone mysterious has been paying our bills. Were it you, child?"

Raising a confused eyebrow, Katie shook her head, murmuring, "No, it wasn't me..."

"I thought it might not be so, nay." Saying this, Eltsha hobbled over and took Katie's hand. "You did follow my Saemin into battle... Though he didn't make it back, for such devotion, I must thank you. It's warming my heart that you did care for him so."

Her lips twitched. "I try not to think about it," she admitted. Her voice, heavy with emotion, was hardly above a whisper as she spoke. "I *had* to go. It's what my grandparents would have wanted... It's what *I* wanted. I didn't want to lose him..." Her voice began to quaver. "But I lost him anyway. I couldn't save him, Eltsha, I..." And Katie started to cry, hanging her head in shame as the woman took her in a gentle embrace.

"Hush, child," she said soothingly. "It were not your fault. You did your best."

"I could've done *better*," Katie sobbed. "I could've *saved* him!"

"Shh," Eltsha whispered, her voice calming my friend a little. "Look, now. No one can save everyone, and Saemin knew it were dangerous. I did not want him to go, yet he did, saying he did want to support his family. You did follow to keep him safe. And Katie, child..."

Katie looked up at Eltsha face, two feet above her own.

In a motherly manner, Eltsha wiped the tears from the girl's cheek. "I know he were very happy to have you there, so hush, now. You're still alive, are you not?"

She nodded, taking a step back. "I wouldn't be if it wasn't for Vanya."

"I owe you both much, aye," Eltsha agreed, nodding as she looked between us. "Mina's condition has improved from the money Saemin sent, and she is awake once more, though still sick."

"Who is Mina?" I whispered in askance. It was the first time I'd spoken.

"She is my daughter," Eltsha answered, pointing towards a room in the back. "She is sick, and has been since she was born. When she grew worse, Saemin sought a job, and when I become injured, he went to war so he could earn more." She hesitated for a moment, and added in a thoughtful, regretful tone, "He was a good son, was Saemin..." And she smiled.

I'd never seen a smile convey such sorrow.

The next hour was mostly Katie and Eltsha talking about each other's lives, in which I took little part. Talking about Saemin seemed to dredge up old memories in Katie's mind, making her uneasy... It wasn't long before even Eltsha noticed it too, and changed the subject for her sake. She really did think of Katie as a daughter... she'd accepted Katie into her family, as if in expectation of the wedding that might have taken place, had Saemin survived... and unlike Trebor, she didn't hate me for not being able to save her son.

I saw a different side of Parasol that day. Beneath the shining towers and majestic facades they maintained, there was a darker side... a side where they hardly cared about their "lesser" employees, seeing taking care of them as too much effort; a side where the low-class workers could hardly afford healthcare, even when they weren't sick. It made me start looking at things in a different light... Maybe Ballpoint only focuses on money, but Parasol focuses on science to the exclusion of all else... even the welfare and happiness of their own people.

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As we left Eltsha's apartment, I started noticing that Katie seemed uneasy. When she opened the door, she stopped suddenly, staring at a passing human in the hallway as if she'd seen a ghost. When we reached the main alleyway, we saw someone climbing down a ladder on the far side, and Katie froze up. Curiously, I stepped ahead of her and looked at her face, and found she bore an expression of sheer horror.

"Katie?" My voice startled her, and she jumped, glancing over at me. "What's wrong?" I asked. By that time, I knew something was up.

"Nothing, I..." she began haltingly, glancing back at the now-empty ladder. "I thought I saw... But I couldn't have, because he... I... Never mind," she finished, her voice trailing into silence.

"You thought you saw whom?" I queried, but she wouldn't answer, only looking away uncomfortably as she hurried forwards towards the stairs. I quickened my pace to match hers.

"You thought you saw Saemin," I guessed as I came back alongside.

With a troubled frown, she shook her head. "I *did* see Saemin. That was the third time today... but it wasn't him, I just *thought* it was him. It's... flashbacks, I think," she said distantly. As she withdrew from her thoughts, she noticed my concern, and hurried to add, "But don't worry! I'll be fine - they go away, and they don't hurt anything. C'mon, let's just get back to the mall and get our groceries, okay?"

Taking her PEA out of her pocket, she called a taxi. Within minutes, we were already on our way back towards the mall... but I couldn't help but be concerned about my friend.

The second shopping trip went largely without incident. Katie, though quieter at first, eventually brightened up a little and became her regular, talkative self again. This time, instead of just leading me around, she took one of the baskets herself, which made it a little easier for me.

On discovering that I had no idea what "cake" was, she made sure to buy two pieces from a nearby bakery after we'd checked out, and we sat at a little cafeteria table and ate. It was delicious - I'd never had anything remotely like it before, but I thought it a little too sweet, and wasn't able to finish the icing.

"Maybe it's just because you aren't used to eating sugary stuff?" Katie asked curiously, picking up half our grocery bags in her fingers and motioning for me to get the others. Apparently, someone who "couldn't eat sugar" was something new to her.

"I don't know," I admitted, curious. "I just... It was too sweet. I feel full already, and I *know* I didn't eat enough to be full."

Side by side, we left the bakery and started walking down the towering hallway towards the main elevator, half a mile away.

Suddenly, I paused as I realized something. "Katie! Wait!"

She stopped, stumbling forwards a step as a dwarf pushed rudely past. "What's wrong?"

"You left your purse at Eltsha's apartment! You hid it in one of the bags, and you don't have it with you anymore." With a bag-laden hand, I pointed at her shoulder.

Her eyes were soft as she smiled. "I said I was going to help, remember? She won't want to accept it, but -"

A cataclysmic explosion interrupted her, emanating from a potted shrubbery twenty feet ahead of us, so powerful it knocked us to the floor before we even knew what was going on.

"VANYA!" I heard Katie scream in terror.

My ears rang from the blast - as they cleared, I began to make out the yelling of panicked people. Looking about wildly, I tried to figure out what had happened. A dwarf's severed arm lay a few feet away, its fingers twitching spasmodically as a small pool of blood pooled beneath it from several large gashes. A wedding ring was visible on one of its fingers. Horrified, I dropped what bags I was still holding and scrambled over to my friend. "Katie?" I asked, panicked. "Are you okay?"

She nodded hurriedly, her eyes dancing about us as she struggled to sit up. "I'm all right," she said assuringly. "I'm just a little shaken."

As I got up to help her to her feet, she pointed at the elevator shaft, her eyes wide. "VANYA, GET DOWN!" she screamed.

The world became chaos.

Spinning towards where she'd pointed, I saw a tiny spot of light rushing towards us, flashing with fire. "*Armok, vendi scild!*" I shouted reflexively. I felt my pulse throbbing in my forehead, as in a heartbeat, a magical shield of blood expanded from my outstretched palms.

A missile exploded - an ear-shattering blast overcoming my shield as it tossed me to the floor, spinning as I skidded backwards fifteen feet, a searing pain in my left ankle. I heard someone scream my name, saw Katie cowering in fear as a second missile rushed down from the elevator shaft.

There was nothing I could do.

The blorp of plasma weapons echoed as energy flew forwards above my head - like a wounded dragon, the missile trailed blackened smoke as it spun out of control, its explosion ripping a gaping hole in a wall, less than fifty feet from where I lay.

"GET DOWN! ON THE GROUND, NOW!" a male's voice shouted - a half-crouched, fully-armored security guard rushed forwards, his weapon at the ready. Behind me, I heard the sound of more guards yelling the same as they sprinted in my direction.

A crack echoed through the air, the sound of a sniper round - I looked on in horror as a cloud of red mist erupted from the back of the guard that had saved Katie's life. He stumbled, flipping to the floor.

"Vanya, *HELP!*" I heard someone scream. My mind blank with shock, I got to my feet and limped blindly towards the call.

A second loud crack rang out - the floor by my side shattered in a short spray of shrapnel.

Everywhere, people were screaming in terror - smoke grenades flew through the air, popping as they released their fumes, but not nearly fast enough - I heard the rushing sound of a third missile. On an instinct, I threw myself forwards towards where Katie lay shaking on the floor, and a shockwave rattled our teeth. A barrage of gunfire rang out from nearby, assaulting my eardrums; their projectiles thudded into the distant wall.

There was silence.

I prayed it was over, but a quick glance told Katie told me otherwise: a large metal beam pinned her left arm to the ground, swirled about with smoke. Getting up, I crouched, putting my arms beneath it and lifting with all my strength, but it wouldn't budge. My ankle screeched with a piercing pain - my leg collapsed underneath me as I crumpled to the ground.

"Get out of here!" a human guard yelled as he heaved the metal girder to the side with a bone-rattling clang. "Get somewhere safe!"

A fusillade of bullets erupted around us, pinging as they ricocheted cruelly off the metallic floor. The man yelled in pain, gritting his teeth and swearing as he fell, clutching at his leg.

"*Winteos, vendi scild!*" someone cried out.

A wispy, purple dome formed above our heads - Katie stood before us, her arms above her head, bullets emitting whirring tones as they bounced quickly away. I felt a sense of relief, but it didn't last long - the gunfire ceased, and an exploding grenade sprayed liquid fire above our heads, carving little crackling trails into her shield.

"I can't hold it!" Katie screamed, her arms shaking violently as the shield flickered. "*HELP!*"

Not knowing what else to do, I grabbed Katie's nearest hand and yanked her towards a nearby doorway. The shield vanished in an instant, the flames spilling onto her jacket and taking root. Half a moment later, a missile exploded behind us, the smokescreen swirling from the blast, but Katie and I were already inside. She bumped me, and a pain shot through my leg; I fell dizzily to the ground. In a hurry, she removed her jacket and threw it to the floor, stomping on it frantically to put out the flames.

As my vision cleared, my heart gentling its beat, I became a little more aware of my surroundings. All was quiet but for the yelling of the guards, the crackling of fire, and the sobbing of the terrified. A sharp odor filled the air, like smoke, gunpowder, and melted steel, so thick that you could taste it on your tongue.

But it was over.

I was lying in a black-tiled entryway to a women's bathroom, my view of the stalls blocked by a cyan-tiled wall. Outside the doorway, more security guards jogged past towards the distant elevator. Katie, hyperventilating, was still stomping fevishly at her smoking jacket, oblivious to everything else.

"Katie..." I said, trying to get her attention. When she didn't respond, I said it louder. "Katie!"

She halted abruptly, making a few more absentminded, mechanical stabs with her foot as she raised her eyes to mine. She was panting... but as she realized where she was, her face lost its crazed expression. Her legs wobbled and collapsed underneath her, sending her to her hands and knees upon the floor, where she began to quietly weep. It was only then that I noticed her arms were wet with blood.

After brushing the mussed hair from my eyes, I tried to stand, but was quickly met with a shrieking pain in my ankle. I yelped, supporting myself with my hands as I tried to shuffle forwards on my good leg. "Katie? Katie, are you all right?" I asked, worried she'd been injured.

She jerked her head towards me, eyeliner running down her cheeks, smoke smeared in across her chin and forehead. "Vanya," she whimpered, her pretty face twisted into an ugly frown, "I can't do this again. I can't... I can't just - I just... I *can't*!" She broke down, falling to her side as she shook with sobs.

And I sat beside my friend, tears in my eyes, praying that Armok would protect us.

Katie had left the military to avoid the horrors of war... and now, it seemed almost as if war was coming back to find her. Though I still couldn't imagine who would want Katie dead, or even *why* they would, I vowed that somehow, I would stop them. I wouldn't let something happen to her, as I'd done to Salaia.

I would keep her safe.

If I'd only known how wrong I was...



## Chapter 55: Stuck at Home

*"It seems to me," you say thoughtfully, "that Vanya was desperate to find a family... perhaps subconsciously."*

*"What do you mean?" You can hear the skepticism in Sally's voice.*

*You lean back in your chair and gesture at the journal. "Well, look at her! First it was Mr Frog - somehow she actually thought he would make a good grandfather. Then it was Scylk, who she wanted to be her 'father'. Now, she wants to call Katie her sister."*

*"You don't understand... She went through her entire life without a good family," the woman says softly. "Then she lost her sister, the only person she had." The woman lifts her eyes to yours. "She's never had anyone she could count on. Everyone disappears."*

*"No," you correct her, "**She** disappears. She runs away. In her own words, she 'leaves everyone she knows and loves behind her.'"*

*Sally's voice is just above a whisper: "Not always..." She turns her head from you, and that's*

*all you get out of her for a long while.*

Screaming, crying, crackling flames; burning buildings throwing smoke: the sounds and smells of chaos are always the same, on Everoc or Parasol. But they're the sounds and smells of death, too. Though not as horrific as the attack on 48D, it wasn't something you wanted to experience twice.

Inside my new boots, my ankle throbbed painfully with blood... it was clear something was very, very wrong. When I foolishly made the mistake of trying to flex it, knifing pain stabbed upwards from the source so intensely that it brought tears to my eyes. I bit my lip to keep from yelping. My pulse quickened, and so did the terrible throbbing pain, *thump, thump, thump* with every passing heartbeat.

Struggling to keep myself calm, I glanced over at Katie's form, curled up in a fetal position. I could tell that she wasn't in any condition to help me, but then again... neither was anyone else.

"Katie?" I said in a tight voice, wincing. "Katie?"

She lifted her head, her dark hair hanging in her eyes. "Vanya?" Her voice menaced with tears.

"Katie, there's something wrong with my foot."

There was silence for a moment, and Katie stared at me blankly before asking in an absent, childlike voice, "Did they shoot you?"

I shook my head quickly. "No, I think it's just twisted or something. What should I do?"

It sounded almost as if she was only half-awake. "What should you do?" she echoed softly.

"Yes! What should I do?" When she didn't answer, I grew frustrated. "Katie! Please, focus! This *hurts!*"

She blinked, slowly looking around, and then propped herself up on an arm. "It didn't hurt so bad when you were throwing us in here," she said with a thoughtful air.

"It *did* hurt, I just didn't notice it as much with the adrenaline pumping. But what should I do now?"

She stared at me for the longest time... a kind of dead, lifeless gaze. It was almost as if she was looking right through me, seemingly disconnected from reality. It was only later that I learned she always did this when overwhelmed. Finally, she said, "You think I know?"

"Wha-" I stopped, confused.

"I'm not a doctor, silly..." She sounded slightly apologetic, but her eyes seemed to brighten as she said, "My pocket PEA! I could use that." She sat upright and slipped it out of her purse pocket, turning it on. "I could call Trebor if I had his number."

I quickly turned her down. "No, don't call Trebor."

She turned a curious, confused eye towards me. "Why not?"

I hesitated, not really wanting to explain. I'd never trusted him much, but I trusted his new attitude even less. "He's probably busy with other things," I lied, desperately wishing she would focus. My ankle still throbbed with pain, drawing my mind towards it irrepressibly. There wasn't really any way to avoid thinking about it. "We shouldn't bother Trebor."

"Hmm," she said, nodding absently. "Maybe. I should make sure my dad knows..." In a slothlike manner, she began feeling at herself for her PEA, and finally found it. I expected her to start tapping away, but instead, she just stared at it, confused. "It's broken..." she mumbled at length. "It can't be broken..."

Suddenly, she twisted around towards me. "Wait, did you say you're hurt?!" she exclaimed, scrambling over. "Where? How bad is it?"

The clear-headed Katie was finally back, and I thanked Armok for it, grateful beyond words.

"It's my ankle," I explained, pointing at it with a finger. "I think it's broken or something."

"Oh my gods," she whispered, kneeling beside me. Her hands hovered above my boot in indecision for a moment, but she eventually backed away. "I probably shouldn't take the boot off... it might hurt it more than it already is."

"I was about to say that," I agreed, biting my lip at the painful thought. "You mentioned hospitals after Reudh rescued us... should we go there? And how are we going to *get* me there, anyway? I can't walk!"

Staring at the floor, she shook her head, puzzling it out in her mind. "I know a minor healing spell, but even the best aren't good for much besides cuts... We need a doctor." She raised her eyes upwards with a purpose, motioning for me to stay put as she began to walk away. "Vanya, everything will be okay, I promise! You'll be fine! I know what to do. I'll be back soon - don't let anyone move you, okay?" As she turned, jogging out the door, she called out again, "Just stay *right there!*"

Sitting alone in the entryway to a Parasol bathroom is usually boring... but when in excruciating pain, it's awful. My arms and neck were getting stiff from holding them in place for so long, and I tried to reposition myself at one point... a mistake I paid for dearly. Tears started to roll down my cheeks, and I was too afraid of moving to brush them away.

Fortunately, no one came through, probably from all the destruction just outside the door, and ten minutes or so later, Katie returned in a rush, practically dragging a protesting medic along with her.

"I really don't have time for this wild goose chase, miss!" the old, white-haired dwarf was saying. "There can't be anyone injured except the people we've already treated because... oh." He stopped and walked forwards, removing a PEA from a medical kit as he knelt down beside me. "Goodness... You really *are* injured, aren't you..." he said softly. "Don't worry: I'll have you fixed up in no time. Can you tell me where it hurts?" he asked, looking into my eyes.

Katie answered for me indignantly. "It's her ankle, like I already told you! You've hardly listened to a single thing I've said!"

"I'm a Parasol Security Medical Officer," the man answered in a harsher tone. "I told you I was very busy when you found me." He stopped, and his patronizing voice returned as he spoke to me again: "Can you tell me *which* ankle hurts?"

"The left one," I said quickly, hoping he would hurry up and get it over with. "But it's under the boot." He immediately reached for it, and I cried out in surprise, "No! Don't touch it!"

He gave me an impatient glare. "This is my job, Miss."

There isn't that much more I remember, largely because he gave me a painkiller that made me woozy for a while... It's all really blurry, and my memory is usually better than that. My ankle was sprained, as it turned out, and the reason it throbbed was because it was swollen - all big, ugly and purple, with a dark bruise running up the back of my leg. Sprained ankles took months to heal back on Everoc... and unfortunately, on Parasol, it's only slightly better. Science can only take you so far towards repairing organic life, which is something Parasol seems to refuse to accept. The doctor gave me a dose of something - nanobots - he said it would speed up the healing process a little, but not by much. I was going to be bedridden for a couple weeks, and Katie was going to be able to leave whenever she wanted. That meant I'd be alone... and I didn't like the thought of that very much.

It's funny how things never really end up how I expect.

~~~

"Dad, I told you a hundred times already, we were just coming home with groceries!"

"*GROUNDED!*" Kenzon roared.

It was the middle of a loud debate between Katie and her father, and I was still a little woozy from all the medications. We'd gotten to her apartment with a lot of difficulty - as Katie couldn't afford a "hoverchair", I was using crutches. The ones at Spearbreakers weren't nearly as fancy, being made of wood... they were so much different from Parasol's metal-and-plastic version. I'm sure my ankle would've throbbed even more if it hadn't been for the painkillers, with gravity pulling all the blood to my feet.

"*Grounded??*" Katie exclaimed. "Are you serious? Why? What did *I* do? I would've sent you a message, but my PEA broke!"

"You should've taken care of it! I'm tired of discussing this with you," Kenzon said angrily, his eyes narrowed. "You claim you were going to get groceries, but the reports from the phone company say your signal was coming from Shallowroot. What were you even *doing* over there? Do you have *any idea* how dangerous and run-down that district is? No. I've had it. You're grounded, and that's final."

Tremendously distraught, she was on the verge of tears. "But dad, I can't just stay here! You've kept me cooped up here my entire life! I've been out on my own before, and I'm fine! I was helping Eltsha out - nobody's paying for her food!"

Kenzon continued firmly, "It's for your own safety, Katie. If someone's trying to kill you, and not even *Division Three's* mall is safe, then Shallowroot is a deathtrap!"

"But dad -"

He interrupted her, fuming. "I'm going to hire a pair of guards and station them outside the door for your protection. I've already hired a private investigator. Until we catch and deal with these thugs, you're staying home, end of discussion." With that, he turned and stormed away.

My friend turned to me quietly, hanging her head. "I'm sorry stuff like this keeps happening," she apologized dejectedly. After a minute, an ironic smile twitched at the corner of her mouth. "This means I'll have to stay home and keep you company, though, so you won't have to be by yourself."

"*I'm* sorry, Katie..." I said, shaking my head quickly. "It's not your fault at all. He shouldn't act this way towards you, and I wouldn't need to keep you here... I'd be okay by myself."

"Oh, hush," she said playfully, thinking better of giving me a friendly punch. "You'd be bored as anything, and you know it. C'mon, let's get you to your room so we can prop your leg up."

~~~

The next two weeks were the quietest I'd had in a long, long time. It was a blessing in some ways, but in others, it was a curse... I didn't like laying still. Even while cooped up in Mr Frog's laboratory, I'd at least been able to get up and walk around. At the same time, my being idle didn't mean nothing ever happened.

As soon as he found out I was injured, Reudh started to visit me. He didn't come every day, even though I'm sure he wanted to... he would spend a couple hours with me, just listening or talking, or doing whatever else I felt like. It felt relieving to talk to a guy that wouldn't judge you, or try to "fix" your problems... he just listened, and that's what I really wanted. We became good



friends during those weeks, far better than we ever would've become at Spearbreakers. I kept thinking he'd eventually "figure out" I was an elf and go away, but he never did.

Trebor came once every day or two, too - not to visit me, though. In fact, he only ever once came into my room and said hello... No, he actually seemed to *like* the fact that Katie had to stay home, in a way. He even told her so, saying it meant she wouldn't have to come over to his place to work on the memoirs, and explaining that his family wouldn't like her much. While Kenzon was away at work, he and Katie would work on their memoirs in the sitting room, and she was always careful to leave my door open so I could hear them. Katie would often cry at first, but the longer they worked, the more Katie was able to come to terms with what had happened. They were going to write everything out, starting with the beginning of their service, and finishing with the final battle of 48D. I wanted a copy of the finished work, so I could paste bits of it into my journal... something I've since done a number of entries back.

As to my journal, it sat on the bedside table those two weeks. It's amazing how much you can write when you don't really have anything else to do... it only took a few days to get past where I'd left Spearbreakers, and past my travels on the bloodplains. Then I got to 48D... and I stopped. I didn't want to write about it, really... especially not considering how I was part of the reason they were dead. It was too soon.

I wasn't bored for long. Katie came to the rescue, just as she always did, and brought me a few of her books. There was a book about vampires I remember in particular... it was my favorite. Although I know "real" vampires - the vampires Parasol and Ballpoint created - aren't anything like they were in the book, it was so chilling, and I ate it up, hating when it ended. Katie brought me other books of hers, and I read those, too. I'd never actually had access to books like that before, and it made the inconvenience of a sprained ankle bearable.

Her father came to visit me once after his daughter had fallen asleep... I was reading with my lamp on, slumped against the headboard, a blanket covering my chest and legs. My injured ankle was propped up on a stack of pillows, just like it always was.

"Vanya..." he called quietly, knocking on the open door.

Frowning, I put my book aside. "Mr. Kenzon? Is something wrong?" I asked. It was unusual for me to visit... he usually chose to ignore me.

"I wanted to ask you a few questions relating to Katie and the attack," he explained, coming into the room. "She won't talk to me about it, beyond telling me you saved her life."

With a sigh, I pulled myself upright to where I could sit. "She doesn't like that you keep her under lock and key," I said pointedly, folding my hands atop the covers. "She's not sick or injured, like me. She's been here all her life, and she wants to leave."

My comments made him defensive. "I always let her have girls over, and I let her join the Parasol Jetpacking Association after they put the new safeguards in place," he listed off. "I'm not 'keeping her under lock and key'. She's never been isolated."

"Did you ever take her anywhere else?" I asked softly. "Did she ever go offworld, or travel on a boat, like the ones you love so much?" I asked, gesturing towards the sitting room with a finger.

Kenzon was beginning to grow frustrated. "I'm not here to talk about my parenting abilities, Vanya," he said, making the name sound like an insult. I reddened... it reminded me of my elven heritage, which I think is what he'd intended. "No, I'm here to ask about the attack, so help me out. What weapons did they use?"

I frowned at the change of subject, and then looked to the side, trying to remember. "Missiles

of some kind," I said slowly, "and... I think a sniper rifle, but they weren't very accurate with it. Then a machine gun, which *was* accurate... and when Katie put up her shield, they launched some kind of fire-filled grenade or something at her, and it hit dead-on."

As I spoke, Kenzon counted on his fingers. "Four people, then," he guessed.

"No..." I said, and stopped. "Well, I don't *think* there were four... none of them fired at the same time, and they should have."

Kenzon nodded briefly in agreement, his brow furrowed in thought as he pinched his clean-shaven chin. He began to pace, staring at the floor. "You're right, of course. They would use everything at once, and each would be skilled if it was part of a group. The sniper rifle inaccuracy stands out on its own. Therefore... I feel it safe to assume they/he had an RPG Launcher, a REACH railgun with AI-assisted targeting, and a one-shot guided napalm cannon..." He frowned, disappointed. "...All of those are rather common."

I was slightly impressed. "Is it all that simple? You can figure all of that out so quickly?"

He lifted his head towards me for a moment, slowing his pacing. "I'm a PWI - a Private Weapons Instructor. It's my *job*. I can operate all of those, and many more, but *I'm* almost 50, and I've been using them my entire life." With a sigh, he folded his arms, leaning against a wall as his puzzled gaze fell to the floor. "It just doesn't make sense..." he mumbled, almost to himself. "Why would someone want to kill Katie? She's never hurt anyone. I don't usually let her expose herself, and I don't have anyone who would try to kill her to get at me, either... It's just not right. We're missing *something*, and if I could just figure out what it is..." His eyes wandered as he spoke, and as they lighted on me, he stopped abruptly and straightened. He'd forgotten I was listening. With a brief nod, he started towards the door. "Thanks for your help, Vanya."

"Goodnight, Mr. Kenzon," I said quietly after him, picking my book back up.

"And, um..."

Looking back up, I saw his head poking around the doorframe. "Yes?" I asked.

Kenzon hesitated visibly, seeming unable to meet my eyes. "As a thank-you for 'saving' Katie's life, I should offer you free training... After your leg improves, of course..."

"Ankle," I corrected him.

"Right."

He wasn't attempting to hide how uncomfortable he was with it, and I felt compelled to ask, "Why are you offering this to me?"

"Well, look, Vanya... I offered it to Reudh, and it isn't in my best interests to be rude to you, seeing as you're clearly capable of keeping my daughter safe from whoever's after her..." he explained haltingly, his annoyance steadily increasing. "Just... do you want it or not?"

With a sigh, I said, "Yes, I'll take it." I had the feeling he wasn't really going to train me, anyway, but right then I was too tired to care.

"Okay, great. Goodnight." Giving me a forced smile, he left the room, and that was the last time I saw him that week.

Being stuck at home wasn't boring at all. Well, at least... not for me.



## Chapter 56: The Moral Line

*Vanya's journal continues in its now-familiar flowing, elven script. She seems less comfortable with using it, you've noticed - there are many instances where her circumflexes and diphthongs are improperly used. It's almost as if she never fully learned to write her own language, and*

*you're curious as to why she's using it in the first place... unless it's to instill a sense of privacy within her mind. It almost makes sense, in a way... Vanya was never used to living around people she didn't know, and you're quite sure she hadn't yet learned to trust Scheck Kenzon, Katie's father.*

"Winteos, Deovaang Liagen!" Katie shouted, and feathery, ethereal wings sprouted from her shoulders.

"Armok, Deovaang Liagen!" I called out after her.

Nothing happened.

Katie was standing across from me in the sitting room, trying unsuccessfully to teach me the "guiding wings" spell for the third day in a row. Mr Kenzon was at work as usual, and we were home alone. My friend had taken excellent care of me during my four bedridden weeks, helping me exercise my ankle as it healed, and supporting me as I learned to walk again. I still hadn't quite managed to regain my full mobility, and though I was finally able to walk without crutches, I knew it would still be some time before I regained the grace or agility I'd demonstrated in my tumultuous battles with Mr Frog and Salaia. The "attack", as Katie and I had taken to calling it, had happened two months before, and I'd out of bed for three quiet weeks. Katie didn't want me to leave the apartment until I could safely walk around without crutches, and after hours and hours of special exercises, we were just nearing that point. It seems that no matter how advanced your technology is, there can never be an instant cure for everything.

As soon as he'd learned of the attack, Reudh had started visiting me regularly. I could count on his visit three times a week, and he proved as reliable and trustworthy as a waterwheel. At first, I wasn't too fond of the idea of him coming over, but he surprised me the first few days by simply keeping me silent company. He didn't ask anything of me, and gradually, I opened up to him. Trusting men is difficult for me to do... but he was so understanding, thoughtful, and encouraging that he became an exception. Before I was even off my crutches, I considered him a true friend.

My "new" friend, Katie, I'd known for a little over two months by that time. She was gradually getting better, but her nightmares kept coming back, refusing to leave her alone. Sometimes she would wake up screaming "Saemin!" in such a distressed, heartbroken tone that it brought tears to my eyes. I wanted to make things easier on her, but all I could do was let her know I cared. The fact that she was still helping Trebor with the memoirs only brought back buried memories.

He still came over from time to time. He and Katie disagreed on a lot of things, but they were pretty far into their book... Unlike writers on Everoc, they didn't use paper - they simply spoke it into their PEAs, editing it verbally as they went along. Somehow, Trebor managed to hook their PEAs to the viewer in the sitting room, and on occasion, I would come and watch them, sitting in the white chair in the corner while I exercised my ankle. It was interesting, but not nearly as interesting as what was happening that eighth week...

I was studying magic again. Katie wanted to teach me Guiding Wings, and I wanted to learn it, even if there was no way I'd ever use it... mainly because of how beautiful it looked.

Unfortunately, it seems that how quickly I learned Vendi Scild at the beginning was just "beginner's luck." I'd been working on Guiding Wings for such a long time, and I hadn't gotten anywhere. Katie made it look so easy, and I couldn't figure out where I was making my mistakes.

"Let's take a break," Katie sighed, letting her wings dissolve into nothingness as she plopped

down on one of the three green, backless sofas. "It didn't take *me* too long to learn it, so I don't see how why you'd be having trouble," she told me quietly, shaking her head in thought.

Disheartened, I sat down on the sofa across from her. "Maybe I'm just not capable of learning it..."

"You *can* learn it," she insisted, her brow furrowed with disappointment. "You *will* learn it. It's just that while I like teaching, I'm not the best teacher."

"How do you know?" I asked softly, leaning down to massage my ankle.

She was quiet for a moment. "You learned the deflection spell, so it shouldn't be too hard for you to learn this one... especially when it's the one I'm best at."

"I don't know," I said with a discouraged sigh. "Maybe we should just forget it and do something else."

My friend crossed her arms. "No. I'm *going* to teach it to you. "

"Trebor will be here soon," I reminded her, sitting up and brushing the hair out of my face.

"We can't spend much longer practicing."

"No, but wouldn't you like to be able to show it to him by the time he gets here?"

I rolled my eyes, smirking. "You *know* he doesn't like me."

"So? I know you won't admit to it, but *you* like *him*," she said, raising an eyebrow knowingly and hiding a smile. "He's 23, only two years older than you. He's handsome, smart, and funny. Who *wouldn't* like him?"

"Please, let's not start this again..." I groaned in vexation. I actually *didn't* like him... at least, not in that way. I merely wished he didn't hate me. For some reason, I feel compelled to try to be likable... possibly because of how I never had any friends while I was growing up. It was painful to know that Trebor loathe me so much. He never hid his animosity towards me, he just kept it in check. Now, in a way... I even wished he would call me "Hot Lips" again.

Katie continued her teasing, leaning forwards and speaking in mischievous, conspirational tones. "At least tell him how you feel. If he knows how much you love him, there's *no way* he'll deny you!"

Normally I would've laughed, but I was still too frustrated from my fruitless efforts. "Katie, maybe I could just go somewhere else while he's here..." I sighed, frowning.

She gave a laugh that ended abruptly in confusion as she considered what I'd said. "Like... go where??"

"I don't know..." I paused for a moment in thought. "I never visited Solnay like she offered."

This produced a reaction a little bigger than just a raised eyebrow. "*Solnay*?? Are you kidding?"

Awkwardly, I shook my head. "Not really..."

We sat there quietly, and after a few minutes I saw her trademark impish smile creep stealthily across her lips. "You really *don't* like him, do you..." At my irritated glance, it faded away just as quickly. "Sorry. Look, I'll give you my key, okay?" She jumped up from her seat, walking lightfootedly towards her room as she motioned me to follow.

"What?" I asked, confused. Somehow I thought she meant she had a key to wherever Solnay worked, but a minute later, I realized how wrong I was.

"It's so you don't have to wait for me to let you in," she explained, laying the keycard to Mr. Kenzon's apartment in my hand.

It felt wrong, and I frowned uncomfortably. "But... you trust me?? What if I gave the key to someone else, and they broke in?"

She laughed, giving me a quick one-armed, friendly hug. "You're so funny sometimes. Of

course I trust you, you're..." She hesitated. "You're *you*. I know you. We've spent last couple months living with each other, haven't we?"

"Won't your dad get angry?"

Katie's happiness dissipated like a snuffed candle. "If he does, that's his problem," she muttered, walking me to the door. "I trust you. Just have fun talking to Solnay, okay? And be careful with that ankle, I don't think it's completely done healing yet."

We heard a knocking at the door. Katie rushed forwards quickly, unlocking and opening it. As might be expected, it was Trebor, dressed in his usual slacks and polo shirt. "Am I interrupting something?" he asked, looking back and forth between Katie and me.

"Vanya was just leaving," Katie explained hurriedly, taking his hand and pulling him in the door.

Trebor seemed genuinely surprised. "Leaving?? If this is a bad time, I can come back some other day..." he offered. I didn't fail to catch the brief glare he sent in my direction.

"It's fine..." I said cautiously, taking a wide path around him. "I'll be back soon, Katie, okay?"

She nodded, stepping away from the dwarven med student and leaving the room with me. To the two guards positioned outside the door, she said, "This is Vanya. She's a friend, okay? Let her in when she comes back, got it?"

They seemed terribly bored. "Yeah, sure," one said, eyeing me with a suspicious glance that betrayed a sense of superiority. The other only readjusted the pistol in his holster, sighing almost inaudibly.

"Make sure you stay safe, Vanya," Katie said with a quick hug. For a minute, she remained outside with me, asking a few worried, last-minute questions as they popped into her mind. When she was done, she went back inside, already talking to Trebor as the door closed behind me.

It took me a minute to take it in: I was in Parasol, and I could go wherever I wanted. It was a sense of freedom I'd never truly felt before... and it felt wonderful. Still, even with this newfound freedom, I had absolutely no idea where I *could* go, or what I could do. Somehow, that didn't matter so much as the fact that I was *free*, and not bound to anyone else's wishes or desires... it put me in a good mood, helping clear away the frustration from my mind.

I'm certain my excited heart skipped a beat as I stood in Rubywood's shuttlecar lobby, the false, setting sun casting its long, warm rays through the clear tube before me. I didn't have to wait long before a car stopped at the platform with a whirr, a blue-carpeted ramp smoothly extending towards it from where I stood. Breathlessly, I stepped aboard and placed my hands on the console, immediately hearing the phantom-like voice: "*Please relax while we make the connection.*" Seconds later, "*Connection established*" intoned softly in my mind.

*Applied Sciences, where Solnay Hylcelon works*, I thought, and the car began to move.

So began the first shuttlecar trip I ever took by myself, and it was far from being the last.

I didn't think about it at the time... it only occurs to me as I think back on it now, a few months later: The girl that hid in the alleyway outside the hospital, so many years ago... the girl who'd called out that Talvi was awake, standing on tiptoe to peer in through a crack in the wall... the girl that used to be me... She would never have been so bold as to take a shuttlecar by herself, not even if her life depended on it. I've changed so much over the past four years... A lot of it is for the better, but still I wonder... Should I miss my old self?

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Humming as it slowed, the car turned off the main rails and down a side path on the right. It was dark outside the tube, and I was so far underwater that I couldn't even see the sun above the ocean surface. The car was well-lit, at least, the ringed lights illuminating the vehicle evenly as we passed through them. Farther to my right, I could make out the shape of a huge, metallic building, shaped like a cube. Hardly a minute passed before my vehicle came to a gentle stop outside a poorly-lit station that resembled Rubywood Apartments's. A metallic ramp of thin, overlapping plates slid outwards towards me with a series of clicks, and I heard in my head: *"Applied Sciences, Division 3, Unit 403. You may exit when ready."*

Taking my hands from the panel, I walked across the ramp, feeling a tingling sensation as I passed through the airshield. As soon as I'd set foot inside the building, the ramp clicked quickly back into place, and the shuttlecar accelerated away. Somehow, with it gone, I felt even more alone.

Lights flickered on around me, revealing a small, silver-walled room. The floor was a little scuffed, as if it'd seen moderate traffic, and been around for a long time.

"Welcome to Applied Sciences' Liquied-Cooled Unit 3-403-F96BTS, codename Cephalopod," a female's smoothly-modulated voice intoned, seemingly coming from speakers all around. It startled me so badly I almost tripped. "Identifying employee. Please remain still." I'm surprised I still remember the serial code, but I may have it wrong.

I swallowed nervously and complied, but my unspoken misgivings proved ill-founded.

"Vanya Carena, military grade classification," the voice spoke again. "Invitation granted by tier-three researcher, 'Solnay Hylcelon'. You may proceed."

To my right, I heard a sound like metal scraping against stone. Turning my head quickly, I saw a heavy door smoothly slide open, less than ten feet away.

"Would you like a tour?" the artificial speaker asked.

"No, thank you..." Without thinking, I gave a prompt response, despite my hesitant state as I peered through the doorway and down a long, white hallway.

There was a pause. "Would you like directions?"

I took a few timid steps towards the open door. "I'd like to visit Solnay Hylcelon, please," I requested, my voice small in comparison to the mighty structure I stood within.

A ten-foot blue line of laser light appeared on the floor in front of me, its brightness pulsing forwards within itself in little bursts. Something about the rhythmic pulsing seemed to draw me instinctively forwards... It was a signal that could be understood in any language: "Come this way."

So I began to walk. As I did, the line altered itself, projected from little motor-driven turrets on the ceiling that constantly adjusted themselves to where I stood, gracefully curving the line to follow the path I was to take.

Down the main hallway, through a door that opened for me, down another hallway and in through a door at one side, I followed the pulsing guide, watching the ground as I walked. Around and above me, I could hear the hum of machinery, the rat-a-tat of muffled machine guns, occasional bursts of electricity and tiny explosions. It was a giant collection of laboratories, cooled by the water surrounding it. It was science... It was elegance... It was Parasol.

And it was wrong.

On the way there, I stopped as I heard a voice just within one of the rooms I was passing.

Curious, I pulled my hair back and put my ear against the white-painted door.

"- don't think that, do you? Come on, you'll be fine. Just climb aboard and we'll start the experiment." It was a male's voice, and though a little high-pitched, it was definitely dwarven. I guessed it was a scientist.

There was silence for a moment, and I thought I could hear the voice of a teenage girl, whimpering in fear.

"Oh, quit whining," the researcher ordered crossly. "The last test subject only lost a few fingers. We put 'em back on and he was fine."

The "test subject" started crying audibly. "I want to go back home," I heard her sob. "Please, just let me go! I don't want to do this! I was in my house just a few seconds ago - I shouldn't even *be* here!!"

"Shut up and stand on the red 'X' like you're supposed to!" said the researcher. "Up the steps. *UP*... the steps. Good girl. Good girl..."

"*Please!* You can't hurt me!" the girl begged desperately, and the frightened tone in her voice made me bite my lip in empathy. "I haven't done anything wrong!! I don't even know where I am, why did you take me here??"

I heard a container slam shut violently, just inside the door. "Damn it, human, just do as you're told!" a third, exasperated voice spat. "You'll be in a lot less danger if you just calm down, and more importantly, we'll have a greater chance of getting accurate results. We'll let you go after we're done."

"But I want to go *now*!!" she shouted, her voice raising in pitch.

"Gods *damn* it!" the third voice cursed. "Jeb, see if you can calm her down. Actually, no, screw this. Let's just start the damned test already."

There was a loud crack, like a branch being broken, and then silence as the girl's terrified screams came abruptly to an end. I caught my breath, tears springing to my eyes as it slowly sank in. I listened in horror, not willing to believe what I'd just heard.

After a long pause, the first voice spoke. "I'd say that was a failure, Mack, what do you think?" There wasn't an ounce of emotion in his voice. "All right, drain the chamber of the mess and let's see what went wrong *this* time."

Whoever the test subject had been, she was dead... and it sounded like it'd been a very gruesome way to die. I could almost picture it in my mind: a teenage girl lying lifeless on the floor, a pool of blood spilling from her chest... It reminded me of the way Salaia died. I snapped. "You monsters!!" I screamed, pounding on the door. "She wanted you to *let her go*!! You had *no right* to keep her here!"

Without warning, a large hand clapped roughly over my mouth and an arm wrapped itself around my stomach, lifting me off my feet and hauling me away. Though I struggled uselessly to escape my assailant, I wasn't nearly strong enough.

My little adventure was over within half a minute; my captor dragged me across the hall, rudely forcing me into a chair as I got my first glimpse of him: an old, muscled dwarf with a beard streaked brown and gray. "What the hell is wrong with you?" he asked incredulously, straightening his whiskers. "Are you *trying* to get yourself taken?"

Too bewildered to respond, my eyes slowly scanned my surroundings. I was sitting in a chair, in a laboratory that looked remarkably like Mr Frog's, except the equipment didn't look hobbled-together, and there was a greater variety of heavy machinery. My chair was turned backwards from a table and facing towards the door, fifteen feet away.

In the hallway outside, I heard a muffled, "Damn it! Where'd she go?" followed by silence.

My kidnapper regained my attention by snapping his fingers in front of my face. "Hey. You. What's wrong with you? Are you daft?"

"Not *another* one, Golchek?" groned a woman's voice from behind me. Even without looking, I could detect a roll of the eyes. "You're no white knight, so you should stop acting like one."

Golchek's attention wandered for a moment. "Hush up, now, Daneerah. Of course another one. I don't usually find 'em in the hallways, though." He turned back to me, squinching his wrinkled eyes. "You're new here, obviously. You shouldn't go around poking your nose in places it oughtn't be."

"What? I... You..." I stammered, trying to figure out what was going on. "Why do you think I'm new?"

Golchek stepped back and gestured dramatically towards the blue laser-line of light on the floor, which was pulsing towards the doorway. "Doesn't take a genius," he muttered.

"They were *killing* someone," I protested, growing angry as I tried to stand. "They'll *keep* killing people if we don't stop them!"

Two hairy hands forced me back into the chair. "Don't I know it. There's nothing you or I could do, girl, so there's no sense in trying."

Slowly shaking my head in amazement, I whispered, "You don't even care..."

"Of course we do, honey," Daneerah corrected me from the other side of the room. Glancing over, I saw a middle-aged, dark-haired dwarf in a labcoat and safety goggles. She was crouched next to a countertop, measuring a dark liquid in a vial before she poured it into a machine. "It's not that we don't care, it's just that we can't *do* anything. It's how Parasol does things, and the government turns a blind eye - they don't even keep security cameras in laboratory buildings like this. They claim it's all for the sake of science. You didn't think we're so advanced because we sit around playing marbles all day, do you?"

I drew my eyebrows together, almost fuming. "But it's *wrong*!" The dead girl's screaming still echoed in my head.

"They don't see it that way," Golchek said gently. I turned back to him. "They just have a different idea of morality. The most me and Daneerah can do is try to save however many folks we can."

"It's more him than me," Daneerah interrupted. "I keep saying he's going to get us into trouble."

The dwarf mumbled something under his breath about probability. "Where are you going, anyway?" he asked, gesturing at the blue line again.

Closing my eyes, I mentally counted to ten, trying to calm myself. Finally, I answered, "To visit Solnay Hylcelon. Do you know where she is?"

Golchek shook his head. "Never heard of her. I suggest you follow... the..." his voice trailed off, and my eyes followed his to the ground. "Well, that's... different..."

The guiding line wasn't a line anymore... the lasers were flashing around on the floor faster than my eye could follow, forming a very clear, if faded, image. It was a face, bearing an empathetic, sorrowful expression, and I recognized it immediately.

It was Joseph.



Vanya's Journals, Chapter 57

You've taken a "coffee" break from reading, and find yourself again at the little table in Vanya's tomb, hidden deep in the stone beneath Parasol's cities. You feel you've waited more than long

enough, and press the button to record your voice as you begin to translate from Vanya's elven script. If your memory serves you, you left off shortly after Vanya had rarely escaped being used in an experiment, just before she saw Joseph's face traced in laserlight upon the floor. You're uncertain of the date, but you believe it to be partway through Splint's third reign at Spearbreakers.

My mind was awirl.

He knew where I was. He *always* knew where I was. It didn't seem to matter whether I was in a fortress, a trench, or under the oceans of an artificial world, he always knew. As his blue-lined face flickered on the white-tiled floor, I began to realize just how far his reach extended into Parasol. I knew he could've killed me at any point - he could've destroyed my shuttlecar himself, or forced an elevator to fall... but something kept him back.

I was forced to wonder: Why does Joseph even want me? Why did he bother keeping me around? I wasn't powerful, and I couldn't do anything to help him. I knew things about him that most people didn't... wouldn't he want to *kill me*?

Eventually I thought I figured it out. He didn't want me for *me*. He wanted me because of my connections to Mr Frog and Spearbreakers. I was a bargaining chip... he knew that the Mr Frog of Spearbreakers was starting to change, and he wanted to make sure he had something against it.

Joseph had said Parasol was "devoid of any sense of morality"... and he was right. I was starting to see Parasol as cruel and uncaring... they allowed their employees to snatch innocent people from their home to serve as guinea pigs in the name of science. Still, I didn't *want* to believe he was right. Every fiber of my being told me that Joseph was a bad person. After all, he'd tried to kill me once... but was Parasol even worse than him?

It was Ballpoint's fault that the Holistic Spawn could infect dwarves and evolve, but Parasol was just as bad... I'd always thought I was fighting on the "good side", but what do you do when every side is revealed to be wrong?

At the time, I tried to console myself with the fact that Parasol wasn't proud of what they did, if I'd never heard of these experiments before... I thought that maybe it was just a fluke, or a few rogue researchers taking things into their own hands. Whether that was true or not, my thoughts were in a wild disarray as the face abruptly scattered, rearranging the laser points into a blue line of light, pulsing towards the door.

"That was bizarre... Never seen that happen before," Golchek whispered, fingering his beard. Louder, he called, "Did you see that, Daneerah?"

I was still too stunned to turn around, but heard her say in disinterest, "See what, Golchek..."

The dwarf said nothing, only staring at the floor in puzzlement. "He had a kind face..." Without warning, he spun towards me so quickly that I was startled. "Do you know him? Who was he?"

"I don't know," I lied. "I don't know who he is."

"Hmm... Strange," he muttered, gazing at the pulsating lasers. A moment later, he spun back to face me. "All right, it's probably safe out there now. Just follow the line to wherever you're going. Solnay, was it?"

I nodded silently, staring blankly at the line.

"Get going then," he urged. "Don't talk to anyone, and don't put your ear to any more doors."

And so I left, headed towards my destination as the doors to Golchek's lab hissed shut behind me. It wasn't until later that I realized I'd forgotten to thank him.

"Aw, I'm so happy to see you, sweetie!" Solnay's warm, clammy hands grasped mine as she greeted me in the doorway, her blonde hair tied up under a hairnet. She was wearing safety goggles and a labcoat just like the one she'd been wearing when I'd first seen her. "I don't usually get visitors," she added as I studied her. Somehow, that didn't surprise me too much.

Feeling a little awkward, I gently pulled my hands away from her, peering past her chubby form and into her laboratory. "It's good to see you again," I said politely, and asked, "What do you do here?"

She laughed nasally. "Come inside and see!"

It looked a lot different from Golchek's laboratory... instead of vials and test tubes, the walls were lined with different types of robotic machinery. Glass display cases stood in neat array at one side of the room, each containing strange gadgetry... It didn't look overly interesting at first glance, until I noticed the ceiling. There was a loose black netting twenty feet up in the air, stretched between all four walls, and the room above that seemed to extend all the way to the roof of the building. I didn't know how to ask about it without making myself seem stupid, though, so I thought it might be best that I stay quiet and wait until she told me about everything.

"You have a nice laboratory..." I ventured carefully.

"It's better than the one I had at the university by a *lot*," she laughed, putting extra emphasis on her words as she hurried past me towards the countertops in the middle of the room. "You have *no* idea. Let me show you what I'm working on right now!"

Stepping farther into the room, I heard the door shut softly behind me with a swish. "Do you work here alone?" I asked curiously.

"No, but you caught me during their lunch break. I know Salamar would *love* to meet you, sweetie. He looks about your age! *Just* out of college." She seemed rather pleased with herself for making the comparison, but quickly diverted her thoughts towards her work.

Though I *really* didn't like the idea of her acting as a matchmaker, I didn't have long to think about it.

"Here!" Solnay said, using a pair of electric tongs to slide a dull, yellowish glob about the size of a frog out of a jar. "Catch this!"

She tossed it so quickly I barely had time to react as it flew forwards, but she'd aimed it well, and I caught it in my hands. "What is this?" I asked curiously, looking it over. It acted like putty; it was thick and pliable without being moist, which was something I found intriguing.

Solnay said with a pleased smile, "Experiment with it. What do you think?"

Unfortunately, I found that once I'd starting tugging at it, it wouldn't come undone. The more I tried to pull it off my fingers, the more it seemed to gum them up, until my hands were hopelessly lost in a sticky mess that quickly became harder and harder to manipulate until finally, I was trapped as firmly as if I'd been handcuffed. Worse, I'd somehow gotten it attached to my skirt, and I stopped moving for fear it might rip the fabric. "What is this?? Help me get it off!" I cried out, my voice raising in pitch as I started to panic. It seemed inescapable, and my fingers were starting to pop.

"Oh, calm down, sweetie," Solnay cooed, walking over to me calmly with her tongs. "It's not going to kill you." When she started to pry it away, I felt a little buzz of electricity crawl across my skin, and the sticky substance released itself, dangling loosely as she held it in the air and used her hand to wrap it into a loose wad. It wasn't sticky anymore at all.

"What is it?" I asked, turning my hands over as I looked at them, still a bit shaken by the experiment.

She smiled and started to walk back towards the counter with it, explaining, "It's 'EDAP.' That's 'Electrically Deactivated Adhesive Putty.' I've been designing it for military use. It's a lot of fun, isn't it?"

"Not really..." I admitted apologetically.

She only laughed, shoving it back into its jar a bit forcefully. "Aw, I don't hold it against you. Though, Vanya, you really shouldn't go sticking it to your skirt." She smirked a little, and then picked a couple more things, bringing them to me. "These are my *favorites*. Look at them closely, sweetie, but don't squeeze them!" she warned. "You'll get hurt if you do."

I didn't want to be unprepared this time. "What do they do?" I asked as she placed them in my palms.

"Well, *look* at them," she urged. "They're like little portals you can hold on your hand, see?"

They were, in a way... little black, solid-backed portals, attached to straps that looked very much like they could be adjusted to fit on your hand. Their sides apparently weren't finished, and looked kind of hobbled-together, with exposed metal wiring and thin transparent plastic covering loose metal strips. "What do they do?"

It was obvious she'd been hoping I would ask that very question. "Come and see!" Solnay said, beaming.

We walked over to a ladder at one corner of the room, that led up to the net draped above us. When we got there, she motioned for me to give them to her as she made what Mr Frog would probably call meaningless chatter. "Salamar and I keep arguing over the name. He's such a dear. I want to call them VPTs, for Variable Portal Thrusters." She strapped one of the bulky devices over the back of her right hand, and then started with the other on her left. "Doesn't 'VPT' sound a lot better than 'FPT?'" she laughed nasally, watching me for approval.

I just nodded. I didn't feel either one was better, really.

"The more you squeeze them, the wider the portals open, and on the other side there's an eternal motion thruster," she explained eagerly as she hauled her chubby frame up the ladder. "It sounds easy, you know, but it's all *rocket* science!" With a little effort, she climbed out onto a little platform just above the netting. Peering through it, I saw her flick her wrists, and the tiny portals seemed to flip to the other side of her hand. Then, there was a hiss of air and fire, and a flash of light. I blinked instinctively, and when I looked back, Solnay was hovering at least thirty feet above the net, far, far above me.

"Isn't it amazing, Vanya?" Solnay cried out blissfully. "I can't imagine why more people don't visit me more often!"

The rest of the day was interesting. Solnay wanted me to test out the VPTs myself, but when I told her I didn't want to, she settled on showing me practically everything else, all amidst a never-ending stream of grating, nasally chatter. Even despite that last, it was fun... what stuck with me most was the fact that she didn't use test subjects, and yet she was still able to invent so many useful things. You don't have to sacrifice people in order to make great things in the name of science, and Solnay's work was proof of it.

I eventually got up the courage to ask about her relationship with Jonah... and though she seemed somewhat pained, she told me the story. They'd met in the military during a war that had taken place twenty years before I was born. After their duty was over, they got married, but Solnay was drafted back a decade later as part of a reserve crew. Before long, Ballpoint had captured her squad, and though she didn't want to talk about it, I could tell it'd been a mortifying

ordeal. By the time she managed to break out, Jonah had joined the military himself in hopes of finding her again... and she found out too late.

It's strange, sometimes, the pain a smile can mask. I never quite thought of Solnay the same way again, and we became friends that day, each sharing the loss of one dearly loved. It bothered me, though... The night of 48D's battle, Jonah had said he'd wanted to tell me something... but he never got the chance to tell me.

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It was late evening of the same day, and I felt exhausted, but peaceful. I'd taken the shuttlecar from Solnay's laboratory to Rubywood Apartments; I'd looked in awe at the great Parasol city stretching out before me, the city lights shining brightly under an all-black, starless sky. It was artificial, yes... but that didn't make it any less amazing. I realized then why I'd never really guessed that the Mr Frog at Spearbreakers was "just a clone"... It's because he *wasn't* "just a clone". He was *every bit* as real as the "real" one. It was just like that night he'd tried to calm me down by showing me the stars, and I'd seen all the beauty of Spearbreakers' towers, bastions, and courtyards... Something doesn't have to be natural, or even naturally created, for it to be beautiful. Hewn stone is every bit as beautiful as trees, and with care, it can be made to look even better. The same can be said of people... or even entire planets. Despite its evils, Parasol had a sort of magic all its own.

Outside the door of Mr. Kenzon's apartment, I stopped, hesitantly eyeing the two guards he'd hired as a group of people brushed behind me on their way into the elevator. I didn't *want* to go back inside. I knew it was late, and that I'd probably miss supper, but that feeling of freedom just felt too precious to give up so soon. I wanted to go see the world. There was a fire in my heart, a thirst that couldn't be quenched... a desire for adventure. I'd had adventures all my life, even if I hadn't wanted them... and today had been another. The fact was, that now, I simply never wanted it to end.

Unfortunately, as imaginative and adventurous as I might be, I'm not very impulsive. Sighing with disappointment, I stepped forwards, and after unlocking the apartment door with Katie's keycard, I went inside.

"So you made it back in one piece," Kenzon's voice called out as I entered the room. "I'm mildly impressed." He was sitting where he always did after work - in his green chair, reading a PEA screen with the televiewer turned on, flashing images in front of us.

I closed the door and locked it. "I went to visit someone," I explained, remembering only too late that I was holding a keycard I wasn't exactly supposed to have. Without thinking, I tried to hide it.

He noticed immediately. "Nope, what's that you have? Bring it here," he ordered. When I hesitated, he added a firm, "Now."

Swallowing nervously, I complied, glancing away from his oddly triumphant grin as I held it out.

"It's Katie's keycard, isn't it? Why would she give it to you?" he asked. He didn't seem angry, which surprised me. It felt like a trap.

"She wanted me to be able to get back inside," I said cautiously. About thirty seconds passed, as he flipped it over in his fingers, staring at it in deep thought. "Are you upset?" I asked, biting my lip with worry.

He raised an eyebrow and handed it back to me with an easy air. "Not at all. I'll get you one of your own made tomorrow, so you don't have to use my daughter's," he replied smoothly, and then turned back to his televiewer program.

Really, I felt a little ridiculous... I'd been so worried he'd get angry or something like he did towards Katie so often. I felt sure if it had been her, instead of me, he would've started a yelling match, so it didn't seem right that he would let me off the hook... But at the same time, I didn't want to tempt fate or push my luck. I left him, heading towards the kitchen, as I could smell Katie's cooking coming from within.

She was standing at the countertop, shuffling a frying pan of meat and vegetables with a pancake flipper. There were three other steaming pots sitting beside it, too.

"Katie?" I asked, frowning with discomfort. It seemed a bad subject to bring up, somehow. "Is everything okay with your dad?"

She quickly turned her head towards me, asking worriedly, "Wrong? What's he doing?"

"Nothing!" I hurried to clarify. The worried look on her face quickly disappeared, but not before I realized she was worried about his safety. "He's just... not angry. He found out about the keycard."

Nodding absently, Katie turned back to the food she was cooking and sprinkled some black pepper onto it. "I figured he would. I thought he might be angry, but I wasn't sure..."

"He offered to make me a card of my own," I said, narrowing my eyes pointedly. "Something isn't right."

To my surprise, she actually laughed. "He just *trusts* you. He has a tendency to trust girls more than he does guys for some reason. I don't know what it is. Besides, you're a special case, like I told you before." With a happy smile, she twirled about on her way to the nearest cabinets, opening them and pulling out a few plates. "C'mon, let's eat! I've been experimenting with the seasonings!"

I got an uneasy feeling, despite her reassurances. Something didn't add up. I felt *sure* Kenzon should've gotten angry about the keycard, and that Katie should've been more worried than she was... I decided to try to figure it all out myself.

"Did you enjoy Trebor being over here today?" I asked, trying to work my way into asking a more serious question.

Her reaction was unprecedented: she blushed. Not only did she blush, but she blushed deeply. She stopped dishing out the food and covered her face with her hands in embarrassment, looking at me through the corner of her eye. After an uncomfortable pause, she hissed defensively, "It's not what you think!"

"You *like* him!?" I gasped, dumbfounded. I hadn't expected it at all. Her eyes widened and she shook her hands about to try to silence me, mouthing to be quiet. I went on anyway. "Katie, he's six years older than you!"

"I do *not* like him!" she protested in a whisper, putting a frantic finger to my lips and glancing towards the living room, where Kenzon was still sitting. "And he's only *five* years older! I turn 18 in a month."

"So *that's* why you wanted to let me leave... so you'd have more time alone with him..." I whispered, matching her volume. It all seemed so clear.

She blushed again, even as the color was just beginning to fade from her cheeks. "It's not like that!" she said quietly. "He's just... he's so much happier when you're not around, Vanya, I..." At my downcast expression, she hastened to add, "I didn't mean it that way!"

"He hates me," I said softly, mulling it over. "I already knew he didn't like me, but I didn't

realize he hated me that much."

Her pretty face wrung itself into a sorrowful expression. "I'm sorry, Vanya... But really, it's all right, isn't it? You don't like him anyway, right? You like Urist."

Urist's name pushed everything else from my mind, and I rolled my eyes. "I don't know..." I muttered, and then changed the subject. "So, do you think he likes you back?"

A smile broke across her face, and she laughed quietly. "I don't know yet, but I think he might," she whispered.

"Excuse me?" Kenzon's loud, unamused voice interrupted us from the doorway, and we spun around, shock apparent on our faces. "What are you two talking about in here? You're giggling like a couple of schoolgirls."

"Girl stuff," Katie said quickly, as if it was a practiced response.

Her father nodded, either satisfied or not simply caring to know. "Are we eating, or are we just going to stand around talking?"

I suppose it was something I could've expected, really... if you survive a dangerous situation with someone, and then go on to spend a lot of time with them, a wayward heart is bound to fall in love. After all, that's what happened with Urist and me... and though I was fighting it, it was starting to happen with Reudh.



### **Vanya's Journals, Chapter 58: False Freedom**

*This is a standard mass-produced Parasol journal, dated from hundreds of years ago. The only thing that separates it from other **journals** is the gold star on the cover and the elven script found within. It's possible Vanya chose to write it in elventongue so that Kenzon, and other potentially untrustworthy people, wouldn't read it, but that remains to be seen.*

I was free - I could go wherever I wanted, do whatever I wanted, and nothing could hold me back. At the same time, I was trapped. No matter where I went, the knowledge that Joseph always knew where I was could never leave my mind. Maybe more importantly, I couldn't leave Parasol... and it didn't seem I would ever be able to. Even when I tried to leave, I was blocked by one barrier after another.

Over the next month, I found myself exploring as much of Parasol's third division as I could. I hated their policies, but their people made it all worthwhile. Yes, some of the dwarves were rude... but many were so kind and thoughtful, it reminded me of Spearbreakers. It felt so good to walk freely among them... something that, as an elf, I'd never been able to do before. I was socializing with complete strangers... I was coming out of my shell. It was terrifying, but at the same time... it was wonderful. Sometimes I would visit Solnay again, and she would show me things like instantly-drying paint, or try unsuccessfully to set me up for a date with her never-present assistant, Gareth. Other days I would simply wander, going wherever I felt like, looking at things I'd never seen before and talking to new people... and those days were my favorites.

One Wednesday afternoon, I left Katie with Trebor and boarded a shuttlecar, starting it down the tube and trying to surprise myself. It was a game of mine: I'd let my mind wander as it so often wanted to, and I'd see where I ended up. You don't even have to think of a destination for it to take you somewhere... it just takes you wherever you *want* to go. Unfortunately, I did it so often that it was almost becoming a habit.

After a while, the vehicle came to a stop at a crowded underwater docking station, and I

hopped out, flexing my ankle a little. It felt better, and I felt a little tempted to dance a little, just because I could... but I didn't want to attract the hostile stares of the dwarves around me. Dancing is something dwarves shun as elven - their bodies are too stout for gracefulness. Instead, I left, taking the only path available: a long, narrow corridor with glass walls.

A few minutes later, I found myself in Division 3's lobby... It looked the same as it had two months before, when I'd first arrived, cowering in the shadows in fear of meeting the reporters.

Against the far wall, the gleaming megaportal beckoned temptingly, and I followed it forwards quietly, my feet guiding me to the desk. I didn't want to leave Reudh behind at Parasol, especially not with how kind he'd been to me, but I was homesick, and I wanted so badly to go home... even if just for a little while.

As I approached, the receptionist - a handsome, skinny dwarf a few years older than me - eyed me curiously. He actually reminded me a little of my old friend, John, until he started talking. "May I help you?" he asked mechanically.

Smiling awkwardly, I leaned forwards and folded my arms on the chest-high counter, looking down at him and trying to make a good first impression. "I'd like to use the portal," I said carefully, trying to keep my voice businesslike as I eyed his nametag: Shaun Toborobok.

Shaun cocked an eyebrow and smirked in amusement, pointing a thumb over his shoulder at the portal. "You're aware of the cost, aren't you? This isn't one of your regular transit portals. This is the *big* stuff, now. These don't transport single people except in emergencies, and even then, you have to have a pass."

My face fell, the smile gone in an instant. "Cost?" I echoed.

Nodding apologetically at me, he said, "Guess you're not taking a trip... Sorry about that." Then, he looked down, tapping at a computer pad under the countertop. "Vanya Carena, right? Former Sleeper? Where were you trying to go?" he asked lightheartedly, leaning back in his chair.

I hesitated before replying... he seemed pretty friendly, really, almost as if he welcomed the opportunity for conversation, or maybe pitied me... it eased my discomfort, but I knew it was against multiversal law for me to even *be* there. "I'm from Everoc," I told him quietly, my gaze straying from his face.

"Ohhhhhh," he breathed, as if everything suddenly made sense. Leaning towards me, he whispered, "You're a native, then, aren't you?"

I swallowed, frowning. "I am... I know I'm not supposed to be here, but..."

"No, no!" Shaun hurried to reassure me. "It's all right! I just didn't know we had any Sleepers there, that's all. It's okay. Really, I won't tell anyone." He glanced downwards and started tapping at his pad again. "You miss your family?"

My frown twisted up at a corner. "I don't have a family... not anymore, anyway. I just wanted to visit my home, that's all... I'm just a little homesick."

"Yeah, I hear you," the dwarf replied smoothly, nodding. His eyes remained glued to his computer's screen. "My little brother used to get homesick, too. It can be a pretty powerful feeling. Where did you live?"

"A dwarven fortress... Spearbreakers."

He reacted to it as if I'd just committed treason. His eyes widened to saucers, and he half-stood, glancing around quickly as he hissed at me in disbelief, "Spearbreakers?? Goddamn, are you serious??"

I felt uncomfortable, but gave a slow, if hesitant, nod.

Shaking his head in shock, he sank back to his seat, scratching his young beard with a hand over his chin. "Holy shit," he muttered, swearing. "Holy *shit*."

I began to grow worried.

The receptionist looked up at me with an empathetic frown. "I am so, so sorry."

"Um... did something happen to it?" I asked fearfully. It had been over a year since I'd been there last, and so much can happen in a year... at the time, I expected him to say it had fallen to the armies of Holistic Spawn.

Fortunately, he quickly shook his head. "No, it's just... Spearbreakers is why we're *here*." He waved his hands around meaningfully to symbolize Parasol. "It's... The HS-2, the Spawn - they cluster there as an affront to the big god in Everoc's universe. It's... um..." He paused and looked downwards, snapping his fingers while trying to remember.

"Armok?" I offered, confused.

Pointing a finger at me, he nodded. "Yes! Exactly. If I understand right, Spearbreakers is in the middle of it all, and it makes things difficult for our soldiers. We're supposed to keep the backwards natives ignorant of us, see, and -" He stopped awkwardly as he realized what he was saying. Frowning, he offered, "Sorry, I'm not meaning to imply that you're... um..."

I found him a little funny. "It's okay," I assured him.

He smirked at himself, though a bit sheepishly, as he leaned forwards, keeping himself upright with his hands against the countertop. "Tell you what. You bring me 500 credits for the trip, and I'll get a guy to forge a pass for you." At my dismayed expression, he grimaced and apologized, "I'm sorry - it's the best I can do. Opening that portal isn't cheap."

"No, it's okay," I assured him gratefully, though disappointed. "Thank you anyway."

With a slight nod, he answered, "Any time. Only wish I could do more. I'll see you around, Vanya."

And I left. Halfway back across the room to the shuttlecar port, as I crossed over the magma-and-marble Parasol logo, I glanced over my shoulder and saw him looking back at me, though he turned away quickly. I was a little worried he might report me.

Somehow, I decided, I *would* get back home. I didn't care if it was five hundred credits or five thousand... Someday, I would get back to Spearbreakers. If not for Urist, then I would do it for myself. I'd gotten over being homesick an entire year before... but that didn't mean I still missed the place I considered home.

Back on a shuttlecar, I spoke my destination in my mind: *Scheck Kenzon's Weapons Training*. The shuttlecar began to move, and minutes later I was flying through the ring-lit underwater tubes, headed towards the underground portion of Parasol's Third Division.

I was already sure of what was going to happen. Even though it was Wednesday - the day Mr. Kenzon had told me he would teach me - I'd leave without any training, just like always. It's hard for people to gain my trust, and he certainly wasn't doing a very good job of it. I really think the only reason he told me he would teach me was to keep me around Katie, because he thought I could keep her safe. His receptionist, Jade, would tell me sympathetically that he wasn't in that day, or that he had an emergency meeting with a few clients, or that he was being paid overtime for something and I'd have to come back later. This time was no different.

The shuttlecar slowed to a gentle halt beside the underground, marble entryway, and I hopped off it quickly, running down the ramp even as it finished extending. There was a kind of excitement to it, in a way... before it attached firmly to the vehicle, it would shake unsteadily under your feet. If you didn't keep a light step as you walked, it'd tip you off, and you'd never



make it to the other side.

After the shuttlecar left, leaving me alone in an empty lobby, I walked over to the receptionist's desk, where a young brunette human sat working, her hair tied up in a bun as she studied the books and lists laid out before her. If Katie's guesses was to be believed, she and Kenzon were actually dating... but it was hard to tell. I never saw the two of them in the same room, and it's hard to imagine them together at all - she's nothing like him.

"Miss Jade?" I asked, alerting her to my presence. "I'm here for weapons training with Mr. Kenzon... is he available today?"

The woman glanced up quickly, taking off her glasses. She was wearing makeup, just like she always was - her gray eyes rimmed with eyeliner, her cheeks a smooth tone. It felt artificial to me... as if she had something to hide... ...as she very well might have. "Oh... Vanya... Hello. Mr. Kenzon, you say?" Jade asked with a friendly smile. "I'll look that right up." After a few seconds of tapping at her computer screen, she turned back with a sincere expression of sympathy. "I'm sorry, no. He's not available today - he says he's refurnishing his armory. Perhaps next week..." At my slight frown, she added, "If you want, I could book you for a session tomorrow."

"No, it's all right," I said, shaking my head with pessimism. "He wouldn't be available then, either."

My comment made her frown with guilt. "It's not a guarantee," she offered, defending him. "He *might* be available tomorrow... just give him a chance."

I just didn't care anymore. Sighing, I shook my head. "You know he doesn't like me... I don't even know why I keep coming here." When she replied with a silent expression of pity, I dejectedly turned away.

A familiar voice called out from deeper within the complex, echoing towards where I stood: "Vanya?" I knew who it was immediately, and my heart seemed to skip a beat.

"Reudh?" I asked in surprise, turning to look down the white marble hallway. "What are you doing here?"

He was fully garbed in heavy white Parasol armor, and his adamantine pike was slung over his back, matching the cyan trim of his suit. His hair was wet, as if he'd just taken a shower, and he looked both tired and a little confused. "I'm here for Kenzon's training, as he told me to come every Wednesday. Do not misunderstand me, my dear, I am greatly pleased to see you, and you look as beautiful today as ever... but why are *you* here, if I might ask?" he asked, continuing down the hallway towards me.

I narrowed a glare in Jade's direction. "I thought you said he was refurnishing his armory," I said quietly.

She only looked uncomfortable, sliding her glasses onto the bridge of her nose as she rearranged the books before her. Caught in a lie, it seemed almost as if she didn't want to notice me, and I wasn't surprised. It probably wasn't her lie, anyway, but Kenzon's.

Facing Reudh as he entered the little lobby, I spoke up, my frustration making its way into my voice. It hadn't been the best day. "I'm here because Kenzon said he would teach me combat skills... but he avoids me instead. I've been here every Wednesday, just like he wanted me to be, but he's always busy... or at least, he *claims* he is."

"He was most certainly not busy today," Reudh noted, scratching his chin under his red-brown beard. "Nor has he been busy any of these past weeks! I must say I'm unsure as to why he would say otherwise. I *am* terribly sorry, however... Might there be anything I could do?"

I managed a disappointed frown. "No, it's okay, Reudh..." I would've stayed longer, but I was

beginning to feel depressed by simply being there. When I'm in that sort of mood, everything bugs me. I almost imagined Jade hiding a cruel smirk behind her desk... Down the hallway, I sighted a dark-coated man with a low-brimmed fedora and my mind immediately labeled him as "shady". Even Reudh himself was starting to get on my nerves. I know he used to do it all the time, but it was happening a lot often then. "I'm just going to go home... Will you visit tomorrow?"

He smiled amiably. "Of course, Vanya dearest! I will escort you there if you'd like."

Shaking my head, I turned him down. "No, it's all right. I can get back on my own."

~~~

Later that night, I sat quietly in the white chair in that single darkened corner of the sitting room, writing in my journal. I was starting to write down the events leading up to the battle of 48D, but I couldn't get my mind off of Reudh and Urist. I've always needed someone to love... It used to be my sister, but after I lost her it became Urist. Now it was slowly, gradually, becoming Reudh, and the thought entered my mind: was I really in control of who I loved? Did I just love whoever was most convenient, and whoever treated me the best? Reudh isn't nearly as handsome as Urist, and I know I can be shallow... but he didn't seem my type at all, so why was I falling for him?

It was then, in a moment of confusion, that I pulled a sheet out of my journal and started to write a letter. I have it still... I'll copy it down here.

Dear Urist...

It's been a long time since I saw you last... a little more than a year now. I don't really know why I'm writing this out, as I have no way of sending it... I guess to pour out my thoughts, without needing someone to listen. It isn't like me to burden someone with my problems, but now, in a way, I'm doing it to you.

When you met me, I'd almost lost hope, trapped in a prison cell in the darkest corners of Spearbreakers... You risked your life to save me, and you didn't care I was an elf. You were the first person who'd ever treated me as an equal, and I was grateful beyond words for it. When I talked, you listened; when I cried, you cared; when I laughed, you smiled. You went out of your way to protect me and keep me safe, even to the point that you did something I thought I'd never forgive you for. I know you understand it now, but the last day I saw you... it wasn't a Ballpoint soldier you killed, but my sister.

For the past year, I've hated you for it, loathing myself for any shred of feeling towards you that remained in my heart. In my mind, you'd betrayed me. In my mind, it was entirely your fault, and I'd done nothing wrong. I've thought of you as a murderer... The pain of what you did still hasn't left me, and it probably never will. I would do anything to be able to go back and fix what was wrong, because it's taken me this long, but now I know: It wasn't your fault she died at all... it was mine. You were only trying to save my life, and you did.

When you sent me the letter on that crumpled page, and that crystal jade spearhead, I realized I'd been fooling myself. I'd told myself I thought about you because I hated you for what you'd done. I'd told myself I wanted to return to Spearbreakers because of the other people there. I'd told myself that I wanted to see you again so I could hurt you - so I could take revenge. In a way, all of that is true, but when I opened that letter, I realized something I've been denying the entire time...

Urist... I think I'm in love with you.

My hands are shaking as I write this... I'm almost hyperventilating, and I don't know why. I know you'll never read this "letter", but it's still so, so hard for me to admit it... Urist... I love you, even now. I love you. I love you dearly. Those three words carry so much meaning, and yet we never said them to each other. I was too shy to bring them to my lips, and even now, if we met again, I still don't know if I could.

And this is the part that confuses me. I'm starting to get those same feelings towards someone else... someone I don't feel I should. How can I like two people at once? How can anyone? How is it even fair?? I'm so, so confused... What would you even think of me if you knew? You're married. I like two different guys. You swore off love. We're nothing more than friends. Is it bad to say I like you as more than that? That when I lie awake at night, it's not only Reudh that crosses my mind, but you?

I'm confused and afraid, but I hide it when I talk to people. Not even Katie, my best friend, knows. And yet, somehow, I'm spilling this out to you. Why do I do that? Why do I trust you so implicitly? Why do I feel this way about you now? I haven't seen you in a year... just like when you rescued me from my lonely prison. My feelings for you never went away then, and they haven't now, either, only clouded by anger and hatred at something that wasn't your fault. And what do I do now? Do I bury the way I feel towards you and let my feelings for Reudh take over? Do I push Reudh away? Do I ignore both of you and live for myself?

I'm so confused... I'm a horrible person, and I'm sorry.

~~~ V

Even when it was hard for me to trust anyone right away... I still wanted to see the best in them. I kept giving Kenzon chances, almost like I was hoping he would prove himself worthy of my trust... just like I'd done with Talvi, Hans, Mr Frog, Wari, John, Klade, and now... And now, Urist...

The sad thing was, I never got any second chances in return. If I only could've gotten a second chance to save my sister, to do the right thing instead of doing what I wanted... If I could've just been *smarter* instead of rushing out to try to save her from herself... If I only could've gotten a second chance to make things right with Urist, to forgive him instead of leaving him to a torment of silence... If I could've just been *stronger* instead of running away to try to save myself...



Her elven script ends here, the ink smudged by ancient teardrops.

Vanya's Journals, Chapter 59: Founder's Day

*These entries, like all the others in Vanya's series of **journals**, are undated and unsigned, save for a hollow star at the end: **Vanya's** symbol. It would likely be useful if she would merely change her style enough to include the date, but there's no way for you to persuade her to comply, as she died hundreds of years before these pages came to rest beneath your eyes.*

Patriotism is an interesting thing... It's like feeling a mother's love for the country or fortress you live in, and it's an almost universal feeling: scythods feel it the same as dwarves and humans do, and the inhabitants of Parasol are no different. Despite their apparent loathing of any day of celebration, they set one day aside every year just to celebrate Parasol, the mighty, planetwide

company they call their home. It's known as Founder's Day, and in Parasol, they call it March... March the twentieth. It's the first day of spring, and in dwarven terms, that's the first day of Granite, the first month in the dwarven calendar. (Even though Parasol's year doesn't quite match up with Everoc's, I think it's still a good frame of reference.)

Something very noteworthy is that Founder's Day happens to coincide with Katie's birthday, and this year, it was on a Thursday. Katie told me that her father, Kenzon, had always done something special for her while she'd been at home - something to celebrate her birthday, but she'd also said that Mr. Kenzon never actually celebrated Founder's Day himself. He wasn't that patriotic of a person, believing that a country was just a place you lived, and nothing more. He had no problem with ignoring Founder's Day completely. Katie, on the other hand, loved Parasol... just as she'd come to love Trebor, even if he didn't seem to love her in return.

Trebor had said apologetically he would be too busy with Founder's Day to visit her on her birthday, and had said that he'd try celebrating it the next Saturday. I could tell Katie wasn't overly happy with this, and in fact, she'd told him it didn't matter because she'd be busy and wouldn't be around anyway. It was a lie, but a defensive one: she didn't want him to know how she felt about him. Instead, she'd quietly, resignedly accepted what would happen on what she obviously believed would be a terrible day for her.

I've never actually had my birthday celebrated before... I know I was born in the winter, but not the day. Not having someone around who remembers the day you were born makes it difficult, if not impossible, to know what day you should celebrate on. I suppose I could simply *choose* a day and celebrate it then, in the way that Parasol's employees celebrate Founder's Day, but I don't really see the point. My birthdays aren't as important to me as they are to Katie, and it hurts me that she could have hers so callously ignored by everyone when she cares so much about it.

These were the thoughts that were running through my mind on March the Twentieth, as I sat on the green divan across from Katie, watching her poke sullenly at her PEA, slumped over its screen. Outwardly, she didn't really seem to care about her birthday... I couldn't see her face, but it wasn't hard to imagine that it was painted with a depressed frown. Some part of me wanted to help cheer her up, though I wasn't sure how.

"You shouldn't be locked up in here all the time," I whispered sympathetically. "Especially on your birthday. It's almost like he keeps you in a prison."

She started, drawing in her breath sharply as she sat upright and raised her eyes to mine. Her face wasn't contorted in displeasure, but rather held a mischievous gleam. "It's a lot like a prison," she replied in a hushed tone, barely concealing the smile that crept stealthily across her face. "You told me you'd been in prison once. How long was it before you saw the sky?"

"What?" I hesitated in confusion, wondering why she would ask. "It was well over three or four years, but you don't see the sky much when you're living in a dwarven fortress."

"That's not much like Parasol," Katie said softly, getting to her feet and walking noiselessly to the window, tucking her hair behind a blunted earpoint with one hand. "Here, it's a rare day for someone when they don't stand under the sky at some point... but here, our dwarves are a lot like your humans." She paused for a moment, thinking. "It's been at least a month since I saw the sky."

I frowned, getting to my feet and smoothing my skirt as I followed her over, looking out the window at Parasol's bright blue atmosphere, the capital city of Division 3 stretching out beneath it: a thousand metal fingers reaching ever upwards. "You can see the sky from here," I pointed

out.

"But it's not the same as *seeing* it," Katie insisted, trying to get me to understand as I stepped beside her, gazing out the window. "You can't feel the air - you can't *feel* the sky. I used to participate in jetpacking competitions - you know that, right? The sky has a *feel* to it, when you stand beneath it... It's nothing you can imitate with a window."

Thinking I'd found a flaw, I pointed out, "But Parasol's sky is artificial. It looks like the real thing, but none of it really is."

She turned her head, and I caught her glance as she spoke. "It's real to me. The only other sky I've ever known were the red and gray skies of Everoc's blood plains." Taking a step back, she twirled around walked towards the sofa, picking up her pea and tapping at its screen for a moment before looking up at me and adding with a teasing grin, "Everoc's skies were incredibly depressing, by the way."

I laughed, staring at my feet and grinning as I walked slowly over to her. "You haven't seen the blue skies outside the blood plains... They're actually really, really beautiful, especially at night."

"As beautiful as our sunsets?" She asked me, narrowing her eyes slyly. We were trying to one-up each other, a game we played sometimes. "Division 3, Parasol's R & D division, has the most beautiful sunsets of all of Parasol."

"Maybe our sunsets aren't as beautiful as yours, but your stars don't twinkle," I pointed out in turn. "I get what you're saying, though. You miss standing under the sky."

Katie nodded in agreement. "I do."

"And Trebor too," I added impishly, watching her out the corner of my eye for her reaction.

It froze her for a second. "I do not!" she denied it, bursting out laughing as she sat back down on the divan. "I just want to get out of here for a little while so I can see the sky."

"Trebor too," I added again in a sing-song fashion, winking at her and playfully sticking my tongue out a little. "I know you, you want to visit him."

Katie looked up from her PEA suddenly. "Maybe I do," she finally admitted, adding in a low, conspiratorial voice, grinning all the while, "So let's go see him. I've been thinking about it all morning, I just wanted to get you to agree to it."

"Your dad will find out," I warned her, cautiously. "What do you think he'd do if he knew you'd escaped again?"

"Does he really have to know?" she asked thoughtfully.

"I guess not," I said slowly, glancing up at Katie, who was looking at me from beneath her dark-brown bangs, a mischievous sparkle in her eyes. "All right, fine!" I gave in, laughing. "I'll help you escape. It's your birthday, after all, and we we can get back before he knows you're gone... but there are two guards outside the door," I reminded her. "We need a way to get past them without them noticing us. Do you have a way?"

That stopped her. "I'm not sure," she admitted.

I sat down, pausing, a finger poking at my lower lip as I tried to figure out a way.

But Katie was ahead of me. "I think I *do* have an idea," she exclaimed, jumping up and heading to her bedroom with a lightened step. "First, make sure you have the keycard to the apartment with you, just in case!"

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Twenty minutes later we were sliding down an improvised rope of bed sheets. We'd fastened

one end to my bed, and after checking to make sure it would reach the next balcony below us, we'd started downwards, laughing and giggling with both fright and excitement. There's an undeniable thrill involved in dangling from a makeshift rope, hundreds of feet above the ground. Behind us, the world of Parasol loomed, with all its flying cars and shimmering towers, the streets paved with the glint of metal, the shuttlescars flashing through their glassy tubes... It was exhilarating just to look at it, but to Katie, it was better than a dream. She *loved* her home world, and the thought that she'd get to see it on Founder's Day, her birthday, excited her to no end.

We landed a little roughly on a smallish patio-balcony two floors below my window: first me, and then my friend, letting go of the sheets and dropping down the six-foot gap between them and the ground. We dusted ourselves off, laughing at our clumsiness, and then fixed our hair in the mirror surface of the apartment's window. When we were done, we quieted our laughter and opened the door. It was an apartment much like Katie's, and we saw a couple dwarves sitting in front of a televiewer, watching some sort of action movie.

Katie, smiling mirthfully, waved at them as we passed. "Don't mind us, just passing through," she assured them playfully. The two men only stared at us in dumbfounded bewilderment as we walked quickly across the room towards the door. Opening it, we exited into the hallway... and almost immediately doubled over in gales of quiet laughter.

"Did you see the looks on their faces?" she wheezed, unable to control her merriment. "'Duh... what's goin' on here?!'" she said in a put-on accent.

"Don't mind us, just passing through!" I repeated her words, laughing. "I don't think they had any clue what to do."

Katie nodded, giggling. "I know!! It isn't every day you see two girls randomly walk through your apartment!" Suddenly, she stopped, and the smile started to fade as she thought of something. "Vanya... how will we get back up there?"

The smile faded from my face as I realized my mistake, and I looked downwards, thinking. Seconds later, I heard someone snickering, and looked back up towards my friend, who was grinning and trying not to laugh at our lack of foresight. I couldn't help but smile, and it wasn't long before we were headed towards the elevator, laughing mirthfully at our situation. When you're really, really happy... it's hard for anything to get you down for long.

"So where do we go now?" I asked her as the car descended, glancing at her from the glass wall of the elevator. "Should we visit Trebor first?"

She didn't pull her gaze away from the view, but nodded. "Definitely Trebor... Maybe we could get him to spend the day with us?" She drew her eyes away from the landscape and studied me thoughtfully for a moment. "I know you don't think he likes you much, but I'm sure if you just gave him a chance, his true colors would show through. He's a really good person, Vanya," she said, trying to convince me.

I didn't really need convincing, although I felt my chest tighten a little in apprehension at the thought of spending the day with Trebor. "It's your birthday, Katie," I reminded her. "We can spend the day however you want, even if it's just sitting on a roof and looking at the city down below."

Tilting her head forwards a bit with a half-nod as the car stopped outside the shuttlecar station, she said in playful merriment, "Definitely, definitely Trebor."

Before long, we were on our way, speeding through shuttlecar tubes towards where Trebor lived with his family.

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As we rode up the excessively fancy, gold-and-glass walled elevator of the Metalbrook building, Katie was talking excitedly about how wonderful the Founder's Day celebration was supposed to be, and what Trebor had told her they'd always done every year. I was listening, but just barely... the Parasol skyline is mesmerizing, especially to an elf like myself; I lived 20 years on a completely different world. The tall, vertical buildings, the sweeping, curving glass shuttlecar tubes, the hovertaxis and the brilliantly colored sky, the light of the artificial sun striking shadows the cityscape... it's too beautiful for words, and Metalbrook, just beyond an artificial lake, was much less closed-in than Rubywood.

"Trebor's family is a very well-to-do one, with strong ties in the military," Katie was explaining excitedly in a rush. "Trebor's father, Traetin, is an admiral in the Parasol military, while his *mother*, Alexia, is a drill sergeant. Just about everyone in his family is in the military, and they're all *really* patriotic!"

Just then, the elevator chimed and the doors slid open smoothly with a hiss. I spun around, and the first thing that caught my eye were the banners and flags hung throughout the wide, two-story hallway beyond - all in Parasol's theme of white, black, and cyan.

"I mean, just look at how they decorate!" Katie exclaimed with an awed gasp, finishing her train of thought and walking forwards. "I can't remember if their apartments are on the left side, or the right side," she mused, walking forwards and leaving me, smiling with amusement, in her wake. It wasn't long before she was ringing a doorbell on the left side of the grand hallway, next to a set of wooden double doors that were labeled very clearly with a gold plaque that read "MALLARKUS" in all uppercase letters.

Katie stepped back a couple paces from the door and we exchanged a suspenseful glance.

After we'd waited for a moment, the left half of the double doors swung open, and a clean-shaven, black-haired dwarf slightly younger than me appeared with a friendly (if somewhat surprised) smile. "Hello, and happy Founder's Day!" he greeted us cordially. "What brings you two ladies here?"

Moving forwards, Katie introduced us. "I'm Katie Okablokum, and this is my friend, Vanya. We're wondering if Trebor is around...?" she trailed off hopefully, almost leaving it as a question.

The man raised a cautious eyebrow, as if confused as to what he should do, and then raised a finger at us. "Just one moment, hold that thought, okay?" He watched us for a moment, and then nodded rapidly before disappearing inside the apartment, leaving the door open without even inviting us inside. Turning down a corner down a hallway, he called, "Lydena?"

"Who was that?" I whispered to Katie.

She shook her head in response: she didn't know.

Moments later, a slender dwarf with long, wavy red hair falling about her shoulders approached us from the same hallway, jogging to the door, her Parasol-themed skirt and shoulder-hung purse bouncing as she walked. "I'm soooo sorry about that!" she laughed, rolling her eyes and shaking her head. "He's so funny sometimes. I'm Lydena, and that was my husband, Cor. We don't live here, so he wasn't sure what to do when he answered the door and saw two people he didn't know." She paused briefly, looking us over. "You're Katie," she guessed, pointing first at my friend, and then me, continuing, "and you're Vanya, right? I've heard so much about both of you from Trebor! How are you two?" She was bright and bubbly, and pleasantly so.

"Very well, and thank you," Katie responded quickly, displaying a far stronger grasp of social

situations than me. "We're actually looking for him - is he here?"

Lydena's red, lipstick-coated lips puckered into a little surreptitious smile. "Oh, wanting to spend the day with him?" she whispered, giving us a wink that showed she could already guess Katie's feelings for him. "I gotcha. I gathered as much from when he's spoken of you, but he's never yet guessed it. You *do* like him!" Katie blushed visibly and started to protest, but Lydena held a finger towards Katie's lips, chuckling with amusement. "Don't worry, your secret's safe with me. And no, he's not here right now... I actually haven't heard from him since last night, which is a little strange... especially for today."

Katie, slightly disappointed, nodded with a grateful smile. "Thank you anyway, Lydena. It was really great to finally meet you! Trebor's mentioned you a lot."

"I hope he hasn't been saying anything bad," Lydena smirked. "If he has, I have some stories I could tell about him, too. But, for now, my husband and I have to finish getting everything ready, so I'll have to see you two some other time! If you're ever up in the East Side, come see us, okay? I *love* getting visitors. We're in the Foresthill apartment building, floor 56. Don't forget, now!"

After Katie had responded, the door closed behind her, leaving us alone in the hallway once more.

"Well..." I said, raising an eyebrow with a sigh, "What next?"

Katie stood there for a moment, pondering what Lydena had said. When she finally moved again, it was towards the elevator, waving for me to follow. "Founder's Day, silly! We still have all day ahead of us."

The rest of the day was amazing. We hurried onwards to the festivities, down Division 3's wide Main Avenue, lined with tall, acorn-less oaks on either side. It was beautiful, and the celebration was amazing. At one point, the sky darkened artificially for "fireworks": amazing swirls of sparkling colors in the sky, with explosive sounds and the smell of gunpowder. It might not be something a dwarf of Everoc would like, but to Katie and me, it was absolutely incredible. There were all sorts of foods at stands lining the streets, and all of it was free. There were banners, streamers, confetti, parades... it was everything we could have wanted, just like a holiday back home. Katie had never been to the Founder's Day celebration, and didn't quite know what to expect, but I think I gave her the best birthday present she'd ever had. I'd given her the gift of freedom, even if only for a day... and there's something about being free that unfetters the heart and soul as well. You feel like you could fly.

It was with joyful thoughts and jubilant smiles that we headed back to Rubywood Apartments... and towards something that would ultimately erase those same smiles from our faces.

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"The elevator won't stop on our floor?" Katie asked in surprise, repeatedly tapping the touchpad on the elevator wall where it said "82". It refused to light up, just like the car refused to move. "All right, we'll go to floor 81 then," she laughed, shaking her head as gave up and pressed the number beside it. The doors slid slowly shut, and although we felt no sensation of movement, the view behind us out the elevator's glass window began to drop away, as we shot higher and higher through the building.

"Why won't it stop at 82?" I asked curiously.



Katie shook her head, smiling and propping herself against the metallic rail across the window, as she looked outwards over the city she called home, the artificial sun setting in the distance. "I don't know, I've never had it happen before. I know that you can shut it off remotely, but I haven't had it happen before, and I don't know why they would. Maybe the button is broken?" she suggested.

I nodded. Things break; everything needs a little maintenance every once in a while, and it made sense that it would happen at Parasol, too. Somehow it seemed too convenient to be that, though.

A few seconds later the doors opened, and we exited into the hallway of floor 81, headed for the stairs.

"Did you have fun?" I asked her as I walked behind her skipping steps. I already knew the answer, but I wanted to hear her admit it.

She laughed in response. "Yes, I did," she admitted, spinning around as she walked to level a playful, mischievous glare at me. "You *know* I did."

"I thought you would," I told her happily, nodding as we started up the stairs. "Want to do it again sometime?"

"Pfft, we won't be able to, you know," Katie said, rolling her eyes teasingly. "*Someone* forgot to invent a way to get us back inside without the guards finding out."

I laughed at her poking jest, pushing open a door at the top of the stairs and following her through after she'd passed. "It's just as much you as me. We'll just say we left through the front door, but they were on coffee break or something," I offered, checking in my pocket to make sure I'd remembered the key to Kenzon's apartments.

She threw back her head and laughed. "Oh, that's *brilliant*!" she said in teasing sarcasm. "Of *course* they'd happen to be away while we left the room. And my dad used to work with security, too, but there's *no way* he would know."

"I doubt they'd want to admit they let us past them while on duty, so maybe they'll just let us back in," I offered, smiling along with her as we turned the corner onto her hallway.

We both stopped abruptly as we caught a first glimpse of our floor. Black-and-yellow tape was stretched across the hall, and white-uniformed Parasol security forces were milling about outside the doorway to her apartment. Two translucent holograms lay in odd positions on the floor - holograms of the bodies of the two security guards that had guarded Kenzon's apartment only hours earlier. Katie's hand flew to her mouth as she let out a little cry and rushed forwards away from me, realizing what had happened only seconds before I did. It was a crime scene, and Kenzon's security guards had been murdered. Someone had made a third attempt on Katie's life, and this time, the only thing that had saved her was our little rebellious birthday excursion. Shaking my head in shock, I tried to convince myself that none of it was real. I could see Kenzon himself milling about among the guards, his hands on his head as he tried to stay calm and keep from panicking.

"Dad!" Katie shouted towards him as she ran, and I started afterwards her at a jog.

"Katie!" he called back, relief and happiness apparent in his voice as he shouldered his way past the police, ducking under the black-and-yellow tape and breaking into a jog. As they met in the middle, he scooped his daughter up in his arms and held her close.

"Dad, what happened?" she asked him.

As I drew closer to them, I could hear him speaking. "I thought I'd lost you... I'm glad you're all right. I got a call at work saying there had been a double murder and a burglary, and that the apartment was empty - I thought someone had kidnapped you and Vanya, or worse."

I heard my name and stopped, ten feet or so away, standing alone and very conspicuously in the center of the hallway. As Kenzon spoke my name, it appeared to remind him of my existence, and he turned his head towards me, narrowing his eyes as he set Katie's feet back down upon the carpet.

"Vanya..." he said slowly, deliberately, leveling a painfully piercing glare at me, "I expect you to explain this."

I glanced from him to Katie, who was looking at me sorrowfully with regret, and then back again to him. "If Katie had been here, she would've been killed, so what did I do wrong?" I asked uncomfortably.

"Far more than you should have..." he said under his breath, a hint of anger in his voice. "Maybe more than you know."



### **Vanya's Journals, Entry 60: A Temporary Home**

*The journal continues, **Vanya's** small, elven font filling every page, one after the next. It seemed she was wanting to fill the journal as completely as she could, but even now, you can tell you're reaching the end... the back cover isn't very many pages away.*

Katie's father was seething. He turned, motioning for Katie and me to follow. "Vanya... Let me show you what you've done."

Following Kenzon, we walked towards his apartment, ducking under the black-and-yellow tape with him. Several security guards, standing at attention, guns in hand, kept their eyes trained on us cautiously as we moved. Two more scanned our faces with their PEAs as we passed, tapping rapidly on their screens as they wrote something down.

However, Kenzon ignored everyone and walked straight to his room, his step heavy and deliberate, and finally pushed open what was left of the damaged door. It looked like someone had kicked it in, but the apartment beyond it was even worse. Every door was standing wide open, many of them split, smashed, or falling off their hinges. All the furniture was overturned, the cushions strewn seemingly at random about the room. It was busy, with Parasol Security guards moving about, some scanning the floors and walls with a purplish light emanating from their PEAs, others scanning with flashing grids of red lasers... with so many people there, I began to feel very much on edge.

"How did I do this?" I asked quietly, aghast at the display of wanton destruction. "I wasn't even here..."

"He followed you here, Vanya," Kenzon said, spinning to look at me, glaring at me with his eyes. "All your recent excursions attracted his attention. I don't suppose you ever thought to check whether someone was following you?"

"No..." I said slowly, processing the information. "Couldn't it have been you, though? Maybe they followed *you*."

"You've noticed that I've been using teleports to travel to and from work, haven't you?" He watched me with his eyes, and when I nodded, he went on, "This is why. I didn't expect you to go anywhere that the killer would expect to find you, but you did: My place of work. He already recognized you from the mall incident, and today, he saw his chance – all of Parasol Security was preoccupied with the keeping the Founder's Day celebrations from getting out of hand."

It seemed impossible. "What? How would you even know this?"

A guard straightened beside us, glancing at my eyes as he rapidly tapped his PEA, scanning my face with it. "We caught it on camera, Ms. Carena. An unidentified figure wearing a black trench coat and fedora followed you home from Scheck Kenzon's Weapons Training, taking a second shuttlecar and keeping his distance. We have proof that it was you he was following from the shuttlecar logs." Turning his PEA towards me briefly, he showed downwards-angled video footage of a man boarding a shuttlecar, dressed all in black. "No cameras managed to catch a glimpse of his face due to his wide-brimmed hat, unfortunately." He paused for a moment and then started to walk away, leaning closer to Kenzon as he did and saying quietly, "Be careful of what you say, Mr. Kenzon, we still haven't finished checking the area, and the apartment may be bugged."

My eyes drifted to the floor as I shook my head in shock. I could remember the man from the day I'd seen Reudh at Kenzon's workplace, but his head had been downcast... I hadn't seen his face. "How did he even know I'd be there?"

"He didn't have to," Kenzon said quietly. "I was there, so if he was looking for Katie, it would make sense for him to watch for me to leave. That's why I teleported to and from work, despite the extra cost."

"Vanya couldn't have known," Katie spoke up defensively from beside me. "It's not her fault."

"Maybe she couldn't have known," Kenzon admitted in a tight voice, as he walked towards Katie's bedroom door, "but it's still her fault. I've packed bags for both of you already. You'll be staying elsewhere until the killer is caught, and Vanya..." Here he paused, picking up two heavy duffel bags and handing them to us before he leveled a piercing gaze at me. "You will *not* continue your random excursions. You are to *stay put* until Katie's life is no longer at risk. Understand?"

I nodded quietly, swallowing back my inclination to protest. It didn't seem fair that simply walking around Parasol had endangered my friend, but I wasn't going to knowingly put her at risk again. I took my bag from Mr Kenzon and whispered, "I understand," unwilling to meet his gaze. Turning, Katie and I walked, downcast, towards the shattered doorway of Katie's home.

Outside the doorway, a Parasol Security guard opened a temporary portal and motioned for us to step in. Katie understood my misgivings and looked at me sympathetically as we walked towards it. "I'm sorry," she mouthed with a sympathetic frown, and I nodded silently. It wasn't her fault, really. I didn't know who was trying to take her life, but I'd vowed I'd protect her, a couple months before. I wasn't going to let anyone hurt her, even if that meant I lost my newfound freedom in the process. Freedom is important... but if it means you lose everyone and everything you care about, can you really say it's worth it?

And with that, we stepped through the shimmering, wavering oval, feeling the sensation of twisting, unfolding, transforming...

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Kenzon had been unwilling to tell us exactly where we were headed, but as soon as we'd exited the miniportal, it was obvious: we'd materialized outside the apartment belonging to Jade, his receptionist. She met us at the door, her reddish-brown hair tied up in a ponytail behind her head. Her face had a prim, tight look to it, with rounded cheeks and a tiny chin, and there was the faintest possibility of freckles beneath her cold, gray eyes. She wasn't wearing glasses this time, nor makeup, and she seemed closer to 30 rather than the 25 I'd guessed originally.

"I'm Jade Medell," she greeted us in a friendly manner, albeit a somewhat awkward one, her hands clasped in front of her. "I'm a friend of your father, Katie, and he wanted to let you live here for a week or two."

"Don't you work with him?" I asked. I recognized her immediately from my visits to Kenzon's workplace, although I wasn't sure Katie wouldn't have seen her before. "You're the receptionist where he works."

I looked over at Katie on my right in time to catch an amused glance from her. "Probably more than just a friend," she guessed quietly, saying it just loud enough for Jade to hear.

Jade blushed visibly in embarrassment, appearing very, very flustered. "We're *just friends*," she insisted, "and yes, I do work for him. Anyway, come on, I'll show you where you'll be sleeping."

Katie had clearly hit upon a particularly soft spot, and it didn't seem like Jade felt like discussing it any further. As we followed her into the apartment, I switched my duffel bag over to my left hand so I could lean a little closer to Katie, and whispered, "Kenzon has to be *at least* ten years older than she is..."

Frowning, Katie gave an acquiescent shrug. "Closer to fifteen," she whispered back. "Humans age differently than dwarves."

"Do you really think they're together?"

"That's my dad for you," she sighed, rolling her eyes at her father's taste in women. Suddenly, she gave a broad, innocent smile in Jade's direction as the object of our conversation looked suspiciously over her shoulder towards us, and that was enough to draw the subject to a close.

Jade's apartment was situated nearer to the center of her building, and as a result, there wasn't a window anywhere to see out of. It was also smaller and furnished far less richly than Kenzon's, but at the same time, it felt homier: it lacked the same sense of sterility, with wicker chairs, soft, cushy sofas of a milk-chocolate colored fabric, cream-colored walls, wooden bookcases and shelving lining the walls here and there. It felt cozy, in a way. You could tell it had been lived in, much unlike Kenzon's, who always had everything put away: A small stack of paper magazines were sitting on the coffee table in the middle of the Jade's living room, accentuated by a tall, plastic cup. A remote control for a televiewer was stuck between two couch cushions, and a used bowl and spoon sat on an end table in the corner of the room. It didn't have the same artificial feeling that so much of Parasol had, but it wasn't overly dirty like Eltsha's place, either. In a word, it was homely.

Our hostess showed us to her little guest room room, which was at the end of a short hallway and furnished with two beds. "I'm sorry I don't have rooms for each of you," she apologized, "I'm lucky I have the spare room. Renting an apartment isn't cheap, and I can't afford to buy one outright."

We thanked her, assured her it was all right, and sat down across from each other on the mattresses of our iron-framed beds, looking through our bags to see what Kenzon had packed. Katie was removing everything from hers, laying it out almost at random on her bed's dark pink sheets, while I was prying through my bag carefully and trying to look under everything. I didn't like the thought of taking anything out of my bag... I suppose it comes from having been a skulker for so long.

"He didn't pack my PEA," she said suddenly in consternation. "How am I supposed to talk to Trebor without my PEA? How will he even know I'm okay??"

I shook my head. "I don't know," I said quietly, lifting out my suit of armor and wondering

why Kenzon had decided to pack it, along with my daggers and Almory's sword. I supposed that maybe he'd just packed everything he was absolutely sure was mine... I didn't get as many clothes as Katie, but at least I still had my journal.

"This is going to be horribly boring," Katie groaned, her eyebrows drawn together in worry. "We can't leave here now, and we don't even have anything to do."

"Why would he leave your PEA behind?" I asked her curiously. "Is it possible he forgot it? Or maybe he's worried that the killer will be tracking it or something?"

She shook her head, rummaging through the outer pockets of her bag and pulling out a toothbrush and a comb. She looked at them disappointedly as she replied, "No, you can't track PEA's like that. Phones, maybe, but mine broke, remember?"

I nodded. I remembered it very well; it had happened on the day we'd been attacked at the Mall. "Maybe he thought that the killer could track us with it anyway... I guess I could sneak out and get it," I mused, almost to myself. If there really wasn't any danger inherent in it, and the person was after Katie, not me... it shouldn't pose any problem. However, Katie didn't seem to hear me, and we didn't speak of it any further. It didn't seem the wisest of ideas to begin with.

Jade cooked dinner herself that night. It was some incredibly spicy kind of Parasol dish that was basically stuffed peppers, and she made green tea as a beverage. I absolutely loved the tea – it was my first time trying any – but the peppers were different. Being from Everoc, I wasn't used to them... I was hardly able to eat food that was so spicy. I sat at the little square table in Jade's cramped dining room, sniffing from a runny nose as I tried to blink back tears, my eyes watering.

Katie, sitting across from me, giggled at my antics. "It's not *that* spicy, but I'll get you some water anyway," she laughed, getting up from her seat and trying to figure out where Jade kept the glasses.

"It's not funny!" I said, laughing nervously myself as I warily attempted another bite. "They don't have spicy food where I come from."

Beside me, Jade seemed curious. "They don't? I've never heard of a place without spicy food... Why don't they have spicy food there? Where are you from?"

Her question stopped me for a moment, and I gratefully accepted a glass of water from Katie as she sat down, using it to buy time as I tried to think of an appropriate answer. I knew it was illegal for someone from Everoc to be at Parasol, and I wasn't sure how much she knew. "I've lived a lot of places," I eventually said guardedly. "Maybe it's just elves that don't eat spicy food," I suggested. It wasn't a lie, really, though I couldn't help but wonder why dwarves on Everoc didn't eat spicy food at all.

"You're an elf?" Jade asked quizzically, leaning sideways in her chair and peering at my ears. "So you are..." she muttered when she'd seen, with just enough of a hint of disdain to make my cheeks redden slightly. "Huh. I'd thought you were dwarven."

"I get that a lot," I whispered, taking another bite out of my food and silently cursing my elven heritage. You always have to be on your toes when you're in the minority... there will always be someone that will hate you just because of what you are.

She glanced down at my arm. "What's that bracelet, is that some kind of strange jewelry for your species?" She was pointing at my portal bracelet, which I always wore with me to remind me of my old home, and her voice sounded almost derisive.

Katie seemed to sense my discomfort. "It's not her fault she's an elf," she said defensively. "I'm part elf, part dwarf, and part human."

Jade's head turned quickly towards her. "That's not possible," she said bluntly, putting another bite into her mouth. "People can't mate between species."

But my friend merely put down her fork, turned her head to the side and pulled back her hair, showing the dull point of her ear; an ear that was clearly neither elven, nor human, nor dwarven. Our hostess seemed to do a double take, leaning forwards just a little as she peered at Katie's ear in disbelief. "It's not possible..." she said, shaking her head slowly in confusion. "I was with a dwarf once, I *know* they can't get humans pregnant... or elves..."

With a mischievous smirk, Katie settled back into her chair. "I'm different," she said simply. "And who do you think my mother would've had to be? You already know my father."

It was somewhat surprising how quickly Katie could pick Jade to pieces: the woman had stopped mid-chew and was sitting frozen, staring at Katie tensely as she tried to figure it out. "It's not possible," she said again quietly, but the conviction had left her voice, and she turned her head towards her plate as she continued eating in silence, clearly not liking the image of Kenzon with another woman, and especially not an elf.

The rest of supper was uneventful, and we helped Jade put everything up afterwards, carrying the dishes to the cleaner and then putting them into their respective cabinets.

Later, I'd asked Katie, "How did what you said make Jade fall silent so quickly?"

She'd only smiled. "It's not the first time I've had to deal with dad's girlfriends. They never like thinking of him having sex with someone else, and especially not someone who's half elf, and half dwarf, like my mom." It was clear she didn't want to continue the conversation, though. Her mother was still an unreachable topic, and I let it drop.

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That night, we lay in bed. Katie was in hers, and I was in mine just across the room, so similar to the first night we'd spent together, back on Everoc. My mind wasn't so much on 48D's trench, though, instead focusing more of the preceding events of Katie's birthday. I thought about what had happened earlier that day... how someone had tried to break into Kenzon's apartment under the cover of Founder's Day, hoping to kill Katie, and how we hadn't found Trebor at his apartment. Somehow, my sleepy mind managed to put the two together. Lydena had even expressed that it was very unusual for Trebor to be missing, especially on Founder's Day, and the idea popped into my mind: What if the killer wasn't after Katie at all? *What if he was after me?*

It made sense... I got attacked in the mall and was injured far worse than Katie, and then, later, the killer had followed me home, perhaps trying to get a clear shot at me. If he was after me, and not Katie, it would still make sense for him to show up on Founder's day... And if the killer wasn't just a killer, but was actually *Trebor*... it provided a perfect reason for him to try to get rid of me. He would never try to harm Katie, but I knew for a fact that he loathed me for what had happened to his sister, Almory.

*"It doesn't make sense,"* I remember thinking. *"Why would he not have attacked me any of the times he'd spent the afternoons there with Katie? There had been so many opportunities for it... is it possible he simply didn't want Katie to find out he'd killed me? Does want to kill me, but love her enough to want to keep her as well?"* My musing got me nowhere, though, until I remembered that Katie had told him she would be busy on that day anyway. She'd fibbed and told him she wouldn't be at home.

Suddenly, *everything* made sense. *I* was the target, and Trebor was trying to kill *me*... which

meant, of course, that if I went and got Katie's PEA, it would be my downfall: Katie trusted Trebor implicitly, and would tell him where Kenzon was keeping us without a moment's hesitation... and then Trebor would come and kill me. All he would have to do is decide to follow Jade home, and then he'd just have to wait. Eventually, he would get his opportunity, even if he had to sneak into the apartment at night and kill me in my sleep, with Katie sleeping unaware beside me.

It was hard for me to fall asleep that night, with so much on my mind. The only thing I couldn't decide was what I was going to do about it all.

